Curriculum Mapping for Effective Assessment

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Assessment: Everyone’s Favorite Task

- Current environment for assessment is still uneasy
- Middle States (MSCHE) “upping the ante”
- The Feds are coming (parents, too)!
- As budgets tighten, “assessment for accountability” becomes an even bigger deal...
- Faculty members still divided over assessment
  - “It’s a plot....”
  - “It’s a lot of work, but a useful tool....”
So, why do we do assessment?

• A) Middle States, SUNY, and other specialized accrediting bodies (ABET, AACSB, etc.) require it;
• B) other external stakeholders (like donors, trustees, grant applications) want us to;
• C) the federal government wants institutions of higher education to be more mindful of how college students are educated;
• D) but most importantly, we want to avoid.....THIS:
“Then you wake up at the high school level, and find out that the illiteracy rate of our children are appalling.”

-- G.W. Bush
Washington, DC
Jan. 23, 2004
“You teach a child to read, and he or her will be able to pass a literacy test.” -- G.W. Bush (Townsend, TN, 2/21/01)

“As yesterday’s positive report card shows, childrens do learn, when standards are high, and results are measured. – G.W. Bush (New York, NY, 9/26/07)

... and, my personal favorite... !!!

“Rarely is the question asked, ‘Is our children learning?’” – G.W. Bush (Florence, SC, 1/11/00)
Dealing with the reality...

- Legitimate case to be made for a mechanism in education that promotes some kind of quality standards
  - Think of all the goods and services that you would not buy without a system of quality control in place
- Most college educators are untrained as educators
  - We are specialists and experts in our respective content fields, but few of us hold dedicated education degrees
  - Assessment processes provide a vehicle for focusing attention on teaching and learning
- Better we “police ourselves” than have to submit to the alternative...
The Brighter Side: Utilizing Assessment for Improvement

• Ideally, assessment processes are NOT all about the numbers and statistics, but about the content and context of the educational product (learning)

• Assessment can help department faculties organize systematically some of the business they are already conducting, and provide a sensible framework for those endeavors

• Even accrediting bodies are now focusing on the “back end” of assessment, rather than the “front end...”
What Middle States says...

- Assessment processes are not about the faculty (assessment results cannot reasonably be used for hiring, promotion or tenure decisions)
- Assessment is not about the numbers (accrediting bodies generally don’t care about the statistics; they want to know how we are using that information to make strategic choices)
- Assessment should not be the top priority of a faculty (“What are faculty members not doing while they are engaged in excessive assessment activities?” – Suskie)
Assessment Guiding Principles

- MSCHE Principles: Assessment should be...
  - Useful
  - Cost-effective
  - Reasonably accurate and truthful
  - Planned
  - Organized, systematized, and sustained

- The process and product of academic assessment will differ depending upon how the results will be used
  - High Stakes vs. Low Stakes
  - Internal vs. External
Curriculum Alignment as a process gives us the chance to:

- Connect what we do in the classroom with what’s going on the real world
- Demonstrate that students are learning what we intend for them to learn
- Understand whether or not the courses we are teaching substantively support the curriculum we have designed
- Pause and consider whether the education we are providing supports the needs of our constituencies
Sounds good, but why bother?

- Busy program and department faculties run the risk of operating their courses and programs on “auto-pilot.”
  - “It ain’t broke!”
  - “The assessment results show we’re doing okay...”
  - “I’m doing assessment, I’m doing program review, what more do you want from me?”

- Even the most invested faculty members may seem reluctant to add (what are perceived to be) extra steps in the assessment and program review process.
...The skeptics....
...And the problem solvers...
We want to turn the hearts of the skeptics into problem-solvers

- No one likes doing extra work
- BUT, what if that work, once undertaken, winds up being valuable, and offers up results that are immediate and worth the time spent?
- The first-time investment requires the greatest effort
- The value of doing academic assessment is not always apparent – curriculum alignment often clarifies that value (remember – “useful” and “truthful”)
“A well-designed curriculum map is one of the most effective tools you can create for documenting how your program-level outcomes are supported by your curriculum.”

-- Michael Middaugh
Chair, MSCHE Executive Committee
A Basic Toolbox for Assessing Institutional Effectiveness
Cranberry Township, PA, August 2010
A Brief Detour ... Regarding Assessment Terms

- The language of assessment is still not uniform
- Differentiating “goals” from “objectives” and “outcomes” can be difficult and irritating
- What about “mission” versus “vision,” “values,” or “principles?”
- Find a sensible internal language standard, and develop your own internally consistent approach
- Explanation provided in accompanying packet of information
The Basics Before Starting

- Some assumptions prior to embarking upon curriculum alignment exercises –
  - Program Mission may or may not be present (but it’s better to have one)
  - Program Goals are present (or “vision” or “values”)
  - Program Objectives/Outcomes have to be present and be well-developed
  - Course Learning Objectives/Outcomes are present
  - A system to measure CLOs is in place
- If the above items are not all evident, then (the good news is that) by engaging in a process of curriculum alignment, all will be present and in place at the end
Tilling the Soil

- Review your department/program mission, goals, and objectives/outcomes
- If a mission or goals set is missing, consider creating it
- The “review” will work best if:
  - Faculty sees value in the process
  - Faculty is ready to do things differently
  - Faculty is willing to “reinvent” what they do
- One successful approach – “Pretend that you are creating the degree program from scratch, and you are not limited by current practices...”
- Finalize this work before moving on...
Initiating the Mapping Process

- Distribute a numbered/lettered list of Program Learning Objectives among the relevant faculty members

- Challenge each faculty member:
  - For each class he/she teaches in the program, determine which of the Program Learning Objectives is covered in the class as a MAJOR part of the course content; indicate also MINOR coverage (separately)
  - This exercise benefits from input from multiple faculty members who teach different sections of the same course, but who respond independently

- Collect and display the information in grid format
Clear, right?
How about an example?
Beekeeping
at Franklin State University
Example: Program Learning Objectives

A graduate of the B.S. degree program in Apicultural Science will be able to:

a. Construct and maintain beehives of appropriate design relative to the beekeeper’s purpose (breeding, honey production, supporting agriculture, etc.) and the breed of bee;

b. Create appropriate breeding environments and apply professionally-recommended techniques in promoting healthy fertility and growth of bee populations;

c. Apply and interpret basic genetic tests of bee samples;

d. Conduct appropriate hybridization techniques;

e. Identify, recognize, and respond to insect behaviors, including those of bee, competing insect, and predator insect species;

f. Promote health and wellness among bee populations;

g. Cultivate plant species supportive of the healthy maintenance of bee populations;

h. Recognize and manage responses to threats to bee populations, such as changes in the seasons, extreme weather conditions, and the presence of pesticides and other toxins in the environment;

i. Apply basic business management principles to the management of the costs and expenses of beekeeping;

j. Demonstrate an understanding of the ethical principles underpinning beekeeping as both a hobby and a profession;

k. Demonstrate an understanding of the role of bee species in the maintenance of a healthy and sustainable agricultural business;

l. Teach and train apprentice beekeepers in the rudimentary aspects of the practice of beekeeping;

m. Capably communicate, orally and in writing, the basic tenets of good beekeeping practices to individuals unfamiliar with bees and the practice of beekeeping.
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Preliminary Review Indicated:

- Program Learning Objective “m” is not covered
  - Faculty discussion revealed that virtually every faculty member thought others were covering the outcome in their respective courses
  - Most faculty members did not feel qualified to teach or grade students on their communication skills
- ENV 111 seemed of little value to the curriculum, BUT it does fulfill science requirement, AND it is a pre-req for ENV 201
- PLO’s “c,” and “d” are under-covered
But wait, there’s MORE

- The curriculum mapping exercise ALSO picked up some areas where there were redundancies, and where courses seemed over-packed.
- Outcomes “f” and “h” were covered in almost every course, and Outcomes “b” and “g” seemed also to be overly emphasized given their relative importance to the whole curriculum.
- Upper-level courses (APS 301 and higher) seemed too densely packed with redundant content.
Follow-up on the initial mapping

- The program faculty is now both empowered and challenged to “fix” these curriculum issues.
- Benefit of this simple procedure is that the pictorial representation gives participants a quick and easy understanding of an otherwise complex system.
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Changes to Curriculum

• Outcome “m” now covered in an APS course each year of a student’s plan of study

• Outcomes “c” and “d” were under-covered because BIO 201 was delayed until the 4th year of study; by moving BIO 201 to the 3rd year, Outcomes “c” and “d” can now be addressed

• Coverage for Outcomes “b,” “f,” “g,” and “h” was lessened to allow for modifications in the course content of several APS classes

• Moving forward, establishing linkage and coverage is not enough – now the faculty must be in a position to document learning
Ascertaining an Assessment Strategy for Courses

- Some courses are stronger in some areas of interest than others
- Although multiple courses may cover the same outcome, not every course provides good assessment opportunities
- Some courses offer breadth over depth
- Some PLO’s can only be covered (and measured) in specific courses
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Final “Linkage” documented

- The faculty has to determine which Course Learning Objectives/Outcomes best suit the matching PLO
- The assumption is that individual courses are taught according to their respective CLOs
- If CLOs are supported by graded (and thus, embedded) student assignments, then that documentation will directly demonstrate support for the PLO (MSCHE wants direct evidence where possible)
- Common sense rules for assessment still apply (as do the broad MSCHE assessment principles)
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The table above shows the distribution of clo#2, clo#3, clo#4, clo#5, and clo#8 across different courses.
Bringing everything together

• Note that all APS courses are participating in the assessment of at least one Course Learning Outcome
• All PLO’s are covered by at least one assessed course
• Remember that MSCHE cares only that the Department faculty demonstrate that PLO’s have been assessed; they aren’t concerned about the minutiae
• This process allows the faculty to show that, by fulfilling linked CLOs, they are likewise showing that PLOs have been measured and analyzed
Unexpected benefits

- As with many assessment activities, once the faculty moves beyond the “worker bee” focus (pardon the pun), the opportunity to consider the bigger picture is usually gratifying and engaging.
- Relationship and roles of individual courses within a curriculum are greatly clarified.
- The benefit extends also to other stakeholders, who can now be reassured that a program curriculum “delivers” on what is advertised.
- This particular exercise can help build faculty consensus, teamwork, and identity.
Another Example (for discussion)--

Consider the following application of curriculum mapping (based on an actual experience; the discipline has been changed, and the institution remains anonymous):

- Department of Religion at a 4-year institution offers a major, but serves far more students who take courses to satisfy the institution’s humanities requirement
  - What should that faculty’s approach be to assessment?
  - How can the process of curriculum mapping help the faculty to figure this out?
Their Mission Statement

- The Mission of the Religious Studies department is to provide students with a complete educational experience. Students majoring in Religious Studies will grow intellectually, civically, emotionally and spiritually. Students graduating with a degree in Religious Studies will be well-rounded individuals capable of pursuing graduate studies, will have a tolerant world view, and will have knowledge of a variety of cultures and belief systems, allowing them to capably interact with people of wide and varying backgrounds.
Department Goals

- To offer students an understanding of the basis for spiritual thought;
- To develop in students an understanding and respect for religious thinking, both western and non-western;
- To provide students with an understanding of the historical developments of world religions;
- To expose students to a variety of ethics models;
- To help students become better citizens;
- To promote strong emotional and spiritual health among students.
Program Learning Objectives

Graduating students with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religious Studies will be able to:

A) Interpret, analyze and evaluate literature, both religiously-based and secular-based, in terms of the spiritual and ethical standards from within the society in which that literature is based.

B) Interpret, analyze and evaluate public discourse, in all media forms, in terms of the spiritual and ethical standards from within the society in which that discourse occurs.
Program Learning Objectives 2

- C) Discuss the main historical developments of at least four of the following world religious paradigms: Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism.
- D) Identify cultural differences based on unshared historical religious experiences.
- E) Differentiate between philosophical and religious thinking.
- F) Demonstrate an understanding of how human spiritual pursuits have an impact on cultural, economic and political developments of societies.
## Curriculum Map for the Religious Studies Department

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Issues with the Religious Studies Dept. Approach

- Mission and Goals are part of identity, and so, cannot easily be criticized
- Department seemed to ignore non-majors in their set of objectives
- Program Learning Outcomes not well-developed
  - Some are too complex & overlapping; others too vague
  - Set of six outcomes probably doesn’t do their program justice
BUT, the process still helped...

- Faculty recognized that their PLOs needed attention
- More importantly, the faculty recognized that, even with more well-developed PLOs, their courses were overlapping significantly
  - One faculty member noted a fear that they were unwittingly teaching variations of the same course 12 times
  - Another faculty member indicated a desire to create departmental “tracks” to help differentiate content from one course to another
- Curriculum mapping triggered a wholesale revision of the department’s curriculum and focus
Applications for SUNY Assessment in General Education

- SUNY Student Learning Outcomes can be similarly “mapped” to local CLO’s, allowing for a “Buy One, Get One Free!” opportunity
- Curriculum planning in General Education is difficult; a curriculum alignment exercise enhances and enables current activities to “pay off”
- Curriculum alignment pertaining to SUNY Gen Ed can also give a faculty greater understanding of the possibilities of assessment for educational purposes, while still fulfilling accountability expectations.
Questions/Comments/Criticisms?

- Thanks and acknowledgement to Gary Larsen, whose Far Side cartoons lightened the mood of this presentation.