

BUILDING A CULTURE OF ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING AT MOUNT ST. MARY'S COLLEGE



2004-05: Progress and Next Steps

Don Haviland
Office of Institutional Research
and Assessment
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State of the College: Assessment 2004-2005

This report reviews the state of Mount St. Mary's College (MSMC) related to assessment of student learning outcomes at the conclusion of the 2004-05 academic year. The report deals fundamentally with *programmatic and institutional assessment* of student learning (how a program or institution contributes to learning) as opposed to classroom or course assessment.

Assessing student learning outcomes on an ongoing basis is critical for two reasons. First, an effective assessment system will help both faculty and administrators become more effective in supporting student learning, informing practice, and directing time and resources toward the areas of greatest need. Second, external bodies, including WASC, expect colleges and universities to develop effective mechanisms for determining whether and what their students are learning. WASC commissioners will be expecting to see (in both a 2006 update and a 2012 visit) that the college has made progress in developing a system of assessment since its last accreditation (2003).

Developing an *integrated system* to assess student learning, and using findings from this assessment to inform institutional and individual practice, remain a challenge for the college. Nonetheless, elements of such a system are already in place and faculty have accepted (if not fully embraced) the value of a formal program to assess student outcomes. This report begins by analyzing the current state of affairs related to assessing student outcomes at the college. Next, the report reviews several core principles that should underlie any campus-wide assessment effort. Finally, it proposes several next steps, most notably the creation of a task force, charged by either the president or provost, to develop a vision for a campus-wide assessment program as well as articulate what kind of support is needed to make this vision a reality.

The Current State of Affairs

Work on assessment has been taking place at the college for several years. OIRA prepared a table for the 2003 WASC accreditation report that outlined multiple ongoing activities related to assessment, and the provost directed departments to begin developing plans to look at student learning outcomes in 2004-05 as part of the overall educational plan. Several activities related to assessment have taken place during the past year. These activities have supported some progress toward assessing student learning outcomes, perhaps most notably by highlighting the need for focused leadership and skill-building around the topic.

The 2003 Educational Effectiveness Study prepared for the WASC accreditation visit identified 22 different activities considered assessment activities. A review done for this report

found that at least three of these activities no longer take place. While the WASC report did not differentiate among the type of assessment conducted, Table 1 organizes the activities described in the WASC report by topic and presents those activities no longer taking place in *italics*.

Table 1
College Assessment Activities

Program/Administrative Review	Student Satisfaction	Student Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course evaluations • Department program review • Service program review • College choice survey • Fact Book • Department profile • Department Cost Analysis • Grade distribution • Fall-to-spring retention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program assessment (Physical Therapy) • Satisfaction surveys • Exit surveys • Senior nursing survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Multi-cultural course evaluation</i> • <i>Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal</i> • California Thinking Skills Test (Nursing) • <i>New graduate survey (Nursing)</i> • CIRP/Freshman Survey • YFCY • College Student Survey • Alumnae Survey

In addition to the activities in Table 1, the college continues to have other ongoing assessment activities. Evaluations of department chairs, quantitative literacy assessments, the diversity climate survey, ISAE, and the work of the Irvine Fellows all reflect the college’s commitment to assessment.

The last four items identified under the student learning column are all plagued by low response rates, making it difficult to rely on them in drawing conclusions about the student experience at the college. However, most notably, there is no clear framework for how these data sources work as a whole to provide a portrait of institutional effectiveness and outcomes.

In 2004-05, the college took three main steps toward strengthening a culture of assessment. First, the Curriculum Committee of the Faculty Assembly integrated assessment into departmental program review. For example, program review surveys will now ask respondents whether department goals include work in assessment and whether the department’s curriculum provides for periodic assessment of student learning. In addition, student interview questions include an inquiry into whether or not students believe the department has gathered sufficient data to make a fair assessment of student learning.

Second, in fall 2004 the faculty assembly created, at the provost's request, a temporary Subcommittee on Student Assessment (under the Curriculum Committee). At the April 2005 faculty assembly meeting, the subcommittee presented a rationale for a standing faculty committee on Student Assessment. The group noted that their work had, in part, made it "apparent that we need on-going work on student assessment." The faculty assembly did not act on the proposal and some professors expressed hesitation with creating another standing committee when faculty participation on committees is already strained. One alternative suggested at the meeting was the creation of task force to move assessment forward.

Third, at the start of the 2004-05 academic year, the provost directed department chairs to work with their faculty colleagues to articulate at least one student learning outcome and craft a plan for assessing student learning related to that outcome. The provost provided support for this expectation by bringing Mary Allen to campus in November 2005. Allen worked with the Subcommittee on Assessment and offered a session for department chairs (attended by about half of the chairs) on how to describe student learning goals.

In April 2005, the provost called on the department chairs to submit their plans for assessing student learning. Of 15 departments, 12 submitted plans for review in this report. These plans, which arrived in myriad formats, demonstrate wide variation among MSMC faculty in both the understanding of student learning outcomes assessment and the ability to articulate and craft a plan to assess these outcomes. More specifically:

- **Learning Outcomes:** Approximately six of the 12 plans articulated one or more learning outcomes, but most of these require substantial refinement before they can be used in program assessment. One common weakness of the outcomes was that they were not behavioral in nature. An effective outcome statement must describe what a student will know, feel, or be able to do as a result of the experience. Saying that a student will have analytical skills or be competent in some area is a good start but must be refined to have value. In at least one instance, the outcomes were not student oriented but rather outlined a plan for how the department will develop an assessment plan.
- **Assessment Plan:** Departments' plans to assess student learning are generally limited, with particular weakness in articulating *how* assessment will be operationalized. For example, how will an outcome be assessed, by who, when, and how will the data be used? Between four and six departments appear to have made a start in this area.
- **Mapping to curriculum:** Up to 5 departments made some effort to map their learning outcomes to their curriculum. However, in many cases they may have done this so thoroughly as to make it more difficult to determine when assessment should take place. For instance, if every course in a department contributes to a

particular learning outcome, when and how should the outcome be assessed?
Departments will benefit from guidance in how to map outcomes to curricula.

- **Measures:** While most departments identified at least one measure of student learning, few departments seek to employ multiple measures.

These department assessment plans, as well as recent ongoing conversations with faculty members, have highlighted several assessment-related needs at MSMC:

- **Campus Model for Assessment:** The college needs a clear model for how assessment will be carried out on campus. The literature offers some guidance on possible models or we may wish to develop our own, drawing from lessons in the literature and through networking with others. The “conceptual model” shared with the chairs/deans in May 2005 may provide at least the basis for such a model. Any assessment model will provide a framework for a common conversation around assessment and a foundation for *templates* that can be used to guide the work of departments.
- **A campus-wide assessment plan:** The college currently lacks a campus-wide assessment plan. The work in 2004-05 provides a good start, but it also made clear that the work in departments is not tied to or guided by a larger framework. Such a plan would give considerable guidance to individual departments and majors in developing their own plans, since these plans should be integrated with a campus-wide plan. The learning outcomes identified in the 2003 WASC Educational Effectiveness Report are a sound start.
 - Graduates will be curious and committed to lifelong learning.
 - Students will develop critical thinking, enhanced by development of analytical skills and problem-solving techniques.
 - Graduates will be prepared for graduate school or advanced study should they choose it.
 - Students will have the broad grasp of humanities and their own discipline necessary to deal with new concepts and situations.
 - Women will learn to be leaders.
 - Graduates will thrive in their careers.
 - Graduates will have the ability to speak and write clearly and concisely.
 - Students will have a sense of volunteerism.
 - Graduates will show commitment to involved citizenship.

- Graduates will embody the mission statement in their lives, values and behaviors.

However, some of these outcomes may need to be further defined (e.g., “graduates will be curious and committed to lifelong learning”) and others may be difficult to measure (e.g., “graduates will thrive in their careers.”)

- **Integrated data collection system:** A campus-wide assessment plan will contribute to creating a coherent, integrated system of data collection to support assessment of student learning outcomes. Some of the elements of such a system may already be in place (e.g., the UCLA surveys of freshmen and seniors), while others are needed (e.g., faculty survey, survey of students in sophomore and/or junior years). An assessment plan will allow faculty and administrators to make informed choices about what surveys or other methods are needed, what questions need to be asked (e.g., more about diversity?), and how all of the methods, including data from departments, will support a cogent picture of the college as a whole.
- **Professional development:** Along with a campus model for assessment should come ongoing professional development for faculty and administrators in assessment generally and the model specifically. Faculty and administrators need to develop skills in identifying learning outcomes, crafting assessment plans, and *using* data to inform practice if assessment is to be worth the effort. Student learning outcomes assessment must be part of a faculty development program. Faculty and others may also need training in how to use technology and/or how to use the ERIS system* when it becomes functional.
- **A broader perspective:** The college has the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others and adapt these practices in a way that enhances the likelihood of their success at MSMC. Sending faculty and administrators to conferences and even connecting with colleagues in Southern California may be useful and cost-effective ways to benefit from lessons others have already learned. Assessment conferences, professional societies, books and monographs, and on-campus professional development are all resources that can help the college make progress with assessment.

The Future: Core Principles of an Effective Program Assessment System

Scholars and practitioners have outlined elements of an effective system of program assessment. AAHE’s “9 Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning” are among

* The ERIS system is currently being developed in collaboration with Collegis. When open, the system will provide pre-formatted reports using data from Colleague. The system may be useful in building reports that departments can use to support their assessment efforts.

the most widely known in higher education. However, others have offered their own lessons and observations as well.

If the above pages have outlined the college's current status with regard to assessment, the remaining pages offer some effort to suggest a vision for where the college *wants to be* regarding assessment and how to get there. Mount St. Mary's should aspire to an integrated system of outcomes assessment that documents student learning, supports its distinctive mission and character, and enhances institutional effectiveness. Some of the core principles in building such a system include:

- Assessment is linked to educational values. There should be a direct line from institutional goals and mission, to campus-level student learning outcomes, to department- and major-level learning goals for students. This structure supports an integrated system of student learning assessment.
- Assessment is comprehensive, systemic (affect the whole institution), and systematic (intentional, taking place in a clear cycle). Effective assessment is based on an intentional plan that outlines clear learning outcomes, collects data, and disseminates and uses the findings. Assessment should occur at all levels of the institution to recognize the multi-dimensional nature of student learning and to get a comprehensive portrait of the student experience.
- Assessment is a formative activity focused not on evaluating faculty or programs, but on supporting student learning and success. While assessment may be part of the program review process (e.g., does the department have an effective assessment system and what has it learned as a result?), the assessment findings must be seen as supporting a process of continuous improvement rather than as a mechanism for holding faculty and departments accountable.
- Assessment findings must be put into practice. An effective assessment system applies a "plan-do-check-act" model, where findings from assessment are carefully reviewed and actions to improve the student learning experience are taken. Assessment has only symbolic value if its lessons are not applied.
- Assessment uses, whenever possible, multiple measures to document student learning outcomes. This process of triangulation provides more reliable findings and recognizes the multi-dimensional nature of student learning.
- Assessment should be led by and seated in the faculty, but requires collaboration and involvement from all stakeholders (students, staff, administrators) and active support from institutional leaders.
- Assessment is transparent. Community members should be aware of the desired learning outcomes, data on those outcomes, and plans for change to support student learning.

- Assessment succeeds when institutions use resources to provide technical and administrative support for the system. Laura Helminski* noted in a recent presentation that the campuses that are succeeding with assessment are supporting it with resources (staff, buy-out of faculty time, training, grants for assessment work, etc.). Faculty benefit from guidance in writing and measuring learning outcomes, resources are needed to purchase and administer reliable surveys, and infrastructure is required to implement an integrated assessment system.

An effective system of assessment embraces the above principles. In addition, such a system supports a more efficient process by providing a broad structure within which faculty and administrators can work. This structure ensures a common language about assessment across the campus and minimizes the chance that faculty will feel like they are “re-inventing the wheel” each year – a problem common on many campuses such a system.

Next Steps

This final section proposes next steps for how to move forward in developing a system of program assessment at MSMC. Creating a task force, which was suggested at the April 2005 faculty assembly meeting, seems like a plausible and productive option. Therefore, I conclude by offering recommendations for the composition and goals of the task force, as well as some questions or topics it might address.

Why a task force?

At the April 2005 faculty assembly meeting, it became clear that some faculty were hesitant to create a standing committee on assessment at this point. While they appear to see the value in or need for assessment, faculty expressed some concern about adding another committee to an already strained shared governance system.

A task force provides a clear way to move assessment forward outside of the traditional governance structure. In fact, a task force may provide greater urgency to assessment than might be the case if the issue were sent to a standing committee. A task force can be central in guiding a campus-wide conversation about assessment, suggesting a direction for the future, and lending credibility to future actions. The task force can be easily convened by the president or provost and given a charge to carry out within a pre-determined timeframe. Moreover, such a task force

* Helminski is chair of the Communication/Reading department at Rio Salado College (Maricopa Community College District) in Phoenix. She has led campus assessment efforts for 15 years and recently became chair of Maricopa Community College District Student Academic Achievement and Assessment Committee.

provides the opportunity to engage a constituency broader than faculty (e.g., student affairs staff, students) in the conversation around assessment.

Task force charge and desired outcomes

The most critical need for the college is to create a comprehensive framework and sense of momentum related to assessment while helping the faculty take ownership for assessment in general. The task force should therefore have this goal as its focus. Working for a period of six to ten months, the task force can play a critical role in helping MSMC move its assessment work forward. Specifically, I recommend that the task force charge include:

- Articulate a vision of program assessment for the college. This vision should include recommending or creating a model of program assessment for the college, proposing campus-wide learning outcomes, and selecting instruments or other methods for examining the student experience across the college.
- Identify barriers to implementing an integrated system of program assessment, recommend next steps, and highlight resources (financial, technical, etc.) needed to build an effective assessment system at the college.

The task force should meet frequently enough to build a shared understanding of what a culture of assessment of the college would look like. To build this knowledge and understanding, the task force (or some of its members) may wish to engage in activities such as the following:

- Convene a campus dialogue about assessment. This dialogue could uncover fears and concerns, as well as aspirations, related to assessment. Such an open conversation would create momentum for moving forward.
- Develop knowledge of what other campuses are doing with assessment. This may include focused site visits to one or more campuses, phone interviews, reviews of other campus web sites, and/or a review of the assessment literature.
- Participate in their own professional development related to assessment. This may mean campus-based or local workshops, or some members may wish to attend an assessment conference held in Indianapolis each November.
- Conduct an environmental scan of current assessment activities at Mount St. Mary's College. Walvoord (2004) recommends interviewing each department chair to uncover what departments are doing in terms of assessment, since many faculty may not even think of these activities as assessment unless prompted in conversation.

The task force should have a multi-disciplinary, campus-wide membership if its work is to be credible and useful. Members should include senior and junior faculty from a range of fields, administrators, and students. As a whole, the task force should have members who are strong communicators, are respected on campus, have sense of and/or can gather data on institutional history and culture, and are able to look at the “big picture” in the context of campus context.

Topics and questions to address

The final product from the task force should be a blue print that can serve as the assessment plan for the college. Such a plan would articulate college-wide learning outcomes, propose a structure and timeline for implementing and monitoring a campus-wide assessment system, identify necessary resources, and provide momentum for moving assessment forward. While any plan would be just the beginning, open to refinement over time, such a plan is critical if the college is to build an integrated assessment system. Among the questions or topics the group may wish to address are:

- What are the desired outcomes of a Mount education?
- What model should the college use for its assessment system?
- How widely (or narrowly?) does the college want to assess student outcomes? Will we stick to just outcomes in majors and general education, or will we seek to look at co-curricular learning as well?
- How (what surveys or other means) and how frequently should the college examine the student experience? Should it do so for all students or just a sample?
- Should alumnae be surveyed? When and with what questions in mind?
- Does the desire to make college-wide claims about student learning require that we have at least some common assessment measures across departments? If so, what are they?
- What happens to assessment results? Who is responsible for helping campus units and/or departments use the results to inform decision-making and improve practice?
- Will assessment happen in a serial order (for instance, assessing students one year, analyzing results the next, and making changes the third) or in a parallel format?

- Will the college benefit from having an external consultant to support the assessment process? If so, what role might he or she play?
- Who will have access to each department's assessment plan and results? Will there be varying levels of access depending on position?
- What skills and knowledge do people need for a system of assessment to be effective?
- What is already happening at the Mount in terms of assessment, or has happened in the past, that can inform our current and future work?
- What support is needed for the college to create a vibrant, integrated system of program assessment?

Conclusion: The value-added of assessment

This report, and much of the current dialogue in higher education, takes the value of assessment as a given. While the reasons for and benefits of building a system of program assessment often appear obvious, it may be useful to conclude by considering both moral and practical reasons why creating such a system are in the college's interest.

In a moral sense, one can argue that the college has an obligation to assess student learning and to use what it learns to improve its programs and services. If we invite students to our campus, ask them to pay large sums, and promise them they will learn, we should be interested in determining whether and how students are learning what we claim they will. Even more basically, we should be interested in clearly articulating what we hope they will learn. Moreover, we should be committed to applying what we discover as part of a system of continuous improvement so that the students who come learn as much as possible as quickly and efficiently as possible.

There are also many practical reasons for building an effective system of assessment. Certainly, pressure from accrediting bodies such as WASC is one motivation. In addition, a sound system of assessment, when used to improve the student learning experience and document outcomes, can be a powerful public relations asset. Having clearly stated outcomes can help attract the kinds of students most likely to stay and succeed at the college, supporting retention and time-to-degree success. Having clearly documented outcomes also can be a great benefit in recruiting students, succeeding in grant competitions, and securing donations. Finally, an effective system of assessment can support institutional resource allocation and faculty work by allowing both the college and faculty to make more informed decisions about where to invest their resources (e.g., time and money) to most effectively support student learning.

Creating and supporting a *system* of student learning assessment is critical if we are to truly document outcomes, earn faculty buy-in, and avoid continually re-inventing the wheel. While building this system will take time and resources, the experiences of others suggests it will be worth the effort.

Reference

Walvoord, B. (2004). *Assessment clear and simple: A Practical guide for institutions, departments, and general education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.