

*Developing a Faculty-Owned, Course-
Embedded Approach to General
Education Assessment*

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Session Overview

This session will provide an overview of one college's experience in planning, developing, and implementing a strategy for a course-embedded approach to general education assessment that grew out of faculty deliberation and collaboration.

Key Issues

- **Assessment of general education outcomes needs to be grounded in the work and culture of the faculty.**
- **Collaboration and “buy in” on the part of faculty members from across the curriculum are essential to assessment that will be more than exercises in compliance.**
- **A central premise is that developing an effective culture of assessment grows out of the collaborative work of the faculty.**

Politics in the Good Sense

- **Setting social responsible goals, understanding the interests of those affected by them, intersecting their interests with the goals, and empowering people to work together to produce a good result.**
- **We must first discipline ourselves to practice politics in the good sense and then frame the issues in a way that empowers others to join us in joint problem solving.**

Managing Ourselves

- **We manage ourselves by framing events in a positive light and disciplining ourselves to see others as half-full vessels.**
- **We must become aware of our own orientations, understand how our orientations affect others, and frame problems as joint problem solving with a win-win outcome.**

Managing Others

- We must understand the core emotional concerns of others and frame problems in ways that support their self-esteem and positive self-image along with clearly defining the parameters of the problem we need to solve.
- Their core concerns fit the framework developed by Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro (2005) in *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate*.

Core Emotional Concerns

- **Appreciation** - Faculty want to feel understood, heard, and valued for their point of view.
- **Affiliation** – Faculty want to be treated as a colleagues rather than adversaries.
- **Autonomy** – Faculty want to feel that their autonomy / freedom / space is not impinged upon.

Core Emotional Concerns

- **Status – Faculty want to feel that their status is respected in areas where it is deserved.**
- **Role – Faculty want to feel satisfied with the activities they perform within their role.**
- **To get faculty buy-in to assessment it is essential that the process be framed and implemented in ways that meet these needs.**

Initial Framing of Assessment

- **Assessment came to the college as an ill-defined external mandate that was perceived to be an adversarial process with connotations that threatened these core faculty concerns. Many faculty members raised questions about how such a mandate could be incorporated into college policy and practice without violating the fundamental values of the institution.**

Faculty Concerns and Assessment

- **Appreciation – this concern was violated in that faculty members felt that they cannot be trusted to maintain standards, grades are viewed as arbitrary and thus not an accurate measure of student achievement. A third party needs to verify achievement and faculty input is not valued.**

Faculty Concerns and Assessment

- **Affiliation** – Assessment seen as an adversarial process of surveillance, standardization, and control.
- **Autonomy** – Assessment requires external agencies to “check up on” what faculty members are doing in their classes.
- **Status** – Assessment represents a kind of institutionalized disrespect of the status of faculty.
- **Role** – Assessment puts faculty into a subordinate role that raises questions about their professionalism.

Positives to Build On

- The campus culture also contained a number of positive attributes that made it possible to neutralize the dysfunctional elements surrounding assessment and reframe general education in a positive light.
- Blackburn is a small college with 35 full time faculty who know each other and form a community characterized by transparency and trusting relationships. This eased potential problems with communication and decision-making.

Positives to Build On

- **The faculty previously had developed departmental assessment plans that used primary trait descriptors to develop rubrics measuring each department's learning objectives. Each department defined its mission, determined its departmental goals, and developed descriptors used to measure the degree to which they were met. As a result, most departments had taken ownership of departmental assessment.**

Positives to Build On

- **The faculty had recently revised the broad goals of general education in the areas of writing, critical thinking, and multi-cultural understanding and, within each of the three categories, had specified a set of learning objectives.**

Reframe the Faculty

- Faculty were reframed as an asset rather than an obstacle.
- Faculty do assessment regularly, care about the results, and are good at it. Faculty take ownership of their grading and care about the results. Grading techniques can be shared and developed across disciplinary boundaries. This expertise was understood as an asset.
- Faculty care about educational goals and are motivated to achieve them. Faculty set the general education goals after long and intense discussions and have ownership of them. They are well-qualified to measure them because they are intimately involved in the development and delivery of the curriculum.

Reframe the Process

- *Build on the familiar* – Faculty already had developed rubrics to assess their majors and this experience was transferred to general education. Assessment was not an unfamiliar, foreign enterprise to be imposed on the faculty.
- *Build on existing commitments* – The faculty had just completed a revision of the general education goals and had taken ownership of them.
- *Build on existing routines and processes* – Assessment is not a separate endeavor but an organic part of the normal process of teaching a class and evaluating student progress. Embed assessment into the normal routines as part of the teaching process.

Reframe the Process

- *Make the process a vehicle for intellectual exchange and reaffirmation* – The process of developing the assessment instrument should bring faculty with common interests together to share those interests and find common ground and mutual support.
- *Make the process a show of respect* – Pay them for their time and serve food.
- *Make it necessary and unavoidable* – Find an SOB. The HLC had made it clear in no uncertain terms that this had to be done. Given this it was better that we did it ourselves in a way that demonstrated our commitment to and achievement of mission and goals than to have some external body define what that means.

Addressing Faculty Core Concerns

- **Appreciation** – Faculty were valued for their commitment to standards and recognized for their skills.
- **Affiliation** – Faculty were embraced as colleagues in a process of joint-problem solving.
- **Autonomy** – Faculty had their autonomy protected by asking them to develop their own measures for their own goals.
- **Status** – Faculty had their status validated and respected in the area of their core responsibilities.
- **Role** – Faculty were asked to engage in activities central to what they perceived to be their unique role.

The Proposal

- From the general education goals faculty selected those central to the class they were teaching.
- Faculty who selected the same goal were organized into interdisciplinary teams to work on a common rubric to assess achievement of that goal.
- Faculty were to develop an assignment for the class that required students to demonstrate achievement of that goal.
- The goal was to be assessed as part of the normal grading process for the class and the score on the rubric would be recorded on a common form and sent to the Office of Institutional Research.

The Workshop

- The rubrics were developed in a workshop held in January shortly before the start of classes.
- Faculty who attended were paid a modest stipend and lunch and snacks were provided.
- After a brief introduction and the writing of a common rubric, faculty were divided into groups based on the goal they intended to assess.
- Workshop was attended by 35 full time and adjunct faculty. All departments and disciplines were represented.

Writing the Rubrics - Introduction

- A Nominal Group Technique was used to write a sample rubric. Participants were asked to write a description in response to the following question:
- “Of all the conferences or workshops you have ever attended, what were the characteristics of the most useful conference or workshop?”
- All responses were listed, common language was agreed to and the description was given the value of 5.

Writing the Rubrics - Introduction

- The process was repeated for: “Of all the conferences or workshops you have ever attended, what were the characteristics of the least useful conference or workshop?” This was given the value of 1.
- The process was repeated for: “Of all the conferences or workshops you have ever attended, what were the characteristics of an average conference or workshop?” this was given the value of 3.
- The group then wrote descriptions for 2 and 4.

Writing the Rubrics - Introduction

- This process had direct and indirect goals:
- The primary goal was to teach the procedure for developing the rubrics.
- A more subtle but important goal was to encourage a commitment to making this workshop a productive experience by first developing a consensus on what they felt they should get out of it.

Developing the Rubrics

- Each group had a facilitator and they were given the following instructions:
 - Write a description of how the top 10% of students you have had performed on this objective. Give it a 5.
 - Write a description of how the bottom 10% of students you have had performed on this objective. Give it a 1.
 - Write a description of how the average student you have had performed on this objective. Give it a 3.
 - Write a description of performance between 3 and 5 and give it a 4.
 - Write a description of performance between 1 and 3 and give it a 2.

Developing the Rubrics

- **Participants cycled through several goals in the course of the day.**
- **Rubrics were collected, compiled, and distributed to the participants for comment.**
- **Over several weeks the rubrics were refined and polished in response to feedback until a consensus was reached.**

Testing & Implementing the Rubrics

- Faculty were asked to develop an assignment for the Spring semester to test the rubrics.
- After mid-term exams they were sent a class roll with space to write in the score for each of the rubrics they had agreed to use, and a copy of the rubrics.
- The scores were entered and sent to the Office of Institutional Research.
- The program was implemented during the following fall semester.

Data Collection

Critical Thinking Goals Summary

1. Students will identify the issue in an argument and the position taken by the author
2. Student will understand that evidence is necessary in order to arrive at reasonable conclusions
3. Students will understand the basic assumptions behind an argument
4. Students will identify and consider the influence of context on an issue
5. Students will understand the process by which one arrives at a logical conclusion and distinguish between valid and fallacious arguments/evidence
6. Students will apply abstract ideas to solve problems

Data Collection

Writing Goals Summary

1. Students will demonstrate conceptualization and thinking. Papers will be focused, well organized, and well developed.
2. Students will demonstrate the ability to write and express ideas. Sentences will be clear and demonstrate command of formal English structure; papers will be free of errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics.
3. Students will demonstrate the ability to use citations and documentation. Papers using outside sources will illustrate appropriate use of the rules for citation; bibliographies or reference lists will be written according to a recognized style manual.

Data Collection

Multicultural Understanding Goals Summary

1. Students will explain the way groups, societies, and cultures address human needs and concerns.
2. Students will demonstrate an awareness of levels and types of cultural unity and divisiveness within their own and other cultures.
3. Students will identify rules and attitudes that pose challenges to cross cultural understanding and understand that these differences in values lead to misunderstanding.

Key Outcomes

- Assessment has been built in at the course level in the general education program.
- Faculty members across the college participated fully in the development of the goals and processes for measuring them.
- The data to date suggest that students have generally demonstrated greater mastery of some general education goals than others.
- Much more remains to be done in terms of methodological purity, but a foundation of “buy in” and participation has been set.
- As data for the full academic career of students become available longitudinal analyses will provide greater insight into the effectiveness and outcomes of general education.

Additional Thoughts

- **The method will need continuous maintenance to produce valid and reliable data.**
- **As new faculty become part of the process they will be less likely than the original faculty to see the rubrics as their work and take ownership.**
- **There may be problems with interrater reliability as faculty in different disciplines apply a uniform set of statements to what they do.**
- **There is a need to hold regular workshops to reaffirm the rubrics and standardize scoring.**

