



GSU Assessment Newsletter

Spring 2007 is Georgia State's last opportunity to document student learning before we prepare our SACS report this summer. SACS is the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, our regional accreditor. The 2006-2007 assessment reports should be posted on WEAVEonline by June 1.

GSU Assessment
Newsletter

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Learning Outcomes Assessment—Year 3: Closing the Loop

During the 2005-2006 academic year a tremendous amount of work was done by GSU faculty in collecting information about student learning, analyzing the results to determine how to improve our instructional programs and posting the results and action plans on WEAVEonline. Our work, which had started in 2004 when each degree program submitted a set of student learning outcomes (http://education.gsu.edu/ctl/outcomes/gsu_plan.htm) has now come full cycle.

Soon the 2006-2007 cycle of assessment reporting on WEAVEonline will begin. In many ways it will be easier than last year's assessment cycle because mission statements, student learning outcomes, aligning learning outcomes with the University Strategic Plan, Institutional Priorities, and general education learning outcomes have already been entered. Likewise, the descriptions of measures and targets for performance have also been posted. WEAVEonline will preserve this information for the 2006-2007 assessment reports.

On the other hand, this spring's assessment cycle is the most important one that we will do because it is the last opportunity we will have to document that we meet the SACS requirements for assessing student learning and, most importantly, using assessment results to inform and improve what occurs in our classrooms.

The SACS accreditation standard is very clear: **3.3.1 The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results.** (Principles of Accreditation, 2005. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools: p. 34).

Note the key words in the standard: "... provides evidence of improvement".

To meet the SACS standard each program will need to:

1. **Review the Action Plans that you developed in last year's assessment report to make certain that the recommended changes have been implemented.**
2. **Review your programs' learning outcomes statements, measures, and targets that were use last year and update them with any changes/revisions adopted by your faculty.**
3. **Collect data on student learning from as many of your students as possible, using course-embedded, direct assessments of student learning in the relevant courses.**
4. **Note any improvement in student learning over what was reported last year, especially those areas in which action plans had been developed for your 2005-2006 report and describe then in the Analysis section.**
5. **Develop Action Plans for all measures in which your target was not met. It is also very important to develop Action Plans that would improve student learning for those measures in which the target was met to indicate our commitment to improvement.**
6. **Post your 2006-2007 assessment cycle findings on WEAVEonline. We have a June 1, 2007 deadline.**

We have some good models of what assessment reports should include in those programs which received the GSU Departmental Instructional Effectiveness awards. You can review them at <http://www2.gsu.edu/ctl>.

GSU's Quality Enhancement Plan for SACS

The SACS accreditation process requires each institution to develop a quality enhancement plan (QEP) which will promote student learning in a significant manner. The goal of Georgia State University's QEP is to increase our undergraduate students' performance on two of the University's general education learning outcomes—critical thinking and written communication.

Why critical thinking and writing? Because an inspection of the learning outcomes for undergraduate programs makes it clear we are already committed to having our students solve the complex, discipline-based problems in each major and to communicate effectively. In addition, many programs report that feedback from the employers of their graduates emphasizes that writing and thinking skills are critical to graduates' success. There is also evidence in the professional literature that writing is an effective tool for developing critical thinking skills. For our QEP, Critical Thinking is defined as: "the general term given to a wide range of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions needed to effectively identify, analyze, and evaluate arguments and truth claims; to discover and overcome personal prejudices; to formulate and present convincing reasons in support of conclusions; and to make reasonable, intelligent decisions about what to believe and what to do" (Bassham, Irwin, Nardone & Wallace, 2005, p. 1).

The strategy for our QEP is to explore and pilot test the kind of critical thinking and writing activities that produce the desired learning. Over the next couple of years we will develop at least two course critical-thinking-through-writing (CTW) courses in all undergraduate programs which will ultimately become a graduation requirement. While the specific design of these courses is a departmental matter, each CTW course would present students with engaging assignments and activities based on issues, problems, and applications within their discipline and approach these through multiple writing-to-learn activities that are characterized by frequent feedback and opportunities for revision. The writing to learn activities may often be short, ungraded work and feedback might be provided by peers, self-evaluation using a model, or faculty comments. For more information contact George Pullman (gpullman@gsu.edu) or Harry Dangel (hdangel@gsu.edu).

Action Plans for WEAVEonline Reports

The Weave Online reports are in—Georgia State's web-based system for reporting student learning outcomes and plans for improving learning. That is the good news. But as you know, assessment is an ongoing process. The department that is concerned about improving student learning must also be serious about developing an evidence-based approach to determining whether or not students are learning what we need to have them learn. Based upon reviews of the 2005-2006 reports, we have put together a list of recommendations for improving future reports, as well as a list of some of the hallmarks of superior assessment reports. We hope the list is helpful.

Recommendations for improving future reports:

- All academic programs must have multiple student learning outcomes that assess what you have determined to be the significant learning outcomes of your programs, namely the knowledge, skills, and values that students should master. The learning objectives listed on course syllabi might serve as a guide. It is alright to have outcomes that don't involve student learning, but these would be in areas such as student recruitment or employment. Undergraduate programs include the major well as general education learning outcomes.
- Make certain that your student learning outcomes use action verbs which define the evidence of learning. Terms which describe actions (e.g., students apply, demonstrate, operate, defend) are preferable to words like identify and understand.
- Always develop an action plan to address any unmet or partially met target levels. To show that your program wants to improve student learning beyond the minimum, you should also include action plans for areas in which the targets were met.
- Because course grades are usually based on the combination of multiple areas of skill and knowledge, avoid relying on grades to document a learning outcome. High or low grades are difficult to align with specific learning outcomes.
- Always include an analysis of your program's strengths and

weaknesses. The analysis section is the perfect place for a comparison of the findings on student learning from 2005-2006 with the 2006-2007 results.

- Only refer to the GSU General Education learning outcomes if you are reporting on an undergraduate program.

Superior assessment reports are characterized by:

- Clearly specified and defined array of learning outcomes which emphasize "deep learning";
- Multiple, course-embedded assessments. The most effective measures are typically individual course assignments. When possible, validated assessments with other measures to help to document mastery of the program's learning outcomes (e.g., licensing examinations or surveys of employers, when available, or surveys of students).
- An assessment process that invites broad and deep participation of faculty and students;
- Program targets for student performance each year that are based on the assessment results from the previous year (e.g., "On the attached rubric, we expect majors' median score to be at least .25 higher than the previous 3,7 out of 5 on mastery of content knowledge on their capstone paper);
- Targets that are a clear and rigorous statement of expectations (mean of 3.5 of 5) and addresses the proportion of students who should meet the standard (e.g., 75%). Standards do not always need to be numerical but should be sufficiently clear that multiple faculty would come to the same conclusion when assessing students' work.
- Analyzing and meaningfully interpreting the findings (this may be evidenced by identification of multiple strengths and weaknesses noted from the data); and
- Planning meaningful modifications based on findings.

How can my department win the instructional effectiveness award?

The Departmental Instructional Effectiveness Award is to recognize and share at the university level outstanding work in promoting and documenting student learning. The Provost awards two departments a \$250 per non-visiting faculty (instructors, professors, and lecturers) supplement to their non-personal budget for the fiscal year following their selection. Winning departments also have their name added to a plaque that recognizes the annual winners. Departments are in one of two categories: professional programs with accreditation associations and programs without accreditation bodies. No nominations are necessary. A faculty committee will select the winning departments from the annual reports on student learning outcomes that are posted on WEAVEonline. To win the award, a department should do the following:

- Make certain that the assessment reports for all programs are posted to the WEAVEonline system **before the deadline**;
 - Make certain that each parts of all programs' assessment reports are marked as complete in WEAVEonline; and
 - Provide clear evidence that all departmental reports meet the SACS standard that each program "... identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results".
- Remember, our deadline for posting this year's assessment reports on WEAVEonline is June 1.**