
Evaluating Assessment Reports from Departments and Programs

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About two years ago, all departments and programs at the University of Wisconsin (UW), Whitewater, were asked to develop assessment plans. In these plans, three types of objectives were described: subject matter, cognitive development, and skills. The University Assessment Committee (UAC) provided guidelines for writing these objectives, which included, among other criteria, using specific verbs and stating the objectives in terms of what students would be expected to demonstrate once the objectives had been achieved. When the plans were completed, they were divided among the members of UAC, who evaluated them and provided

the plans and generating reports of assessment activities.

The first round of assessment reports was submitted to UAC in fall 1994. UAC decided that the feedback for these reports should be more structured than had been the case previously. This was accomplished by developing a form that focused on four criteria: (1) specific measurable objectives, (2) multiple measures/thorough data collection, (3) decisions for changes/no changes documented, and (4) feedback to students/faculty. The standard of measurement applied for each criterion was "needs improvement" or "meets the standard." A number of considerations guided this pro-

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written feedback. Each member evaluated 10–12 plans from both their own and other colleges.

At this point, peer review was intended to provide a necessarily vague sense of direction to departments and programs. After all, the members of UAC were still (and continue to be) in the process of refining their own expectations of what a good assessment plan should include. This ambiguity was freely admitted by all who served on UAC, and it seemed to enhance the receptivity of the rest of the faculty to the feedback. It was important to convey a "we're all feeling our way together" tone while still providing meaningful information to departments and programs. Meetings between UAC members and the department chairs and program coordinators were scheduled in spring 1994 to encourage meaningful dialogue about the assessment process. Generally, comments from the faculty were positive, and the university community was ready to take the next step in the process—implementing

the plans and generating reports of assessment activities. First, UAC decided that it was important to specify the criteria for evaluation because prior to that point in the assessment process the feedback had been rather informal and had not been framed within the context of actual criteria. It was relatively easy for UAC to determine the four criteria given the expectations of the North Central Association, which will send a visiting team to our campus in spring 1996. In addition, the criteria are consistent with previous directives to the departments and programs.

To facilitate the actual use of the instrument, the chair of UAC perused all of the assessment reports, keeping in mind the following question for each criterion: If an assessment report were to meet the expectations of UAC, what would that look like? So, with respect to the first criterion, an example of a specific, measurable objective was isolated and shared with the members of UAC: Women's Studies majors should be able to describe women's experiences from interdisciplinary, historical, and cross-cultural perspectives.

The second criterion addresses the need for departments and programs to specify multiple measures in assessing outcomes. The Marketing Department listed the following: student evaluations, performance in capstone courses, exit interviews with graduating seniors, internship evaluations, placement, alumni survey, employer survey, student participation in campus activities, and performance in student groups. A detailed explanation for each measure is included in the report, which makes it relatively easy to determine if the data collection process is thorough.

Another important element in the evaluation process is the extent to which departments and programs can describe changes based on assessment information. When refining the third criterion, UAC members posed some interesting questions: What if a department or program has made no changes? What if the assessment data support keeping things as they are? Although "no changes" was seen as a possibility, evidence supporting this decision was still regarded as important. The following excerpt is from the Sociology Department report: "The 1993 alumni survey revealed that graduates were generally quite satisfied with the availability of faculty for advising, out of class informal discussions, etc.: satisfaction ranged from a low of 77% in the 1978–82 cohort to a high of 97% in the 1983–87 cohort. High levels of satisfaction were also found in our 1991 pilot assessment survey of undergraduate majors. However, the latter also expressed an interest in even more informal contacts with faculty. Therefore, we attempted to rejuvenate the Student Sociology Association in 1992. It is too early to evaluate fully the impact of such activities as 'Meet the Teach' sessions, picnics, and service projects."

This type of decision making based on evidence (data) was the focus of the third criterion.

The fourth criterion, feedback to students/faculty, was probably the most elusive for UAC. In the course of discussing an example from the Geography Department's assessment report, it became clearer to committee members what was entailed here: "Since the use of student portfolios and the mid-program assessment of geography majors are in their infancy, it will be important to fine-tune and improve these in 1994–95

and coming years. The assessment mechanisms need more time and improvement before they constitute reliable bases on which to initiate program change and improvement. The early indication is that the new assessment mechanisms themselves will lead to enhancing individual student performance as well as overall program effectiveness. We have not yet reached the point where all geography majors fully under-

work in pairs and would evaluate reports generated within their own colleges. This procedure would allow UAC members to work with colleagues whom they knew. A fair degree of trust had been built up by UAC, and members were quite comfortable working within their own colleges. The strategy appears to have worked as a number of UAC members have reported having discussions "around the watercool-

ing tone when corresponding with the faculty.

Generally, the process of evaluating the assessment reports was smooth. The feedback from chairs and program coordinators has been positive. Some had questions about how to meet UAC's expectation for the fourth criterion, feedback to faculty/students. This was not too surprising since it was this same criterion that caused definitional problems for UAC members. But it is precisely this kind of dialogue that has forced the UW-Whitewater community to crystallize its understanding of assessment. Probably the greatest benefit of the approach described above is that faculty are working directly with one another to improve departments and programs. Since the late 1980s, when Whitewater became fully committed to assessment, the administration has supported a faculty-centered model where the faculty have primary responsibility for planning and executing assessment activities.

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stand and appreciate the objectives of these two assessment activities. The major project for Fall 1994 is to revise existing handouts, prepare new handouts, and conduct student information sessions which better convey the importance of the new assessment activities to all geography majors and more consistently alert new majors as they enter the program."

This excerpt from the report indicates that the department has a plan for sharing information about the assessment process prior to students' involvement. Of course, down the road, it is perhaps even more important that the results of decision making based on assessment data are shared with students and faculty alike. One committee member on UAC refers to this as "closing the loop," an integral part of an effective assessment plan.

Committee members discussed extensively each criterion using the above examples. The goal was to create a group of evaluators who were of a similar mind and had similar expectations. The effective evaluation of assessment reports is closely tied to a somewhat uniform understanding of the evaluation criteria. This uniformity should exist at least at the level of determining whether or not the report meets UAC's standards. Since UAC decided it would be important to share such information with departments and programs, the form was designed accordingly. Of course, the ability to set standards is contingent on the process of establishing expectations.

UAC was then ready to apportion the workload. The membership of the committee represents all four colleges on the campus. In fact, there are at least two members from all but one college. It was decided the committee members would

er" with colleagues about the assessment process and ways that reporting assessment results might be improved.

Each UAC pair was responsible for evaluating about a dozen reports. Since the College of Letters and Sciences had the largest number of departments and programs, four UAC members completed those evaluations. Because two UAC members evaluated each report independently, the committee was able to provide two completed evaluation forms to each department and program. There was some concern about a potential lack of consistency in the independent evaluations and how that would be received by chairs and program coordinators. It was decided that the UAC chair would inspect the pairs of evaluations to determine if they were unduly disparate. In actuality, due in part to certainty that each committee member understood the criteria, there were no instances where the two evaluations were substantially different.

The evaluations were all completed by the end of November 1994. In early December, the UAC chair prepared a mailing to all departments and programs that included copies of the independent evaluations, two exemplary assessment reports, and a cover letter. The cover letter introduced the evaluation findings and the process used. It explained the function of UAC as a "resource for departments/programs in the ongoing process of improving the quality of the educational opportunities offered to students at UW-Whitewater." To this end, chairs and program coordinators were invited to contact any of the UAC members (all of whom were listed at the close of the letter) if they had questions. Members of UAC constantly underscored the need to portray an invita-

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