

## SECTION ONE

# Faculty Development for Assessment

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## The Way to a Faculty Member's Head Is through the Discipline

*Barbara D. Wright*

*Look for: Faculty development for colleagues in psychology, sociology, and political science. Learned societies in these fields provided ideas and support for presentations at a meeting of the New England Educational Assessment Network. From Assessment Update 17:3 (2005).*

Assessment gatherings have multiplied exponentially over the past fifteen years, and the amount of guidance now available through conferences, workshops, and other kinds of events is truly impressive. From the national organizations to accrediting agencies and statewide consortia to campus meetings and on-line resources, there are rich opportunities for postsecondary educators to learn about virtually all aspects of assessment: theory, practice, policy, methods, trends, costs, benefits, and so on.

Yet there is one aspect of assessment that has been neglected. Current offerings are overwhelmingly generic—that is, they do not speak specifically to the interests of a faculty member in sociology or geology, in art history or business. Yet the discipline is where a faculty member

lives, literally and metaphorically. It is the discipline to which faculty members devote a lifetime of scholarship. It is love for and expertise in the discipline that they hope to cultivate in their students.

For years, when policymakers or administrators or others have complained that faculty are the chief obstacle to the implementation of assessment, I've wondered silently whether the complainers ever took the assessment conversation to those faculty members' home turf and spoke to them in their own language. I've always suspected that the assessment message would get through more readily if faculty were approached through their disciplines. In April 2004, my colleagues at the New England Educational Assessment Network (NEEAN) and I had an opportunity to test that theory.

## **Sponsorship**

NEEAN was founded in 1995 by postsecondary educators in New England who wanted to provide their colleagues with opportunities to learn about best practices in assessment. As the assessment movement unfolded, NEEAN wanted to ensure that the energy devoted to assessment would actually improve student learning and strengthen institutional effectiveness.

Since its founding, NEEAN's signature event has been the Fall Forum. This one-day conference now offers nationally known keynote speakers and over a dozen sessions; it regularly attracts over three hundred participants from around the region. The Fall Forum has received excellent reviews over the years, but it too is a "generic" assessment event.

In fall 2003, NEEAN's advisory board members decided to try something different by reaching out to faculty who might not have been involved in assessment prior to that time by offering them a discipline-specific development opportunity. Thus began planning for a half-day spring workshop called *Dialogues in the Disciplines*. Thanks to the cooperation of the University of Massachusetts' Office of Assessment, we were able to hold the workshop in a central location, the Amherst campus. Our regional accrediting body, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), also supported this experiment. NEASC has an in-

terest in extending awareness of assessment from the administrative to the faculty level; their collaboration was essential in getting publicity for our workshop to campuses and lending the event additional legitimacy.

## Considerations

The first and most obvious decision to be made was which disciplines to focus on. We settled on a cluster of social sciences—psychology, sociology, and political science—for several reasons. First, these three represent popular disciplines that involve large numbers of faculty and students. In other words, we would have a significant pool of potential registrants—which was important, since for this first-time event we needed enough participation to break even financially—and a large pool of students who could eventually benefit from the use of assessment findings to improve learning and strengthen programs.

Second, we wanted the workshop and its three disciplinary tracks to have scholarly legitimacy with the social scientists that we hoped to serve. That meant looking to the learned societies, following their recommendations, and incorporating their materials into the three tracks. The American Sociological Association (ASA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the American Political Science Association all had taken up the issue of assessment, had articulated positions on what constitutes good practice, and had posted discipline-specific materials on the Web. The ASA's initiatives had a particularly long history, and the APA had recently posted the findings of an assessment task force, including suggested learning goals for psychology majors and the suitability of a range of assessment methods for determining student achievement of the goals.

Third, we wanted the tracks to be led by faculty members in the three disciplines who had hands-on experience with assessment and who could speak with authority about defining learning goals, selecting assessment methods, using assessment findings, and avoiding pitfalls, specifically in terms of psychology, sociology, or political science. With the help of the learned societies and colleagues, we were fortunate to locate three excellent workshop leaders: Catherine Berheide of Skidmore

College in New York (sociology), Margaret Launius of Mansfield University in Pennsylvania, and John Ishiyama of Truman State University in Missouri (political science).

Fourth, it was important to us to put a local face on the workshop, so we paired our lead presenters with New England partners—faculty in the region who had assessment experience and would also bring some knowledge of our regional accrediting body’s expectations, the local policy environment, and economic constraints. Steven Adair of Central Connecticut State University joined the sociology track; Donna Killian Duffy of Middlesex Community College in Massachusetts contributed to the psychology track; and Scott Erb of the University of Maine–Farmington rounded out the roster in the political science track. The lead presenters and New England partners were asked to plan their tracks together, and the collaborations worked very well.

## **Expectations for the Workshop**

The workshop was scheduled for a Friday morning and opened with a thirty-minute plenary session, then the group split into the three discipline-based tracks for the next two hours, and finally, the full group convened for another half hour. The opening and closing plenaries were conceived as a chance to frame the questions and issues that participants might have in common.

The two-hour discipline-based portion of the morning was designed to be hands-on, interactive, and practical. In addition, the time with like-minded colleagues was intended to give participants the chance to talk in discipline-specific terms about issues such as appropriate learning goals, model assessment programs, traditions of the discipline, theoretical assumptions, the methods that flow from theory or tradition, and recommended resources.

It was important to NEEAN organizers that the tracks focus on more than just course-level assessment. We acknowledge the value of course-level assessment and its usefulness as an entry point for encouraging faculty interest in assessment. But at the same time, we wanted to challenge faculty to think beyond the limits of the individual courses they teach or

their particular specialization. We wanted participants to ask questions about what their major *as a whole* adds up to and to consider cocurricular or off-campus experiences as well.

We stressed that the tracks, in addition to dealing with the assessment of cognitive knowledge, should address how to assess complex skills such as advanced writing or research or information literacy skills as well as values and dispositions. We feel strongly that if assessment does not include more ambitious outcomes, the movement leaves itself open to the charge that assessment is reductionist and trivializes higher learning. This does not mean that any discipline has developed fail-safe ways of assessing these less easily quantified goals, but we need to at least keep them on the table and keep trying to develop ways to promote and document them. By presenting more qualitative approaches such as portfolios, capstone projects, or performances, we hoped to give participants both some tools and some encouragement for tackling these most important but also most challenging learning outcomes.

Finally, we promised participants that they would hear about the possibilities for turning their work in assessment into conference presentations and publications and for connecting it with the scholarship of teaching and learning. We wanted participants to know, if they didn't realize it already, that assessment *can* be scholarly work and that it can be respected and rewarded like other scholarly work. As it happened, each of our tracks had a presenter with direct connections to the scholarship of teaching and learning, either through the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching or through a campus initiative.

## What Worked?

The response to Dialogues in the Disciplines was very strong on two levels: first, in terms of registration and overall level of interest in the workshop, and, second, in terms of evaluation results.

Advertising for the April event began in late January and was carried out almost exclusively via e-mail. We eventually registered over 150 participants and actually had to turn faculty away from the most heavily enrolled track, psychology.

The role of the learned societies proved to be critical: they not only lent our enterprise legitimacy but also provided high-quality materials and helped us locate excellent presenters. In addition, they provided practical assistance, posting the workshop on their Web sites and assisting us with advertising. Two of them—the American Sociological Association and the American Psychological Association—even awarded us small faculty development grants to help defray expenses.

Judging from the evaluations, participants greatly enjoyed their time in the disciplinary tracks, talking about the specifics and making contacts with like-minded colleagues across campus boundaries. In regard to the level of the presentations, most participants said they learned useful things; only a handful felt that their assessment program was too advanced for them to benefit from the workshop. And the small number who came to argue against doing assessment at all seemed to enjoy that opportunity as well. Workshop participants were less enthusiastic about the plenary sessions.

## What Next?

Flushed with the success of this first round of Dialogues in the Disciplines, NEEAN has decided to tackle assessment in the humanities. We plan to offer a second round of dialogues, this time with tracks for literature and culture studies, history, and philosophy and ethics. We anticipate that we'll be able to build on the things that worked in the first round, but we also recognize that the humanities present something of a challenge. Useful materials are not as readily available, and we may not find the same level of commitment to assessment in the relevant learned societies. But the next round presents a unique opportunity to shape discussion, stimulate new efforts, and move assessment of student learning forward on a very important front.

In 2005, Barbara D. Wright was assessment coordinator at Eastern Connecticut State University in Willimantic, Connecticut.

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# Assessment in the Major: Response to a State Initiative

Trudy W. Banta

*Look for: Faculty taking charge of the campus response to a state mandate for assessment. Changes resulting from the process of instrument development as well as the interpretation of assessment findings are described. From Assessment Update 2:1 (1990).*

Experience in working closely with faculty at institutions in Tennessee, Virginia, and New Jersey—here the early impetus for campus assessment originated in state coordinating agencies—leads me to conclude that faculty can take charge of assessment, using it to improve curricula and modes of instruction, even when they are initially spurred to act by an external request for evidence of accountability.

In 1979, Tennessee became the first state to allocate a portion of funding for higher education on the basis of evidence that institutions were collecting information about students' performance. Stimulated by the availability of "performance funding," faculty at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), developed a systematic program of assessing achievement in both general education and the major field and of examining perceptions of program quality expressed in survey responses by enrolled students, dropouts, and alumni.

Since 1982, UTK faculty in 100 major fields have selected or developed comprehensive assessment activities for seniors, which are designed primarily to provide faculty with information about program effectiveness but also inform individual students about their levels of achievement.

While evaluative data derived from standardized exams have been somewhat helpful in curricular decision making, the *process* of developing their own assessment procedures has had a far greater impact on the faculty's thinking about academic programs and services at UTK. In considering how to construct an exit assessment experience, faculty have

been encouraged to think together about the nature of the curriculum and the types of knowledge and skills students should derive from it. A portion of the resources provided by the provost to assist departments with instrument development has been spent to obtain the services of external consultants who have expertise in the disciplines. Considering these consultants' perspectives on departmental curricula has also been a formative activity for faculty.

As a result of the focus on common learning objectives for students, a focus that has been part of the process of developing outcomes assessment in the major, the following changes have occurred in a number of departments:

- Faculty have a stronger sense of shared purpose with respect to what graduates of their programs should know and be able to do.
- Several faculties have developed explicit statements of core objectives or competencies for students.
- Stronger agreement about curricular goals has led to increased consistency among faculty in the teaching of core courses.
- Faculty are now more likely to use statements of course objectives in organizing their teaching and to share these statements with students.
- A more orderly progression of courses from the lower to the upper division has been established, and upper-division courses are built more consciously on content that students have experienced in introductory courses.

The work on assessment instruments has stimulated interest in a variety of faculty-development activities. Departments have approached the UTK Learning Research Center to request assistance in writing measurable objectives for programs and courses, organizing course content according to sets of objectives, developing assignments and test items that tap reasoning and problem-solving skills, and constructing reliable assessments of performance. The faculty-development experiences that the center provides have enriched the environment for students' learning by improving the teaching skills of individual faculty.



Most of the assessment procedures developed by UTK faculty have utilized a multiple-choice, paper-and-pencil test as a basic component. In addition, however, many have incorporated essays or structured problems, and several have included a performance component. The latter procedures range from an in-basket exercise to a field-experience evaluation by field and faculty supervisors to the design of an ad campaign for a new product. In one of the humanities disciplines, the assessment procedure consists of a series of activities that take place over a full term in a senior capstone course and are evaluated by a faculty team. These activities include selecting a problem for an extended paper, identifying appropriate references, writing an outline and a first draft of the paper, completing the paper, and presenting it orally for critique by classmates. Initially, at least, final papers have been reviewed not only by UTK faculty but also by the external consultants who assisted in designing the assessment procedure and its related scoring criteria.

The foregoing paragraphs describe the effects—on curricula, instruction, and faculty development—of the process of constructing procedures for outcomes assessment in major fields. After administering these procedures to students, faculty have been stimulated to respond in additional ways—for example, by identifying program strengths and weaknesses that could be corrected in curriculum modifications made necessary by the change from a quarter-based to a semester calendar. Some faculties decided to require more core courses in their disciplines; others altered the nature of courses already in the core.

Individual instructors, influenced by students' failure to apply their knowledge to assessment activities, have increased opportunities for students to practice application skills in courses. Faculty have added field trips, internships, term projects, and problem-solving exercises in their classes and assignments. Instructors have also increased the proportion of items on classroom exams that call on such higher-order intellectual skills as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

UTK faculty have been typical, I believe, in their response to an assessment mandate that originated outside the institution. For a variety of reasons, most reactions were negative. In many departments, a negative

faction remains, but in every department, those most concerned about teaching and students' learning took control of the assessment agenda and shaped it to serve important departmental purposes. Their activities increased the focus of most other departmental members on the purposes and means of education in the discipline and produced important changes in curricula and modes of instruction.

In 1990, Trudy W. Banta was professor of education and founding director of the Center for Assessment Research and Development at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She directed the campus assessment program at UTK.