

Committee on Assessment, 2010-2011

Year-End Report and Recommendations

Mission

According to the Governance, the Assessment Committee

...shall examine and evaluate the practices in place to achieve the College's educational goals as stated in its mission statement and elsewhere. Each year it shall investigate topics that bear on the achievement of the college's stated goals and also address over a ten-year period all of the "Standards for Accreditation" published by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. The results of this investigation shall be presented to the faculty at the end of each academic year and shall contribute to the material presented to the Middle States accreditation committee every ten years. The committee shall also make suggestions to the appropriate bodies about ways to bring the college's practices and its goals into closer alignment...The topics for investigation in the following year shall be chosen by the committee before the election of the following year's committee

Membership

The elected faculty members of the 2010-2011 Committee on Assessment members were Candice Lowe, Vinay Swamy, and Susan Trumbetta (Chair), with ex-officio members David Davis-van Atta, Director of Institutional Research, and Marianne Begemann, Associate Dean of the Faculty representing the Dean of Faculty. As the first charge to the 2010-2011 Committee on Assessment was the task of continuing work on designing an assessment of how student writing develops across the curriculum, we enlisted the expertise of Natalie Friedman, Director of the Learning, Teaching, and Research Center and Lee Rumbarger (first semester, outgoing) and Matt Schultz (second semester, incoming), Director of the Writing Center, who all served as very active committee members. Gary Hohenberger, Director of Corporate, Foundation, and Government Relations, also served as a very active committee member.

Members of the committee took very seriously the need for ongoing participation in assessment workshops. Vinay Swamy attended a Middle States workshop on behalf of the committee and returned to help orient its membership to current directions in assessment. The Associate Dean of Faculty and the Committee Chair joined the Dean of Studies and Dean of Freshmen at the Wesleyan Conference on Assessment in NYC in September, where we shared assessment strategies with representatives of some of our peer institutions. Representatives of several of our peer institutions saw Vassar's development of a faculty Committee on Assessment as a very positive addition to a process that some other institutions confine primarily to the administration. We also learned about a wide array of approaches to the evaluation of student learning and of teaching, some of which may inform our own conversations in this area. Finally, several members of the committee were able to attend assessment events on campus, such as the workshop day sponsored by the Department of French and Francophone Studies in

November, a breakfast meeting with Anne Barrie-Hunter during her visit to campus to work with CCAS on the Student Assessment of Learning Goals (SALG) instrument.

Charge to the 2010-2011 committee

The 2010-2011 Committee on Assessment had two charges, first, to consult with the Director of Institutional Advancement on the Wabash Study, as well as to begin thinking about implementing some ongoing assessment of student learning across the curriculum, and second, to continue work on the Writing Study proposed by the 2009-2010 Committee on Assessment.

Wabash Study. David Davis-van Atta, Director of Institutional Research, briefed the new committee on the Wabash study during the fall semester and we provided feedback to him and the Dean of Faculty regarding the use of a Senior Week incentive to ensure maximum participation in the spring follow-up. Mr. Davis-van Atta kept the committee informed as plans for the spring assessment moved forward with good participation levels, and shared some preliminary results with the committee late in the second semester, just as the data became available. These preliminary results revealed many areas of strong similarity between students at Vassar and those at Vassar's peer institutions, with perhaps a relatively stronger appreciation of writing and a weaker appreciation of quantitative reasoning among Vassar students. We recommend that the 2011-2012 Committee on Assessment consider these key areas of writing and quantitative reasoning for future efforts in the assessment of general education at Vassar.

The Wabash Study results came so late in the year that it will fall to the 2011-2012 Committee on Assessment to follow up with the gathering of collateral information, such as the course selections made by individual students in the class of 2011 cohort, for use in examining the relationship of the Vassar curriculum to areas of student learning assessed in the Wabash study.

Writing study. Our work on the Writing Study built on the work of two prior committees, specifically, the 2008-2009 survey of departments and programs about what constitutes good writing in each academic discipline and the 2009-2010 survey about the role of writing in of departments' and programs' senior capstone experiences, as well as on an initial pilot of collecting writing samples and student comments from several senior assessment lunches about the importance of writing instruction. In the first semester, we worked with Lee Rumbarger on refining the proposed study. A previous attempt to fund the study using external sources brought feedback that the relevant funding agencies were more interested in funding studies using already-collected data than studies to collect new data. We consulted with the Dean of Faculty about possible internal funding for the Writing Study and worked with his suggestions to lower the overall cost while retaining the study's quality. We presented an updated budget to the DOF in March of 2011, for a study to begin in 2012. One key aim of the Study is to develop some consensus across the curriculum about the attributes of good writing in order to give students some clear operational criteria by which to evaluate their own writing. To that end, we examined writing rubrics developed by other institutions and also used the 2010-2011 Assessment Retreat following the Senior Assessment Lunch to involve faculty across the curriculum in an exercise that would help to identify core principles of good writing.

We also worked on a plan to launch the Writing Study, which includes inviting a speaker for the 2012 Assessment Retreat who can lead the faculty in a more systematic development of guidelines for the evaluation of writing and developing videos to inform incoming students about the study and more generally, about the work of the Writing Center. For the latter project, we recommend the assignment of a work-study student with film-making expertise to the Writing Center for 2011-2012, in order to develop a video about student writing projects.

Other responsibilities

Proposed Governance language regarding the Committee on Assessment. The committee discussed at length some language proposed by the Faculty Policy and Conference Committee (FPCC) and agreed on the following principles:

1. Term of office. Assessment of student learning across the curriculum covers a period of at least four years, if we are to assess any graduating class longitudinally, so the current one-year terms seem to provide insufficient continuity. One idea is to have three three-year terms, staggered to have two seasoned members and a new member each year. Another idea is to have two-year terms, with fluctuations in the number of new members each year.
2. Middle States. The Committee on Assessment was formed in response to some of Vassar's needs for ongoing assessment, both internally and in an attempt to address Middle States criteria, so both internal criteria and Middle States criteria need to be mentioned in the committee's charge.
3. Administrative location. The Middle States criteria require a broad assessment of the institution's support of student learning as well as student learning itself. To this end, some members of the committee wondered if the Assessment Committee ought to report directly to the President as well as to the DOF.
4. Specific responsibilities for assessment. There has been some variation from year to year in the relative balance of Committee on Assessment-conducted and delegated assessments. Of course, the committee sometimes needs to assess certain aspects of college practices as a preliminary step toward a more formal assessment, which the committee then delegates to some other committee or administrative group. The question of "who assesses?" will vary by situation and the Governance language will need to be sensitive to that reality.
5. Communications. Of course, the work of assessment belongs to the whole faculty and administration. Faculty assess student learning in their classes, committees assess programs for which they have responsibility. It may help to have a central communications hub for assessment (as the Committee on Committees recommended last year). It will help if the Committee on Assessment is aware of assessment across

the college (example: CCP assessment of the Quantitative requirement) and if faculty generally are aware of Assessment Committee initiatives (usually done through the annual retreat, but also online when a retreat wasn't feasible). Perhaps any committees or subcommittees charged with assessment initiatives should include an ex officio member of the Assessment Committee.

6. Membership. It may help to make explicit the need for ex officio members of the Committee on Assessment as appropriate to each year's assessment focus.

Recommendations

1. We recommend that the College undertake an assessment of student writing across the curriculum beginning in 2012, with the incoming class of 2016.
2. We recommend that the Writing Center be given a work-study student to create a video that highlights the work of the Writing Center and that can also be used to raise awareness of and interest in the proposed Writing Study.

Charge to the 2011-2012 Committee on Assessment

1. Work with the Director of Institutional Assessment on the interpretation of the Wabash Study results. Gather collateral information, as needed, to help illuminate the data. As indicated in the 2009-2010 report of the Committee on Assessment, collateral information may include student majors, division, type and amount of writing required for courses, and/or an updated version of the 2007-2008 tagging exercise, which should include student as well as faculty perceptions of course content.
2. Assist the Director of the Learning, Teaching, and Research Center and the Director of the Writing Center, as needed, with bringing the Writing Study to fruition.
3. Begin assessing student learning in the area of quantitative reasoning, working with the Director of the Quantitative Reasoning Center.