2014

Academic Assessment Plan

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE

Introduction

At the most fundamental level, assessment of student learning is important to SUNY Empire State College because it assists us in providing the best possible educational experience for our students. Assessment also is critically important because it enables us to verify student achievement of learning outcomes, validate academic quality, provide a pathway for improvements at the course and program level, demonstrate student achievement of the college's learning goals, and affirm institutional effectiveness. Finally, it assists us in demonstrating accountability to accrediting and regulatory agencies. Assessing and reporting outcomes also can provide evidence of the effectiveness of the distinctive approach to individualized and self-directed learning offered by Empire State College.

Assessment of student learning is consistent with the college's commitment to academic excellence. It allows us to demonstrate to ourselves where we are succeeding and where we need to improve. The college introduced a system of area of study reviews in the 1980s in which faculty panels reviewed the quality of the contents of student portfolios. This was a pioneering effort to gain an overview of how academic programs were being designed. Subsequently, SUNY began to require outcomes assessment in general education (GEAR) and in the major (AITM). Additionally, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education requires colleges to articulate and assess learning outcomes to both evaluate student learning and inform teaching, programmatic and resource allocation decisions. The college responded by developing methods of assessment that used samples of student work from learning contracts that were evaluated by faculty using internally-designed rubrics.

While the college currently engages in extensive assessment practices, it has been lacking a comprehensive and coherent plan that commits college resources to connecting, aligning and documenting the many and varied assessment processes from pre-enrollment through graduation. This plan will improve upon and expand existing efforts to, and resources for, learning outcomes assessment at Empire State College and inform decisions on student, program and collegewide levels. Overarching all of these, the centrality of student-directed learning as an organizing principle and the distinguishing hallmark of an Empire State College education aligns the Academic Assessment Plan with the Academic Plan, the college's mission and core values.

Objectives for Assessment of Students' Learning and College Programs

The college's Academic Plan presents the assessment of student learning outcomes as a key objective to meet the goal of creating effective, rich and flexible learning environments. The plan calls for the first iteration of an integrated outcomes assessment framework to be developed by 2013. This document addresses that objective.

The fundamental aim of the assessment of student learning outcomes is to ask whether an institution has enabled students to meet both the institution's and the students' learning goals. Learning goals are articulated at the institutional level (college-level learning goals), for each program (undergraduate areas of study and graduate and professional programs), for general education, and for individual learning contracts and courses. All learning goals should be congruent with the broader mission and plans of the college and a comprehensive, coherent academic assessment plan provides a framework to support the alignment of goals at every level.

The college's core values and academic plan emphasize the central role of self-directed Learning (SDL), in which students work closely with mentors and share in the "responsibility for active and constructive engagement in the charting and governance of their own educational experience." Educational research on outcomes assessment in adult learning demonstrates the relationship between SDL skills and successful learning outcomes. For these reasons, the development of SDL skills is infused in the college's goals for institutional effectiveness and as a priority in the assessment of student learning.

Individual student learning is assessed by the faculty member responsible for a course or learning contract, and that faculty member determines the grade and award of credit for that course or contract within the parameters of college policy and according to the formative assessment framework established within the learning contract. The college also must assess its overall effectiveness in enabling students to reach desired goals at all levels, and this assessment plan guides that effort. This section outlines strategies for assessment at each level.

Personal/Individual Student Learning Goals

Objective: Develop more consistent and systematic early assessment to support students' articulation of personal goals and their understanding of college goals.

Objective: Link early assessment to students' learning as they progress toward degree completion.

All entering students will articulate their own personal learning goals, while also becoming aware of the college's college-level learning goals. Conducting an early or "front-end assessment" will identify needs and goals for learning across the lifespan of a student's education. Front-end assessment is the first step of a much longer formative assessment process in which the student learns more about learning goals (his/her own and the college's) and the college learns more about the student, his/her academic profile and his/her learning objectives. Further, as students gain confidence and acquire new SDL skills over time, they should be given ongoing mentored opportunities to reflect on their goals and revise them as needed.

This first step creates the collaborative effort necessary to work successfully at Empire State College. It is a means of establishing a context in which students understand Empire State College and members of the college community understand new and continuing students. Front-end assessment will allow faculty to advise students effectively so that they can achieve both their own personal learning goals and the college's stated learning goals at every level.

A collegewide group has been studying the use of ePortfolios as a potential means to support mentor/ student communication about learning and student reflection on their learning in relation to their personal learning goals and program level goals. It can enable students nearing completion of their programs to reflect on the personal goals they articulated in the front-end assessment process and their evolution and attainment. The use of an ePortfolio may serve as one option for facilitating assessment of individual goals, with a focus on assessing the value added by the student's engagement with learning at Empire State College.

Study-Level Learning Outcomes

Objective: Develop methods to ensure the quality of learning contracts and courses and to assess student learning at the level of the individual study.

A recent revision to the learning contract policy requires all learning contracts and courses to contain clear statements of expected learning outcomes and to lay out a plan for formative assessment during the term of study. The Academic Assessment Plan proposes that these learning contract outcomes need to align explicitly with areas of study, concentration (where specified), general education and overall college-level learning goals (while no one study will cover all of these goals, the collection of studies together, as proposed in the degree plan, should cover each of them fully). At the same time, these defined goals should reflect students' own goal-setting, particularly as they develop SDL skills.

This effort will augment the review of learning contracts that is built into the area of study review (AOSR) that is conducted concurrently with assessment in the major (AITM) for undergraduate programs of study. It is recommended that samples of student work completed in the learning contract or course be examined, as well as the learning contract document itself, in order to ensure that learning activities are aligned with the study's learning objectives. The current undergraduate AOS review process is global, with a single rating of the overall quality of all learning contracts in a student portfolio. Adding direct assessment of student learning, from individualized contract studies and from standardized courses, will drive the process to be an assessment of the impact of learning contracts on student learning. This process will provide a strong basis for improvement of learning and practice, both in individualized educational opportunities and in standardized course offerings. Similar processes can be applied for graduate programs based on the respective academic review and curricular guidelines of the graduate study.

Program-Level Learning Outcomes

Objective: Clarify learning outcomes expectations for all areas of study and other academic programs.

Objective: Enhance existing program assessment methods to ensure that representative samples of student work are reviewed.

Currently, the college's faculty articulate expected learning outcomes for every academic program through the undergraduate area of study guidelines, undergraduate general education competencies, and curricula for graduate programs and the RN to B.S. in Nursing. The degree planning process is a time when mentors and students should collaborate to ensure that students are meeting the learning outcomes proposed at the program level.

The college has several mechanisms in place to assess programs for improvement. At the undergraduate level, for the assessment in the major (AITM) and general education assessment review (GEAR), faculty evaluate the quality of student work and college documentation of that work. While faculty assessment of samples of student work follows best practice in direct assessment of student learning, this method is labor-intensive and has problems of sampling, as regional centers tend to be underrepresented compared to online programs where all student work is archived in the learning management system. The value of these assessments will be enhanced by improvements in sampling

that the wide use of ePortfolios will support. The ultimate purpose of these processes is to ensure that students are truly attaining the appropriate learning outcomes necessary for their own education, through a variety of course offerings and learning experiences.

The undergraduate Area of Study Review (AOSR) identifies improvements that can contribute to higher quality degree programs and portfolios. The Office of Academic Affairs uses the information from the AITM, GEAR and AOSR to support further reflection and action for improvement by faculty and academic professionals. Additional "closing the loop" activities (description to follow) will ensure that the work undertaken in the AITM, GEAR and AOSR is useful and available to the college community.

The School for Graduate Studies has an assessment plan for each degree program area. Some programs at the undergraduate and graduate level also adhere to additional professional accreditation standards. Additionally, structured programs, approved by the college, might have specific assessment needs.

College-Level Learning Goals

Objective: Ensure that area of study guidelines, program requirements and individual degree program design incorporate college-level learning goals.

In 2011, the college adopted college-level learning goals that apply across all programs at the undergraduate and graduate level (these learning goals are presented in the Executive Summary of the Academic Plan). Areas of Study and other academic programs (graduate, nursing) have been asked to review their guidelines or program requirements to ensure that students will likely achieve the college-level learning goals. Further, Areas of Study will undertake the academic oversight of any new programs, according to the framework laid out in this plan. In particular, any prestructured and/or registered programs must be included within each of the assessment initiatives and have the appropriate academic oversight of the relevant AOS.

Area of study guidelines reviews ensure that the principles that help guide students' degree planning not only reflect the overarching priorities of the individual programs/areas of study, but also incorporate learning that is reflective of each of the college-level learning goals. At the undergraduate level, the AOSR will evaluate how effectively the actual work of students in a single area of study is being designed to address both the AOS guidelines and college-level learning goals. Each graduate program will oversee its own curriculum guidelines as they apply to the academic plan for the School for Graduate Studies.

Portfolio and Graduation Review

Objective: Enhance degree program development and review processes so that they are more transparent, more focused on learning goals and outcomes, and more supportive of student reflection on their own learning.

Portfolio review (by faculty assessment committees) and graduation review (by center offices of academic review and the registrar's office) represent official points of assessment of student learning to ensure that students are meeting the college's learning goals and their own goals. Students should be aware of these review points from the moment they enter Empire State College; transparency of this process is essential. Review of portfolios offers an opportunity to evaluate an individual students' plan for learning as compared to personal, program and college goals, as well as to accumulate data within individual programs to evaluate whether program-level learning objectives are effectively being

met by students in those programs. This process will encourage continued creativity in degree program design by reiterating the connections between individual student goals and the educational experiences created to meet those goals.

Closing the Loop

Objective: Ensure that the results of outcomes assessment are widely disseminated, discussed, and used to improve teaching and learning.

The assessment of student learning in individual learning contracts and courses and in degree programs is not an end in itself. Institutions of higher education are required to conduct an assessment of student learning outcomes to guide improvements in teaching, learning, academic programs, and academic processes and services. Accrediting bodies characterize a good outcomes assessment plan as one that "closes the loop" by using the assessment results to improve academic quality. This closing the loop process allows the college to document a culture of continuous improvement, as required by Middle States Commission on Higher Education and aspired to by the Empire State College community. The "closing the loop" activities will begin with faculty (through their work in individual studies and in GEAR, AITM and AOSR), proceed to C-PIE/OAA (with the reflections on GEAR, AITM and AOSR), continue to the appropriate governance committee (for reflection on the assessment processes undertaken at the college, in individual studies as well as in GEAR, AITM, AOSR and Closing the Loop 2), and return to the faculty, who will use the outcomes of these various activities to plan and implement changes in practice.

Undergraduate Programs

In order to close the loop on assessment activities, this plan proposes that the college adds an additional step to the current process, thereby employing a three-stage process that builds on activities currently associated with AITM, AOSR and GEAR.

Presently, Closing the Loop 1 consists of a discussion among the faculty who participate in the AITM, GEAR and AOSR. They reflect on the process and report preliminary impressions and conclusions to the Center for Planning and Institutional Effectiveness or individual Areas of Study, as appropriate.

Closing the Loop 2 consists of faculty involved in the GEAR, AITM and AOSR leading a review within their Area of Study of the report written by C-PIE. The AOS develops an action plan with specific recommendations to address areas for improvement supported by the assessment results.

Closing the Loop 3 highlights the working relationship between Areas of Study and the Office of Academic Affairs. Areas of Study will carry out action plans created in CTL 2, and OAA will work with AOSs to ensure proposed changes have been implemented. Areas of Study will review results and propose new plans and strategies in successive cycles of continuous improvement. They may consult with C-PIE during the development of those plans. Outcomes assessment results also will be reported to the appropriate governance committees (CUSP for undergraduate programs and GSPC for graduate programs). CUSP and GSPC will review assessment as it occurs across the college.

The School for Graduate Studies has articulated its own assessment plan, which aligns with this collegewide plan. For details on this plan, see the School of Graduate Studies Academic Plan.

The Role of Governance in Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

The Committee on Undergraduate Studies and Policies (CUSP) and the Graduate Studies and Policies Committee (GSPC) are the two governance committees charged in the college bylaws with oversight of outcomes assessment and program review. These committees will be responsible, with the support of OAA and C-PIE, for choosing the appropriate methods and venues for disseminating the results of these assessment activities in order to inform and improve academic programs, policies and procedures. These committees' response will link the internal work of assessment (evidenced in the ongoing work of each AOS and in the work of C-PIE) to external assessments of the college's work (including through the Middle States accreditation process). The goal of these committees' review will be to clearly state what the college is doing in terms of assessment and how it needs to improve. Periodically, these governance committees will disseminate more comprehensive reflections of assessment to the college, allowing all of the reports and reflections undertaken by members of the Empire State College community to have a more visible presence.

AAPTF Members and Affiliations (Centers, AOS, Titles)

Name	Role	AOS/Program	Center
Sabrina Fuchs Abrams	AOS Co-Convenor	Cultural Studies/ MALS	Grad
Bob Carey	GSPC Representative	Historical Studies	Metro
Nan DiBello	Dean	Public Affairs	NFC
Shelley Dixon	Chairwoman		OAA
Gregory Edwards	Faculty	Historical Studies	NFC
John Eisler	Associate Dean		NEC/CDL
Joyce Elliott	Faculty Associate/ Director of Outcomes (7/1/13)	Social Science	CDL/C-PIE
Marnie Evans	DAR	Historical/Interdisciplinary	Metro
Jonathan Franz	Dean		GVC
Linda Hamell	DAS		HVC
Rebecca Hegel (Bridget Nettleton)	Faculty (dean)	Nursing	Nursing
Dongho Kim	Faculty	BME	CNYC
Mindy Kronenberg	Faculty	Cultural Studies	LIC
Marjorie Lavin	Vice Provost		OAA
Thalia MacMillan	AOS Co-Convenor	CHS	CDL
Mary Mawn	Faculty	SMT	CDL
Mark Miyake	AOS Convenor	Arts	HVC
Anastasia Pratt	CUSP Representative	Historical Studies	NEC/Grad
Heather Reynolds	Faculty	MAT	Grad
Dawn Riley	Interim Dir. of Outcomes		C-PIE
Roz Rufer	Faculty	Business	Grad
Jim Savitt	Faculty Chairman	Public Affairs	CDL
Michael Spitzer	Dean		LIC
Sharon Szymanski	Faculty	Labor Studies	HVACLS
Peggy Tally	Faculty	M.A. programs	Grad
Angela TitiAmayah	Faculty	BME/Interdisciplinary	GVC
Amy Tweedy	DAR	Social Science	CDL
Jordan Wright	AOS Convenor Faculty Co-Chaiman	Human Development	Metro
Jim Wunsch	Faculty	Educational Studies	Metro

The Mission of SUNY Empire State College

SUNY Empire State College's dedicated faculty and staff use
innovative, alternative and flexible approaches to open, higher
education that transform people and communities by providing
rigorous programs that connect individuals' unique and diverse
lives to their personal learning goals.

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