

Action Plan of the Preliminary Working Group on Student Learning Outcomes

Target audiences: upper administration, faculty and students at URI

Students in the Washington State University Clinical Sciences degree program, nationally ranked and recognized, had a 95% pass rate on the state licensing exam, leading everyone involved with that program to believe that students were learning all that they needed to know to be veterinarians. As part of an inquiry into student learning outcomes, faculty in that program decided to try an oral exam, where students were presented with animals and asked to analyze and diagnose. Students failed this oral exam in astonishing numbers, and faculty were stunned. By every measure we usually use in the academy, WSU had a wildly successful program—but students were not able to integrate or practice what they had learned.

Introduction

Educators in the 21st century must confront a number of interests, innovations, and imperatives that are combining to prompt institutional, curricular, and pedagogical change. These elements are:

1. a shift in academic culture from the delivery of content to students to the learning by students of strategies for evaluating and doing things with information;
2. a transformation from a teaching paradigm to a learning paradigm, and a simultaneous move toward “a culture of inquiry and evidence” (Angelo);
3. a recognition that diversity benefits all learners at a university combined with the responsibility that all students have equal access to learning;
4. increased accountability from and by all stakeholders in higher education strengthen student learning.

More locally, URI has been committed for over a decade to changing the culture for learning. Now, its national accrediting agency, NEASC, has recommended student learning outcomes assessment, which must be in place by the next university-wide accreditation cycle. For NEASC, URI will need to demonstrate effective student learning across all colleges and departments. At the same time, the Rhode Island Office of Higher Education has mandated learning outcomes for all programs by 2008 in keeping with the AAC&U Greater Expectations Report. This initiative is further supported by the APA, AAHE, The Council for Writing Program Administrators, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Many colleges or programs at URI are already engaged in accreditation practices and assessments, and many more are currently engaged in implementing the new General Education program. Beginning in the Fall of 2004, the time is right to initiate processes for evaluating the effectiveness of the eight integrated skill areas: writing effectively, speaking effectively, use of qualitative data, use of

quantitative data, examine human differences, use of information technology, engage in artistic activity, read complex texts. In order to assess the effectiveness of the addition of these skills, we need evidence to support the assumed outcomes that are already embedded in the Gen Ed program.

These national and local conditions combine to prompt a thoughtful and intellectually engaged process for the assessment of student learning. More important than any mandate is the need for students to have a clear sense of what is expected of them and a better sense of what they know and are prepared to do as college graduates, including what contributions they can make to their communities and what concrete skills they bring to organizations, workplaces, or institutions. In addition, in response to a national focus on new models for learning (see Appendix A), a number of institutions have committed resources to student learning outcomes assessment; that is, ways of evaluating or measuring what students know and are able to do at the completion of a general education course, at the completion of coursework for a major, and at the completion of graduation requirements. Many institutions have begun to emphasize reflective learning in all areas in order to help students articulate exactly what their degree programs have prepared them to do.

From within this context, this document proposes a multi-year plan to address student learning outcomes assessment at URI in all programs. Our goal is to engage in a cycle of improvement by implementing student outcomes assessment at the program level.

Timeline and Strategies for Implementation (with an emphasis on inclusion)

In considering venues for examining student learning, we look to two primary areas: 1) a breadth of integrated skills through the Gen Ed program, and 2) depth and application of increasingly sophisticated knowledge through departmental majors. Both of these areas will warrant different types of outcomes and different means of implementation, appropriate for the context. Accordingly, we propose two distinct yet parallel and complementary processes within a common timeframe: one for studying our newly integrated Gen Ed program, and the other to support departments and colleges. Below, we consider both formal and informal strategies, both structural and interpersonal. We have two timelines: one for general education and one for colleges.

Formal strategies:

- Broaden the responsibility of the Instructional Development Program to include direct and sustained attention to student learning and learning outcomes
- Conduct student focus groups
- Include co-curricular learning
- Outline institutional expectations for student learning for all URI graduates (workshop on June 30)
- Coordinate events that highlight and assess students capstone or juried work

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- Invite national experts (Peggy Maki, Barbara Wright, Ruth Stiehl, Tom Angelo) to provide theoretical background, language and vocabulary, and expertise for moving forward
- Establish a larger working group with representation from each college—sensitivity to process for blessing of the fleet JSPC/FC/pres/prov as driver
- Create a URI web site to post information, examples, rubrics, new developments, etc.
- Attend chairs' meetings in each college to inquire what is happening re: student learning and learning outcomes (“how do you know students are learning what you assume they are learning?”)
- Communicate and celebrate assessment findings, e.g., news bureau, events
- Communicate broadly what people are already doing by large formal committee

Informal strategies:

- Analyze available resources or outline resources required (see below)
- Do an inventory/audit of what programs/departments are already doing towards evaluating learning at the student and program level (led by someone in college or department) and to
- Visit with individual faculty and departments about learning outcomes and changing the culture for learning
- Ask URI faculty to present to other faculty re: best practices for student learning and learning outcomes
- Ask accredited programs—e.g., Nursing, Pharmacy, Business, Engineering—what they are already doing towards evaluating learning at the student and program level
- Invite departments to present to the working group about what they are doing, how it is going, and what is next
- Generate and circulate examples from a number of institutions—particularly those from large research institutions—and for a number of different URI audiences
- Attract campus activists to this mission

Both formal and informal:

- Bring new faculty on board
- Move people to action with a number of opportunities, gatherings, events—a whole host of modalities

Resources Required

Identification of resources needed for an embedded, systemic assessment of student learning is difficult when we do not yet know exactly what that process will look like across the university. Different colleges and different disciplines will likely take differing approaches, but we lack accurate projections of how much time and exactly what kind of resources will be needed. One phase of our planning will be to develop more accurate projections, but it will be in excess of \$1 million to implement, with additional costs per annum to sustain learning outcomes excellence and to provide

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technical support. Some estimates suggest that institutions need to spend 10% of their budget on outcomes assessment, but more likely are spending one-tenth of one percent. We can assume that effective examination of student learning will require individual faculty, staff, departments, and colleges to devote various resources to this process at various phases. First there will be a phase of creating university wide understanding of and support for this project. This will require resources to:

- ➔ Address the benefits to faculty and staff of engaging in the process of long-term systemic evaluation of student learning.
- ➔ Determine what strategies for examining student learning might look like across the university and in various department and colleges.
- ➔ Support conference attendance for key individuals.
- ➔ Provide an experienced and knowledgeable grant-writer to assist in securing the necessary resources to create and implement this change.

The next phase will be developmental, and will require support to departments in the form of:

- ➔ Retreats to broadly identify desired outcomes of student learning, and to develop and refine the rubrics that will become the basis of assessing student learning.
- ➔ Knowledgeable facilitators to help in that process.
- ➔ Course release time and/or summer recontracting for individual faculty to further refine rubrics and create implementation procedures.

There will also be a need for long-term resources to support this institutional effort, both to effectively accomplish our goals, and to reap the full benefit of our efforts. This includes:

- ➔ A new position reporting to the Office of the Provost: Director of Undergraduate Education and Student Learning Outcomes. This appointment should be in place at least by time of the appointment of a permanent Vice Provost for Academic Affairs.
- ➔ Staff resources in Deans' offices.
- ➔ Ongoing course release and/or summer recontracting in each department for evaluation of student learning at the program level as well as the training of new and contingent faculty.
- ➔ Technical support appropriate to use of e-portfolios or other technology-based assessment tools.

Appropriation of resources and institutionalization of the process will signal a true commitment to supporting student learning in an environment that increasingly calls for new forms of assessment. While the attraction of soft money enables us to initiate this process, the university must provide a long-term financial commitment.

Benefits and Consequences

What happens if we don't move forward as part of this national trend?

- We will disadvantage our students by failing to take advantage of pedagogy informed by current research

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- Our faculty will be less competitive in the research arena without full accounting of learning outcomes and assessment
- There will be consequences for re-accreditation and for funding from the state.

What happens if this initiative is partial or piecemeal?

- We risk the threat of standardized testing replacing thoughtful and discipline-specific learning outcomes.

What happens if we do this well?

Students will benefit from:

- Developing the ability to understand and articulate what they know and are able to do;
- Creating or identifying a meaningful academic and co-curricular plan;
- Knowing what is expected of them in coursework, in general education, and in the major;
- Taking tangible products with them into workplace or professional environments.

Individual faculty will benefit from:

- Collegial exchanges in the process of discussing expectations, comparing requirements, and developing rubrics;
- Feedback about teaching effectiveness beyond the SETs—in most cases, more appropriate feedback about what students are learning;
- Better informed and reflective students who understand the learning goals of each class.

Departments will benefit from:

- Qualitative evidence that students are mastering content and developing expertise;
- A sustained focus on curricular coherence;
- Maintaining internal control of their students' learning outcomes rather than having them imposed from an external source.

The institution will benefit from:

- Connections across the curriculum supporting student learning and effective teaching;
- The ability to demonstrate educational effectiveness to all of its various constituencies;
- Improved recruitment, retention, graduation rates, and job placement—and associated economic benefits;
- Enhanced reputation for innovation in higher education.