

Macalester College Assessment Newsletter

September 2011

Learning from the 2010-11 Academic Department Assessment Reports
Student Learning Updates

Learning from the 2010-11 Academic Department Assessment Reports

Welcome back and we hope that your year is off to a good start.

As many of you know, last year, academic departments submitted department action reports (DARs) for the first time. We met with individuals and departments from February through April to discuss their assessment activities. Those meetings provided a valuable overview of recent department assessment activities at Macalester. We want to share some of what we learned.

Before proceeding, a couple of caveats are necessary. First, there is no one "right" way for doing department assessment. Department faculty should carefully consider what will enable them to acquire the student learning information necessary for evaluating progress on learning goals. Second, the following numbers are guided by our search for similarity across numerous DARs. Departments are engaging in a range of activities even more diverse than what this newsletter communicates.

Of 32 departments, we met with 26 and discussed their DARs. Below is what we learned.

Direct and Indirect Assessment:

Direct assessment prompts students to demonstrate their learning or produce work so that faculty can evaluate how well students perform on department learning goals. Indirect assessment gathers information from or about students' thoughts, attitudes, or perceptions relevant for department learning goals.

We found that...

...15 out of 26 departments used direct assessment techniques (e.g., major field test, portfolio of student work, rubric analysis of student writing, rubric analysis of oral communication, etc.);

...18 out of 26 used indirect assessment techniques (e.g., senior survey, exit interview, course evaluation analysis, knowledge surveys, etc.); and

...11 out of 26 used both direct and indirect assessment techniques in the past year.

Focus of Assessment:

Departments' student learning initiatives can change annually, depending on what faculty want to assess. In reviewing the 2010-11 DARs, we found that ...

...10 out of 26 used a survey of graduating seniors' attitudes and opinions;

...8 out of 26 evaluated student work in a capstone course;

...6 out of 26 interviewed graduating seniors in a group or individually;

...6 out of 26 administered a written or oral examination;

...3 out of 26 analyzed course evaluations across department faculty;

...2 out of 26 analyzed student work submitted as part of a portfolio;

...2 out of 26 administered an alumni survey;

...2 out of 26 mapped the department's curriculum; and

...2 out of 26 examined student transcripts.

Sample Best Practices:

Many departments are engaged in activities that yield useful information for understanding student learning in their field. In highlighting some of these practices, we hope that they inspire conversations and cooperation from others interested in, or also using, a similar technique.

1. **Systematic planning, implementation, and analysis of student work samples:**
A number of departments relied on carefully planned and implemented assessment activities. The English Department, for example, developed a rubric for assessing student writing on several dimensions (e.g., sentence structure, paragraph construction, attention to units of meaning, and attention to meanings of the text). A subgroup of English faculty applied the rubric to student work collected from several introductory courses. During a retreat, the department as a whole considered the assessment findings and planned next steps for improving student writing.
2. **Integrating student learning goals into existing coursework:**
Finding ways to conduct assessment through specific assignments within existing courses can facilitate understanding of student learning within a department. The Geography Department, for example, used this practice in an intermediate methodology course with a final exam item focused on analytical problem-solving using geospatial techniques. Geography faculty applied a problem-solving rubric to student answers for the exam item and got a sense of how majors perform on an important department student learning goal.
3. **Leveraging professional organization training opportunities:**
Sometimes professional organizations offer relatively inexpensive training which faculty can use to inform relevant department assessment at Macalester. This proved to be the case for the Hispanic Studies Department, which sent a faculty member to acquire American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) training so that department faculty could learn to administer oral proficiency interviews, an internationally recognized assessment technique. Hispanic Studies faculty concentrated on the oral proficiency of graduating seniors, intend to use the technique for students beginning their major as well, and will expand into reading proficiency in the future.
4. **Tracking student learning information over time:**

Faculty often do not have time to analyze and discuss assessment information as soon as it is available. A number of departments have found creative ways to address this issue. The Political Science Department specifically addresses the dilemma by using a shared Google document to track responses generated during exit interviews. Department faculty add comments from the interviews that they conducted to the shared document and examine the file at a later, more convenient time. Also, Political Science adds to the document annually, so that trends in student responses over time can emerge during department discussions.

5. Communicating learning goals to students:

Reaching out and informing students of learning goals is a key to active collaboration between faculty and students on assessment. While a number of departments explain the general purpose of an assessment activity, the Theatre and Dance Department provides a written rationale to majors describing their mission statement and how both their reviews of juniors and seniors are relevant to the mission. The document provides the criteria on which majors will be evaluated for each review.

We appreciated reviewing the 2010-11 DARs and look forward to the 2011-12 reports along with what they will allow us to learn.

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Student Learning Updates: Redesigned Website, GERC's Recommendations for Student Writing

Assessment Office website is undergoing redesign:

The Assessment Office website is undergoing revision to emphasize the four student learning domains at Macalester - institutional, general education, academic department, and co-curricular. In addition to describing recent activities and results in these domains, the site will explain Macalester's approach to assessment and highlight resources at Macalester. Watch for more information regarding the launch-date.

Recommendations from GERC's report on improving student writing at Macalester are being addressed:

Last Spring, the General Education Requirements Committee (GERC) sent a writing report to the Educational Policy and Governance Committee (EPAG). The report had a number of recommendations for improving student writing. EPAG is carefully considering the recommendations this Fall.

Meanwhile, following up on a GERC recommendation, the Assessment Office worked with Academic Programs to collect a First Year Writing Sample from entering first-year students on Assessment Day. Almost all first-year students (98%) provided a writing sample. The samples were scored by 10 faculty volunteers, with recommendations made to the Director of Academic Programs about students who could benefit from supplemental writing instruction. These students

will be able to take an 8-week, 1-credit course focused on specific writing topics taught by faculty. Contact the Ann Minnick, Adrienne Christiansen, or Erik Larsen for more information about this pilot writing program.