Assessment of Student Learning in the Department of Communications: A Successful Faculty Collaboration

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Assessment of Student Learning – Overview

As recently as 2010, our department was noted for its inability to operationalize a program of assessment of student learning. Although several faculty members had presented strong and noteworthy proposals, the department as a whole had not implemented any assessment plan. In January 2011, the department was represented at the university’s assessment retreat. At that time, a four-year plan was developed that identifies seven learning outcomes for all Communications majors and has procedures for measuring and evaluating student learning across the core curriculum and all five of the subject concentrations. Extensive supportive policy was developed. Documentation was made available to faculty, identifying the critical need for assessment data to verify what our students know and how they come to know it in our classes. All of our policy and documentation was published via a Titanium Community.

Progress During 2011-2012 Academic Year

The assessment plan developed in the January 2011 meeting included a policy statement, curriculum map, and flowchart that were finalized over the summer of 2011. During the 2011-2012 academic year, our department went from having assessment ‘on paper only’ to a fully realized program with collected data that served as a basis from which we can now base future curriculum decisions. We completed assessment of student learning in four core courses: COMM 233, 407, 425, and 495. We also completed assessment in three courses within concentrations: COMM 317 (Photo Communications), and COMM 362 and 464 (Public Relations).

Student learning was assessed via a variety of methods including pre/post-testing (COMM 233, 317, 407 and 425), review and analysis of student long-form writing (COMM 362), employer and student surveys (COMM 495), and a professional review panel that offered detailed feedback and critique on student portfolios (COMM 464).

Significance of Our Progress

We gathered data from more than 1,200 students and are still in the process of evaluating much of the results of our work. Although the number of students sounds large, we are a large department and feel that we have just begun to scratch the surface of what can be known about the understanding of students (COMM majors and students in other fields) who are learning in our classes. We can say without hesitation, however, that we have a much stronger base of knowledge of the subject areas that students grasp and appreciate – versus those where student learning appears to be weaker than we’d like.

As a consequence of the involvement of workplace professionals in our assessment effort (COMM 464 and 495) we have renewed appreciation of how our curriculum is structured to address contemporary issues, and what students know of those issues. We have begun a ‘sidebar’ effort to assessment that includes tracking technical proficiencies demanded of students in our classes, whether those proficiencies are professionally realistic, and the extent to which we have sufficient classroom resources to support the learning of these technical proficiencies.

Although not all of our faculty are ‘on the bandwagon’ about the importance of assessment, we feel that we are making strides here, too. Our assessment program was designed to be simple, relevant to our ACEJMC accreditation standards, and structured in a way so as to minimally inconvenience the faculty. (We understand that faculty resistance to assessment is often because it appears to be another administrative burden.) We have met these goals, and as a result, have encountered minimal faculty resistance during our assessment program rollout.

Future Directions

In academic year 2012-2013, we'll be assessing in the Advertising and Entertainment Communication concentrations (COMM 351, 446, and 451). We will also be going back to do another, unscheduled assessment in COMM 233 and 425, as we work to improve our methods and develop more data than we did in the 2011-12 assessments. During the year, we will also be planning for assessment in Journalism and Photo Communications in 2013. At the end of the 2013-14 academic year, we will have completed our cycle and will be in a better position to have the ‘big picture’ about how students learn throughout our degree core and concentrations.