

Curricular Assessment: Tips and Techniques

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1. SUMMARY

Assessment of educational programs is an increasingly important topic. Accrediting bodies regularly ask colleges and universities to provide evidence regarding the quality of their educational programs — what are the goals and objectives of each specific major, and how can the institution know that those goals and objectives are achieved [3]? Legislative bodies seek justification for public monies spent on education. And funders such as the National Science Foundation require evaluation of learning outcomes during the merit review process for education-related proposals [1].

In participating in external reviews of other computing departments, and in talking to faculty around the country, the session leaders have observed a remarkable level of activity regarding the assessment of courses and programs. However, in these conversations, three characteristics seem common:

- Faculty often expend very large amounts of time and effort on assessment-related activities.
- Data collection often yields massive amounts of unorganized and unfocused material.
- Once data are collected, faculty and staff often have run out of time or are overwhelmed by the task of connecting the data with possible improvements in a course or program.

Overall, in discussions with faculty around the country, the session leaders have been impressed by both the interest in improving programs and a sense of discouragement in the perception that any meaningful assessment will likely require unreasonable amounts of time and effort. Further, even when faculty are willing to embrace and expand assessment activities, they often do not have a good idea where to start. The subject of assessment may seem overwhelming.

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This session seeks to initiate a discussion regarding simple approaches through which faculty can gain meaningful insights into components of their courses and/or programs with only modest expenditures of time and energy.

2. OVERALL SESSION OBJECTIVE

This session will bring interested faculty together to brainstorm time-effective assessment activities. Since assessment seeks to aid the on-going improvement of programs, discussion will focus upon how faculty can channel their efforts to identify strengths and opportunities within courses and the curriculum and to make refinements. The session will introduce new assessment ideas, and encourage discussion and idea sharing.

3. OUTLINE OF THE SESSION

This session is designed as a collaborative enterprise, in which both leaders and the audience identify the current status of assessment activities at their institutions, describe challenges and opportunities, and share time-effective approaches that may move programs forward — with only modest requirements of faculty time and effort. In order to structure this discussion within the time available, the following 5-part structure is suggested.

Part 1: Preliminaries (5 minutes)

- Introductions
- Session outline

Part 2: Some simple assessment activities (25 minutes)

- Description of several simple activities that can provide meaningful input with relatively few hours of faculty time. Examples will include each of the following:
 - steps to formulate 5-15 learning outcomes for each graduate
 - small data collection to measure student achievement of a learning objective in a course
 - exit interviews of graduating seniors
 - alumni surveys
 - course-specific end-of-course evaluations
 - tapping on-campus resources to help
 - use of ACM/IEEE-CS CS2013 curricular guidelines [2]
 - use of ABET Assessment Planning [3, 4]
- This preliminary discussion is not intended to provide complete information about every aspect of a course or program. However, in each case, leaders have used these activities, found them to be manageable in implementation, and used the results in meaningful ways.

Part 3: Current Status (10 minutes)

- Audience members will describe the current status of assessment activities at their institutions.
- Audience identification of additional assessment activities that are simple and time effective.

Part 4: Challenges (10 minutes)

- Audience members will outline challenges they experience with assessment.
- Leaders will synthesize and identify 4-5 challenges that reflect a range of issues articulated by the audience.

Part 5: Brainstorming (25 minutes)

- Leaders and audience members will brainstorm approaches to the 4-5 challenges articulated by the audience.
- Depending on the number of session attendees, this part of the session may proceed in 2-3 small groups or as a group of the whole.

4. EXPECTATIONS

For many faculty members, assessment is intimidating, and moving forward can seem overwhelming. This session seeks to help audience participants take a few steps forward from whatever they might be doing for course- or program-level assessment. One session cannot cover the entire subject of assessment, but one session can provide a range of practical ideas and approaches.

Since the session leaders have experience in a wide range of assessment activities — both at their own institutions and during reviews on other campuses, the leaders will present some materials to start discussion and also have additional materials prepared as possible examples and references. The session itself will select those elements that address specific problems identified by attendees. Additional suggestions by other audience members will expand possible ways to address identified problems.

At the end of the session, it is expected that audience members will have identified several practical approaches that might help address current problems regarding assessment at home institutions.

5. SUITABILITY FOR A SPECIAL SESSION

Although the session leaders will begin with examples and approaches that may help seed discussion, this session is designed to be highly interactive and participatory. Leaders will make some short presentations, but the format and intention of the session is to foster sharing, brainstorming, and active problem solving.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] National Science Foundation, Merit Review Criteria. *National Science Foundation Board* (Dec. 14, 2011).
- [2] ACM/IEEE-CS Task Force, *Computer Science Curricula 2013* ACM and IEEE-CS, December 20, 2013.
- [3] ABET Assessment Planning (<http://www.abet.org/assessment-planning/>), accessed August 26, 2014.
- [4] ABET Assessment Planning Resources (<http://www.abet.org/assessment-planning-resources/>), accessed August 26, 2014.

7. LEADER BIOGRAPHIES

Henry Walker has served as an external reviewer of 35 departments (either computer science or mathematics and computer science) since 1991. He also has been a contributor to the Committee on Consultants of the Mathematical Association of America (MAA) and writer of a LaTeX template for reports of external reviewers for the MAA Report, *Guidelines for Serving as a Consultant in the Mathematical Sciences*, Spring 2009. In addition, he has actively participated in three reviews of his own department, in the 1970s, 1995, and 2007. Currently, he is designated as Professor of Computer Science and Samuel R. and Marie-Louise Rosenthal Professor of Natural Science and Mathematics at Grinnell College.

Sue Fitzgerald, Professor of Computer Science, is the senior faculty member in the Department of Information and Computer Sciences at Metropolitan State University, MN. At present she also serves as Director of Metro State's Center for Faculty Development. She has been employed at Metro State since 1996, serving two terms as department chair from 1996 to 2002. From 2010 to 2012, Dr. Fitzgerald served as a Program Director for the National Science Foundation where she made funding recommendations on grant proposals relating to science education at the undergraduate level.

John Dooley is the William and Marilyn Ingersoll Professor of Computer Science at Knox College, Galesburg, IL. He came to assessment purely by accident and reluctantly. He first encountered assessment when he was in charge of the CS department self-study in 2008-2009. Since then he has been working with the College's Department of Institutional Research and Assessment on assessment surveys, data collection, and analysis. He also worked on a science division-wide council to create learning goals for introductory courses and has served as an external reviewer in several CS program reviews. He headed up the 2013-2014 CS departmental program review at Knox.