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How Do We Know If We Are Doing Well?

The Challenges of Core Curriculum Assessment *What Some Schools Are Doing*

By Margaret Davis

When *Conversations* last featured the core curriculum as its subject in 1999, Richard Passon, professor Emeritus at the University of Scranton, reported how his survey of Jesuit institutions had found “few universities with well developed and elaborated schemes of assessment.” He ended his article “What We’re Doing” with this question: “How will we assess our general education curricula to assure the kind of mission centeredness to which we all aspire?”

Writing in this issue eleven years later, (“What I Learned from Working with the Core”), Passon ends with this statement: “By the way, ask me some time about what [core revision] has to do with educational objectives and—groan—assessment.” It appears that the thorny issue of core assessment remains on the table.

But now we must do more than groan because assessment of student learning is a process whose time has come. Our accrediting agencies are demanding that we show value added in our educational process. And while accreditation and accountability are desirable, even necessary, educators have a better reason for forging ahead with this task. We recognize that only by examining students’ work at the program and institutional levels can we know whether they have gained the skills, knowledge, and values that we think we are teaching them.

The task has not grown easier in eleven years, however. One habitual challenge, according to George Sims, provost of Spring Hill College, is

decentralized governance of the core; core courses themselves usually belong to disciplines or departments, and this “dual ownership can create confusion about what needs to be assessed, what criteria to use, and who is responsible for the results.” Our Jesuit institutions, however, face some challenges that may be peculiar to our mission. Our schools tend to have larger core curricula than state institutions. Moreover, we are further interested in the assessment of values embedded in our educational mission, of evidence that students have learned to link faith, reason, and justice. Efficiency in mathematics can be determined by a paper and pencil test, but how does one know when students “take responsibility for [their] gifts and talents and help build up the gifts and talents of others”? (Rockhurst University core value)

Assessment should help us answer that question. Effective assessment must begin with clearly stated learning outcomes. James Wiser, in this issue of *Conversations*, relates his experience with three attempts at core revision and calls this step the most difficult but also the most crucial.

For Jesuit institutions, a productive way of establishing broad learning outcomes is to tie them to the college mission. Seattle University’s clearly articulated core learning outcomes provides a

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model. Its college mission follows the 450 year old Jesuit tradition of educational excellence in “helping students develop into empowered leaders for a better world.” Seattle describes its core curriculum as “courses designed to form a coherent and developmental educational experience that helps students develop as whole persons, think deeply about the world and their place in it, and find and apply the special talents they have to share with the world to make it a better place.”

One of the university learning outcomes is this: “to assess [students’] own levels of commitment to community service and to a just world.” The corresponding core learning outcome calls each student “To articulate one’s vision of social and environmental justice, to assess one’s own personal commitment to justice, and to demonstrate actions taken to ameliorate injustice or to promote a better world.” This engagement between core goals and mission provides a coherent base for going forward.

After learning outcomes are in place, the challenge continues. Faculty leaders determine how to implement two general methods of assessment: micro-evaluation embedded in each course taught in the core, and macro-program evaluation from outside the course. Both micro and macro assessments take many forms. Indirect evaluation takes place through student and alumni surveys, interviews, observation, and reflective essays.

To gain authentic information about student learning, however, institutions also need direct assessment. A number use standardized tests to measure quantitative learning. Student portfolios measure individual learning over time. Case studies allow students to respond to real-life moral and ethical situations. Rubrics administered at the course and program level are widespread (the AAC&U recently published its fifteen VALUE rubrics for the learning



Santa Clara University.

outcomes it considers essential and asks institutions to revise them for local use). Writing evaluations, especially those that measure pre-and post learning, continue to give reliable measurements. And capstone courses that measure many learning outcomes at once are proving to be one of the best venues for assessment of qualitative learning.

What Rockhurst does

Much has been written about assessment strategies, but research yields little information about effective assessment of the kinds of values inherent in Jesuit education. Our institutions are grappling with this challenge, and a number report various successful programs. All institutions take part in some form of surveys, recognized as a valid means of indirect measurement. Rockhurst University has found a way to use these measures in assessing values. It clusters National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Student Satisfactory Inventory (SSI) questions around the university mission, Jesuit core values, and university learning themes. In addition to this clustering, Rockhurst grafts questions pertinent to its mission onto its standardized test. For example, to measure evidence of attitudes and behaviors that support the university mission, the university adds to NSSE, “To what extent has your experience at Rockhurst contributed to your knowledge, skills, & personal development in understanding the Jesuit principle of being ‘men and women for others?’” To

You don't need a perfect tool.

measure the core value of "Finding God in All Things" it adds to NSSE, "In your Rockhurst experience during the current school year, how often have you had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own?" The school's mission and ministry committee annually reviews freshman and senior responses to these instruments to gain information about changes in student attitudes and practices.

Creighton

Eileen Burke-Sullivan, associate professor of theology and associate director of spirituality programs at Creighton University, makes novel use of the case study as a means of assessment. In this program, a real life situation poses an ethical problem, and students are asked to respond from various points of view. For example, a case study on sacraments poses the situation of non-practicing parents who bring their infant for Catholic baptism only at the insistence of the grandparents. Students explain the theological implications involved and respond to this event from the point of view of priest, parent, and grandparent. This assignment calls for knowledge of content as well as expression of an attitude toward the proposed situation, while providing students a context within which to understand and claim their values.

Spring Hill

Several schools report instituting pilot programs. Rubrics, in particular, once tested and refined, are especially helpful in measuring degrees of achievement toward a standard. Spring Hill College plans to pilot the use of rubrics in assessing student learning from its required course in cultural diversity. Instructors of all the courses in various disciplines with a "D" designation will work together to adapt the rubric for *Intercultural Knowledge and Competence* published by the AAC&U VALUE project. This rubric measures student levels of achievement in knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Instructors then will write an assignment to be given to students in all the classes at the end of term, at which point a group of readers will evaluate a sample of the responses according to the rubric.

Boston College

Boston College uses writing evaluations as the focus of its pilot program, comparing samples of essays from students in the freshman writing seminars with those of students in university capstone seminars. Both groups' essays are rated according to rubrics matching stated learning outcomes of the core in response to the same assignment: "Write a 3-4 page essay on the most important intellectual experience (book, course, lecture, conversation, etc.) you have had in the past year and why it was important to you." The university sees this as a guide in defining a comprehensive set of program goals for the general education curriculum.

Seattle

Seattle University has also launched a program to evaluate sample essays from its 300-level ethics course to assess students' ability to engage in sophisticated ethical reasoning. In addition, the school will place reflective essay assignments dealing with social justice in several sections of its senior synthesis courses. It seems obvious that comparison of first- and fourth-year student essays from courses where students are grappling with issues of ethics and spirituality offer an ideal opportunity to assess values related to faith linked to reason.

Most of our Jesuit institutions are concerned about this issue of assessment of the core curriculum, and most are struggling to find ways to produce authentic data about student learning while they recognize that more needs to be done. No administrator seems fully confident that his/her institution's program is sufficient to demonstrate the transformative changes that the core presumes to effect. Joe Burns, associate vice provost at Boston College, however, gives this encouraging word: "You don't need a perfect tool. Have a tool that forces students to answer the right questions and develop rubrics to measure their answers." It sounds simple, but it's not easy. The 1986 document *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education* sets up its first premise for what our institutions intend: "Jesuit education is world affirming [in that] it assists in the total formation of each individual within the human community." Good assessment will help us to know how close we come to that ideal.