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## **ENGAGING FACULTY IN ASSESSMENT THROUGH INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE**

### **Introduction**

Old Westbury's General Education offerings in Western Civilization, Other World Civilizations and the Arts are both multi and interdisciplinary. Assessment presented a challenge. In order to develop measures, course instructors had to be involved. In order to write the plan, dialogue between them was essential. A training workshop was organized in which a discussion about what is taught, what is learned and how it evaluated turned out to be a perhaps un-expected benefit. Faculty collaboration both contributed to and was a positive outgrowth of the process.

### **General Education and Interdisciplinary Studies**

At Old Westbury Western Civilization, Other World Civilization and the Arts are multidisciplinary. (See Attachment A.) Since five departments contribute, the areas are not "owned" by any. Many of the courses are also interdisciplinary. When the college was chartered in 1965 it was envisioned as experimental and innovative; originally all its programs were interdisciplinary. Over the years disciplinary and professional departments have been added and these have increasingly become associated with particular career paths. The interdisciplinary departments have evolved to become central to the General Education curriculum. In the knowledge areas being discussed, three of the contributing departments American Studies, Humanities and Languages and Politics Economics and Society are both multi and interdisciplinary. Each has faculty trained in a variety of fields. Further, several who teach about Asia, Islam and Latin America pursued interdisciplinary doctorates in order to more fully understand the cultures they were studying. Interviews with members of the three departments revealed two fundamental commonalities.

- a. Each defines itself around unifying themes and/or perspectives.
- b. Sources, documents and methods are drawn from several disciplines.

A Humanities and Language offering, randomly chosen for Western Civilization's assessment sample, illustrates this approach. The theme of CH3030 From God to the Machine: Europe from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century is the shift in the European world-view from the renaissance to the enlightenment. Course materials include texts on the intellectual history of science and religion, philosophical essays by Descartes, the novel

*Manon Lescaut* and art slides. The Sociology department is one of the two disciplinary departments contributing to these knowledge areas. However, one of its courses in the World Cultures assessment sample SY4530 Cross Cultural Analysis is also interdisciplinary, drawing on sociology, anthropology and economics.

General education offerings range from the 1000 to 4000 level. PE2240 Introduction to Latin America is an example of an interdisciplinary course frequently taken by freshman and sophomores. Transfer students are more likely to need upper division options. At our college, we did not have the funding to create a new core designed to meet the SUNY initiative. In addition, given our continued commitment to small class sizes, we could no longer afford team teaching. However, we used the resources we had to provide flexibility. Many of the courses also fulfill major requirements, thus easing the credit crunch. General education can be taken throughout the four years and there are choices beyond the typical multiple or large sections of “intro to” classes. Incorporating interdisciplinary courses allows faculty to teach in their area of expertise thereby increasing their interest in being part of the program. Building linkages between introductory and advanced levels and with the major is, according to the American Association of Colleges and Universities (Gaff, 1999; Klein, 1999) a key element of a “strong” general education curriculum.

### **The Assessment Workshop**

A workshop was organized by the General Education Committee (GEC) to train faculty and to facilitate discussion both within and across departments. The GEC Director contacted Chairs, and asked them to compile a list of all those teaching in the relevant knowledge areas. The session was scheduled during a one hour and forty minute common hour when no classes were held. All identified faculty were expected to attend. They were informed both by memo and in departmental meetings. A secretary, the Director and in a few cases the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs made follow up calls. It is widely understood that a course’s general education status contributes to its enrollment and participation in assessment was presented as a necessary aspect of inclusion in the program. The Teaching for Learning Center produced and distributed fliers and provided lunch. The turn out was excellent and initial attitudes were task oriented.

To begin, the GEC Director gave an overview of the objectives of the meeting and the timetable for assessment. Relevant documents, the General Education Bulletin, the SUNY GER, the GEC’s expanded learning outcomes, and previously submitted plans for other knowledge areas, had already been circulated on the campus but additional copies were made available. Then the faculty GEC representatives of Western and World Civilizations presented examples of measures for two courses, one short answer and one essay. The discussion that ensued raised the following fundamental questions.

1. How does the nature of the test influence what is taught and learned? One of the presenters proposed that all adopt short answer tests. As the primary instructor of the basic introductory Western Civilization course, he believed that this approach was best suited to the breadth of the material that needed to be covered. A member of his own department objected that this kind of test would limit what could be taught. She argued that were necessary to encourage a depth of understanding as well as critical thinking.

2. How would assessment results be compared given that the knowledge areas had sixteen to seventeen different courses? The relevance of the SUNY GER became evident. All measures would be based on and all results would be geared to demonstrating the achievement of these learning outcomes. Since the GEC's objectives expanded on SUNY's, these could be used to further specify the required knowledge.

3. What is the ownership of a course in terms of creating and scoring a measure? While adopting a short answer format would have led to a quicker process of data collection and analysis, it became clear that even advocates of such exams would include short identification items. Some instructors assumed that given their knowledge of specific material they would develop the criteria and score. It was pointed out that this created reliability problems. The distinction between grading and assessment was helpful. Instructors would still be responsible for and control making up tests and grading. Assessment measures had to correspond to general education learning outcomes. They could be entirely different from or include aspects of the course test. Others in addition to the instructor would have to be involved in developing and scoring each assessment instrument.

4. How could measures and data from courses at different levels be compared? The SUNY learning outcomes represented common criteria but also in some cases the lowest common denominator. Interdisciplinary and upper division courses included objectives not included in the SUNY GER. The distinction was made between assessment of general education and the major. Courses could be also be evaluated according to their own objectives and for learning outcomes in the major as well.

5. How could critical thinking be assessed within and across knowledge areas and from the introductory to the advanced level? According to our plan, critical thinking was to be assessed in all knowledge areas. Here again, the SUNY and GEC learning outcomes were presented as the basis of assessment measures. Some more complex criteria, such as the ability to present and evaluate evidence for two different hypotheses were suggested. However, such skills were deemed beyond the scope of introductory courses. Again, the possibility of developing additional learning outcomes for more advanced courses was discussed.

The discussion ended with a preliminary consensus. It appeared that there was no single format that could adequately test the diverse curriculum and that course embedded measures were best suited to this curriculum. However, faculty were encouraged to explore uniform approaches particularly for critical thinking where the SUNY learning outcomes could serve as the common basis of a scoring rubric. It was suggested that

because our general education program included offerings at advanced levels, we could go beyond the SUNY assessment mandate at that time and begin to develop additional measures for critical thinking in exit courses.

Participants broke down into knowledge area subgroups. These groups chose random samples stratified so that courses at all levels and from all contributing departments were included. The presence of most of the relevant faculty in the same room facilitated the exchange information as to when courses would be offered and who would be teaching them during the assessment year. Team formation began and faculty whose courses were not in the sample became team members. Responsibility was taken to contact adjuncts and those not present.

### **Developing the Plan**

Approximately twenty-five people, virtually all teaching in the three knowledge areas, were involved in devising measures and rubrics for the eighteen courses in the assessment sample. Interdisciplinary collaboration continued. In putting together the teams, faculty found that it provided an opportunity to interact with others with similar perspectives both inside and out of their own departments. For example, one professor interested in political and another in sociological theory decided to work together. For PE 2240 Introduction to Latin American Studies, a political scientist and Spanish language instructor joined forces. Faculty teaching in the Arts knowledge area had not been asked not to participate in the workshop. The GEC representative and the core of the offerings came from Visual Arts and it seemed that communication would be accomplished most efficiently within the department. However, with the GEC as a base, interdisciplinary exchange proved to be important. Rubrics for the VA2020 and VA2400 Introduction to Design and Photography, developed to assess artistic products, were useful in devising scoring criteria for the Humanities and Languages course CH3901 Introduction to Creative Writing. Visual arts faculty worked with the adjunct teaching MD1000 Music of Global Cultures, which was not situated in any department. The scoring rubric used for AS3482 History of US Film served as a model for the evaluation of the dance course's response paper.

Four of the courses selected in the sample were taught by adjuncts. Given that there were no funds to reimburse them for the additional hours required to participate in assessment, they were not required to be at the workshop. Indeed, several different people had taught a particular course over the semesters. It was agreed that the adjunct instructors would be involved in developing the measure and would be asked to collect tests, papers etc. However, full time faculty would score, analyze and report the data.

Over a period of four months, the GEC representatives were responsible for direct contact with faculty involved. They had access to people in their departments and understood the subject areas. The director oversaw the progress, and provided information on assessment methods and SUNY requirements. Measures adopted included multiple choice and short

identification items, essays, papers and creative projects. Courses at the 1000 and 2000 level primarily utilized a short answer format. All at the 4000 level adopted essays or papers. Each of the three knowledge areas developed a somewhat different approach reflecting both the nature of the material covered and the SUNY learning outcomes.

For Western Civilization, the SUNY requirement “demonstrate the history, institutions, economy, society, culture” was the basis of assessment measures. Individual test items covered history, institutions etc. A scale (ex. 1 to 4) rating knowledge of the information on short identification and essay questions was uniformly adopted. The instructor of one course in the sample, SY4530 Classical Sociological Theory, further specified these areas as they related to her more advanced work. The second part of SUNY’s learning outcome, “Relate Western civilization to other regions of the world” had always been an important perspective at Old Westbury. Indeed, the curriculum in two of the interdisciplinary departments included both Western and “other” cultures. While in some of the Western Civilization courses the connections between cultures were implicit, additional materials and essays were needed in order to directly assess the approach.

For Other World Civilizations, the SUNY GER ask for knowledge of either “ a broad outline of world history” or the “distinctive features of one non-Western civilization”. Courses on several different cultures were part of this area and measures were more likely to involve essays. Reflecting these factors, faculty decided to utilize the more detailed Old Westbury GEC learning outcomes. These included but expanded on SUNY’s, and had been developed through several rounds of consultation with departmental faculty (See attachment B.) These criteria either corresponded to test items or were the basis of a scoring rubric for essays and papers.

The SUNY requirement for the Arts, “understanding at least one principal form of artistic expression and the creative process inherent therein” is broad. At Old Westbury the offerings are in the fields of visual arts, dance, creative writing and film. Four of the courses in the assessment sample involved the creation of a product, three the analysis of artistic works. Faculty in this area found it necessary to begin with the individual course objectives. However, as they began to develop scoring rubrics, those rating creative works adopted a similar approach, as did those evaluating analytical papers.

In assessing critical thinking, both the faculty teaching in Western Civilization and Other World Civilizations, based their scoring rubrics on the SUNY learning outcomes “Identify, analyze and evaluate arguments and “develop well reasoned arguments”. All instructors decided to evaluate this in essays or papers and some had to add essays to the measurement instruments for this purpose. For SY4530 Classical Sociological Theory, the instructor further delineated this competency within the context of the course (as she did for content). In the Arts, criteria for critical thinking were incorporated into the overall scoring rubrics and embedded in the particular artistic form.

## **In Conclusion**

Commitment to the unique interdisciplinary curriculum served as a foundation on which to build involvement. At the workshop, concern was expressed both that the diverse courses be retained and that results be comparable within knowledge areas. The plan that emerged took both issues into account. With the SUNY learning outcomes as a starting point, individual measures of the content in each course as well as common rating scales and rubrics were developed. Faculty began to seek out and accept more uniform approaches, partly as a way of accomplishing their own tasks. They also appreciated that assessment provided the opportunity to interact with others who shared a similar intellectual perspective. The General Education Committee played a pivotal role in organizing and coordinating faculty work and completing the plan.

## **REFERENCES**

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