

Report of APRC, 2014

*Good Assessment Practices*

Simpson College follows good practices in its assessment process in the following ways:

*Assessment done well will focus on student learning.*

As a liberal arts institution with a tradition of focusing on teaching, student learning has always been important to Simpson College. In recent years we have been focusing more on meaningful assessment practices to provide actionable data for improvement of our teaching practices (described below).

*Assessment must be broadly based and is the responsibility of the campus community.*

Academic assessment is squarely under the control of the academic faculty and instructional staff; it is spearheaded by the director of academic assessment, who is a voting member of SLIC, which supports the director in her task. SLIC includes representatives from three separate divisions (Humanities, Social Sciences, Policy Studies, Natural Sciences, and Visual and Performing Arts), the senior vice president and academic dean, a member of the instructional staff, and a student representative. Each department or program has an assessment coordinator who is the liaison between the director of academic assessment and SLIC on the one hand and the departments or programs on the other. Both the director of academic assessment and SLIC provide ongoing professional development activities for the campus community at large and for the department chairs and assessment liaisons. The College does not yet have an institutional researcher, but the 2014 strategic plan includes a proposal to hire a person for this position.

We recognize that we need to do a better job of involving students in the assessment process beyond having them upload artifacts to the assessment portal via the course management system and respond to various surveys outside of class time. One way we are addressing this is by asking the Student Government Association to appoint a representative to SLIC. We also recognize that we need to find a better way to link our administrative processes to the results of our assessment processes. The planned annual meetings between the president's cabinet and those involved with assessment will help to establish such a link.

*Assessment must be treated as part of regular instructional practice.*

While there are established campus-wide characteristics of assessment practice, each department or program develops its own assessment plan and improvement initiatives. All established majors and master's degree programs must assess student learning in relation to program-level SLOs every year. Through AY 2014-15, APRC and the director of academic assessment set standards as to the number of SLOs each program, major, or degree are allowed to have and the timing of the assessment cycle. Each SLO must be assessed with at least two different measures, at least one of which must be a direct measure. Ideally such measures grow from the planned instruction in advanced classes. Collection of artifacts for each SLO is continuous with periodic analysis of all artifacts (or a random sample). All faculty members in the departments are involved with assessment and all assessment results are shared with department members and instructional staff. Our assessment reports state the extent to which objectives are achieved, but even if we achieve set goals, we engage in continuous improvement, so that specific plans are always made for improving student learning. The improvement plans are implemented as soon as the courses affected are next taught. These improvement plans are subsequently assessed for their effectiveness as well as part of regular assessment practice.

*Assessment must include direct measures of student learning.*

While indirect assessments (e.g., student satisfaction) provide valuable ideas for improvement, they are not necessarily good indicators of student learning. Therefore, all programs must include direct measures of student learning. Most commonly this means programs collect artifacts of student learning, evaluate them with a rubric, and measure what proportion of students are achieving the performance goals

*Assessment must be addressed in the planning stages of new programs or degrees.*

New majors and certificates at Simpson are designed with assessment of student learning in mind. Before new majors or certificates can be approved by the Educational Policy and Curriculum Committee (EPCC), the proposers of the major or certificate must create the program-level SLOs and a curriculum map indicating how the required and elective courses contribute to those SLOs. Upon approval of the major or certificate by EPCC, the assessment documents are passed on to the Assessment and Program Review Committee, which reviews the SLOs and works with the proposers to create an assessment plan, including determining both direct and indirect assessment measures, designating in which courses assessment will take place, selecting artifacts, and setting performance goals. The newly-revised general education curriculum, which is addressed below, was also designed with assessment in mind.

*Assessment must be based on buy-in from large numbers of the campus community.*

When Simpson College developed a new general education program (the ECC), which was launched in Fall 2011, the College community worked to create learning outcomes and required course characteristics for each of the 14 designations (Areas of Engagement and Embedded Skills). The process by which courses were designated as part of the ECC is illustrative of the consensus building that has been going on in support of assessment. From Fall 2010 through Fall 2011, the general education director and designation panels (teams of faculty members and instructional staff with expertise in each Area of Engagement and Embedded Skill) vetted proposals to have courses designated for the ECC. The panels made recommendations for improvements when proposals did not meet the required course characteristics and SLOs or did not include sufficient detail on the proposed assessment artifacts to be collected. Proposers (academic department chairs and program leaders) were allowed to resubmit until all criteria were met. The proposals were then forwarded to EPCC and the full faculty for approval.

Since Spring 2012 proposals have been vetted directly by EPCC and must be accepted both by the committee and by the full faculty for inclusion in the ECC. In order to strengthen the connection between SLOs and assessment, all faculty members and instructional staff who teach ECC courses are provided with ECC syllabus grids, which are planning tools to help instructors specify course activities addressing each SLO and related artifacts that can be collected for assessment. Artifacts for assessment of the ECC are determined by the instructor teaching each course. At the time of collection, artifacts are uploaded by the students who produce them to StormFront through a link on the College's course management system (Scholar). These artifacts are evaluated in the general education assessment cycle .

While the acceptance of formal assessment practices has grown in recent years, buy-in is not universal. For example, some members of the faculty resent the time required for proposing and evaluating ECC courses, and some believe that the assessment process interferes with academic freedom by forcing instructors to "teach to the test." We need to do a better job of closing the assessment loop to demonstrate the relevance of assessment to effective teaching and learning.

*Assessment results should show evidence of the strengths and weaknesses of student learning.*

While the results of nationally-normed tests are used in some departments' assessment plans, most plans include direct assessments of student-produced work that is examined using rubrics tied to the SLO. By analyzing sub-scores in the rubrics, it is possible to determine where student learning needs the most support. Such an analysis helps to determine the most effective improvement plan. Rubrics from all programs are shared with the full faculty on the assessment resources portal.

*Assessment should be responsive to our changes in the understanding of student learning.*

Assessment of the ECC is tied to rubrics that were initially adapted from the AAC&U's VALUE rubrics, which were then vetted by the ECC designation panels. As the campus community's understanding of each SLO in the ECC has deepened, we have used community-wide discussions to make changes as necessary to the SLOs and the rubrics. Faculty and instructional staff from each of the fourteen areas of the ECC lead the assessment of the general education program, which is based on random samples of artifacts from all courses whether they are taught in the traditional day offerings or in the C&G. Evaluators go through a norming process with the rubric before assessing the artifacts. The entire committee assembles to analyze and interpret the data and create the improvement plan, which is shared with the full faculty and instructional staff. Changes to either the rubrics or the learning outcomes are among the possible improvements that could be suggested, as are changes to instructional practice. Faculty and instructional staff for majors, master's degrees, and certificates can also change their assessment practices as their understanding of learning in their courses grows. SLIC plays a significant role in advising programs on ways to modify assessment practices in response to their assessment results.

*Assessment requires continuous faculty development opportunities.*

In an effort to create an effective assessment process, we have provided constituencies involved with assessment with professional development opportunities throughout the past several years. We have twice brought in consultants for the wider community to learn about writing effective SLOs and instituting best practices in assessment. The full faculty also receives ongoing professional development in all aspects of the general education curriculum, including assessment. Department chairs and departmental assessment liaisons receive extra, sometimes one-on-one, training in the analysis and interpretation of data and the development of improvement plans. Members of APRC have attended the HLC conference whenever possible, as will members of the Academic Program Improvement Committee (APIC) and SLIC, and the director of academic assessment attends conferences in addition to the HLC conference. An initial core group of faculty functioned as the College's team in the Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning and then acted as consultants to other members of the faculty with assessment-related questions. Finally, a part of the programming coordinated by the Faculty Development Committee and the faculty development office is scheduled to respond to assessment needs.

*Assessment results should be shared with all stakeholders.*

Simpson does not yet share assessment results on an openly accessible website. There are some cultural issues that must be surmounted before the campus community will accept such sharing. Assessment reports, rubrics, and improvement plans for the general education curriculum are

shared internally on StormFront; however, many departments still have some misgivings about how assessment information would be used if it were shared campus-wide. Rubrics developed by departments for direct and indirect assessment are shared on the assessment portal with the rest of the faculty, but we are not yet to the point where assessment reports are shared beyond the department and the SLIC. We have also been slow to share assessment results with the trustees, though they have access to departmental review data. One way we are addressing our communication problems is by putting the director of assessment on the Learning Programs Committee of the board of trustees. We will also work with the Office of Information Technology Services to devise an appropriate interface for sharing assessment results.