

Voices of Experience: Assessment Advice from Cal State Fresno's Veteran Assessment Coordinators

The following synopsis is based on a panel presentation at the Fall 2007 Assessment Coordinator's meeting on September 14, 2007. Panelists were Terry Miller, Professor and Assessment Coordinator for Theatre Arts; Marianne Jones, Department Chair and Assessment Coordinator for Child, Family & Consumer Sciences; Rick Zechman, Associate Professor and Assessment Coordinator for Biology; and Russell Mardon, Department Chair and Assessment Coordinator for Political Science.

Panelists were asked to talk about their experiences as the Assessment Coordinator and to offer advice to new Assessment Coordinators that might help make their role easier and valued.

Tip 1: You won't always get it right, especially the first time

▶ You'll stumble through it at the beginning, and you'll make mistakes, but you'll get another chance.

▶ Assessment of student writing in Theatre Arts is working well. We use a rubric that we've honed over time. But you'll have activities that don't work.

Tip 2: You have to get your colleagues involved

▶ Assessment can't be the job of one person. You have to take hold of it as a faculty group and make it a regular part of discussions.

▶ The Assessment Coordinator role is to be a cheerleader, to rally the troops. You have to organize and get buy-in from colleagues or the activities won't get done, unless you can pull strings behind the scenes.

▶ Get yourself in front of faculty. Get yourself trained so you can be a better resource to faculty. Take advantage of university resources.

▶ Assessing your program should become the way you do business, not an add-on that's done at the end of the year. As it becomes an internal, integrated process that people own, you can expect better results. In Child & Family, everybody talks about assessment and the curriculum as a regular part of department business. The faculty needs regular opportunities to talk to each other. We can't afford isolation—not being part of the unit's culture or not talking about the business of the unit.

▶ All faculty in the Political Science department meet once a year, at the beginning of Fall semester to talk about what we think and make some decisions about the program after having graded student papers during the summer. Before Spring semester ends, I hand out student papers to each faculty member that we've collected during the year. We just take a set of papers students have written in a class, make an extra copy, and stick it in a file, un-graded. Then I deal these out like a deck of cards. Each faculty member

reviews and grades some of them over the summer, using a rubric. After we meet and discuss what we found, I write a summary of what we decided to do, for documentation purposes. I keep minutes for the same reason. We keep track of changes in the curriculum, so we can show this is what we found and this is what we did.

Tip 3: Make assessment activities manageable

- ▶ We pick something we already do. Don't make up new stuff if you can help it.

- ▶ How can you use what you've already got to measure? Pre-test, post-test? Alumni surveys? You can get several measures from an alumni survey if you ask the right questions.

- ▶ Choose two learning outcomes. What are the one or two things all your students should have and how can you capture it in a measure? Probably you're already doing it, or it can't be that important.

- ▶ Have students write a paper. Use a rubric to score it. See if they have analytical skills, demonstration skills, or documentation ability, whatever is most important to your program.

- ▶ Streamline the process as best as you can.

- ▶ Design assessment activities so they reflect on things you can do to bring about positive change in your program.

- ▶ Share the work. Divide it up. Think about ways to make the load lighter. For example, you can sample instead of reading all students' papers. Instead of one person reading 60 papers, have three people read 20. If the work is too heavy, it won't get done. I can delegate some of the work and keep parts of it myself.

- ▶ Everybody's interested in teaching and learning, but maybe they're not interested in every goal in the plan. You can divide the work accordingly.

- ▶ Send reminders to faculty so they remember to implement a particular piece of the plan.

- ▶ Over time, you can get your rubrics honed and the work divided. Never feel it all has to be done today, so long as you're working toward it.

- ▶ When doing assessment, convince yourself. The level of proof doesn't have to be the same as for publication in your discipline.

- ▶ Ask the right questions, and find the right balance. You don't have to do really sophisticated work, but do it well so that it brings your program up without taking up too much time.

▶ Where in the curriculum are your learning objectives being met and to what degree are they not? Developing or revisiting a curriculum map helps determine this and helps with closing the loop, assuring that assessment results are useful.

Tip 4: Measure your program, not individual students or faculty

▶ Measure what your whole program does and is doing over time. Program assessment isn't assessing an individual student in an individual course.

▶ My thought was that outcomes are determined through grades, but that differentiates individuals, not your program. You need to lift up some to gauge the department.

▶ One dilemma involved in doing assessment in a small department, is that individual faculty members can't be invisible. We say we're assessing the program, not the individual faculty member, but it's difficult to make that separation when there's only one or two faculty in the program. How can we help them think about assessment and not get concerned about being blamed if results don't look good? It takes a certain sensitivity to recognize this concern and help people get past it.

▶ Start with just a small thing. We did this and just got results for the first time. We found students aren't getting what they should be. How could that be? After discussing it, we realized there was too much in the course to ever be able to cover it adequately. We revamped the course, not just the pedagogy.

▶ A suggestion to this dilemma offered by Interim Dean of Graduate Studies, Dianne Dickerson, is to focus assessment on a culminating experience where the responsibility falls on the whole department, not an individual faculty member.

Tip 5: Revise your plan, activities and responsibilities as needed

▶ Look at the plan (SOAP) as something you're constantly rewriting and changing. Who's going to do the assessment work? Revise it all the time. Circumstances change. Look at people's workload and make changes when needed. Your plan shouldn't be written in stone.

▶ Program Review is now every 7 years, so we stretched out our five-year SOAP to seven years. We look at assessment and Program Review as a whole package. If you've been Department Chair for seven years, results of the review reflect on you, like it or not.

▶ How much can you bring faculty into assessment when they haven't finished their dissertation? These kinds of circumstances must be taken into account.

▶ Not every technique will fit everybody's circumstances. For example, online surveys don't work with students who aren't computer savvy. In trying to do an alumni survey, we couldn't find our former students. Most of them are females and their names had changed.