Assessing Learning Outcomes in Small-Enrollment Programs

Prepared for the Provost's Commission on Learning Outcomes Assessment
by its Subcommittee on Small-Enrollment Programs*

November 2008

As the University develops processes for assessing the learning outcomes of its academic programs, the question has arisen as to whether it makes sense to assess programs with very small enrollments. This paper assumes small-enrollment programs to be those with five or fewer students enrolled, or 25 or fewer, on average, over a five-year assessment period. After further discussion, our subcommittee decided that some form of assessment is appropriate for small-enrollment programs (recommendations below).

Difficulties of Assessing Small-Enrollment Programs

There are essentially two problems associated with assessing small enrollment programs:

First is the difficulty of <u>generalizing from very little data</u>. When only a few students complete a program, it is difficult to tell whether the assessment results accurately reflect the learning outcomes of the program or the statistical fluctuations inherent in small sample sizes.

The second difficulty is the <u>cost-effectiveness</u> of conducting an elaborate assessment that will benefit very few students and have little effect on the University overall.

Middle States Accreditation Requirements

The general guidance of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education seems to mandate the assessment of all programs. The primary guide to its standards, "Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education," states:

> While some of the impact of an institution on its students may not be easily or immediately measured … the overall assessment of student learning is expected whatever the nature of the institution, its mission, the types of programs it offers.... (p. 64)

The guide also seems to allow the University to assess programs differently if it feels differential processes are warranted:

> While the Commission expects institutions to assess student learning, it does not prescribe a specific approach or methodology. The institution is responsible for determining its … assessment approaches and methodologies, sequence, and time frame (p. 64).

Moreover, the guide strongly endorses taking considerations of accuracy and cost-effectiveness into account when devising assessment approaches, stating that "Whatever the approach,

effective assessment processes are useful, cost-effective, reasonably accurate and truthful" (p. 64).

Student Learning Assessment: Options and Resources, Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2nd ed. (2007, reprinted August 2008), offers a more specific indication of support for assessment of small programs, as well as a recommendation for assessment method based on portfolios:

> Portfolios are structured, focused, and purposeful collections of student work. They are increasingly popular assessment strategies, because they provide an exceptionally comprehensive, holistic picture of student learning….Portfolios may be especially appropriate for programs that enroll only a handful of students (p. 53).

Assessment expert Dr. Peggy Maki suggested, in an online interview on Oct. 22, 2008, that qualitative measures are a good strategy for assessing small programs. Specifically, she advised us to "…ask students to include a critical, self-reflective piece after the major work in each course that asks them to connect the learning that has come from [their] courses." Dr. Maki's suggestions and others were considered by our subcommittee as we developed the following recommendations.

Recommendations

1. Each small-enrollment program should be permitted to assert substantial overlap with another program. If a small-enrollment program justifies substantial overlap with another program, they may be assessed together.
   a) In the case of overlap, the small-enrollment program (such as the certificate in Intelligence Policy) would state, on its assessment report, "See M.A. in Public Policy," and the M.A. in Public Policy would state, "This assessment also includes the certificate in Intelligence Policy."
   b) If a small-enrollment program is part of a joint or dual degree, the small-enrollment program will be assigned to one of those academic homes for assessment.
2. Free-standing small-enrollment programs may conduct a simple assessment or portfolio project in lieu of combining with other programs.

Methods for Independent Assessment of Small-Enrollment Programs

- Portfolios (direct evidence of student learning): a required portfolio of every student, with content as appropriate for program. For example, a portfolio might include student selected materials (small in number) showing how well a student met three key learning outcomes. A portfolio might also include self-reflective, short papers on the program as a whole. A portfolio could also be used formatively at the mid-program point to assess how well outcomes are being met.
- Senior exit interview (written and/or oral), to be conducted through an appropiate neutral party. Questions might focus on the program's learning objectives, on

student suggestions for program and on preparation for entering the job market. An alumni survey might also be done periodically, with similar questions to senior exit interview.

- Value-added evaluation (direct evidence of student learning): A written assignment might be given both at the start and end of a program to evaluate a key learning outcome.

Advantages of Assessing Small-Enrollment Programs

Departments and colleges stand to benefit from simple assessment of small-enrollment programs, whether they are assessed independently or as part of a larger program or programs. By participating in the assessment process, programs remain accountable, self-aware, self-consciously part of the university and its strategic plan, and alert to ways to improve programs to meet student learning needs.

* Authors: Bill Powers, Qing Shen, Katherine McAdams, Diane Harvey, and Joan Burton