

Assessment Task Force October, 2007

Context

As a result of the recent self-study initiated for Middle States Accreditation, the working group on assessment recognized that, while we have always been data-driven, we are not as systematic or transparent in the methods and processes we employ as we could be, and we lack a shared language for discussing our activities at the college and institutional levels. These shortcomings are a result of (a) the decentralized nature of the institution where, for example, local practices are rarely shared beyond departments/schools, as well as (b) the bottom-up approach with which we have always done assessment -- faculty in departments/schools using methods customized to the discipline and their local culture (e.g., capstone courses in engineering, performances in Drama).

In this context, the Assessment Task Force (ATF) was proposed, to more fully document assessment in all its forms as it currently exists on campus, and to point the way toward future evolution of assessment on campus. In a sense, the ATF's goal is to change the conversation about assessment on campus, so that we can take credit for what we do, and encourage continued growth of effective assessment activities across campus, by identifying successful examples within our community. In addition to developing our on-campus conversation about assessment, the ATF will help Carnegie Mellon take a leadership position in the growing national conversation about outcomes assessment in higher education (e.g. Traub, J., "No Gr_du_te Left Behind", *New York Times*, 30 Sep 2007). The focus of the ATF's work will be on assessment in undergraduate education.

Task Force Charge and Frame

At the request of the Provost, a committee representing all colleges has been created for a period of three years with three general framing questions in mind:

What is the current state of assessment of learning outcomes across the entire campus, at the department/school level?

To address this question, the task force will continue to build on the material collected by the Middle States group, expanding the set of materials to more broadly represent the variety of ways we define learning outcomes within different disciplines and contexts, the various methodologies used to collect, analyze and report data, and the myriad uses of this data in curricular decision-making. The ATF may also collect data about where, in the process, our strengths and weaknesses are. For example, it is not unusual for departments to identify a problem and implement innovative strategies to address it, without closing the loop to assure that the solutions were effective in addressing the problem.

What facilitates or hampers engaging in assessment activities at the department/school level?

It became apparent during the Middle States process that departments and programs on campus have varying abilities to engage in, talk about, or use the results of, assessment activities -- whether for student feedback and evaluation, for internal monitoring and updating of educational programs, or for other purposes. The ATF will explore and report on circumstances that facilitate

or hamper assessment activities – e.g. infrastructure, understanding, reward structures, etc. – as part of its goal of encouraging effective assessment practices in the future.

What is the future of assessment practice on campus?

In its final report the ATF will highlight its findings regarding the first two questions above; make recommendations on how to minimize obstacles, and provide appropriate types and levels of support, to encourage departments/schools to continue to develop their assessment practices; and suggest directions for effective assessment practice in the future, in the varying contexts of undergraduate education at Carnegie Mellon.

Activities, Timeline and Deliverables

To gather data, the task force may canvass departments and other units on campus, convene open or closed sessions with community members, conduct interviews, organize panel discussions, sponsor workshops, assist in design experiments¹, etc. In general, our overall plan is the following:

- Year 1 Gather data from departments/schools to better understand their current state of assessment practices, including data collection and analysis methods, processes to utilize assessment data in informing decision-making, etc. (this will build off of the work of the Middles States group). Concurrently gather data on factors identified by departments and faculty that facilitate or hamper assessment.

- Year 2 Identify a few departments/schools interested in expanding their assessment plan and/or practices, and assist those units in conducting design experiments, aimed at investigating opportunities and roadblocks identified in our year one study.

- Year 3 Document processes, initial changes, and factors that facilitated or hampered successful implementation in those departments'/schools' assessment plans and/or practices based on the design experiments. Suggest a long term, sustainable strategy to continue to evolve assessment on campus.

The ATF will produce interim reports and a final report addressing roughly the three framing questions listed above. Final versions of these reports will be publicly available on campus. In addition, the task force may issue other statements and reports related to its work.

2007	November	AFT formally begins work
2008	December	First interim report to the Provost
2009	December	Second interim report to the Provost
2010	December	Final white paper for release and dissemination

¹ Design experiments are a specific kind of experiment in educational research that are not the same as 'designed experiments'. Design experiments focus on trying out an intervention, curriculum, assessment, etc. to see what is actually involved in implementing it, what facilitates and hampers implementation, etc.

Resources

The Provost has provided a budget to the ATF to assure that we will have maximum impact as we work to more fully document current assessment practices and create a vision and plan for the evolution of assessment on campus. The budget includes a Project Manager (for three years) and money to buyout participating faculty in departments who will be working on design experiments.

Committee Composition

Co-Chairs

Dr. Susan Ambrose, Associate Provost for Education/Director, Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence/Teaching Professor, Department of History
Dr. Brian Junker, Professor, Department of Statistics

College of Fine Arts

Dr. Clayton Merrell, Associate Head/Professor, School of Art
Dr. David Boevers, Associate Professor/School of Drama

Carnegie Institute of Technology

Dr. Paul Steif, Professor, Mechanical Engineering
Dr. Lynn Walker, Professor, Chemical Engineering

H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy and Management

Dr. George Duncan, Professor of Statistics

Humanities and Social Sciences

Dr. Richard Scheines, Department Head/Professor, Department of Philosophy

Mellon College of Science

Dr. Gordon Rule, Professor, Biological Sciences
Dr. Karen Stump, Director of Undergraduate Studies/Teaching Professor,
Department of Chemistry

School of Computer Science

Dr. Klaus Sutner, Associate Dean of Undergraduate Programs/Teaching Professor
Dr. Steve Brookes, Professor

Tepper School of Business

Dr. Mark Fichman, Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior and Theory
Dr. Milton Cofield, Associate Teaching Professor of Business Management/
Executive Director of the B.S. in Business Administration

Central Administration

Dr. Anne Fay, Director of Assessment, Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Office of Technology for Education