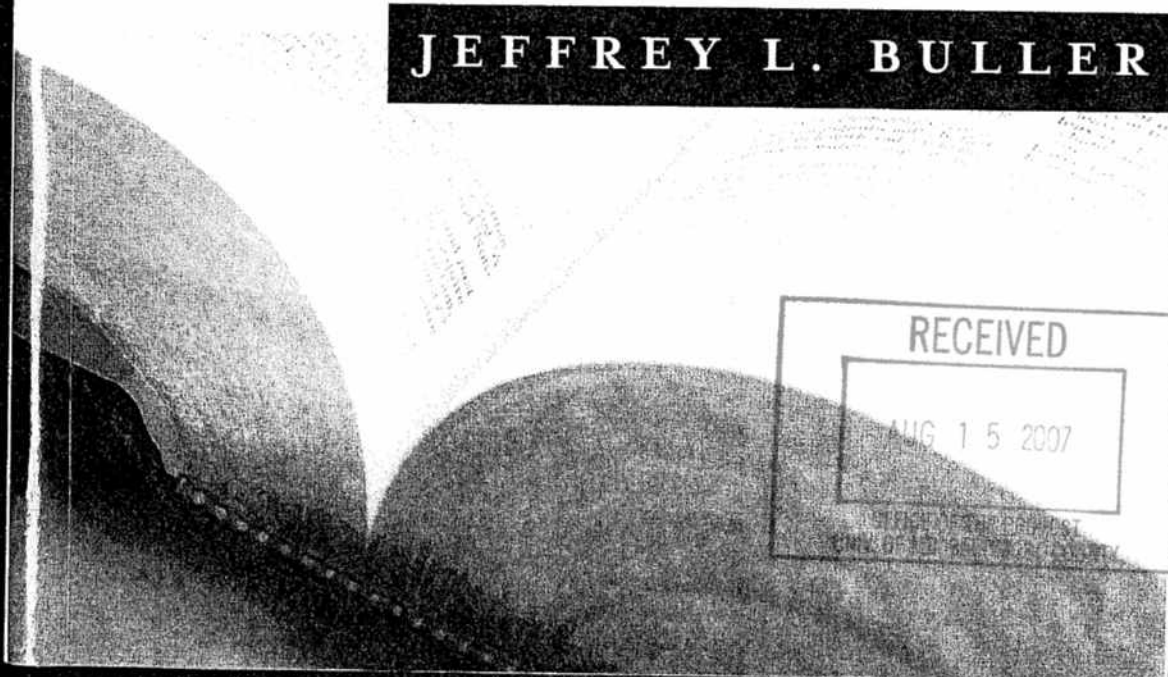


The ESSENTIAL
DEPARTMENT
CHAIR

[A Practical Guide to College Administration]

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The Department Chair's Role in Assessment

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While assessment at your institution is likely to affect nearly every office on campus, as a department chair your direct involvement in assessment is much more likely to be concerned with your discipline's own academic program than with other issues. In other words, even non-academic programs at your college and university are being assessed: the business office, residential life, student affairs, development, college relations. Any unit that exists at your school is doing a form of assessment that is appropriate to its structure, function, and mission. In a similar way, multi-departmental academic programs—the First-Year Experience, the honors program, the general education program, and the like—will be assessed in a manner that is appropriate for them. If you are asked to participate in any of these types of assessment that move beyond your individual department or discipline, you will almost certainly receive a great deal of guidance on what is expected from you by your institution's assessment office or whoever supervises these campus-wide efforts. Where you will probably be given a good deal more autonomy (and thus where you may feel that you may need more guidance) is in the area of assessing the effectiveness of your department and its proprietary academic programs (your major and minor programs, for instance).

In order for department chairs to play an effective role in leading the assessment process for their disciplines, they must start by knowing what assessment is and what it is not. Faculty members may sometimes tell you, "I don't know why we have to jump through all of these hoops on assessment. We're doing assessment all the time. We're assessing students in our courses by means of assignments, examinations, and final projects . . . and those assessment measures tell us that we're doing just fine." The problem is that such a perspective confuses *evaluation* with *assessment* and tries to draw a conclusion more appropriate for one of these activities from the means developed to accomplish the other. In other words, *evaluation* measures the success of discrete individuals, such as students, faculty members, and courses by determining whether these individuals reach some particular standard. *Assessment*, on the other hand, measures the effectiveness of

combined units, such as programs or offices, by determining whether those units are producing particular results. There is an essential difference between these two types of measures.

For instance, the grading of students—one of the types of "assessment" cited by the imaginary faculty member above—is actually a quite appropriate means of evaluation, but a completely inadequate form of assessment. Consider, for example, this scenario: as an administrator, I tell a faculty member, "8 out of 30 students failed your introductory course last semester. From this, I'm concluding that your department is not successful, particularly since there's another department where *no one* failed the introductory course." In such a situation, the faculty member would certainly respond that my conclusion does not make any sense: it was not the department that failed or even the course that failed, I would be told, but rather those eight students. Perhaps they did not study or come to class. Perhaps they were not strong enough academically to be admitted to the college in the first place. Perhaps this is just a fluke, since most students have done well in the course in the past. And all of these points would be valid: The final exam in that course evaluated those particular students' progress in the course; it does not assess the effectiveness of the program at all, at least not in any useful way.

Similarly, your evaluations of individual faculty members indicate whether you believe that each individual has met the standard that you and the department have developed. They do not tell you anything useful about the success or effectiveness of your program as a whole. To learn this, we must rely on the procedure of assessment.

Mission, Goals, and Outcomes

So, if assessment is not the same thing as evaluation, what is it? To put it succinctly, *assessment is the process of determining whether academic programs (or other units of the institution) are meeting their stated objectives*. For academic programs, those stated objectives are placed in the form of *student learning outcomes*. In order to determine what appropriate student learning outcomes are for the individual programs in your department, it is best to begin with your departmental mission statement. To the greatest extent possible, you want there to be as much logical flow as possible from your departmental mission statement to your goals to your student learning outcomes to your assessment measures to the action plan you develop based on the results from those measures. Let's start, then, with your mission

statement. While your departmental mission statement may be inspired, in part, by that of your institution as a whole and the larger units of which you are a part, you will want your departmental mission statement to reflect more specifically how that larger institutional philosophy is being interpreted in light of your discipline's approaches, methodology, and resources. For example:

As a service department within a public research university, the mission of the Department of X-ology is to contribute to the General Education Program of all students, provide support courses to other disciplines, and to produce a small but consistent number of highly accomplished majors. Secondary missions of the Department of X-ology are to assist the university in fulfilling its research mission by producing original scholarship within the discipline, supporting interdisciplinary courses in conjunction with other campus programs, and offering outreach to local schools in X-ology and related disciplines.

Rather than a generic mission statement that provides no guidance for making decisions, this mission statement specifies what the department is seeking to do, for whom, and why. It would be phrased completely differently if the mission of the department included a large major program, a highly popular minor, or a graduate program. It would also have been phrased quite differently if the department were serving a liberal arts college, a professional school, or a teachers' college.

One of the great advantages of developing a well-crafted departmental mission statement is that it makes it quite easy then to enumerate the *goals* of the department. What are departmental goals? *Goals are broadly conceived, general statements about what the program is trying to accomplish in order to carry out its mission in the future.* A program goal answers the question: What purpose are we trying to serve? Unlike student learning outcomes, goals need not be directly accessible or measurable. In fact, they need not even be particularly *attainable*, at least in the sense of providing you with indisputable evidence that you have attained them. In other words, goals are the sorts of things that your program will continue seeking year after year. *Perfection* is a goal:

Although it is something no program will ever completely achieve, that does not mean that it is not something worth striving for. One excellent illustration of how this principle might be applied in your department may be found in the very useful assessment planning guide developed at California Polytechnic State University (<http://www.academics.calpoly.edu/assessment/assessplanguide.htm>). Departments are urged to begin designing their goals by considering the following generic example:

- Example:** The Department of _____ will produce graduates who:
- I) Understand and can apply fundamental concepts of the discipline.
 - II) Communicate effectively, both orally and in writing.
 - III) Conduct sound research.
 - IV) Address issues critically and reflectively.
 - V) Create solutions to problems.
 - VI) Work well with others.
 - VII) Respect persons from diverse cultures and backgrounds.
 - VIII) Are committed to open-minded inquiry and lifelong learning.

Your first response is likely to be that, indeed, these are worthwhile goals for any department. Your second response, however, may be more along the lines of "But how could I demonstrate to anyone that my students in our program really do respect persons from diverse cultures and backgrounds? And how could I prove that our graduates are committed to open-minded inquiry and lifelong learning?" The answer is that it is not important for you to assess your goals either easily or effectively. These are *aims* that your program is *striving for*, not *targets* that you expect to "*hit*" every time.

The ability to prove the attainment of an objective becomes much more important at the next level, when you make concrete the general goals of your program by phrasing them as student learning outcomes. *A student learning outcome is a concise statement of precisely what a student is expected to know, understand, or be able to do as a result of the goals that your program has adopted.* In other words, each learning outcome answers the question:

What will a student be able to accomplish after a particular unit, course, or program has been completed? Because it deals not with general aims for the future, but with specific tasks to be accomplished, each outcome *must* be assessable; the program must be able to demonstrate whether all students (or a specified percentage of all students) are able to perform the task in question.

As you move from your department's mission statement to its overarching goals to developing assessable student learning outcomes, it is probably useful for you to proceed by discussing the following questions with your colleagues in the discipline:

- What specifically do we want our students to know by the time they complete our program?
- What specifically do we want students to be able to do with this knowledge by the time they complete our program?
- What information, content, or skills do we want our students to retain long after our program has been completed?
- What should our students be able to do with that information, content, or set of skills?
- What competencies do we want students in our program to learn or develop?
- What observable behaviors will indicate to us that those competencies have been developed?
- Where—in which specific courses or through what specific experiences—do we expect students in our program to develop these competencies?
- Is there a certain acceptable level or threshold of achievement beneath which we will not permit a student to graduate from our program? If so, what is that threshold and where do we determine whether it has been crossed?
- Is there a certain percentage of students who, if they develop certain skills or competencies to a specified level, we would feel that our program is successful? (Remember the goal may be perfection, but how close to “perfect mastery” do you realistically expect to achieve?) What might we decide to do if our program failed to produce that desired percentage?

- In what kinds of higher-level thinking do we want our students to engage?
- Besides completing exams at the ends of discrete courses, how do we expect students to demonstrate what they have learned in our program and how well they have learned it?
- If an employer or the dean of a graduate school were to ask the students in our program what they have learned, how would we like them to answer this question?

By the time you and your colleagues answer these 12 questions, you should have a fairly clear image of what specific objectives your program is trying to attain and how someone would recognize whether those objectives actually are being attained. Your next step would then be to phrase your department's specific objectives in terms of measurable learning outcomes by using concrete and observable *action verbs*, such as “express,” “critique,” and “examine.” An excellent list of suggested “action words” to get you started in phrasing your learning outcomes may be found at Abilene Christian University's center for teaching excellence web site: <http://www.acu.edu/academics/adamscenter/resources/coursedev/syllabus/verbs.html>. For instance, you might consider a structure for your student learning outcomes based on the following template:

By [SPECIFIC POINT IN THE PROGRAM], [ALL or AN ACCEPTABLE PERCENTAGE OF] students majoring in [PROGRAM] will be able to [GENERAL ACTION PHRASE] by [PERFORMING SPECIFIC OBSERVABLE ACTIVITY].

Admittedly, that template may look quite awkward initially. Once you begin to use it in developing outcomes for your program, you'll see how flexible and useful this structure actually is. Consider the following examples built on this template:

- Upon completion of ITAL 350, 355, and 365, all Italian majors will be able to demonstrate mastery of intermediate language skills by having

read an approved work in Italian of no fewer than 100 pages, discussing that work in Italian for no less than half an hour with no more than 5 grammatical errors, and writing a critical response to the work in Italian (entirely free of grammatical or spelling errors) of no fewer than 10 pages in length.

- Upon completion of any 100-level mathematics course, at least 90% of non-majors will have demonstrated basic quantitative competency by being able to:
 - a) interpret core mathematical models such as formulas, graphs, tables, and schematics
 - b) draw proper inferences from these core mathematical models
 - c) represent sufficiently complex mathematical information symbolically, visually, numerically, and verbally
 - d) use arithmetical, algebraic, geometric, and statistical methods to solve problems
 - e) estimate and check answers to mathematical problems in order to determine their reasonableness, identify alternatives, and select optimal results
- By the time they are ready to begin the senior seminar, all history majors will be prepared to conduct independent and original research by having demonstrated that they can formulate appropriate and significant historical questions, use appropriate primary and secondary sources to determine information relevant to answering historical questions, organize historical information so as to formulate and defend a thesis, and present that thesis and its defense in an effective written form.
- Students who complete the minor in music performance will be able to communicate musical ideas effectively by demonstrating that they are able to perform on at least one instrument with a substantial level of understanding, provide a satisfactory oral summary of the nature of a performance career, demonstrate satisfactory acquaintance with a variety of music, styles, and cultural sources, understand basic compositional processes and styles, and develop and defend musical judgments convincingly.

The *general action phrase* allows you to tie each outcome to a particular statement in your department's goals; the *specific observable activity* allows you to indicate how that more general goal will be made operational in a

student's academic development. The most important thing is that, unlike goals, these learning outcomes are always stated in ways that are measurable, at least measurable in the sense that one can readily determine whether students are achieving the outcomes that you have specified. Once your discipline has agreed on appropriate outcomes—congruent with your mission and goals—you are ready to plan your strategy for assessment.

Assessing Student Learning Outcomes

The means that you will use to assess whether students are achieving the outcomes you have set for your program will vary according to your discipline, its pedagogical methods, and the specific outcomes that you have set. For instance, in the case of the outcomes for the programs in Italian and history presented above, final projects or examinations might be constructed to include the activities required by the outcome. All of which might lead to the question: Earlier you said that examinations were techniques used to *evaluate* individual students; why are they now suitable forms of *assessment*? The difference comes in how an examination is constructed and in the use that is made of data resulting from the exam. For example, in the case of the Italian outcome mentioned earlier, the curriculum might be organized so that each student takes ITAL 365 *last* in the 300-level sequence. Then the activities specified by the outcome can be included as part of the final project for this course. This does not mean, however, that the instructor of ITAL 365 cannot also include other questions on the final exam or additional requirements for the final project. All of those elements—those required for assessment and those required by the specific material of that course—would then be used to evaluate the progress of each particular student. It is only the aggregate data—were all the majors in the course able to perform all the activities specified in the outcome—that is used to assess the program. What the outcome says, in other words, is, "We will consider our program to be fulfilling its objectives if all of our majors can do *this* by *that* point in the program. If they can't, then we have to determine how we can improve the program so that they *can*." In this way, individual course grades still evaluate the performance of each student; parts of the exam and final project are merely used to assess the program itself.

In other situations, different types of assessment measures—portfolios, surveys, exit interviews, employer questionnaires, and the like—may be more suitable for collecting the data that you need. For instance, in the case of the history outcome cited above, students might be required to accumu-

late a portfolio throughout their coursework indicating that they have fulfilled all of the criteria before being permitted to enroll for the senior seminar. In the case of the outcome for the music minor, a jury hearing might be structured in such a way that the elements of the outcome are required components. In each case, however, the important questions for your discipline to come to an agreement on are these:

- What are the specific “thresholds” or “trigger points” that would indicate to you whether the outcomes you have established are actually being achieved?
- What would your discipline’s course of action be if the data suggested that one or more of your learning outcomes were not being achieved?
- How might you then document any improvement resulting from this course of action?

In other words, these questions will help your department to “close the loop,” to use the insights gained from your assessment to improve your program continually.

It could be that, based on what your assessment reveals to you, you modify course content, alter the pedagogical methods used to cover certain material, alter course prerequisites or the order in which certain types of material are covered, introduce a peer mentor program for majors, spend longer time teaching skills that are regarded as higher priorities, provide supplementary materials to students on your web site, or introduce additional checks for competencies in lower-level courses. In certain circumstances, too, you may conclude that your outcomes need to be revised as you had established objectives for your program that are simply impossible for your department to achieve. However the members of your discipline decide to improve your program, you will be doing so now on the basis of clear and demonstrable data, rather than gut impressions or hunches. Remember that, unlike evaluation, there is no way to “fail” an assessment. If your assessment demonstrates that your program is fulfilling completely all of its objectives, you win; you now have data to demonstrate that you are accomplishing the very things that you set out to do. But if your assessment demonstrates that your program is not accomplishing all of its anticipated outcomes, you still win; you now have the information you need concerning how improvements can be made, and you may even have the proof you need to support a budget increase in an area of critical concern.

Assessment has now been in place for so long at so many institutions that there are a wide variety of resources available, so that no one needs to “reinvent the wheel.” For instance, excellent examples of *program goals* include those developed by:

- Central Washington University’s Department of Chemistry (<http://www.cwu.edu/~chem/undergrad/goals.html>)
- Wartburg College’s Department of History (<http://www.wartburg.edu/history/goals.html>)
- George Mason University’s graduate program in music (<http://assessment.gmu.edu/programgoals/CVPA/music-MA/IGoals.cfm>)
Web sites devoted to further information on how to develop appropriate student learning outcomes include:
- The University of Western Australia’s site on how to write statements of learning outcomes, developed by its Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (http://www.catl.uwa.edu.au/current_initiatives/obe2)
- The University of Washington’s faculty resource site on developing student learning outcomes (<http://depts.washington.edu/grading/slo>)
- A site developed by the Office of Assessment at Kansas State University on how to write learning outcomes (<http://www.ksu.edu/apr/Learning/HowTo.htm>)
- The Learning Outcomes Assessment Planning Guide, sponsored by California Polytechnic University (<http://www.academics.calpoly.edu/assessment/assessplanguide.htm>)
- A survey of what learning outcomes are, how to write them, action verbs to include, and a bibliography of some basic resources, provided by the National Center for Geographic Information and Analysis (<http://www.ncgia.ucsb.edu/education/curricula/giscc/units/format/outcomes.html>)