Institutional Assessment Report
Academic Year 2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rather than just summarizing the activities of individual academic and co-curricular program assessments, this year's Institutional Assessment Report delves into Marquette's assessment philosophy, evolution, and directions for future implementation. We felt the need for a written record to inform and inspire the many faculty, administrators and staff who find themselves responsible for their program's assessment but lack context for their individual efforts. Moving beyond the compliance mentality, this report aims to model the integrity, optimism and enthusiasm with which we hope faculty will approach assessment within their programs.

The report traces Marquette's evolution in assessment from its initial formal practice to its current implementation, identifying lingering misconceptions that inhibit embracing more productive approaches. It includes detailed information from this year's Peer Review Seminar and meetings with individual departments. Through this process of peer review, written feedback and coaching, four themes have emerged that, taken together, can be seen as the cornerstones of the assessment culture we hope to build at Marquette:

- *Renewed emphasis on student learning coupled with flexibility in assessment design.* Programs face a number of challenges in designing meaningful learning-centered program assessments. Our processes have evolved to accommodate more flexible approaches, including problem-based assessments.
- *Rigorous, precise assessment design that yields actionable information.* To yield useful information about student learning, outcomes must be narrowly defined, data must be disaggregated, and levels of challenge increased.
- *Flexible reporting to meet needs of different programs*; We identified a need to accommodate reporting of assessment results in a format that does not fit the structure of ARMS, including programs with external accreditors or with small numbers of students; or programs interested in formative or longitudinal approaches.
- *Supporting implementation of best practices across the university.* There is a symbiotic relationship between high-quality assessment and other curricular and pedagogical best practices. Therefore, we have been encouraging and supporting implementation of curriculum mapping and rubrics that follow students through programs.

The report includes appendices with the status of assessment reporting by academic program (A), peer presentations at Peer Review (B), topic feedback from Peer Review (C), Most common kinds of written feedback for assessment reports (D), and types of direct and indirect measures reported in AY 2015 assessment reports (E).

EVOLUTION IN MARQUETTE'S ASSESSMENT CULTURE

Why does Marquette do program assessment? The easiest answer has to do with accountability: we assess to prove that we are doing what we are supposed to do. While that answer is true, there is also a larger context. Assessment is about *growth*--of students, faculty, and disciplines. Looking at it this way, we see that assessment springs directly from the spirit of curiosity, optimism and service that defines and animates Marquette as an institution of higher learning.

However, this conception of assessment has yet to be widely embraced by the faculty culture at Marquette. In part, this has to do with the history of program assessment's implementation as an institutional practice at Marquette and nationally. In the same spirit of integrity and optimism with which we hope faculty will approach assessment within their programs, we present in this year's report a realistic account of assessment's current place in the campus culture, and a blueprint for how we hope to make the assessment culture evolve.

The formal practice of assessment reporting was first implemented to avoid sanction from regional accreditors. Because of the immediate need to meet compliance concerns, the initial reporting structure was very formulaic. While it served its purpose, this early version of assessment left some beliefs and practices ingrained in the minds of many Marquette faculty:

- The belief that assessment involves very rigid requirements for report format and verbiage;
- The belief that programs are required to assess everything taught in the program comprehensively every year;
- The practice of defining and assessing very broad learning outcomes that encompass many discreet understandings and skills;
- The belief that the point of assessment is to "prove" that programs are "successful" -- rather than to spur reflection and innovation in pursuit of ever-better student learning;
- The widespread practice of designating individual faculty members to design, administer, reflect and report on assessment for an entire program or department.

Not surprisingly, many faculty were left with an impression of assessment as an essentially bureaucratic obligation, with little obvious connection to the real work of teaching and learning to which they are committed.

We are working to update the assessment model to reflect current understandings about broader best practice and the needs of Marquette faculty. This year, we've undertaken efforts on a number of fronts to strengthen a new campus assessment culture. In November, after assessment reports had been submitted, we presented a faculty-driven peer-review session that brought together Program Assessment Leaders from across the university to hear from their colleagues about successful implementations of assessment best practices, and then to discuss in table groups opportunities and challenges related to implementation of best practices in their own programs. (Appendices A - C). We followed up the peer review by providing individualized written feedback for every program that had submitted a report for AY2015 (Appendix D). While the feedback was specific to each program, the process revealed significant patterns in the problems and strengths that we saw across the university. Finally, throughout the Spring, we arranged one-on-one meetings with Program Assessment Leaders to discuss the feedback they've received and offer targeted guidance for revisions that will make assessment a more meaningful process.

Through this process of peer review, written feedback and coaching, four themes have emerged that, taken together, can be seen as the cornerstones of the assessment culture we hope to build at Marquette:

- Renewed emphasis on student learning coupled with flexibility in assessment design;
- Rigorous, precise assessment design that yields actionable information;
- Flexible reporting to meet needs of different programs;
- Supporting implementation of best practices across the university.

The rest of this report will address each of these themes more closely.

FOCUS ON STUDENT AND PROGRAM GROWTH

As described above, a common misconception we see in the reports from programs across the university is the belief that the point of assessment is self-justification, a kind of pat-on-the-back reassurance that the program is doing what it's supposed to do. The point of assessment is actually to develop an informative picture of what and how well students are learning, which then serves as a starting point for reflection, growth, and innovation. One major thrust of our coaching work this spring has been to steer programs towards a renewed focus on student learning.

Diverse Challenges in Creating Student-Centered Assessment Plans. We have learned that programs face a number of diverse challenges in designing meaningful learning-centered program assessments. Different programs will need to use very different strategies to access substantive information about student learning. Some factors that affect how programs assess include: whether programs have external accreditors; the number of students in the program; how long students spend in the program and when they commit (e.g. as sophomores or juniors); whether the program serves a discrete group of students, or accommodates many students who are not formally enrolled in the program (e.g. many non-majors enrolling in Communication and History classes); variations in curriculum design, such as the presence or absence of large introductory courses, capstone courses, or specializations within the program; the length of time since last assessment plan revision and how well that plan still reflects what is happening in the program; the relationships and degree of collaboration among program faculty; and other desires, interests and concerns of the program. To be effective, each program's assessment plan must be tailored to the unique circumstances of the program.

Bringing Assessment Plans Up To Date. We also found that many of the programs that are taking a "self-justification" approach to assessment reporting are working from old assessment plans that no longer reflect what they actually do with their students. Appendix A shows the dates of the most recent assessment plans for each program. These outdated assessment plans are another reason that the assessment process can feel bureaucratic and disconnected for many faculty. In our conversations with faculty, we've found that many feel new enthusiasm for assessment once they realize that they are not bound by learning outcomes and procedures designed under duress a decade ago. They start thinking about the questions they'd really like to ask about student learning within their programs -- data they'd like to gather, problems they'd like to solve. Helping faculty see that truly have the freedom and power to craft an assessment process that begins with authentic questioning will be a big step towards refocusing the campus assessment culture away from bureaucratic reporting and towards student growth.

Problem (or Inquiry)-Based Assessment. Taking this flexible, student centered approach to assessment to another level, we have been working with some programs to implement a problem-based assessment model. This is an approach to assessment that is especially valuable for programs looking to move on from dated assessment plans. The model involves faculty identifying a specific questions about student learning, designing assessment that will target those questions, and then exploring how student learning responds to different kinds of interventions. The Physics Major was the first to formally adopt a problem-based assessment plan.

RIGOR AND PRECISION IN ASSESSMENT DESIGN

In order to generate information that supports informed reflection, assessment needs to be both precise and rigorous. By precise, we mean that learning outcomes are narrowly defined and measures are tightly aligned with outcomes, so the data generated is not clouded by factors other than the learning being measured. By rigorous, we mean that the assessment instrument can distinguish between levels of achievement, even at the upper end.

Making Learning Outcomes Specific and Measurable. To yield useful information about student learning, a student learning outcome must be narrowly defined. However, as a lingering effect from early years of assessment, many Marquette programs have sweeping, holistic SLOs that encompass many kinds of student learning. Such an SLO might state, for example, that students will learn to "understand, apply and evaluate basic theories of the discipline." This learning outcome encompasses three kinds of thinking (understanding, application and evaluation) and some unspecified number of "basic theories." If students do not perform well on this learning outcome, the data will not reveal whether the problem exists at the level of understanding, application, or evaluation, or whether students are struggling with theories or just one. Occasionally, these holistic learning outcomes are tied to "performance indicators" that more observable and measurable, but these are often not reported.

We are using a variety of approaches to help faculty refine SLOs that are specific enough to provide meaningful data. In some cases, faculty are reframing the existing assessment plan so that SLOs become "Program Learning Goals" and "Performance indicators" become the SLOs for which data is gathered. In some cases, faculty are using an existing rubric to break down a learning outcome into measurable elements. Finally, the programs adopting a version of problem-based assessment are designing a new, very specific SLO for assessment and analysis.

Disaggregated data. A related problem in assessment reporting is the use of course grades and holistic exam grades as assessment instruments. While it is appropriate (and indeed good practice) to design instruments that assess multiple learning outcomes, the data from these assessments needs to be disaggregated in a way that aligns with the stated learning outcomes and is specific enough to reveal trends. Course grades also tend to reflect a number of factors that are extraneous to the learning outcomes. We have been working with programs to identify alternative assessment instruments that will provide more useful information.

Rigor. When all students assessed are "exceeding expectations," the assessment is not providing helpful information about the range of achievement within the program. We have been working with these programs to increase the level of challenge of their assessment instruments, and/or to refine a rubric that distinguishes more precisely between degrees of student achievement at the upper end.

Direct assessment. Data is most informative when it is derived from direct observations of student performance (on, for example, a test, paper or project). These measures are called direct measures. Indirect measures of student learning (such as self-assessments and surveys) can be helpful aids to interpretation of the data derived from direct measures, but because they are often clouded by factors extraneous to student learning they do not yield robust data on their own. We have been working with programs to ensure that their assessment plans are centered on direct measures of student learning. Appendix E shows the range of direct and indirect measuring instruments reported in AY 2015 assessment reports.

FLEXIBLE APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT REPORTING TO MEET DIVERSE PROGRAM NEEDS

In our conversations with faculty, we have also learned that some programs are conducting high-quality assessments and reflections but not reporting them in the ARMS system. The main obstacle to reporting is a sense that the structure of the ARMS software does not "fit." Faculty do not know where or how to enter the high-quality information they have gathered. Our project this spring has been to work with these programs so that they can use the ARMS reporting system to communicate the full value of their existing assessments.

Programs with external accreditors. Several programs are assessed by external, disciplinary accrediting organizations. We have worked with these programs to set up the Learning Outcomes reported in the ARMS system to align with accreditation requirements. This allows for efficiency in reporting. For example, this year the undergraduate civil engineering program revised its ARMS structure to align with ABET standards.

Programs with small numbers of students. Programs that assess small numbers of students each year face some unusual challenges. With such a small sample size, it can be impossible to generalize from the data. Protecting the privacy of the students is another issue. The University Assessment Committee crafted a policy this year to address programs in this situation, which provides guidance for how to report processes annually, but compile and report data only when a total of five students have been assessed.

Other unique reporting needs. Other programs have described unique reporting needs, which we are working to resolve. For example, the Marketing major's assessment instrument requires students to work through a sequential process. Each step in the process is a learning outcome, but the outcomes cannot be removed from the cumulative process. The program faculty are working on a format for documenting and reporting how far each student gets through the process. Other programs, including computer science, are interested in taking a more longitudinal approach to assessment reporting and looking at trends in the department over time. ARMS does not generate these kinds of longitudinal reports, but we

have discussed uploading the longitudinal report to ARMS as an Excel file so that the program can report and reflect on their assessment results in the format they find most useful.

Exploring alternatives to our current reporting system. Finally, while we are working to adapt ARMS to better suit the diverse needs of programs, we are also exploring alternatives to our current reporting system. One such alternative is the Outcomes module currently under development by Campus Labs, which has additional features for aggregating student-level input data for multiple learning outcomes.

SUPPORTING IMPLEMENTATION OF BEST PRACTICES ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY

We recognize that there is a symbiotic relationship between high-quality assessment and other curricular and pedagogical best practices. Best practices make assessment easier and more informative; information derived from assessment means best practices can be implemented more effectively. Therefore, we have been encouraging and supporting faculty across the university in the implementation of the following practices:

Curriculum mapping. A curriculum map is a matrix that shows at what point in a program curriculum each learning outcome will be introduced, reviewed and assessed. Developing a curriculum map helps program faculty coordinate so that there are no gaps or unnecessary overlaps in the curriculum; a curriculum map helps faculty collaborate and provides a very helpful starting point for revisions of assessment plans. Curriculum maps were presented as a best practice at the November peer review session. Many faculty said this was the most useful presentation at peer review and expressed intention to initiate a curriculum mapping process in their programs. A total of 16 programs included curriculum maps with their assessment reports this year (Appendix A).

Rubrics that follow students through program. Also presented at peer review was the idea of a master program rubric that follows students through their time in the program. This is a way of making learning goals transparent to students and allowing them agency in directing their own learning; it also streamlines the process of data gathering and reporting, and allows for straightforward longitudinal analysis of student and cohort growth.

Organizational structure for assessment.

The 19-member University Assessment Committee met ten times in academic year 2015-16, in addition to attending the Peer Review Seminar in November. In accordance with its charge, UAC monitors assessment of over 100 academic programs. Members follow up with programs that fail to report or are in need of intervention. This year, the UAC developed a new Assessment Process Rating Rubric and approved its use in the Program Review process. As a result of meeting with Dean Holz to discuss assessment in the Klingler College of Arts and Sciences, the committee welcomed two additional representatives from A&S to the UAC. The Committee approved requests for hiatus from 12 co-curricular units and Digital Storytelling certificate program; provided feedback for new assessment plans in Interdisciplinary Math Economics Major and Physics Major. They reviewed new co-curricular learning outcomes and process for creation of new assessment plan for those units. A new policy was developed for reporting assessment results in programs that assess fewer than five students. The UAC

began discussing changes to its charter, which is out of date. In seeking advice for how its responsibilities, authority and composition should change, the UAC was instructed to await the outcome of a broader inquiry into the roles of committees reporting to the Provost.

In the coming year, the UAC expects to continue the revision to its charter.

Appendices:
  A: Status of assessment reporting by academic program, AY 2015
        (Includes attendance at Peer Review and date of last assessment plan.)
        A1- Programs that did not submit reports.
  B: Peer presentations at Peer Review
  C: Topic feedback from Peer Review
  D: Most common kinds of written feedback for assessment reports
  E: Types of direct and indirect measures reported in AY 2015 assessment reports