

# Assessment of Student Learning

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## Assessment: The Big Picture

By Tom Buchanan, President

**A**sessment of student learning has certainly received a lot of press this past year, particularly with the emphasis placed on accountability in the final report of Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings' Commission on The Future of Higher Education. The report was very explicit in its recommendation that "postsecondary education institutions should measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes." While this is a point with which many of us would agree, the report also recommended that "accreditation agencies should make performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning, the core of their assessment as a priority over inputs and process." The report goes on to conclude that a consumer-friendly database should be developed for use by parents, students, and policymakers to compare and contrast institutional performance. As you can imagine, these recommendations generated a firestorm of debate. Professional organizations, regional accreditation groups, and colleges and universities across the nation have all engaged in a passionate discussion about the diverse nature of institutions of higher education and students, as well as the complexities of measuring and simplistically reporting what students are learning. For these good reasons, the report's "one size fits all" approach for standardizing accreditation has been met with significant opposition.

But, no matter how controversial, there is merit in many of the recommendations of the Spellings Commission and its emphasis on the responsibility of institutions of higher education to ensure that students are learning.



Hand in hand with the need for greater accountability is the need for universities and colleges to become more *transparent* with regard to cost, price, and student success. What has become very apparent in recent years is that students and parents want factual information to make decisions, and policymakers want evidence that

there is an appropriate return on the investment of public funds in higher education.

This effort to become *transparent* is not always easy or welcome. We are sometimes reluctant to share complex and multifaceted information in the fear that it will be boiled down to simplistic and inaccurate images of our institution. On the other hand, saying that "things are just fine" is the type of inadequate response that has fueled the Spellings Commission and others to call for increased accountability. In the end, we must be an active partner in this process or someone else will decide learning outcomes and assessment methods for us.

I think this becomes a much less onerous task when we consider that UW has made tremendous improvements in its assessment processes and that there is already a lot of supportive learning assessment data available. Our efforts started slowly, but they have gained serious momentum over the last five years, and thanks to the hard work and commitment of many faculty and staff, quality assessment practices are in place across campus. Learning outcomes have been developed by most departments and are posted on Web sites. Annual reports routinely contain an assessment of progress

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# From the Inside Looking Out



Erika with her daughter  
Lily outside of Salzburg,  
Austria this summer.

Welcome back! I hope that everyone had an enjoyable summer. It is hard to believe fall is here already and things are in full swing again. As always, there are a number of assessment related activities on which to report. This fall, the College Assessment Coordinators—in conjunction with many others—will be sponsoring a weeklong event called *Pathways for Learning*.

The week of October 15 to 19 will feature two keynote speakers, Peter Ewell and Cathy Small. Ewell is often thought of as the leading national expert on assessment of higher education issues. I have heard him speak on several occasions at various national conferences and he is excellent. It is exciting that someone of his caliber will be at UW. Cathy Small (Rebekah Nathan) is the author of *My Freshman Year*. If you haven't had the chance to read this book yet, it is a fascinating read about what it is like for a professor to go back to college as a student again. I would encourage you to take advantage of this week. It should be very interesting and informative.

I am also going to put a shameless plug in for myself. During the *Pathways for Learning* week, I

will be presenting two sessions related to the three institutional assessment studies in which UW is participating. We now have a second round of results from the CLA, results from the Parsing the First-Year Experience study, and updated NSSE results from the spring 2007 administration. These are all interesting studies and surveys. Because these are conducted nationally, there is much to be gleaned from looking at UW from this perspective. Granted, there are shortfalls of using such instruments, but they do provide multiple viewpoints of UW and they are grounded in solid educational research. Speaking of educational research, I am conducting a bit of my own with the CLA study. It is becoming a "study within a study." Some of the feedback I received from faculty early on was regarding concerns over the CLA being offered in a low-stakes testing environment, meaning there are no consequences for students. In one of the scheduled sessions, I plan on sharing what I have learned so far regarding low-stakes testing and whether the testing environment is influencing UW's test results.

Switching gears a bit, I would like to turn your attention to page 6 of the newsletter to a new feature called "Reflections." This is a feature devoted to assessment from a faculty perspective. It is meant to give you an idea of the different, or in some cases, similar lenses from which assessment is viewed. As you may know, assessment of student learning can be a messy business and often times there is no one right answer. If you have the chance, please thank Bill Reiners for being our first contributor to this feature. The idea for this spot actually originated with some dialogue about the newsletter I had with Bill and I want to publicly thank him for caring enough to actually offer constructive criticism regarding UW's assessment efforts. We do listen and appreciate it.

In closing, I would like to offer my continued assistance with your assessment of student learning projects. My contact information is [ekprager@uwyo.edu](mailto:ekprager@uwyo.edu) or 766-2897. Also, if you have ideas for the Web site or newsletter, please pass them along. I am looking forward to another productive and successful year.

*Erika K. Prager*

University Assessment Specialist

# In the Spotlight: The Accounting Department's Journey

By Penne Ainsworth, Associate Dean of Students and Chair of the Department of Accounting

**A** while back representatives of the (then) Big 8 Accounting Firms produced a monograph entitled *Perspectives on Education: Capabilities for Success in the Accounting Profession*. The firms were concerned about decreasing enrollments in accounting, the quality of the students who were graduating with degrees in accounting, and the future of the accounting profession. The monograph suggested, among other things, that departments and schools of accounting were doing a great job preparing students for the technical aspects of accounting careers, but weren't doing such a great job teaching the interpersonal, written, and oral communication skills that they would need to be professional accountants in the 21st century. The firms also suggested that students should develop analytical and conceptual thinking, rather than memorizing rules. This monograph as well as some other reports from our profession became the "call" that began our curriculum revision journey.

In the late 1990s we revised our curriculum in light of the changes recommended by our profession. First, we mapped the knowledge and skills we wanted our students to obtain into the number of courses we would (could) teach at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Then we determined the cognitive level at which we would assess that knowledge/skill within the course (using Bloom's taxonomy). This led to a discussion about the teaching/assessment methods that might be appropriate for various levels. We did not mandate teaching or assessment in a course—except for the introductory courses which have common exams—but we do mandate content.

Next we decided that we would assess our program using portfolios at the undergraduate level, whereby each student would submit (using only the last four digits of his or her ID number) the best examples of their written, presentation, and computer work. We ended up with a curriculum that included much more team work and presentations in the accounting courses and we obtained both a (then) W2 and W3 designation for two of our courses. We were confident that these changes would not only produce the entry-level accountant the profession was clamoring for, but the changes would also increase enrollments. Life was good, or so we thought.



And then came Enron, and then came WorldCom, and then Arthur Andersen fell, and soon a hue and cry could be heard from various entities—the accounting profession, our accrediting body, and the investing public—ethics, ethics, ethics. At the same time, we were having a difficulty with our portfolio assessment—no time. We simply didn't have the time to go through all the student portfolios (or even a sample of them) and assess them. And our enrollments were not increasing. So, it was time to look at the curriculum again. We had to determine whether as accounting educators we had diluted the basic accounting and critical thinking skills in favor of the so called "soft skills." And, we had to figure out if we were going to teach ethics in the accounting curriculum as a stand alone class or try to integrate the concepts throughout the curriculum. We had to determine whether we were going to bite the bullet and pay faculty summer stipends for assessment or try a different approach.

Next, we had to come up with some recruiting ideas. So, we turned to the assessment results we did have to help us make these decisions. We looked at direct and indirect data, we mapped our curriculum again, and we set a new direction. We have dropped our WB course. Our data indicated that students should be getting their WB course from outside the department. We changed our WC course to an Ethics and Professionalism course to address the need for ethics education. Our data indicated that too often when knowledge/skills were supposed to be covered "across the curriculum" in reality, the knowledge/skill did not get the coverage needed. We placed more emphasis on critical thinking and accounting by decreasing the amount of "soft skills" covered in our courses. Data from our colleagues in the college indicate that many of these skills were covered in other courses so we felt comfortable decreasing this coverage. In fact, some students have remarked that they are grateful to be in one less team project. We decided to change our program assessment to course embedded assessment. This allows assessment to be a natural part of what we do, not an add-on.

Finally, we have started a recruitment process that focuses on first educating high school teachers about careers in accounting. Research indicates that high school students still think that accountants are boring, sit behind a desk all day, and wear green eye shades. If we can convince the teachers that accountants work with people, must be excellent communicators, have personalities, and only wear shades in the sun, then maybe they can help us get to the high school students.

## Pathways for Learning

By Jane Nelson, ECTL Director

We are pleased to announce a full week of events for the 2007 Fall Forum taking place October 15 through 19, 2007. The forum is designed to help the university collectively address some of the important questions being raised about teaching and learning. For example, how can we assess for connection-making across fields or for deep understanding of concepts? How do we ensure that students understand collaboration and team behavior? How can we understand the skills, motivations, and behaviors that our first-year students bring to the university?

The events will begin on Monday, October 15, with a half-day set of sessions led by Peter Ewell, vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems in Boulder, Colorado. Ewell has over 25 years experience in assisting scores of higher learning institutions to assess their institutional effectiveness. In his noontime plenary address, Ewell will provide us with

## Pathways for learning

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an overview of national trends in assessment, including accomplishments, challenges, and forecasts. He will help us evaluate our progress and determine next steps in our plans to assess and improve student learning.

At the end of the week, Cathy Small, professor of anthropology at Northern Arizona State University, will be on campus for two full days of talks. Small is the widely-acclaimed author of *My Freshman Year*, an ethnography published under the name of Rebekah

Nathan. Among other topics, Small will provide us with a faculty member's candid account of her research and the resulting changes she has made in her teaching.

A full schedule of events that include panels of UW faculty, in addition to the plenary sessions, will be forthcoming from the ECTL. Registered participants will receive a free copy of *My Freshman Year*, and many of the events are accompanied by meals and snacks.

Co-sponsors of the Fall Forum include the College Assessment Coordinators, the Office of Academic Affairs, the President's Office, the Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning, and the Wyoming School-University Partnership. With the partnership's sponsorship, UW participants will be joined by public school faculty, administrators, and school board members, who will be on campus to attend sessions and meet with university faculty.

## Revising Synergy's Intellectual Community Course

By April Heaney, Synergy Director

In my job as director of the Synergy learning community, assessment plays a critical role in my ability to determine the effectiveness of our program for conditionally admitted students who are often at greater risk for departure in their first year of college. While students' GPA scores and overall program satisfaction were encouraging in 2006, several qualitative assessments prompted me to take a deep breath and reconsider our approach to Synergy's Intellectual Community courses. Focus groups and interviews with students and

teachers in Synergy's I-courses revealed similar problems with the courses—so similar, in fact, that facilitating course revision for 2007 became my first priority. "More structure in the courses," I thought first. "More preparation for teachers." Fortunately, a couple of events led me to a very different solution—one that meant letting go, rather than clamping down.

I'd like to begin with some background. In 2001, the Synergy Program began with four instructors and 35 students. The program's goal

was to connect three USP courses in the fall: First-year Composition, University Studies, and U.S. and Wyoming Government. The program offers smaller class sizes, more student-teacher interaction, and connected approaches to curriculum. When the University Studies course became an Intellectual Community course in 2003, we used the opportunity to focus our non-discipline specific I-courses more heavily on reading and research. Three Synergy instructors from the Department of English

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# Revising Synergy's Intellectual Community Course

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designed and taught the course, electing to center the class on a community study using ethnographic methods, a reading-intensive curriculum focusing on community and success, and a final Web portfolio. Focus groups and surveys in 2003 and 2004 elicited very positive responses; students reported that the course engaged them and solidly prepared them for the kind of thinking and reading expected in their major coursework.

When the learning community expanded in 2005 to include 150 students and 13 instructors, I looked forward to the opportunity to involve more teachers from multiple disciplines in teaching the I-courses. This is where the difficulty began. In helping teachers prepare for the courses, I compiled a packet including assignments, syllabi, rationale, examples of student work...all important things to have, except that the teachers were still by necessity "outsiders" to the course. The problem did not lie in a lack of enthusiasm or willingness on the part of the instructors; they were excited by the course and its philosophy, and they wrestled with the curriculum to connect it as much as possible with their own teaching styles and disciplines.

In 2005 and 2006, we conducted focus groups with over 100 students, surveyed 80 percent of the students in the learning community, and interviewed the faculty. All of these assessments increasingly revealed the same concerns about Synergy's I-courses: they lacked coherence, their goals seemed fuzzy or fragmented, and instructors lacked expertise with the course material. Students and teachers were quick to praise the tight community- and student-driven discussions the courses fostered, but the classes, to use one student's words, seemed to be "missing

a point." In 2007, I finally read Ken Bain's book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*. On page 16, I read a passage that stopped me cold: "Without exception, outstanding teachers know their subjects extremely well...in short, they can do intellectually, physically, or emotionally, what they expect from their students."

In reading Bain's book and talking to an insightful colleague, I was able to quell my first inclination to simply add more structure to the courses—a curriculum championed by the few teachers who designed it, but a difficult proposition for a large group of faculty who had no part in conceiving the courses and who might only teach them once or twice. Instead, instructors now have the freedom to choose the courses' topic, texts, and to a large extent, assignments. The revised courses have a greater tie to specific disciplines, allowing faculty to engage with topics they are passionate about—with an eye toward student interests. At this summer's faculty

colloquium, instead of trying to familiarize instructors with a set course mold, we spent time planning ways to establish some consistency among all of Synergy's I-courses, by maintaining a focus on diversity, field research, and critical reading. The first set of revised courses will be taught this fall, and I look forward to continuing our assessments in the spring.

I learned a couple of much-appreciated lessons from the experience of developing I-courses. First, student focus groups and faculty interviews can dramatically improve courses—and programs. Secondly, I learned something that I seem to keep re-learning in new contexts: the concept of "ownership" does not only apply to students and their ability to engage in coursework; it is just as important to teachers and the success of their courses.

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*To learn more about Synergy, please visit our Web site at [www.uwyo.edu/synergy/](http://www.uwyo.edu/synergy/)*



Top row (left to right): Rick Fisher, Michael Knievel, Joyce Stewart, and Nyla Bailey. Bottom row (left to right): Rachel Stevens, Justin Stewart, April Heaney, Carolyn Young, Deb Bass, and Pam Galbreath.

# Reflections

*By William A. Reiners, Professor, Department of Botany*

**A**sessment in the higher education context is about informing ourselves as to our success in achieving educational goals. On the face of it, this is a reasonable goal seeming to need no argument. Vice President Myron Allen made the case for assessment on the broadest grounds in the September 2006 issue of UW's assessment newsletter. Who could argue with that? But, as is usually the case, the devil is in the details. As one reads these newsletters, attends workshops (which I have not) and sees the avalanche of publications on the topic, the sense of a new educational industry linked to a black hole of faculty time and attention looms before us. Is this No Child Left Behind for tertiary education? Can assessment be realistic? How is responsibility for learning to be shared between the professoriat and the students? Will this necessitate another cadre of non-teaching academic professionals in the university? How much departmental effort is enough; how much is out of balance? Is it intellectually good and reasonable to have common educational goals within and across departmental majors? Will we fall into the same standardization trap as that of No Child Left Behind so that we come to "teach to the test?" Is my disquietude really a disguised insecurity about how effective I actually am as a teacher? The following ruminations come from one who has not been so immersed in the complexities of assessment that the broader perspective has not been buried by the details.

The better side of us tells us that assessment is the responsible thing for us to do. In fact, it may make our careers more—not less—fulfilling. Few would argue that we should not have distinct educational goals in our own courses, that we should have some kind of underlying philosophy for the majors we support, and that we should have some kind of shared values for what the baccalaureate degree represents in 2007. Simply articulating these goals might make a big difference in how we view our professional lives, organize our courses, and interact with students in the classroom. Simply establishing educational goals at various levels of university experience may possibly be the primary value of assessment itself.

Most of us probably agree that assessment is a good thing by now. The trouble is, as soon as we start to think about goals we find that it is hard work and fraught with ambiguity. In fact, we don't actually share the same educational goals and



I argue this is a good thing for the university. Furthermore, there are moral complications, not to mention logistical difficulties in implementing an assessment process. Let us first consider the moral complications. Every student that walks into our classroom or comes to our office for advice has a personal story. Every student has a special family history; a proclivity, as well as capacity, to learn; a set of interests (temporary as they may be); a level of ambition; and a trail of life-changing events, even as they make their way through their

university experience. We well know that students in our classrooms range from those with physical or mental limitations, addictions to video games, problems with alcohol, or failures in parental support to those who are well-adapted, intellectually curious, highly disciplined, eager learners. Is it morally fitting to measure the learning achievement of this range of individuals by the same metric?

Then there are the logistical complications. Assessment requires extra work and time that can only be brought about by reducing the teaching/learning effort and time itself. Time and effort are a zero-sum game although there are some efficiencies that might be possible. Can we all be proficient in this, or will it require yet more staff support at additional expense to the university's personnel budget? Penne Ainsworth's earlier reference to summer stipends for faculty assessing student materials is sympathetic of the fact that assessment has its personnel costs. How do we replace professorial emphasis on information content, skills presentation, and inspiration with sensitivity to the psychology of motivation for learning? Being effective in establishing and then assessing a learning environment comes at some cost to the instructors' love of their subjects, which is often the basis for their entering into academic careers in the first place. Love of subject has to be replaced by more love of effectiveness in teaching. That is not always well received by some scholars. Experts in assessment convincingly insist that testing and grades are not effective assessing devices, but what are the alternatives? These are not yet apparent to me. Finally, most of us would agree that different students learn different things, acquire different skills, and make contributions in different ways. If we agree on this, then we accept that no one assessment tool fits all.

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## Reflections Continued from page 6

What about the students? Shouldn't they be part of the process? Should establishment of goals be a contractual agreement with the students? No one knows what they don't know, and that goes double for 20-year-olds. On the other hand it is impossible and wrong to generalize about our students. UW attempts to teach unmotivated students who see themselves as fee-paying customers who only need to have their tickets punched with enough credits to buy a degree and a guarantee for a decent job. We also have earnest students who are the first in their families to have a post-secondary education and who possess enormous drive to take advantage of this personal opportunity. Might some kind of contractual agreement as to goals not enhance the attitude and performance of all students, regardless of their incoming expectations and capacities? Such contracts would help provide the transparency President Buchanan discussed earlier. In addition to various motivation and excitement levels regarding their education, students have different ability levels and are very diverse when it comes to how they learn best. How do we recognize and respect a pluralism of learning styles and acquired capabilities? A standardized test might achieve some measure of our joint educational success, but perhaps a problem-solving exercise involving group coordination and preparation of oral and written reports would better evaluate a wider range of personality types. It seems curious to me that universities celebrate diversity on one hand and then seek uniform assessment metrics on the other.

Most of the discussion on assessment at UW has been at the course and major level. Perhaps there should be more of an

emphasis on assessment of common goals encompassed by all degree programs, such as the ability to locate and retrieve a wide range of information, knowledge of the special contributions that can be made by persons earning other kinds of educations (such as English versus engineering), a sense of ethics in the workplace, an understanding of domestic—as well as international cultural—heterogeneity, and an appreciation for the place of globalization in their lives. The assessment efforts of UW's University Studies group may address this matter. These criteria may be more important to graduates and society than are skills-level education that seems to be the dominating focus at present.

Based on admittedly slender experience, but also on the exciting results of that experience, I suggest that we cannot assess the success of our teaching and our students' learning until our graduates have been "in the field" for three to five years. It is only then that they will have the experience and gained the maturity to fully reflect on how their education has prepared them for their careers and for living. It is not until then that they can differentiate between entertaining courses presenting easily assimilated but ephemeral information versus insights, universal truths, and measured judgments gleaned from their more frustrating course experiences. It is not until then that institutional, social, and cultural values will become manifest. It may seem more difficult to contact graduates and obtain some voluntary replies, but I submit that the value will be much higher. Some might say that it would be too difficult, uncontrolled, and costly to achieve such information. I would ask: "Compared with . . . ?

## Assessment: The Big Picture Continued from page 1

toward these outcomes. As a result, we have a lot of information to share. The challenge now is to synthesize and display these data in a form that makes sense to others.

It is logical that in the near future we will look closely at using the National Association of Universities and Land Grant College's emerging Voluntary System of Accountability. Developed in support of the federal recommendations, this program will allow institutions of higher education to post a variety of information on their Web sites in a standardized format. Among the information that will be included will be general student information, financial information, and results from various assessment studies. We will also begin our 10-year accreditation self-study this year for the Higher Learning Commission, and this is the right time to evaluate the information we do have and determine

where additional assessment is needed. We do know that our upcoming accreditation will include a close review of our assessment strategies and efforts.

It is easy to cringe when we hear the words "accountability" and "assessment." In truth, assessment is an ongoing process that is wrought with many challenges, but in the end, it is a worthy goal. It is our responsibility to ensure that our students are receiving the best education possible; that should be the heart and soul of the accreditation process. I have every confidence that the University of Wyoming is delivering the quality education that students, parents, and policymakers expect and deserve. Our assessment efforts give us the concrete information we need to support that claim, and I believe we are in a solid position to engage others in a dialogue about what exactly an education from UW means.



## Mark Your Calendar

### **Pathways for Learning**

*Monday, October 15 through Friday, October 19*

A full week of outstanding events about teaching and learning. Keynote speakers include Peter Ewell and Cathy Small (Rebekah Nathan). Various panel discussions and workshops will round out the week. Look for the full schedule of events from the ECTL in your mailbox and on the ECTL's Web page ([www.uwyo.edu/ctl](http://www.uwyo.edu/ctl)).

### **UW Survey Tool Information Session**

*Tuesday, November 13, 2007, from noon–1 p.m., ECTL, Coe 307*

Learn more about using UW's new survey tool for your next online survey. It's free and easy to use!

*The University of Wyoming assessment newsletter is published each semester (Erika Prager, university assessment specialist, editor). Any editorial comments reflect the view of the editor and not necessarily the university. Send comments, questions, and/or suggestions to Erika at 766-2897 or [ekprager@uwyo.edu](mailto:ekprager@uwyo.edu). Past issues are available at: [www.uwyo.edu/acadaffairs/assessment/pages/news.asp](http://www.uwyo.edu/acadaffairs/assessment/pages/news.asp). • Persons seeking admission, employment, or access to programs of the University of Wyoming shall be considered without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, age, veteran status, sexual orientation, or political belief. • If you would like more information about support for students with disabilities at UW or to receive this publication in alternative formats, please call University Disability Support Services at (307) 766-6189 or TTY (307) 766-3073. • Graphic design by Elizabeth Ono Rahel • 2007/2.9M/BG*

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