

**Task Force on Evaluating Assessment Practices  
Final Report  
September, 2021**

**Context**

The Task Force on Evaluating Assessment Practices, or briefly, the Assessment Task Force (ATF) was constituted by the Faculty Assembly (FA) of SUNY Oswego as part of the process of reflection on our program and general education assessment processes within the college. It is also an expression of commitment by the institution as articulated in the last report to the Middle States Committee on Higher Education (MSCHE) in 2012. In Spring 2020, Lisa Glidden, the then Chair of the FA, described the rationale for instituting the task force as “We have established a culture of assessment on our campus. We recognize that assessment of student learning was already happening, and many faculty were reflecting on their courses on a regular basis, but due to external pressures for accountability of higher education and an increased demand for quantitative measures by accreditation bodies, our processes became much more formalized.” Thus, while we recognize that assessment and reflection are part of the daily lives of our faculty and staff in the college, we acknowledge that there is a need to explicitly define the processes by which this reflection happens, and how it guides us towards improved student success. The work of the ATF is also appropriately timed to coincide with the imminent visit of the MSCHE in 2022. Keeping this in mind, we established a liaison with the Standard V subcommittee of the MSCHE self-study group in order to collaborate on assessment as needed.

**The Charge for the ATF**

As communicated to us:

1. Identify our assessment practices for each of the Schools and general education
2. Consider whether there is a need for assessing all (100%) courses versus a statistically valid sample for purposes of reporting.
3. Recommend assessment processes that are meaningful, integrated, and don’t “consume more energy than they produce” (Warner 2019).
4. Identify recommendations for assessment practices that will establish a “well-worn path” between assessment, improving learning, and allocating resources, as recommended by Middle States.

Added by the ATF:

5. What are the equity issues that are at play in our assessment practices? How can we explicitly honor our commitment to equity and related issues as we reflect on our assessment?

**A word on the timeline**

The original timeline for the ATF was February – May 2020, but like most other institutional (and indeed, all life) activities, the pandemic threw that timeline out the window. Nevertheless, the call for nominations for faculty and professional staff members as well as administrative designees to serve on the task force was made, and elections for members were completed in

Spring 2020. All members reiterated their commitment to serve when the current FA chair, Liz Dunne Schmitt, convened the ATF in October 2020.

### **Members of the ATF**

- Michelle Bishop (Faculty, Library)
- Sarah Bonzo (Faculty, School of Business)
- Kristin Croyle (President’s nominee) (Dean, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS))
- Michelle Duffy (Faculty, School of Education)
- Juliet Forshaw (Faculty, School of Communication, Media and the Arts)
- Shokouh Haddadi (Faculty, CLAS)
- Prabakar Kothandaraman (President’s nominee) (Dean, School of Business)
- Christopher LaLonde (Director of General Education) (Faculty, CLAS)
- Mary Ann Preston (Senior Staff Assistant, Institutional Research and Assessment) (Liaison with the Standard V subcommittee of MSCHE)
- Preeti Tripathi (Chair, ATF) (Faculty, CLAS)

### **Activities, Timeline and Deliverables**

To gather relevant data, the task force canvassed departments and academic units on campus, invited community partners for presentations, and conducted interviews as needed.

Our timeline and corresponding activities are as follows:

November – December, 2020	Collected data from departments to understand current assessment practices, what departments found useful, and onerous, about the assessment process, and what processes they had in place in order to utilize assessment data to inform decision-making.
January – February, 2021	Invited specific campus partners/community members to present to the ATF in order to better understand assessment processes on this campus. Simultaneously, analyzed data collected from departments/academic units in order to study emerging themes.
March – August 2021	Examined the data gathered from campus partners and correlated it to the data collected from departments. Sought alignment with Standard V subcommittee criteria for assessment. Designed emergent recommendations.
September 2021	Finalized recommendations regarding long term, sustainable strategies to continue to evolve assessment on campus.

## Data Collection Activities

1. The ATF created and administered a survey (<https://forms.gle/ABLhKNXvewCM5XBX7>) regarding program and general education assessment via the offices of the 4 deans during November 2020 – January 2021. Questions on the survey asked respondents to describe the assessment activities in their programs, the perceived usefulness of assessment activities to the programs, processes that made use of the data that was collected, and what the programs found onerous about the work. Some questions were designed to solicit suggestions on how the process could be improved.

27 units responded to our survey (our thanks to them all!). In most cases, responses were submitted by Assessment coordinators in academic departments. Among those responding, the School of Business and the School of Education are externally accredited. Out of the remaining 25 units, three - Art and Design, Music, and Theater (all housed in the School of Communication, Media and the Arts) - are also externally accredited.

2. In order to understand the context of the current Assessment Programs on campus, we invited Trevor Jorgensen, the assessment coordinator for the college from 2015-2020, to describe the processes that were in place for program assessment, as well as how they evolved while he was the assessment coordinator. Christopher LaLonde, the director of General Education since 2006 made a similar presentation in regard to the general education program.
3. We invited Deborah Furlong, Director, and Mary Ann Preston, Senior Staff Assistant, of Institutional Research and Assessment (IRA) to present to the ATF on how the assessment programs are coordinated at the institutional level, and what further plans were afoot in the near future. Thus, we learned about the software platform, Assessment, Evaluation, Feedback and Intervention System (AEFIS) that may offer some technology-assisted strategies for gathering and collecting data for assessment.
4. Dean Kristin Croyle, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, shared information on the restructuring of the assessment coordination process on campus.
5. We invited an AEFIS representative to describe ways in which the software platform could be used to assist programs and the institution through the assessment workflow process.
6. Mary Ann Preston, our liaison with the Standard V subcommittee for MSCHE shared Standard V criteria and Standard V - Lines of Inquiry with the ATF.

### What we learned from the data

1. **Data collected via the surveys:** This was by far our biggest source of data, and it was analyzed to understand the variety of processes by which various academic units on campus conducted their assessment processes.

From our examination of the data, we noted that externally accredited programs were more systematic and formal in their approach to assessment. This, of course, makes sense since their

assessment activities are aligned to the requirements set by their accreditation bodies. These units, where appropriate, could share best practices for some of our other programs to consider.

- A) Identifying data collection practices: We asked departments to identify data collection activities for program and general education assessment as two separate questions, keeping in mind that program-related learning outcomes are designed by departments themselves, and general education outcomes are derived from assigned general education categories, decreed by the general education council for the college.

We found that, for program assessment, most programs have between 3 and 6 learning outcomes. Assessment activities for these outcomes are designed and conducted on a cyclical basis, so that some of them (NOT all) get assessed during an academic year. Thus, over a period of 2-3 academic years, all of the learning outcomes are assessed, and then the cycle repeats itself. Departments decide to collect data from all of their majors, or a sample of them, based on the size of the student population in the given major. For general education, the sampling is determined in consultation with the General Education council. These two aspects seemed to be relatively consistent among departments.

Where the departments tended to differ is in the range of their data collection activities for their programs. While some programs collect their data from a number of different courses in the program, there are others that use the capstone experience as their sole source for data. Given that these two modes of data collection vary greatly in the abundance and richness of data collected, and in the nature and amount of work they entail for the faculty in the program, this may be a question for further investigation. A related question may be the rationale for the chosen mode for data collection.

In sections (B), (C) and (D) below, we report data as written in the survey forms. We retain the original vocabulary and formatting from the data in order to preserve the voices of our respondents.

- B) What faculty said they found valuable in the assessment process:

Assessment helps to:

- **(Most cited)** facilitate faculty discussions and conversations about Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's), programs, planning and reporting
- identify areas of strength and areas of weaknesses or challenges in the curriculum
- understand whether curricular expectations are being met
- understand what students are getting out of the program, and how best to deliver on our promise of quality in higher education
- establish consistency across different sections/years
- provide data to examine and revise course and pedagogical practices, and curriculum
- track and modify SLO's and adjust as needed
- provide points of discussion among dept faculty
- helps with MSCHE accreditation
- create rubrics to evaluate assessment tools
- continually focus attention on the SLO's

- understand where our students are when they graduate

Additionally, programs/units that are externally accredited identified the following benefits:

- understand the inter-relationships among programs, including how each is different
- develop projects that benefit all programs within a school
- develop a systematic approach to reflection which allows for consistency among program assessments, and the dedication of human resources to maintain the systems
- bolster written communication, ethical reasoning, and critical thinking in curricula

C) What faculty reported as most onerous about the assessment process

- **(Most cited)** the logistics – constructing the assessment plan each year, coordinating data management, setting up data collection and analyses, and report writing
- paperwork and form filling
- faculty turnaround each cycle
- establishing buy-in from faculty
- Gen ed assessment
- Timing of the assessment, usually at the end of the semester
- Dealing with very small sample sizes
- faculty related issues – adjuncts, cooperation among faculty, lack of openness to change, rigidly established practices
- fitting in new/exciting course related endeavors into the assessment plan
- confusion over timing – gen ed is over calendar year whereas program is over academic year
- redundancies between gen ed and program assessment
- over-assessing a specific (possibly lower level) course
- LACK OF RESOURCES allocated

Externally accredited programs added the following caveats:

- sheer volume of assessment is burdensome
- the formality of the process may detract from learning from the process
- changing priorities and standards of external agencies

D) Cries for help

- Given the lack of sufficient numbers of tenure track faculty, we are stretched too thin to benefit from assessments. The process places undue pressures on the coordinator and the few faculty who are qualified to conduct the assessments.
- It hasn't been that valuable because we don't tend to get good data. Hopefully that will change in the future
- While there are results from assessment activities, how to properly evaluate the meaning of the results is an open question.
- Diminishing benefits because of the pressure on a few faculty members to conduct numerous evaluations
- Difficult to have consistency and consistent improvements because of a significant turnover in faculty

2. Trevor Jorgensen and Christopher LaLonde shared the context and reported on the evolution of the assessment process on this campus for program assessment and general assessment respectively. Program assessment activities coincide with the Academic Year (AY). On the other hand, General Education assessment activities coincide with the Calendar Year (CY). This disparity was commented upon in our survey data.

Asked about the move from AY to CY, Christopher Lalonde noted, “The motivation for the change was born of the recognition that we were not yet closing the feedback loop. To this end, it was suggested that we create a forum which draws together faculty members from different departments who teach General Education courses to discuss their assessment results. In Fall 2013, the Assessment Advisory Committee recommended to, and the Faculty Assembly approved the move from an AY to CY cycle for the assessment of student learning in general education courses to allow for a spring retreat to discuss the findings and implications of the data gathering.” One of the reasons for making the change was to encourage conversation about the assessment results within and across departments and programs and to identify any actions to be taken in light of what had been learned from the assessment.

3. The presentation by Deborah Furlong and Mary Ann Preston described the AEFIS Strategic Planning + Data Collection solution that is now used to collect annual reports from all divisions. New for this year is the creation of a Continuous Improvement Report for 2020-21 and a Continuous Improvement Plan for 2021-2022. The report and subsequent plan will capture 1-3 goals from each division and department/unit that are tied to the institutional goals, institutional priorities and mission of SUNY Oswego.
4. Dean Kristin Croyle shared with the group the restructuring of Assessment Coordination that has taken place over the last year. There will no longer be an Assessment Coordinator for the college. Instead, coordination for Program Assessment will be managed via the offices of the Deans, by the Associate Deans. This restructuring was seen as necessary since the previous plan created several redundancies. The Assessment Fellows project will also sunset but faculty or staff members interested in assessment related issues may submit proposals and may conduct funded projects, if approved.
5. An AEFIS representative shared some of the possible technological offerings of the software, specifically related to collecting and managing assessment data directly from our learning management system. The Outcomes Assessment + Evidence Collection solution of the platform will be piloted in the near future.
6. As per Standard V of MSCHE: *Assessment of student learning and achievement demonstrates that the institution's students have accomplished educational goals consistent with their program of study, degree level, the institution's mission, and appropriate expectations for institutions of higher education.*

The corresponding institutional priorities for Standard V are: a) Student Success b) Academic and Creative Excellence, and c) Partnerships

The Lines of Inquiry articulated by the Standard V subcommittee, listed below, address some of the same issues as charged to the ATF.

1. What are the systems for gathering, analyzing and reporting assessment information?
2. How is assessment information acted upon in divisions across campus?
3. To what extent has institutional assessment resulted in better meeting our mission and goals?
4. What resources are available for continuous improvement and how are outstanding examples recognized and rewarded?
5. How does the College ensure its assessment activities evolve to reflect institutional priorities and best practices?

## **Discussion**

From our survey data, it is clear that faculty are cognizant of the benefits of timely, appropriate and consistent assessment. They recognize that the primary purpose of assessment is to improve the quality of their programs by improving student learning. A well designed assessment process provides insight, accountability (internal or external), and data to improve programs, curricula, and pedagogical practices.

Larger units, guided by mandated external accreditation processes, reveal additional benefits that may accrue by coalescing smaller units. Such benefits include visualization of inter-relationships between different programs that constitute the unit, development of programs that benefit all constituents, and evolution of a systematic approach to reflection, and to allocation of resources.

The following characteristics of assessment for programs and for general education provide evidence of the maturity of assessment as a process at our institution.

- Program level SLO's are clearly defined, and processes to collect data towards assessing these outcomes are well articulated.
- The data collection processes are embedded within the life of the programs and the units where they happen.
- Many units report participation of a large number of their faculty in the processes of assessment at the department level.
- Faculty at the program level who are charged with collecting the data and coalescing it into a coherent report geared towards continuous improvement of their respective programs have been carrying out their responsibilities competently and efficiently.
- What departments report as onerous indicates next steps that may be taken to improve the overall process. Our survey data show that faculty seek better facilitation, more active conversations within and across departments, a process that allows them to streamline and revise their assessment plans as needed, and appropriate feedback - overall, a process that is able to demonstrate ways in which assessment is part of decision making processes that are tied to institutional goals, resource allocation and reform. Walvoord (2010) asserts that tying assessment demonstrably to decision making processes and to institutional goals in meaningful ways adds tremendous value to the process.

The task force discussed ways to streamline assessment processes so that we may recommend strategies that don't "consume more energy than they produce" (Warner 2019) - a task that is part of our original charge. Dean Prabakar Kothandaraman pointed out that many of the programs were already following such standard recommendations as assessing SLO's on a cycle rather than every year, sampling as needed, or embedding data collection within departmental processes. He suggested some additional measures such as finding ways to depict and condense the data into very concise and actionable reports that are geared towards improvement in the next cycle. Typically, externally accredited programs like the School of Business are required to follow such guidelines.

A word on the supplemental charge of equity that the task force added to the original charge: As ongoing discussions about equity, diversity and inclusion indicate, currently, there are more questions than answers in this sphere - not just at our institution but indeed across academia. Many of us have reflected personally and professionally on these issues and continue to grapple with them in discussions with colleagues within and across disciplines. In line with these discussions, it seemed appropriate to raise these issues in the context of assessment. Discussion of these issues led to the creation of the document "*Considering Equity in Student Learning Assessment Practices*," attached to this report.

## **Recommendations**

As we crafted our recommendations, we focused on what would be most helpful in addressing some of the issues of assessment that faculty identified as "onerous" or that emerged from our survey data as "cries for help." Concomitantly, we wanted to move the process of reflection via assessment forward. This is the thinking that is reflected in our recommendations below, that we labeled initially as "Wouldn't it be cool if we had ..." (thanks to Sarah Bonzo for that phrase!). We are now in a position to affirm these as our recommendations.

We recommend the following:

1. Seeking ways of tying assessment to policy related issues. What, and how do, departmental, programmatic, and institutional decisions rely on data obtained from assessment? Suggestions include using assessment data and results to explicitly inform curricular changes, and hiring requests. Dean's offices could support this process by helping programs establish robust assessment plans that can answer appropriate questions.
2. A coordinated calendar of assessment requirements for both Program and General Education, with clearly defined due dates, that is published on the Institutional Research and Assessment website. For the same reasons as for General Education, we recommend moving the Program Assessment cycle to the calendar year.
3. Living forms in consistent and easily accessible locations that are updated regularly based on feedback.
4. A training/onboarding program for new assessment coordinators to help them get started.
5. Assessment Coordinator-led annual meeting of program faculty within the department/unit to discuss program assessment. The meeting would address (some of) the following:
  - a. Relating assessment to institutional goals.

- b. What we can celebrate about our students and their achievements.
  - c. Areas that need improvement.
- 6. An annual meeting/retreat for all departmental Assessment Coordinators along with the Deans, and IRA. It would be useful to view an overall picture of assessment within the entire unit at such a meeting. The participants would also discuss due dates, highlight programs that tried something new, celebrate programs that saw improvements, and discuss assessment in general (e.g. Q&A across departments to help share best practices and make the process easier). Externally accredited programs should be included in the meeting.
- 7. A technology-assisted solution (could be a Google shared drive, AEFIS, or something else) that allows everyone involved with assessment to easily upload department reports, see trends over time including ways to visualize data, and see what others are doing to help us grow and learn together.
- 8. Attention to equity as related to assessment. As part of our work, the ATF discussed the following questions:
  - a. What are some key issues related to assessment and equity?
  - a. How can assessment take into account the diversity of students on our campus?
  - b. What resources are needed to help faculty/departments address issues related to equity?

Discussion about these issues led to the creation of the document “*Considering Equity in Student Learning Assessment Practices*” that is attached to this report. The document is intended to provide guidance to departments and program units in evolving their own models to align with various disciplinary areas. Seeking and supporting appropriate opportunities for professional development would further bolster this process.

- 9. A college Assessment website to better reflect the entire process including overarching goals, the activities at each stage, the administrative personnel that provide oversight, and the timeline.
- 10. Allocated resources to strengthen the process, and to help programs and faculty meet expectations. Data from our “Cries for help” section indicate that institutionally, there is a need to attach value to a process that is deemed essential and useful. If we desire that programs and units invest time and energy (and passion) into the assessment process, then they must be provided the necessary resources - in terms of course release as needed in order to plan and reflect on the existing process, support for professional development, and for research, including pilot programs, and lastly, rewards for exemplary performances.

## **Conclusion**

Discussions within the task force focused on ways in which we may address the charge that was delineated to us. Our discussions were extensive and covered a wide gamut of topics related to assessment.

As the work of the ATF concludes, we remind ourselves that assessment is a necessary and crucial part of higher education. For those of us that continually strive to improve the process, and see it as a means of acting in the wider interest of our community while improving ourselves, here are some lines to inspire us:

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;  
... Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

(From: Tagore, R. (1910) "Let my country awake")

We would appreciate your feedback.

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## **Appendix 1: Considering Equity in Student Learning Assessment Practices**