

The University of South Carolina

Multiple-campus Assessment of Student Learning: A Course-embedded Approach

The University of South Carolina's general education assessment project, funded by the Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) and the Office of the Provost from 1991-1993, grew out of several teaching improvement initiatives started in the late 1980s and consideration of a number of important issues raised by the 1990 Institutional Self Study. The overriding issue involved the most effective way of instituting assessment and student learning improvement activities across a multi-campus system which considers itself to be a single institution and which, despite different campus missions, goals, and faculty expectations, shares a common general education core curriculum. A secondary, but no less important focus, was the recognition of the need to address the lack of communication among faculty across the system campuses.

The University of South Carolina serves over 40,000 students and grants more than 6500 degrees each year in its campuses across the state. These include a comprehensive research campus in Columbia, two four-year campuses in Aiken and Spartanburg (and another in Myrtle Beach up through 1992), and two-year campuses located in Beaufort, Lancaster, Salkahatchee, Sumter, and Union. With more than 2200 faculty across these campuses, the sites vary in terms of mission and student characteristics. They also varied in terms of assessment activities at the start of this project. Further, it was realized that, although each of these campuses offered similar general education courses, particularly those at the Freshman level, and that these courses transferred automatically from one campus to another, course equivalency in terms of content and assessment was not realized. This issue was especially significant considering that each year approximately 600 students transfer among the campuses and these are subjected to nonuniform courses and assessment methods. Our goals, therefore, were to attempt to systematize the diverse assessment procedures and improve the nature of student assessment for learning improvement. This also presented a unique opportunity to improve communication among faculty on the university's several campuses and to continue to emphasize the importance of undergraduate education. This project, supported by FIPSE, the University's Office of the Provost, and administered through the Office of Institutional Planning and Research and the Department of Psychology, enabled faculty to collaborate in re-conceptualizing general education abilities and in developing "learning modules." These modules sought to embed assessment within the learning exercises and make it an integral part of teaching general education courses. The initial courses

were selected because they satisfy the core curriculum requirements in all the academic units on all system campuses. The project focused on the following courses: English Composition and Literature, American History, Introductory Calculus and Introductory Biology. Faculty applied to participate, were screened, and selected by a faculty-administration oversight committee. A total of 60 were selected to participate. Selection was based on their demonstrated interest in teaching and undergraduate education and recommendations from their deans and department chairs. Most faculty were involved with the project over the three-year duration, and all campuses were represented.

Before the project began, we surveyed faculty regarding their understanding of the role, goals and content of the course and their perceptions of the work of faculty on the other "types" of campuses (2-year, 4-year, Columbia) including how they spend their time and their attitudes toward teaching. We also interviewed students who were then enrolled in these courses on all the campuses regarding their goals, expectations, and experiences in taking the courses. These data indicated that course objectives were not typically clear to students and that only a narrow range of assessment activities were employed.

These data, along with the university's newly proposed goals for general education, served as context for the first of ultimately two, intensive 3-day orientation to assessment retreats with faculty. Consultants from Alverno College, University of Delaware, Miami University of Ohio, as well as our own project directors and staff introduced faculty participants to various approaches to assessment for student improvement. During the retreat faculty learned a collaborative, small group problem-solving process, and began to articulate desired outcomes, develop criteria, consider the role of student self-assessment, and sought to integrate the assessment of general education abilities and skills with academic content. Following the retreat faculty worked on the initial versions of the assessment modules described in this document daily for five weeks in the summer.

During the summer sessions faculty worked together by discipline to redesign their courses in ways that specifically addressed general education abilities and goals, and included explicit assessments of those abilities in the course context. Most of the groups chose to incorporate assessment of written communication, oral communication, and either small group communication or critical thinking into their courses. The use of collaborative learning was common to all of them. Many of the faculty, including those on the Columbia research campus, felt comfortable with the approach to assessment used at Alverno College. Consultants from Winthrop University, Clayton State University, and Clemson University as well as campus specialists also met with the discipline-based groups during the first summer.

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This process included reading in the assessment area, personal research, and long and intense conversations about curriculum, teaching and learning. In the first weeks frustration was gradually replaced by feelings of camaraderie, intellectual challenge, and excitement about the implications of assessment for profoundly changing their teaching. At the conclusion of the first summer training (July-August, 1992), faculty left with at least part of the course redesigned and with the tools and confidence to incorporate assessment into the class. Some of the faculty had redesigned all their courses to incorporate assessment. A day-long presentation for deans, department chairs, central administration, faculty, and others concluded the first summer. One purpose of this presentation and the display of "posters" describing the work was to provide practice in communicating the important concepts of assessment to others who had not been so deeply involved.

Faculty kept journals during the summer workshops and into the 1993 academic year to record their impressions of the impact of the modules on student learning. Many classes were videotaped and studied. The faculty met in early 1993 to exchange information about what was working and how, and what needed to be revised. Again, we tried to capture their ideas and reflections to improve our own processes. One improvement was an orientation for new faculty prior to the second retreat and summer workshops in July 1993. By the third year, all the faculty had been through a cycle of using the modules and practicing both assessment and collaborative learning. In May of 1994 all faculty were brought together for final module revisions and editing.

This document contains the most up-to-date versions of modular exercises in the four subject areas. They are written in a format which is easily reproducible, in whole or in part. Because of variations in the course contents and faculty orientations there is some dissimilarity in the module formats across the disciplines. This is to be expected.

The work has now been widely disseminated across the various campuses of the University of South Carolina system and elsewhere. Preliminary analyses of our evaluation data is very encouraging. We are finding that, although preparation time and student evaluation takes longer than in courses taught using traditional methods, with the present approach, students' attitudes toward the material, interest, and attendance is high, anxiety over evaluation is lessened, and students are clear about course objectives. Their comparisons of their own classes using the new and old course formats showed higher student grades, higher satisfaction for students and faculty, and better information about students' abilities to apply what they learned in other settings. In the calculus course, for example, faculty put much less emphasis on the lecture and multiple choice testing, and more on interactive learning methods and written reports, so that students actually demonstrate their ability to communicate effectively in the context of mathematics. Faculty

report and their syllabi show that they are now more concerned with depth, and are sometimes willing to forego breadth of "coverage" to insure student learning. Students are gaining experience in assessing their own learning using the criteria made explicit to them throughout the course.

Videotapes show students working in groups with faculty coaching and working with the small groups; when lectures were used the students feel confident to ask questions and to help others. Faculty who collected samples and portfolios of student work in these courses with those produced by students in their courses prior to their assessment training found that now their students' work is more thoughtful, more accurate and shows more depth of understanding. By applying theory to practice, talking with their colleagues on their own campus and other campuses, listening to students, these faculty developed a sense of what would work to improve both student learning and their own teaching.

The more important results of the project are not the products on paper but the changes in faculty teaching and in the understanding of assessment as an important intellectual and educational activity. Like all good assessment, this project was an important form of faculty development. Those whose departments were not initially involved have requested to become involved in the next phase. While the University is using the same criteria to assess general education broadly, the model and process used in this project is continuing with administrative support. Thus, we have found this approach to be an excellent one to use on a multi-campus system such as ours. Faculty who participated in the project indicate that they now spend more time talking with colleagues about teaching and that they systematically self-assess their own teaching as well as integrating student feedback during the courses into their teaching. They also report that they have a new energy for teaching. A few reported concerns that students who are accustomed to passive learning in lecture situations find this approach to require too much work, and some of these students prefer traditional sections. We expect this concern to diminish as more and more faculty adopt this model.

Another result of the project is the new respect faculty have for individuals on other types of campuses. This was an important goal of the project which has been verified by observation, self-reports of behavior, and measurable changes in attitudes, particularly in the period prior to faculty campus interaction to the end of the first summer training. The impact on our faculty can best be summed up with a quote, one of many, by one of our participants:

"This [campus collaborative work and assessment] can be scary since I had an internal resistance to changing the way I did things for years. But I assure you that I'm going to try it. I'm convinced that it's important to try. This has set a major path for a new way of dealing with teaching and learning."

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David A. Bell, Office of Institutional Planning and Research, Project Director 1991-92

Karen Carey, Office of Institutional Planning and Research, Project Coordinator 1992-93 and Co-Director 1993-94

Keith Davis, Department of Psychology, Project Evaluator 1991-92

Lynn Glander, Office of Institutional Planning and Research, Project Evaluator 1993-94, Assessment Specialist 1994

Frederic Medway, Department of Psychology, Project Co-Director 1991-92, Project Director 1992-94

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PROJECT FACULTY

AIKEN

Elizabeth Bell
English
USC Aiken
171 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

William Brockington
History
USC Aiken
171 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

Stephen King
Mathematics
USC Aiken
171 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

Elaine Lacy
History
USC Aiken
171 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

Michael D. May
Mathematics
USC Aiken
171 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

Nieves McNulty
Mathematics
USC Aiken
171 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

W. Harold Ornes
Biology
USC Aiken
171 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

Lynn Rhodes
English
USC Aiken
171 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

Harry Shealy
Biology
USC Aiken
171 University Parkway
Aiken, SC 29801

BEAUFORT

David W. McCollum (deceased)
Biology
USC Beaufort
800 Carteret Street
Beaufort, SC 29902

Ivan Schukei
Mathematics
USC Beaufort
800 Carteret Street
Beaufort, SC 29902

Nora Schukei
Mathematics
USC Beaufort
800 Carteret Street
Beaufort, SC 29902

Sheila Tombe
English
USC Beaufort
800 Carteret Street
Beaufort, SC 29902

Ron Tuttle
Mathematics
USC Beaufort
800 Carteret Street
Beaufort, SC 29902

COASTAL CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

Veronica Gerald
English
Coastal Carolina University
P.O. Box 1954
Conway, SC 29526

Howard Kramer
Biology
Coastal Carolina University
P.O. Box 1954
Conway, SC 29526

Joseph Parker
Mathematics
Coastal Carolina University
P.O. Box 1954
Conway, SC 29526

Prashant Sangsiry
Mathematics
Coastal Carolina University
P.O. Box 1954
Conway, SC 29526

Linda Schwartz
English
Coastal Carolina University
P.O. Box 1954
Conway, SC 29526

Jill Sessoms
English
Coastal Carolina University
P.O. Box 1954
Conway, SC 29526

PROJECT FACULTY

COLUMBIA

Charles Duggins
Biology
USC Columbia
CLS 105
Columbia, SC 29208

Rhonda Grego
English
USC Columbia
Humanities Ofc. Bldg. 215
Columbia, SC 29208

George Johnson
Mathematics
USC Columbia
LeConte 417
Columbia, SC 29208

Mary Ellen O'Leary
Mathematics
USC Columbia
LeConte 402
Columbia, SC 29208

William Rivers
English
USC Columbia
Humanities Ofc. Bldg. 407
Columbia, SC 29208

Michael Scardaville
History
USC Columbia
Gambrell 233
Columbia, SC 29208

Nancy Thompson
English
USC Columbia
Humanities Ofc. Bldg. 316
Columbia, SC 29208

Bob Weir
History
USC Columbia
Gambrell 218
Columbia, SC 29208

LANCASTER

Kay Chanasar
Mathematics
USC Lancaster
P.O. Box 889
Lancaster, SC 29721

Jerry Currence
Mathematics
USC Lancaster
P.O. Box 889
Lancaster, SC 29721

Bruce Nims
English
USC Lancaster
P.O. Box 889
Lancaster, SC 29721

Susan Pauly
English
USC Lancaster
P.O. Box 889
Lancaster, SC 29721

SALKEHATCHIE

Ron Cox
History
USC Salkehatchie
P.O. Box 617
Allendale, SC 29810

Robert Group
English
USC Salkehatchie
P.O. Box 617
Allendale, SC 29810

Bill Lamprecht
Biology
USC Salkehatchie
P.O. Box 617
Allendale, SC 29810

Duncan McDowell
English
USC Salkehatchie
P.O. Box 617
Allendale, SC 29810

Jeffery Strong
Mathematics
USC Salkehatchie
P.O. Box 617
Allendale, SC 29810

Larry Strong
Mathematics
USC Salkehatchie
P.O. Box 617
Allendale, SC 29810

SPARTANBURG

Andrew Crosland
English
USC Spartanburg
800 University Way
Spartanburg, SC 29303

Donald Knight
English
USC Spartanburg
800 University
Spartanburg, SC 29303

PROJECT FACULTY

SUMTER

Charles Denny
Biology
USC Sumter
200 Miller Road
Sumter, SC 29150

Jack Doyle
English
USC Sumter
200 Miller Road
Sumter, SC 29150

Saadallah Hallaba (retired)
History
USC Sumter
200 Miller Road
Sumter, SC 29150

John Logue
Biology
USC Sumter
200 Miller Road/P.O. Box 8055
Sumter, SC 29150

Tom Powers
History
USC Sumter
200 Miller Road
Sumter, SC 29150

Maitland Rose
Mathematics
USC Sumter
200 Miller Road
Sumter, SC 29150

John Varner
Mathematics
USC Sumter
200 Miller Road
Sumter, SC 29150

UNION

Mary Barton
Biology
USC Union
P.O. Drawer 729
Union, SC 29379

Allan Charles
History
USC Union
P.O. Drawer 729
Union, SC 29379

Charles Walker
Mathematics
USC Union
P.O. Drawer 729
Union, SC 29379

Tandy Willis
English
USC Union
P.O. Drawer 729
Union, SC 29379

John Wright
English
USC Union
P.O. Drawer 729
Union, SC 29379

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