

Assessment Conversations

Assessment: A Blessing or a Curse

An Overview of the Changes in Assessment at SCSU in the last four years

By Elaine Ackerman

Assessment as a discussion topic over dinner is probably not one you would introduce, unless, of course, you are dining with a group of “assessment geeks”. Assessment is viewed by many as time consuming, unnecessary, and without reward or recognition. However, institutions granting new and continuing accreditation demand assessment as a process and product.

When arriving at St. Cloud State 4 years ago, I was thrust into the midst of a frenzy of activity, as preparations for the HLC visit were underway. Because I am an “assessment geek”, the idea of being actively engaged in assessment activities was stimulating and challenging. At the time, the university assessment committee, comprised of the college assessment directors/coordinators, served as the catalyst for assessment processes.

The charge to SCSU from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), our accrediting agency, was to provide evidence of student learning. The Higher Learning Commission defines assessment of student learning in the following way:

“Assessment of student learning is a participatory, iterative process that:

- Provides data/information you need on your students’ learning

- Engages you and others in analyzing and using this data/information to confirm and improve teaching and learning
- Produces evidence that students are learning the outcomes you intended
- Guides you in making educational and institutional improvements
- Evaluates whether changes made improve/ impact student learning, and documents the learning and your efforts.”

Thus, the intent of the assessment work of the last four years has been targeted to meet the charge from HLC. For instance, the definition that is requested by annual assessment program report forms parallels the aforementioned information required by HLC as part of accreditation.

From my perspective, there have been several significant activities that have served to move SCSU toward an on-going, systematic approach to a university-wide assessment plan:

1. Assessment sessions and workshops- which were non-existent at the start of my tenure
2. Barbara Walvoord’s visit and presentations- which helped to change the conversation on campus and gave the Assessment Steering Committee valuable guidance
3. [The HLC Assessment Academy](#)- which provided much needed impetus and focus (*continued on page 2*)

4. [Assessment Peer Consulting](#) which involved both more areas of campus and more individuals in the assessment process

I believe SCSU has accomplished much over the last four years to begin to establish an assessment

system embraced by most of the institution. However, with the recent budget reductions, it is imperative that those believing in the purpose and process of assessment keep leading the “movement” to ultimately change the current thinking regarding assessment from a “curse” to a “blessing”.

COLLEGIATE LEARNING ASSESSMENT: [C.L.A. IN THE \[CLA\]SSROOM](#)
PERFORMANCE TASKS THAT ENGAGE STUDENTS IN CRITICAL THINKING

By Sandra Johnson and Suzanne Stangl-Erkens

Are you interested in developing realistic problems in your discipline that require your students to use higher order thinking skills such as critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and written communication? Most faculty members are.

Last May, 21 St. Cloud State University faculty members were joined by 11 other MnSCU participants for the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) in the classroom Performance Task Academy. The Performance Task Academy, held at SCSU, was a two-day, hands-on training workshop that focused on issues of teaching and learning, drawing principles from the literature on authentic assessment, assessment tools, and rubrics. The Academy attempted to “help faculty to develop and assess student learning holistically, and to focus on key higher-order skills together in ways that replicates how these skills are used in the ‘larger world.’” The format of the Academy used a mixture of mini-lectures, small group activities, large group discussion, and independent work. By the end of the workshop, participants were creating their own performance tasks specific to their disciplines.

Each CLA Performance task requires students to use critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and problem solving skills to answer several open-ended questions

about a hypothetical, but realistic situation. In addition to a scenario and questions, each CLA Performance Task has its own set of documents that may include memos, summaries of research reports, newspaper articles, maps, photographs, diagrams, tables, charts, graphs, interview notes, and transcripts. Students complete the task by using these materials in preparing their answers to the questions posed to them. Faculty then apply scale-type rubrics to assess the level of sophistication to which students have learned.

These performance tasks were modeled after the open-ended prompts requiring constructed responses used on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a performance based assessment which measures the institutional contributions to the learning gains made by students. Since SCSU tests both first-year and senior students using the CLA, using performance tasks in classrooms helps students and faculty focus on curricular and pedagogical work that complements institution wide assessment practices.

Participants in the Performance Task Academy can now facilitate similar Academies on campus. Are you interested in learning more about performance tasks or participating in a future academy? Contact the [SCSU Assessment Office](#) for more information.

IN THE KNOW

Assessment Peer Consultants

Here to help

Don't know where to begin? Have questions? Need help? Let our assessment peer consultants come to your aid. They are available free of charge to assist programs, departments and units with any aspect of assessment of student learning.

Visit our [website](#) for additional details.

A.P.A.D.

Advancing Program Assessment through Discussion.

Would you like to start a conversation about assessment in your department? Let us help you by subsidizing the purchase of books to feed the conversation.

Visit our [website](#) for additional details.

Calendar

September 14, 2009

Annual program assessment reports are due to your college assessment director

September 18, 2009

The Collaboration- Assessment for the Changing Learning Environment

Proposals deadline: September 18, 2009

Conference: February 19-20, 2010

October 1 and 2, 2009

New Assessment Peer Consultant Training

October 1-3, 2009

Educating for Personal and Social Responsibility: Deepening Student and Campus Commitments

Minneapolis, MN

October 22-24, 2009

Integrative Learning: Addressing the Complexities

Atlanta, Georgia

October 25-27, 2009

IUPUI 2009 Assessment Institute
Indianapolis, Indiana

November 13-14, 2009

The Collaboration- Bridging the Generational Divide: Working together to teach Millennial Students

Minneapolis/St Paul location TBA

Visit our [website](#) for additional details on the events mentioned

Contributors

Sandy Johnson

Assessment Peer Consultant
Former COSE Assessment Director (2004-2008)

Suzanne Stangl-Erkens

Communications Studies

Elaine Ackerman

Former Assessment Peer Consultant
Former COE Assessment Director (2004-2009)

Holly Evers

Support Staff