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Assessment at the College Level: Core Competencies

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Central Premise

While assessment of student learning outcomes needs to occur at the program level, there are similar student learning outcomes across programs and departments. In the College of Health and Human Services, the college assessment committee changed its focus from reviewing department plans to the assessment of core competencies.

Core competencies for the College of Health and Human Services range from discipline-specific competencies to more general competencies found in any liberal studies curriculum. The college assessment committee narrowed the focus for the immediate future to written and verbal communication, professional identity, ethical behavior, critical reasoning, cultural sensitivity, evaluation of data, and the role of interprofessional work.

For the purposes of this assessment grant, the focus was narrowed to the assessment of student writing. The college assessment committee became the Writing Assessment Group (WAG).

Writing Assessment Group (WAG)

Initially, WAG took a standard approach to the assessment of student writing. As proposed for the grant, one of our end goals was to have standardized practices in place, so that others in the college could help gather data on student writing. Rubrics are standardized ways to assess papers, so the team began by looking at what others had done and the types of rubrics used to assess writing.

Using both the AACU (Association of American Colleges and Universities) *Written Communication VALUE Rubric* and a revised rubric developed by WMU's Office of Assessment and Undergraduate Studies, the team filled out rubrics on student papers (names redacted) from each other's courses, to get a sense of what might be included in a college rubric for writing.

A key learning from this process was that while rubrics can be a standardized approach for the technical aspects of writing, they were not well suited as a standardized approach to the content of a paper. Indeed, after the exercise of assessing students' papers, the consensus of the team was that no one was clear if the students were writing the desired content.

At this point, the dialogue shifted about 180° .

Shifting Dialogue

Not surprisingly, in conversations about student writing, a lot of focus is placed on student preparedness. Blame is placed on high schools, the English Department, or the students themselves.

The WAG dialogue shifted in a few important ways:

- what type of writing was required for an assignment
- how did writing relate to expectations
- was the central issue truly writing or was it critical thinking
- what is the impact of how instructors frame assignments

WAG found three themes related to writing:

- technical writing in the form of composition, spelling and grammar
- technical writing in the form of APA formatting
- critical thinking expressed through writing

WAG recognized that assessment of writing would have to vary by the type of writing required. If students write well in personal reflection pieces, but not in reviews of the literature, what are possible reasons for that gap? To what extent is the gap impacted by student versus instructor-related variables?

The dialogue had shifted to how we assess whether instructors are truly asking for what we expect our students to provide to us.



WAG Workshop

At the first *Frustrated with Student Writing* workshop, participants identified much of the same themes found by WAG, albeit there was disagreement about how or whether to categorize different issues related to writing. Instructors want students to write in a way that is logical, supported by evidence, engages the discipline, synthesizes course material, makes meaning of the topic, and they want those papers to be technically well-written. 75% of participants agreed to participate in the next step of the process, which looks at aligning the instructions for assignments with desired outcomes. Presenters and participants alike recognized that because an instructor knows what they want, that want might not be clearly articulated and could impact the writing that is received.

Next Steps

As discussed in The National Teaching and Learning Forum (Vol 24 (4): 4-6), students benefit from transparently designed assignments (Winkelmes et al, 2015).

WAG plans ongoing work groups for instructors in the College of Health and Human Services to assess what works well in helping students write well.

The next step is to begin assessing assignments, to allow our different professional viewpoints to be resources to each other, and to create sounding boards around expectations and directions to meet those expectations.

Continuing Process

This grant has been extended through 2016-17. In addition to the ongoing work groups, additional workshops will be held so that WAG can recruit multiple instructors in the College to help create better pathways to improving the writing of our students.