

Measures of Success

With assurance of learning standards in full force, business educators evaluate how well their assessment plans are working—and where those plans should lead next.

by **Tricia Bisoux**

For many business schools, assessment isn't just an accreditation requirement; it's a crucial component of higher education. It's also widely misunderstood, say those in assessment circles. They note that some administrators view assessment as a task to check off for accreditation purposes, rather than an ongoing process of continuous improvement. Meanwhile, many faculty view assessment with apprehension—they fear the gathering of data will disrupt their schedules, add to their workloads, or even be used to critique their teaching.

Kathryn Martell is the associate dean of Montclair State University's School of Business in New Jersey and a frequent presenter at AACSB International's assessment seminars. Since AACSB put its assurance of learning (AoL) standards in place in 2003, the business school community has made great strides where assessment is concerned, Martell believes. "It's on everybody's radar screen," she says. "When I first began working with AACSB in 2003, the language was new to everybody. Faculty said, 'We do student surveys. We're doing great.' Now they know that those surveys are not appropriate evidence for the purpose of assessment."

A long-time advocate for assessment, Douglas Eder now serves as the associate provost of institutional effectiveness at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. He emphasizes that while assessment activities are now firmly in place, attitudes still need to change. "We must assure faculty that we're not interested in assessment itself," says Eder. "We're interested in what it tells us about what our students are learning."

Like many proponents of learning assessment, Martell and Eder believe that schools are doing many things right when it comes to assessment. For example, Martell has seen a dramatic shift in resources, citing that business schools have gone from spending an average of only \$5,000 a year on assessment to spending \$50,000. Now, schools must put that money to best use by making assessment an integral part of their programs and mindset, she says. More important, administrators and faculty must realize that assessment itself is not the ultimate goal, but a means to a more important end.

Closing the Loop

Although most business schools have begun assessment in earnest, say Martell and Eder, many have yet to take an all-important next-step: "closing the loop." That is, they fail to use the data they collect to make tangible improvements. In fact, some have yet to finalize their assessment plans. According to AACSB's new standards, schools were to have their assessment plans fully in place by 2007, but many have fallen behind that original timetable.

"Few industries are slower moving than academia. Many faculty believe they can debate learning goals for three years," says Martell. "But they have to realize that they don't have to approach assessment as they would a research study.



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They don't need a measure that's been validated from here to Timbuktu. They just have to jump in, get started, and do their best.”

Last November, AACSB released its white paper, “AACSB Assurance of Learning Standards: An Interpretation,” to help schools through this process. It aims to provide guidance, answer frequently asked questions, and spark further dialogue about assessment.

Course-embedded assignments, capstone courses, and computer simulations provide a wide array of tools for business schools; software providers offer programs to help schools more easily gather and utilize data. Martell also points to standalone testing instruments such as the Major Field Tests in Business issued by ETS, headquartered in Princeton, New Jersey. She emphasizes that while the MFT alone isn't a sufficient assessment measure, it offers business schools yet another tool for their larger assessment toolbox. “The results of



standardized tests are difficult to use to improve the curriculum,” she says. “But if you need data quickly, the Major Field Test can be easily implemented.”

Some schools have already taken action to close the loop, Martell notes. For example, when business professors at Montclair State University discovered that their students weren't retaining their skills in statistics, they decided to record mini-lectures on quantitative techniques. These files were then stored in an “online toolbox” that all students could access. What started as a plan to help students refresh their statistics skills will soon be expanded to include mini-lectures on other subject matter, such as technology and business communication.

At Temple University's Fox School of Business in Philadelphia, faculty found that students needed to improve their ability to integrate information across disciplines. Rather than address this issue with a typical capstone course at the end of the program, faculty created a sophomore-level course built around the Capstone computer simulation from Capsim Management Simulations (formerly Management

Lessons of Assessment

Simulations at Coles College of Business highlight just what students have learned.

by Gary B. Roberts

At Kennesaw State University's Coles College of Business in Georgia, our seniors take a computer simulation to demonstrate their business knowledge after four years of coursework. In the simulation, we include a question that causes quite a stir. We ask, “If you're having dinner with guests from India, Saudi Arabia, China, and Japan, what should you serve?” Their choices include roast pork, beef, and chicken with vegetables. The right choice is chicken with vegetables—it doesn't conflict with any guest's cultural or religious beliefs, and it offers options for vegetarians.

That single question has told us a great deal about our students' global sensitivity. In fact, some students become angry that the question was included; they don't understand why this is a *business* question. We explain that this question has everything to do with global business, because these are the kinds of cultural subtleties that they'll need to know once they enter the global workforce.

More important, such questions in the simulation give us a mirror that we can hold up to our own teaching. When our students respond with uncertainty, we know that we've found an area in our curriculum that we need to improve. That mirror has been the true purpose—and benefit—of assessment.

The Right Mix

At Coles College, we combine course-embedded assessment and computer simulations in our BBA and MBA programs. We've found that effective assessment is the result not of a single tool, but of a mix of tools implemented throughout a number of courses and student projects.

For instance, throughout the semester, we require students to view online five different videos on particular business cases. After they watch each video, they write essays in response to a single question about that case. We also conduct peer evaluations and require oral presentations.

These tools give us good measurements of our students' soft skills, but such pencil-and-paper exercises don't

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—Kathryn Martell, Montclair State University

give us measurements on hard skills, such as ratio analysis and resource allocation. To better measure both qualitative and quantitative business skills, we added two technological components to our assessment plan. Three years ago, we added computer simulations—including the Foundation and Comp-XM Capstone simulations from Capsim Management Simulations. We also use Digital Measures software to record and track student performance.

Throughout the semester, students complete course-embedded assessments, quizzes, and major exams, as well as practice taking the Foundation simulation. At the end of the semester, students take the Capstone simulation, where they manage a business and answer questions posed by a virtual board of directors regarding their strategies and business knowledge. For instance, they are asked what they will do with the company’s inventory if interest rates rise? We want to make sure that students know that they need to reduce inventory to cut costs in this scenario.

Both simulations include 200 questions that our faculty developed and refined; each question is one we believe a business major should know how to answer. Our students’ performance gives us direct feedback on what our students know and what they may still need to learn.

Unexpected Benefits

When we first began our assessment and AoL efforts three years ago, they presented myriad challenges. Now, however, as we apply what we’ve learned to improve our programs, we also find that our efforts have produced unexpected benefits:

An awareness of problems. Our assessment efforts helped us improve our programs so that our students graduate with more integrated, higher-level decision-making skills. The data show where we are still teaching in silos that don’t encourage students to take what they’ve learned in one class and apply it in another.

An opportunity for early intervention. In the past, faculty members could struggle for years trying to improve student performance in their courses. Now, the data tell us immediately if and where there is a problem. If I see a junior faculty member having trouble early on, I can intervene in a way that’s helpful, not administrative or punitive.

An open forum for discussion. Assurance of learning has invited faculty into a continuous and all-inclusive conversation. After each simulation, we meet to discuss the results without an administrator present. We talk about what we’re

doing right, what we’re doing wrong, and what we need to do to improve.

For instance, as a strategy professor, I’ve often been frustrated by the fact that, by the time my students come into my class, they have forgotten ratio analysis. They’ve been taught the skill, but it was not reinforced after they took the final exam. Or, we’ve also found that our management, marketing, and finance majors know accounting principles very well after they take their accounting courses as sophomores; but by the time they take the Capstone simulation as graduating seniors, they can no longer do the kind of accounting analysis that we think they should know. We plan to make changes based on that information, reinforcing this knowledge over multiple courses so students don’t lose some of their skills before they graduate.

Culture of Change

In the past, efforts to improve the curriculum often involved merely changing course titles or adding a new course here and there. Now, we can make changes based on hard data, not opinion. When the scores aren’t where they should be, we know our faculty won’t become defensive, but will react enthusiastically to make necessary improvements.

Our marketing department is now planning brown-bag lunch meetings with faculty about AoL. Our finance department will be running a training session for faculty, based on data we have collected. These are not drastic changes, but they are small steps that are making a big difference for our programs.

That’s not to say that we still don’t face obstacles. While many departments enjoy 100 percent faculty participation, others have tenured faculty who refuse to collect the data. Still, most of our faculty are taking ownership of this process, because they’ve worked together to develop the questions now included in our embedded assessments and simulations.

This has truly been an exciting time. It’s the first time in my 20 years of teaching that I’ve seen a consistent team effort across the faculty to improve the quality of what we teach and the depth of what our students learn.

Gary B. Roberts is a professor of management and entrepreneurship and a member of the assurance of learning program at Kennesaw State University’s Coles College of Administration in Marietta, Georgia.

“While faculty are learning new **pedagogies**, they won’t be submitting grant proposals or writing research papers. Business schools need to adopt new systems that

Simulations Inc.) of Northfield, Illinois. Through the course and simulation, students now learn to integrate what they’re learning early in the curriculum.

When faculty at the Mays Business School at Texas A&M University in College Station examined their assessment data, they found that their students had strong technical skills but showed weaker performance in soft skills such as ethical reasoning, communication, and teamwork. Mays faculty created a course specifically designed to improve students’ soft skills. This fall, the new course will be required for all undergraduates.

That kind of swift action toward genuine improvement lies at the heart of effective AoL, Martell and Eder emphasize. And with so many tools and approaches available, the process invites experimentation and refinement over time. Before long, faculty can have a process that works smoothly and is in line with the school’s mission-based objectives.

“After a year or two, many schools find that assessment is an incredibly gratifying experience,” says Martell. “They love that it brings them back to talking about teaching and learning.”

Engaging Faculty

Assessment advocates emphasize that unless both faculty and administrators share an enthusiasm for assessment initiatives, there is a risk that their efforts will fall flat. In that case, programs won’t benefit from the curricular improvements that can arise from an effective AoL plan.

Faculty buy-in presents one of the biggest obstacles to assessment, says Matt Bartel, president of Digital Measures, an assessment software company headquartered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The most successful schools present AoL not as an externally driven requirement for accreditation, but as a plan that will benefit the faculty and the school, Bartel notes.

“Schools that offer an artificial purpose for pursuing assurance of learning get artificial buy-in,” he says. “One of the most important parts of the equation is communicating the true value of the information to everyone involved.”

Many assessment experts suggest that achieving genuine enthusiasm about assessment starts with faculty development. Most faculty are trained to explore their disciplines, not new modes of teaching, argues Eder of the University of North Florida. Therefore, an even bigger challenge, he says, is to ensure that faculty learn new pedagogies that will translate to better learning outcomes.

It will be up to business school administrators to support that kind of development, he says. He adds that if faculty aren’t encouraged to use assessment as a springboard

The Devil’s in the Data

At CSU, Chico, using STEPS to gather data streamlines learning assessment.

by Gail Corbitt, Steve Adams,
and Ken Chapman

In 2002, the College of Business at California State University, Chico, began to develop a software prototype to help us meet the challenges of the new assurance of learning accreditation standards. We knew that the software would have to be flexible enough to monitor and control mountains of data related to student assignments and demographics, yet simple enough for students and faculty to use without a large investment of time or training.

Our software program, the Student Tracking, Evaluation, and Portfolio System (STEPS), is now in Version 4.0. It has evolved from a tool to support course-embedded assessment to a repository for all the school’s data and information related to assurance of learning. It affords us an easy way to get stakeholder input, track assignments, and monitor our progress.

More important, using STEPS, faculty aren’t burdened with gathering and analyzing data. Instead, they can use their time to help plan assessment activities, develop recommendations based on data analysis, and implement interventions to improve the quality of our program.

Setting Objectives

To maximize the use of the STEPS program, we first had to set the objectives our collected data would measure, as well as establish the flow of information into and out of the system. Chico’s College of Business has two undergraduate bachelor of science degree programs, one in business administration and one in business information systems. We set five general learning goals for each program; each individual program also has three to five program-specific learning goals.

For each goal, we created an Assurance of Learning Advisory Board made up of seven to eight interested faculty members and industry reviewers. Each board determines how and where to assess each learning goal and may also determine the specific attributes of particular learning objectives.

For instance, our board for IT proficiency created a course-embedded assignment that requires students to take responsibility for the design and selection of the

reward faculty for more than their research.”

—Douglas Eder of the University of North Florida

computer architecture to support a company’s new Web site. In the assignment, the company’s marketing department knows the number of daily users for the site, but cannot provide detailed projections for site use. Students work independently to determine likely use patterns, choose architectural components to support that use, and justify their choices.

Before students begin the assignment, we tell them that it will be used for assessment. Students also are given the criteria that will be used to measure successful responses.

Sharing the assessment process with our students has had unexpected advantages. Students tell us that they appreciate knowing what is expected of them, not only in IT proficiency, but also in assignments for critical thinking and written and oral communication. Better yet, they note that this consistent feedback has helped them improve.

Taming the Data

As we fine-tune STEPS, we have developed greater flexibility in the way we collect, store, and access data that we generate in these assignments. Students can go online and follow posted instructions to upload their completed assignments into the STEPS system. Once assignments are in the system, a coordinator uses STEPS to select a random sample of work and assign it to evaluators for double-blind evaluation. In turn, evaluators receive e-mail notification that the work is ready to evaluate. Evaluators can assess their assigned work remotely and enter their assessments into the STEPS software. At the same time, the assessment coordinator uses STEPS to monitor the evaluators’ completion progress.

Concurrently, evaluators meet to calibrate their assessments and make sure they evaluate each student response using the same rubrics. For example, before industry reviewers review the assignment, they first do a sample assessment so that they can address any questions about the application of our chosen criteria.

We originally conceived STEPS as an assessment tool for oral and written assignments. It has become much more, helping us collect more than 1,000 assignments and control the countless moving parts in the assessment process. Eventually, the system will house all of our assessment data.

Raising Awareness

In “Assessing Student Learning: Are Business Schools Making the Grade?,” an article published recently in the *Journal of Education for Business*, Kathryn Martell notes that the weakest link in the assessment process is “closing the loop.” That is, many schools gather and even carefully analyze

the data, but they then fail to take the last step: making improvements based on their analyses.

To address this issue, Chico is revising its curriculum development to incorporate more direct input from the assessment process. For example, based on the analysis of the assessment data, our board for IT proficiency found that we needed to provide students with a better example of IT architecture. Its industry members offered to restructure the assignment given to students to assess their proficiency in applying current technology to a case study.

We also take care to look at the data from different angles. For example, if we were only to combine data from all students and all evaluators, it might hide weaknesses and strengths in subsets of the data. So, we have found it useful to compare students by criteria such as chosen specialization and transfer status.

It was only by making such smaller comparisons that we found that accounting students were receiving lower assessments in written communication than MIS students, particularly in mechanics. This revelation came as a great surprise to the accounting faculty. With the hard data before them, they did not argue with the results; they focused on how to get more writing assignments added to the accounting classes to improve their students’ skills.

To improve writing proficiency, the advisory board recommended changes in the number of assignments and a wider distribution of handouts that cover the expectations of great writing and the common errors to avoid. The college also hired a writing tutor. Since making these interventions in spring 2007, we have seen significant improvement in our students’ sentence structure, paragraph structure, word choice, tone, and professional format.

Ironically, at the same time we actually recorded decreases in their scores in grammar, punctuation, and spelling. But we view these discoveries as part of the process—we’re still digesting these results and plan further interventions.

With STEPS, we’ve worked to make assessment as non-intrusive for our faculty as possible. In the process, more of our faculty have become aware of assessment and have become more interested in raising the quality of student learning in their courses. Such an environment only makes it easier to pursue better assessment methods—and greater learning outcomes for all of our students.

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to inspire new approaches in the classroom, the data they gather will have no true purpose. “Schools have to protect faculty as they learn new ways to teach,” says Eder. “While faculty are learning new pedagogies, they won’t be submitting grant proposals or writing research papers. Business schools need to adopt new systems that reward faculty for more than their research.”

Too Little, Too Late?

Even with all their efforts so far, business schools in the U.S. may still face a bigger challenge than convincing faculty of the benefits of assessment, says Eder. “Higher education has had 20 years to get this right, and most institutions haven’t,” he says. “Now, the federal government is threatening to intervene.” If that happens, business schools may have to work hard to convince the federal government that their assessment efforts are working.

Already two major groups are advocating measures that could substantially influence assessment in public undergraduate education. In November, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities together approved the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) initiative. Under the VSA, leaders from more than 70 four-year public institutions of higher education set standards for assurance of learning, creating a data-reporting template that could become a starting point for federal oversight.

AACSB adopted its new standards in 2003; the release of the Spellings Report in 2006 only increased the pressure on colleges and universities to set standards when it called for an overhaul of U.S. higher education. Some fear that the next step may be an act of Congress to make assessment

mandatory for public higher education institutions.

Martell, however, believes that business schools still control their own destiny—if they act now. “The Spellings Report frightened a lot of people, because it called for some type of standardized assessment. That, of course, wasn’t welcomed because different schools have such different missions,” she says. “It’s important that organizations like AACSB educate Congress on the professional requirements that are already



Assessment at a Distance

OU Business School’s assessment plan must satisfy government mandates, meet accreditation standards, and lead to innovation in its distance learning program.

by Mark Fenton-O’Creevy

The Open University’s OU Business School in Milton Keynes, United Kingdom, has a unique vantage point on learning assessment. First, we are subject to the U.K.’s Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which requires us to set and publish learning outcomes for each course and program. Second, our business program is delivered exclusively via distance learning formats, including the Internet, telephone, print, multimedia, local face-to-face tutorials, and residential study.

Even with so many points of contact and a 1:16 tutor-to-student ratio, our students are less visible to faculty than they would be at a campus-based institution. Students, who study in course cohorts of up to 1,500, are not on campus and cannot drop in to see a tutor face-to-face.

As a university in the U.K., we must answer to the QAA. As an accredited business program, we must meet the standards of the AACSB and other accrediting bodies. But we must also maintain close relationships with, and ensure quality learning experiences for, all of our students—no matter how or when they connect to our programs. We must create robust, reliable assessment methods that work on a large scale, via multiple channels, across multiple student cohorts.

Our Assessment Environment

In the U.K. system, external examiners from other universities work with teams at our school to ensure that our programs meet QAA requirements. In addition, program committees at OU Business School review all learning outcomes and evidence of student achievement to ensure they fulfill the requirements set by the QAA, AACSB, and other accrediting bodies. We carry out annual reviews with the help of external advisors, and our

sample is enough. The point is to generate data we can use.”

—Kathryn Martell, Montclair State University

programs are subject to a quality review by the university every six years. Since 2005, we also have been part of an annual national student satisfaction survey conducted by the government, which examines students’ perceptions of teaching, learning, and student support.

This level of oversight makes it essential that we adopt a central, user-friendly course management system. We are now in the process of integrating all of our online learning and student support systems into a single virtual learning environment based on Moodle, a free, open-source CMS system. Using Moodle, students can access coursework, use the library, submit assignments, handle paperwork, and interact with tutors and peers.

The system keeps detailed records of every interaction we have with each student; we have protocols for information capture and data protection to supplement the relationships between students and tutors. By tracking the learning history of our students, we can identify how well they are achieving our learning objectives, and we can know when a student is struggling. If students are in trouble, we can intervene early to provide them the assistance they require to succeed.

Enhancing Quality

The QAA sets the following benchmark for MBA programs: “Graduates will have been able to ground their new knowledge within the base of their professional experience. They will be able to reflect on and learn from that prior experience and thus be able to integrate new knowledge with past experience and apply it to new situations.”

In 2006, we introduced a new MBA capstone course to help students accomplish this objective. After our course team and external examiner reviewed the assessment data from the course, we realized that many students were having difficulty applying what they had learned in their professional environments. As one team member noted, many students were applying theory to their practice, but they were doing so “as one applies a sticking plaster, rather than using it to effectively generate new insights.”

In response, OU Business School established a working group that collected information from faculty and students and ran a series of workshops that examined approaches to improving students’ “critical engagement.” These workshops have involved major figures in the field of learning, including Etienne Wenger, a leading California-based educational theorist and researcher in “communities of prac-

tice,” and Yrjo Engestrom, director of the Center for Activity Theory and Developmental Work Research at the University of Helsinki in Finland.

Our assessment system also has led us to refine our Professional Diploma in Management. The course includes online collaborative exercises designed to help first-year MBA students learn from other students about the practice of management in organizations different from their own. By the end of the course, we expect students to be able to put what they’ve learned to practical use in their workplaces.

However, a telephone survey of students in the course revealed that the workload in the course was higher than we had anticipated—so much so that our original learning goals were being lost. Based on this survey, we redesigned the course so that students had a more manageable workload and more time to apply their skills.

First, Assessment. Next, Innovation.

The oversight of the QAA—and now of AACSB—has encouraged us to take a more thoughtful approach to designing our students’ distance learning experiences and pay more explicit attention to external stakeholders. The danger, however, is that such audits of academic quality can become bureaucratic. Our concern is not just that the process absorbs resources, but that it can put a brake on innovation.

To this end, the business school has established a Teaching Innovation Group to support development in teaching, learning, and assessment. We also partner with the Centre for Practice-Based Professional Learning, one of four centers for excellence in teaching and learning at OU. Other support comes from the Institute for Educational Technology and the Knowledge Media Institute. These centers evaluate learning, support innovation, and develop technologies to enhance students’ experiences.

Although AACSB’s new AoL standards aligned well with our established assessment systems, they’ve also served as a useful reminder. They encourage us to use these systems in meaningful ways that lead to learning, program improvement, and a better student experience.

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in place. As long as Congress gets the message that we are pursuing assurance of learning voluntarily, we'll be able to continue to police ourselves."

Reaching Beyond Assessment

Since 2003, many business schools have been fine-tuning their assessment plans. Now that they're seeing those plans translate into tangible, positive improvements to their programs, a growing number of faculty are joining Eder and Martell in their enthusiasm for assessment and its place in improving learning outcomes.

One of the key points for school administrators to remember, says Martell, is not to overdo it. "Some schools try to make this way too complicated. I've seen some schools that have set 100 learning objectives," says Martell. "We don't have to assess everything—AACSB only asks us to identify five or six goals that we think are important. Moreover, we don't need to assess a huge number of students; assessing a representative sample is enough. The point is to generate data we can use."

Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University in Marietta, Georgia; the College of Business at California State University, Chico; and Open University's OU Business School in the United Kingdom are three schools where assessment plans have come to fruition. Their stories are shared in "Lessons of Assessment" on page 24, "The Devil's in the Data" on page 26, and "Assessment at a Distance" on page 28. Educators at these schools note that a majority of their faculty have embraced the process as an opportunity, rather than an added burden. Their experiences represent how far business schools have come where assessment is concerned. Yet, as many assessment experts argue, challenges still lie ahead.

So far, business schools have been trying and testing their approaches to find a system of accountability that works for their missions. By emphasizing streamlined systems and team involvement, many schools have found that effective assessment can be a strong catalyst for positive change. Once school faculty and administration realize the power of assessment data, say many experts, they become more excited about the prospect of improving their teaching, their programs, and their graduates. ■

For more information about AACSB's assurance of learning standards, visit www.aacsb.edu/resource_centers/assessment. AACSB's white paper, "Assurance of Learning Standards: An Interpretation," can be found at www.aacsb.edu/accreditation/Papers/index.asp. For information about the Major Field Test in Business, visit www.ets.org. To read more about the VSA initiative, visit www.voluntarysystem.org.

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- Aldrich Callins
Junior - Finance