Allegheny College Framework for Assessing Student Learning
November 9, 2015

Allegheny faculty have affirmed four institutional learning outcomes as guiding principles for students’ Allegheny educational experience:

Graduates should be able to
1. think critically and creatively
2. communicate clearly and persuasively as speakers and writers
3. invoke multiple ways of understanding to organize and evaluate evidence, and to interpret and make sense of their experiences and the experiences of others
4. apply their knowledge and learning to engage in informed debate and to analyze and solve problems

Allegheny’s curricular structure is designed to support these outcomes. As part of their graduation requirements, students are required to complete the First-Year/Sophomore program, the Distribution Requirements, a major, and a minor:

• The FS Program is specifically designed to begin developing critical and creative thinking, as well as clear and persuasive written and oral communication.
• The Distribution Requirements introduce students to a range of approaches to interpreting and understanding experience.
• The Major Requirement builds on the capacity for critical and creative thinking and communication introduced in the FS Program by honing and deepening these abilities within the context of a discipline. The major culminates in a comprehensive independent Senior Project, which showcases students’ achievements through application of knowledge and problem-solving in a focused, sustained project.
• Although it does not require the same depth of study as the student’s major program, the Minor Requirement parallels the major in building on the abilities developed within the FS Program while encouraging students to engage more deeply with a way of understanding that is different from the approach typical of their major program of study. If neither the major nor the minor is interdivisional, the graduation major and minor must be in different academic divisions (humanities, natural sciences, social sciences) to ensure students are exposed to multiple ways of understanding and interpreting their experiences and the experience of others.

The College assesses student learning in each of these four curricular areas to inform the ongoing development of the College’s educational programs:
1. Since a primary focus of FS 101 and 102 is preparing students for advanced college-level work by cultivating students’ thinking and communication skills, assessment of student achievement in those areas would be appropriate at the end of the first year. Such assessment should be designed and administered by the FS program to inform ongoing development of the FS program. Since FS 201 focuses on communication within a disciplinary context, assessment of the effectiveness of FS 201 would more naturally be included in Departmental or Program Self-Study.
2. The Distribution Requirements are designed to support Institutional Learning Outcome 3 by introducing students to multiple ways of understanding, interpreting, and making sense of their experiences and the experiences of others. As such, the
Requirements warrant an ongoing effort by the Assessment Committee to determine the degree to which courses identified as satisfying particular Distribution Requirements are meeting the outcomes for those requirements.

3. As the capstone experience of the major, the Senior Project is an ideal venue to assess students’ abilities to think critically and creatively, communicate orally and in writing, and apply their knowledge and learning to engage in informed debate and to analyze and solve problems. The Office of Institutional Research administers the Senior Project Assessment (SPA); individual academic programs use the SPA results in their respective self-studies.

4. The minor requirement supports deeper engagement with a second mode of inquiry, different from that of the student’s major program, which suggests a regular assessment of the efficacy of minor programs in developing students’ proficiency with the minor field of study’s approach to organizing information and making sense of the world. Assessment of the minor requirement is most appropriate in the Departmental or Program Self-Study.

Assessment of the First-Year/Sophomore (FS) Program
Every 8 – 10 years, the Provost appoints a committee to engage in an in-depth program self-study and planning process for the FS Program. The self-study process is adapted from the Program Self-Study and Planning process used by programs supporting majors, and includes a review of program learning outcomes, an assessment of the alignment of program outcomes with institutional learning outcomes, an assessment of the extent to which students are achieving those outcomes, and an exploration of how the program might be improved to better support student learning. The Self-Study process culminates with the development of an action plan to implement program improvements identified by the careful review.

In the spring of 2015, the Provost formed a committee to begin the next cycle of self-study and planning for the FS program. We expect one item in the action plan of the current FS self-study will be a plan for implementing ongoing assessment of student achievement in FS 101 and 102 as well as some discussion of how the results of that assessment can be used to inform ongoing program improvement so that the process is more continuous rather than episodic. In particular, the Committee is charged with recommending a program of ongoing and regular assessment and program improvement that includes structures to facilitate the interpretation of assessment results, report the results back to faculty teaching in the program, and implement recommendations for change that grow out of ongoing program review.

Assessment of the Distribution Requirement
Each of the courses satisfying each requirement will be taught by a wide-range of departments from across the College. Consequently, assessment of the distribution requirements will be managed by the Provost’s Office, which will ensure the following steps:

• The Curriculum Committee has established a learning outcome for each of the eight Distribution Requirements and will be responsible for managing any changes related to those outcomes.
• Whenever a new course is proposed as a candidate for fulfilling one of the Distribution Requirements, the Curriculum Committee will review syllabi and/or
course materials for the candidate course to ensure that it can reasonably be expected to lead to student achievement of the learning outcome for the Distribution Requirement tag for which it is being proposed.

- At the end of each semester, the Provost’s Office in collaboration with the College Archivist will collect syllabi for all courses offered in that semester and flagged as fulfilling one or more of the Distribution Requirements.
- The Assessment Committee will review two of the Distribution Requirements each year by evaluating a randomly selected subset of syllabi for each course flagged as fulfilling the learning outcome of those requirements. The goal of this review is to assess the degree to which the materials suggest that there continues to be a common understanding, across faculty teaching the course, of the Distribution Requirements being reviewed and their attendant learning outcomes as well as some commonality and consistency of student experience with respect to the requirements.
- Should the Assessment Committee’s review raise concerns or suggest that a change in the requirement or courses being flagged as meeting a particular Distribution Requirement may be needed, the Assessment Committee will inform the Curriculum Committee and Provost who will review the Assessment Committee’s work and recommend faculty development programs and/or modifications to the Distribution Requirements as appropriate.
- Every five years, the Assessment Committee will review its collected body of assessment related to the Distribution Requirements and prepare a report to the faculty describing the Committee’s findings and suggesting ways the Distribution Requirements might be strengthened, if such suggestions seem warranted.

Assessment of the Major and Minor Programs
The Departmental and Program Self-Study and Planning process (typically referred to as Self-Study) is the College’s primary vehicle for assessing major and minor programs. The process includes a review of program learning outcomes, a discussion of the alignment of program elements within the program and with institutional goals, an assessment of student achievement of the program learning outcomes, and the development of a plan for improving student learning within the program. A more complete description of the process is found in the Guide to Departmental and Program Self-Study.

Assessment of the College’s Educational Program as a Whole
This Assessment Plan is predicated on an assumption that students who successfully complete the College’s academic program will, in fact, be meeting the College’s Institutional Learning Outcomes. As one example, we assume that if a course tagged for a Distribution Requirement does support student achievement of the learning outcome for that requirement, and if a student completes at least one course for each requirement, then the student will have achieved basic proficiency with the third Institutional Learning Outcome, which states that graduates are able to “invoke multiple ways of understanding to organize and evaluate evidence, and to interpret and make sense of their experiences and the experiences of others.”

Although the assumption that completing the College’s curricular requirements leads to fulfilling the College’s institutional outcomes has face validity, the Assessment Committee is tasked with periodically reviewing the collected assessment data to determine the extent to
which we can demonstrate students do meet the institutional outcomes, identifying any gaps or areas of concern, reporting their findings to the faculty, and suggesting ways to improve student achievement of learning outcomes or the assessment of student achievement when their review uncovers such opportunities.

The Role of Assessment Committee

The principal function of the Assessment Committee is to serve as the primary oversight body for the College’s assessment of student learning. As such, the Assessment Committee is responsible for oversight of four primary assessment mechanisms: 1) monitoring the ongoing development of the Departmental and Program Self-Study process; 2) evaluating the Distribution Requirements’ effectiveness in helping students achieve the associated learning outcomes; 3) providing guidance to the Office of Institutional Research in the ongoing development of the Senior Project Assessment; and 4) monitoring and reporting on surveys and other assessment data as they pertain to student achievement of the Institutional Learning Outcomes. In addition, the Committee provides guidance and/or recommendations to improve these four assessment tools, and serves as a resource to facilitate communication among the faculty and administration about assessment-related initiatives and projects.

The specific responsibilities of the Assessment Committee are:

a) To assist in the prioritization of assessment of learning outcomes and to recommend to the faculty a small number of learning outcomes as a central focus for institutional assessment, particularly in the context of departmental and program self-study.

b) To provide guidance to Departments and Programs on developing student learning outcomes.

c) To consult with the Administration on college survey instruments, identifying areas of importance for learning outcomes.

d) In consultation with the Provost or the Provost’s designee responsible for assessment, formulate recommendations on assessment initiatives, including the Middle States institutional review process.

e) In consultation with the Provost or the Provost’s designee responsible for assessment, work to identify priorities for situating Allegheny’s assessment practices and results with respect to relevant comparison groups and information.

f) Provide advice to Departments and Programs on the range of assessment data available for inclusion in Departmental and Program Self-Study reports and work with the Office of Institutional Research, the Registrar’s Office, and other Administrative offices to define a “standard data set” that will include enrollment data and the results of student and alumni surveys.

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1 This committee re-description is currently under review with Faculty Council and will be presented at a future faculty meeting for a formal reading and vote.
g) Provide advice and guidance to the Provost or the Provost’s designee responsible for assessment on structuring and supporting departmental and program self-studies and related activities. In particular, the Committee will review Self-Study reports and Action Plans to evaluate the effectiveness of the self-study process. In its review, the Committee will pay particular attention to the effectiveness of the Self-Study process as a tool to assess the degree to which program graduates are meeting the program’s stated learning outcomes and as a tool to identify ways to improve program effectiveness. The Committee will also note the degree to which the data presented support the conclusion that program graduates are meeting the College’s Institutional Learning Outcomes. As warranted, the Committee will recommend changes to make the Self-Study process more effective or efficient as a mechanism for assessing programs and supporting ongoing program improvement.

h) Review the Distribution Requirements on a five-year cycle, reporting findings to the Provost and Curriculum Committee each year. During the first four years of each cycle, two categories will be reviewed each year. In the fifth year, the Committee will review the Distribution Requirements as a whole, including their relationship to assisting students with achieving the Institutional Learning Outcomes.

i) Every fifth year, review a variety of assessment data to determine whether students are meeting the College’s Institutional Learning Outcomes, provide suggestions for how the College might improve student achievement of learning outcomes, seek opportunities to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the College’s assessment processes, and report the findings to the faculty.

2. Reporting Frequency and Procedure

a) Meetings of the Committee will normally be open to all members of the College Community.

b) The Committee will report periodically to the Provost.

c) An annual report in the form of an Executive Summary will be filed with the Faculty Council and the Administrative Executive Committee; it will also be deposited in the College Library.

3. Membership, Membership Selection, Terms of Office and Chairperson Selection

a) The Committee will be chaired by a faculty member selected by the Committee for a one-year term who will determine an agenda in consultation with the Provost or the Provost’s designee responsible for Departmental Self-Study and the Director of Institutional Research.

b) The Committee membership, selected to represent broadly the campus community, will be composed of the following voting members:

i. The Provost or the Provost’s designee responsible for assessment;

ii. The Director of Institutional Research;
iii. Three faculty members, one from each division, nominated by the Faculty Council and elected by the faculty for three-year staggered terms;
iv. Institutional consultants, retained by the Provost, who regularly advise on assessment matters will serve as non-voting members.

The Role of the Provost’s Office
As the chief academic officer, the Provost has ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the College has an appropriate assessment plan in place, that appropriate resources have been allocated to execute the plan, and that the plan is, in fact, being followed. Consequently, the Provost will designate a member of his or her administrative team to manage the assessment process in collaboration with the Assessment Committee and provide the administrative support necessary to execute the plan. The administrator designated by the Provost for assessment oversight will be a tenured member of the faculty and will serve on the Assessment Committee.