

COMPREHENSIVE LONGITUDINAL ASSESSMENT OF A BUSINESS DEPARTMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a longitudinal program assessment process for a business department. The program supplements several other assessment methods already in place. One key feature will be gathering data from students each year as they progress from their freshmen through their senior years, allowing for longitudinal comparisons. Additionally, data will be gathered from alumni and employers allowing for additional comparisons. The project is in its early stages, but initial results are shared in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Today most colleges and universities recognize the need for assessment, not only as a performance measure required by accrediting bodies, but also for the quality added through continuous improvement [1]. Departments and programs within those colleges and universities are no exception. Such program assessment becomes critical in order to insure quality of graduates. Palomba and Banta state, "...the ultimate emphasis of assessment is on programs rather than individual students." [11]

The literature abounds with the need for and examples of differing types of assessment and differing tools to be used for assessment purposes in business programs. However, which tool and which assessment methodology to use remains the overriding question. Even the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), while strongly encouraging outcomes-based assessment, provides no set structure on specifically how assessment should take place. AACSB states, "There is no intention in the AACSB accreditation process....that they should assess accomplishment of learning goals in the same way." [1] Thus each higher education institution and program within those institutions must determine for itself which assessment measures and tools will be most effective.

Some institutions take a course-centered approach to assessment. Cunningham & Omaoyole [5] maintain that the key to assessment is the course syllabus. Bycio & Allen [4] take a differing approach to assessment using instead a critical incidents approach. Moberg & Walton [10] discuss the need for assessment in the major. Roberson, Carnes & Vice [14] take another approach to assessment instead reviewing needed student competencies in the business area.

Payne, Whitfield & Flynn [13] utilize stakeholder theory in their assessment of the capstone course in business, which for many institutions is the final program course and used widely for assessment purposes. Aurand & Wakefield [2] have included student peer evaluation as a piece of assessment in a marketing capstone course.

Karathanos [7] discusses two standardized tests to be used for schools of business, the Core Curriculum Assessment Program, CCAP, and the Business Test as developed by the Educational Testing Service

(ETS). Black & Duhon [3] also discuss the use of the ETS Major Field Test in Business as a means of assessment. Manton & English [8] discuss the use of specific objective test questions to assess student outcomes relative to required competencies. Mirchandani, Lynch & Hamilton [9] discuss the use of GPA and the Major Field Test [MFT] in business as a method of assessing student outcomes.

In the Mirchandani study, "... need for a multifaceted approach to assessing learning outcomes..." was presented [9]. Young [15] also emphasizes the need for multiple assessment measures. Palomba & Palomba [12], in their discussion of assessment for the College of Business at Ball State University, list several differing assessment tools used including: cases, problem sets, pre-post tests, alumni surveys, embedded course assessments, graduating senior surveys and taped presentations in capstone courses.

Within the context of using a multifaceted approach, the business department in a western college has included many of the above pieces in their overall program assessment. The MFT test in Business has been utilized for many years as the primary means of assessment, not unlike many other business departments. The capstone course has been used as a demonstration of student learning and departmental outcomes. Internship surveys have been included in the assessment plan.

However, that western college business department identified an important element that was lacking in its assessment program. A critical missing piece in the above plan components has been input from graduating seniors, alumni and employers. Dyke & Williams [6], Young [15], and Palomba & Palomba [12] have stressed the importance and relevance of information obtained from graduates and employers in maintaining program quality.

Hence, that western college business department launched a long-term project to gather graduate and employer data for program assessment purposes. As the department head and lead investigator laid out that plan, they also determined it would be advantageous to track the progress of students from their freshman year, through their senior year and into their post graduation careers. The information from graduates could be tied to data from the same individuals as they moved through their college careers.

THE PROJECT: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The longitudinal assessment project began in summer 2005, with the lead investigator studying three earlier attempts to design a comprehensive assessment system for the business department. Each of those designs was appropriate for the process as envisioned at that point in time. However, none of the three had been implemented due to lack of sponsorship. Furthermore, none of those earlier designs was appropriate to the presently envisioned process. Hence, the project would not be constrained by earlier decisions as to hardware, software, methods, etc. The constraint was cost, as there was no funding.

In fall 2005, the department head and project manager devised two questionnaires; one for freshmen enrolled in a required Freshman Business Seminar; the other for seniors enrolled in the required Business Policies and Management capstone course. Administration of questionnaires was initiated late in the fall 2005 semester and repeated near the end of the next two semesters. Consequently, nearly all business freshman and senior were surveyed. That will continue annually.

In 2006-07, surveys will be developed to gather data from sophomores and alumni. The sophomores obviously are those who were surveyed as freshmen in 2005-06. Initially, only alumni who graduated in 2005-06 will be surveyed. Each year, another class of graduates will be added to the alumni survey. Eventually, the plan is to backfill the alumni data set with those who graduated prior to 2005-06. The

sophomore and alumni surveys will continue each year.

In 2007-08, surveys will be developed and administered to juniors and employers of graduates. Most of the juniors, with the exception of transfer students, will have been surveyed as freshmen and sophomores. Initially, the employers to be surveyed will be those who have hired graduates since 2005-06. Each year more employers will be added. Eventually, the employer data set will include employers who hired graduates prior to 2005-06.

As of this writing, analysis has been performed on the data collected in fall 2005, spring 2006 and fall 2006, with 170 freshmen and 144 seniors participating. Freshmen were given an incentive of points in class, while seniors were asked to participate as good citizens of the department. In the future, the department will consider somehow requiring participation.

The freshman and senior surveys each contained 38 questions, including similar demographic questions on each. Many of the attitudinal questions varied between the two instruments, but each contained four similar questions with responses measured on a five-point Likert scale. The common questions are:

1. How well did the course prepare you to complete your business degree or to enter the work force?
2. How well did the course prepare you with critical, analytical, technical skills for problem solving?
3. How well did the course prepare you with oral or listening communications skills?
4. How well did the course prepare you with a general knowledge of business?

The results of the first four questions were nearly identical for freshmen and for seniors, clustered from 3.5 to 3.8. Seniors were also asked the first four questions in regard to their overall business program. It is interesting to note that the seniors rated their overall business degree relatively higher than they rated their capstone business course with means ranging from 4.1 to 4.5.

Freshmen were also asked to respond to questions regarding why they chose this college and program, to whom they turned for advising, and much more. Questions asked of seniors included those about their future plans, as well as open ended questions about departmental improvements. Analysis of those data can directly lead to program changes.

Much more interesting analysis of the data will come in the future when there are more data to compare for freshmen and seniors. More importantly, though, will be the future comparisons that can be made of this year's freshmen responses to next year's sophomores, the following year's juniors, and then the seniors as these freshmen move through their college careers, as well as from their employers.

SUMMARY

This paper has presented the initial stages of a planned ongoing addition to a business department's assessment process. The program will collect and analyze longitudinal data from students as they progress from their freshmen through their senior year and into their employment in the business world. Similarly, data will also be collected and analyzed from employers of those students. Partial preliminary results were reported herein. More results will be reported as the project unfolds.

REFERENCES

References are available from authors upon request. (Tables and figures are also available upon request.)