Assessment of Learning Goals at Carleton: Recommendations for the Next Cycle

A Report by the ECC Assessing Assessment Subcommittee
June 7, 2000

The ECC Assessing Assessment Subcommittee met twice during the winter and spring terms of 2000 to discuss the past assessment cycle and to consider opportunities for improvements and streamlining that could occur in the next cycle. Some members of the subcommittee also had conversations with Dave Davis-Van Atta of Institutional Research and Beth McKinsey to investigate how the work of Institutional Research might be more efficiently integrated into the assessment process. The members of the ECC Assessing Assessment Subcommittee included: Steven Drew (Chair, ECC member), Clara Hardy (Classics), Shelby Boardman (Geology), and Maria Nelson (ECC student member).

HISTORY

In 1995 the college completed and submitted A Plan for Assessment of Student Academic Learning to The North Central Association in compliance with requirements of the association that would be evaluated as part of the college’s reaccreditation process. This plan was the culmination of numerous discussions with faculty coordinated by the Dean’s office to explicitly state the implicit learning goals of the college along with a reasonable means of evaluating our success in achieving those goals. Table 1 delineates the college’s central academic learning goals.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The College’s learning goals are...</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1       To foster students’ ability to read perceptively and critically at an advanced level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2A      To help students develop their ability to speak effectively in English.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2B      To help students develop their ability to write effectively in English (i.e. the writing requirement).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3       To help students learn a second language (i.e. the language requirement).</td>
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<tr>
<td>4       To help students attain proficiency in a discipline (i.e. the major).</td>
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<tr>
<td>5       To encourage students to become acquainted with method and purpose in a variety of disciplines (i.e. distribution requirements and interdisciplinary studies).</td>
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<tr>
<td>6       To foster students’ ability to think analytically and synthetically within a discipline and across several disciplines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7       To encourage students to acquire an awareness of cultural diversity (i.e. the RAD requirement).</td>
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<tr>
<td>8       To help students develop basic skills for working as a member of a team or work group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9       To provide students with a variety of cultural, service, recreational, and intellectual opportunities.</td>
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In preparation for the reaccreditation process the college, under the auspices of the ECC and the Dean’s office, undertook an assessment of the college’s now explicit learning goals. The general approach adopted was to form a subcommittee of the ECC to examine a particular learning goal or sometimes a combination of learning goals. Reports were generated, shared with the ECC, fully discussed, and recommendations were generated that often lead to changes in educational policy. These changes ranged from minor administrative recommendation, such as developing LTC sessions surrounding reading proficiency, to larger scale changes in educational policy that had to be endorsed by a majority of faculty via a faculty meeting vote, such as changes to the writing requirement. It should be noted that in many cases no major changes were recommended in how the college approaches a particular learning goal as the status quo was determined by faculty and students to be highly successful.

With the College’s successful completion of its reaccreditation in 1999, the time was ripe to look again at our plan for assessing our stated academic student learning goals. This report is a summary of the findings and recommendations of an ECC subcommittee charged with “assessing assessment.”

The First Assessment Cycle: What worked and what could be improved

Our subcommittee unanimously agreed that the learning goals developed in preparation for the first assessment cycle were right on the mark, in fact some would say inspired. These goals succinctly and elegantly describe the mission that all faculty and students undertake in the classroom at Carleton. There is no need to alter these learning goals in any way. Our subcommittee also felt that the “ECC subcommittee approach” of assessing the college’s success in achieving these learning goals is expedient and successful. Finally, the “minimalist” approach that the College has adopted with regard to assessment is appropriate. Only assessment activities that will serve the College well by generating useful information and initiating productive discussion on topics that are relevant to the specific teaching and learning environs of Carleton should be pursued. The College does not want to undertake an assessment program that generates reams of information that the Carleton academic community would not find consistent with the end goal of improving the academic product of the College.

Along with the successes there are a few areas where the process could be improved and streamlined. For example, our subcommittee concluded that the ECC tried to take on the assessment of too many goals over too short of a period. True, some of the learning goals can be evaluated and dispensed of very quickly, but others, such as improving the writing requirement, will require sustained attention by the ECC. In addition, better mechanisms could be put into place to feed the information that is discussed in ECC back into the community in general. The ECC, and now the FCPC, pay a lot of attention to these matters, but many faculty seem unaware of the bigger picture of the curriculum and how specific proposed changes will help us better achieve our stated learning goals. Assessment is here to stay and this process needs to become an permanent, institutionalized fixture. As a new cycle of assessment starts up the College must not ask future ECC subcommittee’s to reinvent how a learning goal is to be examined every time it comes up for review. Rather, data collection, e.g. surveys, needs to be an ongoing process that
generates an archive of information that subcommittees can tap into as needed. Faculty should not be expected to design data collection tools as a consequence of agreeing to serve on an ECC subcommittee. The subcommittee should be able to go to a permanent source on campus to examine archived data, discuss the data, then generate a report with a series of recommendations. The original plan for assessment stated the importance of departmental reviews in the assessment of the college’s success in achieving its learning goals. Our subcommittee questioned whether the departmental review process had even been altered to take this assessment need into account. In addition, we wondered how the results of departmental reviews could be fed back into the community in general so that the college as a whole could enjoy some of the benefits of such a close scrutiny of an academic program.

**Future Assessment Cycles: Recommendations**

Based on the experience of the first assessment cycle the ECC Subcommittee Assessing Assessment recommends the following:

1. **Spread out the assessment cycle.** The assessment cycles should be lengthened, giving ample time between data collection/report preparation and the discussion/follow-up that naturally follows. A possible assessment cycle is proposed in Table 2. Note that some learning goals are assessed twice in a reaccreditation cycle while some more peripheral goals are only evaluated once.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Learning Goals to be Assessed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1, 2A, 2B, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Discussion/follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4(6), 5(6), 7</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Discussion/follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1, 2A, 2B, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Discussion/follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4(6), 5(6), 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Discussion/follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>8, 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Discussion/follow-up and write reaccreditation document</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **Institutionalize data collection and archiving.** Data collection, mostly in the form of surveys, should be an ongoing process regardless of when a learning goal is being evaluated. The main objective here is not to require an ECC subcommittee to design and administer surveys, but to have a permanent procedure in place to collect and archive appropriate data. Our subcommittee discussed a couple possibilities with Dean McKinsey and Dave Davis-Van Atta, all have budgetary implications:
a. Form focus groups in each class and pay them to participate in a series of surveys throughout their entire career at Carleton. Surveys could be administered via the web every term or every year. In addition, students could archive a portfolio of their writing. A sample of an individual's progress and opinion could be followed throughout that person's Carleton career.

b. Utilize the current Freshman and Senior surveys to probe student opinion as they enter and leave Carleton. Questions tailored to probing the success of achieving the College's learning goals could be added to these surveys. In addition, an Alumni survey could be administered to determine opinion after some number of years beyond graduation. One concern here is the return rate on these voluntary types of surveys, excepting the freshman survey which is administered to a captive audience.

c. Consider polling faculty on a regular basis regarding how activities in their courses feed into achieving the college's learning goals for students. Of particular interest would be such information as number of oral presentation opportunities and the number and types of written, reading, and group assignments. This polling could perhaps occur in conjunction with their biennial reports.

Whichever options are adopted, there will be implications for the staffing in Institutional Research which seems to be the logical home for these activities. By bringing Institutional Research permanently into the assessment process it makes sense to have Dave Davis-Van Atta as a member of the Assessment Oversight Group. With regards to the generation of data collection tools, our subcommittee recommends that a consultant be hired to work with Dave Davis-Van Atta in the creation of meaningful survey questions that will help determine the College's success in achieving its learning goals. We suggest that the first set of assessment reports serve as a guide for the creation of these survey questions.

3. **Have departmental and program reviews specifically address the college's learning goals.** Require that part of a departmental review self-study document address how the department works to fulfill the college's stated learning goals for students. This does not need to be a substantial addition to the process, but rather an appendix that can be easily separated from the self-study document and examined by a faculty committee, such as FCPC, to try to place the work of the department into a larger college-wide curricular context.

4. **Use the FCPC to improve feedback into the community.** The annual curricular report of the FCPC seems to be a great way to provide faculty in general with an overview of the progress the college makes each year in assessing its success in achieving its learning goals with students. Since the members of this committee serve on the ECC and work closely with the Dean on the allocation of FTE, they are in the best position to see the big curricular picture and recommend general directions for the future. In particular, the FCPC could synthesize the results of subcommittee assessment reports and departmental reviews in conjunction with FTE allocations and general ECC business into a report that feeds findings back into the community.
Projected Assessment Schedule -- Carleton College

Learning Goals from Assessment Plan:

1. to read perceptively and critically at an advanced level (96-97);
2. 2A. to speak effectively (96-97) and 2B. to write effectively in English (95-96);
3. to learn a foreign language (95-96);
4. to gain proficiency in a discipline (97-98);
5. to learn method and purpose in a variety of disciplines (e.g., distribution requirements and interdisciplinary study) (98-99);
6. to think analytically and synthetically (in major, with goal 4, 97-98; across disciplines, with goal 5, 98-99);
7. to acquire an awareness of cultural diversity (98-99);
8. to work in teams or work groups (97-98);
9. to provide a variety of cultural, service, recreational, and intellectual opportunities (95-96).

1995-96
2B. to write effectively;
3. to learn a second language;
9. "myriad opportunities."

1996-97
1. to read perceptively and critically;
2A. to speak effectively;
[continue discussion of 2B, writing].

1997-98 -- write reaccreditation self-study report
4. proficiency in a discipline (the major);
6. thinking analytically and synthetically in the discipline;
8. working together in work groups or teams;

1998-99 -- host reaccreditation team's visit
5. method and purpose in variety of disciplines, e.g., general education (distribution) and interdisciplinary study;
6. thinking analytically and synthetically across disciplines;
7. awareness of cultural diversity.

1999-2000
* Assess Assessment
2B. Continue improving the writing program; write Bush grant
3. Language -- receive Certificate of Advanced Study
To: Assessment oversight group
From: Beth McKinsey
Date: 2 August 2000
Re: Further thoughts I’ve had about the future Assessment timetable

DRAFT
Assessment Timetable, continued....

1999-2000
* Assessing Assessment
  2B Writing – continue planning and write Bush grant
  3 Foreign Languages – revise Certificate of Advanced Study

2000-01
  1 Reading critically
  7 finish RAD discussion from before

2001-02
  2A Speaking in public

2002-03
  4 Majors

2003-04
  8 Group work

2004-05
  5 General Education & Interdisciplinary Study [split these?]

2005-06
  7 Diversity/RAD

2006-07
  an extra year – add something new? Revisit an ongoing topic?

2007-08
  9 Myriad Opportunities
WRITE SELF-STUDY

2008-09
REACREDITATION VISIT

Note: We could move the “extra” year earlier, to undertake an “extra” topic in a timely way, such as Information Literacy to coincide with assessment of the grant activities. We could add in followup assessments of some topics, such as Writing again in the year we need to assess the results of the Bush grant (presuming we get it). This is very much a working list, subject to modification as we go along.