

Fifteen Years of Mixed Method Evaluation to Inform Curricular Design

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When faced with the prospect of having to engage in program evaluation, departmental faculty members often feel overwhelmed with the task's magnitude and struggle to relate assessment results to curricular improvement. This paper offers an approach – phased mixed method assessment – that makes implementation more manageable, program maintenance more realistic, and curricular change more meaningful. Though not unique, Capital University's use of this approach illustrates its benefits, which include: a) evolution of curricula and departmental structures to serve student learning, b) connection of institutional assessment projects to disciplinary initiatives, and c) promotion of a culture that embraces the *scholarship of teaching and learning* (SOTL) and fosters student-faculty collaboration on undergraduate research.

Capital University's institutional guidelines for program assessment call for “[a] comprehensive assessment program [that] involves both direct measures of student learning outcomes and indirect measures pertaining to program effectiveness [along with a] focus on the development and implementation of an assessment plan that directly measures student learning outcomes for the purpose of improving teaching and learning.” (Capital University 2003) The guidelines favor an *evolution of data collection cycles*, recognizing the efficacy of small-step, incremental progress over all-or-nothing dashes at assessment results. Short, methodical steps – the tortoise will remind you – are fairly efficient and seldom as exhausting as the mad dash just prior to decennial accreditation. Now, add to this approach mixed method program evaluation that employs both qualitative and quantitative data to answer assessment questions across the lifespan of a program (Frechtling and Sharp 1997; Mertens 2005) and the result is a long-term examination of continuous program improvement. This method of program assessment is best illustrated by tracing the work of a single department, Behavioral Sciences, which comprise the disciplines of psychology, criminology, and sociology. In the approach mentioned here (and in the associated webpages we have linked as resources) the reader may find relatively simple, straightforward examples that easily translate across disciplines and institutions.

The Behavioral Sciences Department used both formative and summative evaluation processes. Formative evaluation occurs as a program or a change to a program is being implemented and provides feedback at a time that allows for additional refinements to the program before its end. By example, mid-term evaluations often are

formative in the sense that these examine how classes are going so that adjustments in teaching can be made prior to the end of the term. Summative evaluation, on the other hand, occurs at the end of the program and provides evidence of the overall effectiveness. As part of the process of program evaluation, the department also gauged the efficacy of the different assessment techniques and instruments used. As one example of this, the department had implemented a content knowledge pretest-posttest assessment for the research methods course. As the research methods course was revised, we determined that the assessment no longer reflected the work that was being done in the course and is now being revised.

Many faculty members wonder how to add assessment activities to their already full schedules of teaching, scholarship, and service. Yet, assessment, we argue, precisely aligns and often overlaps with these same highly prized domains of faculty responsibility. Whether a university's promotion and tenure criteria value assessment activities serves as a Litmus test for an institution's commitment to student learning. An example of a promotion and tenure rubric that incorporates assessment is available at <http://www.capital.edu/25639/>. Moreover, the approach we have taken recognizes practitioner-based research and more specifically, within the discipline of psychology, embraces a scientist-practitioner model. This model emphasizes the use of theory and scientific evidence to guide practice and recognizes that practitioners have an obligation to contribute to the accumulation of new knowledge and the pursuit of quality and effectiveness. Faculty and students are encouraged to collaboratively use the SOTL to develop as professionals and improve their own programs.

The fundamental goal of an undergraduate education in criminology, psychology, or sociology is to teach students to think as scientists about individual and social behavior; this includes a solid foundation within the discipline blended with a strong liberal arts background. To this end, continuous program evaluation in our Behavioral Sciences Department spans 15 years, beginning with comprehensive program review that included peer-review by outside consultants. This program review resulted in personnel changes (i.e., addition of three tenure-track faculty), curricular changes (e.g., creation of a developmentally responsive seminar series), and resource acquisition (e.g., establishing laboratory space for courses and undergraduate research). After three years of assessing these changes, the department used the results to inform a second curricular revision, which included the implementation of requiring primary source reading in 300-level and 400-level courses, a change from 3-credit hour courses to 4-credit hour courses, and development of course-leveling guidelines (available at <http://www.capital.edu/25639/>).

The departmental course-leveling guidelines were used to inform the creation of college-wide course leveling guidelines, thereby extending the assessment results of the department to the broader campus community.

This second round of changes was assessed for several years using a variety of techniques (e.g., evaluation of student written and oral work, evaluation by internship supervisors, exit interviews). Departmental assessment activities were complemented by a mandatory institution-wide comprehensive review of the department. These combined assessment results lead to two primary outcomes: additional curricular change and department restructuring.

Curricular assessment prompted the department to blend “disciplinary” research methods courses into a single social sciences research methods course. In order to meet the needs of the disciplines being served by the blended research methods course, which includes the three majors within the department (criminology, psychology, sociology) and three majors outside the department (health and sport sciences, social work, interdisciplinary studies), a working group was created to discuss course topics and experiences for students. This working group has expanded to other disciplines that offer research methods courses (biological and environmental sciences, nursing, political science) and formalized regular conversations about pedagogy.

The second outcome was a decision by the Behavioral Sciences department to amicably split into two departments: Psychology and Sociology/Criminology. This split was designed to facilitate the development of disciplinary identities and improve student recruiting efforts. This split was phased in over two years to ensure the viability of the smaller of the two new departments by fortifying the leadership skills of the senior faculty for this new department and hiring two new tenure-track faculty members.

Throughout this process, the department used national disciplinary initiatives as well as guiding principles from the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) to inform assessment and curricular revision. We also worked with interdisciplinary groups (i.e., Project Kaleidoscope, Council on Undergraduate Research) to foster the development of undergraduate research experiences. The need for more and diverse undergraduate research experiences was evident in the first program review and has been highlighted in college-wide assessment activities. Part of the undergraduate research experiences that were developed fed back into departmental assessment by having students design, implement, and analyze the results from some of the departmental assessments. Our students then disseminated their results to department faculty and the institution via oral presentations and written work, thus drawing students directly into SOTL and good stewardship of their curriculum. Across the entire process,

department faculty also disseminated results of the assessment work via conference presentations and peer-reviewed publications. A list of these presentations and papers is available at <http://www.capital.edu/24061/Behavioral-Sciences/31533/>.

Throughout our efforts, we drew upon a variety of resources to guide and inform our activities. These resources are available at: <http://www.capital.edu/25639/> and include (a) an example of a summary matrix for mixed method program evaluation, (b) departmental assessment rubrics for student written work and oral communication, (c) assessment rubrics adapted from Dunn et al. (2007) that provide a comprehensive overall assessment of the department, (d) evaluation materials for internship supervisors, (e) examples of how to connect the learning goals for the institution, discipline, and department across courses, (f) course-leveling guidelines, and (g) a rubric for evaluating faculty for promotion and tenure that includes how faculty should use assessment to inform their teaching and how the SOTL can be valued by the institution. We also provide a template for a short implementation plan to guide faculty through the thought processes involved in adopting some of the resources at their institution. This template has faculty and administrators identify the key individuals at their institution who need to agree to use the resource, a timeline for initiating use of the resource, and how they will connect the use of the resource to making changes at their institution.

Comprehensive program assessment, when phased in across years, has the potential to lead to significant improvements in student learning, informed program maintenance, creative curricular reform, and valuable research opportunities for faculty and students. Institutions can further support assessment efforts by valuing them in the promotion and tenure process and thereby integrating assessment activities into faculty culture.

References:

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