

Student Learning Assessment at Portland State University: *A Framework for the Future*

A Report to President Daniel O. Bernstine
from the 2004-2005 *Assessment Resource Network*

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Assessment Resource Network Members

Martha Balshem, *Center for Academic Excellence* (Chair)
Amir Ameri, *Department of Architecture*
Mary Ann Barham, *Information and Academic Support Center* (WS)
Jennifer Dorner, *Millar Library* (F)
Wendy Endress (F)
Sukhwant Jhaj, *University Studies*
Kent Lall, *Department of Civil Engineering/Department of Engineering &
Computer Science*
Paul Latiolais, *Department of Mathematics*
Cheryl Livneh, *Extended Studies*
Carol Mack, *Graduate School of Education*
Kenneth Peterson, *Graduate School of Education*
Julie Rosenzweig, *Graduate School of Social Work*
Robert Schroeder, *Millar Library* (WS)
Juliette Stoering, *Office of Institutional Research and Planning*
Daniel Sullivan, *Department of Sociology*
Ellen West, *School of Business Administration*
Craig Wollner, *College of Urban and Public Affairs*
Center for Academic Excellence Assessment Staff
Cheryl Ramette, Assessment Associate
Andy Wang, Assessment Associate
Melissa Leonard, Graduate Assistant for Presidential Initiatives

Introduction

The *Assessment Resource Network* (ARN) is the central faculty body responsible for pushing forward the President's Assessment Initiative. The group's core mission is to promote and support the assessment of student learning at Portland State University. The group arose six years ago from the Assessment Action Council, which it replaced, and was initially led by a Center for Academic Excellence (CAE) Faculty-In-Residence for Assessment. The current ARN includes members from all seven schools and colleges and from the University Studies program. The ARN is staffed by the Center for Academic Excellence (CAE); during the 2004-2005 academic year, the CAE Director served as ARN chair.

During academic years 1999-2000 through 2002-2003, the focus of the ARN was on encouraging the academic units with their assessment work and helping a number of programs to begin formal assessment programs. Academic year 2003-2004 was dominated by efforts to populate the assessment database administered by the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP). In his letter of appointment to members of the 2004-2005 ARN, President Bernstine laid out the charge to the group.

"The Assessment Initiative has matured to the point at which it is now important to address higher order questions about our assessment work. I am asking the ARN to spend this year working on responses to the following questions, and to deliver a report to me before the end of this academic year. It is my hope that this report can serve as a framework to guide the assessment work of our academic units.

1. Judging from a review of the assessment information in the OIRP Program Review site, what curricular and assessment issues are most important to our faculty, and what characterizes assessment practice at Portland State?
2. Does a clear picture of faculty thinking about curriculum and assessment emerge from a review of available statements on our mission, priorities, student learning goals, and the like?
3. What should be the future of the ARN, and how might assessment at Portland State develop in the direction of shared governance?"

The ARN accordingly began the year focused on the task of writing this report. We have, however, come to see the year's work in a very different context. The real work of the ARN this year has not been writing this report, but convening a series of discussions about many of the complex issues that student learning assessment work presents. We are gratified that these discussions have been productive and have led us to a list of recommendations that can guide the institution's continuing conversations about assessment and chart a course for the future of the ARN.

In this report, we will begin by describing the flow of the year's work. We began the year with several intensive reviews of the OIRP assessment database. We then conducted campus outreach to gather reactions to our draft ideas and to fill in any gaps in the database. We canvassed assessment offices at other institutions to see how assessment works at Portland State compares to work done elsewhere. Finally, the group considered the future of the ARN and the role of shared governance in student learning assessment. We reframed and elaborated President Bernstine's charge somewhat by posing the following overarching questions.

- **Question 1 — What is our current assessment practice?** — The group wished to discover not only what assessment practices are common at Portland State, but also whether we share common understandings and underlying principles that guide our work and help us to improve it.
- **Question 2 — Is assessment changing our practices?** — The group undertook a thorough and honest look at our current assessment situation, and sought to assess whether our work was making a genuine difference in the quality of our programs or in student learning.
- **Question 3 — What is the current state of assessment work at Portland State?** — The group organized an outreach effort on campus to solicit reactions to its preliminary conclusions, and investigated assessment practices at other institutions, in an effort to situate its evaluation of Portland State's assessment scene.
- **Question 4 — What is the role of the ARN?** — The group felt that the ARN needed to redefine and clarify its own role in the Portland State assessment scene; make clear that it is a resource and support for faculty in their assessment efforts; and take time to explore the question of shared governance carefully.
- **Question 5 — What has to happen next to support our assessment efforts?** — The group identified policy issues regarding the permanence and sustainability of our assessment efforts and the reward structures and other policies that affect faculty who invest in assessment work.

With this expanded version of the President's charge, the ARN proceeded with its year's work. Here, we will review our investigations and discussions of each question in turn, ending with our recommendations for the future direction of the assessment initiative.

Response to the President's Charge

Question 1 — What is our current assessment practice?

In 2000, soon after the ARN was founded, then-Provost Tetreault directed the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP) to build a database in which program review information on all academic units would reside. In collaboration with CAE assessment staff, the OIRP designed a subsidiary database of information on student learning. This database now stands as an invaluable and searchable repository of information regarding the assessment practices and challenges that predominate on our campus. The database currently holds information on 75 academic programs, with each department or other academic unit reporting on at least one program. Included are virtually all undergraduate programs plus those graduate programs that the academic units chose to list. The database therefore allows us to canvas the separate academic units with questions about our current goals, practices, and challenges. Based on such reviews, we can construct statements about the overall situation at Portland State based on information that is gained inductively, which is an approach that is consistent with Portland State's institutional culture and values.

Throughout fall term of 2004 and into winter term of 2005, the focus of the ARN's work was its reviews of the OIRP assessment database. In several ARN meetings, members worked with printouts from the OIRP database and discussed categories for analysis. Between meetings, CAE assessment staff (Balshem, Ramette, Wang, and Leonard) carried the reviews forward. These reviews, like the database, have problems. Our current efforts to double-check the information on the database tell us that this information is already outdated, in some cases in important ways. Student learning assessment projects are sometimes described on other sections of the program review site, and we have probably missed some of that information. Finally, assessment work at the course level may be programmatically important, but not part of a program assessment plan, so it would not show up on this database. Nonetheless, the database reviews afford us a rare opportunity to draw at least a rough picture of the Portland State assessment scene.

The first finding from the database review is that student learning assessment work is alive and well at Portland State. Of the 74 programs listed, 68 (92%) are engaged in student learning assessment. The on-the-ground experience of the CAE assessment staff underscores that there is indeed a high level of student learning assessment work on our campus. Regarding the six units listed on the database but not reporting any assessment work, 3 are undergraduate programs, two are graduate programs, and one is a non-degree program.

The next question about our assessment work concerns the curricular interests of the Portland State faculty. In his charge, President Bernstine asked us to review the database to judge “what curricular and assessment issues are most important to our faculty . . .” To construct an answer, we conducted a review of all the student learning objectives listed by all the programs listed on the database. Two ARN meetings were devoted to looking for the major commonalities tying together the student learning objectives of the various programs. The CAE staff then completed the task.

This review was an inductive content analysis in which we looked for themes and interests that emerged naturally from the learning objectives stated by the academic units. The categories that emerged from this inductive review are those that tend to emerge from such reviews and discussions in most contemporary institutions of higher education in this country. These categories cut across the widely varying vocabularies that faculty in different disciplines use to describe their objectives for student learning. To further explore these inductively-derived categories, the CAE staff compared them to the results of three other recent statements about student learning objectives at Portland State—the mission, vision, and values statements; the markers project statements; and the University Studies goals—all three of which were also based on the work of Portland State faculty groups. Similar categories emerge from all of these efforts. Although the inductive analysis we performed could be done again and again, with lumpers and splitters engaging in long arguments, we see the following six categories as being an accurate and honest reflection of the themes and interests that Portland State faculty touch on repeatedly in our program learning objectives (see Appendix 1).

- Inquiry and critical thinking
- Communication
- Ethics and social responsibility
- Appreciation of diversity
- Understanding of international and global perspectives
- Disciplinary/professional expertise (“learning to think like those in the discipline do”)

Following our content analysis of program and department student learning objectives, we launched two efforts to share our developing discussions with the broader campus community. On February 24, 2005, we held a Portland State Town Hall Series event titled “Assessment at PSU: How does it all add up? A report to the campus from the Assessment Resource Network” (see Appendix 2). ARN members were joined by about 15 members of the campus community for a positive and spirited discussion of the above list of curricular goals and of our preliminary thinking about the current state of assessment at Portland State. A second outreach project involved interviewing 65 members of the campus community who have been active in assessment work over the past several years. These interviews were conducted by the CAE Assessment Graduate

Assistants and staff. Both outreach efforts involved asking for feedback about the list of themes and interests that emerged from the assessment database review. On the whole, the Town Hall participants were comfortable with the six general student learning objectives we listed, and reacted positively to their overlap with the University Studies goals.

The survey of assessment activists revealed the same, with 61 (94%) of the 65 respondents stating that this list of six student learning goals made sense to them as undergraduate student learning goals.

Of particular note is the separation of diversity and internationalization into two goals. As many other groups on campus have recently done, the ARN has debated this division. We separate the two because much new energy is emerging on campus around internationalization, and making it a separate goal facilitates curricular and assessment thinking on this issue of future academic and institutional importance. The CAE Assessment Graduate Assistants, who have a special interest in internationalization, present an analysis, based on data from the survey of campus assessment leaders, of those who favor collapsing diversity and internationalization into one goal and those who favor the separation into two goals (Appendix 3).

We realize that at some institutions, central student learning outcomes are developed as an early step in the campus assessment movement. At Portland State, our general education goals, known as the University Studies goals, were adopted in 1994. The goals that emerge from the assessment work of the separate departments and programs are very similar to the University Studies goals. The ARN foresees, however, that considerable discussion would be necessary before the campus would define any list of goals as campus-wide learning outcomes.

Even on the ARN, there is a concern that the adoption of such outcomes is contrary to the principle of departmental and program control of student learning assessment planning. None the less, the six themes stated above do prehend the vast majority of student learning objectives stated by the separate programs and departments. They are therefore de facto, if not de jure, institutional learning goals. As such, the campus community and to the ARN may benefit from using them as touchstones in thinking about departmental, program, and institutional assessment planning.

One question that we have not addressed is that of the differences in purpose between undergraduate and graduate education. This is a matter to be discussed at a future time, perhaps in concert with the Graduate Council. Our review of the assessment database moved on to look at assessment practices at Portland State. This review depended largely on a reading of the plans and specific projects described on the database by the programs and departments. This review was conducted solely by the CAE assessment staff.

The staff set as a central question of that review the distinction between assessment methods that provide indirect evidence of student learning (self-report of student learning from surveys, for instance) and those methods that involve direct evidence of student learning (student work samples such as written material, performance in professional contexts, for instance). The results of this review were compiled in a table that serves as a quick gloss of the assessment database (Appendix 4). When the table was completed, every academic unit was sent a copy of its entry or entries on the table and asked to correct and update it if necessary. Most inaccuracies were corrected through that process, although the table, like the database, will always be outdated to some degree.

Keeping these caveats in mind, the database review suggests that of the 74 programs listed, 68 (92%) are engaged in student learning assessment work. Of these 68, 61 (95%) base at least some of their assessment work on analysis of actual student work samples. The use of scoring rubrics is listed by 37 (61%) of these 61 programs. We have not yet established formal benchmarks to tell us whether we should be satisfied with this level of activity, but we are informally very pleased by it. We realize that the degree of assessment knowledge and activity on campus is still uneven. Based on CAE staff experience, data from the survey taken by the Assessment Graduate Assistants, and information available on the database, however, we are satisfied that most of the work that is going on is good. Many of those active in assessment work are aware of the central importance of basing at least some of their work on direct measures of student learning; this has been a central message of the ARN from the beginning. Moreover, we are pleased with the level of reflection and insight that people are bringing to their assessment work. The level of discussion about student learning on our campus, at least within our departments and programs, seems to us to be high.

Question 2 — Is assessment changing our practices?

The information gained through assessment is only meaningful if it informs decisions about educational practice. Following the above-described review of assessment methods, the ARN requested that the CAE assessment staff perform a review of how department or program faculty use assessment information in decisions about curriculum. The review revealed that a greater number of departments have based curricular decisions on assessment information than we expected (Appendix 4). Of the 68 units that report doing assessment, 38 (56%) report that they have made or plan to make specifically identified program or curricular changes based on information gained through assessment. Additional units report making changes to their assessment process (6), affirming the value of existing curriculum (4), changing their learning objectives (2), or enjoying good faculty discussion (2) based on their assessment work. Counting all of these, 52 (76%) of the 68 units that report doing assessment also report having made some use of the results.

A less direct but still interesting source of information about the extent to which assessment information is being used comes from the previously mentioned interviews of campus assessment leaders (Appendix 5). Respondents to this survey include faculty from academic programs, student services personnel who frame their assessment as student learning assessment, and one respondent from the library. Of the 65 respondents, 57 (87%) report that they have used assessment information in discussion of their program, and 45 (69%) report that their unit has based programmatic decisions on assessment information.

From the foregoing, it is clear to the ARN that assessment information is in fact informing a good deal of curricular decision making at Portland State. Again, we have not established benchmarks for success, but we are pleased by the quality of thought and curricular revision that we see reflected in the database.

Question 3 — What is the current state of assessment work at Portland State?

Before we address our final two questions, both of which are practical in nature, we would like to offer our overall evaluation of the assessment scene at Portland State. There are several issues to consider. First, has assessment taken root at Portland State? Do the assessment efforts of the separate academic units add up to an institutional shift towards a “culture of evidence”? Second, is the assessment scene on campus robust enough for assessment to be sustainable? What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats face us in our efforts to sustain this work? Finally, how does our assessment work compare to the work being done in other institutions that are similar to us in various ways?

In looking for a shift towards a “culture of evidence,” we are aware that some academic units have been doing student learning assessment for a long time. Some of the professional accrediting agencies have long required it, and some academic areas, notably in education, have a natural professional interest in and knowledge of assessment work. Our goal, however, was to evaluate whether assessment is practiced widely on our campus and feels like a normal part of faculty work. For assessment to be meaningful and sustainable, we have learned that it must be based on motivations that are rooted in and make honest sense to our academic community.

On the whole, it appears that assessment has to some degree taken root within the institution. To a person, Portland State faculty cares about student learning, and the methodological skills to do assessment are in no short supply on campus. This is a good substrate for a healthy assessment movement. Most ARN members feel that there has indeed been a cultural shift towards the use of systematically collected evidence in curricular planning—that, as one ARN member put it, when we think about curriculum, we think about assessment, and

vice versa. It seems that a good many people on campus believe that assessment allows us to make informed decisions about curriculum—to either document and validate good programs and practices or to identify any needs for changes and improvements.

One common theme that seems relevant to many people on our campus, perhaps reflecting characteristics of our campus culture, is that assessment is valuable because it leads to good faculty reflection about student learning. It is also commonly voiced at Portland State that such reflection often in itself can lead to better student learning, as faculty reevaluate learning objectives, focus coursework more tightly around them, and communicate them more clearly and directly to students. Many Portland State faculty describe reflective practice as one of the central benefits of doing assessment. The Freshman Inquiry Portfolio Assessment, for instance, is valued within University Studies not only as a measure of student performance, but also as an opportunity for faculty discussion about pedagogy, curriculum, and student learning.

In many quarters, however, these positive feelings towards assessment are fragile. With the exception of some of the professional programs, both the systematic assessment of student learning and the felt importance of conducting good assessment are still fairly new. Assessment work in itself is not yet a part of the institutional reward system in any systematic way. The CAE staff has seen many faculty reduce or eliminate their involvement in assessment for this reason. Second, Portland State has no institutional policies that govern the use of student learning assessment information in the evaluation of individual faculty. Some faculty fear that assessment information could be used punitively in faculty evaluations. Third, some on campus worry that the results of assessment could be used out of context to damage the reputation of specific programs. This, too, has had negative effects on the conduct of student learning assessment in some of our academic programs. Finally, our general tendency at Portland State to be independent and skeptical even beyond the norm for the academy leads to healthy questions regarding whether the relationship between student learning assessment work and actual improvements in student learning is as strong and direct as some assessment advocates claim it is. Some of the most active assessment thinkers on campus would like to see the assessment literature improved by some small-scale short-term empirical studies demonstrating that student learning assessment actually leads to improved student learning.

The next question is whether the current level of assessment work on our campus, considering all these positive and negative factors, is sustainable. On a philosophical level, we want to consider assessment to be a normal part of faculty work. On a practical level, faculty have no extra time and energy to do it. A good deal of assessment work, especially in the professional schools, will continue regardless of this because of external pressures from professional accrediting agencies. We would predict, however, that the current level of assessment work being done across campus is not sustainable without support

from the CAE.

It is important to have realistic expectations regarding faculty involvement in assessment work. It is certainly not the case, nor would we expect it to ever be, that every faculty member is involved. Our assessment pioneers, here as elsewhere, were faculty who are intellectually interested in assessment as a research focus and have devoted scholarly energies to this form of departmental and institutional service. At present, there is involvement beyond the pioneers. Our general sense is that assessment work on our campus now involves people one concentric circle out from the pioneers. We see signs, however, that we are nearing the limit of how much involvement we can expect. Many faculty feel that they will not be able to sustain their current levels of involvement. Assessment work in and of itself is not valued in tenure and promotion decisions; it only “counts” if it results in peer reviewed products. Because of this, many faculty who have invested heavily in assessment work feel unable to continue without considerable cost to their professional progress. In fact, it is likely that without support from the CAE staff and GA’s, a lot of assessment work currently being done would cease.

Another way to judge whether assessment at Portland State is well rooted is to compare the amount and quality of our assessment work to that of similar institutions. To pursue this comparison, we sent a brief, informal e-mail survey (see question list and report in the appendices) to contacts at the other Oregon University System institutions, to the “Urban 13” institutions, and to other institutions in the Portland metropolitan areas. We asked about the degree to which they have institutionalized assessment and whether they have formalized it through shared governance. Based on responses from nine other institutions, it appears that we are as far along with our assessment work as anyone who responded to our query and have accomplished more than some of the institutions we surveyed. We are still very much aware, however, that the assessment movement on our campus is, as noted above, still very new and in some ways fragile.

Because Portland State faculty and administration are spread so thin, the provision of central resources to the programs and departments is a key to the continuation of a good deal of our student learning assessment work. Assessment work has made inroads into institutional norms, but it is not yet sustainable. External pressures have helped focus people’s attention on assessment, and many faculty and administrators have developed assessment experience and knowledge. To make the work sustainable, we need to maintain support for it and reward it.

Question 4 — What is the role of the ARN?

Up until now, the role of the ARN has evolved from year to year, becoming more or less involved in direct service provision and adapting its work to the

current needs of the assessment initiative. Over the past several years, the CAE has assumed a clear role in the provision of central assessment resources. The CAE staff and Graduate Assistants are now positioned as an internal consulting service that assists the academic units with assessment planning, project design, and data analysis. With the CAE settled into this role, the ARN faces the need to evolve again. Specifically, President Bernstine has asked the group to think about whether it might find a place in the shared governance structure.

In its thinking about these questions, the ARN has been guided by the principle that student learning assessment belongs in the hands of the faculty. No central authority should direct the decisions of departmental or program faculty regarding the definition of assessment issues or decisions about assessment and curriculum. Any central assessment functions that exist in the administration should be overseen by an appropriate faculty group. This group should be knowledgeable, representative, and answerable to the general faculty through some legitimate channel. In this, the ARN sees its future role. As such, it is not appropriate that the ARN remain unconnected to the shared governance structure.

In our discussion of this matter, we have looked at a number of alternatives. The CAE Director looked at the governance structures for assessment at about six other institutions; consulted with the Faculty Senate Steering Committee early in this academic year; and attended a meeting of the Educational Policy Committee to discuss the matter. The Faculty Senate Steering Committee expressed its reluctance to assume the challenge of finding faculty to fill yet another committee; likewise, members of the Educational Policy Committee expressed their hesitation to assume the additional responsibility of the ARN reporting to the Senate through them. Some members of the Faculty Senate Steering Committee expressed the view that presidential appointment gives the ARN greater visibility and prestige, and makes it easier to recruit members. In considering how those appointments might be structured—from representatives of the bodies in the colleges that are responsible for assessment to a collection of departmental assessment leaders—the ARN could not conceive of any requirements for membership that would be superior to or even very different than the current system of recruiting people well known for leadership or expert knowledge in the area of assessment.

On May 11, Michael Cummings, the Presiding Officer of the 2004-2005 Faculty Senate, visited the ARN for a lengthy discussion of the governance issue. As a result of this discussion, the ARN members weighed the relative advantages of the ARN either becoming a faculty committee, with its members appointed by the Committee on Committees, or continuing to be presidentially appointed, with the group itself and the CAE staff having a strong voice in recommending members. Although the ARN members present felt strongly that the present structure had resulted in an unusually effective committee, we decided that assuring faculty control of assessment was of primary importance.

The group therefore voted unanimously to recommend that the ARN be replaced with a University Assessment Committee, duly appointed by the Committee on Committees. We further recommend that membership in the group be defined in ways that will result in a membership that is essentially similar to that of the present group. This University Assessment Committee would attend to the policy, governance, and faculty workplace issues that assessment brings up, bringing such matters to the Senate with recommendations for action as needed. The Committee might, for instance, recommend policy that safeguards the independence of program faculty with regard to assessment decisions; regulates the use of assessment information in the evaluation of individual faculty; the valuing of assessment work in tenure and promotion decisions regarding departmental assessment leaders; and the framing of assessment work as scholarly work. Moreover, the University Assessment Committee would provide faculty oversight of the CAE's assessment work, and include its evaluation of CAE assessment services in its report to the Senate.

Question 5 — What has to happen next to support our assessment efforts?

Following are our recommendations for the continued support of student learning assessment work at Portland State.

1. We recommend that the ARN be replaced with a University Assessment Committee, duly appointed by the Committee on Committees.
2. The specific duties assigned to the University Assessment Committee should be—
 - a. To oversee the CAE in its provision of assessment support services to the campus and with regard to any institutional-level assessment planning or projects that it may attempt.
 - b. To develop policy regarding the philosophical, ethical, and faculty workplace issues engendered by student learning assessment work.
 - c. To respond to other campus needs and issues related to student learning assessment work.
 - d. To make a yearly report to the Faculty Senate, including any recommendations for presidential or Senate action related to student learning assessment.
2. We recommend that assessment work be valued in tenure and promotion decisions. We further recommend that where assessment work is regarded by program faculty to have been useful in curricular decision-making, it be accepted as having been peer reviewed.
3. Portland State is a decentralized institution, with a strong and independent faculty. It fits the culture of our academic community that we have progressed well with regard to student learning assessment, and yet have

- no formally agreed upon institutional goals for student learning. We recommend that if the faculty community chooses to develop such goals, those goals should be developed inductively and be subject to broadly-based discussion before being formally adopted.
4. Assessment should always be motivated by genuine curricular revision questions. We recommend that student learning assessment efforts at the program level should always be undertaken in service of the periodic curricular revisions that occur as a normal part of program functioning, whether motivated by an institutional program review cycle, preparation for specialized accreditation review, or faculty interest. We further note the desirability of the University Assessment Committee, the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, and the Graduate Council being able to work together on substantive curricular issues.
 5. We recommend that the current assessment database be redesigned. It should be simplified and streamlined, with its function as a searchable archive of assessment activity maintained and even enhanced. We support the institution of a five-year program review cycle, to be maintained and supported by OIRP, which should establish a schedule of updates that fits the needs of the departments and programs.
 6. We strongly recommend that the current level of funding and staffing for the support of student learning assessment work be maintained. The student learning assessment staff in the CAE is needed to meet the needs of the academic units and to support the ARN's work.

Appendices

- Appendix 1. "[Review of the OIRP Assessment Database: Student Learning Objectives.](#)"
November, 2004.
- Appendix 2. PowerPoint Presentation. "[Assessment Resource Network \(ARN\) Dialogue with the Campus.](#)" February 24, 2005.
- Appendix 3. "[Interviews with Campus Assessment Leaders: Internationalization and Diversity as Student Learning Goals.](#)" June, 2005.
- Appendix 4. "[Review of the OIRP Assessment Database: Assessment Methods and the Use of Assessment Data.](#)" Updated May, 2005.
- Appendix 5. "[Interviews of Campus Assessment Leaders: Response Frequencies.](#)"
May, 2005