Recommendations from the Assessment Working Group – March 2014

In Fall 2012, a group of faculty and administrators was convened by invitation from the President, Provost and Office of Planning and Assessment\(^1\) and charged with developing a Bloomsburg University Assessment Plan handbook that communicates the purposes of assessment at the university, program, and course levels; means of assessment at each level; appropriate use and reporting of assessment results; and the assessment cycle/reporting timelines. The Assessment Working Group (AWG) was not empowered to make policy. During the Spring 2013 semester the AWG completed one part of its charge: the drafting of a handbook. This first handbook addresses assessment in academic programs. The Assessment Working Group continues its work in 2013-2014\(^2\).

Best practices, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and PASSHE are in agreement about assessment needing to be useful and manageable. The AWG’s assessment handbook is articulated with this consensus in mind, and offers guidance on assessment that is consistent with it.

The Assessment Working Group finds, however, that some local policies and procedures make acting on this consensus difficult. Fortunately, these local policies are under local control, and can therefore be modified, allowing the evaluation of student learning to become a valuable (and manageable) part of improving what we do here.

Put briefly, the Assessment Working Group makes these recommendations:

1. Assess general education goals on a cycle (p.2)
2. Assess student learning directly in programs, except in the case of General Education SLOs; assess student learning in individual courses only as indicated by program assessment plans and accreditation requirements. (p.3)
3. Support assessment processes within departments and/or programs (p.4)
4. Communicate assessment expectations clearly (p.5)
5. Use formal, transparent processes for assessment planning that include representatives from across BU’s professional community (p.6)
6. Offer financial support to departments and programs for effective assessment activities (p.8)

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1. Assess general education goals on a cycle
   - The Assessment Working Group recommends that the General Education Council (GEC) limit its requirements for assessment data collection and reporting, asking for data and reports from departments not every semester, but only as needed to support periodic assessment of goals, in accordance with the cycle articulated in GEC operating procedures (see handbook, Appendix 3, or http://bloomu.edu/documents/ged/OperatingProcedures.pdf).

Rationale:
Requiring annual reporting to the GEC to support a five-year assessment cycle is consistent with the General Education goal assessment cycle articulated in GEC operating procedures. It is also consistent with Bloomsburg University’s (BU) General Education policy, which stipulates that “Data must be submitted annually to the Office of Planning and Assessment” (see handbook, Appendix 3, or http://www.bloomu.edu/policies_procedures/3612). However, each year only the data the GEC needs to support the relevant phase of its assessment cycle would be required.

During the pilot years of 2012-2014 the General Education Council required data to be collected and submitted from all sections of General Education classes every semester in order to obtain baseline data; and also field test the data collection technology (see http://bloomu.edu/mycore-assessment). However, it seems reasonable to interpret policy asserting that “the GEC will receive data annually” to mean that the GEC will request and receive data annually, but only for the particular General Education goals the GEC will be reviewing in the following year. The GEC has developed a systematic assessment plan that follows this recommendation.

The hypothetical department calendars in the handbook (see handbook, Appendix 1) reflect this recommendation. The first hypothetical department, which offers many General Education courses, toward many goals, would still submit General Education data and reports annually, but it would collect and submit only the data required for the current goals in the GEC assessment cycle. The second hypothetical department—a department offering courses toward only a few General Education goals—would only collect and report General Education data in the years in which those goals are targeted according to the GEC operating procedures. The intent of this recommendation is for Departments to efficiently collect and report the data needed for assessment of the General Education program by:
   - using representative sampling of students and course sections and
   - collecting, reporting, and analyzing General Education assessment data only as required for the GEC’s 5-year review cycle.

The purpose of assessment of the General Education Program is to obtain information on student performance and progress on general education goals. The needed information can be obtained through representative sampling, without collecting data for each student or each section of the general education courses.
New general education courses should be assessed the first semester they are offered in order to field test the rubrics and appropriate collection of student artifacts. For some courses that are taught infrequently or for which few sections are offered, departments may choose to collect data more often than indicated by the 5-year cycle. This will allow data to be aggregated over sections and years, thereby helping to avoid identification of assessment data with a particular instructor. It is important to maintain a structural barrier between student learning assessment and performance evaluation of faculty members (see handbook, “Structuring assessment ethically”).

2. Assess student learning directly in programs, except in the case of General Education SLOs; assess student learning in individual courses only as indicated by program assessment plans and accreditation requirements.
   - The Assessment Working Group recommends that paragraph 14 of the Master Syllabus (PRP 3233) be interpreted to allow measurement of student learning through program assessment, as an alternative to assessment of individual courses; General Education SLOs will still be assessed at the course level (see recommendation 1).
   - The AWG also recommends that the definitions in the Glossary of Terms in the Master Syllabus policy (PRP 3233) be interpreted with the understanding that programs, like courses, may have student learning objectives.

Rationale:
The current BU omnibus form master syllabus policy requires that paragraph 14 “State how it will be assessed that the course meets each of the student learning objectives” (see handbook, Appendix 3, or http://www.bloomu.edu/policies_procedures/3233). This language implies (and has been interpreted locally to mean) that every student learning outcome in every course must be assessed directly. The Assessment Working Group recommends that departments not be required to demonstrate directly that every SLO of every course is being met. The Assessment Working Group believes that through the development of program-level SLOs, course-level SLOs clearly connected to program-level SLOs, curricular maps, and thoughtful assessment of student learning at judiciously-chosen points in the students’ progress through the major, the value of individual courses will also be demonstrated. The need for more information about student learning in key courses may mean that some individual courses are assessed, either regularly or periodically, but such assessment should be undertaken as needed for program assessment and as part of the assessment plan which departments develop based on their particular needs.

The assumptions and interpretations proposed above are consistent with the Middle States Commission’s guiding principles for assessment, which include the development of a “realistic plan” which gives “useful data” and is cognizant of “existing culture” (Guiding Principles 2, 6, and 1, respectively; see handbook, Appendix 3). The Middle States Commission’s Student Learning Assessment: Options and Resources handbook also asks whether “efforts to use ‘perfect’ research tools [are] balanced with timeliness and practicality,” and asserts that “Just as every possible outcome need not be measured, it is not necessary to collect data about each student’s performance” because:
The Commission is interested in the institution’s ability to graduate students with appropriate knowledge, skills, and behavior, not a demonstration that every student was tested. Meaningful and representative sub-populations (randomly chosen when appropriate) can provide the basis for demonstrating that students across the institution are achieving learning goals. (p.41)

The Middle States Commission’s assertions are consistent with PASSHE’s policy on assessing student learning (see handbook, Appendix 3, or http://www.passhe.edu/inside/policies/BOG_Policies/Policy%201997-01.pdf).

The hypothetical department calendars in the handbook (Appendix 2) reflect the recommended approach. Meeting these more reasonable assessment requirements would still involve attention each semester, as shown in the hypothetical five-year assessment calendars included in the handbook. In some departments, accreditation may require assessment of many (or all) courses or course SLOs. Assessment can be done efficiently and effectively by using targeted assessment elements measured at pre-determined intervals in programs to determine student learning. The emphasis is on the enhancement of the outcomes for students in the program rather than evaluating individual faculty.

Rationale for expanding the interpretation of “student learning objective”:
The current Required Format for Master Course Syllabi offers definitions for three terms: program goals, student learning objectives, and expected outcomes. The definitions assert that while “programs have goals,” courses have “student learning objectives” (PRP 3233; see handbook, Appendix 3, or http://www.bloomu.edu/policies_procedures/3233). However, programs can—and should—have student learning objectives. Student learning outcomes are the measurable manifestation of the curriculum and instruction’s success in teaching students what they need to learn: it is through examining students achievement of these objectives (through outcomes) that we do assessment.

3. Support assessment processes within departments and/or programs
   - The AWG recommends that BU support the ongoing development of a “culture of assessment” through fostering departmental (and/or program) dialogue. Specifically, each department and/or program should routinely do the following:
     1. articulate (or revisit) program-level SLOs (see handbook, “Establishing learning objectives”)
     2. map their curriculum, or review their curriculum map (see handbook, “Curricular mapping”)
     3. develop an initial departmental assessment plan, or refine the existing plan (see handbook, “Measuring whether these goals have been met”)
     4. collect or review collection of assessment data
     5. have or continue to have departmental conversations about the implications of the collected assessment data for improving student learning (see handbook, “Evaluating results to improve teaching and learning”)
6. plan or adjust action steps based on the evidence

These steps must be undertaken with due care (see below), but departments need to move forward. Many departments are already engaged in this cycle. For those that have not completed the cycle, these steps should be completed by Spring 2015 to establish a baseline for future assessment.

Rationale:
Focusing on assessment within departments and programs will encourage wide departmental participation and investment in assessment. The goal is for departments to use assessment to improve student learning. Benefits include:

- making clear that assessment is about using data to improve learning, not just reporting data;
- having departments focus on real questions they want to answer about student learning;
- giving departments the opportunity to internally discuss data before reporting to entities such as GEC, accrediting bodies and the 5-year review report; and
- providing time for departments to articulate meaningful program-level SLOs, collect and review data, and identify action steps to enhance student learning opportunities.

What is important is that departments move forward with an assessment plan that is helpful in improving student learning. They need to start where they are, but they do need to start. Departments have been mandated to have been working on assessment plans for many years; SLOs and assessments of student achievement have been required in five-year program reviews since 2008. And while it is important to deliberate, if a department expects a perfect plan before it will move forward, nothing will happen. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to require that departments complete steps 1-6 enumerated above within a year.

BU will need to provide decisive leadership, a clear structure, and a meaningful timeline to assure that we move forward.

4. Communicate assessment expectations clearly

- The AWG recommends that assessment expectations be clearly communicated and explained to all stakeholders, and that whenever possible they build on past expertise and practice. The Office of Planning and Assessment has a key role in this. Deadlines for reporting must be similarly clear, giving ample lead time (notification the semester prior would be reasonable), reasonable deadlines, and specificity in expectations.

Rationale:
Over the years, there have naturally been changes in the assessment expectations of BU, PASSHE and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. However, changes in approach and emphasis have meant that campus expectations have varied from department to department and changed over time. Faculty and staff need to be informed of the procedures for
assessment and understand how assessment can be implemented as a meaningful part of educating students. Similarly, departments and programs must communicate with the Deans, college assessment committees, and the Office of Planning and Assessment with regard to their assessment plans, activities and resources needed. The Provost, Deans, Office of Planning and Assessment, BUCC, General Education Council and the TALE Center all provide information about assessment. Keeping information about assessment and available support in a central location would be helpful to departments trying to implement assessment. The Office of Planning and Assessment’s website (http://bloomu.edu/planning-assessment) offers one location for articulation and explanation of expectations. The handbook developed by the AWG will be available on the website and will need to be kept current. Coordinated communication among faculty and deans, as well as the bodies making decisions about assessment, such as the BUCC, the GEC, and Academic Affairs, will also be important.

Since the assessment process is still being developed, it is inevitable that changes will need to be made. However, as much as possible, changes should allow departmental assessment plans that are in place to continue. This not only helps to avoid confusion, but also allows a set of data to be collected over the years that can inform departments in improving student learning.

5. Use formal, transparent processes for assessment planning that include representatives from across BU’s professional community

- The AWG recommends that BU rely on formal, transparent, inclusive processes in the development of assessment expectations, and that these expectations be documented.

Rationale:
Effective assessment at BU will need the support of formal, transparent, inclusive administrative processes for the development of assessment activities, backed by documented policies and procedures reviewed and supported by relevant stakeholders. We recommend a structure consisting of a university-wide Assessment Committee as well as college-wide Assessment Committees. This is consistent with the Middle States Commission’s third guiding principle for assessment, which calls for “academic leadership” (see handbook, Appendix 3).

The university-wide Assessment Committee could
- provide a forum for faculty and staff input into the assessment process;
- assist in coordinating assessment efforts across the university;
- communicate information needed for effective and efficient assessment;
- ensure that policies and procedures are reasonable in light of departmental, university, PASSHE, Middle States and federal standards where applicable;
- provide a sounding board, advice, and support for the Office of Planning and Assessment; and
- make recommendations for the distribution of resources in support of department/unit assessment activities.
Effective assessment requires the commitment of everyone in BU’s professional community, including faculty, staff, and the administration. This commitment can be effectively built only if planning for assessment includes those affected by assessment expectations.

Moreover, BU needs its discussions about, planning for, and implementation of assessment practices to be constantly evolving in order to practice increasingly efficient and effective assessment. Therefore, BU needs formal mechanisms through which to develop its employees’ knowledge about assessment.

A committee comprised of elected faculty and appointed members from the administration and staff, would be an effective way to provide this transparency and inclusion, as well as to provide professional development. This is not the first time such a recommendation has been made at BU. In 2008 BU’s Assessment and Evaluation Task Force made a detailed recommendation for an elected faculty committee, and envisioned the assessment of student learning as being directed by faculty (posted on BU’s Middle States accreditation process site, http://bloomu.edu/middlestates). To ensure that both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs are represented we suggest a committee composed of:

- 3 faculty elected at large
- A faculty representative from each college-wide assessment committee elected by that committee
- A faculty representative from the General Education Council elected by that committee
- The Assistant Vice President of the Office of Planning and Assessment
- A representative from the Graduate Council
- A representative from the Student Affairs Assessment Committee
- A representative from Academic Achievement
- A representative from the Office of Technology and Library Services

The Chair of this committee should attend BUCC meetings. Additionally, the Chair will invite other individuals, such as the TALE Director, the Dean of Undergraduate Education, the Registrar, the Director of Enrollment Management, the Director of Institutional Research, and Middle States Committee representatives, to attend meetings and advise the committee.

College and/or unit-level leadership would also be beneficial. College assessment advisory committees could be comprised of faculty conversant in assessment goals and strategies. They could assist the Dean in working with departments to develop meaningful assessment plans: colleagues from outside a department need to assure that assessment plans are workable, that they keep the big picture in mind, and that they are likely to give information useful not only to the department, but to the college and university. Such committees are in place in some colleges. We recommend that assessment committees be established, or re-established, in colleges in which they do not currently exist.
6. Offer financial support to departments and programs for effective assessment activities

Departments and programs need a clear process to obtain financial support for assessment activities. Examples of such support include:

- compensation for evaluations by external reviewers, such as guest critics
- stipends for faculty evaluating complex data sets, such as portfolios, over the summer
- expenses for retreats during which the department discusses assessment data
- purchase of standardized tests and detailed additional reports on standardized test results
- reassigned time for assessment leaders
- professional development
- staff support

The Office of Planning and Assessment would be a logical body to coordinate such funding.

Rationale:

The Middle States Commission’s second guiding principle for assessment asserts that “plans for assessment at the program, school, and institutional levels should be realistic and supported by the appropriate investment of resources” (see handbook, Appendix 3). The University has made substantial investments in assessment, particularly by creating an Office of Planning and Assessment. Faculty have been supported in professional development for assessment through funding to attend external institutes, workshops and conferences. TALE workshops on assessment have been provided on campus. Considerable support for assessment has also been provided at the college and department level. Still there is a need for a clearly defined process for departments to obtain funding for the types of assessment expenses listed above.