

Amended Report of the 2011-12 Academic Assessment Committee

The report of the 2011-12 Academic Assessment Committee (AcadAC) was brought to the faculty for discussion on April 27, 2012. Based on that discussion, Provost Thomas Stephenson decided to accept the recommendations of the Committee regarding changes to our Academic Assessment Plan, with the exception of its recommended changes to the course evaluation process. Because of faculty concerns, these will not be implemented, but will be discussed further by the Division Chairs in 2012-13. In the meantime, the process for course evaluation outlined in the original Assessment Plan will remain in place. The committee's report has therefore been amended to annotate affected content, and to move its full discussion of recommendations regarding course evaluations to the appendix. It otherwise remains unchanged from the document reviewed and discussed by the faculty.

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The 2011-12 Academic Assessment Committee (AcadAC) was charged with reviewing and recommending any needed changes to the Academic Assessment Plan in light of many suggestions from the visiting team for our 2009 Middle States reaccreditation Self Study, clearer (and stricter) guidelines from Middle States and from various grant agencies regarding assessment, and the work of recent Assessment Committees in reviewing how our Plan has been working.

The committee would like to acknowledge and commend the members of the 2005-06 ad hoc committee who developed the Plan. Upon re-reading the document, we were struck by how comprehensive, sensitive, and flexible it is. During our work it became clear that any shortcomings that exist in our assessment practices have more to do with our implementation than with problems or omissions with the Plan itself. With the benefit of several years of experience and feedback, we will suggest that the emphasis of some aspects of the Plan be increased or decreased, but do not suggest substantive changes to the Plan itself. The points below summarize our suggestions, with the remainder of the document providing a description of our work and the context for our suggestions.

- The committee ***affirms*** the Provost's request for departments to articulate their goals and objectives for student learning by the end of the 2011-12 year, as a valuable exercise and the requisite first step in conducting assessment.
- The committee ***recommends*** that support for faculty in conducting assessment, such as resource materials, training, opportunities for discussion, etc., be a high priority for the College.
- Since course evaluations provide only indirect reflections of student learning, we ***recommend*** that direct assessments also be undertaken.

NOTE: Recommendations regarding course evaluations will not be implemented, and have been held for further discussion by Division Chairs in 2012-13.

- The committee has several related recommendations with regard to course evaluations.
 - We **recommend** that all faculty members conduct course evaluations in all their courses, *for their own review only*.
 - We **affirm** that departments design and use evaluations focused on aspects of the curriculum, which we call “curriculum evaluations” to be used in targeted courses.
 - We **recommend** that the requirement for individual discussions between the chair and instructors about the curriculum evaluations be dropped, and replaced with broad discussion within the department, without reflecting on individual instructors.

- We **recommend** that in their End-of-Year reports departments address a set of specific questions (included later in this document), which reflect the intent of the original Plan and the revisions outlined here.

- The committee **recommends** that a process be established to articulate college-wide goals for student learning, including a plan for assessment of these shared goals. The process should address the role of student support and co-curricular functions at the College, including the Dean’s Office, the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility, the Library, the Writing Program, and other areas.

- Our final **recommendation** is that assessment guidelines be reviewed again in another five years, as we continue to learn from our experiences.

BACKGROUND

The committee reviewed the original Plan for Assessment of Student Learning, the work of prior committees as reflected in meeting minutes and final reports, and documents from Middle States outlining their expectations with regard to Assessment. Feedback from the Associate Provost and IR Director from the conversations taking place in their meetings with departments was also valuable. Through several discussions the committee identified the gaps between our current practices and what is expected by Middle States. Our goal in making recommendations to close this gap was to respect Middle States requirements while also staying true to our values as a liberal arts institution. While every institution has room for improvement and can benefit from some of the thoughtful approaches and best practices endorsed by Middle States and the assessment movement, we must be careful not to be so overly prescriptive or bureaucratic that assessment distracts from the very thing it purports to improve – teaching. Therefore the recommendations of this committee, like the original Plan, attempts to balance external requirements with our values as a liberal arts institution that is already highly focused on

excellent teaching. We assert that there must remain some measure of departmental autonomy and flexibility. We have confidence that departments will engage seriously with their assessment work in the way that makes sense for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Articulation of Goals and Objectives for Student Learning

In fall 2011, as the pressures from the financial downturn eased somewhat and the initial phase of the strategic planning process drew to a close, the Provost acted to renew our commitment and progress with assessment. The initial Plan had identified the articulation of goals for student learning as a first step in assessment, but reviews of the departmental reports by subsequent assessment committees found that this was not commonly done. In a November email to all faculty, the Provost requested that all departments articulate goals and objectives for student learning by the end of the academic year, and announced that the Director of Institutional Research (who co-chairs the Academic Assessment Committee with the Associate Provost) was partially reassigned (1/3 time) to the Provost's Office to provide guidance and support. In the fall, the Provost, Associate Provost, and Institutional Research (IR) Director met with department chairs by Division to explain the request for goal articulation and answer questions. Beginning in Spring 2012, the Associate Provost and IR Director met with each academic department to explain the request, provide sample materials, and answer questions. The Committee affirms the importance of this activity, as it is the foundational step in conducting assessment. A review of the Middle States documentation confirms that this is a clear expectation.

Resources and Support

As it conducted its work in 2005-06 the original ad hoc Assessment Planning Committee engaged faculty widely in discussions about assessment. There have been scant discussions since that time, even though the original Plan called for educational support¹. Departments dutifully implemented the plan, conducting course evaluations, holding and reporting on end of year retreats, and reinstating departmental reviews. However, the only resource materials provided were documents reflecting the requirements, which were emailed to chairs at appropriate times of the year, and available on the Provost's website. General information about assessment was available on the Institutional Research website, but was not publicized. Beyond

¹ In spring of 2011 Swarthmore participants of the Tri-College Teagle Grant "Sustaining Department Level Assessment of Student Learning" shared their experiences at a session open to all faculty. In April 2012 a Tri-College forum reflecting on this project was also held.

this, there has been no guidance on how departments might conduct other kinds of effective and systematic assessments. Furthermore, until 2011-12 when it became a practice for the departmental reports to be discussed with the Provost, there had not been any formal feedback concerning the contents of the departmental report.

The AcadAC recommends that the College place a priority on providing learning opportunities and resources for faculty who want them, around assessment, so that their efforts are productive. This year the IR Director created a comprehensive web site for assessment, taking components previously located separately in the Provost and Institutional Research website, and adding resource material. The new website documents our processes and provides some institutional outcome measures and sample activities for both internal and external audiences. Furthermore it begins to build a range of resources for our internal community to help them with assessment, focusing initially on articulating learning goals. Middle States identifies such a website as an appropriate form of documentation and support. The link to the website was shared with faculty members in each department by email, after their meeting with the Associate Provost and IR Director. The committee suggests that this sort of work continue.

As the discussions about implementing Strategic Directions focus on teaching and learning, support for the assessment of student learning must be considered. Further support opportunities might include:

- Invited speakers
- Topical workshops
- Lunch discussions
- Consideration of funding opportunities for special assessment projects
- Repository for departments to share Goals, End-of-Year Reports, examples
- Continued outreach to departments by Provost’s Office at key times, such as preparation for or follow-up to external reviews.

Direct Assessment

The original Plan put particular emphasis on course evaluations. Though many faculty members already used course evaluations, they had not previously been conducted in any systematic way at the College. These course evaluations would be the topic of special discussions between the instructor and the department chair. As this was a new process, great care was taken to engage in discussions, explain fully, and provide reassurance about its use. This emphasis may have unintentionally contributed to a prevalent misperception that course evaluations are the primary form of assessment. While course evaluations are important and provide useful feedback, they present student perceptions and do not reveal objectively the extent to which students are learning. “**Direct assessments**” are those that rely on actual evidence of student learning, such

as projects, presentations, examinations, etc. While these activities may be traditional grading opportunities, they can be evaluated in ways that reflect on particular learning goals across all students. The original Plan noted several promising sources for use in direct assessment: the culminating exercise and the honors experience. Subsequent committees also pointed to these experiences as underutilized for this purpose. Finally, the use of direct assessment is an explicit requirement of Middle States. The committee therefore *recommends* that departments engage in direct assessments of student learning in addition to course evaluations, and that this be made explicit in instructions. The spring 2012 conversations that the Associate Provost and Director of IR had with departments confirmed that some faculty members may need opportunities to learn more about ways to conduct direct assessment effectively without creating undue burden. Therefore this recommendation requires that the educational support and resources described above be made available.

Course evaluations

NOTE: Recommendations regarding course evaluations have been held for further discussion by Division Chairs in 2012-13. They now appear in an appendix to this report.

End-of-Year Reports

A review by the 2009-10 committee of the End-of-Year departmental reports revealed that there was great variability in the contents and quality of the assessments conducted and reported. In recognition of this, that committee developed a set of questions, which it suggested be addressed in the reports. They are:

1. What issues were discussed by the department?
2. What parts of the program seem to be working well? How do you know?
3. What parts of the program seem challenging and how will the department proceed to address the concerns?
4. What aspects of the program have you assessed this year? How did you do it? Did the assessment work well? What did you learn?
5. What plans have you made for assessment during the coming academic year?

The list was offered for departments in spring 2010, but subsequent reviews of reports showed that few departments had used it. We *recommend* that the question set be modified to more clearly reference the steps of meaningful assessments and the College's process with the following changes:

1. What goals or objectives have you assessed this year?

2. How did you do it (be sure to describe at least one example of direct assessment*)?
3. What did you learn?
4. What changes will you make as a result of this work?
5. What plans have you made for assessment during the coming academic year?
6. *What topics and courses did you cover in your course evaluations, and what were the nature and implications of your findings?*
7. What other issues were discussed by the department?

(* This note will reference a separate document that clearly describes and provides examples of “Direct assessment.”)

NOTE: The original question #6 reflecting course evaluations offered by the committee used language reflecting its recommendation for changes to the process, which have not implemented at this time. Therefore, the item has been modified in this amended report to reflect our current policy. The original question was: “What topics and courses did you cover in your ‘Curriculum evaluation’ questions, and what were the nature and implications of your findings?”

We further recommend that all departments address these questions in their reports, beginning in 2012-13. The questions are intended to help guide and remind faculty about the important points to address and activities to document, but still leave considerable flexibility for them to focus and highlight as they deem important.

College-wide activities

The original Plan offered suggestions for addressing College-wide assessments of the academic program, including specific projects. It charged subsequent Academic Assessment committees with identifying further assessments needed. While subsequent committees did discuss College-wide work that was already ongoing (initiated through other mechanisms), they have not taken the initiative for identifying new needs. Furthermore, the original Plan did not identify the need to articulate college-wide goals for student learning, which, along with departmental assessment, will need to be a high priority in order to establish the framework of our liberal arts mission that informs work across all departments, and also to meet Middle States expectations. Therefore, the current committee **recommends** that a process be established for articulating College-wide goals for student learning, perhaps building on overlapping goals identified by departments. This process should address a plan for assessing them, which might involve the Provost’s Office (including the IR Director), the AcadAC, CEP, or some combination of these entities, and should address the role of student support and co-curricular functions at the College, such as the Dean’s Office, the Writing Program, the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility, and the Library, in contributing to students’ learning. This was a formal recommendation of our Middle States visiting team of evaluators in our 2009 reaccreditation. The process should also clarify a mechanism for identifying additional assessment needs beyond the department level, whether it

is the responsibility of the Academic Assessment Committee as envisioned in the original Plan, or another entity.

Further evaluation

Finally, given the evolution of assessment and expectations of Middle States, and our continued learning through our experiences, we recommend that a similar review of our assessment processes be undertaken in another 5 years or so.

2011-2012 Academic Assessment Committee

Patricia Reilly, Associate Provost and Associate Professor of Art History (co-chair)

Robin Huntington Shores, Director of Institutional Research (co-chair)

Tia Newhall, Associate Professor of Computer Science

Robert Weinberg, Professor of History

Craig Williamson, Professor of English Literature

Lisa Bao '14 (fall)

Tarini Kumar, '12 (spring)

Bernard Koch, '13

Appendix

NOTE: These recommendations that were part of the original committee report have not been implemented, and instead are held for further discussion by Division Chairs in 2012-13.

Course evaluations

The committee became aware of several concerns regarding course evaluations, in addition to the misperception noted above.

During the meetings with departments in spring 2012, the Associate Provost and IR Director heard that while some departments found the required individual discussions about course evaluations between the instructors and the chair to be valuable, others found that the time needed for them (especially for the chair) sometimes outweighed the value gained.

Furthermore, there remain real concerns that information learned while discussing course evaluations could unintentionally affect the promotion and tenure process. The original Plan stated, “We encourage departments to use these evaluations as an opportunity to assess particular components of their curriculum.” The intent of the discussions with the chair was to foster a comprehensive view of feedback about courses. The process was explicitly not intended to be used, even unintentionally, as teacher evaluation.

Given the intent of the Plan and the experiences suggesting that the practice may not always quite match the intent, we recommend several changes to the course evaluation process. To help clarify these changes, we suggest adopting language that distinguishes *course evaluations*, which collect feedback from students about the course for the instructor’s use, from *curriculum evaluation*, which comprise departmentally designed questions for student feedback, common across targeted courses, and designed to address departmental goals for student learning and the curriculum. (The original Plan referred to the latter type as “Departmental Course Evaluations.”)

First, we *recommend* that all faculty members conduct course evaluations in all of their courses, as they provide useful feedback for improvement. However, they ought to be limited to only the instructor’s review. Consistent with the original Plan, we *affirm* the requirement that curriculum evaluations be used in courses targeted each year by the department to reflect particular goals on which they are focusing. However, we *recommend* that the requirement for individual discussions of these evaluations with the department chair be replaced with broad discussion within the department, without reflecting on individual instructors. The table below illustrates.

Course evaluations	Curricular evaluations
Designed by individual instructor	Designed by department
Questions about individual course	Questions about the course's contribution to curriculum, or about curricular elements in course
Used in every course	Used in targeted courses, consistent with departmental goals being evaluated
Reviewed only by instructor	Reviewed by department, without reflecting on individual instructors

The committee considered a number of mechanisms that might enable departments to collect curricular evaluations without attribution to the instructor. For those using paper forms, the curricular evaluation might be stapled to the course evaluation, and separated by the departmental AA for later discussion. Or the two forms could use different colored papers that are routed accordingly. Electronic course evaluations could include a link to a second electronic curricular evaluation for appropriate courses, or links to curricular evaluations could be sent to students separately. We ultimately decided that the mechanism should be decided by the department, depending on its needs and culture.

Below are a few examples of questions that might be appropriate for curricular evaluation. Examples of evaluation instruments will be made available via the assessment website.

How well did the prerequisite courses prepare you for the requirements of this course?

Do you feel that this course prepared you adequately for other courses in this department?

How did the course help you improve _____ (here specify skills, e.g., writing, presentation skills, ability to analyze data)?

Did you receive adequate support for learning from [identify resources of interest, such as tutors, library staff, ITS staff, and language resource center staff] as needed? Please explain.

One of the goals of this course is for students to _____, How well do you feel that the course contributed to your learning in this area?

We acknowledge that many departments have been effectively engaging in course evaluations as well as curricular evaluations already. The difference these recommendations make would be in the nature of the departmental oversight. Rather than the chair reviewing evaluations with individual faculty members, the department as a whole discusses the implications of the curricular feedback. These discussions and any changes they inform should be documented in the End-of-Year report to the Provost, or in time to be included in the fall meeting between the Department Chair, the Provost, and the President.