

CSOA Minutes, March 2006

Attending: Schmitz, Colburn, Reineke, Nelson, Baughman, Turman (alternate) for Chatham-Carpenter

Regrets: Berghammer (from Poland!)

1) FAQ project.

The committee discussed the nine frequently asked questions that had been generated in the college last year. It was asked whether these are still live questions. Reineke noted that three of the questions had been asked by faculty in communication studies. She also noted that two of the questions had been of strong interest to faculty in her department this spring (Why are we doing assessment? What is the difference between grading and assessment?). One of the questions had been asked this past fall.

The committee divided up the questions that had not been selected previously through e-mail. By distributing authorship of the questions across the committee, faculty ownership of the SOA process in CHFA will be demonstrated. This idea was used at North Carolina State and results in a very effective demonstration on their website of the breadth of faculty commitment to SOA.

Committee members will tweak the notes compiled by Reineke about each question and send the answers to her. These will be posted on the CHFA SOA web site. Newsletters next year from the college can feature these FAQs and direct the readers' attention to the SOA website where additional questions can be solicited.

The SOA website will be ready some time in April. Reineke is working with persons in educational technology on the home page in order that the page look compatible with the university assessment web site and other pages on the CHFA website.

2) Continued to look at Direct Measures from Allen and discuss ways in which we can facilitate knowledge within the college of various models.

The committee discussed the critical need for rubrics for direct measures that are up to the task of facilitating assessment of complex learning objectives. Committee members noted that some members of the faculty are adept at using rubrics. For others, this will be a new experience. A workshop on making rubrics with examples of strong rubrics would be helpful. It was discussed whether CHFA should plan such a workshop or if the university assessment office could facilitate workshops on this and other topics, drawing on talent across the university.

Schmitz noted that his new SOA sub-committee had been looking at the new SOA procedures and has taken note of the change from previous models. The idea of formative assessment and of asking questions about areas in which students don't seem to be doing well is starting to take hold. Some interest has been expressed in looking at student writing, including whether students are developing the writing skills they will need in their careers.

This led to a general discussion of how concerns about writing seem to be common to every department. At the same time that writing is a concern, there is ambivalence about making writing a departmental goal. Some faculty members believe it is not their job to teach students how to write. Or, more precisely, faculty believe that it is their job to teach writing skills specific to the major but that students are not coming to them with basic writing skills. Concerns are expressed that students are not developing adequate writing skills in the LAC. In turn, faculty members who teach the writing course in the LAC do not feel that a single course can equip students for all of their writing requirements across the entire LAC and in their majors. Students need multiple opportunities to practice different kinds of writing.

It was suggested that a new era of "writing across the curriculum" may be in order. There needs to be ownership and resources provided for students to enhance their writing skills at all levels, so that faculty teaching in the major may appropriately focus on major-specific writing skills (e.g., professional report writing). Committee members again wonder if the university assessment office can sponsor a university-wide initiative on the assessment of writing and on how to teach writing skills.

Concern that there is not structure in place for assessment of the LAC skills across four years was mentioned. This concern is recurrent for the committee: LAC skills need to be perceived as an achievement over four years (whose final outcomes are assessed in the capstone). This will facilitate ownership among all faculty members of the LAC skills.

Reineke noted that her department has interests in making oral communication skills an outcome at some time down the road. Her faculty members have observed that students demonstrate abysmal skills in making oral presentations. She noted that when she visited Alverno, students are required to work on oral communication skills over all four years and maintain video portfolios of presentations and of their progress. She said that when she viewed some of these portfolios she noticed that students in their first year have only the most minimal oral communication skills but by the time they are seniors, they are presenting themselves in ways that suggest they could be employed as professional speakers. They are extremely poised and articulate. These skills are important for students in their careers. But at UNI it doesn't seem that

students have opportunities to track oral communication skills after their LAC course.

Turman pointed out that even within that course, only 6 weeks of the course focuses on student presentations. The rest of the course focuses on other aspects of communication.

It was suggested that the call for new LAC committees based on categories might be the occasion for creating opportunities for dialogue between faculty who teach the skills courses in the LAC and other faculty. LAC courses may need to be revised in order to better meet needs faculty are seeing in the majors for skills. In turn, such dialogue could also enable faculty outside of the LAC to take more ownership of LAC outcomes they will sustain and support in the majors. This dialogue should avoid accusatory language but should be promoted with a focus on a shared commitment to student learning.

[Note: after the meeting I recall reading about one university that created such dialogue about the quantitative reasoning skills. Majors that require quantitative reasoning skills (one example was the major in nutrition) created entrance-level math skills tests for their majors. The tests were based on skills that the students would need in the major and that the faculty perceived should be brought by students into the program from their LAC course in quantitative reasoning. The faculty noted clusters of low scores on several elements of quantitative reasoning. These clusters were shared in common among tests offered to students in multiple majors. Faculty members teaching these majors shared their concerns with the faculty teaching the LAC quantitative reasoning course. Those faculty members, in turn, reviewed their syllabi and discovered that none of them were having students work on these specified skill sets. They also said they would not have any problem with adding skill development opportunities in these areas to their course. This seems to me to be a good model for what we discussed at our meeting.]

3) Progress reports/concerns from departments.

In discussing what each department is doing, Turman mentioned that Communication Studies is working on portfolios and is looking at common outcomes across the variety of majors that they offer. Baughman mentioned that there is not currently a capstone experience for the English course. Capstone courses are often an excellent locus for senior-level assessment.

Colburn pointed out that there are some issues with creating rubrics for artistic competence. Students look at the rubrics and mentally cross off all the categories as “done.” This enables them to say “I’ve done this, so I am an artist.” Other committee members concurred that this is a risk of rubrics, especially because the rubrics that students encountered regularly K-12 (or in the College of Education which tends to use the K-12 approach to rubrics) were presented to

students often in terms of mastery. Teachers did check off items on the rubrics and if all items were checked, the student earned an "A."

Turman pointed out that the rubrics he uses are presented in ways that document completion of the items as "average" achievement. The rubric scores are tiered in such a way that full achievement of goals is described as "exemplary" performance. Rubrics always leave room for the student to grow and on face value rubrics only represent "C" level work. This reminded the committee again of the need for guidance in the development of rubrics. However they are used, students need to see faculty articulating expectations clearly and often and giving feedback. Students should not get the sense that rubric categories can be mastered.

One committee member mentioned that some concern had been raised in their department about formative assessment being used against departments by the administration. If a department discovers weaknesses in its students' learning, departments could be punished. Reineke said that she would discuss this with the Dean. She noted that the associate provost at Baylor had given a very reassuring presentation to the faculty that addressed precisely those concerns. Something like this might be included in the fall meeting of the CHFA faculty.

Reineke also noted that, in the meantime, persons can be reassured about assessment by discussing whether program review at UNI has ever been used to "punish" departments. She thinks that if senior faculty members consult their memories, they will have great difficulty thinking of occasions when program review has been used as an occasion to withhold funds or close programs. Some departments have decided in the course of program review to close down one of their programs (typically an MA) but in her recollection this idea was always generated by the faculty themselves as part of their program review. Program changes were not imposed on the faculty by administrators. The good record of program review at UNI should reassure faculty that SOA, which feeds into program review, will be treated in the same way.

In reporting on Philosophy and Religion, Reineke noted that progress had been made on picking goals and outcomes. The exercise to align the outcomes with the curriculum had proved confusing on two points. Some faculty felt obliged to say that they were working on all outcomes in all their courses, apparently out of concern that their courses be deemed worthy. After it was pointed out that there would be an expectation that some courses wouldn't demonstrate outcomes selected for the first three years, faculty felt freer to "pass" on some of the outcomes. There was also confusion about the categories of "introduced, practiced, and demonstrated." Again, faculty wanted to say that all three were being done in their classes, even when the classes are introductory to the major. Based on this experience, clarifying language will be added to the matrix so that "practice" is linked with "intermediate" and "demonstrated" is linked with "advanced."

Storm indicated that Spanish is moving along with their plans for SOA. That Spanish is going first, to be joined each year down the road by another modern language, is not a source of problematic morale in the department. They are happy to take leadership by one year because they already have assessment in hand. Concern has been expressed, however, about funding oral exams, which will be associated with a key outcome – oral proficiency. Reineke said she would consult with the dean about resources for SOA.

Next meeting:

Due to Reineke attending the NCA meeting, the next meeting will move to the 2nd Tuesday. She will be able to report on the NCA meeting as well as on the results of the first University Assessment Committee meeting.