

Assessment of Student Academic Achievement

In the last ten years, Cottey has devoted considerable effort toward establishing an integrated and well-articulated assessment program. The College's initial response to the most significant concern of the 1993 consultant-evaluation team was to file a report with NCA to outline its plan for assessing student academic achievement. That report, filed in March 1995, was approved. The plan has developed into a viable assessment program, and definite progress continues. Chapter 13 discusses and evaluates the process of establishing a culture of assessment at Cottey.

Assessment Committee

The Assessment Committee guides evaluation of student learning at Cottey. Established in 1991 by the President as an ad hoc committee to study the emerging assessment movement, the committee has evolved along with assessment at Cottey. In 1996, the Assessment Committee became a sub-committee of the Campuswide Planning Committee with the division chairs as its members. (Though subsequent development proceeded differently, the idea at the time was that the formal planning process already in place at Cottey would provide assurance that recommendations were made and action taken on data generated by the assessment program.) The primary focus of the committee during this period was to assist faculty in developing assessment activities. Periodic meetings were held to discuss progress, but

most of the work was done within the faculty divisions. Acting as the Assessment Committee, the division chairs demonstrated excellent leadership, actively engaging faculty in classroom assessment activities and encouraging faculty to move beyond course-level assessment. They were also key advisors to the coordinator of institutional research in the selection of institutional measures of student learning.

In December 1999, the composition of the Assessment Committee was changed to involve a wider range of campus constituencies in the effort. Two at-large appointed faculty members, one first-year student and one second-year student joined the division chairs and the coordinator of institutional research. The primary focus during the period 1999-2002 was planning Assessment Day and educating faculty about assessment.

As the self-study process for continued accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association evolved, two things became clear: the division chairs' responsibilities had increased since 1996, and, for Cottey's assessment program to move beyond a compliance approach and toward being internally motivated by institutional curiosity, additional faculty should be involved in directing the assessment program.

Accordingly, in March 2002 the composition of the Assessment Committee was changed again. The division chairs had the option of remaining on the committee since their leadership and contributions were important, but during the spring of 2002, each of the division chairs chose to seek a new divisional representative and leave the committee to focus on other responsibilities. They continue to contribute leadership to assessment at Cottey, as the first item listed on the Assessment Committee charge is "faculty representatives work with the division chairs to facilitate assessment processes."

The current faculty members of the committee are taking an active role in the further development of the assessment program by chairing the data analysis groups formed in fall 2001.

Course Assessment

The assessment program at Cottey began at the course level in 1996-97. Each instructor selects the College goals that his or her courses seek to achieve and develops measures of student academic achievement appropriate to personal preferences and course characteristics. Nearly all faculty members conduct some sort of assessment in one of their courses each year. From 1996-2002 the results were reported yearly to the division chairs, the VPAA and the coordinator of institutional research. At the beginning of the project, the respective division chair wrote a response to each faculty member submitting a report. (Notebooks containing the reports and responses are available in the Resource Room.) In 2002, the reports were submitted to the coordinator of institutional research with the VPAA and division chairs receiving a copy.

The faculty have expended a great deal of effort on assessment at the course level. The strengths of this program are that it is faculty-driven, multiple and varied measures are used (standardized tests, external evaluators, and surveys), and students are actively involved. Although classroom assessment generates information for faculty members about how individual courses accomplish Cottey's goals, it does not furnish a comprehensive evaluation of what students are learning. In addition, classroom assessment informs the faculty member, but it is difficult to collect information that will inform curricular decision-making processes.

Classroom assessment will continue to be an important component of Cottey's assessment program. Faculty will continue to conduct assessment at the course level and summarize changes they have implemented due to course assessments.

Assessment Day

While faculty focused on course assessment, Assessment Day was implemented in 1999 to assess student academic achievement on an institutional level. On Assessment Day each spring, students are released from classes and campus jobs to respond to a variety of assessment instruments. Both first- and second-year students take part in Assessment Day, with the primary focus for second-year students being the assessment of the College's student learning goals. Through the activities on Assessment Day, data is collected using both direct (standardized tests and locally developed instruments) and indirect (questionnaires and surveys) measures of student learning. The instruments used on Assessment Day vary according to which of the College's goals are the focus of evaluation. The Assessment Committee assists the coordinator of institutional research in determining which goals will be addressed on Assessment Day based on ideas generated from that committee and also from other sources, i.e., a committee, a division, a student, or a staff member.

Assessment Day at Cotney is a very successful endeavor. (Complete information on Assessment Day is available in the Resource Room.) The faculty, the student life staff, and SGA all participate in the promotion of Assessment Day. Student involvement in planning and organizing is the key to strong student participation. The students on the Assessment Committee contribute to the decision-making process for the activities scheduled on Assessment Day and also in promoting and encouraging student participation. The SGA Senate gives advice and suggestions to the coordinator of institutional research in developing incentives to participate and includes Assessment Day as a topic on scheduled rounds through the residence halls.

Data Analysis

Results from tests and surveys on Assessment Day have been shared with faculty, staff, students, trustees, P.E.O.s, and alumnae, though not in any

consistent manner. As the self-study process evolved in late spring 2002, it became clear that while the assessment program collected a lot of data and faculty were closely involved through classroom assessment, there was no institutional process for analyzing data in order to use it to improve student learning. At a meeting of the Self-Study Steering Committee following the resignation of the VPAA in May 2002, the chair of the social science division volunteered to review and analyze some of the data. This initial effort, along with the leadership experience and the knowledge of assessment processes of the new VPAA, set in motion the development of six data analysis groups.

Some of these groups have been formed specifically for the purpose of analyzing data collected to evaluate the College's goals (i.e., reading/critical thinking, science/mathematics, writing skills), while others are existing committees or groups to whose duties the analysis of appropriate data has been added (i.e., the Fine Arts Division, the Technology Committee, the International Focus Committee). Each group is chaired by a member of the Assessment Committee. (See Appendix 13-A for a list of the data analysis groups.)

The College's goals are not stated in terms of student competencies. To correct this problem, the data analysis groups working in fall 2002, identified measurable student learning outcomes for the goal they were evaluating, established expected results (benchmarks), and recommended actions for improvement. A set of six guiding questions and a seven-column matrix structured and standardized the work. (See Appendix 13-B for the set of questions and a sample matrix.) The data analysis groups each put together a notebook with detailed information about their work. (The notebooks are available in the Resource Room.)

Feedback Loop

Originally, the planned feedback loop funneled information from course assessment to the Campuswide Planning Committee. This satisfied the

expectation that the assessment program should provide information to all constituencies on campus, but made the process difficult to carry out because the Campuswide Planning Committee is a large, representative group. In addition, while an overwhelming majority of Cottey faculty members were conducting classroom assessment and making changes in their courses and instructional techniques as a result, very few suggested improvements that required additional resources.

A second feedback loop that funneled information from classroom assessment through the division chairs to the budget process was to be put in place during the 2000-01 academic year, but proved too cumbersome to be effective. In addition, it took into account only changes resulting from course assessment activities and did not consider the results of the more comprehensive measures administered on Assessment Day. (The Assessment Program Progress Report, written in 2000, has more details and is available in the Resource Room.)

Also, the College has a long history of routinely buying and replacing equipment, software, and anything else faculty request for teaching. In response to a survey by the chair of the Assessment Committee in December 2001, 18 of the 22 faculty responding said they had not made budgeting changes due to assessment. (See Appendix 13-C for a copy of the faculty survey on assessment results.) One respondent commented: "Replacing equipment is routine for us. Assessment info has not told me to do this. However, if we were not doing this, student feedback [from assessment] would tell us to." Thus, at present, the existing budgetary framework suffices to fund curricular changes that have been suggested by assessment.

Concerns about the feedback loop have been addressed by the data analysis group process. The faculty members on the Assessment Committee took a leadership role in communicating the results of the data analysis to members of the faculty and the administrative council at the February 2003

and March 2003 (scheduled) faculty meetings. To further establish a feedback loop, the data analysis groups forward recommendations to the Assessment Committee and the committee informs the appropriate department, office, or committee to implement the recommended improvement. Following implementation, the assessment cycle begins again.

To reinforce the importance of using information generated by assessment activities to improve the curriculum, the faculty development seminar scheduled for August 2003, (p. 99) will include assessment information in the discussion "The Learning Students Need for the 21st Century," from the publication *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (2002).

The Levels of Implementation

Having outlined the development and present state of the assessment program at Cottey, this chapter will conclude by evaluating Cottey's assessment program using the patterns of characteristics of the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) Levels of Implementation of assessment of student academic achievement. Cottey's goal is to develop a system of assessment that provides for continuous improvement in student learning; thus, the levels of implementation not yet attained should stand as benchmarks as the College moves its assessment program forward.

Initial comparison of Cottey's program with the patterns of characteristics emerged from the self-study process. To support those findings, the division chairs organized an examination of the levels and patterns by the entire faculty in January 2002. Faculty used a modified analysis worksheet that included only the three levels, not the numbers one through nine. The following table illustrates the mean of faculty responses for each of the patterns of characteristics. (Complete information on the analysis worksheet is available in the Resource Room.)

Table 13.1 - Means From Faculty Survey on Levels of Implementation

Patterns of Characteristics of an Assessment Program	Cottey Level
I. Institutional Culture	2.32
a. Collective/Shared Values	2.36
b. Mission	2.29
II. Shared Responsibility	2.32
a. Faculty	2.27
b. Administration and Board	2.28
c. Students	2.41
III. Institutional Support	2.31
a. Resources	2.54
b. Structures	2.08
IV. Efficacy of Assessment	2.12

I. Institutional Culture: a. Collective/Shared Values

In this area, the institution falls within Level 2 - Making Progress in Implementing Assessment Programs. Generally, faculty regard assessment as widespread and valued by the institution. The majority of faculty see assessment either as an integral part of the institution's culture or as present in most programs and currently expanding its influence. Some feel that the results could be used more effectively, and the work of the data analysis groups demonstrates progress in this area.

I. Institutional Culture: b. Mission

The College's mission and goals statements do indicate the value placed on student learning. Faculty indicated that Level 2 statements clearly apply to Cottey, and expressed confidence that the goals for many academic departments are reflective of the institution's mission and goals. In addition, faculty expressed concern that there is still work to be done to clarify learning expectations and to use the results of assessment to improve learning.

II. Shared Responsibility: a. Faculty

Prior to fall 2002, some faculty were working to use assessment information to modify programs, but only at the classroom level. In addition, there were some faculty conducting classroom assessment not using the data to modify their courses, stating instead that their assessment efforts prove that students are learning. The faculty struggled for several years, attempting to extend course assessment to the department or program level. This difficulty is due, in part to the small size of the college. When a faculty member is the entire department, there is the temptation to extrapolate directly from courses to programs and vice versa.

With new academic leadership, the faculty is now focusing on the College's goals and how they are assessed across the institution. The most common evaluation of faculty on the January 2002 survey is that there now exists enthusiastic participation and assumption of responsibility for assessment on the part of the faculty. The work of the data analysis groups illustrates that Cottey's faculty can develop measurable objectives for the College's goals.

II. Shared Responsibility: b. Administration and Board

The trustees, the President, and administrative council members demonstrate ongoing support of Cottey's assessment program. For example, the successful conduct of Assessment Day activities involves cooperation and commitment on the part of all areas of the campus, and administrative council members give direction to their staffs and provide resources to make that possible.

The process of using consultants and writing the self-study did illuminate for the institution that it had until recently remained at Level 1 in some aspects of administrative commitment. Because of a lack of top level academic leadership in the implementation of the assessment program, the program's development had stalled. The reflection and evaluation involved in the self-study made clear that improvements were needed in the area of

oversight responsibility for the operation and promotion of the assessment program. With new academic leadership providing the required direction and impetus, faculty note a significant recent improvement in administrative commitment that enabled the College to move rather rapidly into patterns more characteristic of Level 2.

II. Shared Responsibility: c. Students

The level of participation by students received the highest mean response in the pattern of shared responsibility. Cottey's assessment program reflects all of the characteristics in Level 2. Students are knowledgeable about assessment; there is student representation on the Assessment Committee and the data analysis groups. The purposes and value of assessment is communicated to students, and they demonstrate clear understanding. Student leadership in promoting Assessment Day is vital to its success. Some faculty feel that in this area of shared responsibility, Cottey has progressed to some facets of Level 3 - Maturing States of Continuous Improvement, although a few feel students could be better informed and committed to assessment.

III. Institutional Support: a. Resources

Considerable resources are devoted to the assessment program, and faculty are positive about the availability of resources and funding for assessment. The mean response to this pattern was the highest. Funding for assessment at Cottey primarily comes from the institutional assessment budget allocation, established in 1993-94, and from the Institutional Research office budget allocations for supplies, communications, and copying. Attendance at conferences devoted to assessment is supplemented by funds allocated by the VPAA and the President.

III. Institutional Support: b. Structures

The existence of an organizational chart, calendar, Assessment Committee, and coordinator of the program are evidence of matching the characteristics of Level 2. The Office of Institutional Research has indeed

been delegated the desirable expanded authority described. Faculty indicate that Cottey's data collection structures are good, but there is some uncertainty about linking assessment outcomes with resources to make changes in academic programs.

IV. Efficacy of Assessment

One year ago it would have been true that "few academic programs and departments are collecting, interpreting, or using data about student learning beyond the level of the individual classroom" (Level 1). In the last year, the College has made significant steps toward a more efficient program. Comments from the faculty survey indicate that the majority of faculty feel Cottey's assessment program is making progress, but that more work is necessary in the development of benchmarks and using assessment results to improve programs.

Through efforts on Assessment Day, the College has collected significant amounts of data on student and program achievements (Level 2); however, that data is inconsistently used as the basis for making changes. The work of the data analysis groups shows progress toward incorporating assessment findings into reviews of the academic program. In Level 3 the patterns "explicit statements regarding the institution's expectations for student learning are widely publicized" and "student learning is central to the culture of the institution" are characteristic of Cottey. As often occurs, characteristics of all three levels are present in examining the efficacy of the assessment program; however, most of the statements that most closely pertain to Cottey's program fall in Level 2.

The self-study process and the review of the Levels of Implementation alerted the College to the fact that the assessment program was not fully implemented at the institutional level. Data collection at that level has been well established as a result of Assessment Day, but until recently there was no uniform system for using the data. The work of the Assessment Committee in

fall 2002 to establish a system for interpreting and analyzing the data, as well as for making recommendations to improve programs, demonstrates that Cottey does understand the elements that make up an effective assessment program. In addition, recent activities take the College beyond simply understanding how the process works, and exhibit a rapid improvement in the level of implementation of the program.

