

Assessment at a Multi-Campus, Multi-Delivery Institution

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Abstract

Davenport University uses course-embedded assessment to show that its graduates have grasped the outcomes of their school, programs, and courses. These assessments must be designed so that they can be uniformly implemented at over two dozen campuses located in urban, suburban, and rural areas that span two states. They must also be delivered in a variety of formats, including traditional, nontraditional, and online.

This presentation will discuss how the challenges of designing and implementing this program were addressed, as well as the results to date. Although the discussion will center on the introductory statistics course, examples from other disciplines will be also be included.

Introduction

A Brief History

In May 2000, Davenport College, Detroit College of Business, and Great Lakes College began operating under the name Davenport University. As part of the transition to become a single university, the faculty was given the task of creating a unified curriculum to be implemented in the fall of 2003. As part of the development of the new curriculum, the faculty was asked to keep in mind the University's mission "to prepare individuals and organizations for success in the knowledge driven environment of the 21st century" and its embodiment as represented by the DUES™.

The integration of a common set of skills was based on the adoption of the Davenport University Excellence System™ (the DUES™), which form the base for Davenport's assessment program. All courses in the curriculum must address the three major categories of Dynamic Leadership, Global Communication, and Professional Excellence. The skills outlined in the DUES™ are on all syllabi used, and the design of the assessment program to ensure that every specific skill in the DUES™ is assessed in some way in every degree program. As can be seen from the following list, the DUES™ address both general education and career skills:

- Leadership - How does the student show and understand guidance?
- Reasoning and Problem Solving - How does the student think through problems?
- Teamwork - How does the student work within a group?
- Interpersonal Communication - How does the student interact /respond with others?

- Oral Communication - How does the student present ideas verbally?
- Written Communication - How does the student convey ideas in written form?
- Global Perspective - How does the student recognize different perspectives?
- Honesty and Integrity - How does the student act ethically and with accountability?
- Computer Proficiency - How does the student stay current with technology?
- Information Literacy - How does the student show commitment to learning?
- Mathematical Literacy - How does the student apply analytical and problem-solving skills?
- Career Skills - How does the student develop a career plan?

In essence, every assignment a Davenport University student completes is geared toward answering at least one of the questions above. (Funaro, McGee, & Colatosti, 2004)

The Plan

Recognizing the large-scale challenge that assessment represents, the University decided upon using course-embedded assessments in the classes that are most common to every student, delivery, and campus. These courses form the core of the students' program, and include: Foundations of Excellence I (Associate's level general education coursework), Foundations of Excellence II (Bachelor's level general education coursework), Business Foundations, and the "Major". For each designated course, the faculty members were asked to identify a naturally-occurring assignment (i.e., this assignment was part of the coursework, regardless of instructor, location, or delivery). They were then asked to create a standardized version of the assignment that would then become a mandatory part of the class. During this process, the faculty also identified which course, program, and school outcomes, as well as which DUEStm components, the assignment reflected.

The assignments served a second purpose as well: by collecting these assignments, students create a "portfolio" of their educational experience. At the end of their degree program, student take a 'Capstone' course designed to be the culmination of their educational experience. The first assignment in the Capstone course is to choose several of these assignment 'artifacts', and write a reflection paper on how these items demonstrate their growth as a student, and as a person.

Challenges

Faculty Acceptance

An initial advantage for Davenport was that, in the process of merging and unification, there were no established universal assessment tools for the faculty to cite as precedent; this lack of "sacred cows" allowed the University to more easily implement the new standards. Importantly, the University asked the faculty, themselves, to design the artifacts. Although this wasn't always the most efficient route, the faculty members would have a harder time objecting to their own tool, in comparison with an externally designed one (e.g., commercially-available standardized test). This process also served as a workshop in pedagogy, as instructors shared their ideas during the creation of each assessment measure. The final, and largest, selling point for using standardized assessment measures was that it offers a means to control quality.

Communicating With Adjunct Faculty

The nature of Davenport University necessitates using a high proportion of adjunct faculty, who in addition to being academicians, are actively employed in their fields. While students benefit from, and enjoy having, instructors from the "real-world", those instructors tend to operate independently. Fortunately, the general consensus among the department coordinators (Davenport's direct link to their adjunct population) is that the adjunct faculty members are "open" to guidance regarding curriculum. Unfortunately, since most of our adjuncts are employed fulltime in their discipline, their availability for additional meetings or trainings is quite limited. Direct meetings with large groups of faculty also tend to be cost-intensive. To resolve this issue, a section describing the details of the artifact was added to the syllabus template for each appropriate course. This section described the assignment, the outcomes it addressed, and suggested assessment criteria, ranging from point break-downs to full rubrics.

Implementation across Various Deliveries

Among the various deliveries that Davenport University offers are traditional, condensed, online, accelerated, and external learning options (e.g., video, independent, etc.). While the goal was to maintain the same level of rigor and quality throughout, accommodations were made for logistic reasons. Some artifacts were designed to be group projects; these turned out to be difficult for students taking the course as an independent study. Online courses presented challenges for group projects, as well as projects requiring presentations. The input from online personnel regarding their unique circumstances had the benefit of causing the artifacts to be subjected to an additional round of clarifications and corrections before the courses were ever taught.

The Assessment Process

The artifacts are collected on a three year rotation; the first collection took place in the fall of 2003. A systematic approach to sampling the artifacts was used: each instructor submitted to their division chair un-graded copies of the project from every fifth student on their class roster. The division chair then divided the collected artifacts among a review task force comprised of faculty from their division, as well as representative members from each college. Currently, the review consists of checking the artifact for individual completeness and overall consistency in design, as well as whether outcomes and DUES™ are reflected within the students' work. The results are compiled by the division chair and then forwarded to their dean and the institutional research department.

Unexpected Challenges

As if the subjective nature of assessing whether an artifact addressed certain outcomes or DUES™ components wasn't challenging enough, problems never before dreamt continued to manifest themselves. Among the many discoveries made in the review process were: instructors misinterpreting written instructions for the assignment of artifacts, instructors misinterpreting written instructions for the collection of artifacts, and technical difficulties with collecting artifacts (e.g., variety of media format for video tapes).

Conclusions

Results To Date

The results of the review of artifacts collected in fall semester 2003 were presented to the entire faculty in February, 2004. Changes that were made as a result of the analysis ranged from minor (placing additional clarifications in the syllabus template) to major (redesign of the artifact). These changes were not restricted to reviewed items, only; based on the discussions that followed, several non-reviewed projects were deemed too ambitious or unwieldy, and were made more modest in scope.

Final Thoughts

If the University's assessment program was about process improvement, then its ability to expose "areas for future improvement" has proved successful. Many of our difficulties resulted from difficulties in communication; to remedy this, division chairs are now visiting campuses more often. Additionally, the adjunct faculty members have been encouraged to contact their division chairs directly, rather than their department coordinators, with any curriculum issues. The remainder of the difficulties arose from unrealistically ambitious expectations, partially the result of establishing new ground. The majority of faculty members, while convinced that they personally are effective teachers, have no training in formal assessment; they teach as they were taught. Our advice to other institutions embarking on a similar venture would be to strive to maintain intensive communication between parties, and to offer formal assessment training to faculty, prior to the design process. A final caveat for high consideration: *Always err on the side of the student*. We all have grandiose ideas of what our courses should be, but it is only through experience that we discover whether our expectations are reasonable. Students should never be disadvantaged as we explore new academic territory.

References

1. Funaro, R., McGee, N., & Colatosti, C. (2004). *Resolving the dichotomy: integrating general education and the major*. Lecture presented for the Higher Learning Commission 109th Annual Meeting, San Antonio, TX.
2. Riegel, K. (2004). Course-embedded assessment, portfolios, artifacts: Where can they take us? *DU Virtual Connection*, 4(3). (Internal Publication)