Chapter XXIV
Method Development for Assessing a Diversity Goal

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the authors describe a method developed to assess the outcome of a "cultural familiarity" general education goal. Challenges in defining, measuring, and providing summary information on variables of interest are discussed. We review the process of developing our own "oral examination" assessment method, explain our rationale for using this particular method, and suggest that locally-developed methods – this one and others – may have particular benefits that make them especially useful for program review and revision. In addition, we provide insight about how this specific method could be adapted to provide meaningful data for other goals that are similarly difficult to assess in a higher education environment.

INTRODUCTION

Four years ago, the University of North Dakota (UND) went through the once-every-ten-years process of institutional re-accreditation by a regional accrediting agency, in our case, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. In recent years, the accreditation process has come to routinely include close attention to assessment of student learning. Assessing learning within degree programs is a challenge with which many institutions still struggle. But assessing general education outcomes is a particular challenge (Aloi, Gardner, & Lusher, 2003). The accreditation team's report to the university in the wake of our site visit emphasized the need to improve our work in assessment of learning, citing assessment within the general education program as a particular weakness.

In this chapter, we describe one project that was developed in response to the clear need, pointed out by accreditors but also recognized by internal constituencies, to overhaul and improve our assessment within general education. Many of the earliest and most productive efforts to assess general education outcomes have focused around goals for which learning outcomes can be relatively easily documented, most notably in the areas of critical thinking, written communication, and oral presentation (Banta, 2007, Blattner & Frazier, 2004; Eder, 2004; Greene, 2003; Lusher, 2003; Morreale, Rubin, & Jones, 1998). But what about other goals like cultural understanding or ethical development? How do we document learning in these areas?

The project outlined in this chapter was a locally-developed solution to the need for a direct assessment of student learning around UND's "cultural familiarity" goal, one of a handful of general education goals that are common nation-wide, but for which student learning is difficult to document. What methods can generate data about outcomes for a goal that's abstract and somewhat ambiguous? What methods will result in information that faculty will find interesting, informative, persuasive, and useful?

These questions are explored in this chapter. We describe our process of developing a measure that proved useful for examining student learning around a diversity goal, and we identify lessons learned from that process. Furthermore, we describe the method developed and provide our thoughts about how that method could be adapted to provide meaningful data for other goals that are similarly difficult to assess. Finally, we argue that "home-grown" qualitative methods of assessment, while perhaps out of step with the national drive toward comparability of measures, can often be more meaningful and more useful for curriculum revision than commercially available standardized assessments.

NAMING A DIVERSITY GOAL

Most university systems have a goal pertaining to diversity and student learning. Yet diversity itself is an evolving and contested term that invites debate. Shifting cultural, racial, and national boundaries encourage us to continually rethink how we frame diversity (AAC&U, 2006); thus it comes as no surprise that, while campuses almost uniformly have diversity goals, they also have quite divergent language describing these goals. Diversity goals may be very general or quite specific. For example, while some students may be encouraged to "respond thoughtfully to diversity," (West Chester University, 2008) others may be charged with studying "the interrelationships of individuals, racial groups, and cultural groups to understand and appreciate issues of diversity, equality, and structured inequality in the U.S., its institutions, and its cultures" (San Jose State University, 2005). In this context, diversity is understood to "include the experiences and/or contributions of those varying in (including but

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