**2011 Assessment Report Feedback – Women’s and Gender Studies**

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First, thanks to you and colleagues for completing and submitting the department’s 2011 assessment report. The document provides a helpful overview of the WGS curriculum. As noted in earlier feedback from the Assessment Committee (see esp. 2009 feedback from Vicki Baker), the outlined plans seem to provide a solid foundation for future assessment efforts.

A significant concern, however, is that assessment efforts in WGS seem to have stalled, with little tangible implementation of the good ideas and proposed frameworks outlined in the department’s 2009 assessment plan/report. Both the 2010 and 2011 reports, for instance, note that student learning data was to be collected for the introductory major courses (106 and 116), but that the data was either lost or otherwise mishandled.

*Due to this lack of clear progress, most of Vicki Baker’s comments, concerns, and suggestions regarding the 2009 assessment report still apply to assessment efforts and results in WGS*. Thus, I have copied those comments below, and added my own comments where appropriate in response to the WGS 2010 and 2011 assessment reports (newer comments below are introduced by the initials SH, and formatted in red font).

*Step 1:  Mission*

Based on the additional information provided in the report, the mission appears to be aligned well with the program components and is a good representation of the program overall. Our only suggestion is that the mission statement probably should include students in the mix, since they are the focus of departmental teaching efforts, and since student learning is the focus of the assessment plan and assessment efforts generally.

SH: I second the suggestion that you emphasize student learning goals/outcomes more directly in mission statement, especially for use with assessment plans and reports; doing so could especially help external audiences (e.g., Assessment Committee, Accreditation Team members, prospective students and faculty in other departments) understand more fully the connections between your department’s theoretical foundations and the learning goals/outcomes for students in department.

*Step 2:  Outcomes*

My only concern with the outcomes is the sheer number.  This is a lot to assess/to ensure that your program structure/curricular progression is achieving. There might be a way to collapse some of these into broader categories.  By no means is this suggestion a requirement, but again, I am just concerned about your ability to effectively assess whether these outcomes are being achieved.

One possible way to reorganize your outcomes is as follows: Department might organize all of the outcomes into 2-3 categories (e.g., areas of knowledge; specific abilities?), and focus initial assessment efforts on one of the categories. Categories might also be developed as Intro, Mid-career, and Advanced (plus lots of other options!). Or, perhaps select 2-3 key outcomes from the longer list and start with these few outcomes (those outcomes that are foundational, or cut across most courses, etc.—again, lots of options for defining and focusing outcomes).

\*\*\*In fact, you may already have these categories listed in Step 3: Institutions or Knowledge Systems, etc. *OR, the A, B, C, D list of four major “pieces”?*

SH: I’ll echo Vicki’s earlier comments; organizing several of the 12 learning outcomes under the four categories listed in Step 3 should be a helpful (and relatively minor) change to already developed assessment plans within the department. This change would perhaps allow for greater implementation of the assessment plan, since fewer learning outcomes would likely seem less complicated and less of a burden for faculty and staff to put into practice. In addition, faculty conversations about restructuring learning outcomes would perhaps lead to greater collective understanding, awareness, and interest in fostering and reporting on student learning within the program. (Indeed, a key goal of assessment efforts is to provide forums and reasons for faculty within and across departments to discuss student learning outcomes as well as the means and methods to help students reach these outcomes.)

\*\*\*See additional comments about the above suggestion under Steps 5 & 6 below.

*Step 3: Program components*

I appreciate you listing the program requirements as they relate to the various outcomes you listed in Step 2. However, you need to provide specific examples that clearly articulate (1) how the actual outcomes are being achieved, and (2) how you are assessing IF they are being achieved.

To address Point #1 – Provide specific examples of courses that support and achieve each outcome /fall under each of the 5 emphases with corresponding examples of readings, activities, assignments, etc. that are specifically aimed at getting students to think about these issues/achieve the outcomes.

Related to the comment above - Under each emphasis, I know courses are offered in a range of disciplines and they can count towards meeting this requirement (correct me if I am wrong).  If this is the case, you need to assess that what students learn in one course in this category is comparable to what students learn in a different course (but within the same emphasis). In other words, there needs to be some commonality and assessment method that ensures that the available options within an emphasis are achieving the same goals.

To address Point #2 – What assessment methods are you using?  Do you conduct exit interviews with graduating seniors?  Do you conduct alumni surveys?  Do you hold focus groups with current students to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum?  Do you have common grading rubrics or do the faculty who teach courses for WGS have regular meetings to assess program effectiveness, curricular issues, etc.?  While you do not need to address ALL of the questions, I am posing, you need to address some.  You also need an ongoing plan of assessment which needs to include both direct and indirect measures of assessment.  Examples of direct measures may include tests/examinations, assignments/papers/projects, portfolios and field experience evaluations (to name a few). Examples of indirect measures include retention, graduation, placement rates, surveys (alumni, student), and grades (e.g., do you see students’ performance improving or decreasing over time?).

SH: For the sake of document clarity and ease of understanding (especially for external audiences), please list/include the appropriate WGS courses in this section, rather than refer readers to the college catalog.

*Step 4: Methods/Data*

The proposed major exit interview/capstones sounds like a feasible method and helpful instrument for assessment student learning, especially as you are able to connect student questions and responses back to WGS learning outcomes (and assuming that your scoring or recording rubric is appropriate).

It’s unclear, however, what you see as the relationships between the exit interview and the course components/requirements listed in Step 3. *In fact, the expectation for this section of your assessment plan is that you would describe/discuss the methods and instruments currently being used (or planned) for gathering information about whether (and how) the learning outcomes (Step 2) are being achieved in the various program components presented in Step 3*.

You also need to use both direct and indirect methods of assessment. In assessing student learning, there are direct and indirect sources of evidence. Direct evidence is clear and convincing information about student learning, such as: tests, examinations, papers, projects, assignments, field experience assessments, and portfolios. These are particularly strong sources of evidence especially when accompanied by articulated standards (such as a rubric). On the other hand, with indirect evidence there is room for other factors to affect the outcomes either positively or negatively. Examples of indirect evidence include: retention, graduation, and placement rates (may be impacted by economic conditions or college policies); surveys of students and alumni (may indicate feelings about college experience); grades (standards and even content may differ across instructors and institutions).

SH: A few additional comments about this section of recent WGS reports. The WGS exit interview student comments (from May 2010 report) are indirect information about assessment in the department: that is, the exit interview responses capture student perceptions/opinions about their own learning and the WGS program, rather than actual student learning. A quick review of the exit interview questions confirms that these are not designed to elicit student learning responses.

In addition, the 106/116 “instrument for assessment” would be a helpful document to include in future assessment reports (even if the plan is to move away from this instrument), both to demonstrate that the department has developed this document, and so that others could review and provide helpful feedback, as appropriate (which might provide guidance that would enable the department to adapt and implement the instrument in relatively easy steps).

*Step 5: Analyze and interpret the data*

SH: As mentioned at the start of this feedback document, the fact that data was supposed to collected for the WGS introductory courses (106/116), but was either not collected or subsequently lost raises concerns that assessment efforts have stalled within the department.

In general, it might be a really helpful step to go back and review/revise the WGS student learning objectives with the goal of deciding *which 1-3 learning goals (of the 12 total) are most important for students and the WGS faculty*; then discuss and figure out where in the major students are introduced to, are asked to apply, and/or are asked to expand on the most important learning outcomes. (Vicki suggests this as a possible approach in her comments above, under Step 2). Make these fewer learning goals your starting place: begin with small but feasible steps and plans, ones that you are almost certain you will be able to implement without adding to the workload of faculty and students...

*Step 6: How will the data collected be used for decision-making, strategic planning, etc.*

SH: Information/discussion should be added for this section.

The discussion would be especially helpful if the section explained how and why changes to the assessment plan, or to the major, have been attempted and/or implemented (casual faculty conversations, review of student learning information, formal proposals from faculty or students, etc.).

For example, the May 2011 assessment report notes that the WGS committee decided to shift from assessing student learning into 106/116 to the junior-level theory courses (with assessment to take place during senior year). However, the report is unclear on specific reasons for this shift in focus.

In any case, good arguments could be made for keeping the 106/116 assessment *and adding* assessment for the junior-level theory courses: this two-tier model should provide a useful gateway-to-capstone framework that creates opportunities for gauging student learning in the time and the major courses between their entry into the WGS major and conclusion of the junior-level theory course (with assessment to take place during senior year).

Finally, note a potential concern about the proposal to add a senior year paper for assessment purposes: while this could be a feasible (and valuable) model, it also adds to work that students and faculty are already doing (assuming that faculty will be called upon to evaluate the papers). Embedded student learning assessments are often easier to implement--such as a similar paper assignment that all theory students would complete at end of this course (junior year?). This is true especially in the early stages of developing assessment programs within a departmental major. (That is, build on what students and faculty are already doing in major courses, rather than add external measures and thus extra work for all parties involved.)

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For your next round of assessment plan updating, please consider the comments, suggestions, and recommendations above, and incorporate these as feasible and appropriate. Our hope is that departments will actively and routinely use assessment activities as practical tools for informing curricular and pedagogical change; in such cases, departmental assessment plans and reports will be able to show how departmental assessment efforts have informed program improvements, enhancing student learning within the major.

Please contact your Assessment Committee liaison if you have follow-up questions, comments, or concerns.