A Process for Establishing Outcomes-Based Assessment Plans for Writing and Speaking in the Disciplines

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Outcomes-based assessment is gaining prominence in higher education. Many regional accreditation agencies are either strongly encouraging or requiring that colleges and universities under their purview instate this kind of assessment.[1] Professional accreditation organizations are also moving toward outcomes-based assessment. Perhaps the most dramatic case has been the American Board of Engineering and Technology (ABET), but there are others as well. For example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the Institute of Food Technologists, and the Council on Social Work Education are either considering or have fully established this assessment method for accrediting member institutions.[2] In addition, many colleges and universities, such as mine, have embraced outcomes-based assessment as a way of encouraging continual improvement in academic programs and of demonstrating accountability.

Outcomes-based assessment invites us to view our courses and curricula from a different perspective. We're used to thinking about education primarily in terms of inputs: we designate a particular set of courses for students to take and when the course count is completed we declare them educated and send them on their way. We assume that the inputs we provide for students will lead to certain outcomes, the knowledge, skills, and other attributes we believe graduates should possess. However, an outcomes-based approach to education does not rely only on assumption. By that method, faculty identify the educational outcomes for a pro-

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gram and then evaluate the program according to its effectiveness in enabling students to achieve those outcomes.

The main advantage of this outcomes perspective is that it provides data for closing the educational feedback loop, that is, faculty can use the results of program assessment to further improve their programs. In addition to this general benefit, an outcomes-based model also has potential advantages for writing and speaking professionals working in the disciplines. First, asking faculty in the disciplines to identify writing and speaking outcomes for their programs—either as part of an institution-wide initiative or, on a smaller scale, focusing individually on departments—encourages greater faculty investment in their students' writing and speaking. Because these outcomes reflect the values and goals of the disciplinary faculty, not those of outsiders, the outcomes may possess greater credibility with the faculty in the discipline. The role of the writing and speaking professional, then, is to work with faculty in the disciplines to help them make their insider's knowledge and expectations explicit, to enable them to recognize and define their own expertise in writing and speaking in their disciplines.

Second, asking faculty in the disciplines to assess their students' writing and speaking based on the disciplinary outcomes they themselves have created places the responsibility for writing and speaking in the majors on the program faculty. Writing and speaking become intimately tied to disciplinary ways of thinking and professional discourses of the field. Thus, the quality of students' writing and speaking is also an indicator of students' ability to master the ways of thinking and professional discourses of a discipline. Communication abilities are not outside the discipline, solely the purview of writing teachers, but linked directly to the discipline and are thus the responsibility primarily of faculty in the disciplines. The role of the writing and speaking professional, then, is not to take on the task of teaching students to communicate more effectively but to better enable program faculty to meet their responsibility for their students' writing and speaking.

And third, involving disciplinary faculty in outcomes-based assessment encourages them to take a wider view of writing and speaking in their programs. One of the problems of incorporating writing- or speaking-intensive courses in the disciplines is that faculty tend to see communication as isolated within their programs, something to be taken care of elsewhere, not in their own courses. However, program outcomes lead to a programmatic perspective. Writing and speaking come to be seen as critical throughout the program. Students' failure to meet an identified outcome means that faculty must look at the entire program to identify opportunities to improve students' learning. The role of the writing and speaking professional is to help faculty recognize those opportunities and design instruction that will better enable students to meet the outcome.

Thus, the function of writing and speaking professionals may change in an outcomes-based model of assessment. This paper focuses on the first role mentioned above, helping faculty in the disciplines identify program outcomes and devise assessment procedures for measuring those outcomes. At my university, we have been involved in university-wide, outcomes-based assessment for over five years and have developed a procedure for working with program faculty to generate assessment plans. I will present that procedure in detail here as an aid to writing and speaking professionals interested in initiating or in taking a more prominent position in an outcomes-based program on their campuses.

Institutional Context at NC State

Institutional context is, of course, critically important. The particular history and ethos of a college or university shapes its writing and/or speaking programs in particular ways. In order to provide a better understanding of the NC State program, I will briefly describe its background.

In spring 1997, a university committee submitted a proposal for a rather modest writing-across-the-curriculum program instituting two writing-intensive courses within the majors, ideally one each in the junior and senior years. Much to our surprise, the proposal was rejected by the provost and deans, who asked us instead to design a more ambitious program that would: (1) focus on speaking as well as writing, (2) place primary responsibility for writing and speaking in the majors on the faculty in each department, and (3) hold departments accountable for writing and speaking in their majors through outcomes-based assessment. After a brief period of shock, we set about designing a discipline-specific, outcomes-based writing and speaking program.

It was clear that we could not simply expect the colleges and departments to manage writing and speaking assessment by themselves. Thus, the university created the Campus Writing and Speaking Program (CWSP) to provide guidance to departments for assessment and to offer faculty and course development related to writing and speaking. The CWSP began by creating a plan whereby it would work with each of the nine undergraduate colleges over five years to help departments generate writing and speaking outcomes and procedures for evaluating those outcomes. After this process had begun, the CWSP provided additional support for faculty through an extensive program of faculty development workshops, seminars, and grants.

In the fourth year of the five-year plan, another NC State faculty committee launched a university-wide assessment initiative that mandated all academic programs be reviewed periodically through outcomes-based assessment. This change in program review dove-tailed quite well with the ongoing writing and speaking assessment because we had realized very early in the process that, to a large extent, writing and speaking outcomes are also curricular outcomes: the sophisticated knowledge and skills that faculty expect of their graduates can best be demonstrated (as well as taught) by students' writing and speaking.

The university program review and the CWSP have worked closely with each other toward mutual goals. The program review has taken advantage of the fact that the campus had already been thinking in terms of outcomes-based assessment and so many departments had already generated assessment plans. The CWSP has taken advantage of the university's putting its full weight and resources behind outcomes-based assessment. The CWSP continued to work with departments in creating outcomes-based assessment plans.

NC State's CWSP represents one approach to writing and speaking in the disciplines. There are, however, other ways an outcomes-based model can be applied. For example, it could be used with just one department or college seeking a better focus for its curriculum. It could also be used in conjunction with writing- or speaking-intensive courses to help program faculty to consider students' communication abilities within a wider programmatic framework. The following process, then, may be useful in a variety of institutional contexts.

A Process for Generating an Outcomes-Based Program Assessment Plan

Outcomes-based assessment of academic programs typically seeks answers to three questions: (1) What are the outcomes—skills, knowledge, and other attributes—that graduates of the program should attain? (2) To what extent is the program enabling its graduates to attain the outcomes? and (3) How can faculty use what they learn from program assessment to improve their programs so as to better enable graduates to attain the outcomes?

The first question marks the starting point for the process; outcomes-based assessment must begin with outcomes. After identifying outcomes, program faculty answer the second question by assessing the program according to the outcomes, which requires an assessment procedure. The last of the three questions is the most important. The primary purpose of outcomes-based assessment is, as I have said, to provide program faculty the opportunity and the data for improving their programs. Faculty can close the feedback loop of the assessment process by using the data from the program assessment to discern strengths and weaknesses of the program and find ways to build on the strengths and target areas that need improvement.

In this paper, I will address the first two of the three questions, describing a process we have developed at NC State to guide faculty in the disciplines in identifying outcomes and generating assessment procedures to evaluate those outcomes. The following process is designed to meet three criteria. It should be:

1. student centered, i.e., it should place students at the center of the process by focusing on student learning outcomes;
2. faculty driven, i.e., it should encourage broad faculty investment in and responsibility for teaching and assessing program learning outcomes; and
3. meaningful, i.e., it should provide the data and the means for faculty to make valid and appropriate improvements in their programs.

1. *Setting the stage.* The initial goal of the assessment process is to establish a committee of program faculty for the writing and speaking professional as facilitator to work with.

But before that can occur, it's important to prepare the way by involving college and departmental administrators in the process. Even though we are seeking a bottom-up engagement in assessment, we cannot ignore the top-down administrative structures of most colleges and universities. Sometimes this can be a time-consuming part of the process, so it's best to begin early.

Our work with each departmental program starts at the college level. The facilitator meets with the associate dean for academic affairs, the second-in-command after the dean, and also with the dean if she would like to be involved. We explain the institutional background of the assessment process, describe its goals, provide examples of assessment plans from other colleges, and then ask for guidance on how to proceed in that college. This latter move is the critical one. It includes the deans as partners in the process, allowing the facilitator to take advantage of their political stature within the college and their understanding of its culture. This usually provides a valuable insider's perspective into the college, its programs, its needs, its politics, all of which may be useful in working with departments in the college.

Next, the facilitator moves to the level of department heads. We prefer to meet with the college deans and department heads together if such a venue is possible. The facilitator runs through the same topics as above, ending as before by asking the department heads for their suggestions for making the process work in their departments and in the college as a whole. If there is no opportunity for meeting with the heads together, then we set up individual meetings, also including the undergraduate coordinators or associate heads of the department and, perhaps, other critical faculty, such as the chair of the departmental curriculum and instruction committee. In a large university such as ours, we have found that it is the undergraduate coordinators or associate heads who typically become the primary and most valuable contact in the departments.

The last element of setting the stage is to visit faculty meetings of the various departments we will be working with. It is at this point that we being to involve the faculty directly in developing an assessment plan. The facilitator gives a five-minute overview of the procedure, its goals, the process we will follow, a sample assessment plan from a similar department, and the potential value for the department's programs. After the short presentation, the facilitator takes questions for as long as the meeting's agenda allows, responding as frankly as possible (see Dealing with Resistance below). This is a critical meeting because it is where faculty buy-in must begin.

We have found that this procedure of working down through the administrative ranks works well at a university as large and decentralized as ours. Colleges and universities that are smaller or more centralized many not require such an elaborate operation for setting the stage. Whatever the situation, though, it is helpful for the facilitator to be sensitive to the political structure of the institution and to work effectively within that structure.

2. *Establishing a program assessment committee.* Creating the assessment plan is the task of a committee of program faculty who are assigned or volunteer to work with the facilitator. Usually, the undergraduate coordinator or associate head will appoint faculty to the committee or identify an appropriate standing committee to work with. We generally ask that the committee meet three criteria:

(a) it should be representative, i.e., it should be composed of faculty from the major elements of a department so that the final document produced by this committee reflects the outcomes of the faculty as a whole. For example, a committee from the department of history may consist of faculty from American history, modern European history, ancient and non-Western history, and philosophy of history and historiography.

(b) it should be large enough to be representative but not so large as to be unwieldy. We prefer groups in the range of five to eight faculty.[3]

(c) it should be able to focus its attention on the assessment plan. One of the problems with working with standing committees such as a department's curriculum and instruction committee is that they usually have very full agendas. One such committee kept putting us off for more pressing matters until the time allotted for them had disappeared.

How the facilitator interacts with these committees is also important. It's a good idea, for example, never to chair the committee. Not only would that burden the facilitator with calling the meetings and sending out reminders and trying to work with faculty members' schedules, but it also projects the impression that it is the facilitator who is in charge, the one who is responsible for the assessment plan, thus sending a mixed message as to her role as facilitator. In conjunction with that, the facilitator should also play close attention to other aspects of committee management in order to place authority and responsibility for the process on the faculty. For example, always let the chair of the committee initiate the meeting, avoid sitting at the head of a conference table, and defer whenever possible to the chair when there are disagreements among members or logistical issues to be decided. It is important to demonstrate that it is the program faculty who are in charge of the process and that the facilitator is there primarily to make their job easier.

3. *Explaining the task to the committee.* At the first meeting of the program assessment committee it is necessary to make sure all the members understand the purpose and goals of the process. The facilitator may quickly restate some of the material presented during the faculty meeting (if there had been a faculty meeting), place the committee's task within the broader assessment process of the university, and then describe in more detail what it is that the committee will produce and the recommended process it may follow. The committee's assessment plan will consist of objectives, outcomes, and a procedure for assessing the outcomes. It is helpful for the facilitator to define each of these terms.[4]

(a) *Objectives* are broad goals that the program expects to achieve, defining in relatively general terms the knowledge and skills the program faculty will help its students to attain.

(b) *Outcomes* are operational definitions for each of the objectives. Because educational objectives are broadly stated, they do not provide enough detail to be teachable and measurable, that is, to guide teaching in the curriculum and to be reliably assessed. Thus, they should be written in a way that is demonstrable, that is, they should state what it means to demonstrate the knowledge and skills named in the objectives.

(c) An *assessment procedure* outlines the methods program faculty will follow to determine the degree to which the program is enabling students to attain the outcomes. It typically identifies for each outcome what data will be gathered, what kind of assessment tools will be applied to the data, and when assessment will be done.

To help the committee members comprehend and keep up with the overall process, we give them a checklist of the various tasks of the committee (see Figure 1). And to set their minds at ease about the commitment they are taking on, we make it clear that mainly what we need from them is their time and disciplinary expertise. The work of drafting the assessment plan will be the job of the facilitator.

__ 1. Draft of program objectives (a list of broad goals the program seeks to achieve)

___2. Draft of program outcomes (a list of specific, teachable and measurable skills, knowledge, abilities majors are expected to achieve)

___ 3. Objectives and outcomes approved by program faculty

___ 4. Draft of program assessment procedure (the data to be gathered and the form of analysis to be used for each outcome)

___ 5. Program assessment procedure approved by program faculty

___ 6. Assessment initiated (begin to gather and analyze data)

___ 7. Preliminary report submitted to college Courses and Curriculum Committee and University Academic Program Review:

- list of approved program objectives
- list of approved program outcomes
- approved program review plan
- results of initial assessment
- description of assessment activities to be carried out in the following year

Figure 1 This handout is given to faculty on a program assessment committee. It outlines the initial steps in the outcomes-assessment process.

4. *Dealing with resistance.* As you can imagine, some faculty members may be initially resistant to outcomes-based assessment. And this resistance is often expressed in the first meeting of the program assessment committee (also in the faculty meeting). We can certainly appreciate the source of such resistance. Course-counting has served as our standard of practice for so long it is difficult for many faculty to see any other way. A significant change in the status quo, and particularly the prospect of being held accountable for program outcomes, may understandably generate feelings of threat.

So after the introductory remarks, the facilitator invites comments and questions about the assessment procedure (often an invitation is not necessary). It's extremely important that faculty be given the opportunity to speak their minds as well as that the facilitator demonstrate that she is open to their concerns and will not dismiss them. Often, we will spend the entire first meeting dealing with resistance. And that's perfectly fine. We know what drives it and do our best not to take it personally. The challenge is to avoid becoming defensive, to listen to faculty concerns and respond with empathy and good humor. In our experience, the overwhelming majority of resistant faculty will energetically engage in generating the assessment plan once they are able to voice their objections and to see that those objections have been heard.

Here are some of the questions and comments faculty may bring up:

- Why do we have to do this?
- Who's behind this, who's making us to this?
- Is there any evidence that this outcomes-based approach actually improves programs?
- Focusing only on measurable outcomes reduces our program only to what is measurable. All the non-measurable goals we have will no longer be of value.
- How's this going to be used against us? What kinds of punishment will there be if we don't meet our outcomes? Are we going to have our funding cut?
- We're already way too busy with what we're doing now. How in the world will we be able to find the time to do all this assessment stuff?
- We already give grades to students in our courses? Why can't we just use those grades for assessing our program? If students are passing our courses, that

must mean we are doing a good job. Or doesn't the university trust the faculty?

- I think it's unfair to evaluate individual faculty this way.
- This process assumes there are problems with our program. What evidence is there that such problems exist?
- What happens if we don't do assessment?

These are all legitimate issues and deserve a fair response. Often they are the result of misunderstandings that can be easily clarified; sometimes they are only exhibitions of resistance. In all cases, the facilitator should take them seriously and respond as helpfully as possible. (Responses to some of these and other questions may be found at http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/academic_programs/uapr/FAQ/UAPRFAQ.html; see also Patton et al.).

5. *Eliciting information about program objectives and outcomes*. Now it's time to turn to the task of generating objectives and outcomes. We avoid asking the committee directly to identify program outcomes, which can make for a very constricted conversation punctuated by lots of squirming in chairs. Rather, it's best to start indirectly by asking open-ended questions that encourage faculty to talk about their program, particularly its value, what it offers its students, and what opportunities for student learning and performance of learning it provides (see Figure 2). Our strategy is to take detailed notes of the conversation generated by the questions, trying to capture as much of the language of the faculty as possible. It usually takes somewhere between forty-five minutes and one-and-a-half hours to get enough information to begin drafting objectives and outcomes.

We have found that it is best not to start this process with any list of departmental goals that may have been previously drawn up. Such goals are generally created by administrators and are not likely to encourage the faculty investment that comes of a process that involves the faculty in defining their own values for teaching and learning. Indeed, the facilitator will likely find that this step is the most enjoyable part of the process. Typically, all resistance disappears because faculty love talking about their programs, especially with a very interested outsider. Also, the experience provides the facilitator a unique opportunity to understand a discipline from an insider's perspective.

Questions for Brainstorming Objectives and Outcomes

Imagine an ideal graduate from your program. What kinds of skills, knowledge, or other attributes characterize that graduate?

What is it that attracts students to this program?

What value does this program offer a student?

How do you know whether your students possess the kinds of abilities, knowledge, skills, and attributes you expect of them?

What kinds of assignments or other activities do people in this program use to encourage the kinds of abilities, knowledge, and skills you have identified?

What is it that distinguishes this program from related programs in the university?

Is there anything about your program that makes it stand out from other similar programs?

What kinds of research methodologies are people in this field expected to perform?

Oftentimes, disciplines are defined by ways of thinking. What does it mean to think like a person in this discipline?

What kinds of jobs do students in this field generally take?

What kinds of skills are appropriate to jobs in this field?

How do you know whether students possess those skills?

What advantages does a student in this program have on the job?

What sorts of speaking and writing do professionals in this field do on the job?

What sorts of speaking and writing do students do in their classes?

Are there any particular types of communication that people this field are expected to master?

Figure 2: These are questions the facilitator can use for initiating and guiding the conversation with faculty concerning program objectives and outcomes. They are meant to be heuristic, not to be rigorously covered by the facilitator.

6. *Drafting objectives and outcomes.* The next, and perhaps the most challenging, step is to use the notes to draft objectives and outcomes that the program faculty will readily see as reflective of their own program. This means identifying the broader values or goals, which could become objectives, and the detailed information about each of those goals, which could become outcomes.

One way of doing this is to:

(a) type up and print the notes while the conversation is fresh and it is still possible to elaborate where the notes may be sketchy;

(b) read the printed notes several times, at first just to get a sense of the whole and then to search out superordinate ideas or themes: broad concepts that emerged from the conversation, ideas that are repeated, points that faculty members particularly emphasized, key words or phrases that keep coming up, etc.;

(c) mark the themes in the text of the notes and make a list of them, eliminating all but the ones that seem to be most important to the faculty;

(d) rearrange the electronic version of the notes to create a rough thematic outline consisting of the themes and under each theme the subordinate ideas that are attached to it and define it in more concrete terms;

(e) draft formal objectives by starting with a heuristic sentence opener such as, "Graduates of the Department of X should be able to demonstrate that they can: …" and rewriting each objective, i.e., each theme, as the completion of the sentence;

(f) draft the outcomes for each objective also by starting with a sentence opener such as, "Specifically, graduates should be able to demonstrate that they can: …" and completing the sentence by incorporating, wherever possible, concrete verbs used by the faculty to indicate what students should be able to do—to describe, to analyze, to critique, etc. (when in doubt, Bloom's taxonomy provides a good source for such verbs).

See Figure 3 for an example of a final draft of objectives and outcomes.

Program Review
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
B.A. in Anthropology

PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the faculty in Anthropology are to:

1. provide instruction to enable students to understand the interrelationships among the social, cultural, and biological bases of human behavior

2. help students achieve competence in understanding, critically assessing, and using major anthropological concepts

3. introduce students to the various theoretical perspectives of anthropology and to encourage an appreciation for the historical development of the discipline as a social science

4. equip students with a knowledge of research methods appropriate to socio-cultural anthropology

5. encourage in students a rich understanding of and appreciation for cultural differences through knowledge of major forms of social organization from a cross-cultural perspective

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Students should be able to demonstrate:

1. An understanding of the interrelationships among the social, cultural, and biological bases of human behavior. Specifically, students should be able to demonstrate that they:

a. can describe critical cross-cultural *differences* in human behavior (in evolutionary and/or contemporary contexts) and to account for those differences in terms of the interplay among society, culture, and biology

b. can describe critical cross-cultural *similarities* in human behavior (in evolutionary and/or contemporary contexts) and to account for those similarities in terms of the interplay among society, culture, and biology

2. **Competence in understanding, critically assessing, and using major anthropological concepts. Specifically students should be able to demonstrate that they:**
   a. can define major anthropological concepts in such a way that shows a firm grasp of the concepts

   b. can apply major anthropological concepts to specific situations, showing that they are able to (1) use the concepts to organize and make sense of what they find in specific situations and (2) use specific situations to exemplify and amplify major anthropological concepts

3. **A familiarity with various theoretical perspectives of anthropology and an appreciation for the historical development of the discipline as a social science. Specifically, students should be able to demonstrate that they:**
   a. understand the major theoretical perspectives of anthropology

   b. appreciate the contribution of the major theoretical perspectives to the development of anthropology as a discipline

4. **A knowledge of research methods appropriate to socio-cultural anthropology. Specifically, students should be able to demonstrate that they can:**
   a. identify, define, and give examples of various methods used in anthropological research of contemporary societies

   b. recognize and interpret research methodology in anthropological literature

5. **A rich understanding of and appreciation for cultural differences through knowledge of major forms of social organization from a cross-cultural perspective. Specifically, students should be able to demonstrate that they can:**
   a. show that they are familiar with the major forms of social organization characteristics of the cultures of at least one non-Western ethnographic area

b. show a rich appreciation for cross-cultural differences and an understanding of the importance of cultural context

SOURCES OF DATA FOR REVIEWING PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Exit interview question
Faculty survey of students' abilities
Portfolios of student work
- selected exams or other assignments from all 400-level courses except theory (ANT 411) and methods (ANT 416)
- selected assignments for ANT 411
- selected assignments for ANT 416

Student self-assessments
- ten-to-fifteen-minute in-class exercise in which students are asked to identify and comment on two major theoretical perspectives in anthropology
- ten-to-fifteen-minute in-class exercise in which students are asked to identify and comment on two major anthropological research methods

Outcome #1: an understanding of the interrelationships among the social, cultural, and biological bases of human behavior
- Exit interview question to be added to the existing instrument: "Did your program of study help you become aware of cross-cultural similarities and differences among human groups?"

Outcome #2: competence in understanding, critically assessing, and using major anthropological concepts
2a: to demonstrate that majors can define major anthropological concepts in such a way that shows a firm grasp of the concepts
- Faculty survey of students' abilities

2b: to demonstrate that majors can apply major anthropological concepts to specific situations, showing that they are able to (1) use the concepts to organize and make sense of what they find in specific situations and (2) use specific situations to exemplify and amplify major anthropological concepts

- Faculty survey of students' abilities
- Portfolio of selected exams or other assignments from all 400-level courses except theory (ANT 411) and methods (ANT 416)

Outcome #3: a familiarity with various theoretical perspectives of anthropology and an appreciation for the historical development of the discipline as a social science

3a: to demonstrate that majors understand the major theoretical perspectives of anthropology

- Portfolio of selected assignments for ANT 411
- Student self-assessment: ten-to-fifteen-minute in-class exercise in which students are asked to identify and comment on two major theoretical perspectives in anthropology

3.b: to demonstrate that majors can appreciate the contribution of the major theoretical perspectives to the development of anthropology as a discipline

- Portfolio of selected assignments for ANT 411

Outcome #4: a knowledge of research methods appropriate to socio-cultural anthropology

4a: to demonstrate that majors can identify, define, and give examples of various methods used in anthropological research of contemporary societies

- Student self-assessment: ten-to-fifteen-minute in-class exercise in which students are asked to identify and comment on two major anthropological research methods

4b: to demonstrate that majors can recognize and interpret research methodology in anthropological literature

- Portfolio of selected assignments for ANT 416

Outcome #5: a rich understanding of and appreciation for cultural differences through knowledge of major forms of social organization from a cross-cultural perspective

- Faculty survey of students' abilities

PROGRAM REVIEW CYCLES

Initial Program Review Cycle

2001/2002: Develop program objectives, outcomes, and assessment plan; initiate assessment of outcomes

August 2002 Preliminary program review report submitted to CHASS Dean and to Committee for Undergraduate Program Review:

- program objectives
- program outcomes
- program review plan
- results of initial assessment
- description of assessment activities to be carried out in the following year

Fall 2002: Continue gathering assessment data and complete assessment of outcomes

Spring 2003: Assessment reports submitted to departmental Curriculum Committee:

- description of process of assessing program outcomes,
- results of assessment
- recommendations for changes in curriculum and/or changes in outcomes and assessment plan

Departmental Curriculum Committee considers recommendations and takes them to faculty for discussion and approval

August 2003: Full program review portfolio completed and submitted to College for review and then, with any necessary revisions, to Committee for Undergraduate Program Review

Subsequent Seven-Year Review Cycles for University Program Review

2002-2005: Continue gathering assessment data at appropriate intervals

Fall 2004:	Assessment reports submitted to departmental Curriculum Committee: • description of process of assessing program outcomes, • results of assessment • recommendations for changes in curriculum and/or changes in outcomes and assessment plan
Spring 2005:	Departmental Curriculum Committee takes recommendations to faculty for discussion and approval
August 2005:	Full program review portfolio completed and submitted to College for review and then, with any necessary revisions, to Committee for Undergraduate Program Review
2005-2008:	Continue gathering assessment data at appropriate intervals for third review cycle
Fall 2007:	Complete assessment of outcomes; assessment reports (including description of assessment process, results, and recommendations for changes in curriculum and changes in outcomes and assessment plan) submitted to Curriculum Committee
Spring 2008:	Curriculum Committee takes recommendations to faculty for discussion and approval
August 2008:	Program review report completed
August 2009:	Reports of both review cycles submitted to Committee for Undergraduate Program Review
Etc.	

Figure 3: This document, created by anthropology faculty at NC State, contains the major elements of an assessment plan, program objectives, outcomes, and an assessment procedure.

7. *Reviewing the draft of objectives and outcomes with committee.* The next meeting of the committee is given over to reviewing the draft. At the end of the previous meeting, the facilitator should ask whether or not and in what form the committee members would like the see the draft before the following meeting. The facilitator will likely find, however, that even if they elect to receive it, many if not most of the members won't read it ahead of time and often forget bring the copy to the meeting. So it's helpful to arrive with a few extra copies.

The procedure that seems to work best is to read the draft aloud one objective and outcome at a time and, after each, to stop and give the members time to process the material and to ask questions and suggest revisions. As facilitators, we take great care to distance ourselves from the draft so as to give faculty full rein in criticizing it. We do not want the faculty to think that they are criticizing us personally. We actively invite revisions by asking questions about the draft as we go through it, pointing out areas we're uncertain about, asking for committee members' advice about the phasing, etc.

This step marks a particularly productive point in the overall process because faculty are seeing their program set forth in black and white, usually in an explicitness that they've never encountered before. The course-counting approach to curriculum typically requires little if any discussion of its goals, keeping those goals safely implicit for each faculty member. However, outcomes make these goals explicit, often prompting useful disagreement among committee members as they discuss, usually for the first time, what it is that defines their programs. Generally speaking, the more abstract the discipline, the more disagreement there is. In many technical programs, there tends to be a broad consensus about the outcomes. But elsewhere, in the social sciences and humanities for example, the revision process can go through as many as six drafts.

It's helpful for the facilitator to encourage the faculty to do the hard work of revising together in the meeting, resisting attempts to put it all off on the facilitator to do it afterward. The outcomes need to reflect their words and their decisions. Use prompts such as: "How can we put that into words?" "What can we do here to make it better?" "How can we restate this so that you would agree with it?"

8. *Getting full faculty approval for objectives and outcomes*. After the committee members accept a draft of the objectives and outcomes, they then decide how and when to take the draft to the rest of the faculty for discussion and approval. Making the assessment process truly faculty driven requires extending the process to the full program faculty. We recommend doing so at this point because the committee will need to have faculty approval of the objectives and outcomes before it begins to consider the assessment of the outcomes.

In most cases, the committee members will place a discussion of the draft on the agenda of the next scheduled faculty meeting. Or if there is no meeting soon, they may call a special one. But the logistics of bringing the full faculty into the conversation will vary according to the departmental culture. In some cases, committee members prefer to send the draft to their colleagues beforehand; sometimes they choose to handle the entire approval process by e-mail. The facilitator may or may not be asked to attend the meeting. Whatever the means, it has been our experience that objectives and outcomes are almost always accepted by the full faculty with at most a few minor revisions. Even so, it is critical to involve the rest of the faculty at this stage of the process.

9. *Identifying data and research tools for assessment procedure.* Once the program faculty have approved the objectives and outcomes, the next major task of the committee begins—deciding how to assess the outcomes. Even though we all assess student learning in our classes, most faculty find it challenging to think in terms of program assessment. It is not assessing students, though it is likely to incorporate some materials produced by students. It is assessment that takes a programmatic perspective; its central question is, "To what extent is the full program enabling students to attain the outcomes designated by program faculty?"

An assessment procedure should identify data to be gathered, how the data are to be evaluated, and when assessment will take place. We have found that it's best to start by giving the committee members a list of possible assessment tools and going over the list to explain the kinds of assessment that are most applicable to the program (see Figure 4). This list helps to make program assessment more concrete for faculty and provides a valuable heuristic for talking about assessment. The tool that often arouses the greatest concern among faculty is the portfolio of student work. We tell them that the portfolio need not be longitudinal, collecting individual students' work over time, but is likely to be a best-case portfolio, meaning that faculty would identify the student performance that best represents students' ability related to an outcome, usually from a more advanced class, and collect a sample of that performance, such as a homework assignment, a video-tape of a presentation, a lab report, or a project report. In colleges and universities where assessment already plays an important role, such as through institutional use of portfolios or individual program accreditation, it is useful to link outcomes assessment, where appropriate, to assessment measures already required.

Possible Sources of Data for Program Assessment

Sources of Data that Provide Relatively Direct Evidence

Samples of student work (longitudinal or best-case portfolios), such as:

- Homework assignments
- Essay tests
- Research reports
- Capstone projects
- Project proposals
- Student journals
- Reaction papers
- Literature reviews
- Oral presentations
- Student reflections on projects or other assignments

Formal observations of student behavior
External reviews of student projects
Internship reports
Standardized tests
Performance on national licensure examinations
Student self-assessments/reflections on learning

Sources of Data that Provide Relatively Indirect Evidence

Alumni, employer, student surveys
Focus groups with selected students or alumni
Surveys of faculty concerning students' abilities
Discussions at faculty meetings or retreats concerning students' abilities
Senior exit interviews
Percentage of students going to graduate or professional schools
Enrollment and retention patterns
Job placement statistics
Reviews from accreditation agencies
Reports from external review committees

Figure 4: This list has been divided into relatively direct and indirect evidence as a way of encouraging faculty not to rely only on the latter. Though not all these assessment tools lend themselves to evaluating writing and speaking, most do.

We ask faculty to apply two criteria to their decisions about assessment procedure: it should be valid (i.e., provide a way to measure what they want to measure) and it should be feasible (i.e., can be done with a reasonable outlay of resources). Sometimes there are faculty, particularly in the social sciences, who will cloud the issue by raising abstruse issues of research methodology. We assure them that for this kind of assessment it may not be necessary to meet rigorous research standards. Rather, the point is to gather data that will enable them to make judgments about their program and to use those judgments to guide decisions for improving it.

We begin this part of the process with brainstorming, going through the outcomes one at a time and for each one asking how the faculty would know whether or not students were able to achieve the outcome. Then from the list of the means of assessment we have accumulated for each outcome, we identify the ones that that best meet the criteria of validity and feasibility. Finally, we consider the timing of assessment, when and how often it is to be done; this may already be determined by college or university policy.

10. *Drafting and reviewing the assessment procedure.* Drafting the assessment procedure is much more straight-

forward than drafting the objectives and outcomes. During the meeting, the faculty committee has identified the key elements in the procedure. If the committee was not able to get through all the outcomes in one meeting, the facilitator should draft the ones they have done, review these at the beginning of the next meeting, and then finish the rest of the outcomes. The review of the assessment procedure typically runs to no more than two drafts. (See Figure 3 for an example of an assessment procedure.)

11. *Getting full faculty approval for assessment procedure.* This is a similar process to the approval of objectives and outcomes. The committee usually prefers to have the facilitator at the meeting to explain the logistics of some of the assessment procedures to the faculty.

Conclusion

An outcomes-based model for writing and speaking in the disciplines can be applied in different circumstances. For example, it can be used in a highly focused way with a single college, department, or even a program within a department. It can be used for a broader, campus-wide writing and speaking program. Or it can be used in conjunction with other outcomes-based initiatives, associated perhaps with university or program accrediting agencies.

In the last case, even though the primary motivation for assessment may not be the improvement of writing and speaking, the potential for such improvement is certainly strong, especially if writing and speaking professionals take an active role in the process. Indeed, writing and speaking professionals have the opportunity to enhance considerably their roles on campus by taking a lead in outcomes-based assessment. Our understanding of assessment, our experience in working with faculty from across the university, and our grasp of a wide variety of disciplines make us valuable players in the process.

Creating assessment plans is only the first step in a longer process. Writing and speaking professionals can also play important roles as the assessment process itself gets under way and faculty must gather data, make judgments based on the data, and devise changes to improve their programs. We can help faculty at each stage of the process through consulting and faculty development workshops. Outcomes-based assessment provides the impetus for continuous improvement of programs. We can play an important role in providing direction and support for that improvement.

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End Notes

[1] For example, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools sets as a standard that "The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs…; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of these results" ("Principles of Accreditation" 11 http://sacscoc.org/accrrevproj.asp).

[2] Information about the assessment procedures of these professional organizations may be found at their web sites: ABET at http://abet.org/accreditation; NCATE at http://ncate.org/accred/m_accreditation; IFT at http://ift.org/education/standards; and CSWE at http://cswe.org. Other organizations, such as the Council of Writing Program Administrators, have published national outcomes to encourage greater articulation among institutions and higher or more standardized expectations for student achievement (see http://www.cas.ilstu.edu/english/hesse/outcomes.html).

[3] In smaller institutions, the faculty in entire departments may be fewer than the number of representatives mentioned here. Even at our university, we worked with one program with three faculty members, all of whom comprised the program assessment committee. When working with small programs, it is probably best to include all the faculty in creating assessment plans; it is certainly more efficient, and having the full faculty engage in defining their program can be beneficial.

[4] Our usage of *objectives* and *outcomes* is derived from the assessment guidelines of ABET and formally designated by our university as common language for all programs. As a land grant university with a strong emphasis on engineering, this choice was appropriate. However, other colleges and universities with different traditions and perhaps even previously accepted assessment vocabulary may find language that is a better fit, goals and objectives or teaching aims and learning demonstrations, for example. We have found that having both general specific levels for defining outcomes is useful for helping faculty generate assessment plans.