

How Assessment Works at One Community College

IN 2007 the faculty at my institution, Miami Dade College, joined the student body in signing a covenant “to build a foundation for the success of future students.” The event capped a two-year effort on the part of the faculty to articulate the foundations of a 21st-century college education and codify them into 10 clear statements.

However, creating a top-10 list of what we want our students to learn was only part of a larger mission—one we began in 2005, in response to a national dialogue on openness and accountability, fostered by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Since then, our journey has been navigated by various faculty committees that not only developed our list of goals, but are also working to develop assessment tools and curriculum-mapping processes.

The next logical step was to measure our success at teaching those essential skills. In a report released this month, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in fact called on community colleges to improve their assessment skills. While “outcomes assessment” is a hateful phrase to many, and while quantifying a college education in concrete terms may seem distasteful, outcome assessments can be accomplished while preserving professors’ individuality and freedom in course design. Proving the attainment of set standards often evokes fears of “teaching to the test,” but we see assessments as opportunities to design creative, thought-provoking challenges.

Since 2006 our semiannual, collegewide assessment process has been the primary means of proving how well our students measure up. As each fall and spring se-

mester draws to a close, approximately 10 percent of the graduating class is selected from advanced courses (typically taken in a student’s final semester). Faculty members who teach those courses are asked to volunteer one class period for the assessment, the subject of which is assigned randomly and not matched to the class topic. (Five of the 10 outcomes are assessed each semester, ensuring that they are all measured each year.) All students in each selected classroom are asked to participate, although some may choose to opt out.

Students who participate in the assessment sit down in front of a computer and

have 50 minutes to respond to a challenging, multifaceted scenario. For

example: “Imagine that you are part of a production team for a television series entitled *The Global Citizen*. From a list of possible global issues, what considerations and process would you use to identify the most pressing issue, and how would you convince your production team of the urgency of this issue?”

We call such questions “authentic tasks” because they deal with real-world situations and have no perfunctory answer. Other tasks may involve public speaking and are videotaped; some require deciphering graphs or responding to works of art. Our faculty members believe that such types of assessment, which measure several skills at once, reveal more information than standardized or multiple-choice tests. (An exception is made for a computerized test to measure technological skills.)

Each student’s performance is scored on a four-point scale as “emerging,” “developing,” “proficient,” or “exemplary,” but individual participants are not identified. The scores are then aggregated to provide

a snapshot of the graduating class’s level of achievement, which allows for comparisons from year to year. The results also provoke important cross-disciplinary dialogue about new means of achieving the 10 learning goals.

The results so far suggest that certain areas need greater emphasis in the curriculum. One such area is the cultural, historical, and global-perspectives goal. While a lack of global awareness seems to be a national phenomenon, the finding still surprised us since Miami Dade College has one of the most diverse student bodies in the nation.

The collegewide assessment also tells us that we need improvement in the areas of quantitative analytical skills, ethical thinking, and appreciation for aesthetics and creative activities. By recognizing those deficiencies, we can now identify the best ways to improve them, whether by reforming current courses and programs or adding new ones.

A concurrent and complementary reform process now under way is the mapping of the curriculum: the painstaking process of dissecting each course according to the 10 learning outcomes. Each course is charted based on how well it introduces, reinforces, or emphasizes the relevant goals. (The Excel spreadsheet that tracks that effort will eventually have 10 columns and over 2,000 rows, corresponding to the college’s more than 2,000 courses.) Upon detecting weaknesses, faculty members review the curriculum and attend workshops to develop new assessments for their courses. Course-specific assessments help us meet the ultimate goal of assessing all students, in each outcome, using thought-provoking methods. For example, professors may ask students to create a marketing campaign for a local

client, or to complete and review a volunteer project in the community. One English class conducts a mock trial for a character from a Herman Melville story.

The administration provides opportunities, such as chances to attend relevant conferences, to faculty members who must dissect their courses and develop new assessments, and it requires departments to offer professional-development support for those faculty members. The means of incorporating the learning goals into each class remain at the discretion of the instructor. At the institutional level, a few dozen professors voluntarily serve on planning committees, and a smaller crew is compensated for time spent educating other faculty members and for developing, administering, and scoring the collegewide assessments.

We are constantly refining our assessment process. Motivating students to perform their best work on the collegewide assessment, for which they are not assigned a grade, is a challenge that we acknowledge and are trying to meet by presenting the assessments as learning opportunities.

In our ideal curriculum, every course would consider all 10 learning outcomes and all students would excel. In the real world, however, professors and students struggle to expand their consciousness, bit by bit and year by year. Yet we are making progress. Through both collegewide and course-specific assessments, the processes of teaching and learning become more intentional and more open, and faculty members and students become more accountable—all in the name of doing our best to serve our students’ needs.

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By Eduardo J. Padrón

Miami Dade College’s 10 Essential Learning Outcomes

Graduates should be able to:

- Communicate effectively, using listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.
- Use quantitative analytical skills to evaluate and process numerical data.
- Solve problems using critical and creative thinking and scientific reasoning.
- Formulate strategies to locate, evaluate, and apply information.
- Demonstrate knowledge of diverse cultures, including global and historical perspectives.
- Create strategies that can be used to fulfill personal, civic, and social responsibilities.
- Demonstrate knowledge of ethical thinking and its application to issues in society.
- Use computer and emerging technologies effectively.
- Demonstrate an appreciation for aesthetics and creative activities.
- Describe how natural systems function and recognize the impact of humans on the environment.