TIP Sheet #20

Assessment of Student Learning in Graduate Programs

The assessment effort at UWF can be characterized by two important goals. The first is to create assessment methods that will provide information that will inform faculty about the nature of student learning in their programs. The second is that the assessment process be sustainable. In the 2006-2007 academic year, we plan to establish procedures for the assessment of student learning in General Studies/Academic Foundations and in graduate programs. We also plan to continue the assessment work in undergraduate programs that was established in 2005-2006.

This TIP Sheet will address questions regarding the establishment of assessments for graduate programs. The four most recent TIP Sheets (16, 17, 18, and 19) were devoted to questions about the assessment of General Studies/Academic Foundations.

What assessment activities will be required of departments with graduate programs during 2006-2007?
Departments should finalize their Academic Learning Plan (ALP) for graduate programs and develop a method for the ***direct measurement*** of student learning in graduate programs in the Fall Term, 2006. Departments should collect data on graduate student learning in the Spring Term, 2007 and begin the process of using assessment data for making decisions about graduate education.

What domains should be included in an Academic Learning Plan (ALP) for a graduate program?
The university has adopted the structure of the undergraduate Academic Learning Compacts for use in developing graduate Academic Learning Plans. Thus, graduate ALPs should include student learning outcomes in the following domains: Content, communication, critical thinking, integrity/value, and project management.

Why is project management included as a domain for graduate programs?
Completion of a thesis, dissertation, internship, or other capstone experience in a graduate program is a classic example of work that requires good project management skills. Students must select topics and projects that are manageable within the constraints of a limited time frame for the degree program and limitations on the resources available to the student to complete the work. Students must develop and use a variety of self-regulation skills, including time-management, seeking guidance and feedback from faculty, making effective use of constructive feedback, etc. As such, it makes sense to include assessment of project management as a characteristic of graduates of these programs.

Some departments will collect and use assessment data in three different areas (General Studies/Academic Foundations, undergraduate programs, and graduate programs). They have a lot on their "assessment plate." How many measures for assessment will be considered "good enough" for assessment of graduate programs?
One direct measure of student learning will be sufficient to meet expectations for assessment of graduate programs. Departments are encouraged to take advantage of theses, dissertations, and

internship papers/portfolios as opportunities for creating an embedded assessment as their direct measure. Because these capstone products are designed to showcase the full range of skills and competencies associated with a graduate degree, a rubric that assesses student learning outcomes broadly could be crafted. This rubric might capture the quality of student learning in all five domains of the graduate Academic Learning Plan. An example of such a rubric for a thesis is provided at the end of this TIP Sheet. This rubric is offered as a ***suggestion*** for something that might be created. Departments should use this rubric as a source of ideas that might be included in a rubric that is meaningful for the goals and expectations for students in that department's program.

What strategies might be used to assess student learning in graduate programs?
Three different strategies might be used. The first strategy, described above, consists of a broad, comprehensive rubric that could be used to assess the quality of student learning on all five domains represented by work associated with a capstone project (internship paper, thesis, dissertation). The second strategy consists of a focused assessment of specific student learning outcomes associated with one domain in the Academic Learning Plan. The third strategy consists of documenting student learning through a portfolio, which might include work from a variety of courses throughout the graduate program.

What are the advantages of using a global, comprehensive rubric to assess student learning represented in a graduate thesis, dissertation, or internship project?
A global, comprehensive rubric has the advantage of providing information about student learning at the end of his or her graduate career, when mastery can be expected. A comprehensive rubric would also allow departments to monitor student learning on all domains on a continuous basis. This approach should be easy to implement and would place a minimal burden on resources required to store student work over several terms (as would be necessary with the portfolio approach). Because the assessment is based on a final project, the timing of assessment is unambiguous compared to assessments based on portfolios of material accumulated across a series of course projects.

These rubrics look complicated. Can't we just rate students on how well they demonstrate their competency on the student learning outcomes described in the Academic Learning Plans?
Although a detailed rubric will take some time and care to develop, this time and effort will pay off later in terms of the quality of information obtained. The detail in the rubric will help standardize the assignment of points on a given outcome and will improve the reliability of the ratings generated by different people who use the rubric. In addition, a detailed rubric provides clear diagnostic information about student learning. A student whose work earns fewer than the maximum points available on a rubric element will get clear feedback about the characteristics of his or her work that led to the lower rating. This information will be useful to departments in identifying strengths and weaknesses commonly identified in student work. Finally, a detailed rubric will be useful as an advising and mentoring tool. If students have access to the rubric at the onset of their graduate program or when they begin work on their capstone project, they should have a clear understanding of the expectations for the quality and scope of the work produced for a thesis, internship paper, or dissertation.

What are the advantages of focusing assessment efforts on a single domain when assessing student learning represented in a graduate thesis or internship project?
This approach to assessment will be attractive to departments that have a specific question about a particular aspect of the graduate program. When an assessment plan is focused on a single domain, it is possible to create measures that will produce specific, diagnostic information about student learning in that domain. The formative assessments that can be obtained with this approach might be quite useful for departments that want to examine and revise one component of the curriculum.

Are there any models for rubrics for assessment of graduate theses and internships?
A sample rubric for a global assessment of several domains of an Academic Learning Plan is provided at the end of this TIP Sheet. This rubric is intended as a ***draft rubric***. Departments can modify and revise this rubric to suit their specific program goals and meet their assessment needs.

What other measures of student learning might be used?
A variety of direct measures that would be suitable for assessment of graduate programs are available:

- Professional licensure exams (if these are required for entry into the discipline following graduate education)
- Performance on a comprehensive exam related to one or more domains of the Academic Learning Plan
- Performance appraisals obtained from supervisors at internship sites. Care must be taken that these external evaluations provide meaningful evidence about student competencies on Academic Learning Plan domains
- Data on completion rates within the time frame of the graduate degree program would be a good assessment of the project management domain
- Portfolios of samples of student work compiled over the course of the graduate program. Portfolios should include specific assessment of work included as evidence for various competencies. A rubric would be helpful for the evaluation of this work.

My department admits a cohort of students every other year. Each cohort requires two years from the beginning of the program to completion of the capstone experience. How often should this program collect assessment data?
If the mechanism for assessment of student learning is based on the capstone experience and this event occurs only once every other year, assessments can only be done every other year. If a new cohort is admitted each year and takes two years to run to completion, the department will have one cohort that completes the program each year and should collect assessment data on program completers once a year.

Students complete theses, dissertations, and internship projects at various times throughout the academic year. Does it make sense to only collect assessment data in the spring term?
It makes sense to plan to initiate the assessment process for graduate programs in Spring 2007. Most departments will require the Fall Term to develop rubrics and other methods for direct assessment of student work. Once the assessment process is in place, departments with small numbers of graduate students might shift to a procedure in which graduate student work is

assessed whenever a student completes his or her thesis, dissertation, or internship. If a department has a large number of students, it might prefer to keep the work of assessment manageable by limiting assessment of graduate student work to the sample of students who complete the program in the Spring Term. In either case, departments should plan to hold one meeting each year during which faculty discuss the assessment data collected to date and consider program improvements suggested by these data.

Sample Rubric for a Thesis or Internship Paper

Criteria & Points Assigned	Missing	Unacceptable	Below Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations	Points Earned
	0	1	2	3	4	
Content						
Summarize, compare, and evaluate, at an advanced level, the concepts, research findings, and current theories and models relevant to the thesis topic.	Literature review in the thesis was incomplete and/or omitted important research findings or theoretical positions.	Literature review is incomplete and includes excessive discussion of unrelated issues and/or significant errors in content. Assertions are made without adequate support from evidence.	Literature review is brief with insufficient detail. Unrelated issues were introduced and/or minor errors in content. Assertions are made without adequate support from evidence.	Literature review is brief but complete; review focuses only on issues related to the question; review is factually correct; assertions are clearly supported with evidence and appropriate use of logic	Literature review is complete; sufficient detail is provided to support assertions; assertions are supported with evidence; includes an original and relevant insight or analysis of the topic.	
Orals: Summarize, compare and evaluate concepts, research findings, and current theories and models in the core content areas of psychology.	Unable to respond to questions posed about research or theory in core content areas of psychology.	Serious gaps in the basic details needed for an adequate response to questions. Fails to support assertions with evidence	Most of the basic details are included but some are missing; fails to support some assertions with evidence	Provides more than just the basic information; supports assertions with evidence	Deals fully with the entire question. Assertions are well-supported with evidence.	
Critical Thinking						
Evaluate and integrate the psychological literature to address a specific theory or practical problem. Describe and select appropriate scientific and statistical methods to answer a question.	No clear research question posed. Relevance to existing literature and theory not established. Major errors in choice of research methods or statistical analysis. Conclusions are inconsistent with the evidence presented.	The question posed is of questionable relevance or has clearly been answered. The question is unrelated to the existing literature. Errors in the choice, execution, or interpretation of methods and/or statistical data. Conclusions weakly justified by evidence.	The question has been adequately answered in prior research; no clear rationale for reexamination of this question is given. Research and statistical methods selected are flawed or inadequately carried out. Conclusions overreach the evidence presented.	A meaningful question is posed but may not be fully explicated. Research and statistical methods selected are appropriate for the project. Conclusions follow logically from the evidence presented.	Project addresses a question or problem that is meaningfully connected to the existing literature and theory. Student provides a clear explanation of this relationship. Research and statistical methods selected are appropriate for the project. Conclusions follow logically from the evidence presented.	

Criteria & Points Assigned	Missing	Unacceptable	Below Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations	Points Earned
	0	1	2	3	4	
Communication						
Organization and logic	No logical order to the information provided	Weak organization; sentences rambling; ideas are repeated	Minor problems of organization or logic; Needs work on creating transitions between ideas	Presentation is organized but does not present a clear argument for a given position	Clear and logical presentation; good development of an argument; Transitions are made clearly and smoothly	
Mechanics of writing (spelling, punctuation, grammar, clarity of prose)	Problems with the mechanics of language serious enough to interfere with effective communication. Frequent errors in punctuation, spelling, sentence structure, etc.	Major problems with mechanics of language; Awkward sentence construction; Poor or absent transitions; Frequently difficult to understand	Frequent problems with mechanics of language; Occasional awkward sentences and poor transitions;reduce readability	Infrequent and minor mechanical problems; Errors do not impair readability	Clear, readable, prose. Good use of transitions; no problems with spelling, punctuation, or grammar.	
Use of relevant APA Style (Title page, citations & references, use of language, etc.)	No evidence that APA style was used.	Minimal use of APA style; multiple errors in use of APA style	Attempted to use APA style but errors are frequent and include errors in citations & references	Infrequent errors in APA style; errors involve only minor aspects of APA style – no errors in style for citations & references	All relevant aspects of APA style are used correctly	
Orals: Communication skills during presentation	Unable to respond effectively to questions posed by committee members.	Answers to a several questions were incomplete; needed frequent assistance from thesis/internship chair.	Answers to a few questions were incomplete; needed occasional assistance from thesis/internship chair.	Provided complete answers to questions posed. Presented thesis or internship work in a coherent manner.	Appropriate use of technology during presentation (where relevant). Presentation of thesis or internship work was clear and well-organized. Responded to questions in a poised, articulate, and professional manner.	
Integrity/Values						
Clear understanding of and adherence to scientific and professional ethics.	Evidence of failure to obtain IRB approval, to protect client confidentiality, or other transgression of scientific, professional, or academic integrity.		Compliance with principals of scientific, professional and/or academic integrity is likely but may be poorly documented.		Clear documentation of compliance with relevant ethical guidelines (IRB review, protection of confidentiality of clients, etc.). Clearly establishes authorship of thesis or internship work.	
Student strengths:						
Student weaknesses:						