

# The Assessment Quarterly

*A Publication of the Heartland Community College Assessment Committee*

## Developing Rubrics

### A Learning, Assessment, and Evaluation Tool

*By Kathy Walls, Professor of Nursing*

**E**valuation and assessment should be an integral part of the instructional process. Whatever types of evaluation and assessment tools are used, they must be useful and designed to reflect concepts and skills emphasized in a course or program.

Evaluative measures should never be a surprise to students but rather should be designed to make instructor's expectations clear. For the

instructor, good assessment measures help illuminate what was taught well, and what areas need work. Rubrics are excellent instruments for both summative and formative evaluation processes. They not only assist faculty in making final judgments on students' assignments, but, if used properly, help students gain an understanding of a task and how to proceed.

Rubrics are described as authentic forms of assessment, emphasizing application and use of sophisticated thinking skills (Montgomery 2002, Andrade 2000). Rubrics are scoring guidelines, which clarify an instructor's expectations, used to evaluate students'

performance on written papers and projects (Montgomery 2002, Montgomery 2000, Andrade 2000, Popham 1997, and Wenzlaff 1999). In addition, rubrics are learning tools to assist students in understanding how to complete assignments (Hansen 1998). For faculty, rubrics are a helpful way to quickly, efficiently assess student work and to justify grades. The following components are recognized as essential when developing a rubric instrument:

- The rubric instrument should be a graduated scale with proficiency levels clearly specified. A description of each level of performance should be included (Montgomery 2000 and Andrade 2000).
- Rubrics should contain short specific criteria. The recommended number is three to four. These criteria should represent key attributes of the skill being assessed (Popham 1997). The language must also be clear so students understand what constitutes each level of grading. The criteria can be equally weighted or weighted differently.
- When using rubrics, it is helpful to provide models or examples of expected performance (Hansen 1998).

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## March

## 2004

*The Assessment Quarterly* is published by the Heartland Community College Assessment Committee, 1500 W. Raab Road, Normal, IL 61761  
www.hcc.cc.il.us/committees/assessment

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## Message from the Chair



### The General Education Project

Over the past year, with input from the Assessment Committee, I have spent many hours contemplating the course of this project. The original thinking was to examine the top 30 credit-generating courses minus any of the developmental-level courses. One important factor that was not examined was critical mass. To be able to collect artifacts from across multiple sections would require enough sections taught every semester by more than a few faculty members teaching those sections. When I began to look at the course enrollments, I discovered that only the top 16 credit-generating courses met the critical mass issue. Those 16 courses are: ENGL 101, ENGL 102, PSY 101, COMM 101, SOC 101, HUMA 101, BIOL 114, BUSN 110, EASC 111, MATH 131, EASC 121, ECON 101, SOC 135, HIST 136, HUMA 250, and ART 150. To me, this list reflects a cross-section of courses across different disciplines and produces an accurate picture of our General Education program.

The next part of the project is to develop a several-year plan to study/assess all of these courses. If we select four courses per year – two per semester, we will have a four-year cycle to complete all 16 courses. In the near future, a blind drawing is planned to determine when each course will be selected for assessment. To reduce the effects on several groups of faculty, it was proposed that both ENGL 101 / 102 and EASC 111 / 121 be staggered to every other year. The schedule will be published in the next newsletter so faculty teaching the above courses will know when their courses will be selected.

Once the courses are selected, the planning will begin the semester before courses are to be assessed. For example, if ENGL 101 and BIOL 114 are selected for the Fall of 2004, then planning will begin late in the Spring of 2004. The planning would include a two – three hour workshop with a majority of the faculty (adjuncts will be paid for their time) who teach the selected courses. During the workshop, a discussion of course issues, pedagogy, learning outcomes and the General Education outcomes will occur with the opportunity to revise the Master Syllabus. In addition, ideas for the common artifact would be solicited during this workshop. A second, shorter meeting would take place before the start of the semester to decide on the artifact and how and when to implement it. During the course of the semester, if desired, a WebCT chat group will be used to discuss course issues and best practices.

The plan for the artifact is for faculty to release it during the middle of the semester. This way, the artifact can be collected and assessed by a team of Assessors who will provide feedback before the end of the semester. The Assessors, during the course of the semester, will develop a rubric and use it to assess student work when faculty makes the artifact available. The Assessors will also receive input from one or two faculty members from a course to provide both the course pedagogy and the context of the artifact. Finally, the Assessors will be compensated for their time and may be asked to commit to the project for a year or longer to avoid having to constantly

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## Message from the Chair (continued)

Your ideas or thoughts on the above plan are more than welcome. Please direct any inquiries to me.

*R. John Muench, Assistant Professor of Chemistry*

### NEWSLETTER ARTICLES

The Assessment Committee is seeking articles about research, classroom assessment techniques, rubric development or use for publication in *The Assessment Quarterly* newsletter. Articles can be e-mailed to the editor, Katherine I. Starks-Lawrence at [katherine.starks-lawrence@heartland.edu](mailto:katherine.starks-lawrence@heartland.edu)

Please keep articles to 400 words. The newsletter is published using The Associated Press Stylebook.

## Calendar of Events

### March 27-30, 2004

- Annual Meeting of The Higher Education Commission, North Central Association (NCA) will hold its 109th Annual Meeting at the Hyatt Regency, Chicago.
- Pre-conference workshop Friday, 3/26. Registration \$210 before 3/10; \$235 after. For more information visit <http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/AnnualMeeting/>

### April 16-17, 2004

- Undergraduate Assessment Symposium, North Carolina University, Cary, N. C. Registration fee \$225. Hotel deadline 3/1/04. For more information visit: [http://www.ncsu.edu/undergrad\\_affairs/assessment/files/resources/symposium.htm](http://www.ncsu.edu/undergrad_affairs/assessment/files/resources/symposium.htm)

### June 19-23, 2004

- American Association for Higher Education 2004 (AAHE) Assessment Conference, Toronto, Ontario
- Pre-conference workshops begin June 19. Conference program June 20-23. For more information visit: [www.aahe.org/conferences.htm](http://www.aahe.org/conferences.htm)

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# Grading Higher Education

By R. John Muench, Assistant Professor of Chemistry

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education ([www.highereducation.org](http://www.highereducation.org)) releases a biennial report card for each state that provides a grade for its overall higher education system based on five criteria. The NCPPHE is an independent, non-profit, non-partisan organization sponsored in part by the PEW Charitable Trusts, the Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Ford Foundation. The most recent report was released in 2002.

The five categories that all states are graded on are: (1) Preparation, (2) Participation, (3) Affordability, (4) Completion, and (5) Benefits. All grades given are relative to the other 49 states – that is, a grade of an “A” does not imply that there is no need for improvement, but rather that particular state ranks ahead of most of the other states. The factors that go into each of the five areas are described briefly below as well as our state’s grade. If you would like more information on the actual study, please see the above website.

Preparation includes high school completion rates, the number of students taking upper level math and science courses, and results of 8<sup>th</sup> grade achievement tests. The grade for our state is a B<sup>+</sup>, which is based mainly on our high level of students completing a high school degree (87%).

Participation includes the rates of both adults aged 18 – 24 as well as 25 – 49 that are enrolled in any higher education setting. Our state received an A for this area. However, it was noted that 40% of white students aged 18 – 24 enroll in higher education while only 21% of minorities enroll.

Affordability included the family’s ability to pay for higher education, the access to state aid, and the average amount of loan money needed per year. The grade here was a B.

Completion included the persistence rate of college freshmen into their second year and the degree completion rates within a five or six year period. Our state rated as a B- with considerably low marks for both retention and completion.

Benefits included various measures like percent of adult population with a Bachelor’s degree, increase in personal income because of the degree, election participation, charitable giving, and high-level literacy skills. Once again, our state was given a B-.

One particularly disturbing result for ALL states was a sixth measurement entitled Learning. In this category, all 50 states were given an “I” grade – *incomplete*. In the NCPPHE report they state that, “Assessing student

learning in college is perhaps the most important criterion for measuring success in higher education. Despite assessment activities in many states, however, there are no common benchmarks for student learning that would allow meaningful state-to-state comparisons. Therefore, *Measuring Up 2002*, like *Measuring Up 2000*, gives all states an Incomplete in this performance category.”

The response from higher education to this report was one of silence. Perhaps the feeling was that if higher education ignores this “incomplete” report that it will just simply go away. However, business leaders, state governments, and accrediting agencies are not ignoring this. In fact, the discussions about assessing college-level learning resulted in a diverse group of leaders that convened in November of 2001 (one of those who participated in the discussions was the CEO of State Farm, Edward Rust). The group concluded that assessment of college-level learning was so long overdue that it should, and must, be started as soon as possible.

**Renowned Assessment Expert Peter Ewell responded:**

“States need to be able to assess the educational level of their residents, to help guide new investment in higher education, to identify subpopulations that require special attention, and to ensure equitable access to educational opportunities. Data on educational capital could also be used to build support for new initiatives in higher education, much in the way that national leaders have used international rankings in science and mathematics to rally support for new initiatives to address deficiencies in those disciplines.”

My opinion on this issue is that we, as educators and citizens of the state of Illinois, should want to have proof of student learning at not only our institution but also across the state. To accomplish this, we need to develop and document a system to measure student learning across a variety of skills. One of the methods to accomplish this is our own **General Education Assessment Project** that was piloted last spring. Not only can this project yield data about individual courses, but it can also inform us about the General Education program as a whole once all of the courses have been assessed. Further, such a project could be duplicated and

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## Grading Higher Education (continued)

used at other schools across the state for seeking a state “report card”. The critics, of course, will say that such data will only be used to compare and punish the poor performers. However, that is exactly what the data will never be used for, as assessment is always meant to produce process improvements. Finally, if we want to demonstrate to both the business world and our legislators the importance of our work for purposes of funding, we must develop and implement measurement methods to prove that we do make a difference in student learning.

## Developing Rubrics *(continued)*

Giving the rubric out ahead of time adds to the learning process. To be a truly formative evaluation method, students should be allowed to receive feedback and revise their papers. Feedback should include both strengths and needed improvements.

- Students should be included in the rubric development process. An exercise, suggested in the literature, is to have students evaluate previous student work to practice with descriptions identified in the rubric. Ask students to make comments as they make an evaluation. Use these comments to revise the rubrics.
  - Incorporate self-assessment in the process.
  - Examine student work from previous classes by ranking the good and not-so-good work and listing evaluation criteria. Use discussion of the student papers to begin a list of what is essential in quality work. A separate description should be given for each qualitative level. Articulate gradation of quality for the selected evaluation criteria; begin by describing the best and the worst then work on the middle.
- Use clear language.
  - Focus on behavior(s)
  - Provide specific feedback on student work.

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# F a c u l t y   W o r k s h o p   S u r v e y

*Please tear off this page and return it to John Muench, Assessment Committee Chair, ICB 2400, Math/ Science Division*

1. Did you attend the Spring 2004 Workshop held January 8? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
If no, please indicate why?
  
2. What topics are you interested in hearing about at future workshops?
  
3. What type of delivery method do you prefer most (hands-on, lecture, panel discussion, online etc.)?
  
4. Did you like the format of the last workshop (Morning Session followed by Break-out Sessions)?  
Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
If no, what would you like to see?
  
5. What suggestions do you have to help improve the workshop?
  
6. Do you have a topic you would like to present at a future workshop? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_  
If yes, please write your name and topic below.

*Thank you for your time and input.*

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