
Assessing Student Learning Outcomes in a Freshman Transition Course for SACCS Accreditation

Elizabeth Bernard
Jacquelyn Nash

The Freshman Center and University Transition Programs
Student Academic Affairs
George Mason University
February 2009

Overview

- SACS accreditation process
 - Identification of Student Learning Outcomes for University 100, Mason's freshman transition course
 - Theoretical framework, assessment process, and prompts for student narratives
 - Collection and analysis of the data
 - Results and other questions generated as a result of this activity
-

SACS Accreditation Process

- The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) conducts reaffirmation of accreditation for higher education institutions every ten years. All university units, both academic and support, must identify their goals, how they are assessing them and how that information is used to improve programs
 - For our next reaffirmation at Mason, all information related to the SACS accreditation process must be compiled by each unit by summer 2010, having completed two measurement/improvement cycles
 - Both program outcomes and student learning outcomes are required for even non-academic departments (depending on the nature of services offered)
 - Within Student Academic Affairs, the University Transition Programs offer an excellent venue for assessing student learning in a first-year curricular intervention
-

Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's) in University 100

- Identified four elements of life readiness that students should acquire or strengthen to be successful in college and beyond:
 - **Gather and articulate self-knowledge**
 - **Understand and interact with the external environment**
 - **Integrate knowledge gained about self and environment, and apply to decision-making and goal-setting**
 - **Strengthen verbal and written communication/interpersonal skills**
 - Linked our SLO's to University 100 course goals and to CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education (ensuring accurate identification of desired outcomes)
-

Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's) in University 100 (cont.)

- In collaboration with Career Services, we created a process matrix that scaffolds the life skill learning throughout the college experience
 - Students build upon these skills through participation in other University Transition Programs (UTP) courses, progressing from Acclimation to Exploration, then Preparation, and finally Pursuit
 - UTP courses include: freshman seminar, sophomore career exploration, junior career readiness and student leadership development, and senior transition to workplace or graduate school
-

University Transition Programs - Process Goals and Learning Outcomes

Process Goals by UNIV course level:				
400 Pursue	Demonstrate job hunting and self-marketing strategies	Connect with alumni and employers; pursue networking leads	Successfully transition to a job or apply to graduate school; develop an action plan	Deliver resume/cover letters and personal pitch; interview for jobs
300 Prepare	Reflect on and process self-knowledge gained through experiential/ career-related learning	Engage in experiential/ career-related learning as an intern or student leader	Inform/confirm career choice and strengthen preparation	Develop resume, interviewing skills; practice in actual intern/ student leader role
200 Explore	Determine personal career influences; strengthen inner voice and compass	Utilize world of work information and resources	Choose a major and/or career	Articulate a personal statement; conduct informational interviews
100 Acclimate	Identify contributing factors to successful personal college transition	Engage in the George Mason University community	Develop a personal and academic plan for sophomore year and college experience	Strengthen peer and faculty relations, reflective writing and presentation skills
Learning Outcomes:	Gather and articulate self-knowledge	Understand and interact with external environment	Integrate knowledge gained about self and environment, and apply to decision-making and goal-setting	Strengthen verbal and written communication/ interpersonal skills

Assessment of Learning - Framework

- **Authentic Assessment** - also called performance-based assessment, is designed to actively engage students in real-life tasks to teach them skills which they will be able to use throughout their lives.
 - **Characteristics:**
 - Reveals how students connect content knowledge to a given problem in the student's world
 - Gives students a real, participatory stake in the learning process
 - Closely aligns with the ways in which a person's abilities are "tested" in the real world
 - Requires students to develop responses rather than select from options
 - Elicits higher order thinking in addition to basic skills
 - Directly evaluates holistic projects
 - Synthesizes classroom instruction
 - Teaches students to evaluate their own work
-

Assessment Process

- For the first cycle of SACS data collection (Fall 2008), the student learning was captured and assessed via a take home final paper with guiding prompts, given out at the end of the freshman transition course
 - Three of the prompts specifically targeted data to be collected on student learning outcomes
 - The SLO that provided the clearest indication of learning was the integration and application of self and external environment knowledge gained by participating in University 100 (the application to future college success)
-

Guiding Prompts

- University 100 Final Paper – Guiding Prompts
 - 1. **Describe how you felt being a new freshman here at Mason when you began this course 14 weeks ago.**
 - 2. **What have you learned about yourself through the different areas of the course geared towards self-awareness and reflection that will help you succeed in the rest of your college experience?** Potential items to include in this response are related to:
 - Healthy relationships and choices
 - Learning styles, time management and academic success skills
 - Major and career decisions (your interests, values, skills and major/ occupation investigation findings)
 - Conflict styles
 - Money management
 - Diversity
 - Leadership
 - 3. **What have you learned about the George Mason University campus and community that will help you succeed in the rest of your college experience?** Potential items to include in this response are related to:
 - Mason traditions, campus involvement/organizations/events, policies, catalog
 - Communicating with faculty and advisors
 - University libraries
 - Campus computing
 - Community engagement
 - Learning through experience

Guiding Prompts (cont.)

■ Guiding Prompts (cont.)

- **4. Discuss in-depth several decisions, plans, and/or goals that have emerged for you, as a result of what you have learned about yourself and about the Mason community in this class.**
 - **5. What advice would you share with next year's new freshmen regarding the transition from high school to college?** Potential items to include here are related to:
 - Helpful information learned in this or other courses
 - Things you've learned outside of the classroom (in the residence halls, social events, service activities, etc.)
 - Things that friends, family, classmates, faculty or staff have shared
 - Your own observations and knowledge
-

Data Collection and Analysis

- Data was collected from 520 students in 28 sections of University 100 at the end of the Fall 2008 semester
 - Learning outcomes were captured and categorized as:
 - reported by the student (prompts 2 and 3)
 - demonstrated by the student (prompt 4)
 - For SACS accreditation purposes, the percentage of students who *demonstrated* learning was evidence of achieved student learning outcomes
-

Results and Discussion

- 85% of the documents have been analyzed to date
 - More students *reported* the learning that occurred (prompts 2 and 3) than actually applied, or *demonstrated*, the learning (prompt 4) to decisions, plans, and/or goals for the rest of their college experience
 - Reported learning: 98% of total
 - Demonstrated learning: 64% of total
 - Reasons for lower percentage of demonstrated learning:
 - Plans, decisions and goals articulated in the narrative were not directly tied to course content
 - Those identified had been set prior to the course (but reconfirmed), thus not a direct result of the course content
 - No decisions, plans, or goals were identified in the narrative
-

Results and Discussion

(cont.)

- The decisions, plans, and/or goals developed as a result of taking the course that were most often cited are:
 - Better time management; study more
 - Get and/or stay involved in campus organizations/activities
 - Budget money better in the future; get a job to earn more money
 - The most influential aspects of the course for facilitating decision-making and goal-setting were:
 - meeting with an academic advisor (cited most often)
 - awareness of ways in which to get involved on campus
 - career development exercises/visit to the career library
 - the class on budgeting, credit, and money management
-

Results and Discussion (cont.)

- The clear distinction between what the students *said* they learned vs. *demonstrated* that they learned was a surprising find for us
 - The pieces of advice for future freshmen cited most often were: keep an open mind, don't miss class, and get involved!
 - Data outliers:
 - No learning could be interpreted on 3% of the papers, based on a misinterpretation of the assignment (i.e., course evaluation/critique)
 - Every paper in one section of the class was completely off topic; attributed to miscommunication of the assignment by the instructor
-

Further Questions Generated by this Activity

- Were there differences between sections due to the nature of the instruction or special population (i.e., athletes, living learning community themes, etc.)?
 - How can we better capture demonstrated learning?
 - Different or more specific prompts
 - Other modes of demonstration (i.e., portfolio, presentation, etc.)
 - The *advice to incoming freshmen* prompt was inspiring to respondents and they took it very seriously. Is this also a method of demonstrating learning through “teaching” or “advising?”
 - Beyond learning assessment, these narratives offered very valuable insight into freshmen perceptions of their first experience with college. How else can we use this information?
-

Modifications for the Next Cycle of SACS Accreditation

Compliance

- We reported an outcome measurement for the demonstrated learning much lower than our original target (target = 85%; actual = 64%)
 - Next cycle we will evaluate *reported vs. demonstrated* learning with differing target %'s
 - We will look at alternative modalities for capturing demonstrated learning via the goals of authentic assessment (i.e., portfolios, presentations, other creative endeavors)
 - With these different modalities, we can also assess written and/or verbal communication (SLO 4) for that course assignment
-

References

- Suskie, L. (2004). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Levine, M (2005). *Ready or not, here life comes*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Myers, S. (2008). Authentic assessment [Electronic version]. *Research Starters Education, 1-7*.
- Janesick, V.J. (2006). *Authentic assessment primer*. New York: Peter Lang.

Thank you.

Contact Us:

- Primary Researcher: Jacquelyn Nash
 - Assistant Director, TFC and UTP
 - PhD Candidate – Dissertation research continuing along the line of inquiry relating to learning assessment in a freshman transition seminar
 - Email: jhilldru@gmu.edu or phone: (703) 993-3223
 - Director: Elizabeth Bernard
 - Oversees entire operation of The Freshman Center and the University Transition Programs
 - Possesses long-term experience and knowledge of TFC and UTP evolution
 - Email: eberner2@gmu.edu or phone: (703) 993-9080
-