A Note from the Associate Director

Not surprisingly, the assessment movement has given rise to a burgeoning industry that offers (for a price) solutions to the problem of demonstrating to accreditors and other stakeholders that colleges and universities do assess student learning and use the results to improve programs. Software products proliferate, promising “assessment and accountability management” and “accreditation solutions.”

Ironically, what can get lost in the effort to demonstrate compliance is the genuine core purpose of assessment: to provide good information to improve teaching and student learning.

Assessment at UVa is predicated on two tenets: 1) the primary purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning; demonstrating accountability and compliance flows from this and thus becomes secondary; and, 2) good assessment begins and ends where it can be most effective: faculty teaching courses within a discipline.

Choosing assessment software for UVa requires finding and evaluating tools that support faculty and programs in their day-to-day work. IAS identified a tool, “Waypoint™,” that supports faculty grading and feedback to students and efficiently generates assessment data. In spring 2008, the software was pilot-tested by a number of UVa faculty and TAs; this newsletter describes Waypoint and the pilot test. We thank the faculty members and TAs who tested Waypoint and shared their observations with us. The pilot study will extend into AY2008-2009. If you are interested in participating, please contact Lois Myers (lm2r).

Grading and Assessment: Having Your Cake and Eating it Too

You have to grade student work anyway…why not use the results of your grading for student learning outcomes assessment? That’s not usually possible (do you recall our mantra, “Grades are not enough?”)…unless you use well-crafted rubrics that define and measure achievement of specific student learning outcomes.

We pilot-tested software that permits faculty to do just that: grade student work online, using interactive rubrics of instructors’ choice or design, and efficiently provide feedback to students, while in the background, gathering those rubric results into a database for assessment purposes. The software, called “Waypoint™,” is the creation of Subjective Metrics.

The immediate purpose of the pilot study was to evaluate the utility of this software for faculty who use rubrics to grade and the potential utility for gathering and using student learning outcomes assessment data.

Faculty members and some teaching assistants from the College of Arts and Sciences and the schools of Architecture, Commerce, Education, Engineering, Nursing, and Continuing and Professional Studies participated. We surveyed participants about their expectations before they used it and then interviewed them about their experience and solicited their recommendations for improving the software.

Grading and Feedback

Instructors constructed rubrics in Waypoint for course assignments or exams, building them out of individual elements (equivalent to narrowly-defined learning outcomes or subsets of learning outcomes). Some entered established rubrics, others modified existing rubrics, and still others developed new rubrics. Instructors could weight each element according to importance and link each element to a competency, such as those defined by ABET or Virginia Department of Education. (Waypoint now also makes possible linkages to school or program learning outcomes.) When shared with students, the rubrics could communicate instructors’ expectations.

Instructors and TAs applied the rubrics as they graded student work using Waypoint, with some taking advantage of the ability to add specific comments or recommendations. Based on the instructor’s ratings and on the relative weights given to each rubric element, the software calculated a total score for each completed rubric. Students could receive the feedback via email or in hardcopy form. Ratings by element and specific comments added by the instructor regarding each student’s work—element by element, and/or overall—appear in the student’s version of the
rubric. The grade, but not the score, also appears. When students see the completed rubric, they learn how they can do better, and they may be less inclined to question or challenge their grade because they have more information about how their grade was determined.

Especially for instructors or teaching assistants who grade large numbers of student papers or exams, this software can be a boon. After a little practice, some instructors reported that using Waypoint became more efficient than pencil-and-paper grading. For especially complex rubrics or diverse (in terms of ability) groups of students, it was not clear if using the software was more efficient. Pilot-testers did report that grading became more consistent when the rubric was used: the need to complete a rubric provided the discipline to treat each student submission the same. Also, the built-in scoring system helped to sort student work.

Assessment

Behind the scenes, as instructors grade student work, Waypoint records and compiles the results of each completed rubric into a database. The database can serve as a rich source of information for:

Course improvement: Waypoint provides immediate results by element, tabulated across students. One pilot-tester reviewed the results of a mid-course paper assignment and decided on the basis of the tabulated results that students were not learning well enough how to introduce a thesis topic and how to present counter arguments. The remainder of the course was restructured somewhat to spend more time on these two learning objectives.

TA training: In one course, analysis of rubrics completed by TAs revealed differences in grading standards among TAs. We all know through anecdote or observation that some TAs grade harder or easier than others, but in what ways? The tabulated rubric data, analyzed by element, revealed precisely how TAs differed. Such results could be used to provide feedback to and guide TAs as they refine their grading practices.

Another instructor used rubrics to assess TAs’ performance in the classroom. With Waypoint accessed through a laptop, this instructor rated the TAs on multiple criteria as they taught their class section. Again, analysis of the tabulated rubric data provided information about TAs’ strengths and weaknesses that could inform the faculty member’s approach to TA training and evaluation. This kind of information, rooted in data rather than anecdote, can facilitate faculty oversight of TAs.

Student evaluation and advising: Waypoint permits the instructor or student’s advisor to view summary rubric results on each student, tabulated across courses and years and organized by broader competencies. How is this student doing in acquiring the important competencies of the discipline? Is there an area of consistent weakness that stands out, that can be remedied through targeted advising?

Student learning outcomes assessment: Depending on how extensively the software is used, the database may contain rubric results that extend across courses and years and that link to shared competencies, program objectives, or student learning outcomes. Such a database would permit faculty to address such questions as: how well are our students meeting the standards we’ve set? In what areas are they strongest? Weakest? How has their learning improved since we implemented the new curriculum or the new requirements?

Finally, the database would provide compelling evidence of the University’s commitment to defining and assessing student learning outcomes and using the results to improve teaching and learning. It is a decidedly decentralized, faculty- and student-focused approach to demonstrating compliance with assessment accreditation requirements.

Interface, Access, and Security

The Waypoint user interface was judged by some pilot-testers to be “clunky.” In response, Subjective Metrics, working with us this year, is implementing a more user-friendly interface. Meanwhile, we will continue the pilot study and our evaluation of alternative products. We plan to make a product selection next year, one of the requirements being compatibility with the UVaCollab course management system.

Important questions remain to be answered before the University purchases and implements this or a similar software product: for example: how will faculty access the software? As rubric results are collected in a database, how will data security be ensured? Who will have access to the data? We recognize the issues of access and security and will take them into serious consideration as we consider the best approaches to managing access for purposes of both program management and institutional compliance.

Learning Assessment Grants

A joint initiative of IAS and TRC, the program will offer small grants to facilitate student learning and program assessments in AY2008-9. For more information, contact Lois Myers (lm2r).

Application deadline: October 1