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HAPPY THANKSGIVING

Confessions of an assessment skeptic

When members of the Political Science program were told we'd have to adopt assessment, we were, shall we say, less than fully enthused. If you have ever tried to wash a cat in a kitchen sink, you have a sense of the sprit in which the POLS program approached this task. I should hasten to say that this reluctance was not because we did not want useful feedback, or that we did not wish to enrich or improve our program or our courses. Rather, our hesitation was principally based in a real skepticism about the likely utility of this endeavor.

Perhaps it was a measure of our conceit, but we did not believe we needed assessment of this sort, and, frankly, we had good reason. You see, there is a peculiar and perhaps unnatural characteristic of the POLS program at Stockton that I should admit to you: we like each other. There, I said it. I know this is perhaps a troubling trait in academia, where it is said that the battles are so fierce because the stakes are so small. It is, nevertheless, true. We enjoy each other's company. We voluntarily spend some free time together. We like to talk about our classes and our students, so we do so a lot. In fact, our skepticism was based in the fact that we were already doing assessment, regularly, and with good effect, albeit informally.

Showing Off Our Well-Trained Tutors

When we prepared our five-year self study last year, we bragged about how the experience of working as a tutor at the Writing or Math Tutoring Center has positive effects on the undergraduate students who work as tutors. We said that students who serve as tutors improved their communication and problem-solving skills.

Our consultant called us on this claim and asked how we have assessed this.

"Well, it's obvious; we see it," we said.

We just know. Trust us.

She smiled at us and nodded, and we thought she bought our argument. However, in her report, she said we should find a way to assess what skills our tutors have developed as a result of their training.

So Luis Peña from the Math Center and I signed up for the Assessment Institute in May. Our goal was to learn more about assessment and develop a performance task that could measure our tutors' skills at problem-

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Our proclivity for dialogue extended to our students and graduates; we have polled former students every five years for three decades. This seemed like a good way to figure out how we're doing.

Nevertheless, we were expected to standardize these practices, and we faced the task with the enthusiastic deference to authority that you can only understand if you have raised a teenager or trained a mule. We tried pre- and post testing; we discovered what we already knew: our seniors were smarter and knew more about politics than our freshmen. Quantifying this difference impressed none of us. We tried senior portfolios and discovered that they take time and effort and did not provide us with much useful information. Given our regular communication about students, a review of their collective work offered little new insight, other than a more acute appreciation for the need to avoid such mind-numbing tasks.

The third prong of our effort proved more fruitful. We began panel discussions with our graduating seniors. With every senior seminar class, we arranged a focused and interactive discussion about their experience at Stockton. All program faculty members are invited to attend, and most have. These panels allow us to have useful conversations with our students and to think seriously about what we want our students to achieve, what skills and wisdom we hope to force upon them before they wrestle free. Our procedure is unremark- able, following general social scientific methods, adjusted to suit us. The results and insights of each panel session are written-up by the coordinator (me) and discussed by the entire program. The results have al- lowed us to '"close the loop" and use the results of assessment to inform and reshape our practices.

Some results have helped reshape courses. Our methods course, a core program course and one of only two courses required of all majors, has been altered to address student feedback that it was overcommitted and

> *"When was the last time students asked you to make your courses harder?"*

did not allow students time to digest important principles. Such complaints could also be gained from class evaluations. However, when the advice comes several semesters after the students completed the course, after they've been asked to use their skills in subsequent courses, and from students who did not take the course together, the feedback was more notable.

More generally, program faculty members have adjusted their curricula as a result of panel feedback. Multi- ple panel discussions revealed that previous coursework had not fully prepared students for the rigorous senior seminar experience. In particular, students noted that they had inadequate opportunities to critically evaluate scholarly research prior to the seminar. In fact, several panels pushed strongly for greater rigor in the program coursework more generally. When was the last time students asked you to make your courses *harder*? Being a program with a reputation for rigor, we were surprised by this result and took it seriously. In response, multiple courses were altered to incorporate more analysis of scholarly research. We and the stu- dents have noted the value of these changes in subsequent panel discussions.

Perhaps most significantly, panel feedback helped us reshape the program structure. Panel discussions re- vealed that some students desired greater structure in the political science curriculum. The Political Science program only requires two courses of all students; remaining coursework is to be determined in consultation with a preceptor. However, with the relatively recent (and unfortunate) ability to register for courses without preceptor approval, the structure of the program can appear rather absent to some.

This observation catalyzed discussion among program faculty that in turn led to the developed of three fo- cused concentrations in social studies education, pre-law, and sustainability. Students may still pursue

a general political science degree, but now they also have the benefit of delineated tracks of study in our three most common career trajectories. These concentrations have proved very popular and may in part account for a consistent rise in POLS enrollments over the past two years.

Am I a convert? A true believer in the holy church of the assessment? Well, sort of. My initial concerns with assessment were twofold: First, I was wary of efforts to quantify things that cannot (or should not) be quantified. A fetishization of numbers has made a mess of much of political science, I say, as a numbers guy who does a fair bit of quantification in my own work. Second, I am suspicious of trends in management that become mindless procedures to fulfill a purpose that was once sound but is now lost. As a specialist in environmental policy, I am familiar with bureaucratic procedures that accomplish little. My concerns haven't changed. But, as my examples indicate, assessment can have advantages—when done right.

> *"assessment is valuable to the degree these efforts are organic to the existing program, meant to enrich and thicken the valuable aims and efforts that are already there."*

So, how do we do it right? Assessment cannot be simply appended to existing practices or imposed from the outside. As with most adventures in life, the first step is the most important. In assessment, the first step is recognizing the value of what you already have and then thinking about how to enrich existing good practices and achieve existing goals. Panel discussions allowed us to enhance and inform an existing, vital relationship among program members who share a commitment to good teaching. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. In the end, my observations, like so many in social research, amount to the obvious: assessment is valuable to the degree these efforts are organic to the existing program, meant to enrich and thicken the valuable aims and efforts already there; it is empty, or potentially detrimental, to the degree that they are not.

Patrick Hossay, *Associate Professor of Political Science*

Development of the Social Work Program Performance Task Assessment

In May, 2009, we attended the Stockton Assessment Institute. The three day Institute seemed to be a relatively painless (and compensated) way to learn more about what assessment might mean to us and how our programs might benefit from (or be burdened by) them. The facilitators provided an extremely interesting and enlightening three days that we recommend to our colleagues.

The Institute required collaboration, and a common interest in applied ethics brought us together for the project described here. The goal of the Institute was to produce a performance task assessment that could be used in one or both of our programs (Social Work and Philosophy). The model guiding our work was that of CLA (Collegiate Learning Assessment) in the Classroom, which emphasizes "authentic assessment" intended to reflect the complex processes that are central to a field of study. A primary goal of this approach is to design a performance task capable of evaluating the higher order cognitive skills of critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and problem solving. In addition, analytic writing is viewed as a skill that must be integrated with the others and is also assessed. Specific components of these analytic skills include evaluation of evidence, analysis and synthesis of evidence, drawing conclusions, and acknowledging alternative explanations/viewpoints. Writing is assessed for presentation, development, persuasiveness, mechanics, and interest.

We had several challenges in working on this project. First, we come from fairly different fields: social work and philosophy. Second, neither of us had engaged in this kind of activity before. Third, because we come from different fields, it wasn't clear whether we would construct a general tool or one focused on one of our own areas, and if the latter, whether it was to cover both or only one.

By settling the last issue, we dealt with the first two. We decided that, while it might be fun to construct

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solving and communication. Luis and I came up with a scenario that tutors often face: a disgruntled student, frustrated by poor performance and angry at her professor, comes to the Tutoring Center for help.

Luis and I then went our separate ways, as the task would be different for Math and Writing Center tutors. In my scenario, the student, a recent transfer from a community college, brings in a paper returned with lots of unkind comments and a big F grade. The professor offers the student a rewrite option and advises her to work with a tutor at the Writing Center. The student arrives at the WC with a set of documents, ready to make her case that the faculty member is unfair. These include his RateMyProfessor reviews, her community college transcript, the assignment, an assigned reading, and her essay.

The tutor's task is to sort through these documents, identify those that are most relevant, and explain how she/he would begin this tutorial. I developed three specific questions for the tutors to answer: The first asks the tutor to respond to the student in a way that balances the need to establish a relationship with the student with the need to be honest and objective. The second question requires the tutor to demonstrate problem-solving and determine the main problems with the student's work. The third question asks the tutor to suggest a step-by-step plan for the student and to assist the student in the process of getting started on a rewrite.

In short, this performance task asks tutors to show me how they would tutor their way out of a difficult situation. They need to show me their communication and problem-solving skills.

On October 28, I administered this per-signment in GEN 3952, *Writing Tutor* Center tutors. The results were inter-course in the future. Most of the tutors ing to the student. Some of my tutors dent's dislike of the professor, even unnamed faculty members. I was most litely but then moved the discussion faculty member and nudged the stu-

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formance task as a midterm in-class as-*Practicum*, the training course for Writing esting and may impact how I teach the went for friendly over direct in respond-offered too much empathy for the stu-offering their own bad experiences with pleased with the tutors who listened po-away from the personal attacks against a dent toward the task at hand.

Almost all of my tutors-in-training did a good job of directing the student to the assignment and noting how her essay fell short of the assignment. I wanted them to realize the essay was beyond fixing, and the student needed to start over, this time with more attention to the assignment, including making references to an assigned reading.

Some of the tutors were more hands on than others about helping the student get started. Most seemed reluctant to over-tutor, or be perceived as doing too much of the student's work for her.

I realize in looking over their work that I may be putting too much emphasis on establishing a positive relationship with a student. I would have liked to see less sugar-coating and more direct communication. I also think I may have overstressed the importance of having the student do most of the work. This particular student would be unlikely to find her way without a hefty push from a tutor, and I need to find a way to communicate that some hand-holding is OK at the beginning.

Using a performance task such as the one I developed helped me see which of my new tutors are furthest along. I wrote detailed comments to each one highlighting what I liked and what I had hoped to see. Developing a rubric forced me to itemize the individual ingredients that go into a good tutoring session. I plan to develop more per-formance tasks for tutor training involving more scenarios that might happen in the Writing Center.

Now if our next consultant asks how we know that our tutors have these skills, I will whip out my performance task, show her the results, and gloat: "Well, it's obvious; look for yourself."

Pam Cross, Coordinator of the Writing Center

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an assessment tool that determined a student's ability to write up an evaluation of a dysfunctional family situation *and* critique Leibniz's best of all possible worlds argument, we should focus on one area. Given that the social work program is involved in a self-study to reaffirm its accreditation, we concluded that we would be of most help in working on a performance task for them. We decided to evaluate the students' capacity to respond effectively to an ethical dilemma that might well come up in the course of their career. This emphasis tapped our common interest in professional ethics, and it provided a context in which Rodger's scholarly expertise was brought to bear on a task that was more relevant to social work than philosophy. Finally, while we needed to make the test reasonably focused, we wanted to look at students' cultural competency and their knowledge of social work concepts, in addition to the other areas commonly assessed by CLA-style performance task assessments. With input from Social Work Program faculty, we later further refined these objectives to match the Program goals, objectives, and competencies.

Our next task was to determine how the performance assessment task would function: would we ask students to complete it when they were about to graduate as an evaluation of their practice competence? use it diagnostically when they entered the program? in their second year? Obviously, the extent of their background and training would help us determine what it would be reasonable to expect them to know. After consultation with Social Work Program faculty, we decided to administer the assessment at the beginning of social work majors' senior year and again right before graduation. This time in their career provides us with a unique opportunity in that students have taken a number of courses and experienced a 90-hour junior internship, yet they are just about to embark on two critical aspects of the program: their senior seminar and the field practicum, which requires 200 hours of work per semester in a social work agency or institution. At the onset of senior year we believe students will have enough background to understand the nature of the dilemma, but they have only had a small taste of what social work refers to as its "signature pedagogy," the field experience, which includes (at least) weekly supervision from a Master's level social worker, bi-weekly field seminars, and classroom instruction from senior social work faculty. We can use the performance task assessment to evaluate progress over time in critical thinking and ethical decision making.

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Next, we needed to determine the form of the instrument. Drawing inspiration from sample CLA tools and conversations with seminar colleagues, we constructed what we call a "decision scenario." Social work students would have to make a decision about the placement of a client, on the basis of a set of materials we would provide them, and write a report to be read in court with their placement recommendation. In order to make the ethical dilemma especially prominent, as well as test the students' understanding of the role of self-determination and cultural competence [prominent ethical principles and competencies outlined in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics*], we made the client a biracial adolescent from a semi-rural community whose family had several years of involvement with the Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) and whose problematic behavior was escalating as he aged. The client desires a placement option which is contraindicated by the materials provided to the students.

The test begins with the students reading all case materials and documents related to the effectiveness of various programs available for the client, which will be the basis for their evaluation and recommendation. Included in the packet are case material on the family of the client, selections from the NASW *Code of Ethics*, abstracts from genuine journal articles about the effectiveness of various placement options (e.g., boot camp, staying with his father, a group home, etc.), and details from program evaluation reports. After reading

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through the packet, students choose the best placement option for the client based solely on the materials provided to them. They write up their recommendation, giving reasons for their decision with clear, detailed reference to the materials in the packet. In addition, to force students to deal with the ethical aspects of the case, we include a second product, a memo students write to their hypothetical supervisor in which they informally discuss the ethical issues they face in making a recommendation for their client.

The final component of our project was the assessment rubric. We decided to rate students' achievement of a combined set of specific Social Work Program objectives and competencies and common CLA objectives. We used a three point scale (2, 1, 0), indicating the extent to which the student achieved a given objective (or competency) completely, partially, or not at all. We identified four Program goals to be assessed using this tool, and each goal has specific competencies which are to be rated on the three point scale. Some of these competencies come directly from those required by our social work accrediting body, giving this tool utility as a means of collecting required data for accreditation purposes. Other objectives come from the CLA critical thinking skills categories mentioned above. This approach was inclusive of a broad range of social work knowledge and skills we believe vital to competent generalist social work practice.

We intended to pilot test our Social Work Program performance task assessment with a small number of seniors this year, get some feedback from students and faculty, and make revisions for wider use in the future. However, Program faculty members were enthusiastic about its value, and we chose the Senior Field Practicum as a venue for administering the tool to all seniors at the beginning of the current semester. In addition, Social Work admitted its first Master's students in September, and, in slightly revised form, they completed the task assessment as well. We are currently involved in a reliability check of the MSW scoring rubric, a process of multiple readers scoring each student response and comparing their scores of the individual competencies. At the BSW level we are holding off on scoring the responses until we have conducted the post-tests in the spring. During the summer of 2010, Program faculty will divide the approximately 110 pre- and post-test responses, and each will be scored by at least two faculty members. Each assessment response will have been coded so when scoring we are blind to both student identity and to assessment date (i.e., whether or not we are reading a Time 1 or Time 2 response). This method will allow us to conduct a reliability check on our scoring rubric and to avoid scorer bias, as anyone who is aware that s/he is scoring a Time 2 response might be unconsciously inclined to score it more favorably than a Time 1 response.

Although we are early in the process of scoring the MSW student responses, we can offer tentative observations. First, a comparison of two coders' scores of approximately one-third of these responses suggests that we may be able to achieve a reasonable level of inter-rater consistency but may need to eliminate or revise a small number of objectives/competencies that are difficult to interpret. Second, many of the first year MSW students had considerable difficulty completing the task. While most of these students have no social work background, and, therefore, would not be expected to address the social work specific aspects of the task with anything approaching proficiency, as they are college graduates we expect them to follow instructions and evaluate evidence. Many, however, were challenged by these aspects of the task. We have not yet completed data analysis, so we don't know if these early observations will hold for all MSW responses or how they will compare to BSW student performance. Finally, the process of constructing this performance assessment task and thinking about it in relation to Program goals and objectives has stimulated us to think about what exactly we would like our students to know upon graduating with a BSW and how to determine if they are meeting that standard. This final outcome argues for the value of this process and suggests that assessment need not be a rote exercise completed only as a means to others' ends.

Rodger Jackson, Associate Professor of Philosophy, and Bill Reynolds, Assistant Professor of Social Work