

College of Arts and Sciences
Report on Outcome Assessment
(March, 2005)

The purpose of this report is to briefly summarize the outcome assessment activities of the College of Arts and Sciences. These activities are at the College-level in the assessment of the SAGES pilot program, and at the department-level in each of the College's 21 academic departments.

College of Arts and Sciences' Assessment of SAGES (Seminar Approach to General Education and Scholarship):

The primary outcome assessment activity of the College of Arts and Sciences is the ongoing assessment of the SAGES program. Currently in the final year of its three-year pilot phase, SAGES is the subject of a comprehensive, rigorous, and continuous assessment program. The assessment involves a range of methods, including standardized course evaluations, SAGES-developed course evaluations, direct observations of the learning environment, interviews with faculty and students, and use of National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data.

Multiple groups of students are currently included in the assessment. Students entering as first year students in August, 2002 were asked if they wanted to be included in a random selection pool for SAGES. The assessment included: (a) first year students who wanted to participate and were selected to participate; (b) first year students who wanted to participate but were not selected to participate; and (c) students who declined to be included in the pool of students to be selected for SAGES. Students entering in August of 2003 and 2004 have also been included in the assessment.

The high level of rigor and comprehensiveness in the SAGES assessment is of central importance to a pilot program like SAGES, both for the assessment of student outcomes and for evaluation and refinement of the SAGES program itself. Because new assessment information is continually collected and analyzed, the most effective reporting mechanism is through a website (www.cwru.edu/sages/newgereval).

Department-Level Assessment in the College of Arts and Sciences:

The Executive Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences, in consultation with then Dean John Bassett, determined that outcome assessment in the College required accommodation of the variability among our twenty-one departments. As would be expected, outcome assessment plans differ from department to department. All departments submitted a plan for outcome assessment that was reviewed and approved by the Executive Committee and the Dean. Annual reports include an item asking for departmental activities related to outcome assessment. Interdisciplinary programs do not, in general, have formal outcome assessment plans.

While there is some overlap, there is not a single strategy for outcome assessment across academic departments. Outcome assessment methods across the departments include the following mechanisms:

- course evaluations
- exit interviews with graduating seniors
- essays by graduating seniors evaluating their experiences
- admission to top graduate and professional schools
- admission to special summer programs abroad
- discipline-specific written questionnaires
- e-mail or phone interviews
- portfolios of writing projects
- evaluations of capstone experiences
- ongoing evaluations of student progress
- alumni interviews

Some departmental plans originally included GRE scores. However, the Executive Committee raised questions as to confidentiality and GRE scores were removed from assessment plans.

Effectiveness of Outcome Assessment Efforts:

The most promising outcome assessment activity in the College is the ongoing assessment of the SAGES program. SAGES resulted from many years of faculty discussion about the goals of an undergraduate education. It was believed that these educational goals could be better met through the SAGES program than the existing general education requirements that involved a breadth of courses, but not a coherent plan for the outcome of the educational experience. While SAGES was initiated in the College of Arts and Sciences, it has been adopted as the general education requirements for all undergraduates entering beginning in the Fall of 2005. SAGES, then, sets the criteria for judging the outcome of an undergraduate education while also being the subject of ongoing evaluation to improve the educational experience.

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of department-based outcome assessment. While annual reports from departments include the request for a report about progress and activity in outcome assessment, there has been no evaluation of assessment results across College departments. Additionally, outcome assessment at the department level has a number of limitations (See Continuing Issues below).

Plans to Implement New Assessment Activities and/or Phase Out Existing Methods

The SAGES program will continue to be refined and evaluated. SAGES has already modified aspects of its program in response to assessment and evaluation. The SAGES budget contains funds for outcome assessment and personnel identified for these tasks. Importantly, there is an intellectual and programmatic interest in assessing how well SAGES is accomplishing its pedagogical goals.

There are a number of limitations to the department-based assessment activities. These limitations are outlined below (see Continuing Issues below).

Perceived Readiness of the College to be Evaluated (NCA accreditation):

The SAGES evaluation is very strong, comprehensive and rigorous. It is an ongoing enterprise. This should be the College's primary effort in outcome assessment for accreditation. Unlike department-based assessment activities, SAGES is involved with a broad and large enough sample of students to produce meaningful results. SAGES also has clearly articulated goals for all students (for example writing, a capstone experience) that lend themselves to a more College or University-wide assessment effort.

Continuing Issues:

Serious issues of resources and support for outcome assessment remain for department-based efforts. These include:

- Some departments graduate too few majors in any given year for assessment to move beyond anecdotes.
- It is difficult to separate out the major/minor from the broader educational experience.
- There is no clarity as to how outcome assessment results will be used.
- Departments should have a dedicated person to conduct and analyze these assessment data.
- Departments need funding and intellectual support for these activities, including support for the dedicated person.
- Departments need support from Alumni Relations to provide all departments with up-to-date lists of alumni for assessment purposes.
- Departments need further education as to how to conduct and interpret outcome assessment.
- Departments, and the College, need regular input as to the results of University-wide assessment activities (e.g. NSSE data).

The student component of outcome assessment also needs attention. The issues include:

- Students need to take ownership and interest in their learning goals and whether they are being accomplished.
- The value on student responses needs to be demonstrated by insuring that all students participate.
- Students deserve feedback on the assessment activities for which they volunteer their time.
- Care must be taken not to over-assess students such that students feel that time is taken away from other important activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Outcome assessment should be more centralized for purposes of sharing expertise, data, access to and information on alumni, etc.
- The challenges to outcome assessment repeatedly come back to issues of resources (financial, personnel, time). One possible solution would be for outcome assessment to be embedded in a new university-wide center for the study of learning and curricular innovation. Case is in a unique time in the history of our own university as well as in a position to take a leading role nationally (and perhaps internationally) on education, learning, and curricular innovation. SAGES is being initiated for all incoming students in the Fall of 2005. Many of the professional schools are taking the lead in curricular reform as evidenced in the strategic planning meetings over this semester. With such a conscious rethinking of the educational enterprise, Case is in a position to undertake a concerted look at the outcomes of these innovations.