

ASSESSMENT NEWS

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Special points of interest:

- Froese presents SC assessment program at NCA meeting
- Annual report available on the web
- Editorial addresses assessment as threat or opportunity

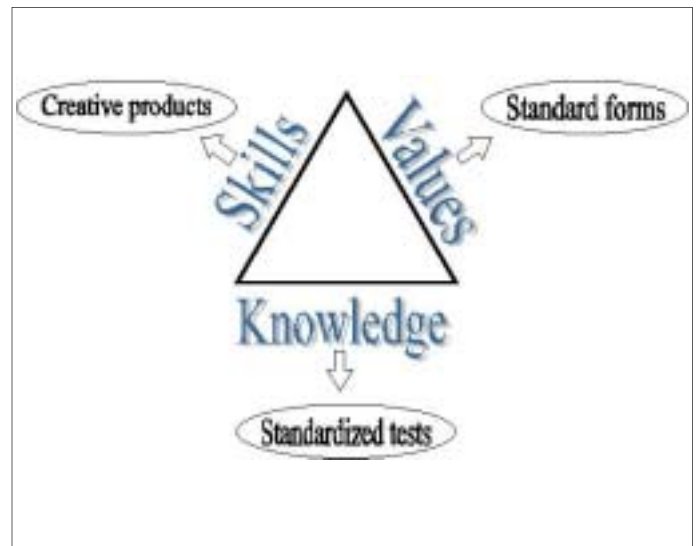
2004 ASSESSMENT REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

The Assessment Committee distributed copies of the 2004 Assessment Report to interested campus constituents earlier in September. That report is now available on Sterling College's web site www.sterling.edu under "Academics."

The 2004 report highlights progress in the College's attempt to improve student learning outcomes. The assessment program targets knowledge, skills, and values outcomes. The 2004 data include continuing reports of knowledge and skills outcomes, and expanded evaluation of values outcomes to include ethics instruction and impact.

The report first describes student and departmental compliance with data collection. For the second consecutive year, compliance rates are excellent. All departments submitted assessment reports, and students completed assessment assignments at rates exceeding 90%.

Sterling College assesses students' knowledge in their majors and in general



Sterling College's assessment targets (the triangle) and methods (the ovals).

education. Sixty students completed a major field test in 2004. Average percentile scores have declined over the last 3 years, but remain within about 10% of the 50th percentile. Graduates scored well in general education knowledge, achieving the 69th percentile in their composite scores. The highest scores were in science and social studies (79th percen-

tile) and the lowest score was in math (47th percentile). These scores are from samples of graduates over the last 4 years.

Students demonstrate their disciplinary skills in creative products ranging from research papers to performances and teaching lessons. The report describes improved faculty evaluation process, and

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NCA RESPONDS POSITIVELY TO STERLING'S ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Director of Education and Training at the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (NCA) contacted Arn Froese after the last NCA convention, asking him to participate in developing training and evaluation materials related to assessment of student learning. Di-

rector Lynn Priddy informed Froese that NCA staff members had heard his presentation entitled "Integrated Assessment: Conceptual Framework, Feedback Processes, and Improved Student Learning." NCA was developing a Think Tank and Development Team on Assessment of Student Learning and

invited Froese to participate for one year. The first meeting of the Think Tank occurred during Sterling College's Commencement, preventing Froese's participation. However, Priddy has included Froese in a reviewing role.

Froese described

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NCA RESPONDS (CONT'D)

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Sterling College's assessment program at the national convention at the end of March, 2004. The convention attracted more than 2,700 institutional representatives from the 19 states in NCA's region. About 200 of those representatives attended Froese's presentation. Froese began the

view their assessment programs as clear, easy to administer, or effective in changing student learning outcomes.

Froese then described the conceptual base of Sterling College's assessment program, four principles that contribute to its effectiveness, and results of assessment activities. The assessment base identifies the



NCA's logo for the higher education unit.

types of student outcomes that assessment addresses—knowledge, skills, and values. The principles include simplifying processes, targeting common elements for assessment across programs, using standard measuring instruments, and organizing productive feedback loops.

Froese illustrated each principle with stories from Sterling's assessment history and related Power Point graphics. Froese concluded the 45 minute presentation with data that demonstrated attitude change in computer science students after completing their

service project.

The invitation to participate in NCA's development work on assessment reinforces the quality of Sterling College's assessment work. A team of NCA reviewers visited the college in spring 2003, in part to examine progress on the assessment program. They stated that "the basic features of the current assessment plan place it in the mainstream of the assessment movement." Froese's presentation in spring, 2004 provided evidence for even greater use of assessment data to improve instructional effectiveness.

NCA is interested in clarifying quality criteria for its institutions and its evaluators. The Think Tank's purpose is to create resources for training consultant-evaluators, and to develop procedures to assist institutions in developing meaningful assessment programs. Sterling College is pleased to be part of this planning process. ▲

"Froese's presentation in spring, 2004 provided evidence for even greater use of assessment data to improve instructional effectiveness."

presentation by asking participants to answer 10 questions about their institution's assessment activities. Participants responded as had Sterling College Department Chairs some years earlier—they did not

2004 HIGHLIGHTS (CONT'D)

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improved student reports of faculty interaction as they created their products.

Students demonstrated several weaknesses and strengths in general education skills. Their weaknesses were

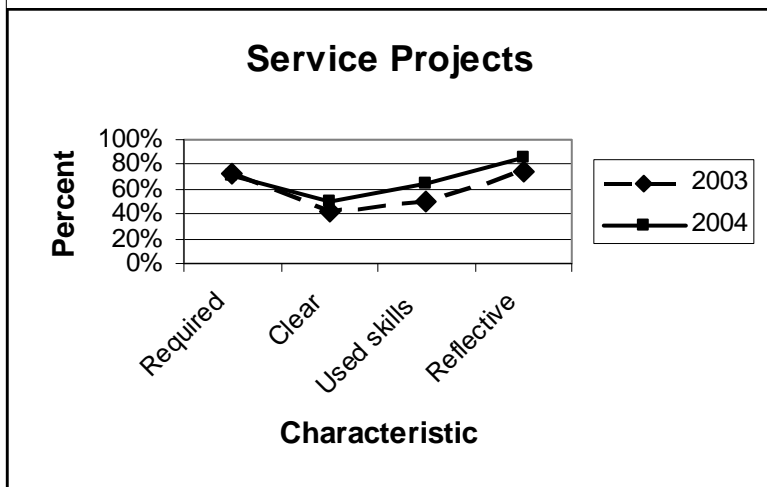
geometric and algebraic calculations, and their strengths were in understanding social science and science procedures. Interestingly, students scored well in using appropriate statistical reasoning.

Sterling students continue to report service project characteristics that could generate greater commitment to the service value that is central to the college's mission. Compared with the prior year, students reported that more service projects were clearly described, required skills taught in their discipline, and required reflection on the value of service.

Every department documented some ethics instruction in their curriculum. Frequently, that instruction involved some

form of exposure to ethical issues without any requirement that students respond to the issues. Such exposure is a beginning point for ethics instruction, but student reflection will increase, and the impact of ethics instruction will expand as students wrestle with ethical issues on assignments and projects.

The annual report concludes with a description of success stories. The assessment program has raised faculty awareness about weak points in the instructional process. Faculty have responded by clarifying assignments and expanding feedback to students about their learning progress. In turn, students' pride in their creative products, and their perception of faculty involvement in their learning have increased. ▲



CONTROVERSY ABOUT CONFIDENTIALITY POLICY

SGA and the Faculty Assembly endorsed a proposed confidentiality statement during September. Although the Assessment Committee was treating personally identifiable information with confidentiality, no policy statements were previously in place.

SGA approved the proposed policy without modifications. The faculty first amended the policy to refer only to confidentiality of student identity. They then de-

bated whether the data file should include student names or numbers. Some expressed concern for a greater likelihood of accidental release of personal information if identity was by name. Others argued that using numbers increased faculty work and the likelihood of transcription errors in the data base.

In a split vote, faculty rejected an amendment to require records by number. Faculty then voted in favor of the

new policy. That policy is now published on the web page under "Academics." ▲



Keeping identity of score providers debated

Assessment News is distributed periodically to inform faculty, staff, and students of the work of the Institutional Assessment Committee. Address any comments or letters to Arnold Froese, Director, Institutional Assessment at campus box 165 or email to afroese@sterling.edu.

EVALUATING THE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

For the last 4 years, Sterling College has worked to implement an assessment program that is clear and simple. Faculty approved using standardized testing, standard forms across programs for department chairs to complete, and standard forms for students to evaluate their products and experiences. The Assessment Committee has streamlined data collection processes and implemented feedback loops that make assessment results useful to departments for improving student learning processes. As the faculty approves new assessment tasks, data collection and analysis become simultaneously more complex and more useful.

The assessment plan is incomplete. Furthermore, the college changes faculty and administrative personnel each year, and new faculty do not have the same historical understanding of assessment as those who watched its birth and development. Therefore, faculty should periodically evaluate the assessment program to provide the Assessment Committee information about what is clear/unclear, helpful/unhelpful, and easy/tedious. In its assessment rubric, "Levels of Implementation—Patterns of Characteristics", the Higher

Learning Commission of the North Central Association (NCA) states that in "maturing" assessment structures, "The comprehensive assessment program is evaluated regularly and is modified as necessary for optimal effectiveness."

The last evaluation of the assessment program at Sterling College was an informal evaluation by department chairs in Fall of 2000. At that meeting, chairs quickly agreed that the assessment program needed to change.

It is time to evaluate the general assessment program again. The Assessment Committee needs to know if data collection processes and assignments are clear, if feedback mechanisms provide opportunities to clarify what programs accomplish, and if the reports the Committee provides assist the department in considering meaningful changes to improve student learning processes. The Committee will prepare an evaluation form in fall. That form will include opportunities for faculty to rate the effectiveness of various aspects of the assessment program.

The form will also solicit suggestions for modifications in assessment processes. Faculty can prepare for effective participation in this evaluation process by noting any confusion or concerns as they read the current assessment report.

The Committee believes that Sterling College has a model assessment program. Nevertheless, any program can be improved. The Committee hopes that this evaluation process, will enhance the assessment program and increase administration, faculty, and student commitment to a growing "culture of assessment." ▲



Committee is preparing a survey.

"It is time to evaluate the general assessment program again."

Institutional Assessment Committee

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We're on the Web
[http://www.sterling.edu/
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EDITORIAL

Tensions about assessment seem greater than they have been in the past few years. These tensions have several sources. New faculty do not have historic contrast with the previous assessment system, and they bring diverse experiences with assessment from prior employment settings. Furthermore, assessment information suggests threats to some as their programs are evaluated for quality of student learning.

We live in days characterized by threat, highlighted by a political campaign in which threat from unpredictable terrorists, or from our responses to unpredictable terrorists is a major issue. In addition, threat arises from external agencies that can challenge our methods with lawsuits and injunctions. Threats are also much more personal. Additional work threatens our control over our own time. The threat increases when the work presents a mirror for self or external evaluation.

We could easily be incapacitated by the fear of what could go wrong. Could confidential data be compromised? Could my performance as a student be evaluated poorly after 4 years of work and tens of thousands of dollars? Could my identity as a teacher be threatened by the performance of my students?

In contrast, we could be energized by what can go right. Assessment is designed as a method to continually improve instructional processes. This improvement is a legitimate goal for every program, regardless of its quality. As departments consider their students' assessment performance and feedback from the Assessment Committee about their instructional processes, they can modify the structures for student learning. In the short history of our current assessment program, we have seen departments on the move. They have modified curricular requirements, clarified the assignments they give to students, improved feedback processes, and changed coverage in courses to address issues identified by assessment data. The next newsletter will highlight modifications that departments have implemented based on 2004 assessment data. Anticipate these fruits of our assessment labors. See the perspective of opportunity instead of threat. ▲

FRESHMEN PROVIDE CBASE PRETEST SCORES

The Assessment Program tests all seniors for general education knowledge. To determine how much seniors learned during their years at Sterling, the college needs some baseline measure of what students know when they arrive. For the last few years, students entering the Education program provided these pretest scores.

Pretest scores from Education students provide limited baseline information. Education students may be different from the general student body. Furthermore, some students decide to enter the Education program after their freshman year. These pretest scores are influenced by



To the 40 freshmen who gave an hour to assessment.

a year of general education classes.

This year, the Education Department decided to use a different test to screen interested students. This change created the opportunity to improve the baseline records.

The Assessment Committee asked 40 randomly sampled freshmen to take the CBASE test. Students who declined to take the test were replaced by other students with equivalent ACT scores.

Completing the testing required about 4 weeks. More than half of the students approached agreed to take the test. The final sample (Mean = 21.4) closely matched the freshman class (Mean = 21.5) on ACT score.

The Committee gratefully acknowledges the cooperation of these 40 students. Sterling College now has good baseline data for comparison with senior scores and for pre-test/post-test comparisons when these freshmen reach their graduation. ▲