How to Get the Assessment Monkey Off Your Back: 
A Simple, Basic Plan for Outcomes Assessment in Your Department

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This document is aimed at departments suffering from Assessment Hostility Disorder (AHD) often characterized by FOF (fear of filing) or FWT (fear of wasted time)—in this case, wasted time collecting pointless data that might bite us in the posterior if misused. The solution: We as faculty must own the assessment process at the department level, collect only those data that matter to us as teachers, and use the data for our own purposes to improve student learning.

When assessment is owned by faculty, it can be a powerful strategy for improving the learning environment we create for students. In fact, it may be one of our best strategies for maintaining the centrality of teaching and learning at Seattle University.

The purpose of assessment is threefold:

- To help faculty make improvements in curriculum, assignments, or teaching methods to improve student learning or performance
- To help faculty assess the disciplinary and Core competencies of graduating seniors
- To provide diagnostic information about individual students for more effective advising, placement, or supplemental instruction

The rest of this document provides a template for a simple, basic approach to assessment that any undergraduate department can use to improve its major.

The Prerequisites Before initiating this basic plan, your department must do the following:

1. Develop learning outcomes for your major.
2. Agree to devote one meeting per year (two hours) to an evidence-based discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of your graduating seniors.
3. Appoint an assessment coordinator to run the meeting and write a one-page report.
4. Agree to experiment with changes in teaching methods, emphases, assignment design, or curriculum to address weaknesses identified in 2. above.

The Basic Plan This basic plan uses two assessment measures, one direct and one indirect:

- Direct measure: Teacher observation of the performance of seniors on course-embedded assignments.
Indirect measure: Data on your majors’ responses to the Seattle University Survey of Student Engagement Questionnaire or to a departmentally designed questionnaire focused on learning in the major.

The Procedures for Implementing the Plan on a Two-Year Cycle

Year One:
1. Department selects one or two learning outcomes to be assessed.
2. Teachers of upper division courses identify course-embedded assignments that assess the selected outcomes.
3. Throughout the year teachers track the performance of seniors on these assignments and note characteristic patterns of strengths or weaknesses.
4. At the department’s annual assessment meeting, teachers report on the patterns they have observed. At the same meeting, teachers analyze departmental data provided by your department’s chosen questionnaire.
5. Teachers identify characteristic problem areas in senior performance and brainstorm possible changes that might be made in curriculum, assignment design, emphases, or teaching methods to address these problems.
6. Assessment coordinator writes a one-page report for departmental records.

Year Two:
1. Faculty try to implement the changes identified in Step 5 above. Such changes could involve a variety of individual experiments (for example, developing methods to improve critical reading or placing more emphasis on library research) or a whole department experiment (piloting a new course to address a gap in the curriculum or developing a new unit in an existing course).
2. At the department’s annual assessment meeting, faculty report on their experiments for boosting student performance. Individual instructors provide observational data—again based on course-embedded assignments—about how well the experiments worked.
3. Assessment coordinator writes a one-page report for departmental records.

Years Three and Four:
Repeat the process on new student learning outcomes.

At time of program review
The department’s one-page reports on each year’s assessment activities become evidence that (1) the department has an assessment plan; (2) that it monitors the disciplinary competence of graduating seniors; and (3) that it uses assessment results to improve instruction.

Basic Plan Upgrades
If your department discovers that this process initiates valuable discussions of teaching and learning and identifies ways to improve curricula or instruction, the efficiency and power of the process can be increased through upgrades such as the following:

- Creating scoring rubrics for assignments. These allow for much more precise observation of student work and lead to improved analysis of students’ strengths and weaknesses.

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1 This web-based survey, adapted from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), will be administered annually by the Office of Institutional Research. Departmental results can be provided for any major if the number of responding students is large enough to generate statistically meaningful data. Departments will need to encourage their majors to complete the survey.
• Selecting a representative sampling of seniors’ work and scoring the sample together as a department or committee.
• Improving the use of Senior Synthesis as an assessment site for seniors--for example, embedding a short assignment in Senior Synthesis to assess certain student learning outcomes.
• Requiring seniors to take a nationally normed examination, if relevant to your major
• Creating a departmental requirement that encourages majors to synthesize their own learning, demonstrate their competencies, and reflect on their personal growth.
  o Develop a departmental exit exam embedded in Senior Synthesis
  o Require a capstone paper or project
  o Require a portfolio
  o Require a reflection paper
• Creating a mid-career diagnostic assessment for students just entering the major
• Creating an exit questionnaire for seniors
• Creating an alumni questionnaire (for questionnaires, coordinating with the office of institutional research might save labor).

Conclusion    Like cholesterol, there can be “good assessment” and “bad assessment.” Bad assessment happens all over the country and is a primary (and legitimate) cause of Assessment Hostility Disorder. Assessment goes bad when it wastes faculty time, when it becomes disconnected from teaching and learning, when it collects data that no one has time to look at, when it requires reports that nobody reads, or when it produces information that is misused by administrators. Good assessment, in contrast, leads to valuable insights into student learning, reveals gaps in the curriculum, develops a faculty culture focused on pedagogical discussion, and increases the scholarly dimension of teaching. The basic plan presented here offers an opportunity for good assessment.