Starting at the End: Using Theses and Dissertations for Program Assessment

A great way to start to assess your program is to examine the culmination of students’ work in a program, their theses and dissertations. These works represent many of the deep skills and much of the knowledge your students have acquired over their studies and thus the work reflects much of their education.

Below, we’ve provided a brief description of how to use your students’ theses and dissertations for program assessment. If you would like a broader and more thorough discussion of using dissertations for assessment, you might like Barbara Lovitts’ book Making the Implicit Explicit (2007). Copies have been ordered for each department and program and will be dispersed to department or program chairs. Copies have already been made available to members of the GSAS Assessment Committee, and others can be ordered at your request.

To proceed, you need the following:

(a) A set of goals that program faculty have for the education of your students (“program-level student learning goals”): You can’t determine whether students have accomplished the program goals unless you know what the goals are. (See detail at right.) For this assessment cycle you need to identify at least one goal.

(b) A set of objectives that describe more concretely what students should be able to do if they’ve accomplished the program goals (see example on the lower right).

(c) Criteria for deciding what a student’s work would have to have in order to demonstrate that the student had met an objective.

With this information decided by program faculty (or some subset of faculty to whom that responsibility and authority has been delegated), you need only apply it to the students’ theses and dissertations. You could draw up a “rubric” that expresses both the objectives and the criteria (for an example, see “dissertation_rubric.xls”)

Alternatively, one could draw up a checklist of qualities (e.g., uses language effectively with attention to connotation and denotation, maintains professional tone) or content (e.g., presents a clear thesis, uses primary sources to support thesis) expected in the work. Faculty can use

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1 The same rubric can be used for many purposes. For example, students can use the rubric in developing their proposals and in writing their theses and dissertations. Faculty can use the rubric while reading the theses and dissertations to provide feedback to students or keep records for themselves.
it to indicate whether or not a thesis or dissertation possesses each quality or contains the specified content.

Next, you (and your colleagues) collect your rubrics or checklists and summarize the evidence: How many students performed at each level? If you used a rubric, you can count the number of students who performed at each of your levels (say, outstanding, acceptable, unacceptable). If you used a checklist, you can count the number of students who demonstrated each item.

Finally, you and your colleagues review the findings and discuss what, if anything, needs to be done in response. Suppose, for example, that your assessment shows the following:

(a) Almost every dissertation contained a clear, well-articulated thesis statement.

(b) About half of the students provided minimal or inadequate support from primary sources.

From these results, it would appear that students need more support or instruction on finding and using primary sources. N.B.: Before settling on that conclusion, the faculty who worked with the students as they produced these papers should weigh in. If the faculty had to exert Herculean efforts to get the students to articulate thesis statements, or if there were extenuating circumstances that prevented students from getting primary sources, attend to that information. Once you’ve determined the strengths and weaknesses of the students, consider what might be done to improve your students’ education. You may need to review your courses, for example, to determine whether students get sufficient opportunity to learn and practice the skills required in their dissertation research. Is there some way to improve students’ preparation for the dissertation (and hence education throughout the program)? Together, the program faculty should decide on how to proceed, either by further investigation to determine how to improve the program or by implementing changes to the program.

Notes:

You need not include every students’ work in the assessment, a sample may suffice. Decide the size of your sample based on the size of your graduating class. See “Sampling for Assessment” (attached) for ideas.

Some of this information may also apply to Master’s programs with capstone papers, internship papers, or field experience papers, while capstone projects for other types of Master’s and Certificate programs may need to be evaluated using a different approach. The GSAS Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives, Partnerships and Assessment, Amy Tuininga (tuininga@fordham.edu, (914)273-3078 ext. 13), and the University Assessment Officer, Jeannine Pinto (jpinto3@fordham.edu, 718-817-0430) can be of help with this process.
Sampling for Assessment

It’s important to your assessment work to get an accurate picture of your program. Collecting information selectively can satisfy that need and reduce your workload. The goal is to select samples that are representative of all your majors, masters students, doctoral students (or whichever other group you’re concerned about) when you can’t examine every student’s work or when doing so isn’t useful. Below, we’ve described some approaches:

If you have a very large set of student work to draw from (or you know that your students don’t vary enormously):

Random sampling: If you have a large set of student work (say, the final paper in all the EP2 courses taught in 2010-2011), you can select some at random from the entire set. For example, if you had 600 EP2 final essays in a folder on My.Files and if you wanted to select 20 papers, you might start at some randomly selected file and then select every 30th essay after that. (The final provision ensures that you pick up essays throughout the set.) If you had paper copies of the essays, shuffle them as best you can and select the same way. While it is possible that your selection will under-represent some levels of work and over-represent others, when you have a large initial set, you’ve got a pretty good chance of selecting a representative subset.

Most programs don’t have very large groups of majors. You can still use this approach with smaller groups. To decide whether random sampling is appropriate for your program, consider how likely it is that a random sample of your students will contain one or more outliers. (If you could find yourself qualifying your analysis by saying “Yes, but this group includes Student B, who is unlike any other student we’ve had in 20 years,” then random sampling is not the way to go.)

If you have a smaller set of student work:

Another way to ensure that your review of student work provides you representative information is to examine work until it is no longer informative as follows: Select 5-10 papers at random (see above). Read them and note general characteristics pertinent to the learning objectives you are examining. For example, if you’re examining whether and how well students evaluated alternative perspectives on a problem, you might read 5-10 papers, characterize students’ performance on those papers (using a rubric or checklist, if you like). Then randomly select another set of papers and examine the same information in those papers. If the results of your second set look the same (or nearly the same) as your first set (and hence provide no additional information) then you have pretty good reason to think the material you’ve looked at is representative.

If you have a very small set of student work (less than 5):

Use all of your student work. If you have just a few students in your program, you can reasonably use every student’s work on a particular task (say, their theses). In fact, if anything, you may want to combine work across several years so that you have a minimum of 5 pieces of student work to examine.