

## **Using the Senior Seminar to Inform Assessment Efforts\***

As a result of discussions in the College about assessment of student learning outcomes, Department Y's curriculum committee is considering ways to evaluate the educational achievement of its concentrators. The committee has decided that the department's senior seminars, which function as required capstone experiences, could provide a rich source of data about the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum. The department offers 3-4 such seminars each year, and responsibility for them rotates among the faculty. While each faculty member grades individual students in the seminar, the committee is considering a proposal that would enable the department to look at student achievement in the aggregate, perhaps even across multiple cohorts. They have developed three alternatives to achieve this goal.

### **1. Discussion of Senior Projects at an Annual Faculty Meeting**

Students in each senior seminar will be required to carry out an original research project. As is the department's custom, each faculty member will continue to evaluate and grade the papers produced by their section of students. Then, each May, at a faculty meeting devoted to the undergraduate program, each faculty member who taught a senior seminar would discuss two strengths and two weaknesses in their students' projects overall. These findings would inform discussion of potential changes to the curriculum.

### **2. Senior Portfolio and Reflective Essay**

In each senior seminar, students would have two comprehensive requirements: the standard research paper, as well as a portfolio comprised of three substantial papers/projects from their concentration coursework. The portfolio would include a reflective essay in which students reflected on their own learning as represented by their previous papers and by the senior project. Individual projects and portfolios would be evaluated by the faculty of each seminar. In addition, a sampling of portfolios would be reviewed by a departmental sub-committee which would make recommendations for changes to the curriculum.

### **3. Survey of Senior Seminar Participants**

Each spring, students in each of the senior seminars would take a short survey with the following questions: 1) What earlier training in the department prepared you to carry out your senior project? 2) What aspects of the project did you find most difficult? 3) What aspects of the program helped prepare you to address those difficult areas? 4) What suggestions do you have for how the concentration might have better prepared you? Survey responses would be aggregated and reviewed at the faculty retreat each year and would inform potential changes in the curriculum.

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\* Options 1 and 3 are adapted from "The Useful, Sensible, No-Frills Departmental Assessment Plan," by Barbara Walvoord (*Essays on Teaching Excellence*, 19(8), 2008-2009).

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the pros and cons of each proposal?
2. Which seems most promising to you in the context of your department?
3. What alternative approaches might you suggest for using the capstone course or senior seminar to inform assessment efforts?
4. What are the barriers to implementing a capstone assessment? How might you overcome them?