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## Case Study: Engaging Adjunct Faculty in Program Assessment

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### ABSTRACT

*This case study of a public, multicampus college in New Hampshire contributes to the growing body of literature about the role of part-time or adjunct faculty in program assessment. The study takes a historical look at the college's progress in engaging its part-time faculty over a period of thirteen years via administrative and faculty leadership, course-embedded assessments, multidisciplinary scoring teams, and grant-funded resources. Emphasis is placed on initiatives that assess core competencies across the curriculum. Building on part-time faculty's commitment to their classrooms, systematic reflection on teaching and learning emerges as the most meaningful and, therefore, motivating reason for adjunct faculty to engage in program assessment.*

### Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics tells us that in the fall of 2007 postsecondary institutions that grant an associate's or higher degree and are eligible for Title IV federal financial aid programs employed 1.4 million faculty members, 49% of whom were part-time faculty.<sup>1</sup> While the literature

on outcomes assessment is rich in its attention to the role of faculty, disproportionately little of the assessment literature specifically addresses adjunct faculty.<sup>2</sup>

This case study of a public, multicampus college in New Hampshire contributes to the growing body of literature about the role of part-time, or adjunct, faculty in program assessment. The study takes a historical look at the institution's progress in implementing program assessment—with emphasis on core competencies—noting successes and failures in the engagement of its part-time faculty. Three questions frame this study: (1) How does institutional context shape faculty engagement in assessment? (2) What are the resources and institutional organization that best sustain faculty engagement? (3) How does assessment stimulate discussions about student learning and inform faculty modifications in their teaching methods? For this college's part-time faculty, systematic reflection on teaching and learning as part of program assessment has emerged as the most meaningful and, therefore, motivating reason for engaging in it.

## **Institutional Context**

Granite State College (GSC) began in 1972 as the School of Continuing Studies utilizing faculty from University System of New Hampshire institutions (Keene State College, Plymouth State University, and the University of New Hampshire). When the college was recognized as having separate degree-granting authority in 1981, it retained its model of a part-time (all-adjunct) faculty. Each year, approximately 300 faculty members are hired on a course-by-course basis to teach for the college, on average, twelve credit hours per year. They have been a mix of scholars and practitioners: 54% have been teaching at GSC for five years or more; 35% for ten or more years. Discipline-specific resource faculty have been selected from the teaching faculty and contracted to serve on committees and advise on curricular matters. Even these roles remained exclusively part-time.

GSC has built a supportive community for its geographically dispersed part-time faculty. The college designated regional administrative positions charged with supporting faculty. These Academic Affairs staff members worked closely with faculty on matters related to their teaching, the curriculum, and evaluation and assessment. Regional faculty meetings have been held each academic term, and faculty members were expected to participate in at least one per year. The Faculty Professional Development Fund supported faculty activities that strengthen teaching and learning at GSC.

Virtual forums (the Faculty Center and Assessment Center on the college portal) supplemented regional faculty colloquia—all were forums for faculty members across disciplines to talk with one another about their teaching and, on occasion, their scholarly work.

Over its history GSC has provided statewide access to higher education to over 54,000 students—via graduate, bachelor's, and associate degrees, post-baccalaureate teacher certification programs, and noncredit offerings. The college's primary student population is adult learners. The average GSC student is thirty-six years of age and pursues a degree part-time. Eighty percent of students who entered the college in 2009 transferred credits from other institutions. It is not unusual for students to stop out for periods of time to attend to family, work, or military obligations. The academic year consists of four terms, and students can pursue their degree programs at campuses in nine communities across the state (North Country to the Merrimack Valley, Connecticut Valley to the Seacoast, and across mountain ranges), as well as online.

Programs and courses have been delivered in a variety of formats (online, hybrid, face-to-face) to meet the needs of students who are balancing family and work with their educational responsibilities. In 2006 only one degree program was available to students completely online. Today, all degree programs may be completed online—a shift that is consistent with the institution's mission to “expand access to public higher education to adults of all ages throughout the state of New Hampshire. The college achieves this mission by offering degree, certificate and contract programs of excellence that serve communities through learner responsive curricula, innovative teaching methods, and ongoing assessments of learning outcomes.” Among the institution's core values is the “belief that effective teaching and learning results in assessable outcomes.”<sup>3</sup> As an outcomes-based institution, since inception GSC has made learning outcomes for all courses and degree programs transparent to the college community. As this study will illustrate, the college has a long history of measuring learning outcomes of individual courses. Systematic assessment of academic programs, on the other hand, has progressed intermittently since its inception in 1997.

## **Adjunct Teaching Forum**

Planned, college-wide faculty conversations about assessment began in 1997 when GSC was awarded a three-year Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant to create a systematic professional

development program for the part-time faculty. In what became known as the Adjunct Teaching Forum, the college attempted to engage faculty in assessment by linking it with something they felt passionate about—their teaching. In that effort, GSC acted on the message that to engage faculty in assessment, “we must link it with work they are already engaged in” and “provide its advocates with evidence of its sustained impacts.”<sup>4</sup> In the design of the program, assessment strategies were intentionally braided with content intended to promote reflection on teaching and, thus, heeded the advice of Ernest Boyer, “Teaching—pedagogical procedures—must be carefully planned, continuously examined, and relate directly to the subject taught.”<sup>5</sup>

The Adjunct Teaching Forum consisted of five ten-hour modules: adult development theory; development of higher level cognitive skills; facilitating active, collaborative, experiential learning; rethinking course designs; and assessment strategies. Over the period of April 1998 to June 1999, seventy-two faculty members in four cohorts participated in project seminars—reflecting on assessment strategies that they used in their courses and experimenting with new performance-based methodologies. They developed rubrics for scoring assignments that asked students to demonstrate mastery of learning outcomes.

Faculty members were informed that upon completion of the forum, their salary for teaching would increase by 10%. Interestingly, the incentive of a pay raise played only a minor role in participation in the program. A few forum participants even said they were unaware of the incentive. Most indicated they participated because they wanted the opportunity for dialogue with their peers, as illustrated in the following comments:

Without question, the opportunity to interact with other faculty and to discuss issues of mutual interest was most valuable to me, particularly since we are so isolated from each other.

I have often felt as if I operate in a bit of a vacuum. I now feel a bit more connection with other faculty.

This has been an ideal vehicle for faculty to share the dynamics of their presentation methods, teaching strategies with one another. It is often difficult for adjunct faculty to develop a sense of community . . . the program has done that. Or, at least, has begun to address that.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to this collegiality, forum participants acknowledged influences on their teaching, as documented in the participants' evaluation of the project:

This program has helped to change participants by exposing them to new materials and concepts, forcing them to think about how they teach.

[The program] allowed me to better understand the need for assessment.<sup>7</sup>

Two-thirds (67%) of the participants felt they had become better teachers; four-fifths (84%) said the assessment modules or rubrics were most useful; and over half (59%) indicated that learning to use rubrics was most useful.<sup>8</sup>

Two pedagogical outcomes of the assessment strategies module were noted: (1) faculty achieved greater congruence among stated outcomes, learning activities, and assessment methods, and (2) faculty changed their assessment strategies, focusing on more performance-based assessments that addressed higher levels of cognition. One structural outcome emerged from the Forum: the introduction of a lead/core faculty group to advise the college on curriculum matters and assessment initiatives. The majority of those who served as the initial lead/core faculty were participants in the FIPSE project.<sup>9</sup>

## Action Research on Teaching/Learning

In follow-up to the Adjunct Teaching Forum, the college encouraged forum participants to embark on action research studies to test the impact of changes they were making in their courses as they experimented with new teaching/learning strategies. In one study, five faculty members surveyed fifty-seven of their students to determine whether the rubrics developed for course assignments were perceived as having enhanced their learning. Survey results indicated that students saw the rubric as a useful tool: 96% indicated that it was somewhat to very useful; 86% reported that they had an opportunity to provide input on the rubric before the assignment was given; and 77% percent said they used it for self-evaluation after completing the assignment. Additionally, however, 57% responded that the rubric criteria for performance did not match their own thinking about what was required by the assignment, and only 48% indicated that the rubric helped them set a higher standard for themselves.<sup>10</sup>

The work of this all-adjunct faculty in conducting such rudimentary action research studies was a catalyst for faculty discussions about their students' learning. In the previous example, consideration of survey findings led to consensus that rubrics should be used as a tool for learning in key (not all) assignments and that the ideal situation is to engage students in the design of rubrics to reinforce their understanding of criteria and levels of performance. Faculty agreed that their adult students who are practitioners in a particular field often have highly developed notions of excellence in that field and should be included in college discussions of standards of performance. They discussed situations where weighting rubric categories would be appropriate; agreed on the importance of providing students with constructive feedback about how to attain a higher level of performance; and recommended probing student assumptions about standards of performance. The faculty concluded that the more they know about student thinking regarding standards, the more likely faculty and students can arrive at a consensus regarding course standards.<sup>11</sup>

In 2000, at a statewide forum that was then known as Faculty Day, faculty in attendance agreed on the importance of outcomes assessment and together identified benefits of a good assessment process:

- Enables the college to create benchmarks of student progress and gather evidence that they are meeting objectives;
- Provides consistency in program delivery and statewide course standards, and informs the teaching/learning process;
- Emphasizes skills outcomes early in the students' programs and highlights the teaching of skills (especially critical thinking and writing) across the curriculum;
- Builds a learning organization within the college that allows faculty, staff, and students to share expectations and ideas;
- Identifies gaps and disconnects within the system and encourages continuous improvement of teaching and learning; and
- Informs marketing and retention efforts and provides information for public relations and image building within the college community.<sup>12</sup>

## **College-Wide Assessments**

Building on the momentum of these adjunct faculty exchanges, GSC launched a college-wide assessment initiative during the 2000–2001 academic year. The goals of the initiative were “to monitor program

development and delivery, determine learner success in demonstrating knowledge, skills, and competencies across the curriculum, improve quality in teaching and learning, and ensure institutional effectiveness.”<sup>13</sup> Leading the initiative was the college’s first Assessment Committee, appointed by the academic dean that same year. In concert with the part-time lead/core faculty, the Committee proposed an outcomes assessment plan that addressed four domains:

- College-level skills (core competencies);
- General Education Courses;
- Programs Areas (content/discipline areas); and
- The Integrative Experience (Capstone).

The first phase of the plan’s implementation examined the college’s curriculum in support of student writing. Writing was chosen as the first of five core competencies to be assessed because faculty agreed that the ability to write clearly is central to college success. By sampling student writing at three strategic points in the curriculum (i.e., at the skills level before completing thirty hours of college credit, at the program level in selected upper-level courses in the student’s discipline, and at the capstone or integrative experience), the college studied how writing skills are introduced, reinforced, and applied across degree programs.

Data were collected anonymously through course-embedded writing samples (most of which were lengthy) and through surveys or focus groups with stakeholders (students, faculty, staff). The intent was to begin a process of information collection and analysis that would build over time. Lead/core faculty from across disciplines constructed a rubric for the assessment of writing. With teams of faculty and staff, they trained in its use and scored 181 student papers that were sampled across the college in behavioral science, management, and communications courses. Faculty scorers received stipends for their services.

This initial assessment initiative provided the college with baseline data regarding student writing. While promising in its design and usefulness, however, the study was viewed as excessively labor intensive and, in large part because of its drain on limited resources, difficult to incorporate in the routine operations of the college. By the conclusion of the study in 2001, GSC had entered an uncertain environment—facing financial stress, experiencing changes in leadership, and undergoing reorganization. Program assessment was set aside for a period of five years while the college stabilized.



Under the leadership of a new president and academic dean, the college resumed its attention to program assessment in 2006 with a grant proposal to the Davis Educational Foundation (“A Proposal to Assess and Compare Learning Outcomes Using Classroom, Online and Hybrid Delivery Formats”). The proposal was funded by the foundation and, based on the success of the 2006–8 initiative, two subsequent grants were awarded in 2008 (“The Assessment of Learning Outcomes in Three Core Courses Required at Granite State College”) and 2010 (“Outcomes Assessment and Instructional Development for Faculty Across Degree Programs”). The Davis Educational Foundation has had enormous influence on the college: enriching the professional discourse of the administration and faculty and shaping not only outcomes assessment, but also curriculum development, faculty development, and academic planning.

## **Adjunct Faculty Leadership**

A key component of the 2006 proposal was a model of part-time lead faculty (reminiscent of the concept of lead/core faculty that emerged during the FIPSE grant) to lead the initiative with the support of a principal investigator. The lead faculty were selected on the basis of their teaching experience at the college, respect among colleagues, and willingness to challenge their assumptions about assessment. They represented different disciplines (humanities, mathematics, and social sciences); resided in different geographical regions of the state (North Country and Seacoast); and taught in different delivery formats (online and face to face). Lead faculty were paid stipends for their leadership positions, and these stipends were jointly funded by the grant and the college.

Initially, three part-time faculty members served as lead faculty. A fourth joined the leadership group in 2010 as assessments increased in scope and volume. These lead faculty were essential to the three grants’ successes, in part due to the talents they brought individually/collectively and, in part, because they were long-standing members of the faculty who had collaborated over the years in the development of the curriculum that was being assessed, an element identified as critical in recent studies:

Although leadership is imperative at all levels, assessment has the most impact when responsibility for carrying out assessment resides primarily at the unit level. Because unit faculty and staff

have developed goals for student learning, they must assess student achievement of those goals. The learning that takes place in the process of assessing the degree to which goals are achieved is most useful at the unit level where the principals can take that understanding and apply it in improving the curriculum and instruction.<sup>14</sup>

Consulting with their GSC colleagues, the lead faculty developed assessment instruments and scoring rubrics. They served on faculty teams that scored student assessments and interpreted findings, and they facilitated faculty colloquia on assessment and consulted with/mentored colleagues upon request. Lead faculty communicated regularly with colleagues about their progress—sharing early missteps and personal frustrations as well as successes. Initially, only a few colleagues responded to their outreach. Believing that communication among faculty who are involved in an innovation is key to motivating others for involvement, lead faculty persevered in their outreach efforts.<sup>15</sup> Over time, their messages were much better received, in large part because the college made it clear—through top leadership—that outcomes assessment was not going away.

From the start of the first Davis Educational Foundation grant, the principal investigator encouraged lead faculty to document their observations of process as well as content. These chronicles have taken various forms, including *Open Letters to the Faculty*, authored by Dr. Claude Caswell, lead faculty for writing and critical thinking. Segments of the *Open Letters* are incorporated in this narrative to tell the story of how, and why, one part-time faculty member—representative of many others—engaged in program assessment.

Two years into the first grant, Dr. Caswell presented the case for program assessment to his colleagues:

Why assess? The easy and simplistic answer to this question is because Granite State College's accrediting body, NEASC, requires it.

The ideal—and also perhaps the real—answer is to improve what we do. Teaching is our business and our love. It's natural and good that we want to do it better. The major reason we want to improve our courses at Granite State, however, is not only for professional dedication and high standards. The more important reason driving the constant quest to improve GSC at all levels, particularly in the classroom, is the commitment to provide students with the best education possible.

How? Evaluating the performance of the people we teach seems like a good place to start. Are they really learning what we think and hope they're learning? Sounds simple. It turns out to be anything but, as anyone who has fallen into the black hole of assessment can attest. So many variables, so little funding . . .

We all assess as we teach. We give quizzes, assign papers, conduct discussions, require portfolios—and we grade them all. We generally have a kind of innocent faith that these student performances are evidence of learning. We hope.

How do we know for sure? Formal institutional assessment is a way of wrestling with this question. Not just for one section of one course—not just from the teacher/mentor's perspective—not just for a particular group of learners—but “objectively,” generically, over time. It's a piece of a puzzle that is endlessly complex, but a crucial piece.

The ultimate usefulness of this piece is, of course, not simply to paint a picture of our performance but to provide a map to point the way to positive changes in the courses and programs at GSC. We already tweak syllabi, try new texts, test new methods, implement new pedagogical approaches. Outcomes assessment simply provides a more informed way to make those changes in a systematic way.

As teachers, if we are wise and caring and have fought bravely in the trench warfare of public pedagogy, we are skeptical. Outcomes assessment done badly or superficially or narrowly or politically, even with the best of intentions, is worse, we may suspect, than no assessment at all. The standardized testing of the MCA's or No Child Left Behind may leap to mind here.

These issues of competence and legitimacy and motive are precisely why teachers need to get involved. We need to make assessment real and meaningful . . . [and] take ownership of the process.<sup>16</sup>

## **Administrative Structure for a Culture of Assessment**

While lead faculty and the principal investigator served as visible leaders of early assessment initiatives, it was the president and president's staff who most convincingly conveyed the value of assessment via their careful attention to institutional effectiveness and strengthening the connection between assessment and GSC planning. Accordingly, the college began to

build an administrative structure for assessment. The Davis Grant Steering Committee was providing guidance for implementation of the grants. It built a virtual Assessment Center on the college portal to serve as a repository of assessment resources and also provide faculty with another forum for discussing assessment among themselves. Steering committee membership included lead faculty, the principal investigator, and other faculty and staff members who were directly involved with the statewide initiatives.

In July 2007 a new position was created—associate dean of academic affairs for assessment—to lead the development of an outcomes assessment plan and oversee its accompanying initiatives. The person who assumed this position was serving as the principal investigator of the Davis Educational Foundation grants and, therefore, had a close working relationship with the lead faculty. Her membership on the college’s standing committee on academic affairs and the Institutional Review Board enhanced coordination and communication among assessment stakeholders.

One year later, Academic Affairs resurrected the Assessment Committee to assume a broader role in assessment than that charged to the Davis Grant Steering Committee. Membership of the 2008–9 Assessment Committee consisted of staff from Academic Affairs. In 2010 part-time faculty members were included as members and received stipends for their committee service. Initially, the Assessment Committee focused on the New England Association of Schools and Colleges’ (NEASC) E-1 Inventory for Institutional Effectiveness. Curriculum mapping was completed for all baccalaureate degree programs: some by the committee; some in program reviews; and one by a faculty team—whose expenses were subsidized—at the New England Educational Assessment Network (NEEAN) Summer Institute. The committee’s focus soon shifted to curriculum modifications that were recommended during the curriculum mapping process and to implementation of the Assessment Plan for Academic Affairs that was being vetted within the GSC community.

The 2010 Assessment Plan for Academic Affairs outlined the purview of the Assessment Committee:

- Provides oversight and recommends policies and procedures regarding college-wide assessment of student learning.
- Aligns outcomes assessment efforts with the GSC Strategic Plan.
- Develops mechanisms for using assessment data in decisionmaking.
- Incorporates program-level outcomes assessment in academic program reviews.

Promotes a culture of assessment across the college community.

- Provides assistance and guidance to faculty/staff regarding strategies for outcomes assessment and interpretation of data.
- Familiarizes faculty/staff with the uses of assessment data to strengthen student learning.
- Solicits proposals and awards funding, as available, for innovative outcomes assessment initiatives.

Evaluates/recommends technology that enhances assessment.

Facilitates periodic evaluation of the outcomes assessment initiatives at the college.<sup>17</sup>

## **Assessing Student Learning Across Delivery Formats**

One goal of the first Davis Educational Foundation grant was to develop a faculty leadership model for the initiative. The second major goal was to develop a methodology for comparing student achievement of learning outcomes across delivery formats: online, hybrid, and face-to-face classes. In 2006, 23% of GSC courses and four baccalaureate degree programs were delivered online, and the college planned to expand its educational accessibility by increasing those numbers significantly. The assessment study would provide evidence of student learning in online courses that would be compared with measures from face-to-face classes. These comparative data would inform the college as it assumed a leadership position in distance education.

Early choices that were made regarding methodology of the 2006–8 project were consistent with a quasi-experimental design. A pretest/post-test design was chosen to measure student competencies at the beginning and end of three introductory courses in the core program: Critical Thinking; The Writing Process; and Contemporary College Mathematics. During four sequential terms in 2007–8, assessments that were developed by GSC faculty were administered to all students who were enrolled in the three courses. Student samples were selected randomly (via stratification) from the enrolled students. Demographic variables of the random samples were collected and analyzed to ensure that the samples were representative of the GSC student population. In each assessment, a number of students dropped out, and analyses were performed to identify dropout characteristics that differed from the students who persisted. Teams of adjunct faculty came together to score the sampled work yielding composite scores

(an average of two raters' scores) that indicated a student's performance overall and also subscores that corresponded with specific learning outcomes. Interscorer reliabilities were run, and norming sessions were held until the interscorer reliability coefficients were acceptable. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed to measure student learning and to test for differences in student performance in classroom settings versus online course delivery.

Lead faculty oversaw the development of GSC assessments and scoring rubrics, and they were attentive to lessons learned in the 2000–2001 initiative. That first statewide assessment project sampled and scored lengthy essays, and this time-consuming process drained limited resources. In contrast, the 2007–8 critical thinking and writing assessments consisted of prompts that students were asked to respond to in class or online via short answers (for critical thinking) or short essays (for writing). The quantitative reasoning assessment consisted of eight problems that measured problem-solving, probability, algebraic reasoning, and statistics. Students were instructed to show their work. In an attempt to motivate students to complete the assessments, the Davis Grant Steering Committee decided that the posttest assessments should be worth a minimum of 10% of final course grades.

Thirty-seven adjunct faculty members and 535 students participated in this assessment initiative. Over the two years, considerable outreach was extended to instructors of the courses. Faculty meetings in four regions of the state were held to describe progress, field questions/comments, and respond to skepticism or resistance. Lead faculty followed up with their colleagues via telephone conversations and email exchanges. Some faculty offered to serve as scorers. Others were recruited, and teams of the part-time faculty from across disciplines came together to score the sampled work.

### **Adjunct Faculty Scoring Sessions**

With an all-adjunct faculty dispersed across the state, the college found it extraordinarily challenging to assemble a critical mass of faculty from any one discipline. The decision was made to assemble multidisciplinary scoring teams, a pragmatic choice that led to significant achievements regarding professional development. The choice (1) demonstrated the breadth of the college's commitment to program assessment, (2) provided a forum

for faculty across disciplines to work together in a common effort, rather than in silos, or isolation, (3) enabled nonwriting faculty to discuss writing standards with their writing colleagues, and (4) initiated conversations about how core competencies (writing and critical thinking particularly) are braided (or not) in discipline-specific courses/assignments.

The scoring team for Contemporary College Mathematics consisted of faculty members from the disciplines of mathematics, business management, and science. The team for Critical Thinking consisted of faculty who teach critical thinking, behavioral science, and criminal justice. Scorers for The Writing Process were faculty members from the humanities, business management, and early childhood education. All scorers received stipends for their services. From the start, the interdisciplinary scoring sessions quickly evolved into lively discussions about standards of student performance, and faculty welcomed these exchanges. Together, faculty scorers revised the writing and critical-thinking rubrics, making the trait descriptors for each rating more precise, while MATH faculty revised a few of the assessment problems. Interscorer reliability improved over time (see table 1).

TABLE 1. Inter-scorer reliability coefficients, Winter 2008–2010

CRIT Assessments	Winter 2008	Winter 2009	Winter 2010
Pretest Classroom	0.75	0.88	0.89
Posttest Classroom	0.38	0.62	0.92
Pretest Online	0.51	0.98	0.79
Posttest Online	0.39	0.90	0.98
Writing Assessments	Winter 2008	Winter 2009	Winter 2010
Pretest Classroom	0.50	0.90	0.81
Posttest Classroom	0.90	0.93	0.88
Pretest Online	0.50	0.80	0.88
Posttest Online	0.77	0.95	0.89
MATH Assessments	Winter 2008	Winter 2009	Winter 2010
Pretest Classroom	0.92	0.95	0.99
Posttest Classroom	0.96	0.98	0.99
Pretest Online	0.93	0.92	0.99
Posttest Online	0.92	0.99	0.99

## Initial Faculty Resisters

Those instructors who collaborated with the lead faculty in the development of the assessments or who participated in scoring sessions made serious attempts to motivate their students to do their best. Others were less enthusiastic about incorporating the assessments into their courses. It soon became clear that students as well as faculty considered the assessments extraneous to the teaching/learning process. Students enrolled in online sections were particularly dismissive, and too many simply chose not to participate. Turnover of faculty during the five years that had passed since the last assessment initiative resulted in relatively few instructors who were involved in earlier assessment initiatives at the college. It was difficult for these faculty members to see how program assessment would impact/benefit them, and frankly, the language of assessment was off-putting to nonscience faculty.

Faculty skepticism was addressed head-on by our lead faculty—as illustrated in the 2007 “Open Letter to the Faculty,” authored by Dr. Claude Caswell:<sup>18</sup>

Last month at Faculty Day a faculty member said in a private conversation, “When is this assessment stuff going to end?” As a fellow pilgrim in the ethereal vineyard of poetic pedagogical intangibility, I can relate. The reality is, however, that the “culture of assessment” is just beginning at Granite State and will get better and better as we faculty get more involved in its design—but it will never end. . . .

Frankly, many of the faculty in the three pilot courses, myself included, were a little suspicious, a little resistant, and maybe a little cynical about an “imposed” system of assessment. So we did one of the things faculty do best. We complained. We complained about the prompt essays, we complained about wasting class time to do “assessment lite,” we complained about the arbitrariness of the rubric, we complained about assigning 10% of the course grade to an “embedded” assessment exercise that felt anything but integrated genuinely into our course design, and we complained about global warming and the loss of planet status for Pluto (a personal pet peeve of mine).

As the process went on, however, and we began to communicate with each other about the flaws and frustrations with the initial assessment approach, we began to realize that we will actually benefit,



personally and institutionally, by taking charge of the assessment process as a faculty. Involved faculty began to turn their complaints into innovative suggestions, and the assessment instrument is already on its way to vast improvement. The Writing Process faculty, in particular, unanimously voiced the idea that without a revision element, assessment of writing progress has little validity. The Critical Thinking faculty also want a revision aspect inherent in the assessment instrument.

Together we are redesigning the assessment process to address all of our collective concerns. . . .

I see great positives in getting involved in the GSC assessment approach. *We faculty* get to design and refine the assessment tools—embedded in *our* assignments and in harmony with what we believe in. . . . The positive things about assessment will only happen, though, when we work together—pooling our experience and inventiveness. As adjunct faculty, we all have huge challenges of time, money, death, and taxes. . . . Granite State is our institution. Let's assess it.

## **Assessments Evolving into Course-Embedded Common Assignments**

The following year, Critical Thinking and Writing Process faculty redesigned their assessment instruments and scoring rubrics, and the in-class essay prompts evolved into a common essay assignment that instructors would now embed in all sections of Critical Thinking and The Writing Process. The assignment became an essay that students would revise in multiple drafts during the course. First and last drafts were sampled to measure student learning in the courses. In 2009 the GSC curriculum committee approved this assignment as an essential component of the two courses. Regardless of where students took the courses or who taught them, they would be asked to demonstrate their competencies in a standard way. This was just one of several assignments that a faculty member could assign for his or her course. It should be stressed that the common assignment, while required of all faculty teaching these courses, did not inhibit individual teaching style or creative differences in pedagogy. It was simply a standard assignment that embodied and highlighted the key outcomes of the courses. Accompanying the assignment was a scoring rubric, also revised by GSC faculty.

The rate of student completion of assessments improved once the assessment process was embedded in an assignment that was an essential component of the student's course. As for the reluctant faculty, common assignments that were mandated by the college curriculum committee clearly caught their attention. Program assessment was becoming a part of the culture of GSC, not an extraneous experiment.

By 2009, lead faculty and faculty scorers were leading norming sessions with colleagues who were not scoring assessments, but were simply interested in participating in the dialogue. Grant stipends were awarded to participating faculty to help defray their travel expenses to the sessions. Several faculty requested anchor papers to illustrate exemplary writing or critical thinking, average performance, and inadequate performance. Skeptics responded positively to Claude Caswell's 2010 "Letter to the Faculty" and were beginning to see the value of the information for their teaching.

I quickly learned that the Common Assignment, in order to work as we want it to, cannot be peripheral or marginal. It has become the central writing piece of my Critical Thinking course. In fact, I now call it the "Major Critical Essay," and it counts for 25% of the course grade. I explain that it is the embodiment and lightning rod of all the skills we are trying to learn in Critical Thinking. Everything we do in Critical Thinking should eventually be reflected in the evolving drafts of this research essay.

I also realized that I had to take strong pedagogical leadership of the assignment. Therefore, I embed a minimum of three required drafts (beginning, middle, and final) in the process—with clear guidelines concerning what each draft should achieve. I also "workshop" the essays, after the first draft, with the class as a whole, focusing on thesis and argument. Then I bring in Learner Services personnel to do mini-tutorials on citation and virtual library research. Finally I give written feedback on the first two drafts, suggesting ways of clarifying or refining the thesis and balancing or strengthening the supporting evidence.

The change in my course design has been significant and a direct result of the assessment initiative. The major written piece for my course used to be a research/oral presentation paper due in the latter half of the course, focusing on an issue of global significance—a one-shot paper with no revisions, but theoretically reflecting the

cumulative skills of the course (very much like the traditional graduate school “seminar paper”). I think many of my colleagues teach this way—assigning papers of increasing increments of complexity and challenge, leading up to a final paper at the end of the course. The Common Assignment still allows us to do that, but with an instrument whereby both teacher and student can see and achieve progress more clearly and consistently in one, evolving document.

I also now include a purely oral presentation assignment on a global issue, as a corollary skill set in tandem with the Common Assignment. Each student has to choose a global topic, find two sources focused on two different countries, and present an overview/critique of those sources to the class. The same organizational and communication skills at work in the Common Assignment are reflected in the oral presentation.

Thus my pedagogy has changed and grown—I feel very positively—due to the Common Assignment.<sup>19</sup>

## Reporting Statistical Analyses

A statistical consultant (who also teaches for the college) was funded by the grants to guide methodology and data analyses. Beginning in 2007 descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were performed to measure student learning and to test for differences in student performance in classroom settings versus online course delivery. Additionally, students whose critical thinking and/or writing competencies were measured in introductory courses were tracked across their degree programs. Capstone papers/projects of these students were scored to measure these same competencies at the completion of degrees.

Lessons were learned regarding the presentation of findings. MATH faculty embraced the opportunity to discuss measures of central tendency and variability for subscores that related to specific learning objectives (see tables 2 and 3). First, they connected the patterns of student performance to their teaching, and one faculty member realized her students were disadvantaged because that she had not “had time” to sufficiently address the learning outcome regarding probability. Then, noting bimodal distributions of performance, faculty broadened their attention to the demographic variables of students who chose to enroll in online, as opposed to

TABLE 2. MATH pretest–posttest total scores (range 0–24)

Classroom Total Score (N = 24 in 2010)	2010 Pretest	2010 Posttest	Change 2010	Change 2009	Change 2008
Mean: Classroom	6.97	15.35	+8.38*	+4.86*	+3.23*
Median: Classroom	6.00	18.00			
Standard Deviation: Classroom	3.79	5.51			
Interquartile Range: Classroom	8.00	6.00			
Online Total Score (N = 16 in 2010)					
Mean: Online	8.10	14.53	+6.43*	+5.50*	+1.96*
Median: Online	7.35	15.25			
Standard Deviation: Online	3.37	4.83			
Interquartile Range: Online	2.05	8.38			

Note: T-tests were conducted. Asterisk indicates statistical significance  $p < .05$ .

TABLE 3. Results of inferential tests: 2010 MATH subscores for statistics problem (range 0–3)

Statistics Problem	Pretest	Posttest	Change
Mean: Classroom	0.53	1.80	+1.27*
Median: Classroom	0.00	2.00	
Standard Deviation: Classroom	1.06	1.10	
Interquartile Range: Classroom	1.00	2.00	
Mean: Online	1.06	2.03	+0.97*
Median: Online	1.00	2.00	
Standard Deviation: Online	1.11	0.97	
Interquartile range: Online	2.00	1.75	

Note: T-tests were conducted. Asterisk indicates statistical significance  $p < .05$ .

face-to-face, course sections. Two years into the first grant, MATH faculty were considering curriculum modifications focused on revising learning outcomes and course sequencing.

Faculty from the humanities and other nonscience disciplines, however, often failed to engage when presented with this statistical information. Lead faculty learned to augment these data with percentages of students who

achieved each standard of performance and graphs to visually stimulate discussion (see table 4 and figures 1 and 2). In retrospect, the principal investigator should have been mindful of Derek Bok’s advice that “the proper test for universities to apply is not whether their assessments meet the most rigorous scholarly standards but whether they can provide more reliable information than the hunches, random experiences, and personal opinions that currently guide most faculty decisions about educational issues.”<sup>20</sup>

## Technology Enhancements

By the 2009 Winter term, in an effort to better manage the assessment process across geographic locations, students—in face-to-face as well as online sections of Critical Thinking and The Writing Process—were instructed to submit their common essay assignments electronically via BlackBoard, the

TABLE 4. Percent scoring acceptable or above on ENG overall and sub-score items, Winter 2010

Pre/Post	Pretest % Acceptable	Posttest % Acceptable
Overall Score	17%	25%
Thesis	17%	42%
Reasoning	17%	25%
Evidence	50%	42%
Framework	25%	42%
Structure	33%	50%
Grammar	8%	50%
Language	25%	50%

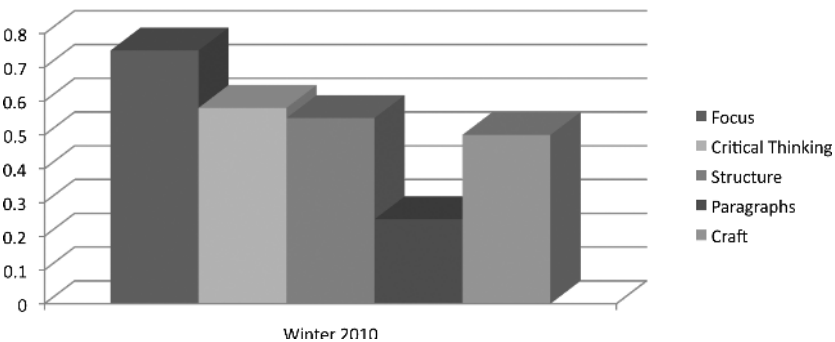


FIG. 1 Mean pretest-posttest gain/decline for ENG classroom sections (N = 12)

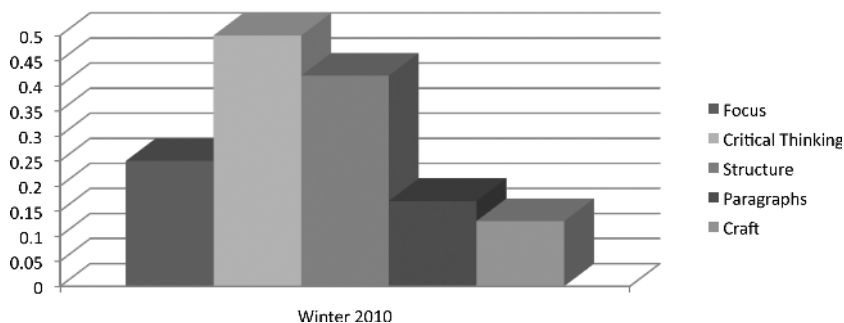


FIG. 2 Mean pretest-posttest gain/decline for ENG online sections (N = 12)

course management system that was used by the college. A few instructors who were teaching face-to-face sections questioned the appropriateness of this change, claiming that their students would not have the technology skills or, in the case of rural locations, internet bandwidth at home to navigate BlackBoard. In response to these concerns, manual procedures were substituted as needed. Over time, cases where students lacked the technology access and skills declined substantially.

GSC continued looking to technology to increase efficiencies and strengthen its infrastructure for sustainable assessment. As much as possible, the college intended to automate procedures for: sampling; student submission of assessments; inputting assessment scores; data analysis, and report dissemination. In October of 2010, the college contracted with Axiom Education for the use of their MENTOR software. MENTOR is a holistic assessment management system. The college piloted it in 2010–11 in the belief it would be a good fit for its assessment needs and provide technological enhancements not yet imagined.

## Personal Faculty Experience

One of the criteria for the selection of our lead faculty was a willingness to challenge personal assumptions about assessment. An adjunct faculty member since 1988, Claude Caswell assumed the role of lead faculty for assessment while describing himself as “a little suspicious, a little resistant, and maybe a little cynical.”<sup>21</sup> It was these qualities in addition to the respect he held from the GSC community that made him a pivotal player in assessment initiatives. Converting this prominent faculty member from “suspicion, resistance, and cynicism” to advocacy of assessment was an intentional strategy for engaging the all-adjunct faculty. Over the

subsequent five years, he clearly challenged his assumptions about assessment and openly shared with colleagues the meaningful impact assessment had on his teaching. The following, taken from his 2010 “Letter to the Faculty,” credits his assessment experience with unexpected feelings of empowerment and confidence:

Through these open discussions we came together as a faculty and made a commitment to each other to make this process work for our students, Granite State, and each other. This unanimity—unity without conformity—was light years from where we started four years ago.

In mid-fall 2009 we presented our assessment initiatives to the Board of Trustees of the University System of New Hampshire, at Granite State President Karol LaCroix’s invitation. We were received with gracious enthusiasm and encouraging questions.

We presented our assessment progress to the NEEAN conference at Holy Cross in November 2009. We conducted a break-out session attended by over 60 education colleagues—and some Davis Foundation members. Again, we were received with enthusiastic questions and compliments. I think all of us on the Granite State assessment team felt this [second] NEEAN presentation was far more clear and powerful than the one we presented last year—because we have learned so much and covered so much ground.

When I think back over the past four years, I can’t believe how empowered and confident I feel about this assessment endeavor. I felt very inadequate and frustrated many times during this long learning curve. Now that I see it all coming together, however, I am very proud of my colleagues and my institution. Of course, the proof is in the figgy pudding (as Harry Potter would say), but I am confident that the scores from this process will continue to reflect accurately the positive efficacy of Granite State’s pedagogy and student progress. All indications point to that trend.

Nevertheless, the most important step . . . is the one we are now taking: learning from assessment how to improve how we teach.<sup>22</sup>

## **Lessons Learned and the Way Forward**

This study has documented Granite State College’s progress over thirteen years as it engaged its all-adjunct faculty in outcomes assessment via administrative and faculty leadership, course-embedded assessments,

multidisciplinary scoring teams, and grant-funded resources. Much was learned about both assessment and teaching thanks to the commitment of the Davis Educational Foundation, the support of a series of presidents and deans, and the willingness of faculty to question their assumptions and work collaboratively.

The context and organization of the college prominently shaped faculty engagement in assessment both positively and negatively. It flourished during periods of financial stability and leadership commitment and, as during the period of 2001–6, stagnated when these were lacking.

All GSC faculty members were part-time, teaching in varied delivery formats at multiple campuses across the state. While they were experienced in strategies for assessing the learning outcomes of their courses, program assessment was a new concept to them. Its relevance to their teaching was untested.

The model of part-time lead faculty proved to be key to engaging their colleagues in assessment. Lead faculty members were long-standing members of the GSC faculty who had collaborated over the years in the development of the curriculum and, therefore, were invested in its assessment. They led the development of assessment instruments and scoring rubrics; served on faculty teams that scored student assessments and interpreted findings; facilitated faculty colloquia on assessment and consulted with/mentored colleagues upon request. Lead faculty communicated regularly with colleagues about their progress—sharing early missteps and personal frustrations as well as successes.

Enlisting the leadership of a well-respected, but skeptical faculty member as one of the lead faculty also was significant to engaging early resisters. This willingness to challenge one's assumptions about assessment was perhaps the single most important quality of faculty leaders in assessment.

Still, because GSC faculty were hired to teach on a course-by-course basis, supplemental stipends were essential for leadership and scoring roles. These stipends were jointly funded by Davis Educational Foundation grants and the college.

The president and president's staff most convincingly conveyed the value of assessment via their careful attention to institutional effectiveness and by strengthening the connection between assessment and college planning. An administrative structure was built to enhance coordination and communication among assessment stakeholders: the Assessment Committee; Davis Grant Steering Committee; virtual Assessment Center; and position of associate dean of academic affairs for assessment.



From 2001 to 2006, the college lost momentum in its assessment initiatives during an environment of financial stress, changes in leadership, and institutional reorganization. In retrospect, even a small project each year could have kept program assessment in the college's routine operations and, thus, perceived by new part-time hires as an essential component of teaching.

Reminiscent of this earlier time, the 2011 fiscal crisis in the State of New Hampshire has resulted in an unprecedented reduction in state appropriations to the University System of New Hampshire. In an effort to reduce expenditures, Granite State College has reorganized its divisions and consolidated positions. One position that was impacted by these reductions was that of associate dean of academic affairs for assessment. In June of 2011, this position was eliminated. As a result, today, GSC looks to technology to increase efficiencies and strengthen its infrastructure for sustainable assessment.

Assessment stimulated discussions about student learning and informed faculty modifications in their teaching methods. This resulted in three significant developments.

- First, course-embedded program assessments were taken seriously by students and faculty in direct proportion to their being essential, not extraneous, components of courses.
- Second, multidisciplinary scoring teams provided forums for part-time faculty across disciplines to work together in a common effort, discuss standards of student performance, and see the breadth of the college's commitment to program assessment.
- Finally, assessing core competencies across the curriculum focused faculty attention on the extent that the competencies (e.g., writing and critical thinking) were braided, or not, in their discipline-specific courses/assignments.

There was a common thread that joined activities as different as scoring sessions of student assessments or committee work and action research studies. Whether participating in professional development (e.g., Adjunct Teaching Forum or faculty colloquia) or serving as lead faculty, GSC part-time faculty became engaged in systematic reflection on their teaching and their students' learning.

Ultimately, the college vision was to enrich its culture by fully integrating program assessment in the pedagogy of its part-time faculty. Mindful

of the use of assessment language and methods, and paraphrasing Derek Bok, program assessment need not meet the most rigorous scholarly standards as long as it provides more reliable information than the personal anecdotes that often inform college decisions.

Initially skeptical, Claude Caswell captured the excitement and the reward of so much (ongoing) work. It comes when the college takes “the most important step . . . the one we are now taking: learning from assessment how to improve how we teach.”<sup>23</sup> The classroom experience is what is meaningful to adjunct faculty and what they are passionate about. Connecting program assessment to that passion was, for them and for the college, the most compelling reason to pursue and contribute to assessment discourse.

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