

Engaging Faculty in Department-Level Assessment

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Assessment, it seems, is everywhere – in the popular media, in publications for and about higher education, in reports prepared for accreditors, on the agendas of college administrators, and in keynote addresses and concurrent sessions at national conferences. While faculty increasingly believe that assessment is worth doing even apart from the imperatives of accreditation, and the array of credible approaches to assessment is growing, considerable challenges remain. Foremost among them is the challenge of using evidence from assessment in academic decision-making – the very thing that is supposed to be the *raison d'être* of assessment in the first place. There are many good reasons for this. Assessment data can take a long time to generate, and most of what we have is institutional-level data – that is, information gathered from a group of students selected from the institution as a whole about institution-wide outcomes and processes, such as critical thinking, effective writing, or student-engagement. Moreover, it is difficult to establish a convincing link between day-to-day academic decisions at the classroom or program level – what concepts to introduce in a course, what assignments to develop, what courses to require for a major and how to sequence them – and the broad outcomes typically documented by assessment.

We believe that assessment at the department level holds promise for overcoming these challenges. A successful program of department-level assessment can foster engagement with assessment data at every level of the institution – course-level, program-level, and institutional-level. It keeps attention focused on the ultimate purpose of assessment – to provide systematic evidence of patterns in student learning and to use that evidence to sustain what is working well and improve what is not. It yields outcomes that are easier to connect to the daily activities of teaching and learning and that have personal significance for faculty members. It can nurture

collaboration and collegiality within and across departments and programs. It distributes responsibility for assessment broadly across an institution, rather than assigning it to an unfortunate few with little or no time to do the job well. The reason department-level assessment can do these things is because it reflects an important principle in effective assessment: *Responsibility for assessment should coincide with responsibility for program content and delivery.* Those who actually provide curriculum and instruction are in the best position to identify what they need to learn about their students; to decide what kind of evidence would be representative, reliable, meaningful and actionable; and to act on their findings. Linking assessment responsibility with program responsibility can set the stage for the use of assessment results to inform academic decision-making and strengthen student learning.

In this paper, we will demonstrate the benefits of linking assessment responsibility with program responsibility by describing key features of the department-level assessment effort at St. Olaf College. We will outline what departments and programs have been asked to do, and then identify the factors that are contributing to their success in doing it. In particular, we suggest that framing assessment meaningfully, adopting a “meet-in-the-middle” approach to leadership, and equipping departments for success can allow institutions to reap the benefits of department-level assessment outlined above.

The case and its context

St. Olaf College is a selective liberal arts college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, located about thirty-five miles south of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. With an enrollment of approximately 3000 students, the college is known for the high percentage of its students who study abroad, for its exceptional programs in the natural sciences, music, and

mathematics, and for the engagement of its students in undergraduate research, experiential and service-learning, and multi- and inter-disciplinary study (<http://www.stolaf.edu/about/>). In recent years, faculty interest in and engagement with assessment has been steadily growing in response to a confluence of factors: the expectations of our accrediting organization, the North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission; visible leadership and grant-funded support for the scholarship of teaching and learning; grant-funded assessment-focused partnerships with other liberal arts institutions; and enhanced expertise in and leadership for assessment in the college's Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation, co-led by one faculty member and one staff member. While assessment-for-accountability is still a major part of the college's culture of assessment, and is likely to play an important role for the foreseeable future in sustaining assessment activity, a growing number of faculty find assessment-for-improvement both credible and appealing.

This relatively-assessment-friendly context notwithstanding, St. Olaf's assessment program, like that of many institutions, is under scrutiny from its accreditors. The college was given a very specific charge from the Higher Learning Commission in 2007 with direct implications for its departments and other academic programs. St. Olaf had just completed a required progress report on its assessment program for the HLC, pursuant to the recommendations of its 2003 reaccreditation visiting team. That 2007 report described substantial progress on a number of fronts, including the articulation of intended learning outcomes for general education, the expanded collection of institutional-level assessment data, and the evolution of a sustainable infrastructure supporting assessment. Nevertheless, the Commission concluded that another interim report documenting further progress in assessment prior to St. Olaf's next reaccreditation visit in 2013 was warranted. By January 2010, St. Olaf must deliver a report to the Higher

Learning Commission that documents:

- Completion of the articulation of learning objectives for all programs;
- Real and specific examples of how assessment data inform academic decision-making;
- An explicit budget for the assessment program;
- A clear explanation of the governance structure for assessment; and
- Specific documentation relating to the engagement of faculty in assessment of student learning.

These expectations are public, incorporated on the institutional information page for St. Olaf on the Higher Learning Commission website

(http://www.ncahlc.org/index.php?option=com_directory&Itemid=192&Action=ShowBasic&instid=1404).

These institution-specific reporting expectations flow directly from a new conceptualization of the role of assessment in the revised criteria for institutional accreditation established by the Higher Learning Commission, effective January 2005. The things St. Olaf needs to have in place by the time it submits its 2010 assessment progress report are milestones in the march toward reaccreditation in 2013 under a revised set of criteria. The revisions put in place by the HLC since St. Olaf's last reaccreditation review treat assessment quite differently from its previous role in accreditation reporting. Assessment does not function as a separate, isolated category of institutional activity or infrastructure; instead, it is referenced throughout the HLC's accreditation requirements, either as a "core component" of more than one criterion, or as part of the evidence an institution might present to demonstrate that it meets a criterion. Among other things, institutions accredited by the HLC must demonstrate that their "ongoing evaluation and assessment processes provide reliable evidence of institutional effectiveness that clearly informs strategies for continuous improvement" (Criterion 2, Core Component C) and that their "goals

for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible” (Criterion 3, Core Component A). Institutions can demonstrate that they “create effective learning environments” (Criterion 3, Core Component C) by showing that “assessment results inform improvements in curriculum, pedagogy, instructional resources, and student services.” They can demonstrate that they “assess the usefulness of [their] curricula to students who will live and work in a global, diverse, and technological society” (Criterion 4, Core Component C) by providing evidence of “learning outcomes document[ing] that graduates have gained the skills and knowledge they need to function in diverse local, national and global societies.” In short, assessment expectations in relation to reaccreditation reviews are now diffused rather than concentrated. The only way to meet these expectations is for assessment itself to be a broadly-diffused feature of institutional life.

The implications of these directives from St. Olaf’s accreditors for program-level assessment were clear. In order to meet the short-term expectations for our assessment progress report in 2010, and to meet the longer-term expectations for a successful reaccreditation effort in 2013, we needed to engage our departments, interdisciplinary programs, and other academic programs in articulating intended learning outcomes and gathering and using assessment data to inform department-level academic decisions. Consequently, in 2007-08, all departments and interdisciplinary programs were asked to develop intended learning outcomes for their majors or concentrations (disciplinary or interdisciplinary minors). The expectation was modest – that the academic unit identify three to five outcomes distinctive to their program that they expect of their graduates. This project was followed by a request in 2008-09 to choose a single learning outcome and gather evidence of student learning for this outcome. Both requests were made by the Provost and Dean of the College upon the recommendation of the faculty-led Curriculum

Committee. As of this writing, intended learning outcomes (ILOs) have been developed and published for all fifty-four majors and concentrations at St. Olaf

(<http://www.stolaf.edu/committees/curriculum/ge/learning-outcomes.html>), and nearly all departments have developed and are currently implementing a strategy for gathering systematic evidence of student learning in relation to an outcome of their choice. Department-level assessment is well underway.

Challenges in department-level assessment

There were no guarantees at the outset that departments would respond so promptly and imaginatively to these requests to articulate intended outcomes and to gather relevant evidence. There are very real challenges in gathering and using assessment evidence at the program level – challenges that will be familiar to anyone who has sought to foster meaningful assessment at their institution. On the face of it, we might expect residential liberal arts colleges to be far better positioned than other kinds of institutions to embrace assessment as a regular feature of organizational life. They give priority to teaching and learning in their missions, their faculty reward structures, and the allocation of faculty time. Their students are more available, their numbers are more manageable, and their faculty are more likely to collaborate across disciplines and programs. Innovations in pedagogy, course offerings, and curriculum requirements are commonplace, and faculty are granted considerable autonomy in defining course content and choosing instructional strategies.

But the very commitments and institutional characteristics that appear to make assessment inviting to liberal arts faculty also make it challenging. Faculty who already engage deeply with students, and who enjoy significant autonomy in defining the terms of engagement, do not

immediately see the potential for assessment to help them do their jobs better. And they are right to question the “value-added” of assessment. Successful assessment at the department level must overcome at least three practical barriers: (1) Lack of *time* both individually and collectively; (2) lack of *expertise* in gathering assessment evidence; (3) lack of *immediate benefit* to teaching and learning. Developing plans, collecting evidence, and making meaning out of the results takes precious faculty time. Both the individuals responsible for leading the effort in the department, and the department faculty as a whole, need to juggle priorities in order to give attention to assessment projects. And as one department chair recently said, “Nothing else goes away!” Moreover, there is a lingering perception that assessment means quantitative data-gathering and numbers-crunching. Many faculty believe that assessment is the purview of experts in educational research and/or statistics, and are concerned that they are simply not prepared to do the kind of research that good assessment requires.

Perhaps most significantly, investment in assessment is a gamble. We are early enough in the process that, despite the injunctions of our accreditors, we can’t yet point to many actual improvements in teaching, much less in student learning, as a result of assessment evidence. As one faculty member – a colleague who happens to be sympathetic to assessment – put it, “If I have to choose between the long line of students waiting outside my office door and the department assessment report, the students will win every time!” Busy faculty committed to high-quality teaching, trying to maintain a scholarly research agenda, and increasingly engaged in a broad array of governance and administrative responsibilities, are understandably drawn to activities with more immediate and certain payoff than assessment. Moreover, St. Olaf had already mounted an unsuccessful effort at department-level assessment in the mid-1990s, again in response to the expectations of our accreditors. Each department was asked to develop and

submit an assessment plan, and most departments invested considerable time in doing so. But the plans were never carried out, partly because the leadership structure then in place for assessment was not sustained, and partly because the plans themselves were unwieldy and the faculty lacked the time and expertise to implement them. Consequently, our faculty had already gambled and, from their point of view, lost. It would be an uphill climb to persuade departments that this time around, things would be different.

Meeting the challenge: Fostering actionable assessment at the department level

Given the challenges of time, expertise, and uncertain payoff, there is a high risk that assessment at the department level will remain a matter of accountability and compliance rather than institutional learning and improvement. Institutions must be intentional in constructing an approach to department-level assessment that responds directly to these challenges. In this section, we describe three features of the department assessment effort at St. Olaf that have mitigated, though not entirely eliminated, the challenges we have identified.

Framing the effort: Linking assessment to faculty work

Conceptualizations matter. They shape individual perceptions of the purpose, processes, and personal significance of institutional projects, and thus can invite or deter engagement. At St. Olaf, assessment has been intentionally and publicly conceptualized as an ongoing project that connects to faculty identities and supports faculty work. The way we talk about assessment reminds us of our intentions in undertaking it, while acknowledging the challenges of doing it well. Our conceptualization of assessment was initially developed by the faculty Director of Evaluation and Assessment during the drafting of the assessment section of the college's 2003 reaccreditation self-study, and subsequently reviewed and affirmed by the broadly-representative

faculty advisory group convened to support that effort. Since then, the key words and phrases characterizing our conceptualization of assessment are being integrated into our public documents, our committee conversations, and our faculty-wide deliberations.

Two phrases have been especially helpful in framing assessment efforts at St. Olaf. The first is our characterization of assessment as a form of “inquiry in support of student learning:”

The purpose of assessment at St. Olaf College is to help us determine how, and how well, we are meeting our educational promises to our students. It is one of several forms of inquiry into student learning, with implications for our classroom practices, our curriculum, and our priorities for faculty development. At its best, assessment can help us *sustain* what we are doing well and *strengthen* what we need to do better.

(http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ea/Assessment/Assessment_as_inquiry.htm)

This conceptualization ties assessment to both of the principal dimensions of faculty work – teaching and research – and focuses on its intended uses by faculty. It also invites the use of multiple methods of evidence-gathering:

Inquiry in support of student learning, like other kinds of inquiry, springs from questions or puzzles originating in the lived professional experiences and disciplined reflections of committed teacher-scholars. Moreover, it can draw on a wide array of methodological tools originating in those same experiences and reflections. Assessment need not be restricted to quantitative research conducted within the positivist social science tradition. It can draw on multiple methodologies (feminist, post-positivist, historical, etc.) and multiple kinds of evidence (narratives, portfolios, interviews, content analysis, etc.), to provide richer and more persuasive evidence of the process and outcomes of student learning.... If such inquiry is to be embedded in our academic programs, the methods of inquiry need to be grounded in the disciplines characterizing these programs. We need to inquire into our teaching in ways that fit what and how we teach; we need to inquire into student learning in ways that fit what and how students learn.

We have promoted the use of the phrase “inquiry in support of student learning” in a variety of ways, particularly early on in our renewed efforts to develop an assessment program. Before we had an Assessment Subcommittee as part of our regular governance structure, we convened an ad hoc assessment advisory team we dubbed the “ISSL [Inquiry in Support of Student Learning] Workgroup.” We have used the phrase often in public discussions about assessment, and we have devoted a section of our assessment website to explaining it

(http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ea/Assessment/Assessment_as_inquiry.htm). A conceptualization of assessment as “inquiry in support of student learning” addresses two of the perceived challenges to assessment at the department level. It reminds faculty that they are not without relevant expertise; their disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge can be powerful assets in the effort to gather evidence of student learning. It also encourages a focus on the practical significance of assessment findings – specifically, its anticipated payoff in improved teaching and learning. While this does not, by itself, guarantee that outcome, it reminds faculty that this is our intent.

A second “framing” phrase that has had broad appeal for our faculty is our assessment “mantra:” We seek to foster assessment that is *mission-driven*, *meaningful*, and *manageable*.

Here is how we have elaborated on each of these characteristics:

Mission-driven: At the institutional level, our inquiry priorities should be consistent with (and therefore help to advance) our distinctive mission as a liberal arts college of the Church that fosters a global perspective. At the program ... [and] classroom level, assessment activities should be guided by intended learning outcomes or course objectives.

Meaningful: A meaningful program of inquiry in support of student learning must be designed to inform decision-making, satisfy genuine intellectual curiosity, promote faculty development, and improve student learning.

Manageable: A manageable assessment program is realistic about the resources available for the design, administration, and data analysis involved in high-quality inquiry, and about the time that is needed to disseminate, discuss, and apply the results to decisions about pedagogy and programs (<http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ea/Assessment/Mission-driven.htm>).

Like “inquiry in support of student learning,” “mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable” is increasingly becoming part of our shared institutional language about assessment and helps to mitigate the challenges of assessment identified above.

This is not to suggest that all faculty members now understand assessment in this way. In fact, one of the things we have learned in working with departments is the need to help our colleagues discard conceptualizations of assessment developed during the early 1990s that run

counter to the understandings we are trying to promote. As the chair of our Curriculum Committee recently observed, “The preconceptions about what ‘assessment’ must require are so strong that no matter how carefully you state the M’s [mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable], people nevertheless conclude that something extrinsic and quantifiable is required in every case. Consequently we have to work over time to overcome the preconceptions.” Nevertheless, we are confident that continuing to frame assessment as we have, especially in the context of active departmental engagement with evidence-gathering, will help move us closer to a shared understanding of assessment as “inquiry in support of student learning” rather than “proof that we are doing our job.”

Structuring the effort: Adopting a “meet-in-the-middle” leadership strategy

It’s one thing to articulate a lofty commitment to “mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable” assessment that yields actionable evidence of student learning. It’s quite another to operationalize these aspirations in structuring a program. A key element in our effort to engage departments was the leadership strategy we developed to initiate and oversee the project. St. Olaf adopted a “meet-in-the-middle” strategy, employing both “bottom-up” (faculty-driven) and “top-down” (administration-directed) leadership. The bottom-up approach utilizes the College’s faculty governance system to establish the purposes and specific procedures departments would follow in articulating learning outcomes and gathering assessment evidence, and to provide support for departments in their efforts. The top-down approach utilizes the authority of administrators to activate the process.

At St. Olaf, principal responsibility for assessment rests with the faculty Curriculum Committee, which “is charged to oversee the curriculum of the college in light of its mission, aims and objectives, and to recommend to the faculty procedures and policies affecting the

educational work of the college. The committee reviews proposals for new programs and courses, oversees the soundness and vitality of existing programs, and makes recommendations to the faculty at large on both matters” (<http://www.stolaf.edu/committees/curriculum/>). The Curriculum Committee in turn delegates the detailed work of shaping, promoting, directing, and overseeing the college’s assessment efforts to an Assessment Subcommittee, which includes faculty members appointed from outside the parent committee as well as Curriculum Committee members. From its inception, the Assessment Subcommittee has included broad representation from across the campus. In addition to the faculty Director of Evaluation and Assessment, the subcommittee includes the Associate Dean of Fine Arts and one faculty member each from the other four academic divisions – Humanities, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Social Sciences, and Interdisciplinary and General Studies. Importantly, nearly all the members have had substantial experience as department chairs.

To date, the Assessment Subcommittee has led both the effort to articulate and publish intended learning outcomes (ILOs) for all departments and programs and the effort to gather assessment evidence within departments. But it has not acted alone. A St. Olaf faculty committee cannot *require* the faculty to do anything; it can only make recommendations. Consequently, the “bottom-up” strategy of faculty-driven leadership has been complemented by a “top-down” strategy of administrative directives to departments. During both the outcomes-development phase and the evidence-gathering phase, the Assessment Subcommittee developed the process, the parent Curriculum Committee recommended it to the chief academic officer, and the chief academic officer formally asked the departments to implement it, specifically referencing the role of the committee in recommending this course of action.

In the first phase (2007-08), members of the subcommittee collaborated to prepare a

document requesting that all departments and programs identify a small set of intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and establishing timelines and parameters for doing so. That document was forwarded as a recommendation of the entire Curriculum Committee to the Provost and Dean of the College, who issued the official request to department chairs and program directors:

As part of a continuing effort to gather evidence about student learning that is helpful to our work as teachers, and on the recommendation of the curriculum committee, I ask each department and program to develop statements of intended learning outcomes for each major or concentration for which you are responsible. By April 6, 2008, each department and interdisciplinary program should send to the Director of Evaluation and Assessment a list of intended learning outcomes for each of its major and concentration programs to be posted on the Curriculum Committee website. The list of intended learning outcomes should include at least 3-5 outcomes distinctive to the major or concentration and selected college-wide outcomes featured prominently in the curriculum for majors.

[Excerpt from Dean's memo dated October 12, 2007]

The request to gather evidence of student learning outcomes during the second phase (2008-09) proceeded in the same way. The Assessment Subcommittee prepared a text, the “next steps memo,” that the Curriculum Committee endorsed and the Provost and Dean of the College issued, asking departments and programs to select one of their ILOs and develop a strategy for gathering assessment evidence about it.

On the recommendation of the Curriculum Committee, I ask each department and program to gather evidence about student learning based on the intended learning outcomes developed for majors and concentrations last year.

November 24, 2008 Identify which department/program ILO will be the focus of evidence gathering for this academic year.

October, 2008 - March, 2009 Attend one or more assessment-related events sponsored by IR&E and the Assessment Subcommittee in support of the department's or program's work on this project.

June 1, 2009 As part of the Department or Program Annual Report to your Associate Dean, explain what you learned about student learning in your major or concentration and what implications the results have for the program.

[Excerpt from Dean's memo dated October 28, 2008]

Finally, the timeline and guidelines for reporting the evidence departments gathered were drafted by the Assessment Subcommittee, refined after informal review by several chairs, affirmed by the full Curriculum Committee, forwarded as a recommendation to the Provost and Dean of the College, and finally issued by the Dean as a request to chairs.

Assessment reporting will involve a two-phased process. Departments will be asked to include only brief descriptions of their evidence-gathering process in their June 1 annual reports. More detailed reports that focus on the *actions* (broadly defined) that a department/program plans to take in response to the evidence they gathered will then be due by October 15, 2009. The guidelines for these 1-2 page action reports, described below, have been recommended to me by the Curriculum Committee and reflect feedback from several chairs and program directors. We ask that you focus on the following questions:

1. Which features of your major/concentration are likely to be continued, and which might be modified or discontinued, on the basis of the evidence you gathered about student learning? If you believe changes are warranted, what kinds of changes do you anticipate and why?
2. What other actions, if any, might your department take in response to the evidence you gathered?
3. What kind of assessment evidence would you like to gather next, and why?
4. What kind of feedback and practical support in response to your assessment action report would be helpful?

[Excerpt from Dean's memo dated May 12, 2009]

In general, this “meet-in-the-middle” leadership strategy forged a productive partnership between the faculty governance structure and the college administration. The Assessment Subcommittee provided a vehicle for experienced department chairs to shape the request to departments, which resulted in a more manageable approach to program-level assessment than the College had developed in the early 1990s. The expected “deliverables” were clearer, the timeline was more realistic in relation to the scope of the effort, and the work was phased.

Moreover, the Subcommittee did not simply abandon departments to the work. In the spirit of peer review, Subcommittee members evaluated each department's intended learning outcomes and strategies for gathering assessment data, and provided feedback to their colleagues to assist them in implementing their plans. The Subcommittee developed a simple rubric for providing feedback on intended learning outcomes. Each department and program was scored on a scale that included “Exceptionally Strong, Satisfactory, Can be Improved, and Insufficient Information to Judge.” The eight scoring criteria were divided into “mission-driven, meaningful and manageable” categories, consistent with our approach to assessment:

Criteria for Department/Program Feedback on ILOs

Mission-driven

1. Clear relationship between ILOs and department/program mission
2. Focus on student learning rather than faculty inputs
3. Reflection of appropriate levels of Bloom's taxonomy

Meaningful

4. Use of terms that will be clear to students and to faculty in other disciplines
5. Conciseness
6. Amenability to assessment

Manageable

7. Focus on a single outcome (rather than multiple outcomes) within each enumerated statement
8. Limited number of outcomes (3-5)

Departments and programs were provided with the rubric results and with other comments or resources as deemed appropriate by the Assessment Subcommittee. In some cases recommendations were made for revising the ILOs because they were insufficiently clear or targeted superficial outcomes rather than more substantive objectives.

When departments and programs submitted their plans for gathering evidence about a particular ILO, the Assessment Subcommittee also provided feedback. Four questions were considered:

Feedback Questions for Departments and Programs Gathering Evidence about Student Learning

1. Does the proposed strategy provide direct evidence of student learning?
2. Does the proposed strategy disaggregate performance data in a way that provides useful information to the department or program?
3. Is the plan appropriate in scope (too large or too small)?
4. Does the information provided by the department or program provide a sufficient level of detail to determine how the information will be gathered?

Departments and programs received feedback on these questions from a member of the Assessment Subcommittee. A list of possible resources was also included to further support departmental efforts.

It is worth noting that not all departments and programs received the feedback as the advisory (rather than autocratic) peer review it was intended to be. The purpose of the

Subcommittee review of ILOs and evidence-gathering plans was simply to increase the likelihood that departments would gather evidence in which they could have confidence, and to point departments to resources that could save them time and strengthen the “actionability” of their findings. However, some departments and programs – particularly the smaller units with fewer faculty to carry out the work – have experienced the feedback as edicts rather than suggestions and support. Moreover, it took considerable time to review and respond to all the plans, and some departments received feedback after they had already begun implementing their evidence-gathering plans. We are attempting to address this problem by clarifying the purpose and origins of the review process, reiterating our commitment to manageable assessment that yielded information that departments could use, reminding departments that they are the principal audience for their own work, providing more timely assistance during the implementation phase (see below), and making sure that everyone guiding the process – individual Subcommittee members and faculty and staff in the Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation – conveys the same message.

Despite some confusion about Subcommittee intentions and authority, the active engagement of elected faculty in deciding what we would do and how we would do it has been vital to the credibility of our department-level assessment effort. This point was brought home to us at a recent faculty development workshop focused on the use of rubrics for department-level assessment. One participant asked how our evidence-gathering project had been launched. Upon hearing that it was initiated by a recommendation of the Curriculum Committee to the Provost and Dean of the College, another participant (a department chair) said ruefully, “You mean we did this to ourselves?” Though offered as a tongue-in-cheek aside, there is more than a little truth in her observation. We hope that, in the long run, the involvement of our faculty

governance system in shaping the department assessment effort will lead to a different kind of experience for our colleagues, one in which assessment will be more than just another exercise in externally-imposed, accountability-only data collection. Our “meet-in-the-middle” leadership strategy, characterized by a strong faculty governance role and supported by our efforts to frame assessment appropriately, is designed to ameliorate legitimate faculty concerns about lack of time, lack of expertise, and lack of immediate benefit for teaching and learning.

Supporting the effort: Equipping departments for success

As helpful as an appropriate frame and leadership strategy may be, these alone will not guarantee widespread success in gathering actionable evidence of student learning at the department level. Equally important is the capacity for departments actually to do the work. As noted above, the lack of support for departments to carry out the assessment plans they had developed in the mid-1990s was a key barrier to the success of that earlier effort. Consequently, in both the intended learning outcomes development phase and the evidence-gathering phase, we have sought to expand organizational capacity and equip departments to accomplish what they were asked to do. Below is a description of the steps we have taken and how they have helped mitigate the challenges of department-level assessment.

Building on institutional-level experience with assessment

A key difference between our current department-level assessment effort and the effort undertaken in the 1990s is that this time around, we did not engage departments until after the college had racked up some assessment “wins” at the institutional level. First, St. Olaf had recently completed a two-year effort to develop explicit statements of intended learning outcomes for each of our eighteen General Education requirements. The statements had been developed through the faculty governance system and voted on by the faculty as a whole. The

request to departments and programs to develop intended learning outcomes for majors and concentrations was not issued until after the faculty-wide GE ILO project had been completed.

Second, St. Olaf had had several years of experience with successful inter-institutional collaborations around assessment. One grant from the Teagle Foundation enabled us to work with three other liberal arts institutions (Carleton, Macalester, and Grinnell) to pilot and evaluate an array of alternative approaches to assessing several key learning outcomes for liberal learning: critical thinking, effective writing, quantitative reasoning, and global understanding (<http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ea/Assessment/CALL.html>). Not only did this effort support several successful efforts to gather meaningful institutional-level evidence of student learning (for example, through the longitudinal administration of the Collegiate Learning Assessment [CLA]), but it also introduced a core group of faculty to the potential benefits of assessment for improving teaching and learning. Many of these faculty participants, both then and now, occupy key leadership positions at St. Olaf as department chairs, committee chairs, and associate deans. Another grant from the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education (NITLE) allowed St. Olaf to participate in, and eventually lead, an inter-institutional project developing and piloting the Research Practices Survey, an instrument for assessing the research experiences, habits, attitudes, and proficiencies of undergraduates (<http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ea/Assessment/ResPracSur/FacultyInfo.htm>). The Research Practices Survey is now being used by more than 40 institutions, and will continue to be available in the future through the Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) consortium. This project has fostered productive assessment partnerships involving staff as well as faculty, both within and across institutions, and has demonstrated that “mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable” assessment is indeed possible.

Finally, thanks in no small measure to these grant-funded assessment initiatives, we have a growing array of instruments for gathering both direct and indirect evidence at the institutional level, and we are encouraging departments to consider using or adapting these instruments in their program-level assessment efforts

(<http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ea/Assessment/InstrumentsProgramLevel.html>). Our assessment website has been a valuable resource for this purpose. For example, the Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation worked with a team of students to organize assessment-related items in national and regional surveys we already administer, such as NSSE, the HEDS senior and alumni surveys, and CIRP, into an on-line “Student Learning Item Catalog” (SLIC). Departments can find survey items relating to student learning behaviors, attitudes, or perceived outcomes they are interested in, and develop parallel items in assessment surveys they administer to their majors. This allows some comparison between the results for a specific program and results for a campus-wide sample (<http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ea/Assessment/SLIC.html>). As another example, some departments are planning to include the Research Practices Survey as part of their evidence-gathering projects this spring. They will not need to collect the data themselves; instead, the college’s Institutional Research and Evaluation Office can administer the survey for them by adding a department-specified sample of students to the college-wide sample, and then reporting the sample results back to the department.

Building department-level assessment efforts on institutional-level successes responds to all three of the challenges we have identified. It saves time by giving department faculty access to existing instruments they can use or adapt to their own purposes. It uses expertise and experience the college already has in designing, administering, and reporting assessment data. Finally, it offers evidence up front that assessment can yield information of relevance to teaching

and learning. Linking departmental efforts to institutional efforts has additional benefits; it enhances the extent to which institutional-level data is acted on, and brings more cohesion to the overall assessment program at an institution.

Providing hands-on help

A second way of supporting departments in carrying out the work of assessment has been to offer workshops and “clinics” (help sessions for work in progress) during both the intended learning outcomes development phase and the evidence-gathering phase. These opportunities have been co-hosted by the Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation, the Assessment Subcommittee, and the Center for Innovation in the Liberal Arts (our faculty development center). Two clinics were offered to assist departments as they were drafting their statements of intended learning outcomes, one in January 2008 and the other in February 2008. Faculty from more than half of the 54 majors and concentrations participated in these clinics, with 11 different programs represented at the January clinic and 17 different programs represented at the February clinic.

During the current “evidence gathering” period, we are continuing to support faculty by providing workshops, clinics and other sessions tailored to meet their needs. We used the information departments included in their evidence-gathering plans to design programming for the clinics. Topics range from the use of specific assessment instruments (e.g., rubrics, portfolios, surveys, and learning outcome inventories), to suggestions for summarizing and interpreting results. We have also collaborated with our faculty development center to alert department liaisons to workshops of particular significance to assessment; our most recent assessment-focused workshop had to be moved to another room to accommodate the number of participants. Finally, we are offering individualized consultations to departments seeking

feedback on the specifics of their evidence-gathering efforts, addressing questions about the wording of survey items, approaches to sampling, rubric development, and interview protocols.

These in-person sources of hands-on support have been supplemented by a growing collection of web-based resources. The Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation maintains an extensive assessment website, with information about the purposes of assessment at St. Olaf, the array of available instruments, recent institutional-level assessment findings, grant-funded assessment projects, and increasingly, the work departments are now generating (<http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ea/Assessment/index.html>). Together, these in-person and virtual resources have made department-level assessment less time consuming, more informed, and more likely to yield useable results.

Offering small grants

A final means of equipping departments for success has been the provision of funding in the form of small grants to departments and programs. The grants, for up to \$500, support expenses related to assessment efforts (<http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ea/Assessment/DepartmentGrants-Index.html>). Funds are released upon receipt of a report detailing how the funds were used and what was learned. Proposals and reports are posted on the assessment website to provide examples of successful projects.

Since the assessment grant program was launched in Fall 2008, we have awarded ten grants. The work undertaken by departments has been varied and rich. Some examples of work completed to date include:

- *Biology*: The biology department purchased and administered the Major Field Test in Biology to 40 senior majors in Fall 2008. Their goal is to determine how their students compare nationally and to assess student abilities in the various sub-areas of biology as identified by the exam.
- *Romance Languages*: The romance languages department held several mini-retreats in

which they used scholarly research on second language acquisition to “operationalize” their intended learning outcomes into specific proficiencies, map the development of these outcomes onto their curriculum for majors, and begin developing tools for the embedded assessment of the identified proficiencies in selected courses.

- *Chemistry:* The chemistry department sought student input on learning outcomes and assessment strategies, discussed outcomes and strategies in a faculty mini-retreat, and purchased copies of the American Chemical Society (ACS) standardized exams for the Physical Chemistry course.
- *Education:* The education department was interested in determining how well they prepare teacher candidates to make instructional decisions based on student data. They held a focus group of K-12 teachers across disciplines to collect information on how they currently use data to drive instruction, how they would like to use data to drive instruction, and what they see as vital for student teachers to know about data-driven decision-making as they enter the field.
- *Psychology:* The psychology department arranged for a three-day visit by a faculty assessment consultant from the Department of Psychology at James Madison University, an institution that has been engaged in campus-wide assessment activities since the mid-1980s. Outcomes of this consultation included the decision to explore using measures such as the Area Concentration Achievement Test (ACAT) and the Academic Skills Inventory to assess the learning of senior majors; the identification of existing and potential sources of assessment data for foundation courses in psychology; and a commitment to share the results of assessment activities more broadly, especially with students, so that everyone understands how assessment data is informing the department’s decision making.
- *Statistics:* The statistics department plans to use the Reasoning about P-values and Statistical Significance scale (RPASS), developed by one of its faculty members, to assess students enrolled in the first of two core courses in the Statistics Concentration. In particular, they will use RPASS data to compare students with and without a previous course in statistics, to inform a decision about whether a previous course in statistics should be a rigid prerequisite for entry into this core course.

Outcomes and next steps

While the story at St. Olaf is still very much in progress, there is preliminary evidence suggesting that our efforts to frame, lead, and support assessment at the department level will lead to improvements in teaching and learning. First, this project has engaged more faculty in thinking about assessment and its potential benefits for student learning than any other assessment project we have undertaken to date. We asked departments to indicate the number of

faculty who participated in developing their statements of intended learning outcomes for majors and concentrations when they submitted their ILOs to the Assessment Subcommittee. Allowing for some overlap where the same individuals contributed to the development of ILOs for more than one program, we estimate that more 200 faculty members – approximately two-thirds of our total faculty FTE – participated in this phase. Our current list of department assessment liaisons for the evidence-gathering phase of the project includes more than 100 faculty members – approximately 40% of our full-time faculty. Moreover, the participants are distributed across the entire faculty and include faculty at every career stage – early, mid-career, and senior. The critical mass of faculty members learning about and engaged with assessment is large, broadly representative, and growing. As more and more faculty participate, the challenge of expertise will diminish.

Another indicator of project success is the voluntary participation of other academic programs that do not offer majors or concentrations in the effort to define learning outcomes and collect evidence of their accomplishment, even though they were not explicitly requested to do so in the Dean's original directives to departments. St. Olaf's Center for Experiential Learning (CEL), and the Office of International and Off-Campus Studies (IOCS), are first in line. The leaders of both programs believe that the ILO-definition and evidence-collection process is likely to enhance the quality and coherence of their programs, and to strengthen the integration of their programs with on-campus classroom instruction. Both programs have drafted intended learning outcomes and are in various stages of planning their strategies for gathering evidence.

A third indicator is the number of positive statements departments have made about the internal conversations these requests have stimulated. On the form we developed for departments to submit their intended learning outcomes, we included an invitation to comment

on the process. We were pleasantly surprised by what we read:

It was helpful for us to articulate, as clearly and simply as possible, our most fundamental goals.

Clear articulation of goals is a challenge but essential prior to any curricular reform.

The activity of rewriting [our] old [program] objective statements into learning outcomes ... provided a way to discuss what learning cuts across our four program areas and is relevant to the [program] as a whole.

It was very important to have this conversation, given that [our] program is so eclectic.

The process of drafting and discussing ILOs was beneficial in that it helped us look at our majors from a slightly different lens: that of a developmental sequence.

We hope to see similar comments after the first round of evidence-gathering is completed this spring. These responses conveyed an important insight: We don't have to look just to assessment *results* in seeking a payoff in improved teaching and learning. The departmental conversation around planning and carrying out assessment – the *process* – can lead to that payoff as well, by stimulating and focusing department conversations about curriculum and pedagogy. A well-designed strategy for engaging and supporting departments can, in and of itself, help to mitigate the challenge of uncertain benefits for teaching and learning. This is good news for busy faculty who are necessarily selective about where they put their time and energy.

We have some distance to travel before we can say with assurance that we have an institutionalized program of department-level assessment. As noted above, the evolving role of the faculty governance system in guiding the assessment effort has not always been clear to our colleagues, and there is not yet a fully-shared understanding of what kind of evidence “counts” as assessment. We will need to make decisions about how often, and how extensively, departments will be asked to gather evidence of student learning; how we will continue to grow the pool of faculty with assessment experience and engagement; whether and how we will

disseminate results, both internally and externally; and how department-level data will factor into institutional-level decision-making. But we believe that our effort to link assessment responsibility with program responsibility holds promise for assessment that actually improves student learning. We expect to continue to advocate for mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable assessment, and to maintain a “meet-in-the-middle” leadership approach with a strong role for our faculty governance system in deciding what we will do, when, and how. We will also sustain our efforts to provide practical support for faculty in learning how to gather systematic evidence of student learning in majors and concentrations. We are eager to see what our colleagues will have learned this spring and how they plan to act on their learning.