MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT: THE BENEFITS OF INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT

ABSTRACT

Curricular mapping demonstrates the degree of alignment and coherence among the institutional mission and learning outcomes (institutional, program and course). It can also demonstrate the sequencing and levels of achievement of the degree. In the redesign, WASC asks for schools to provide a “holistic exploration” of the degree through an examination and assessment of the curricula, learning outcomes, sequencing and relationships among the various components. Curricular maps contribute to this holistic examination, but one dimensional curricular maps are often cumbersome and difficult to follow. This project presents an interactive web-based curricular map designed for both faculty and students to use as a visual representation of this matrix. The web-based map provides a clear view of the path students are asked to follow and the relationships they forge in degree completion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Curricula in higher education are comprised of complex, interdependent parts that consist of three to four major components. These components include courses and learning activities directly related to instruction in the major, general education courses, electives, and co-curricular experiences all arranged in such a way that results in a cohesive developmental learning experience. The advancement of learning outcomes has helped to make curricula more transparent and comprehensible for both students, faculty, staff and the general public. It has also helped to meet the demands placed on higher education for better accountability and transparency (Cuevas, N; Matveev, A; Miller, K, 2010). In the WASC redesign, institutions are asked to explain the meaning, quality and integrity of a degree. Curricula mapping can assist in this process.

Mapping demonstrates the degree of alignment and coherence among the institutional mission and learning outcomes (institutional, program and course). It can also demonstrate the sequencing and levels of achievement of the degree. In the redesign, WASC asks for schools to provide a “holistic exploration” of the degree through an examination and assessment of the curricula, learning outcomes, sequencing and relationships among the various components. This visual representation of the parts, demonstrated through a matrix of the whole, allows one to view the paths students take and the relationships they forge in degree completion (Cuevas, N; Matveev, A; Miller, K, 2010). Cuevas et al.
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(2010) refer to “curriculum intentionality” (p.11) as a “deliberate and systematic alignment of intended program learning outcomes with course outcomes and instructional and learning activities” (p.11). Assessment intervals in the curriculum can be identified in mapping to demonstrate key points to evaluate efficacy.

This project involves the development of an interactive curricular map that demonstrates curricular coherence between academic programs, the institutional mission and institutional learning outcomes (ILOs). Institutional alignment maps or matrixes help to clarify this process – both verbally and visually. These institutional maps offer a diagrammed space to explore how and to what extent the university mission extends to both the classroom and its students.

ALIGNMENT OF CURRICULUM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO LEARNING

Curricula in higher education should be much more than a collection of courses that students take to complete requirements. It should portray a developmental journey or a path of educational attainment. This path should be comprehensive, well integrated, cohesive and connected to the institution’s mission. Allen (2006) states that “a cohesive curriculum systematically provides students with multiple opportunities to synthesize, practice and develop increasingly complex ideas, skills and values” (p.92). We know from the research that when students can make associations between new knowledge and their current knowledge, learning becomes easier and more meaningful. The more we can make sense of new information the better our understanding becomes and the more useful it is to us (Tagg, 2003). Entwistle (2001) reports how different approaches to learning yield different types of results. A “deep approach” necessitates the use of active learning strategies to help ensure a comprehensive understanding of material. Superficial approaches are useful for short term learning needs such as memorizing facts or learning information for an examination. With superficial learning there is less of an understanding and integration of knowledge which results in information not lasting very long. Entwistle and Entwistle (2003) report,

The deep approach involves the intention to reach a thorough understanding for oneself, while the surface approach suggests an intention to reproduce the material to be learned. To reach their own understanding, students tend to make connections with previous knowledge and examine evidence, while relying on reproducing invites routine memorization (p.19).
Motivation to learn is a factor in both deep and surface learning with intrinsic motivation being associated with deep learning and extrinsic motivation and fear of failure being associated with surface learning (Entwistle and Entwistle, 2003).

**NOEL ENTWISTLE (2001) DEEP AND SURFACE LEARNING**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF LEARNING</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
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</table>
| Deep Learning    | To understand ideas for yourself | Relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience  
Looking for patterns and underlying principles  
Checking evidence and relating it to conclusions  
Examining logic and argument cautiously and critically  
Becoming actively interested in course content |
| Surface Learning (reproducing) | To cope with course requirements | Studying without reflecting on either purpose or strategy.  
Treating the course as unrelated bits of knowledge  
Memorizing facts and procedures routinely  
Finding difficulty in making sense of new ideas presented  
Feeling undue pressure and worry about work |

**WHY IS ALIGNING LEARNING OUTCOMES SO DIFFICULT?**

When curricula are mapped, the maps can demonstrate where learning opportunities occur and where there are connections with the institutional mission and outcomes. In general, when assessment moves beyond the course level it becomes more difficult to draw valid conclusions. As you move further away from a common sample, examined in a closed environment (such as the classroom or major), additional variables come into play. Assessment is not research; it differs, as its purpose is to examine trends from a triangulation of information, including both direct and indirect measures. There are knowledge and skills that are part of the mission of an institution that cut across majors and disciplines. When you attempt to move outside of the institution for comparisons, the mission becomes an important factor (Entwistle, 2001, 2005). Establishing learning outcomes helps to clarify mission and purpose within the institution, but without common outcomes there are many variations from institution to institution, making comparisons more challenging.
Measuring higher order skills such as critical thinking, writing, leadership and ethical decision-making must be done across disciplines and curricula. These can allow for comparisons among institutions (Benjamin, 2008). Many of these types of skills and knowledge are “monitored” in the general education curriculum. Boorstein and Knapp (2005) state, “One purpose of a liberal arts or general education requirement is to enrich students’ lives and to ensure that students can be contributing members of society who are able to meet the challenges of their chosen profession.” Given the importance of these skills, aligning, mapping, and tracking student learning in these fields is key, but aligning such broad skills from overarching ILOs down to specific and unique course learning outcomes is tricky and challenging, yet vastly important.

THE VALUE OF ALIGNMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

The mission, values and ILOs are shared criteria that all students are expected to meet during their educational experience. Mapping identifies, for both students and faculty, where this may occur in the curriculum. Many institutions now include general education and co-curricular experiences in their matrixes, providing opportunities for viewing different types of experiences that help to develop higher order thinking skills. ILOs often encompass broad learning such as writing, oral communication and critical thinking but they are much more far-reaching when they define the values of the institution. ILOs, once achieved, should transform and influence students’ ideals, perspectives, and awareness of the world (Fried, 2006). These changes can be lifelong. Curricular mapping can provide opportunities for assessment and reflection through its holistic view. Mapping provides a comprehensive view of curricular sequencing and degree concentration (units or credits) of time spent in different areas. It can examine the general path for the majority of students and then also offer an individual examination of some of the varied opportunities that exist. It is a tool for administration as well as for faculty and students (Sumison & Goodfellow, 2007).

Developing matrixes that identify where and how there is alignment between programs and the institution can help students to see both the connections and cohesiveness of their curriculum as well as help faculty to build these connections into their curriculum and understand their ongoing importance. An alignment matrix helps to make the connections in curriculum more transparent, while demonstrating the journey. The use of outcomes in achieving these connections defines the level of sophistication and complexity of the expectations and helps to evaluate the integrity of the curriculum. A curricula matrix at the institutional level provides a holistic view of the student experience and should
demonstrate relationships and progressions (Borrego, 2006). Borrego (2006) states, “In order to support the learning environment you need to understand the institutional values, the vision and the mission. Institutions should be positioned to support the institution” (p.13). Developing a matrix to demonstrate program alignment with the institution’s mission and outcomes allows for examining the student experience beyond one’s discipline.

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY: PROGRAM REVIEW

Program review is Pepperdine University’s central and inclusive assessment activity, as well as integration point for the assessment of student learning, curricula and pedagogy. It is through program level assessment that learning outcomes can be examined holistically. This includes the relationship between institutional level outcomes and program/course level outcomes. It also provides an opportunity for both internal and external audiences to view the relationship between the institutional mission and mission of the program. The expectation is that they are supportive, interconnected, and interactive. At Pepperdine University, a Christian institution, the mission of preparing students for a life of Purpose, Service and Leadership is evident in both curricular and co-curricular learning outcomes.

Program review at Pepperdine University has existed since the 1990s but the process has become much more comprehensive and focused on student learning in recent years. With the revisions in the process came the requirement for clear articulation of how each program supports the institutional mission and learning outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MISSION STATEMENT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pepperdine is a Christian university committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and Christian values, where students are strengthened for lives of purpose, service, and leadership.</td>
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<tr>
<td>VISION STATEMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepperdine University will be a preeminent, global, Christian university, known for the integration of faith and learning, whose graduates lead purposeful lives as servant-minded leaders throughout the world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>INSTITUTIONAL EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES</td>
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<td>The Institutional Educational Objectives (IEOs) are formed by two components:</td>
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<td>1. Core commitments: Knowledge and scholarship, faith and heritage, and community and global understanding</td>
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<td>2. Institutional values: Purpose, service, and leadership</td>
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<td>Each commitment is evaluated and implemented through the lens of the institutional values. All components are represented in both the learning environment and the student learning outcomes.</td>
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STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Student Learning Outcomes are measurable expectations that are formed from the model of the Institutional Educational Objectives (formed by core commitments from the University Strategic Plan and institutional values of purpose, service, and leadership). Outcomes-based assessment allows the institution to measure the impact of their educational environment. The outcomes listed below will be measured at various points during the educational experience, at graduation and post-graduation. The SLOs in the matrix below can be thought of by using the precursor, "Pepperdine graduates and alumni will be able to:"

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Knowledge &amp; Scholarship</th>
<th>Faith &amp; Heritage</th>
<th>Community &amp; Global Understanding</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PURPOSE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate expertise in an academic or professional discipline, display proficiency in the discipline, and engage in the process of academic discovery.</td>
<td>Appreciate the complex relationship between faith, learning, and practice.</td>
<td>Develop and enact a compelling personal and professional vision that values diversity.</td>
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<td><strong>SERVICE</strong></td>
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<td>Apply knowledge to real-world challenges.</td>
<td>Respond to the call to serve others.</td>
<td>Demonstrate commitment to service and civic engagement.</td>
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<td><strong>LEADERSHIP</strong></td>
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<td>Think critically and creatively, communicate clearly, and act with integrity.</td>
<td>Practice responsible conduct and allow decisions and directions to be informed by a value-centered life.</td>
<td>Use global and local leadership opportunities in pursuit of justice.</td>
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For more information about Pepperdine's Learning Outcomes, please visit the Learning Outcomes tab on the Office of Institutional Effectiveness website.
REFLECTION ON THE WEB BASED PROGRAM PROJECT

Pepperdine University has articulated a clear Mission, Core Commitments and Values. From these, the Institution has nine Institutional Learning Outcomes. In Pepperdine University’s current assessment process, departments are asked to develop two curricular maps: one to demonstrate how the program learning outcomes align to the Institutional Learning Outcomes and one to identify where and to what degree the program learning outcomes are taught in each course (where students learn and achieve the outcomes). Both of these matrixes are common practices at most institutions. This project attempted to combine these two matrixes and demonstrate the relationship between them. In doing so, one can follow the process from institutional learning outcomes to course outcomes.

Included in the appendices (A-E) is a one dimensional demonstration of how these two processes relate to one another. We used two examples, one from our graduate school (Psychology) and the other from our undergraduate school (Theater). Screenshots of the web-based alignment maps we developed can also be found in the appendices (F-K). The web-based version allows the participant to follow an individual path, beginning at the Institutional Core Commitments to Values, ILOs, all the way to the individual courses. Although simple in concept, developing a website such as this took a great deal of time and planning. With the assistance of a web designer and developer we worked through many scenarios to find the most effective way to achieve our goals. There were many factors to consider:

- Simplicity in design to allow a balance between interactive “buttons” and text.
- The ability to move back and forth through the system so one could follow their path forward and backward during the entire process.
- Cost of the site. The more features the site has, the higher the cost and the higher the maintenance. The attempt was to choose the features carefully so the site was affordable and easy to maintain and modify as content changes.

For this project we have two programs populated for viewing:

1. Graduate School of Education and Psychology: Masters in Psychology
2. Seaver College: Theater Major

THE LINK BELOW WILL TAKE YOU TO THE SITE – ENJOY!!!

http://services.pepperdine.edu/oie/learning-outcomes/ilo-alignment.aspx
BIBLIOGRAPHY


