

Social Science Core Area Assessment Committee Report

Submitted by Dr. Robert E. Sanderson, CAAC Chair

I was recently appointed as the replacement for Adriana Ramirez, representative for Sociology (& Anthropology) on the Social Science Core Area Assessment Committee. In addition to serving as the Sociology committee member, I have also been appointed chair of the committee. Currently, the members of the committee are:

- Jess Porter, Geography
- Amanda Nolen, Psychology
- Kenneth Galchus, Economics
- Julianna Flinn, Simon Hawkins, & Robert Sanderson (chair), Sociology & Anthropology
- Emily Berthelot, Criminal Justice
- Eric Wiebelhaus-Brahm, Political Science

The Social Science Core Area Assessment Committee (CAAC) represents seven disciplines that used a shared rubric for Knowledge 1 Learning Objectives and Outcomes. In the spring of 2015, the CAAC developed a general rubric to assess the student artifacts to be produced in accordance with discipline specific assignments. The CAAC members of each curriculum section determined the strategies for randomizing the selection of specific sections for each core course in the core.

Following the guideline for random selection denoted in Phase 1 of the document “CAAC Social Science Assessment Process v3” (Appendix I), the committee used the random generator at <http://www.random.org> to select sections to be assessed for each core course in each social science department. Upon development of the selection process and rubric for assessing student artifacts, the CAAC was prepared to begin the assessment process in the fall of 2015.

Assessing student performance

Beginning in the first few weeks of the fall semester, the CAAC representatives initiated the assessment of student performance. For each social science program, a CAAC representative randomly selected the section(s) of core area courses to be assessed according to the knowledge 1 goals and attendant learning outcomes. The student “artifact” submissions were collected by the instructor from every student in the randomly selected assigned courses. The instructors in the selected sections provided three student artifacts, a GOOD outcome (grade A work), FAIR outcome (grade C Work), and a POOR outcome (grade F work) from an assignment that matches the goal and outcomes assessed by the rubric. The instructor from the selected core course section forwarded the work of all students in that section to be assessed (divided into the three designated categories) to the CAAC to be scored and assessed using the common core

rubric that was designed in the spring of 2015. Each department CAAC representative was responsible for collecting the student submissions from the faculty whose section of a designated core course had been selected to be assessed. Most departments had only a single core course to submit except for the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, which had three distinct core area courses to be evaluated: Anthropology, Gender Studies, and Sociology.

Each CAAC representative served as an assessor whose task was to randomly pick one submission from each category and score that submission. In all cases, assessors didn't score artifacts from their own courses. This meant that the discipline representative needed to provide a detailed scoring key for the content of the assignment to the assessor of his or her course. It was the responsibility of the course instructor to create a scoring key or rubric for the artifacts based on the CAAC assessment rubric. Concurrently, it was the instructor who explains how the artifacts will be sorted into three piles representing levels of student success for the assessors.

Scoring student submissions

Upon completion of the student submission process, the CAAC was tasked with scoring the submissions using the common rubric chosen by the committee. Assessment teams consisting of two Social Science CAAC members assessed each course using provided artifacts and grading keys/rubrics. The scores were tabulated and appear on individual documents--CAAC Assessment Score sheets--that were presented in a table, which provided the common rubric and scores for the data compiled from the assessment process. Each social science core course was assessed, scored and reported on a single document, making the assessment results understandable without much difficulty for a reviewer. However, in theory the formulaic process looked straightforward, but in practice there were individual reporting variations that made the reporting process somewhat confusing. For example, one assessor might turn in a packet containing examples of student works with cumulative scores of Good, Fair, or Poor written on the student submission without any systematic referent as to how the process was conducted. Questions about how the rubric was used, or whose course was being evaluated, or how the data was to be interpreted were either unanswered or left to the assessor to determine. Others would submit the necessary information in a disorganized fashion, but at least the requisite information was provided. What was lacking in the assessment process, as demonstrated, was a straightforward and unified form for reporting assessment results that would make the reporting of results and conclusions much more consistent and efficient.

The common rubric seemed to work well, especially for those who exhibited a clear understanding of the relationship between stated goals and the learning objectives when assessing student artifacts and categorizing them as good, fair, or poor, and providing either by example or clearly stated methodology used to interpret student artifacts. Essentially, the common rubric provided all of the criteria necessary for evaluating

student outcomes, but the actual reporting process was often less than proficient. For example, for ECON 2322, several syllabi were submitted along with some student artifacts, but two learning outcome scores (theory and methodology) were omitted entirely, and only scores for “real-world applications” were provided. The ECON example wasn’t the worst-case scenario of the assessment score submissions, but it does demonstrate some of the irregularities in the reporting process.

Another issue of concern is that all core courses were to include the learning objectives submitted to the Core Council in their syllabi. However, for syllabi that were included in the current submissions, the goals and outcomes or a link to them were often omitted. However, to be fair, many of the instructors of core courses have not updated their syllabi to reflect Core Council requirements, especially for those who didn’t offer the core course in recent semester. Hopefully, by year’s end (2016), all syllabi for courses in the social science core will be updated to include the goals and learning objectives established under the Core Council recommendation.

The core assessment evaluation process for the Sociology program indicated a significant problem, especially for adjunct faculty and off-campus part-time instructors. Despite the best efforts of the department, requests that part-time instructors submit copies of their syllabi for review and acceptance by the full-time faculty, several instructors failed to comply with the request. As a result, there was little knowledge of what part-time instructors were doing in regard to assessment. And, for those that did specify core course goals and learning objectives in their syllabi, they seem to have very little, if any, comprehension of the importance of the assessment process for the department or the college. Some off-campus instructors were not employing the standard university format in the construction of their course syllabi, resulting in noncompliance with the department’s style of syllabi design. What appears to be a possible source of this dilemma is the lack of uniform communication between regular full-time faculty and their program’s part-time instructors, especially regarding issues pertaining to core assessment. A prime example of the breakdown in communication is as follows: The sociology program’s CAAC representative randomly picked a part-time faculty member for the core assessment process. The outcome was the unfortunate miscommunication between the CAAC member and the instructor regarding core assessment that eventually derailed the process and failed to produce any palpable results. Hence, Sociology’s pilot core assessment process and subsequent documentation is nil for this report.

Finally, and perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this round of assessment, was the lack of interpretive explanations or “answer key” for clarifying the scoring process for assessors who were left making decisions about scoring student artifacts based on the common core rubrics. In other words, individual instructors need to provide a scoring key indicating how they determined if a student artifact was good, fair, or poor. Such an interpretive key should: (1) be clear, concise, and comprehensive; and (2) it should correlate with the scoring rubric developed by the CAAC. In several cases, assessors were unclear about how student artifacts were graded in relation to learning objectives,

what criteria were used in determining grades, and to what extent did the selected student artifacts reflect the efficiency of the rubrics in the assessment of the core course(s).

Discipline specific core assessment

Anthropology

The student artifacts were comprised of a set of essay questions that were graded and categorized as good, fair, or poor, in correspondence with specific learning outcomes. Assessment rubric scores and scores on the essay assignments appeared to correlate 1:1, although no specific statistical measure was used to verify this relationship. However, the apparent correlation implies that the rubric adequately measures the success or failure of the selected course's proficiency in imparting learning objectives to students while providing effective measurement strategies to determine results. Scores on student artifacts indicate that goal attainment (acquiring knowledge) is relatively effective and measureable by specific learning outcomes.

The submission packet contained copies of graded student artifacts, rubric scores, and most importantly, learning outcome specific keys for assessing the artifacts in question. The inclusion of the key efficiently and effectively streamlined the assessment process by eliminating guesswork and confusion over how to interpret the artifacts by assessors lacking an adequate understanding of jargon and specialized knowledge of the discipline.

One thing is clear; the rubric is an efficient means of assessing and scoring student outcomes in the anthropology core course. Overall, the anthropology program submitted a well-organized and complete assessment packet in complete compliance with Core Council specifications. The only thing that seemed to be absent from the program's submission packet was a copy of the course syllabus. Nevertheless, assessing the syllabus was not the focus of this phase of the core assessment process. In spite of the absence of a syllabus, anthropology did a stellar job at this stage of core assessment.

Criminal Justice

The Criminal Justice Department's submission packet contained all of the required documentation including: copies of graded student artifacts, rubric scores, and a detailed key stating specific learning objectives, and ideal learning outcome. Students were to answer the questions:

- “What theory is characterized by such conditions as fluctuating populations, significant numbers of families on welfare, families renting, etc?”
- “_____ theory holds that the administration of criminal justice reflects the unequal distribution of power in society.”
- “What are the elements of a research proposal? Explain each.”

Here again, as was the case in anthropology, the rubric proved to be an efficient means of assessing and scoring student outcomes in the criminal justice core course. Overall, the Department of Criminal Justice provided the CAAC with a detailed and sufficient core assessment submission.

Economics

The Department of Economics submitted information on two different core courses: (1) ECON 2301 Survey of Economics; and (2) ECON 2322 Microeconomic Principles. Each of these courses will be discussed in the sub-sections that follow.

--ECON 2301 Survey of Economics--

The submission for this course was at best incomplete. The CAAC received a copy of the course syllabus including course objectives but no clear linkage to core course objectives as delineated by the CAAC. Also, the submission contains an outline for the “Macroeconomics Project” that serves as the focus of core assessment. For the project students were to gather data, analyze the data, and make a macroeconomic forecast. The project also contained its own rubric that included three learning outcomes and three questions for students to answer. The learning outcomes corresponded to those of the core rubric: (1) develop foundational knowledge of theory, Question--inflation consequences; (2) develop foundational knowledge of methods, Question--current unemployment; and (3) develop foundational knowledge of real world applications, Question--what should the Fed do? Subsequent documents detail the results of the project survey categorized by “Above Average” (good), “Average” (fair), “Below Average” (poor). Each example contains answers to the above specified “Question(s),” plus a graph showing: unemployment rate (UNRATE); labor force participation rate (CIVPART); and, inflation rate (CPIUCSL_PC1) respectively. The examples provided are clear and the correlation between the course rubric and that of the CAAC seems very high. However, there are no statistical measures to qualify this, only a general assumption based on the use of similar language in each rubric and the specifications in the project instruction for the student(s).

--ECON 2322 Microeconomics--

The submission for the selected microeconomics course was less complete and more confusing than the one for ECON 2301. By comparison, microeconomics had three syllabi in the submission packet, one of which was selected as the course under assessment. There was no key or instructions on how to interpret the scoring criteria used in the assessment process. However, the course instructor did supply a copy of his/her own “Scoring Matrix” that only loosely correlated with that used by the CAAC. Except for Learning Outcome 3 “develop foundational knowledge of real world applications” of the CAAC scoring rubric, there was no mention of the other two components in any of

the submitted material. Hence, the assessor was only able to provide minimal data demonstrating the effectiveness of the core rubrics in assessing the course and student artifacts.

The instructor for the selected course did supply copies of student artifacts which she used to score student success. Scoring sheets were attached to the assignment (articles that were read and analyzed by the students) and each of the sample students were given scores on three criteria that corresponded to the course matrix, but not the core assessment scoring matrix (rubrics). Here again, without a key, it is difficult (impossible?) to adequately score the course and artifacts based on the CAAC rubrics. The one exception, Learning Outcome 3, was scored and some correlation can be drawn between the course scoring rubrics and that of the CAAC. The instructor did provide a detailed list of instructions for the “Real-World Article Assignment,” but nothing for other components of the common core learning objectives and learning outcomes.

Gender Studies

The Gender Studies program submitted materials containing all of the required documentation including: copies of graded student artifacts, rubric scores, and a copy of the course syllabus indicating specific learning objectives, and learning outcomes. Also, the inclusion of a syllabus made it easier to assess the correlation between course learning objectives and those articulated in the rubric design by the CAAC.

The student artifacts were essays called “End of Semester Concept Papers.” Essay topics varied, but there were grading keys attached to each paper that assisted the evaluator in assigning a grade for the paper. The assessors had no comments about any difficulties with the assessment process and filing the rubrics for the learning outcomes. Two assessors evaluated the student artifact submissions and their individual scoring of the artifacts correlated almost 1:1 with only 1 number differing between their scores. The difference may be the result of interpretation of rubric levels or assessor preference in assigning scores on learning outcomes. Either way, the issue should be addressed before the assessment of fall 2016.

Geography

The Geography Department’s submission for CEOG 2312 Cultural Geography was similar in content to that of the Criminal Justice Department. In fact, the material contained score submissions by two members of the CAAC and their individual rubric scores differed for both High and Medium scoring, but both had the same score for Poor student artifacts as assessed by the rubric. Here we find the issue of reliability, and to some extent, validity, to be critical and should be addressed before moving forward in the fall 2016 assessment period. Clearly, the distinction between what one considers as criteria for a “Good” learning outcome and that for a “Medium” learning outcome is not

that discreet. However, it seems readily apparent that assessors have no difficulty in assigning “Low” scores based on the criteria given. The distinction between one interpretation and another should be almost negligible, but clearly, we have a problem to address if we wish to produce the desired outcome of the assessment process. Moreover, questions of validity and reliability should be addressed in order to insure that the rubric and CAAC assessment model is sufficient for subsequent future use in the college.

Political Science

The Political Science Department’s assessment submission was clear, concise, and comprehensive. Included in the submitted materials were examples of the POLS 2301 syllabus, an example of the exam that was administered from which student artifacts were produced, three examples (High, Medium, and Low) of student artifacts, and the scoring rubric with assessment results.

The instructor for the course section selected for the pilot assessment supplied all of the required materials, including a graded example of the test given the student artifacts. Evaluation of the student artifacts appeared fairly straightforward and relied heavily on the qualitative measurement for grading the instrument (student artifact) which was comprised of both essay and objective type questions. However, clear discreet criteria for artifacts being placed in High-Medium-Low were not supplied and the variance between High and Medium scores was 5 points, while the distance between Medium and Low was only 2 points. I wasn’t clear how these discreet values were selected, other than arbitrarily by the assessor. If such a process was employed for the pilot assessment, the criteria for selecting placement scores (High-Medium-Low) must be stated clearly and succinctly before the actual application of the assessment model in the fall of 2016. The issue of interpretation of criteria for scoring student artifacts and assigning learning outcome scores is not problematic for Political Science alone, nearly all programs have issues of validity and reliability to address before the fall 2016 assessment process begins.

Psychology

The materials submitted by the Department of Psychology were minimal, at best. The packet contained only copies of student artifacts; no syllabus or rubric outcomes. The assessor had some difficulty with scoring the student artifacts since there was no key attached to help with interpretation and distinguishing between the three different outcomes. Therefore, the assessor did the best that could be done without a key. With regard to the learning outcomes, there was generally no mention of theory or methods in many of the artifacts, and in some cases there was simply no artifact to evaluate. In all fairness, though, the artifacts that were submitted may have been the best evidence of meeting the department’s core assessment requirement, but those not familiar with

psychology theory and methods would find scoring a daunting task without a key for interpreting the submissions.

Despite the difficulties confronting the assessor, some data was derived from the scoring process. However, in the future, the Psychology Department needs to submit the materials requested by the CAAC in order to give a fair and thorough assessment of its core course, PSYC 2300.

Sociology

The Intro to Sociology course is not included in the assessment results presented in this report due to missing or incomplete data. The course randomly drawn for this pilot assessment was taught by an adjunct who failed to produce the requested materials. The lesson learned from this attempt is that in the future we must better communicate to adjuncts prior to the beginning of the semester what their responsibilities are with regard to course structure and providing of assessment materials.

The material submitted by the sociology program's adjunct instructor, indicated that the sociology program lacked a fundamental understanding of the core assessment process. Indeed, the program needs to review its assessment procedure and focus on training and communicating how the assessment process was to be conducted and the importance of core assessment to the college and to the sociology program itself.

General comments regarding core assessment

In general, the time required for scoring each student artifact varied significantly depending on whether the artifact being scored was in numerical or narrative form. For artifacts presented in quantitative form, the process may take 1-2 minutes per student for each of the three learning outcomes; overall it would require 5-6 minutes at most for each student. If the student artifact was in the form of a narrative or essay, it may take 10-15 minute per artifact, depending on the length of the narrative being assessed. It appears that quantification in the assessment process is more efficient in terms of the time required to score learning outcomes. But, on the other hand, narrations or essays reveal different, qualitative data that is often more subjective in nature and require lengthier time periods to fully assess learning outcomes. At this point, the selection of student artifacts for scoring purposes is left to an individual instructor's choice. Ultimately, though, the scores on the rubric, whether representing quantitative, qualitative, or some mixture of the two, are presented as numbers on the rubric scoring sheet and the data are entered in numerical form on the accompanying Core Council designated Excel spreadsheet.

The common core rubric, when administered correctly, is a useful and practicable instrument for assessing student performance throughout the various social science

disciplines in university. Any misgivings that individual instructors may have regarding its utility are attributable to the means of selecting student artifacts, interpretation of the various scoring standards among different disciplines, or the lack of preparatory training in the use of the rubric before it was administered by selected instructors. In some instances it was clear that the CAAC representative and the instructor of the class selected to administer the rubric differed in their understanding of the assessment process and the best means for utilizing the rubric and interpreting the findings. However, it may need refinement or updating in the future, but based on the findings of this report, the rubric designed by the CAAC is an effective mechanism for conducting core assessment.

As with any changes in policies and procedures implemented by university administrators that directly impact the work-life of departmental faculty and staff, temporal and financial concerns must be considered and resolved in order to ensure efficiency and compliance. Efficiency, in this context, refers to the smooth transition from its inertial state to full implementation of the core assessment policy and procedure by individual college departments within the university. Compliance, on the other hand, often requires that departmental faculty and staff relinquish some of their own personal autonomy for the sake of a structural prerogative. In the past, administrators are perceived by faculty and staff as having little or no regard for the needs and wants of the “rank and file.” Hence, there has been resentment and resistance on behalf of many faculty members, especially when they perceive themselves as being disenfranchised from any decision-making process. In short, seldom does anyone hear the words, “I love assessment,” uttered by a faculty member. Nor, are faculty and staff ready to comply with assessment protocols of implementation without at least “moaning and groaning” about their discontent. Hence, non-compliance may take the form of passive resistance to participating in the assessment process. Or perhaps, issues of efficiency and compliance have little to do with faculty and staff resentment, but may be linked to confusion over the best method of implementing core assessment within each department. In the current case, the latter seems to be the *raison du moment* for explaining any breakdown in efficiency or loss of continuity in conducting core assessment.

Regardless, of any reasons, stated or unstated, common core assessment should be conducted as smoothly and efficiently as possible in order for all stakeholders to benefit from the process.

Recommendations

Obviously, communication is of utmost importance in the successful administration of core assessment. Administrators, assessors, CAAC members, and departmental instructors should all be in concert when communicating about general or specific components regarding core assessment. All stakeholders should review the findings of the annual core assessment report in order to incorporate any recommended changes in instructional or departmental core assessment policies and procedures. For this phase of the core assessment process, the following are more specific recommendations:

- The common core rubric may need refinement but based on the findings of this report, it works and it should continue to be employed in future assessment applications.
- In order to maintain consistency and continuity, every instructor of the department, whether full or part-time, must be trained in the proper understanding and employment of the rubric prior to implementing the core assessment process for the various departments.
- Core course syllabi should incorporate the learning objectives outlined by the CAAC for assessment purposes.
- Core course instructors should create a “scoring key” for interpreting how student artifacts are to be assessed on the specific learning outcomes in the assessment process.