

Reflection on KU Student Learning Symposium 2015

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Student Learning Symposium 2015, Welcome and Introduction

On April 18, 2015, the Center for Teaching Excellence hosted the first annual Student Learning Symposium at The Oread Hotel. Fifty to one hundred faculty and administrators attended this event, which offered several opportunities to reflect on course and curriculum assessment, both of which are high priorities for the Provost's Office and the university's deans owing to the recent implementation of the KU Core.

The overall format of the event included a conference-plenary-style welcome, presentation of two awards pertaining to assessment of a degree program and innovation related to the KU Core, respectively, and an overview of the day's agenda. A light breakfast was served upon our arrival at 8:00 a.m., followed by a substantial (and delectable) brunch at 11:00 a.m. That food was part of the occasion is worth noting because it speaks to the informal and collegial tone that KU administration sought to set for this conversation, an important aspect of what I believe was a successful beginning of this annual occurrence.

This conversational tone was corroborated by the event's format: substantial time was spent in conversation with colleagues at a banquet table and minimal time was spent listening to a sage-on-the-stage-style performance at the front of the meeting room. In this the Symposium's planners carefully modeled a good active learning environment for those present and showed how to keep it on topic, even when working with a large population.

Student Learning Symposium 2015, Session II

To facilitate this conversational atmosphere, midmorning the Symposium broke for concurrent sessions. In Session II: KU Core, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences (CLAS) Dean Ann Cudd offered some preliminary comments and then encouraged conversation among participants, who were seated at six tables of five to seven participants each. The room was nearly full and felt a bit cramped, but few seemed to notice amid a lively conversation about the ways Core assessment is using the Value Rubrics published by the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), which rubrics are the toolset for Core-related assessment projects university wide.

Across those present there was a wide variation of familiarity with the AAC&U rubrics: some made comments that evinced intimate familiarity with minute details on the rubrics, whereas others seemed to be only newly or recently aware of the rubrics' existence and use at KU. Dean Cudd's overview of the rubrics and their use was conversational enough to entertain questions from those present as we went along, which made the dean look accessible, receptive to feedback, and responsive to concerns and questions.

Dean Cudd's overview began with the assurance that what is being assessed in KU Core assessment is not the teaching of the instructor nor the merit of the course design per se, but the broader learning outcome represented by the AAC&U rubrics' criteria and students' achievement of this outcome as represented by student work. One faculty member raised concerns about the enterprise of assessing

students' development of "a background of knowledge across fundamental areas of study" (KU Core, Goal 3), arguing that this is a metacognitive project and therefore much more difficult to assess at the level of a single course, since courses tend to produce cognitive information. Dean Cudd responded to this concern by directing attention to what she perceives as the more important issue at this stage of Core assessment, which is an expedited Core review process. In response to this another faculty member voiced concerns that, pursuant to the 18 December 2014 meeting in which Dean Cudd requested work on what most in attendance considered a very short timeline, no response has yet come from the University Core Curriculum Committee (UCCC or "U triple-C"). Dean Cudd's response to this concern was a reminder that the UCCC is responsible for reviewing some 1400 courses from across the university, and they will be meeting next week out of which meeting the awaited response is expected to come.

Nonetheless, the faculty member's point is worth considering: could the UCCC create a point of contact so that inquiries about the status of submitted assessments could be responded to in a timely fashion and with the reassurance that so much faculty work will receive due consideration on a timeline that allows faculty to plan a response to the feedback they receive from administration? Perhaps the short timeline for assessment data articulated at the 18 December 2014 meeting inadvertently set a precedent suggesting that the *modus operandi* of administration's approach to Core assessment is last-minute communication of deadlines that will require a lot of effort in a short amount of time. Faculty need the reassurance that they will have ample time to plan, implement, and report an assessment, that the work they produce will receive careful attention and a thoughtful response in writing, and that they will have access to those who are responding via email, telephone, and fora such as the Student Learning Symposium. Such initiatives will help reassure faculty that administration's assessment goals are achievable, that timelines are reasonable, and that the faculty themselves have an important voice in how the university thinks about Core assessment, its design, purpose, and implementation.

As a demonstration of an efficient yet effective assessment process, Dean Cudd had scheduled Sarah Crawford-Parker to present the information obtained by Core assessment of the First-Year Seminars program during Summer 2013 and Summer 2014. Crawford-Parker's work demonstrated not only that efficient, effective assessment is possible, but that it has the potential to raise important considerations about the designs and implementation of Core courses, their alignment with other courses in their curricula, their alignment with other courses in the Core, and the alignment of course assignments and course rubrics with the AAC&U rubrics used to assess those courses in Core assessment processes. In short, Crawford-Parker's presentation raised a multivalent conversation about alignment and its relationship to assessment.

This neatly segued into a conversation about what assessment data means. At this point one staff member who also teaches courses suggested that in certain courses, e.g., first-semester first-year courses, it might be an achievement just to get students to produce work that's assessable by the AAC&U rubrics. This suggestion momentarily interrupted what had been a conversation about AAC&U's levels (1-4) and which was most acceptable for students' work to reflect. From the suggestion that secondary education may not be adequately preparing students to produce AAC&U-assessable work came a recognition that students might not produce 4-level work on some categories of the rubrics until later in their degree programs. Another faculty member mentioned that some graduate students' work doesn't perform at level 4 on some categories, suggesting that level-4 work on these categories might not be an appropriate expectation for undergraduates.

Yet another line of questioning focused on the usefulness of the AAC&U rubrics as potential sources for course goals. Can we read the AAC&U rubric categories as scaffolded levels of achievement? Can we think about level 1 as a helpful achievement for students to focus on in preparation for working toward level 2 during year two, level 3 during year three, etc.? In short, can AAC&U rubric categories—even the lower categories—be included in course goals as important milestones en route to capstone-level work?

Finally, a third line of conversation focused on measuring change across courses, curricula, and degrees by starting with baseline data and comparing it to capstone work done near the end of a student's time at KU. This line of thinking asked how we collect baseline data on student knowledge at the beginning of a course in order to demonstrate student learning across the duration of the course.

Student Learning Symposium 2015, Brunch and Table Discussions

The brunch and table discussions in the third segment of the symposium reinforced the idea that assessment need not be all critical reflection with controversial implications. A trivia game about KU metrics (time-to-degree, retention, etc.)—complete with prizes—reinvigorated the discussion and boosted morale following an engaging and somewhat sobering conversation in which faculty mapped their departments' majors and identified roadblock, sinkhole, and exit ramp courses that might mark either strategic points in the major (if placed intentionally) or opportunities for redesign (if not the product of intentional curriculum design).

During this time some faculty expressed frustration over the lack of value their departments place on teaching and teaching-related work; one administrator generated a lot of conversation about what he wanted his units to study; and lots of inter-departmental conversation took place, which largely served the purpose of updating outdated knowledge, raising awareness of what students are learning elsewhere in the Core, and connecting over common issues faced in course design and implementation. This part of the day resembled a vibrant think tank.

Personal Reflections

While some of the writing above includes my analysis in addition to observations from throughout the Symposium, it seems important to include a few reflections on the experience of attending the Symposium as a graduate student.

As a graduate student I felt unexpectedly welcome in a circle otherwise comprised of faculty and administrators. I informed one faculty member that her work with UTAs might be publishable in ISSOTL's journal, *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, because ISSOTL is dedicating an increasing amount of attention to undergraduates' role in practicing SoTL and publishing SoTL research. Two administrators seemed not only receptive but enthusiastic about my suggestion that we consider the possible merits of "game-ifying" the MySuccess interface so that students received not only warnings of low performance but also notifications on outstanding success and updates on the success statistics for a proposed major of study based on their performance in completed coursework. In short, I was welcomed as a colleague, though I am but a colleague-in-training; this makes me proud to work at a place like KU.

Attending this event was excellent professional development as it gave me practice discussing the assessment side of teaching with faculty and administrators, a skill which will be invaluable to me in an interview process. It also gave me a better idea of how to pursue teaching that actively responds to

administration's concerns about assessment, accreditation, etc. So often I design courses with the student and the department-administrative audiences in mind; this event has helped me to begin thinking about how to design courses with the university-administrative audience in mind, which I am sure will make my work more eligible for awards and recognition as I refine it. Given these benefits, I am grateful to the staff at the Center for Teaching Excellence for the opportunity to participate in this event; and I hope that the information in this report helps to clarify what took place at the inaugural Symposium while also capturing a snapshot of the teaching and assessment conversation at KU.