A Rough Outline of Degree-Level Assessment
Prompts and Questions for Faculty

Assessment – or the study of how our students are learning – is similar to scholastic research: just like our studies of academic questions aim to contribute to extant bodies of scholarship, so too does assessment aim to refine our extant curriculum in ways that respond to student needs and emphasize our colleagues' strengths. Both processes are inquiry-driven and continuous; just as there is always intellectual space for new scholarship on, say, literary movements in France or the genetics of cancer, so too is there always pedagogical space for engaging students.

Although we have tenure pressures and professional expectations surrounding our research, the substantive content of our scholarship is our own choice. The same holds true for the study of student learning as well: our university may expect that we engage in the study of student learning, but faculty can pose their own questions about their students and curriculum.

The prompts below aim to get you thinking about what sorts of things *you and your colleagues* want to know about *your own* students and degree programs. What method of inquiry is most convincing to you? How will you know when you've answered the question to your satisfaction? With this new knowledge in hand, how will you refine your curriculum?

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Let's begin with the most important: **what are you interested in learning about your students?** What questions do you have about your degree program and curriculum? Focus on inquiries in which you and your colleagues are sincerely interested.

How do these inquiries relate to your degree program's **core objectives** or the things you want students to take away from their time in your department? Do you and your colleagues occasionally revisit these objectives? Are they written down or codified in some way?

Do your inquiries **focus on a specific point or critical juncture** in your students' overall trajectory?
      -- formative questions (freshmen, sophomores, 100- and 200-level courses)
      -- summative questions (seniors, 400-level, and capstone courses)
      -- post-graduate questions (professionalization, employability, grad admissions)

Given your inquiry and its focus, **can you identify a specific course** (or sequence of courses) in your curriculum that might lend itself to an exploration? Depending on the nature of the inquiry, it might be appropriate to think about **extracurricular activities** – like study abroad, service learning, and internship programs – in addition to in-class experiences.

Do these courses or activities generate a particular **assignment that aligns** with one of your department's stated learning outcomes? What does that assignment look like? Would it be possible for you or a group of your colleagues to obtain **samples of that assignment**?

If you have a research question, a stated learning outcome, and an understanding of where to look in your curriculum for evidence of student success on that outcome, then you're ready to think about **an assessment tool**, whether that be a five-point rubric, a survey, an interview protocol, or a collection of answers on an exam.

When choosing an assessment tool, consider the following:
-- Does your discipline find quantitative or qualitative evidence more persuasive?
-- Who in your department will apply the tool? Faculty? Grad Students? Committee?
-- If multiple people are applying the tool, how do you ensure reliability across individuals?
-- Which of your colleagues do you foresee working together on this project?
-- How do you ultimately intend to analyze or tabulate the data?

With evidence in hand, now comes the most important question: **what can you learn** from the data and **how can you refine** your existing curriculum? Answering this question should involve everyone in the department, perhaps taking place at a regular faculty meeting. (It's important to note here that this process isn't an exploration of what your department is "doing wrong." The study of student learning often reveals many things that departments are doing very well. It can be more productive to think about your curriculum in terms of *emphasis*, *efficiency*, and *effects* of various instructional methods and course sequences.)

Finally, something to ponder: **how does your department go about implementing change**? Changing a curriculum or course is difficult in any context; thinking about the culture, incentives, and opportunities in your department ahead of time can lead to more productive dialogue.