

# Assessment Matters

## At Montclair State University

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### Faculty: the key to student learning outcomes assessment

By Dr. Coté-Bonanno

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Institutional assessment of student learning outcomes has been around in higher education for over 25 years ago, but no component is more critical than the role of faculty in such work. This importance of faculty, "... it seems safe to say, is shared by just about everyone who works in, writes about, worries about, or champions assessment." (Hutchings, 2010, p. 6)

It is clear that the nation needs more college graduates who demonstrate higher levels of student accomplishment and no group is more critical to attaining this goal than faculty.

Why is faculty so important in this process? Simply because the real promise of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment (SLOA) is to obtain information faculty can use to determine:

- ◆ Are our students learning what we think is important?
- ◆ Are they learning what they need to succeed in this field or profession?
- ◆ Are we improving in our ability to help students learn?
- ◆ Should our curriculum or teaching strategies be modified?
- ◆ Are there other techniques or additional resources that would help our students learn more effectively?

Assessment results can also provide objective information that can be used in program review or budget planning to document the need for resources necessary to improve student learning. ([www.unc.edu/inst\\_res/SACS/files/ppt/Faculty\\_Council\\_Sept\\_3.ppt](http://www.unc.edu/inst_res/SACS/files/ppt/Faculty_Council_Sept_3.ppt))

According to Hutchings (2010), the importance of faculty involvement has come to be seen as a kind of a gold standard, the key to assessment's impact "on the ground"—in classrooms where teachers and students meet. In addition, Fontenot (2012) points out that while faculty participation is critical for an institution's assessment efforts, assessment is not solely the responsibility of the faculty. It should also be an institutional priority. Administrators should not only be knowledgeable about assessment of student learning, but they also need to be aware of the challenges and concerns of faculty and provide the support faculty engaged in assessment need.

At Montclair State University, the Provost's Office offers ongoing support through workshops, one-on-one training sessions, and department "house calls".

You will be receiving a survey to further elaborate on your needs for support of the assessment process. Please help us assist you in this essential work of higher education.



#### Office of the Provost

1 Normal Avenue  
Montclair, NJ 07043

#### Dr. Coté-Bonanno,

Associate Provost for Academic Programs and Assessment, # 6234  
[bonannoj@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:bonannoj@mail.montclair.edu)

#### Dr. Irina Koroleva,

Assessment Coordinator  
# 3114  
[korolevaai@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:korolevaai@mail.montclair.edu)

#### Gail Ahnemann,

Assessment Specialist  
[ahnemanng@mail.montclair.edu](mailto:ahnemanng@mail.montclair.edu)

#### Maria Aiello,

Assessment Specialist  
[maiello29@gmail.com](mailto:maiello29@gmail.com)

## Assessment Faculty Highlights

The Provost's Office chose Dr. Lisa Hazard, Dr. Denis Feigler, Dr. Brian Abrams and Dr. Emily Isaacs to highlight their work in assessment this year.

*Dr. Lisa Hazard* is an Associate Professor and Chair in the Department of Biology and Molecular Biology at Montclair State. As a new chair, Lisa feels that it has been interesting and informative learning about the assessment process. Hazard states, "It gives me a different perspective on our programs." Irina she says, has been a big help in the process. She had so much to learn as a new chair that it was difficult to learn about her new position as well as about assessment. Assessment was put on a back burner for quite a while until she had to scramble and get the necessary tasks done. Going on her second year Dr. Hazard feels that assessment will be a much smoother process. The results of her assessment findings in her department will be used to make revisions to the Biology BS curriculum.



*Dr. Lisa Hazard*

Lisa states, "I will be continuing our planned assessment and checking to see what alterations we may

need to make to our assessment process based on our program alterations. Additionally, the department will be discussing last year's assessment results to see how our results might impact what we do in our courses."

*Dr. Denis Feigler*, Associate Professor and Director of Industrial Design, was also chosen to be highlighted for his work in assessment. Dr. Feigler feels that, "It is critical that students in a professional undergraduate major, such as the Industrial Design program, develop the ability to form and defend value judgment and communicable design ideas and concepts on a professional level. "Students in the Industrial Design major were evaluated on criteria that represent the highest standards of the industry from entry-level designers." He feels that the significance of Assessment is that it creates a connection between the learning objectives of different classes and subject areas. Denis feels comfortable with assessment because the business of Industrial Design constantly uses assessment of ideas and objective rationalization of concepts. The only obstacle is that in the different phases of the design process, students are required to apply specific knowledge and technical mastery that also have to be assessed separately in each phase. He says, "This may not reflect on the final design solution; however, it does not affect their grade if not de-

livered or presented to expectation. So we are a bit more complex in assessing learning."

Denis has already discovered, as a result of their assessment findings, that teaching has to be less of an individual show and more of a transparent project based motivating experience. Thus, "the curriculum of several freshman and sophomore classes will be based on more project based opportunity to prevent students from seeing their classes as separate entities for earning credits."

*Dr. Emily Isaacs* is the Department Chair and an Associate Professor of English. She found that the two most useful assessment tools were an alumni survey and meetings with the English Advisory Committee. The alumni survey helped gain a sense of where the students go after graduation and what courses and experiences they most value. Dr. Isaacs stated, "From the alumni survey I am made aware of the difficulties that recent graduates have in finding strong employment, though they continue to highly value their major. Our students hold on to, and remain sustained by, their memories of great teaching moments, and the individuals whose wisdom and peda-



*Dr. Denis Feigler*

## Assessment Faculty Highlights

gological strengths were behind those moments. What this suggests is that we need to make sure we continue hiring and supporting great faculty for whom teaching is their life's work."

Dr. Isaacs was also asked what has helped her in the process and what obstacles were faced. She felt that the willingness of the faculty to participate in assessment was crucial. Emily felt, "The most challenging aspect of assessment is capturing meaningful information as students depart the major. As faculty, our commitment to best teaching will always trump our desire to assess fully, which is to say that we're not going to create programmatic assessments that are not also valuable to student learning, and we have to therefore accept that not every competency will be fully or ideally assessed."

Dr. Isaacs was also asked what she planned on doing with the results of her assessment findings and her plans for the AY



*Dr. Emily Isaacs*

2013-2014 school year regarding assessment. She stated, "We have had some conversations about our assessment findings, and at

present our assessments do not indicate a need to change the curriculum. For example, I had a question in my mind about whether or not research methodologies were being taught, and the assessment indicated that they were, which was a relief. Additionally, scoring on student writing and theoretical engagement suggests that our majors are doing well in these crucial areas. In 2013-14 we are retaining our assessment methods, making one minor but important change to the placement of our exit assessment, which we hope will lead to more participants."

*Dr. Brian Abrams*, Associate Professor of Music, Coordinator of Music Therapy Studies, was asked how assessment has impacted his program and himself. As the program coordinator, he sees how assessment will help faculty hold to their curricular content and make it more accountable for meeting the competencies required of MSU and national music therapy standards. Dr. Abrams stated, "It also helps us to think more carefully how to align syllabi, course objectives and approaches to instruction within the program."

When asked what has helped him in the process and what obstacles were faced, Dr. Abrams responded, "First and foremost, the most helpful element has been the staff in the office of the Provost, who have patiently and persistently

provided well-informed guidance and assistance, as well as friendly reminders to keep the process timely and on track."

He said, "The greatest obstacles I have faced are the time constraints and the idiosyncrasies of the specific program, which I coordinate (music therapy), which render it difficult to "locate" assessment outcomes within single courses."

Dr. Abrams shared his plans for the AY 2013-2014 school year regarding assessment. He stated that once the process is complete, he intends to utilize the data gathered to help structure the academic and clinical preparation of the music therapy students, in ways that better identify the strengths and areas of need at various stages of their degree program.



*Dr. Brian Abrams*

**Assessment makes a difference when it begins with the issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.**

- AAHE, Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student

## Coordinator's Corner

### Discuss and Use Your Assessment Results

To make your program efforts meaningful and sustainable it is necessary to link results with action. It is integral to the assessment plan process that:

- ⇒ Faculty and administrators meet to discuss results
- ⇒ Decide what measures will be taken to use the results to improve student learning
- ⇒ Re-evaluate learning goals: Are they appropriate?
- ⇒ Revise curriculum: Does it address all of the learning goals? How can courses be modified to do so?
- ⇒ Re-evaluate teaching methods: How can the teaching methods be improved to empower students to achieve learning goals?
- ⇒ Re-evaluate the assessment tools: Are they appropriate?

Assessment Guidebook is now available at:

<http://www.montclair.edu/provost/assessment/assessmentguidebook/>

## Upcoming Events

- ◆ Analyzing and Reporting Results Workshops:

[Click here to RSVP for one of the sessions.](#)

- ◆ Middle States Events:

[http://www.msche.org/events\\_calendar.asp](http://www.msche.org/events_calendar.asp)



## Next Issue Highlights

- Becoming an Assessment Facilitator Workshop
- New Jersey Assessment Consortium

**Our assessment team wishes you a very Happy Thanksgiving!**



### References

- Hutchings, P. (2010). *Opening doors to faculty involvement in assessment*.(NILOA Occasional Paper No.4). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Fontenot, J. (2012). Faculty Concerns about Student Learning Outcomes Assessment ... [illinois.edu/blog/view/915/76774](http://illinois.edu/blog/view/915/76774)