

Illinois State University
Department of History
MEMORANDUM

To: John Freed, Chair, and DFSC
From: Alan Lessoff, Undergraduate Coordinator
Regarding: Student Outcomes Assessment
Date: 30 May 2003

Attached you will find a series of documents related to the "student learning outcomes assessment for the current year. As everyone should know, the IBHE has mandated that all departments and programs carry out such an assessment annually. A copy of this report with addenda will be submitted today to the University Assessment Office to demonstrate compliance with this mandate.

IBHE guidelines state that by June 1 of this year, each department needs to "demonstrate how [its] assessment system has led, or is leading, to program improvement." This is the first year we have gathered sufficient material for this purpose. After several more years of running the assessment, we should have accumulated an adequate base of material on student performance to guide curriculum development in a systematic way. At present, as you will see, only tentative conclusions can be drawn from this study. With regard to the IBHE target, we can rightfully claim that this material will be of use to the Planning Committee and the Curriculum Committee in ongoing reviews of HIS 200, HIS 300, and other elements of the undergraduate curriculum. As the attached documents from last fall make clear, we needed to work through a series of glitches and details before we could implement a manageable and useful assessment system.

1. PROCEDURE

The procedure followed for assessment has been discussed in numerous departmental memos, including the attached report from October 2002. There is, therefore, no point in going over details or rationale now.

The basic procedure begins with the collection of disks with electronic copies of HIS 200 and HIS 300 papers and to copy them into computer folders for each section, which I maintain both on my computer and on a ZIP disk. As in the trial run (attached) conducted of paper collected in spring 2002, this simple procedure results in almost complete compliance among students. At most one or two per section fail to turn in the required disks. {I can supply rosters marked as to who did and did not turn disks in, upon request.} In each section, one or two of the disks prove unusable for this or that reason. In any case, we end up with 80%-90% of the papers from each of these sections in a format that can be readily stored and consulted.

In the fall, I received disks from every section of the relevant courses. This spring, one retiring professor has not yet turned in disks for his 200 & 300 sections, while an adjunct promised to do so, but has been late.

Nevertheless, we ended up with 73 usable papers for HIS 200 and 81 usable papers for HIS 300.

As explained in other documents, in theory, if we could show progress in students' historical knowledge, research and analytical skills, and written communication from HIS 200 to HIS 300, then our BA/BS program would be achieving its program goals as outlined in 2001. (A copy of the goals are appended to the attached October 2002 report.)

I used the following procedure to derive a random sample of one out of every four papers, up to four per section. For a "section 1", I evaluated papers 1,5,9,13, as these sorted themselves in the folders in MS Windows (an order that is not necessarily alphabetical for various reasons not worth discussing). For a "section 2", I evaluated papers 2,6,10,14. And so on. By this procedure, I ended up evaluating 18 of 73 papers for HIS 200 (24.7%) and 21 of 81 papers for HIS 300 (25.9%).

A copy of the evaluation rubric used this spring is attached, along with a copy of the rubric used in the trial run of spring 2002 papers conducted last fall. Please recall that these rubrics are based roughly on the evaluation rubrics devised and published by our colleagues, Larry McBride and Fred Drake, with revisions to make them closely reflect our program goals.

This past year, with the help of my student assistant, Chandra Stangland, we compared the relevance and consistency of our rubric with that of the rubric developed by our colleague, Ross Kennedy, when he performed a similar task at San Francisco State University. Ms Stangland and I concluded that with minor revisions based on some of Dr. Kennedy's ideas, our rubric was more practical for our particular purpose than the SF State one. We revised the "research and analysis" slightly to account specifically for use of sources. We revised the "communication" category slightly to account for grammar and syntax.

2. RESULTS

Attached are tables summing up the results of the assessment on a 1-6 scale for the random samples taken from the HIS 200 and HIS 300 papers. Names have been removed from the tables, but I have copies in my office with names attached, in case anyone wishes to check.

As one might expect, the results suggest progress across the board. Indeed, in reading such a large number of papers from a variety of sections, I was struck by the general improvement especially in primary research ability, the ability to analyze sources, and the ability to organize and present research between HIS 200, which is meant to introduce students to historical research and analysis, and HIS 300, which is meant to draw together accumulated skills.

One hesitates to label these results significant for several reasons.

First, I believe that the sample is too limited in time and in scope even to justify running significance tests upon it. I would suggest that we collect a couple of years more worth of information before we try to attribute statistical significance to this assessment.

Second, as the attached report from October 2002 indicates, the trial run we did based on papers collected in spring 2002 suggests tentatively that the rubric yields consistent results for different evaluators. So far, however, I am the only person who has used the rubric to review the 2002-03 papers. I would suggest not placing too much emphasis on these results until a couple of people have evaluated substantial numbers of papers using the rubric over time.

Still, one can see a couple of tentative uses for this information. The department has made several attempts, hampered by shortages of available staff, to appoint "captains" for HIS 200 & 300, whose job would be to review and possibly revise course objectives and to ensure sharing of ideas and consistency of general goals between instructors. My impression from reading the papers is that people who have taught several years worth of HIS 200 (and to a lesser degree HIS 300) find it easier than novice instructors to design the course so that it fulfills overall objectives. This would argue for the kind of organization within the department that we hope to achieve once more faculty can devote sufficient time to such supervisory roles.

Also, the assessment so far would seem to justify the measures we have taken to make more regular the order in which students take HIS 200 and HIS 300.

Finally, the Undergraduate subcommittee of the Planning Committee has floated a number of ideas for infusing documentary research throughout the curriculum. This information supports that effort, if tentatively.

3. "INDIRECT" ASSESSMENTS

The department's student assessment plan also includes two forms of "indirect" assessment, that is, students' perception of their accomplishments, as opposed to our "direct" evaluation of those accomplishments.

The most elaborate is meant to be an alumni survey carried out each year. In August 2002, I submitted the question list appended to the October 2002 report to the Institutional Research Office. This list was prepared in consultation with the DFSC and with Institutional Research. I have to confess that I have never heard back from Institutional Research even as to whether these questions were indeed included on surveys sent to alumni, let alone whether we have any results. Perhaps the next assessment coordinator can make following through with alumni surveys a priority.

More promising has been the 400-1,000 word student "self-assessments" turned in with the HIS 300 papers. In practice, we request students to prepare these but do not pressure them to do so. I received and read 49 usable self-assessments from five different sections of HIS 300.

Over time, if we continue to collect these, we will accumulate a large reservoir of interesting information on the background of our students, the various ways that they came to major in history, their personal and career goals, and their experiences. At present, the self-assessments provide only sketchy evidence, but students do seem to feel that they are achieving the program goals set for them. Typical comments reveal that students have gained "confidence" in their research and writing ability, that they were intrigued to encounter historiography and historical analysis, and that they have become more "critical of what I read" or "better at recognizing a good argument from a bad argument." A number of students talked about having gained the basic historical skill of using the general – or "broad" as one student put it – and the particular to illustrate one another. They seemed generally more favorable towards HIS 300 than towards HIS 200, something the faculty has also felt at times. Members of Phi Alpha Theta were quite positive about that experience. Particular faculty members came in for considerable praise, while complaints of this order were minimal. Students seemed to feel that faculty were accessible and, importantly, that faculty approached history with an "expert attitude and knowledge." The departmental advisors came in for particular and at times lengthy praise. Several students did remark that they would appreciate more career guidance for those who are not education majors. The full self-evaluations are available for departmental review, and I have made sketchy notes on them.