

To: Connie Hungerford, Provost

From: Assessment Planning Committee

Re: Comprehensive Assessment Plan

Date: May 8, 2006

## **Introduction**

From September 2005 to April 2006 the Assessment Planning Committee (APC) met weekly to develop a plan for assessing student learning. Our committee's charge grew out of both internal interest and external pressure. The internal motivation came from growing faculty and administrative interest in using surveys, interviews, and other approaches to learn more about our students' experiences at Swarthmore and how they reflect on those experiences after they leave Swarthmore. Some of this work has been facilitated by Robin Shores, Director of Institutional Research, but it has also occurred independently in departments and programs.

The external pressure came from the College's accrediting agency, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. The College's accreditation was continued based on the Periodic Review Report submitted in June 2004. The Middle States Commission, however, had some concern as to whether the College was making adequate progress toward developing a plan for assessment of student learning, as required in the Middle States standards. Rather than wait to hear about our progress at the time of the College's next accreditation self-study (in 2008-2009), the Commission required that the College submit a progress report on April 1, 2006, describing efforts made toward developing that plan.

To inform faculty about our work, we gave a faculty lunch presentation in fall 2005 and held a series of divisional lunches in spring 2006; the division chairs met with department chairs and later met with faculty from the divisions. Faculty also had the opportunity to learn about some interesting approaches to assessment employed at Hamilton College, as presented by Dan Chambliss (Professor of Sociology at Hamilton and director of Hamilton's assessment project) at a special faculty lunch in February 2006. The Committee brought its draft plan proposal to the faculty on March 17, 2006; we made some revisions to the draft plan to reflect faculty sentiment and now submit this final version to you.

## **Guiding Principles**

A common initial reaction to the news that the College is developing a plan for assessment of student learning is puzzlement at why we need a plan, given that we already do a great deal of assessment, both formally (e.g., through the Honors Program) and informally (e.g., through faculty conversations about students' progress through the major). Although we have been doing assessment, our approach has not been as

systematic as it could be. Faculty and departments at Swarthmore traditionally have considerable autonomy in many areas, including assessment. In addition, students integrate their interests in different disciplines only in stages and through various paths. In developing the assessment plan, therefore, we have attempted to find a balance that is systematic in procedure, allows as much autonomy within disciplines as possible, and respects the exploration, reflection, and critical thinking that are hallmarks of the liberal education treasured at Swarthmore.

Another common reaction is irritation that we need to respond to the Middle States Commission's expectations. As we have discussed in the past, Middle States sees itself as, in fact, trying to protect colleges and universities from far more rigid and distressing assessment requirements that could be instituted by the federal government. For that reason, as well as because many of us believe that we can learn a great deal from well-designed assessment activities, it is in our interest to be responsive. Our desire to be responsive has been guided, in turn, by the principle that we should build on what we already do—and do well—to be sure that our assessment plan is one that fits with Swarthmore's culture. The plan incorporates a number of assessment mechanisms already in place but seeks to employ them in a more comprehensive manner. The plan also supplements what we are already doing with some new approaches, when we feel that what is already in place is not adequate.

Yet another reaction is that assessment sounds more like it is focused on faculty performance than on student learning, even though the focus of the assessment plan is rightfully on the latter, not the former. This is easier to avoid in large universities in which it is credible to talk about student learning in, for example, an introductory biology course in which there are many sections. At a school as small as Swarthmore it is harder to separate the course, the faculty member, and the student learning. But we have tried to be sensitive to this issue, both in terms of how we plan to assess student learning and how we propose that information be used.

Even when able to move past these common reactions, further concern is sometimes expressed that the assessment will be a waste because nothing will be done with what was learned. The assessment plan will be useful only if it incorporates elements for conducting assessment and describes how the assessment outcomes are used to inform change, when such change is the appropriate reaction. Ensuring that change occurs requires that information about student learning is shared and that the College provides the support required to implement needed change.

Discussions with faculty and review of assessment materials both within and outside the College have taught us that it is important to employ a variety of assessment tools and types of data in conducting effective and meaningful assessment. In a sense, this is more a matter of implementation than planning so we will not discuss this issue at length here. The key point is that assessment needs to be responsive to variations in goals for student learning at different stages in students' development (both throughout their time here as well as when they become alumni) and across the curriculum. Assessment can be direct or indirect; data can be collected through surveys developed at Swarthmore or by other

organizations (such as COFHE's biennial senior survey); can happen every semester or over longer time periods; and can include all students in a certain category or a sample of those students. To put it another way: the plan does not propose a "one-size-fits-all" approach to assessment but, instead, demands careful consideration of the specifics of the types of learning being assessed and requires the flexibility to design the best assessment tool or tools for each situation.

Finally, development of the plan has been guided by the desire to make the burden of assessment as manageable as possible for faculty, while still ensuring that we achieve the objective of assessing student learning. In some instances, we have dropped proposals because we ultimately decided that not enough useful information would be generated to offset a substantial amount of additional effort at this time. (See Appendix A for a list of such proposals.) As part of its on-going work, the APC will consider ways to provide support to lighten the burden of assessment including, for example, additional staffing.

### **Elements of the Assessment Plan**

The assessment plan encompasses three specific elements that focus on student learning in courses and departments and one broader element to assess student learning at the institutional level.

#### **Annual Departmental Meetings to Reflect on Student Learning**

Departments have a number of good sources of direct assessment already in place in the form of honors and senior comprehensives (in whatever specific form they take—e.g., thesis, oral or written examination, etc.). We believe that by building on what we are already doing in a more systematic manner we can elicit more useful information about student learning than has been the case across the College in the past. To that end we recommend that each department have an annual meeting, preferably after honors and comprehensives are completed, to reflect on student learning over that academic year. To make this meeting useful, departments will need, prior to the meeting, to have articulated learning goals for the major and minor and for courses. The department can decide what materials to use as input to the reflection; for example, faculty might want to discuss student performance on senior theses or comprehensive exams. Departments might also decide to address a particular issue that requires special assessment efforts; e.g., if a department wanted to consider whether it is preparing its students appropriately for graduate study, it might complement some of the data noted above with alumni survey results or data on graduate school acceptance rates. Obviously, in order to have these materials ready, departments will need to plan ahead. A department might include on its agenda at the end of the year consideration of what it would like to study at the following year's meeting; it could identify at that time surveys or interviews that would need to be conducted so that the data would be available by the end of the following year. (See Appendix B for suggested topics for discussion at this annual meeting.)

The meeting provides an opportunity for the department members to consider, collectively, whether they feel that their students have achieved course and departmental

learning goals and, if not, what should be done. The Chair will write a brief report which goes to the Provost; this report provides an opportunity to summarize the assessment results, the department's conclusions, and to highlight any needs or issues that arose from the discussion.

### External Reviews of Departments

Many colleges and universities routinely have external reviews of departments on a regular schedule, normally every 7 to 10 years. Swarthmore, too, had external reviews until the 1980s when they were no longer regularly scheduled (although they have occurred occasionally due to specific circumstances and needs). We believe that there is a great deal to be learned from careful consultation with colleagues from outside the College. The assessment plan includes reinstatement of external reviews, with each department being reviewed every 8 to 12 years.

Policies will be developed regarding how to structure such visits and the types of questions that committees will be asked to address. These policies will be of a general nature, with department-specific needs and issues also included in the instructions to the committees. A policy will be created for determining the composition of the committee that incorporates both suggestions from the department faculty and also from communication between the Provost and Provosts at other colleges and universities from which those doing the review might be invited.

Regularizing the schedule for external reviews will enable departments to plan ahead and conduct assessments that might inform preparation of the departmental self-study that would be part of every review and would provide the visitors with a rich array of materials with which to conduct their reviews.

### Course Evaluations

Many faculty members already use mid-semester and end-of-semester course evaluations in their classes and seminars and find them a useful means to collect information about student learning and how it relates to features of the class or seminar. The plan systematizes the use of course evaluations and makes them more useful by requiring that each faculty member distribute end-of-semester course evaluations in at least one course per year.

The plan does not call for a standardized form across the College. We believe that each department or program can best tailor a form that will effectively elicit the types of information most relevant to that department. Thus, the plan calls for systematic use of course evaluations by ensuring that all faculty participate, but stops short of prescribing specific questions or forms that might not be well suited to a particular discipline.

The course evaluation forms will consist of a section that is generated at the department level and that seeks to determine whether the department's goals for that course are being met. Faculty can supplement this section with any additional questions that would be

useful. We anticipate the departmental questions will seek to collect information about intellectual engagement, improvement in skills (such as writing or critical thinking), articulation and achievement of learning goals, and the relationship between learning goals and class assessment, such as exams and papers. Course evaluations will also provide an opportunity to determine whether students in a particular class and department feel that they are getting the support they need (e.g., from ITS, the libraries, departmental clinics, and Writing Associates). (See Appendix C for suggested questions to include in the departmental course evaluation.)

The departmental portion of the course evaluations will be reviewed by the faculty member and the Department Chair (or another colleague designated by the Chair). We believe that this discussion is an important component of making the course evaluations worthwhile; the discussion can provide an opportunity for the faculty member and the Chair to discuss whether it would be useful to consider changes to the course or to other courses in the department or to identify strategies to address issues raised in the evaluations. The objective here is not to focus on the faculty member's popularity or appeal but to focus on the student's perceptions of learning that occurred in the course and the facets of the course that contributed to or hindered that learning. To be explicit: we do not intend for the course evaluations to be used as part of tenure and promotion decisions.

We encourage departments to use these evaluations as an opportunity to assess particular components of their curriculum. For example, in a given year the department might have all the faculty teaching an introductory course select that course as the one in which they do the evaluations; the department could then develop a set of questions that specifically address the goals and learning in the introductory courses. Alternatively, a department might look at mid-level courses as a group to see whether students are prepared as they enter the courses and prepared for higher-level work as they leave. Again, we recognize that the scope for these types of integrated assessment efforts using course evaluations will vary across departments. Therefore we do not make this approach a requirement but do urge departments to consider whether they can incorporate such an approach.

### College-Wide Assessments of the Academic Program

All of the plan elements noted thus far have been at the level of the course or department; that is how we began our work. But, of course, student learning is not restricted to these domains and occurs in many other ways across courses, across departments, and outside of the curricular aspect of the academic program. To address this broader focus the plan calls for assessment efforts that span the academic program. We offer here some suggestions for topics that we identified by looking at college graduation requirements (which we take to be an expression of goals across the student's educational program) and the College's stated goals for its graduates (as expressed in the *College Catalog*). We believe that this is just the beginning of a list. The College participates in a number of periodic surveys (including surveys of first year students, seniors, and alumni) that may generate other topics that arise directly out of students' perceptions of how they learn and how they experience their Swarthmore education.

We list here some of these topics for assessment that we identified from the structure of the academic program and from the College's stated goals: senior capstones and comprehensives, writing courses, first-year seminars, distribution requirements, the foreign language requirement, community-based learning initiatives, and civic engagement. First, the plan calls for CEP, in 2006-2007, to consider whether senior capstones and comprehensives, as currently structured, are an effective tool for achieving their goals, most obviously whether they provide useful information on student learning in the major. Second, when the faculty passed the legislation creating writing courses, it mandated that they be assessed in 2007-2008; the plan calls for that assessment to be conducted as legislated, along with an assessment of first year seminars. Determination of the timing of subsequent assessments is the on-going responsibility of the Assessment Planning Committee; the plan calls for regular assessment of all College-level requirements as well as of other appropriate topics identified over time.

### **Governance Structure and Administrative Support**

The APC will continue to work on development of a plan through the time of the College's Self-Study Review in 2008-2009. It has been charged with recommending the best permanent structure for supporting assessment of student learning and for evaluating the effectiveness of the plan over time. Options to be considered include a different committee structure, additional staffing, and creation of a teaching and learning center providing support for assessment and teaching.

As was discussed throughout this document, assessment will only be worth doing if we are able to learn something from it and are able to make changes in response to what we learn. We anticipate that some of what we individually and collectively learn will encourage us to think about our courses, our teaching, and our departmental curricula. There are some resources currently available for exploring these issues (such as special faculty lunches on pedagogical issues) but we think there is scope for expanding such offerings. Many comparable schools have teaching and learning centers, the staff of which can provide support to faculty seeking to develop aspects of their teaching (such as giving effective feedback to students on written work or encouraging engaging discussions). We recommend that the College explore the possibility of making this type of support available.

### **Timeline for Assessment Plan Implementation**

The assessment plan should be implemented in phases, culminating in full implementation by 2008-2009, the year in which the next Middle States Self-Study will occur.

More specifically, the plan mandates that departments and faculty design their course evaluations in fall 2006 and implement them beginning in spring 2007. Annual end-of-year department meetings will first occur at the end of the 2006-2007 academic year. The Committee, in consultation with the Provost, will prepare guidelines for conducting

external department reviews and develop an overall schedule, with the first round of reviews conducted in 2007-2008.

### **Evaluation of the Assessment Plan**

The assessment plan contains a number of specific recommendations for types of assessment as well as some general structural recommendations. We recognize that this is only the beginning of what will be an ongoing process of planning for and conducting assessment of student learning. As the faculty moves ahead with this work, we will no doubt learn more about which approaches yield useful information and which do not. The Committee should evaluate the initial assessment plan and propose modifications as necessary.

### **Assessment Planning Committee (2005-2006)**

Jean-Vincent Blanchard  
Nathaniel Deutsch  
Carr Everbach  
Ellen Magenheim, Chair

Carol Nackenoff  
Ann Renninger  
Don Shimamoto  
Tom Stephenson

## **Appendix A: Assessment Approaches Discussed and Deferred**

Over the course of the year we considered a wide variety of approaches to assessment. We developed a list of approaches to consider by reviewing the questionnaires completed by department and interdisciplinary program chairs, by reflecting on past practices (in some departments) at Swarthmore, and by collecting information about practices at other colleges. Ultimately we settled on the approaches documented in the committee's report to the faculty and chose not to pursue these other options at this time.

We list them below in case a future committee chooses to consider approaches alternative to or in addition to the ones recommended in the APC report. In particular, we imagine that some of these may be attractive components of preparations for departmental external reviews (e.g., departmental alumni surveys), as a component of assessment of distribution or other college requirements (e.g., collection and analysis of written work at different stages of a student's career), or as an element of college-wide assessment of student learning not tied to specific requirements (e.g., senior exit interviews, longitudinal surveys of alumni).

1. Collection and comparative analysis of student papers, reports, and exams (e.g., pre-post analysis)
2. Longitudinal surveys of alumni across the college
3. Pedagogical seminars: These are regularly scheduled department meetings at which several faculty present syllabi from their courses and lead a discussion of their pedagogical practices.
4. Departmental alumni surveys
5. Senior exit interviews
6. Reviews of senior faculty (to be conducted in the years after promotion to full professor)



## **Appendix B: Suggestions for Annual Meetings to Reflect on Student Learning**

Departments will hold an annual end-of-year meeting to reflect on student learning over the past year. The meeting will provide an opportunity for the department members to consider, collectively, whether they feel that their students have achieved course and departmental learning goals and, if not, what should be done. The Chair will write a brief report which goes to the Provost; this report provides an opportunity to summarize the assessment results, the department's conclusions, and to highlight any needs or issues that arose from the discussion. The report should be circulated throughout the department for comment before it is submitted to the Provost and should include acknowledgement of general information learned from the Chair's review of the departmental course evaluation.

Below we offer some ideas generated by the APC for topics departments might want to address at the annual meeting. Obviously, any particular department's agenda will depend on the issues it is facing at that time or topics that require consideration; we offer these as suggestive of the types of questions we had in mind when recommending this assessment approach.

### **Suggested Topics for Discussion at Annual Department Meetings to Reflect on Student Learning**

1. Review how seniors did on the senior comprehensive that year and whether the comprehensive is working the way it is intended to.
2. Discuss feedback about curriculum from Honors examiners.
3. Discuss curricular goals. For instance, choose some particular dimension of the curriculum (overall departmental, level-by-level, course-by-course), and identify curricular goals and how well they are being met.
4. Review any curricular discussions and decisions within the department that may have taken place earlier in the year for possible inclusion in the end-of-year report.
5. Identify assessment topics for the coming year and for next year's meeting and what information needs to be collected along the way.
6. Consider whether students are getting adequate support for learning from tutors, the libraries, language resource center staff, and ITS.
7. Determine whether the departmental course evaluation form was successful in eliciting useful information or whether it needs to be revised.
8. Determine whether there are topics that surfaced during the annual meeting that should be further explored during an external review.

## **Appendix C: Departmental Course Evaluation Guidelines**

In at least one course per year, each faculty member will administer departmental course evaluations. We believe that these departmental evaluations can provide useful insight into student perceptions of their experience in specific courses. These evaluations will be reviewed by the individual faculty member and Department Chair (or someone designated by the Chair).

We encourage individual faculty members to supplement the departmental evaluation forms with any additional questions of interest to the faculty member. Although the committee makes no recommendation regarding review of this component of course evaluations, we encourage individual faculty to review the answers to the supplemental questions with the Chair or another colleague when it seems that a conversation about the evaluation responses will contribute to the faculty member's development.

The APC generated a list of questions to illustrate the types of questions that might be included in departmental course evaluations. We offer these questions, listed below, simply as suggestions. The Committee is fully aware that each department will have its own needs and will identify areas of greatest departmental interest. The questions give a sense of some of the kinds of insights into student learning that the Committee thought could be gained through the use of well-designed course evaluations; the Committee hopes that they are useful in helping departments start the work of creating their own course evaluation forms.

### **A. Questions applicable to any course:**

1. How did this course contribute to your intellectual growth? Were you exposed to new concepts or perspectives? Please elaborate.
2. Were the goals and expectations for this course clear? Do you feel that you achieved them? Explain.
3. Why did you take this course? How well were your own goals met?
4. What skills were you supposed to acquire? To what extent do you feel that you have acquired them? Please explain.
5. How did the course help you improve \_\_\_\_\_ (here specify skills, e.g., writing, presentation skills, ability to analyze data)?
6. Were the written and oral assignments and tests well designed so that completing them helped you meet the learning goals for the course? Please explain.
7. How did grades and feedback on papers, tests, and other assignments help you understand whether you were or were not meeting the goals and expectations of the

course?

8. Did this course stimulate your interest in \_\_\_\_\_ (specify the department or program)? How?
9. What factors promote or reduce the "esprit de corps" of the students in this course?
10. Is the format of the course (e.g., lecture, seminar, discussion, etc.) appropriate to its content? Why or why not?
11. Was class time used well? Was the course well organized? Please explain.
12. Did you receive adequate support for learning from tutors, library staff, ITS staff, and language resource center staff, as needed? Please explain.

**B. Questions for non-introductory course with prerequisites:**

1. Did your previous coursework prepare you adequately for this course? Were the assumptions about what you knew coming into the course accurate and/or fair? Please explain.
2. What role did the prerequisites play in your comprehension of the subject matter in this course?

**C. Questions for courses with lab/drills:**

1. Did the laboratory experience/drill complement the content of the course? What changes, if any, would you like to see implemented?
2. One of the goals of the laboratory/drill curriculum is \_\_\_\_\_. How do you think that this lab/drill contributed to achieving this goal?

**D. Questions for introductory courses:**

1. Was the field you studied in this course completely new to you or have you had any previous academic experience with this field? Please explain.
2. Were the assumptions about what you knew coming in to the course accurate and/or fair? Please explain.
3. Did the course help you understand concepts, methods, and/or content in this discipline? Please elaborate.
4. Did this course stimulate your interest in \_\_\_\_\_ (the department or program)?

5. Having taken this course, are you more or less likely to enroll in another course in this department? Why?