

The Not-So-Stony Path to Program Assessment and, Along the Way, Transforming a Senior Capstone Seminar in Anthropology

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This is the brief story of how one department moved from disinterest to (pretty much) enthusiastic pursuit of a plan for program assessment. All it has taken is eleven years, multiple retreats and workshops, a departmental paradigm shift, the vision of some old and new personnel, a few missteps, and just a little kicking and low-level screaming.

We began, eleven years ago, as a small department of anthropologists: five faculty members³ who represented most of the standard subfields of anthropology—cultural anthropology, archaeology, and biological anthropology (including forensic anthropology).⁴ Our curriculum was organized around this multi-subfield approach and through the efforts of our committed faculty we managed to offer a varied array of current topics, methods and theories in our discipline. We had also instituted a senior capstone course, organized around emerging themes in anthropology, which allowed our faculty to teach collaboratively. In this annually-changing seminar, we were excited to model for our students the kinds of dialogue and debate that took place between professionals in our field and to expose them to the exciting problems that were driving disciplinary research.⁵

We discovered, after seven years of offering this thematic capstone seminar, that our seniors were less than enthusiastic, faced with the more immediate concerns of post-graduate life. Many of them were terrified about the prospects of finding employment, contemplating changing relationships, and confronting financial and independence issues. What should they do next? Did they have any skills? And was there any significance in the collection of classes, called the anthropology major, that they had pursued for four or more years? We, as a faculty, had to admit that we were simply not meeting the real needs of our seniors. Our senior capstone course, conceived as a final seminar in ground-breaking method and theory, was not working.

Simultaneously, we began to hear more and more about the expectations of departments to conduct formal program assessment. Some of us were less than eager to initiate what appeared to be a tedious administrative task with uncertain benefits. We also had real concerns about how to assess a program like ours—multidisciplinary, broadly sketched to look at all of the human condition, meandering across topics as disparate as human and cultural evolution, primate behavior, criminalistics, homicide victim identification, cultural concepts of illness and health, human ecology, gender in prehistory, traditional gardening, among others. And although deeply concerned about teaching and student learning, research and student advising, we were not entirely certain about how to coherently evaluate our program. Used, as we were, to really thinking quite individually and independently about our own

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⁴By definition, anthropology is a wide-ranging, highly diverse field where we examine the interplay of biological, social and cultural factors in past and contemporary human societies. Thus, our teaching and research frequently fall across the boundaries of the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities.

⁵Topics such as new fossil evidence for human origins; race and ethnicity; applied anthropology and social problems; cultural perspectives on health, illness and disease; gender and evolutionary ecology; and new models for the peopling of the New World

teaching, we rarely visited each others' classes or read each others' syllabi. There were, of course, occasional rewarding conversations as we discovered shared passions and classroom approaches, but these never reached the level of real program assessment.

Serendipitously, one of us (Lang), had a strong commitment to and considerable experience in qualitative approaches to assessment of student learning in her own courses and other programs. She was also familiar with the use of narratives for assessment work in her previous affiliations with Pat Sanborn and the Integrated Studies Program. She led the way in getting us to move toward program assessment. Another one of us (Leach) was new to assessment but was developing a project to focus on our senior capstone seminar through the UND Office of Instructional Development/Bush Teaching Scholars Summer Workshop. Leach was fortunate in being invited to attend a two-day Bush Foundation-supported Assessment Team Workshop in September, 2001⁶, and began to explore national conferences, workshops and literature developed by the *National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*.⁷

As a department, we agreed that we had to do this thing called "assessment." Still, we broached the task gingerly. At an Art Museum lunch retreat, we began to discuss what we truly valued about the unique perspectives and contributions of Anthropology and what we hoped for our students as they departed UND. We agreed that we viewed Anthropology as central to a general, liberal arts education and fundamental in helping students to reflect on their place in an increasingly globalized world. We hoped that they would leave us prepared to critically evaluate arguments, experienced in research and inquiry, concerned about ethical issues, able to integrate big ideas from across our discipline, and competent to display the cross-cultural multimedia communications skills so necessary in today's rapidly changing job markets. We began to develop a shared view of what students who graduate from the anthropology program should know and, more importantly, be able to do (Henscheid 2001). We related these ideas to the UND mission and our departmental mission statement. And, finally, we formulated a series of goals that we felt students should achieve by the time they graduated. With this initial conversation, we had just taken the first step toward developing a program assessment plan – and it was relatively painless!

This first vital accomplishment, establishing goals for our program, was invigorating. This goal-setting activity had allowed us to identify, for all of our courses, key overarching themes, measurable skill sets, common threads and recurring central ideas. All we had to do next was simply (ha!) design methods for assessing how well our students were commanding and articulating these ideas and mastering these skills. It would require really looking at what we were having students do in our courses and how well they were doing it.

Too, we realized that we already had in place the context for focusing our assessment work: our faltering senior capstone seminar. One clear advantage to focusing our assessment in this course was that each professor need not individually assess the work of his or her own students relative to the program goals. Rather, we hoped we could design program-wide assessment tools that could be administered primarily in the seminar with our senior students. Of course, we would have to substantially modify the course, redesigning its purpose, structure, and objectives. And we were mindful, now, that the course, its content and activities needed to be made more relevant to the concerns of our seniors. But we were up to the challenge.

By examining how others had designed their capstone courses, both on our campus and in the literature (especially

⁶Bush Program Assessment Team Workshop, Philip K. Way, Guest Consultant from the University of Cincinnati, September 27-28, 2001, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND.

⁷*National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition* (NRC-FYE-ST), University of South Carolina, 1629 Pendleton Street, Columbia, SC 29208, (803)777-6029.

Cuseo 1998; Gardner *et al.* 1998; Goodale 2001; and Henscheid 2000), we began to get a sense of how our new capstone course should look. One painful revelation (gently inspired by Libby Rankin in the Bush Teaching Scholars Summer Workshop) was that we would have to scratch the seven year-old topical theme approach. The annually-changing themes simply got in the way of our being able to flexibly address more relevant purposes in the seminar. We were still concerned that our students exhibit mastery of the key ideas of anthropology, but we also wanted them, in this last opportunity, to look at their work over their entire undergraduate career and reflect on what they had gained from majoring in Anthropology. Did they look at the world differently than students from other majors? Had they been transformed, in some way, by their study of Anthropology? Had their world view changed over the course of their undergraduate careers and did they recognize this?

So, employing Cuseo's (1998) general capstone objectives of *integration*, *reflection*, and *transition*, we wanted to create an environment where students would have opportunities to:

- *Integrate* ideas from across the Anthropology curriculum, critically evaluating evidence, assumptions, theoretical perspectives and arguments;
- Work collaboratively and evaluate their peers;
- Address anthropological issues from multiple subdisciplinary perspectives (biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, archaeology, applied anthropology, etc.);
- *Reflect* on their intellectual growth and the "meaning" of the college experience, including a careful review of their many anthropological accomplishments and work products;
- Receive assistance in the *transition* to post-graduate life through career planning and resume drafting;
- Experience the seminar discussion mode of graduate school and the team-work environment required increasingly in the workplace;
- Identify and acknowledge the many relevant skills acquired as an Anthropology major and consider how those skills might translate to a diverse marketplace;
- Listen to alumni experiences and understand what alumni valued about their Anthropology major experience, and get a glimpse of how alums had applied in their own careers the skills learned in their major and the perspectives of anthropology.

Our new seminar objectives now included assisting students in the synthesis and *integration* of core concepts of anthropology, challenging students to observe, *reflect* on, and document their growth across their college career, and helping students prepare for the *transition* to post-college life (jobs/graduate school, etc.). We developed a new syllabus, selected new texts, and designed a number of new class assessment activities that explicitly connected student work to *integration*, *reflection*, and *transition*.⁸ The course would be offered once per year in the Spring semester and would be team-taught by two anthropologists with different subdisciplinary strengths.

We transformed virtually every aspect of the seminar, and in our first offering (Spring 2002) we were astounded at how well the students responded – they were engaged, excited and involved, energized about the key debates in anthropology, and eager to look back on their major to identify their skills and accomplishments. Further, students seemed to gain real confidence about their futures as we carefully built a linkage between Anthropology and the real world.

⁸Specific assessment activities and student work "products" of the seminar included a competence-based, functional *resume*; an Anthropology "*mini-statement*" of student's interests and career aspirations; a series of critical *essays* and oral presentations analyzing scholarly articles that highlight current debates and controversies from an anthropological perspective (with peer reviews); a substantial (7-10 pages) *self-reflection essay* ("What has Really Mattered in College?"), in which the student analyzes experiences, relationships, achievements, and course products over the entire undergraduate career (including reflection on the perspective of Anthropology and what lies ahead); a comprehensive *portfolio*, introduced by a program-goal driven *portfolio narrative*, containing self-selected works (for example, posters, graphic presentations, essays, research papers, laboratory reports, journals, awards, group project reports) that reflect students' experiences and achievements as a major in anthropology; and an extensive, qualitative *course evaluation* in which students assess the effectiveness of course activities with regard to integration, transition, and reflection.

But how did this seminar transformation move us closer to program assessment? The key, of course, was to return to careful consideration of our program goals. We had been inspired by what the assessment experts⁹ had said about the utility of cleverly scavenging existing course activities for documents useful in assessing student learning. So we wondered if our capstone activities and work products, initially designed to help students with integration, reflection and transition, might also provide powerful documents through which we could examine student achievement of our program goals (Table 1). For example, the students were asked to organize the *portfolio* according to our program goals and they made the choices about which products of particular courses should be used to demonstrate achievement of particular goals. We had carefully instructed the students about our program goals and asked them to prepare a detailed portfolio *narrative* that analyzed work products from their entire undergraduate career. Here, they had to reflect on how well specific products demonstrated achievement of each of the program goals.

Table 1. Relationship of Program Goals to Senior Capstone Seminar Assessment Tools.

Program Goals	Assessment Tools
1. Recognize the holistic, integrative, and comparative nature of anthropology, with an understanding of how anthropologists employ scientific, social scientific and humanistic modes of interpretation in their study and research	Senior Self-reflection Essay Portfolio Senior Anthropology Mini-statement Capstone Critical Essays
2. Understand and appreciate cultural and biological diversity and recognize the common origin of humans, along with an awareness of the prevalence of ethnocentrism and prejudice across many world societies and communities, including our own;	Senior Self-reflection Essay Senior Anthropology Mini-statement Portfolio Capstone Critical Essays
3. Demonstrate experience in carrying out a research project (laboratory, fieldwork-based, or library-based) in biological, cultural or archaeological anthropology, that includes: formulating and justifying a research question, collecting and analyzing data, and articulating conclusions;	Portfolio Functional Resume
4. Understand the ethical problems related to a) the concept of cultural relativism, b) conducting ethnographic, archaeological or forensic/biological anthropological fieldwork in communities and with individuals in these communities, and c) analysis, presentation, and interpretation of data;	Senior Self-reflection Essay Portfolio Senior Anthropology Mini-statement Capstone Critical Essays
5. Recognize how anthropological approaches and perspectives can be applied to powerfully assist understanding and solution of contemporary human problems;	Senior Self-reflection Essay Portfolio Senior Anthropology Mini-statement Functional Resume Capstone Critical Essays
6. Develop and refine communication skills, including writing, oral presentation, and data presentation in various formats (e.g., posters, Websites, electronic presentation media, etc.).	Senior Self-reflection Essay Portfolio Senior Anthropology Mini-statement Functional Resume Capstone Critical Essays

As we linked each of the capstone work products to one or more of our program goals, we were able to build a substantial body of evidence for our program assessment activities. The seniors' work products became essential

⁹Bush Program Assessment Team Workshop, Philip K. Way, Guest Consultant from the University of Cincinnati, September 27-28, 2001, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND.

assessment tools for student learning BOTH in the senior seminar and in their undergraduate program experience as a whole. Thus, our *program* assessment tools were neatly embedded in those tools we were already using for the capstone course.

We think that the products of the capstone course and the student portfolio of works produced over the undergraduate career represent the best material evidence of student learning and level of achievement. We now view the capstone seminar as a primary way of understanding how our courses, advising, field and laboratory opportunities, and over-all departmental activities have contributed to student knowledge and the ability to apply this knowledge to current issues and topics with which anthropologists are engaged. By regarding the capstone seminar as an opportunity to identify patterns of strengths or weaknesses among the students in that particular year's seminar, we are able to recommend to our colleagues which kinds of learning activities need to be emphasized as we plan our courses for the next year.

Since 2002, we have carried out a committed program assessment plan built around the capstone course and a three-part, teamwork process:

1) At the end of each senior capstone seminar (spring semester), the two co-instructors (our *ad hoc* assessment team) systematically evaluate each seminar participant's *portfolio* and *portfolio narrative*, the functional *resume*, the anthropology "*mini-statement*," the *critical essays*, and the *self-reflection essay*. Our objective is to conduct three levels of assessment – individual, course and program – to determine whether course and program goals have been achieved. Standardized scoring sheets are used to allocate simple numerical scores to goal-related products and some qualitative data are gathered. This is a time-intensive, marathon session taking parts of several days.

2) During final exam week, the department faculty gathers together for a pleasant breakfast retreat. The assessment team communicates their assessment results, with a graphic presentation of the scores for each program goal and detailed discussion of the students' performance relative to each goal. For each goal they explicitly address the following: how well have students demonstrated some level of goal achievement? Where do they see weaknesses? Which program goals appear to be represented and how strongly does the evidence of student work represent some achievement of those goals? And do the students, themselves, recognize their achievement of a particular goal? The team also makes specific recommendations for improving learning outcomes.

3) Finally, we attempt to "close the loop" by moving from each year's data to an assessment of our curriculum, course activities, and our program as a whole. We discuss what we have learned and talk about what needs to be strengthened or modified in the design of our courses and in our curriculum. Faculty members are explicitly asked to keep the program goals in mind as they plan a course and various assignments, with the idea of providing opportunities for students to meet one, two or more of the goals (and to provide one or more products – papers, laboratory reports, essay exam questions, photographs, websites, etc. – for later use in their portfolio). A centralized file is maintained in the department which contains each year's program assessment data, results, and recommendations. The file also holds samples of professors' innovative assignment sheets, organized by relevant program goal.

Over the years, here are some of the things we have recognized about our students' learning and how we have responded on a program level:

- Anthropology students increasingly recognize and can provide substantial evidence of having acquired practical skills, including analysis, communication, presentation with a variety of media, and cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity (diversity), in our program. We have seen an improvement in the clarity and strength of written and oral communication, as a result of assessment recommendations, and we continue to emphasize these skills in our courses.
- While we have been pleased at the many kinds of research opportunities that we offer, we need to heighten student awareness of the significance and processes in which they are engaged in these research projects. Our students have provided relatively weak evidence of their understanding of how theory affects observation and interpretation in scientific and humanistic research. Moreover, their ability to apply core theoretical approaches and explanatory models needs to be improved considerably. We have instituted at

least four new method and theory course options in our curriculum and we are considering a specific theory requirement for the future.

- Early assessment data suggested that our students were not readily able to recognize or respond to ethical issues in the practice of anthropology. Immediately, we strengthened the treatment of ethics in all courses, including exposure to the IRB process, professional codes of ethics, and specific fieldwork and analysis scenarios. We have also given more explicit assignments and essay exams directed at ethical issues. We have noted marked improvement in the students' thoughtfulness and awareness of the dilemmas that anthropologists face and how ethically to deal with those dilemmas. In the last four years, in particular, there has been much stronger evidence represented in student portfolios of an understanding of ethical issues.
- We have had a recurring concern about students' comprehension of the key concept of "culture" and its profound and subtle impacts on individuals' lives, as well as their understanding of their roles and obligations in society. To be good citizens they must understand how culture works, how it infuses every interaction from the most personal to the level of the nation state. We have responded with determination to increase our faculty strengths in cultural anthropology and in 2003, after Lang's retirement, we were careful to hire a new cultural anthropologist with a parallel grounding in the area of applied anthropology and social problems. We have begun to talk about developing new courses with strong *applied* foci in globalization, historic preservation and primate conservation. These courses will be highly relevant to our students' lives and will explicitly discuss students' potential contributions in the 21st century. With a second temporary cultural anthropologist this year we have been able to add several new culture area courses and to provide stronger coverage of culture theory. We have also discussed the possibility of bringing community service into the program in a 'documentable way,' with planning and critical evaluation by the students. We have increased the service activities of our department, the visibility of that service to our students, and the service activities of our Anthropology student organization.
- Over the years, we have realized that our students need to think about their anthropological learning and achievements in more integrated ways. They need to become far more aware of our goals for their learning and to be able to articulate what they have learned. As a result, we are making our program goals more transparent to the students in syllabi and class discussions. We have now provided a copy of the program goals in a new majors' binder and are planning an annual majors meeting in which the overall pattern of working towards having a portfolio organized around learning goals is emphasized.
- Finally, we have seen tremendous evidence that our students recognize the unique contributions of Anthropology and its impact upon them. They remark that they feel different from their peers in other majors, aware that their responses in seminars seem qualitatively different, informed by cross-cultural awareness and recognition of ethnocentrism. Our seniors, in their self-reflection essays, expressed an eagerness to take on the world, to dive into culturally diverse contexts, to interact with others not like themselves, to look cautiously at evidence and arguments and to analyze complex situations holistically (or at least make the attempt!). In short, our seniors recognized significant shifts in their world view as a result of majoring in Anthropology and in their skills and level of confidence in facing a rapidly changing world!

We are just about to embark on our sixth year of real commitment to examining our program, assessing our students' learning across the major, and modifying our courses and curriculum. Faculty members have come and gone from the department. Some have needed more convincing than others that the pay-offs of assessment are worth the effort. Some have embraced the program goals and eagerly embedded them into their class assignments; others have been hesitant to see the relevance of goals in shaping what they do in the classroom. We have had some adjustments to make and have sometimes rankled at the energy and sustained work that thoughtful assessment of learning requires. But can we really imagine anything ultimately more important for the students in our program?

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