

office of **Academic Planning & Assessment**  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

# Faculty Focus on Assessment

**This issue:** The Hewlett Fellows explain how they used assessment techniques to promote communication with students in their large general education courses.

**The Hewlett Fellows Program**  
“The Hewlett year served to remind me that communication between teachers and students is not automatic and must be constantly refreshed and renewed.”

– David Lenson

Professor of Comparative Literature



*Year 1 / Left to right seated: Susan Cocalis, Susan Whitbourne, Alan Swedlund, Patricia McGirr. Left to right standing: Donal Carbaugh, Stephen Arons, Allen Barker, Kenneth Kitchell, Albej Reiner. Missing: Kevin Boyle, Judith Young.*



*Year 2 / Left to right seated: Susan Michelman, Mary Anne Bright, Karen List. Left to right standing: Bernard Morzuch, Edward Chang, Robert Feldman, T. Dennis Brown, David Lenson, Richard Yuretich. Missing: Stephen Schneider.*

Large lecture general education courses are a particularly challenging part of the undergraduate experience. Students often find these classes impersonal, and faculty often find it difficult to gauge student learning. Too often both students and faculty become disengaged, frustrated by the lack of communication between them. At UMass Amherst, however, faculty are finding innovative ways to address some of the challenges of teaching large lecture courses.

For the past two years, UMass senior

faculty in the Hewlett Fellows program have been working on improving student learning in large general education courses. The Hewlett Fellows, named for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation that provided a grant for the initiative, focused on methods for improving student engagement, faculty-student communication, and assessment of student learning. The program was a collaborative venture of the Center for Teaching (CFT) and the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA).

## Re-envisioning Assessment: Assessment as a communication tool

*“I have learned that providing a range of assessment opportunities beyond traditional tests permits students to feel that their strengths are being assessed.”*

– Robert Feldman

Professor of Psychology

While in many circles “assessment” is viewed primarily as externally-mandated standardized testing, the Hewlett Fellows discovered a variety of course-based assessment techniques that are useful for helping facilitate faculty-student engagement. Information on a number of course-based assessment tools is available in the *OAPA Course-Based Assessment Handbook* (available online at [http://www.umass.edu/oapa/top\\_assessr.html](http://www.umass.edu/oapa/top_assessr.html), or call us at 545-2564).

Among the most popular assessment techniques were those that helped

improve communication between teachers and their students, because effective communication is such a challenge in large classes. The Hewlett Fellows found the following assessment techniques particularly effective:

- **Articulating and Reinforcing Learning Goals and Objectives.** Faculty developed methods for explaining their learning objectives and their expectations for students in a variety of ways (in the syllabus, at the start of each unit, in outlining the goals of specific assignments, etc.). *continued*



The Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) provides service to the campus community in evaluating student learning and program effectiveness. OAPA can assist departments and individual faculty members in several areas: ■ **Developing evaluation plans** for new programs, grant proposals, and externally and internally funded projects ■ **Exploring and articulating** student learning outcomes appropriate to a course or program ■ **Finding useful ways** of assessing student success in achieving program goals ■ **Developing strategies** for ongoing reviews of program effectiveness for quality improvement, accreditation, and other purposes.

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### Re-envisioning Assessment: Assessment as a communication tool *continued*

Karen List, Professor of Journalism, says that by explicitly stating learning goals, she could articulate those goals more clearly to students and revisit them with students throughout the semester.

- **Student Background and Experience Surveys.** A number of Hewlett Fellows gathered information about students' expectations for the course as well as their previous experience with the course topic. Susan Cocalis, Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures and the Hewlett Faculty Program Coordinator, used a *student information survey* to learn more about students' interests, reasons for taking the course, and personal experiences relevant to the course. She then used the information to help shape class activities.

Some Fellows took the idea further and administered "pre" and "post" surveys and quizzes to track changes in students' attitudes and performance over the course of the semester. Ken

Kitchell, Professor of Classics, used a *pre-thought sheet* to assess student knowledge of course material at the beginning of the semester. He then used the same question at the end of the semester as part of the final exam. That connection, according to Kitchell, "enabled students to address the extent to which they felt they had achieved the goals of the class."

Stephen Schneider, Professor of Astronomy, used a *conceptual pre-assessment quiz* to probe deep-seated misconceptions about astronomy and used the results to revise his course. Schneider administered a "post" assessment at the end of the semester to assess how much students' misconceptions had changed. As he explains, such conceptual quizzes illustrate "how hard it is to overturn deeply rooted misconceptions."

- **Student Feedback.** Many Fellows used *mid-semester evaluations* to determine the effectiveness of various course components. Susan Whitbourne, Professor of Psychology, explains that student feedback allowed her to be "much more tuned into the student's

experience of the course." This "allowed [her] to overcome some of the frustrations [she] had felt in the past regarding written assignments."

Other Hewlett Fellows, such as Richard Yuretich, Professor of Geosciences, and Patricia McGirr, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, used minute papers to track student performance on key concepts. All the Hewlett Fellows used extra questions on the campus' course evaluation instrument (SRTI) to assess student reaction to specific learning goals. For example, Donal Carbaugh, Professor of Communication, explored whether students had become more aware of cultural codes in their own communication practices as a result of his course. Alan Swedlund, Professor of Anthropology, used SRTI questions to assess student response to collaborative exams and course website usage.

*For more information see the final report to the Hewlett Foundation at [http://www.umass.edu/cft/teaching\\_development/hewlett\\_program.htm](http://www.umass.edu/cft/teaching_development/hewlett_program.htm)*

## Learning More About Learning and Teaching

*"The Hewlett sessions reinvigorated my sense of the value and challenge of the teaching enterprise"*

– Stephen Arons  
Professor of Legal Studies

As a result of the Hewlett experience, many of the Fellows reported that they were better able to gauge how and what students were learning and to identify which teaching methods best contributed to that learning. They used course-based assessment as a way to begin a dialogue with students about course content and successful learning strategies. They also found it intellectually challenging and enlightening to reflect on their teaching in a community

of peers. As Hewlett Fellow Dennis Brown, Associate Professor of Music, explains:

"Barely a class goes by without my thinking of something we discussed or pondered at our Hewlett meetings.... First and foremost, my Hewlett experience changed the way I think about teaching. It helped me look at ways to reach my students, to challenge them, and to do so creatively and imaginatively."

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