

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

# Faculty Focus on Assessment

*This issue:* Dennis Hanno, Associate Dean, and Joan Spalding, Director of Student Services, discuss tools used by the Isenberg School of Management to assess how the undergraduate experience aligns with program goals.

## Their Program Assessment Toolkit

“[The questionnaire has] been tremendously valuable because...the data are broken down into areas where we can draw general conclusions and get into the nitty gritty of student responses.”

– Dennis Hanno  
Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs

Program assessment at the Isenberg School of Management initially focused on satisfaction surveys filled out by seniors. The Isenberg School uses a national survey instrument developed by their accrediting agency in partnership with Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI). Students rate their satisfaction with curriculum skills, advising, career placement, overall academic experience, and other areas specified by the School, and answer open-ended questions. EBI compiles the data and reports the Isenberg School’s results compared to peer institutions. Hanno notes, “It’s been tremendously valuable because it’s a well-thought-out questionnaire, and the data are broken down into areas where we can draw some general conclusions and get into the nitty gritty of student responses.”

Another instrument, a national survey of business-school alumni in which the School participates, provides feedback data that only alumni can give: Has their degree provided them the skills they need in their careers? What do they wish the Isenberg School had done for them that can now be done for current students?

Those initial efforts have expanded to include a survey of first-year students



Dennis Hanno, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs, and Joan Spalding, Director of Student Services

upon arrival at campus. The survey collects demographic data, but fleshes out that data by asking students why they chose to come to UMass and what kinds of activities might interest them. Last year’s incoming students were also asked to bring to orientation an essay on what they expect from their Isenberg School experience. “The goal,” Hanno explains, “was two-fold: to find out who they are a little bit, and to get a sense of whether they understand what we have to offer.” Remarkably, the essay response rate was greater than 90 percent. These data provide a “good read” on students’ expectations and abilities as they begin the program.

## What They Found Out

“You might think you have a handle on where the need is..., but assessment tools like these really give you that objective eye.”

– Joan Spalding  
Director of Student Services

The Isenberg School has used the EBI senior survey for five years, so there is a significant mass of data to analyze for trends. “We get tremendous response on the free-form comments,” Hanno says, “and we read them carefully – things emerge.” They found patterns of dissatisfaction with the computer facilities, the advising services, student activities, and training in quantitative skills. Alumni

surveys consistently confirm that preparation in technology and communications skills are critically important professional needs. The freshmen survey continues to provide useful benchmarking information on whether students understand what the Isenberg School has to offer overall and what their presuppositions are about the various majors.

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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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## What They Found Out, continued

As Spalding says, the data give a view from “a step back. You think you might have a handle on where the need is or

what is being expressed, but assessment tools like these really give you that objective eye.”

## How They Responded

*“When we look at the longitudinal data on the things we targeted early on, we can see that we’ve improved significantly.”*

– Dennis Hanno

Given that the data provide specific feedback, Hanno remarks, “we have focused our attention in those directions.” Some changes have been comprehensive. The entire advising function was revamped, allowing faculty advisors to focus more on discussing their disciplines and areas of expertise with students. In quantitative skills preparation, Hanno says, “We basically threw out the quantitative curriculum and started over. New courses, new structure.” In response to comments about lack of student activities, the Undergraduate Leadership Council was formed and now maintains its own fundraising and programming. “Students had a need,” says Spalding, “and faculty supported them, but it’s student-initiated and managed.”

“Would we have done these things without the data behind them?” Hanno asks. “Probably, but it would have been much more haphazard without the assessment data.” The data have served not only to point to areas of concern, but to map improvements as well. “When we look at the longitudinal data on the things that

we targeted early on,” Hanno says, “we can see that we’ve improved significantly.” Survey results on changes in the quantitative skills curriculum won’t begin to show up until later this year, but the informal feedback has been positive.

The Isenberg School is now moving, through its Curriculum Committee, to looking at learning outcomes at the course level. The first step was defining broad curricular goals, a complex process in itself. Hanno notes, “People on the outside might look at our list and say, ‘Of course you want to have problem solving and communications skills and information literacy,’ but until you sit down and go through the process, you don’t realize how hard it is to specify goals and narrow them down into specific skills and outcomes.” For this process, Hanno and Spalding recommend *Designing and Assessing Courses and Curriculum: A Practical Guide* by Robert A. Diamond. The School has moved on to the second step, which involves collecting multiple measures of student performance and analyzing these data.

## Advice for Other Faculty

*“Don’t be afraid to think outside the box in considering ways to collect data that will be useful.”*

– Dennis Hanno

Spalding reiterates how valuable the array of survey instruments has been in generating feedback information. Using the surveys, she says, “We can micro-manipulate the data in terms of our own needs and areas of concern. They’ve been an incredibly valuable tool in giving us a better focal point from which to look at what’s going on.” Hanno emphasizes the value of using program assessment tools not just for one year,

but in an ongoing manner. “It doesn’t make good sense just to say, ‘We’re going to do assessment this year and maybe we’ll get something out of that.’ Stick with it, and continue to share the information, with faculty, external constituents, even with the students. And experiment a little bit as well. Don’t be afraid to think outside of the box in considering ways to collect data that will be useful.”

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