

**Harold Washington College  
Assessment Committee Annual Report  
Fall 2009 – Summer 2010**

## Introduction

This has been another busy and successful year for the Assessment Committee. The report summarizes and comments on the major activities and achievements of the committee. Particular attention is paid to the depth of faculty involvement in this voluntary contribution to the quality of collegiate life and the centrality of focusing on student learning outcomes as the primary charge of the HWC Assessment Committee. Specific tasks, results, and challenges are presented, discussed and indicators for the future work of the committee are discussed.

## Participation Data

These data are presented to give some sense of the scale and scope of faculty and staff involvement in Assessment Committee activities.

<b>Fall Semester 2009</b>	
Assessment Committee Standard Meetings	12
End of Semester Celebration	1
Lowest weekly meeting attendance	12
Highest weekly meeting attendance	18
<b><i>Average weekly meeting attendance</i></b>	<b>15</b>
Number of Departments and Offices represented	10
Regular contributing Departments and Offices were: Advising, Applied Science, Biology, English, Library, Math, Research and Planning, Physical Science, Social Science, and ELL/WL.	
<b>Spring Semester 2010</b>	
Assessment Committee Standard Meetings	13
Assessment Week open presentations	3
Lowest weekly meeting attendance	10
Highest weekly meeting attendance	15
<b><i>Average weekly meeting attendance</i></b>	<b>13</b>
Number of Departments and Offices represented	10
Regular contributing Departments and Offices were: Advising, Applied Science, Biology, English, Library, Math, Research and Planning, Physical Science, Social Science, and ELL/WL.	

The fall 2009 attendance data show a 20% increase from the previous year and a 20% decrease in spring 2010 attendance in comparison to 2009. It is not known what influences attendance fluctuations, suffice to say that members juggle a range of commitments and teaching timetable clashes sometimes occur. However, the spring 2010 semester seems to have been a particular struggle for regular weekly attendance at the committee.

While we have welcomed some new members (Jacqueline Cunningham, Charles McSweeney, Jeffrey Swigart, Loretta Visomirskis and Vincent Wiggins) the committee has a solid and long-established membership with a balance of seasoned members and those still within the tenure process. The slow down in hiring new faculty may have decreased the ratio of untenured faculty and increased our institutional expertise base. The committee still has strong cross-

discipline and departmental participation and has added important stakeholders such as Advising and the Office of Information Technology over this academic year.

### **Key Activities Fall 2009**

There were four key areas of activity this semester supported through our subcommittee structure. These areas were: Quantitative Reasoning, Social Science, Writing (now named Effective Writing) and Findings and Dissemination. Committee members were distributed fairly evenly across these subcommittees.

### **Quantitative Reasoning Assessment**

Data gathering was prominent since the assessment of the quantitative reasoning student learning outcomes was the focus for assessment week. For this we used our usual methodology of asking for faculty volunteers to bring classes at a scheduled time to the assessment room. For the first time we were able to offer \$2,500 of incentives for student participation.

Administration provided these resources and we purchased 10 iPods and 20 nanos believing these would prove attractive to the student body. There was considerable debate within the committee about the value and impact of rewarding student participation in this way. We also hoped to encourage individual students to 'drop-in' and take the assessment independent of their instructors kindly volunteering them during class time. There was some sense that for a math test we might need to invest more in getting students to participate. There was also considerable investment in new classroom posters with a sequence of changing messages in the lead up to Assessment Week. The intention was to build a bigger presence within the student body for the assessment.

### **Assessment Week – Quantitative Reasoning**

The data collection occurred during Assessment Week beginning November 9<sup>th</sup> and included sections from the full weekly schedule. The original target for completed surveys was set at 800 but this was revised to 1,000 as Assessment Week approached, and as can be seen from below, this was surpassed by 14%.

<b>Day</b>	<b>Projected</b>	<b>Actual</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b># Walk-Ins</b>
Monday	252	265	+13	6
Tuesday	307	369	+62	12
Wednesday	278	316	+38	8
Thursday	156	138	-18	7
Friday	21	23	+2	Not open
Saturday	43	37	-5	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1,057</b>	<b>1,148</b>	<b>+91</b>	<b>35</b>

There was an average 69% participation rate for students in scheduled classes, which is helpful information to remember should we use this methodology in the future. We were able to schedule 65 class sections of which 61 completed the assessment. Logistically it was a busy and successful week in which we made

effective use of the full committee for managing such large numbers. This was a paper and pencil 7-page test and thanks should also be given to reprographics for the production of individually numbered tests and the Applied Sciences Departmental secretary who contributed considerable administrative time to assessment week preparation. It should also be noted that surveys were scanned and ready for initial analysis with one month after data were collected. This was an exceptionally fast turn round time, in large part due to the additional resources given by administration and through the Office of Research and Planning.

### **Social Science Assessment**

Considerable time was spent in preparation for this assessment following our established systemic process. The student learning outcomes were officially approved at the October 28<sup>th</sup> meeting. Committee members handled challenges in trying to partner with the Social Science Department, since some felt we would be 'assessing' specifically their work and thus the Department should have a stronger influence over our assessment process. It became clear that our original schedule of data gathering during spring 2010 would not be possible. This assessment was rescheduled for fall 2010.

### **Effective Writing**

This subcommittee worked consistently through the semester with considerable debate about both the learning outcomes and the most effective methodology for assessing them. It was decided to focus on written communication only and rubrics were created in grading students writing samples. The subcommittee also considered whether it would possible to collect writing samples from students and instructors rather than ask for new writing sample to be generated specifically for our assessment purposes. These discussions continued throughout the semester.

### **Findings and Dissemination**

This has been a consistent area for development for the committee for a considerable time and specific investment was made in this element of the assessment cycle. This included new laminated classroom posters with changing content printed on transparencies. A full Science Assessment Report and a new digital 'Assessment Briefing' document which summarized key findings from the full Science Assessment report. These dissemination strategies were added to our traditional Assessment Times that is produced each semester by the Vice Chair. A self-assessment of committee tasks and processes was also conducted during this semester, which confirmed the view that dissemination was our biggest challenge. 'Positive and Productive Meetings' and 'Administering Assessments' were the two activities most positively rated by committee members, and 'Data Analysis' and 'Supporting Evidence-based Change' were the least. The addition of Christopher Kabir as a permanent committee member from Research and Planning certainly improved our capacity for data analysis.

## **Key Activities Spring 2010**

The committee worked on five key tasks during this semester: data processing, analysis and report writing for our Quantitative Reasoning Assessment; tool creation and methodological discussions for the upcoming Social Science Assessment; continued work in preparation for the Effective Writing Assessment; dissemination of Natural Science findings; and, three presentations which constituted Assessment Week.

Additionally, the committee considered formalizing our procedures with regard to our official products and how these are accessed by stakeholders beyond immediate committee members. Storage and destruction of the mass of paper tests was also considered; primarily created by the trolley-load of boxes used to contain all the Quantitative Reasoning surveys. We consulted with previous long-term committee members to learn from our own assessment history and elected officers for the following academic year. Mike Heathfield and Todd Heldt were re-elected Chair and Vice-Chair respectively, and Jeff Swigart took over the role of committee secretary. It should be officially noted our thanks to Chris Sabino who served so ably as secretary for many years. The spring semester concluded with a range of tasks to be conducted during the summer using special assignments approved by administration.

## **Quantitative Reasoning Assessment**

The subcommittee members responsible for processing this assessment data achieved a remarkable turn round time from data collection and scanning, through to grading and analysis. The final report writing and the formal presentation of findings has now landed on the shoulders of one key faculty member who already has many other responsibilities within college. This is a similar structural challenge we have found at the report writing stage of a number of our assessments and one for which we have found no suitable solution to date. It is planned to have the full report and a range of dissemination products from this assessment circulated before the end of the year. This stage in our process requires further attention to ensure committee members can carry a more equitable distribution of work. This is an item for further discussion in the upcoming year.

## **Social Science Assessment**

With strong support and technical advice from Ephrem Rabin, the social science assessment tool was created based on blackboard. This design allows us to avoid the mass of paperwork created by the quantitative reasoning assessment and potentially to offer remote access to the assessment tool, thus creating new opportunities for student participants. Work on the assessment tool, including an informative pilot, involving over 100 students, took place during the summer semester. The tool idea, design and detailed implementation came solidly from within committee membership, highlighting an important strength of the committee. We are becoming adept at creating assessment tools specific to our own student learning outcomes, diverse students and urban community college context. This methodological expertise is, perhaps, another area where the

committee could build further opportunities for the reach of the committee and expand our dissemination beyond college walls.

### **Dissemination of our work**

We continued to use the new classroom posters to place committee messages throughout the college. Messages have included the usual encouragement to take part in upcoming assessment committee events. They have also been used to place interesting and summary assessment results directly into classrooms. For the first time the committee also produced a colorful and electronic 'Assessment Brief' which distilled information from the full Natural Sciences Assessment Report and presented it in a more accessible and engaging manner. Feedback from administration on this new dissemination technique was positive and we intend to repeat this practice with all further assessment findings. This semester there was also an edition of the more usual and familiar 'Assessment Times' which primarily was used to advertize and recruit broader faculty engagement in Assessment Week workshops.

### **Assessment Week**

In the spring we took the opportunity to take a break from data gathering and presented three workshops open to faculty, administration and students. The incentive for this was to give Carrie Nepstad, Janvier Jones and Patricia Perez (Applied Science Department) a trial run on their Higher Learning Commission presentation. Our natural science team delivered an informative presentation on the Natural Science Assessment findings, and the Chair created an interactive assessment quiz that utilized clickers to engage audience members in exploring assessment at HWC.

With the exception of the HLC preview presentation, which was scheduled during standard assessment committee meeting time, the other presentations were very poorly attended. This stimulated considerable discussion in committee about how we engage a broader constituency at college beyond the regular and committed members. We also acknowledged that we all lead busy lives and should consider other forms of connection that do not necessarily expect our colleagues to be in the same location at the same time.

### **Learning from our practice**

This has been a year of considerable learning from our practice and one in which the new leadership team has begun to establish a firmer grasp on the complexities of delivering on our charge while being primarily a voluntary faculty-led committee. There were some notable developments this year indicating a solid and maturing approach to improving student learning outcomes through assessment.

For the first time we were able to use incentives for students to participate in taking an assessment. This certainly did not function in the way we anticipated; from the very few number of 'drop-in' students for the Quantitative Reasoning assessment, we could surmise that iPods and nanos were not as attractive to our

student body as we thought. They certainly provided a reward for the lucky 30 students receiving them in the raffle of all respondents. We are not able to say whether they actually functioned as an indirect incentive to faculty in volunteering their classes. Indeed, we may know more after Assessment Week Fall 2010 and the Social Science Assessment. If we manage to achieve our target of 1,000 student respondents without incentives, we could reasonably conclude it was a good idea that did not seem to work.

The Quantitative Reasoning Assessment was very successful in collecting data and provided a very busy week where our logistical capabilities were stretched to the limit. This was a paper and pencil test creating a physically bulky mass of completed surveys. We have already moved forward with our next assessment being electronic, thus becoming greener in our methodology and gathering data in a readily more manageable format. It is hoped we can continue to develop data gathering strategies that are more efficient, less obtrusive, more accessible and easier to speed through to the crucial analysis and dissemination stages of our well-established process.

A continued 'choke-point' in our process has been the report writing stage, which frequently lands on the desk of just one or a few faculty. While this might seem sensible in both a writing and disciplinary frame of reference, it does exert huge pressure and additional workload on key committee members. This work is voluntary and onerous, not least because of the amount of data we are able to collect. In the next year we should explore strategies for sharing this load more widely.

We have developed a broader variety of dissemination artifacts which we should continue to explore including more recent social media. It has always been known that the in-depth reading of our lengthy formal reports was limited to a very small number of people. We should also consider specific audiences for our dissemination: why not target specific findings, analysis and solutions to students directly?

This year we certainly confirmed that making the usual presentations and inviting faculty is one of the least successful dissemination and dialogue strategies. We have discussed using other systemic approaches to dissemination and dialogue such as using the departments and faculty council structures to widen the dialogue about improving student learning through our assessment work. This part of the assessment cycle remains our biggest challenge, and one that we plan to invest more creative energy and time on over the coming year.

During this year the quality of our artifacts has benefited from graphic resources provided by administration and this should continue, especially as we consider a broader range of stakeholder audiences for our work. In this respect we are also better able to speak to wider audiences and have our messages more accessible and with greater utility.

Our history has shown we are good at creating, adapting and building our specific assessment tools to ensure authenticity, appropriate contextualization and utility. We must continue to work on building stronger connections to our assessment knowledge as a change agent and rather than yet more dense information in an already noisy academic world and college context.

This might, in part, explain why we have not, as yet, been able to capitalize on the assessment data gathered in our second Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) in 2009. In this mass of data there is interesting material relevant to the many changes implemented since the first CCSSE results in 2005. Again this rests on the heads of one or two people who have little time for the in-depth submersion in data required to make something of use out of this important assessment. Perhaps, in this case, it might indicate the Assessment Committee is better at handling assessment done by us rather than on or to us by external bodies.

### **Conclusions**

This has been a strong year for the assessment committee in which our many strengths have continued to grow and our areas for development have also remained somewhat constant. We have improved our output of relevant and engaging artifacts, again created innovative assessment tools and successfully sampled a strong sample of our student population. The Assessment Committee remains faculty-led and driven by a genuine investment in improving student learning and the outcomes for our students.

Administration has continued to both support and encourage the committee in its endeavors, something which seems very likely to continue in our changing context. Release time continues to be an important investment in key officers of the committee, as does the weekly assistance from the Office of Research and Planning. Special Assignments have also proved to be very useful, giving committee members' specific tasks alongside remunerated time. This should also continue if the committee is to sustain and improve its performance and maintain an impressive scheduled workload.

Within a year, HWC's Assessment Committee will have assessed each of the seven general education outcomes for the first time. This will be a significant achievement and sets out a new phase in our work when we get to revisit and improve our understanding and impact on student learning. This achievement is due in large part to the voluntary engagement of key faculty, administrative vision and resources. Coming together regularly for dialogue, debate and action on improving our collegial practices is the bedrock of our Assessment Committee process.

Mike Heathfield  
September 2010