Introducing Deliberate Campus Change Efforts

Higher education in the twentieth century was built solidly on the foundation of credits and coursework. It was obvious to students first that this framework was not transparent in terms of what they were learning, what they could do, and how it all fit together. Later, this became obvious to our larger community and their political representatives. Finally, it became obvious to faculty. The challenge though is how to introduce change in ways that will not result in immediate rejection, confusion, or misunderstanding. An easy answer to implementing change is to do it slowly; however on its own this is not a guarantee of acceptance. Designing the proper introduction of concepts in a scaffolded way is imperative to engage a larger group of stakeholders.

The project, Assessing and Reporting DQP Competencies in the Context of Transfer, was supported by Lumina Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation as part of AAC&U’s ongoing Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative.¹ To create seamless transfer from the Associate of Applied Science to the Bachelors of Applied Arts and Sciences, the University of Wisconsin-Parkside and the University of Wisconsin-Waukesha partnered to use the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP: http://degreeprofile.org/) to establish a framework for program outcomes that maps courses by learning outcome and skills proficiency, within the Bachelors of Applied Arts and Sciences (BAAS).

The BAAS is a skills-based degree completion program that is designed to prepare students for a life of creative and productive work in a changing and increasingly interdependent world. The BAAS is not a discipline-specific education, but a proficiency-based degree that helps prepare students for a variety of career fields by focusing on helping students gain knowledge of global systems and processes, work collaboratively in pluralistic environments, and develop cognitive and analytical, critical-thinking skills through research, applied decision-making, and employing creative skills to real-world problems.

¹ LEAP, or Liberal Education and America’s Promise, is AAC&U’s signature initiative that champions a twenty-first century liberal education for all students in higher education.
The program’s broad perspective, rather than zeroing in on specific departmental components, helps participants – advisors, faculty, and students – to more directly engage with the learning experience.

One of the unique aspects of this degree completion program is the collaborative nature between the two-year University of Wisconsin Colleges campuses that confer the degree and six different comprehensive universities that provide a number of courses for the degree.² Of the sixty credits required as a part of the degree completion program, up to thirty credits are earned through course work offered by University of Wisconsin System’s comprehensive institutions with the rest earned through course work offered by the UW Colleges. The challenge, therefore, is to create a deep working partnership that is more than additive so students are not just adding credits, but are also having a fully integrative and seamless educational experience through their coursework. This requires a clear explication of a transparent framework that embeds course learning outcomes within programmatic outcomes and then relates this structure to nationally recognized degree standards.

Two factors are relevant to the partnership. Even though this was a three-year project, an environment of initiative fatigue on both campuses resulted in nearly imperceptible progress on this initiative in the first two years. The result was that once we decided our path, we needed to work fairly quickly to meet our goals. The second factor partially explains why we were able to make such rapid progress—the BAAS was a nearly new program, and we had the opportunity to build a competency based program, with assessment, from the ground up.

We needed to design a project, with end goals in mind that repeatedly emphasized and clarified the overall project goals, and introduced change slowly (albeit within a limited time frame). The elements that supported and hindered our work progress are listed below.

Elements that supported progress included
1. a common framework – the University of Wisconsin System (UW-System);
2. a time period to concentrate on setting up the framework;
3. a new program, and a process by which new courses were approved.

Elements that hindered progress included
1. changes in personnel; and
2. initial feelings of hierarchy regarding the relationship between two- and four-year campuses

² See this link for a description of the University of Wisconsin System: https://www.wisconsin.edu/campuses/
(the new BAAS, a program in which a two-year institution offers a Bachelor’s degree with the collaboration of a four-year partner, was originally a difficult sell throughout UW-System).

QC dyad leaders needed to introduce change by building “doors” through which a large and diverse group of stakeholders across both institutions could enter in order to apply and understand project work. Initial work was done in a small group to set up the framework. The objective was to organize the BAAS according the associate and bachelor’s level of competencies in the Degree Qualifications Profile. Since it was a new program, and we were adding new courses, we were able to work with the core courses, and the ones that were being added. Also, since course proposals required an accompanying syllabus, we were able to assess the course according to explicit or implicit learning outcomes.

**Door One: Start with the Familiar**

Very few, if any, faculty or staff were aware of the DQP on both campuses; we couldn’t introduce the DQP as a framework for the program or the courses, so we set the stage with Bloom’s Taxonomy (1974, c1956) as it related to both institutions’ existing course learning outcomes. Given its early development in the 1950’s, it is perhaps the most widely known framework for faculty to rank learning outcomes. Using Bloom’s as a starting point, we placed the courses within the BAAS program goals (global skills, cognitive skills, and sustainability) ranking the learning outcomes according to the level of thinking skills. Even though the courses were in the framework, we ranked the learning outcomes, not the courses. This introduced an integrative component to the courses. Learning outcomes for the courses were not all at the same level, nor were they in the same program objective. Since faculty have a sense of ownership toward their courses, that tends to hinder larger programmatic design. By working solely at the learning outcome level, it is possible to circumvent this tendency. After we created this framework populated by learning outcomes of courses, we sent each instructor a partial snapshot of their course, as it could be integrated into the BAAS program, for their input.

**Door Two: Add a New Framework to the Old**

We then took the vetted framework and created an overlay on the DQP to create a ranking with the DQP benchmarks for the associate and bachelor’s degree, across the five proficiency domains. The original framework did not allow for an identification of progress within the domains. It described proficiencies for students at the point of transitioning from associate to bachelor’s degrees. The framework was not designed for integration of proficiencies within each degree level, nor did it allow for
integration across degrees. We wanted to designate movement along these proficiency domains, so we followed the advice of the DQP creators, and modified it to fit our needs.

We divided proficiency markers into three separate categories:

1. Concepts: core foundational aspects including definitions and basic theoretical approaches
2. Methodologies: qualitative and quantitative, methods of investigation
3. Interaction with subject: applied learning

The final academic mapping of the BAAS demonstrated how all learning outcomes within the courses moved through the proficiency domains and revealed strengths and weaknesses in the BAAS, levels of proficiency development, and potential learning gaps. But what was most important for our relationship between the two campuses was that the learning outcomes of the courses were not clearly separable. Advanced learning outcomes were present at our two-year partner, and more foundational learning outcomes were present at the four-year partner.

Door Three: Move from the Conceptual to the Applied

Professional development sessions to fine-tune the mapping were held for participating instructors, advisors, and administrators. Three day-long sessions were held – one at each institution, and a third combined session. Results from the sessions included an improved connection between a course and the program, more obvious connections between courses, and a chance to look at each course with new eyes. Some learning outcomes were repositioned after instructor feedback, revealing the more nuanced aspects of their application. Essentially participants could see the learning that was mapped, without artificial boundaries isolating the learning behind course titles and credit hours.

With participation that included faculty and academic staff, the end result for the student was a more coherent presentation of the program, how courses fit together, and even the order in which they should be taken. And, faculty and instructors benefit from students having a clearer idea of where each course/learning outcomes fit within their program of study.

Setting up a program so intentionally, identifying and shining a light on learning expectations for students, is a perfect set up for programmatic assessment. Following the first year of the BAAS program, a capstone assessment process, based on the DQP and accompanying VALUE rubrics
(http://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics), was approved for all BAAS programs throughout the state (at the time there were six partnerships). It seems as if this was an easy and logical step, relatively speaking, and it was. And the lesson learned for us was that good assessment practices start with being absolutely clear about the learning expectations in your programs, not only to the student but also to the instructors.

**Door Four: Spread the Word**

After the project’s completion, the work of the Waukesha-Parkside dyad was successfully adopted system-wide. We attribute this success to the close collaboration between institutions, instructors, advisors, and administrators. Our model has been expanded to include all participating two-year campuses in the state, and the assessment, based on the DQP proficiencies, is used throughout the state as well. Even though others are now responsible for the program, the model continues to be used, and we have become the ‘elders’, which is exactly as it should be. In the past year, the core group, representing both Waukesha and Parkside, has presented statewide, with special focus on the UW-Colleges, since they are the primary purveyors of the BAAS.

**References**