

GASP! Get a Student Pondering

QEP & Assessment “Stuff”

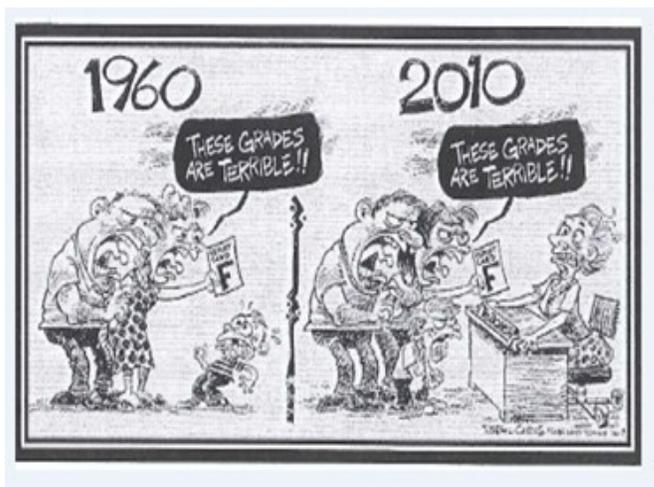
In the eyes of faculty...

Learning to Love Assessment

By Professor Daniel McGavin

Fall was cold that year, but I wasn't. As I sat in my seat on the #2 bus going south to Delray Beach after teaching Business Communication for the third week in the Bachelors Program, I was infuriated. I was seething. I hope people didn't stare at me as they passed me on their way to a seat in the rattling bus along the cold, dark route. I was not angry at myself, nor at my teaching, nor at my students. I was angry at the college. I had just graded my first set of papers. My students were all Associate Degree graduates of Palm Beach State College. They had all taken and passed ENC 1101 and ENC 1102. They have written research papers for Gordon Rule courses. All of them should have been able to write competently, and most could. But not all – not by a long shot.

A significant small group of five to seven students not only could not write well; they could not write at all. I mean they could not write a simple sentence with any grammatical accuracy. They did not know how to organize or to write a clear and simple topic sentence. I was appalled. Like any other teacher, I hate flunking students because it means that I have to question my own role in their failure. Did I not antici-



pate their needs or been clear enough in my expectations or in some other way influenced their understanding of the assignment? Was I expecting too much given their knowledge and skill level? Well, I did not have to wonder this time. Associate degree graduates should be able to write a simple sentence. I did not play a role in their failure. The college did.

I was angry because the damage was done. Somehow these students finished a degree and learned nothing about writing. These students and others like them were out there in the community representing our college. We failed them and we failed the community we serve. The next week, I called a meeting of Bachelor degree teachers and found that all agreed with me – a minor but significant portion of our graduates could not communicate

in basic, written English. I was furious. I represent English composition skills at my college. What went wrong?

How can students find the easiest way through the maze of teachers and courses and end up with a degree backed up by such poor skills? I understand that students want the “degree,” but most don't realize that the degree represents a level of competence that the community expects them to deliver.

When they can't deliver, they lose jobs and return to the poverty they came from. When degrees are not backed up by deliverable skills, we as teachers, a department and as a college become complicit in their failure.

Alone in the dark on the bus that night, I knew we had set

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*Special points
of interest*

Featured author

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Contributions by Professors

Patrick Tierney
Anthony Piccolino

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The QEP: Now You See Us, Now You See Us Differently

Accreditation requirements were the impetus that got us started with our critical thinking focus at the College level. A desire to “get better at what we do” is driving us forward.

Because the initial push was necessarily getting our accreditation reaffirmed, there was much “talk about” the QEP. But after a few semesters of high visibility, initial efforts last fall were primarily behind the scenes. Now—ready or not, here we come!

Going forward, you may see things a little differently as we intentionally focus less on the term QEP and more on critical thinking. In all that we do, our goal is to find ways to engage in critical thinking our-

selves, and to encourage students to do the same. Here is some of what we've been working on.

Workshops. 15 faculty and staff members, representing all campuses, multiple disciplines, and many levels of involvement with the QEP, have developed several unique workshops related to critical thinking. More information is below.

Online repository. We are finalizing a format to upload classroom strategies to teach and assess critical thinking. It's been a long time getting here, but it's almost ready to launch.

Collaboration. We have already created some opportunities for faculty and staff to

share best practices. We continue to seek out additional avenues for collaboration that builds on reflection and scholarship, and we look to include anyone interested in professional learning as we move ahead.

Assessment. We are working on ways to integrate the measurement of QEP learning outcomes into course work for a clearer picture of how we're all doing.

Little by little, anticipate more.



Spring 2013 Critical Thinking Workshop Schedule

Critical Thinking Workshop Series: A Creative Experience ~ February 15-22, 2013

Most workshops are one hour with varied topics related to critical thinking.

[Click here to view descriptions.](#) Enrollment through your employee web opens soon!

Lake Worth

- 2/15, 10am: Elizabeth Wilber, “Stewart Award Do’s and Don’ts”
- 2/18, 10am: Rick Reeder, “Empirical Reasoning – A Bottom Up Approach to Critical Thinking”
- 2/18, 5pm: Lyam Christopher, “Coaching Metacognition”
- 2/19, 10am: David Wells, “Faculty Communities of Practice”
- 2/19, 1:30pm: Manuel Larenas, “Clarity – Challenging Students to Seek Clarity & Sound Reasoning”
- 2/20, 10am: Lyam Christopher, “The Lost Art of Visualization: The Role of Imagination in Critical Thinking”
- 2/21, 11am: David Wells, “Faculty Communities of Practice”
- 2/21, 3pm: Marcie Pachter & Karen Pain, “Move the Content – It’s Flipping Fun!”
- 2/22, 10am: Manuel Larenas, “Student Team Challenges – Engage!”

Palm Beach Gardens

- 2/18, 1pm: Magdala Ray, “Connecting the Digital Native with Critical Thinking”
- 2/19, 9:30am: Andrew Plotkin, “Values, Emotions, and Motivation in Critical Thinking – An Evolutionary Approach”
- 2/20, 10am: Jeannette Sullivan, “And the Horse You Rode in On—The Role of Critical Thinking in Classroom Civility”
- 2/20, 5:30pm: Elizabeth Wilber, “Stewart Award Do’s and Don’ts”
- 2/21, 3pm: Eliana C. Mukherjee, “Web 2.0 for Critical Thinking”
- 2/22, 10am: Eliana C. Mukherjee, “Web 2.0 for Critical Thinking”

Boca Raton

- 2/19, 2pm: Dan McGavin, “Creating & Communicating Assignments in Gordon Rule Courses”
- 2/21, 1pm: Mindy Yale, “Deciding What to Do and Doing It”

Belle Glade

- 2/19, 10:30am: Kristy Taylor, “Stop, Look, Clarify”
- 2/20, 4:30pm: Kristy Taylor, “Socratic Questioning”

Faculty Speak about Gen Ed Changes

General Education Changes Campus Update Meetings

Changes in general education at the state level are being developed. Two of our faculty members were invited to become involved on state committees. Hear from them now, then attend your campus meeting (if you have not already) to become informed and discuss the changes with colleagues and administrators.

*All meetings are on Friday mornings
8:30am—noon
(Some may have concluded.)*

Palm Beach Gardens: 1/18/13, SC127
Belle Glade: 1/25/13, TEC127
Boca Raton: 2/1/13, HT103
Lake Worth: 2/8/13, Stage West

A Change in Thinking

by Professor Patrick Tierney

So, I've had a few months to reflect on the changes coming our way as the State of Florida revamps its thinking about general education courses and outcomes. I believe that it will be to our advantage to match our Gen Ed learning outcomes to the five state defined areas of study: Communications, Natural Sciences, Humanities, Mathematics and Social Sciences. These categories are already aligned with the College's general education areas as well as with the SACS definition of a general education program. This will mean that we will have to rethink how we assess our Gen Ed program, but by creating new learning outcomes that are aligned to these specific areas, we will have a far greater ability to make the assessments more relevant.

The rest of the 15 hours, which we will decide as a faculty, will be a weighty task, especially in the areas of Communication, Humanities and Social Sciences. The decisions we make here could significantly affect faculty teaching assignments, but the overall result will be a more consistent approach to providing our students with a strong academic foundation to take with them beyond our institution. We all need to be involved in this process in the coming months with a view to enhancing the academic and secular opportunities for our students.

Background and Perspective

by Professor Anthony Piccolino

Early last Fall, I was invited to serve on a committee, jointly organized by the State Board of Education and the Board of Governors, whose charge was to re-examine the existing general education requirements for higher education students throughout the state of Florida and to identify a maximum of five courses in each of the general education subject areas (communications, humanities, mathematics, natural science, and social science) which would embody the concepts and skills considered essential in these disciplines.



The committee convened on October 25, 2012, at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Faculty selected for each of the discipline committees came together with a steering committee to discuss the overall charge and a tentative timetable for accomplishing our goals. Faculty then met in their respective disciplines to set subject matter goals and identify the courses which would serve to achieve these goals. Subsequent to this meeting in October, the various subject area committees have discussed and revised their work through electronic communications.

My perceptions from participation in this process have been very positive. In my view, I see a concerted effort to develop a more uniform and articulated general education program throughout the state of Florida which would more effectively embrace the mission of general education, NOT as a laundry list of many courses that could be used by students to complete their Gen Ed requirements, but rather as a minimal core of courses that embody the concepts and skills that should be an integral part of every student's program of study, irrespective of their anticipated major and/or career goals.

By requiring students to choose only one course from each of the five disciplines identified above, the proposed general education revisions also allow each institution throughout the state to maintain a degree of autonomy in deciding whether additional courses to complete the general education requirements come from each of the subject area disciplines or can be chosen from any of the approved Gen Ed courses irrespective of discipline. Since the new regulations reduce the general education core to 30 credits, it is anticipated that many institutions will require students to choose two Gen Ed courses from each of the five disciplines mentioned above.

With respect to the subject matter subcommittees, I was privileged to serve on the mathematics committee and engage in lively dialogue with mathematics colleagues throughout the state of Florida who each brought different perspectives to the table. This committee identified the goals driving mathematics in general education, and the consensus was to include quantitative reasoning and critical thinking as the two objectives that should permeate throughout all Gen Ed mathematics courses. The four courses selected to meet these goals were College Algebra, Statistics, and Liberal Arts Mathematics I and II. These were excellent choices for the mathematics general education core since they all emphasize critical thinking and quantitative reasoning while also incorporating the cultural and historical aspects of mathematics. In my view, the current revisions can serve as a catalyst to stimulate connections among the various disciplines and promote the notion that general education is indeed interdisciplinary.

**GET IN ON THE CONVERSATION!
DISCUSS YOUR THOUGHTS AND PREFERENCES AT
YOUR CAMPUS MEETINGS.**

Learning to Love Assessment

Professor Daniel McGavin (continued from cover)

up my student's failure. We sold them a lie. We told them they had a degree that meant something, and it didn't. We failed to set clear, measurable learning outcomes for composition, and we failed to measure how well they mastered those outcomes. Had we done our job better, those students would be able to write. I was damned if I was going to let that continue.

From another college I knew about learning outcomes and assessment. Assessment there was simply part of curriculum development for all who taught in any college program. Not so here. When the word "assessment" is mentioned, many professors at Palm Beach State College react with

"I was angry because the damage was done. Somehow these students finished a degree and learned nothing about writing... These students and others like them were out there in the community representing our college. We failed them and we failed the community we serve."

equal parts resentment and fear. Assessment has a bad reputation. For years "assessment" has been associated with state and accreditation mandates. To faculty, it seems that outsiders are making ever-increasing incursions into the classroom. And these "outsiders" are the very people who have no credentials to teach the subject, yet alone assess it. To faculty, the sanctity of the student teacher relationship and the ability of teachers to know what is best for students is called into question by administrators who want to measure what we teach and perhaps influence how we

teach it. That's how it seems to many professors. In addition, assessment has become politicized to some. Funding and continuing contracts may be tied to "assessment" in the future. Fear, loathing, and a sense of increasing impotence are emotions I sense when the word "assessment" is mentioned in some faculty circles. But it's not going away – ever.

I am off the bus now, done with the class, and on my way to retirement. But between then and now, composition courses have changed. Composition learning outcomes are defined by observable behavior, and we commonly assess all outcomes with a valid rubric. How did we get there? To paraphrase an old movie subtitle, here is how I stopped worrying and learned to love assessment.

Let me start with some misconceptions surrounding assessment. First is that it's foreign. It's not. We do it all the time. Anytime a teacher creates a test and grades it, or anytime a teacher grades a set of papers, students are assessed. When teachers take attendance, students may be assessed. Anything that contributes to a student's grade is part of assessment. Assessment is probably half of what teachers do already. It is not usually the fun part, I'll agree with that, but we do it because rating and ranking students is integral to our job definition. And, let's face it, we feel rewarded when we know through assessment that students are learning, that they are progressing, and that we, as teachers, are making a difference.

The second assumption is that assessment is punitive. But knowing that students are not succeeding is not punitive – not in the least. Understanding where student knowledge is missing only points us as teachers in a new direction. As a result of our in-class assessment of student learning, we redirect our own teaching. Assessment helps us change our teaching from semester to semester to help students succeed in the future. How is that punitive?

"Yes," you say, "that's fine because I am the one designing the tests and making the assignments." And you're right. We build our teaching based on the course outline the state provides. Learning outcomes in those course outlines tell us what to teach

and then we use our knowledge and creativity to structure an exciting course. So far, so good.

We know what we know and we teach it. Is that enough? It certainly wasn't for the degreed students who couldn't write, and it may not be true for graduates of your program. Outcomes and assessment are two key components. Let's look at outcomes first. Many vaguely worded state learning outcomes can be restated to make observable behavior the essential ingredient, from "appreciate art" to "recognize and describe artistic periods," for example. How do you recognize "appreciate"? How do you know when enough of it has occurred to pass a student? As you can see, vaguely worded outcomes result in chaos. Because state language for composition was vague and wordy, students enrolled in the same class encountered a wide variety of educational experiences. Some students experienced a series of grammar tests with little writing. In another classroom down the hall, students were writing research essays in MLA format throughout the term. In the classroom next door, students learned more about literature than composition. The result was a program that should have been tightly controlled but wasn't. Similar problems may exist for any program. Without measurable outcome language and a common way to measure those outcomes, anything can happen.

Fortunately, most of our "hands on" technical degrees, like aviation, have umbrella organizations that demand rigorous program evaluation that includes measurable

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Mark your calendar for the critical thinking workshop series ~ information on Page 2!

HAVE YOU VISITED YOUR CAMPUS PTLC LATELY?

Each campus has its own Professional Teaching & Learning Center. The PTLC mission includes a goal to help faculty “enable students to think critically.” From technical support to faculty presentations and conversations, learning opportunities abound. [Click here](#) to locate information about the PTLC on your campus.

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outcomes that must be achieved to a particular degree. We don't want pilots who can only land a plane two out three times successfully. The sciences are blessed with numerical and measurable outcomes built in. Not so for humanities and general education. It is time to examine and refine learning outcomes and common assessment measures in all courses in humanities, general education, and social sciences. As faculty and as a college, we want to be able to say, with certainty, that all students have achieved the same degree of success if they passed a course not matter when, where, how, or who it is taken with. How do we do that? I have discussed two steps:

1. Examine and change the state's language of the learning outcomes in all course outlines to make them observable and measurable. Don't change the content, just simplify and make them observable.
2. Create, test and validate a common assessment rubric that observes and measures the revised outcomes.

To these, I want to add a third:

3. Gather sample data from that common assessment yearly and provide feedback to the faculty who teach the courses (full-time and adjunct) so that future changes, if any, will be based on facts, not assumptions.

Measurable outcomes, common assessment, and statistically valid feedback form a closed loop, an ecosystem that perpetuates faculty and student success because faculty discussions are based on shared, common ground. Cluster decisions about changes to courses will be based on validated facts, not opinion. Following these three steps will help departments move from a collection of individuals to a collective community centered on successful programs we believe in and teach in.

Objections? Sure. It takes time to review courses and to create and verify common assessment. Samples of student work must be examined by department representatives and fed back to department professors. Paradigm shifts take time. Ultimately it takes courage and commitment, charac-

teristics that are not often expressed until danger and fear stare us in the face.

But here is the rub. If we don't do the assessing, “outsiders” will. Danger and fear are real, not the fear of assessment but a much more primal fear. As we know, continuing contracts are in transition, whether we like it or not. Continuing contracts are based on successful performance. Would you rather rely on voluntary student feedback or facts based on performance? Would you rather wait to have the state define what it means to be a successful teacher, or do you want to create fact-based data to prove that you and those in your department are successful? Would you rather do nothing and not care if students fail to perform in our community despite having a “degree” from our college? It is up to you.

On the bus late that night in November, I was probably lucky that no one called the police about a suspicious looking fanatic, muttering to himself, someone who looked dangerously close to exploding. At the time I didn't realize why all of the seats around me were empty and the others were filled with some people even standing in the aisle. But, at least in terms of the composition courses, outlines have changed, common assessment is a fact, and feedback will improve student learning. Before I was dangerously angry; now I'm just some crazy, old academic, sitting alone on the bus, probably still muttering to myself, but harmless and pretty dang happy.

Contact Professor Daniel McGavin at:
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Meet Dr. Daniel McGavin

A seasoned college professor, Dan McGavin has been a faculty member at Palm Beach State College since 2003. He has contributed significant time to QEP development and implementation, as well as the redesign of course outcomes in EAP, developmental writing, and English courses, and also volunteered time on the General Education Assessment Committee.



On most days, McGavin enjoys a 16-mile commute to work by bicycle. His other interests include kayaking, learning and sharing ideas, chi-gong and tai-chi. Additionally, he studies Buddhist and Native American thinking and practice. Many of his interests become evident in a perusal of his photography. Visit his website at:

<http://danmcgavinphotography.com/index.php>

Join Professor McGavin on Tuesday, 2/19, on the Boca Raton campus for his workshop “Creating & Communicating Assignments in Gordon Rule Courses. His presentation is part of the February critical thinking workshop series (see Page 2 for information).

*About **GASP!***

Palm Beach State College

The idea behind *GASP!* is pretty simple. We all want students to think! As faculty and staff, we appreciate ideas that will make it easier for us get students thinking, and we want to better understand how assessment can help us know we're on the right track. *GASP!* may come in the form of a single fact sheet, a newsletter, or sometimes perhaps, something more journalistic.

The QEP and General Education Assessment Committees want to use *GASP!* as a platform to

- feature faculty and staff who have or are using strategies that help students demonstrate achievement of any of our general education learning outcomes, including critical thinking;
- update readers on important issues related to assessment, accreditation, or the QEP;
- promote College events related to critical thinking, assessment, or professional learning opportunities for faculty or staff that will lead to improved student learning.

So what do you think? Have an idea? We're listening!

Please contact us if you have something to share!

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Who's Who?

Assessment Chair: Helen Shub

QEP Chair: Karen Pain

2012-2013 Committee Members

Assessment	QEP Implementation
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Tcherina Duncombe	Caroll T. Capers
Robin Fiedler	Carleton Chernenkoff
Robin Hoggins-Blake	Lyam Christopher
David Knopp	Brian Findley
Marcie Pachter	Manuel Larenas
Ginger Pedersen	Daniel McGavin
David Pena	Eliana C Mukherjee
Ana Porro	Richard Reeder
Debra-Anne Singleton	Kristy Taylor
Warren Smith	David Wells
Melissa Stonecipher	Elizabeth Wilber
Patrick Tierney	Mindy Yale
Connie Tuisku	



VISIT US ONLINE!

<http://www.palmbeachstate.edu/qep>

<http://www.palmbeachstate.edu/learningoutcomes/>

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