

Documentation Methods for AACSB Learning Assurances

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Abstract

In 2003, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) redefined their accreditation and reaffirmation standards to move from a traditional outcome-based system to a systematic process-based review. Documentation is required to assure student learning in several core areas, including communication. This paper outlines the data collection procedures and documentation methods used to document one university's business communication learning assurances.

We assessed students' communication skills in three distinct skill areas: written, oral, and general knowledge. The assessment began during the spring semester of 2005, and we collected a total of three semesters' worth of data in all three skill areas prior to our accreditation review in October of 2006. We included at least one section taught by each business communication faculty member during all three semesters of the assessment process. We assessed students' written skills using an in-class writing assignment requiring students to apply their bad-news writing skills; two faculty members separately assessed each student's written work. We evaluated students' oral skills during short team presentations, also assessed by two faculty members. The two-faculty rater procedures demonstrated no meaningful differences in faculty grading measures. We assessed students' general knowledge through a standard objective test.

The faculty prescribed 70% as the minimum pass rate to determine that students had satisfactorily met the learning goals. Our AACSB report presented data both by major and by class standing. This paper outlines our assessment techniques, methods of data collection, the study's findings, and conclusions for continual AACSB assessment procedures.

Introduction

When the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) redefined their accreditation and re-affirmation standards in 2003, they included a significant focus on the documented inclusion of learning assurances. Although their mission and standards have remained consistent during the transition, the framework of a traditional outcome-based system changed to a systematic process-based review. This change reflects a significant attempt to focus on continuous improvement in higher education (Miles, Hazeldine, & Munilla, 2004). For business communication faculty preparing for their institution's AACSB accreditation reaffirmation, this means that we need to provide specific evidence that documents that our students achieved the objectives of the business communication course beyond simply providing a summary of students' grades. Although grades are a general indicator of how well students

performed in the class, AACSB requires additional proof that the students not only learned the specified content by demonstrating their competence in the identified skill areas, but that they reached quantitative levels of performance as predefined by the faculty. In effect, the AACSB change from an outcome-based review to a systematic process-based review requires that student assessment focuses on the process of students' learning. This is exemplified by AACSB's emphasis on "learning assurances."

This study focuses on the AACSB learning assurances documentation methods conducted by a school of business at a regional state university in the southeast. AACSB awarded our initial accreditation in 1979. Although our institution was not one of the first to prepare for reaffirmation of their AACSB accreditation under the new framework of learning assurances, we began our preparation for reaffirmation before many other institutions had experienced the new requirements. Therefore, we did not have the opportunity to seek guidance from other institutions who had previously found successful methods of documenting their students' learning assurances. In the spring of 2005, the dean of our school of business charged the faculty with the task of determining the best methods to assure student learning in several core areas, including communication. The business communication faculty created a system of assessments that they implemented over the course of three semesters in each section of business communication. This paper outlines the assessment areas we deemed appropriate based on the objectives of the course, the methods used to collect student performance data, an analysis of our data, and conclusions.

Assessments

Brennan and Austin's (2003) research addresses the need to determine a management process in preparation for higher education accreditation measures. They stated, "The first step is to establish a project team, with a faculty leader as the project manager and a representative cross-section of the faculty in the group" (p. 58). We appointed the senior faculty member in our department with the most years' experience teaching business communication as our project leader. Given the small number of faculty in our department, all faculty members who taught business communication participated in the project team. We met during the first few weeks of the spring 2005 semester and were able to embed the assessment procedures within that same semester. These procedures included an in-class writing activity to assess written skills, a short team presentation to assess oral skills, and a unit exam to assess general knowledge. We used these assessments during the three sequential semesters: spring 2005, fall 2005, and spring 2006.

Written skills

When the faculty team initially discussed the assessment procedures, all faculty indicated that they planned to incorporate a bad-news letter as an activity within their individual business communication sections. We asked each faculty member to suggest a bad-new case study for the project team's review. We selected several case studies during the initial semester, many of which were modified slightly from exercises provided in the textbook (all sections of business communication used the same textbook). Once we identified the case study, the only adjustments that we needed to make were to ensure that all students completed the bad-news letter within the same time constraints (50 minutes) and within the same week during the semester to safeguard

any possibility of students sharing their feedback from the assignment outside of class. Although we used the same case study in all sections within a semester, we used different bad-news case studies during each of the subsequent semesters to ensure students did not pass along their graded work to other students.

In each section, faculty provided instruction about the elements of an effectively written bad-news letter and demonstrated at least two practice case studies as either group work or homework before we assigned the in-class writing activity to assess writing skills. In all sections, we presented the bad-news material approximately mid-way through the semester, which meant that students had experienced at least five previous writing assignments. We felt it was important to provide students with a foundation of basic writing skill instruction prior to the writing assessment.

Oral skills

During the initial project team discussions, all faculty members indicated that they used oral presentations in their business communication classes near the end of the semester. We were able to agree that the last full week of classes prior to final exams would be earmarked as the “presentation schedule” for all sections. As we developed the assessments during spring 2005 semester, we decided that students would make short (ten-minute) presentations in teams of two on a specific topic. We felt the small team size would require individual students to be more accountable for their collaboration efforts. In our experience, oftentimes students are able to “hide” within a larger group. Because we evaluated each student individually during the team presentations, the smaller group size facilitated easier assessment methods for faculty.

We re-evaluated our assessment procedures after the first semester and decided that although the use of time limitations and two-person teams needed to remain constant among all sections, the topics did not. We determined that since the agreed upon presentation rubric focused on the assessment of students’ organizational and delivery skills, the specific presentation topics did not matter. In all subsequent semesters, faculty assigned different presentation topics without affecting the two-faculty rater system, which are discussed in the methods section.

General knowledge skills

The final skill area that we assessed to document students’ learning addressed their general knowledge of business communication. Because every section of business communication at our institution used the same textbook, we were able to agree easily that the textbook’s automated test bank would serve as a foundation for the general knowledge skills assessment. Our initial discussions leaned toward using a unit exam that covered the foundational aspects about business communication theory, which we address in the first few chapters of our textbook. However, after much deliberation, we agreed that students often do not perform well on their first test in a class. Although we disagreed as to the reasoning of this observation – whether it was due to lack of familiarity with the content or the vagueness of the material as compared to chapters on specific writing situations – we agreed on the outcome of the experience. Therefore, we used a unit exam covering the chapters on writing routine messages, persuasive messages, and bad-

news messages. We provided approximately the same amount of instructional time and practice activities prior to the assessment, which we conducted midway through the semester.

The general knowledge skills assessment used 50 randomly selected multiple-choice questions from the textbook's test bank, which we administered on Blackboard. All business communication students completed the unit exam within a 50-minute time constraint in the same computer lab during the same week of the semester. Faculty were able to assign different points per question based on their own grading scales and course point systems; however, all exam results used for the AACSB data collection purposes were assigned one point per question, or 50 points for the entire exam.

Methods

As described by Vice and Carnes (2002) in their research on developing, implementing, and evaluating the effective use of rubrics, or checklists, to assess students' business writing skills, assessment techniques can be very subjective. Below is a discussion of how we determined the best methods of grading the assessments for each of the skill areas.

Written skills

Although the organizational elements of placing specific content within specific areas of a message are rather straightforward, grading students' use of tone and style in a business document often is more subjective. During the first semester of our assessment procedures, the faculty spent several weeks discussing how we typically grade students' written work. Although we discovered that we each used a different point system, we all valued the same elements of format, content, organization, and style. Initially, we attempted to create a grading rubric for the writing assessment that worked well for every faculty member; however, this was unsuccessful due to a variety of issues, most of which focused on the assignment of points per error.

To determine how similarly the faculty would grade the same work, each faculty member contributed two samples of students' work that had not yet been graded, but had been assessed for quality. Each faculty member provided one well-written example and one poorly written example. We made photocopies, and every faculty member graded every example. When we compared our assigned grades, which were tabulated by percentage to conform to the wide variety of point systems, we discovered that the outcomes were very consistent. None of the faculty's assessments varied more than 5 percentage points or half a letter grade from each other. For consistency in our data reporting, however, we agreed that two faculty members would grade every assessment.

Oral skills

Unlike the written assessment, we were able to create a grading rubric for the oral presentations that everyone agreed would be useful (see Appendix). We divided the criteria into four categories of presentation skills including organization (15%), content (20%), delivery (45%), and visual aids (20%). Although students conducted their presentations in teams of two, we evaluated each student individually. Therefore, each faculty member used two evaluation rubrics

for each team presentation. For consistency, two faculty members evaluated each team presentation. The rubric used a three-point Likert-scale system with a total of 60 points. Faculty multiplied or divided students' total points as needed to fit the rubric into their existing course point systems. As with the writing assessment, none of the faculty's evaluation scores varied more than half a letter grade.

General knowledge skills

As indicated previously, we used Blackboard's assessment tools as the method of data collection for general knowledge skills. We tabulated the students' objective test scores and combined our data for analysis.

Analysis

One of the unique aspects of the AACSB learning assurance directives was that the criteria by which an institution deemed itself as successful was based on whether it effectively met its own goals and standards. AACSB "explicitly acknowledge(s) that each candidate institution has a distinct mission, unique sets of stakeholders, and resource bases with different outcome expectations" (Miles, Hazeldine, & Munilla, 2004, p. 29). We decided that to be successful, we needed to document that at least 70% of our students performed at 70% or better on each communication assessment area. We chose these percentages based on our consensus that 70% of the students presented a majority of our students and that a "C" grade (e.g., 70%) represents an average grade. We presented the data for each skill area within the variables of students' majors and class standing.

Written skills

The data revealed that the students reached the targeted goal; at least 70% of the 336 students who participated during the three-semester data collection performed at 70% or better on their bad-news letter assessment. We found no meaningful differences among the two-rater faculty evaluations. Overall, the scores of the instructors of record averaged 75%, and their colleagues' assessments of the same students were 74%.

Table 1 demonstrates the number of students by major who passed (74%), which indicates that we met our target goal. Although average grades are provided by major, our AACSB reports focused on the percentage of each major that met the target goal of at least 70%. In some cases, such as the business education (100%), economics (82%), and finance (84%) majors, the percentage of students who passed was higher than the group's average grades (84%, 76%, and 74%, respectively). In other areas, the opposite is true. The average grade for transportation majors was 70%, but only 53% performed at that level or higher. The wide range of scores in the lower-performing groups evidences these deviations.

Additionally, some majors performed better than others did. For example, 100% of the business education majors (n=8) passed the written skills assessment; however, only 53% of the transportation majors (n=15) passed the assessment. In both sample sizes, the representation of

these majors is small compared to others, such as accounting (n=83) and management majors (n=108).

Table 1
Writing Skills Pass Rate Averages by Major

Major	Total (n)	Average Grade	Passed (n)	Percent Passed
Accounting	83	75%	59	71%
Business Administration	9	67%	5	56%
Business Education	8	84%	8	100%
Economics	11	76%	9	82%
Finance	32	74%	27	84%
Management	108	75%	81	75%
MIS	11	70%	7	64%
Marketing	59	75%	43	73%
Transportation	15	70%	8	53%
TOTAL =	336	74%	248	74%

We also analyzed students' written skill performance by class rank. As a 300-level course at this institution, the business communication course is populated by a majority of students who are in their sophomore or junior years. As indicated in Table 2, the higher the class rank, the better the students performed. This is true for both average grades by rank as well as the percentage of students at each level who met target goal of 70% or higher (i.e., passed the assessment).

Table 2
Writing Skills Pass Rate Averages by Class Rank

Major	Total (n)	Average Grade	Passed (n)	Percent Passed
Freshman	17	73%	11	65%
Sophomore	111	72%	79	71%
Junior	160	76%	121	76%
Senior	48	77%	37	77%
TOTAL =	336	74%	248	74%

Oral skills

A total of 399 students participated in the oral skills assessment, which required pairs of students to conduct a ten-minute professional presentation. We believe more students completed the oral presentation assessment (399) than the writing skills assessment (336) because the presentation represented a larger percentage of the students' final grade. In most classes, the writing skills assessment was one of many writing assignments throughout the semester. We found no meaningful differences among the two-rater faculty evaluations; instructors of record averaged 86%, their colleagues' evaluations averaged 84%.

Table 3 lists the oral skills pass rate averages by major. It is interesting to note that the students performed much better on their oral skills assessment than on the writing skills assessment. All

of the majors met the targeted goal. Two majors achieved a 100% passing rate; every marketing major and transportation major who participated in this study scored at least 70% or better. The average scores were 87% for marketing majors and 88% for transportation majors.

Table 3
Oral Skills Pass Rate Averages by Major

Major	Total (n)	Average Grade	Passed (n)	Percent Passed
Accounting	110	83%	105	95%
Business Administration	13	85%	10	77%
Business Education	11	86%	10	91%
Economics	14	84%	12	86%
Finance	40	87%	39	98%
Management	118	86%	116	98%
MIS	11	82%	10	91%
Marketing	66	87%	66	100%
Transportation	16	88%	16	100%
TOTAL =	399	86%	384	96%

When we analyzed the oral skills pass rates by class rank, we noticed an interesting difference between students' written skill performance and oral skill performance. Whereas the average writing skill grades improved from freshman to senior levels, the average oral skill grades declined (see Table 4).

Table 4
Oral Skills Pass Rate Averages by Class Rank

Major	Total (n)	Average Grade	Passed (n)	Percent Passed
Freshman	21	89%	20	95%
Sophomore	147	84%	140	95%
Junior	177	87%	172	97%
Senior	54	84%	52	96%
TOTAL =	399	86%	384	96%

General knowledge skills

Table 5 indicates the general knowledge skills pass rate average by major. A total of 430 students completed the general knowledge skills assessment. The difference in the number of students who took the general knowledge skills assessment (430) as compared to the oral skills assessment (399) is based on the time during the semester when we administered these assessments. Students took the general knowledge skills assessment in the middle of the semester prior to the posting of midterm grades. We documented that 29 students dropped their business communication class after taking the general knowledge skills assessment but prior to the oral skills assessment at the end of the semester. The remaining two students were unaccounted. Because student names were not recorded with the data collection procedures for this study, we were not able to remove those students who did not take all three assessments. Further, we were

not able to track students' performance across all three assessments. This was a limitation of this study; we have modified our current data collection procedures to facilitate this analysis.

As indicated in Table 5, none of the majors successfully reached our target goal of 70% performing at a minimum of 70% on the general knowledge skills assessment. The average grade was 62% for all students in all majors. Only one-third of the students scored at least 70% or better on the assessment. This is an area in which we need to "close the gap."

Table 5
General Knowledge Skills Pass Rate Averages by Major

Major	Total (n)	Average Grade	Passed (n)	Percent Passed
Accounting	119	63%	39	33%
Business Administration	12	62%	5	42%
Business Education	12	65%	4	33%
Economics	16	66%	9	56%
Finance	41	65%	15	37%
Management	128	59%	31	24%
MIS	14	65%	6	43%
Marketing	71	65%	31	44%
Transportation	17	56%	4	24%
TOTAL =	430	62%	144	33%

Table 6 lists the general knowledge skills pass rate averages by class rank. The juniors had the highest average grade (64%) and pass rate (38%), but they also represented the largest group of students (n=198, which represents 46% of all students in the study).

Table 6
General Knowledge Skills Pass Rate Averages by Class Rank

Major	Total (n)	Average Grade	Passed (n)	Percent Passed
Freshman	20	58%	6	30%
Sophomore	156	61%	43	28%
Junior	198	64%	75	38%
Senior	56	63%	20	36%
TOTAL =	430	62%	144	33%

Findings

We were successful at documenting that at least 70% of our students passed the written and oral skills assessments. However, we found that we need to address students' general knowledge skills. The faculty project team is continuing to research best practices for "closing the gap" for learning assurances. We address students' deficiencies with general knowledge skills differently depending on our individual testing strategies. Those faculty members who use unit exams work with students who perform poorly on their initial tests. Other faculty members whose testing strategies incorporate weekly quizzes rather than unit exams provide online drill and practice

opportunities to help students prepare for their assessments. On-going data collection in this area will help us determine whether these methods are effective.

Conclusions

In her study of achieving a successful communication program, Barrett (2002) suggested important criteria including providing individual mentoring opportunities for students with apparent deficiencies and constant re-evaluation of the assessment techniques. Our approach to documenting AACSB learning assurances accommodated both of these aspects of Barrett's conclusions. We address each of these issues as part of our effort to "close the gap" between those students who successfully completed the assessments and those who did not.

With respect to providing individual mentoring opportunities for students with apparent deficiencies, we use two intervention techniques. First, if students continue to perform poorly after the second graded writing activity, they are required to meet individually with their business communication instructor to review their work and discuss methods for improvement. Although this usually encourages the students to work on enhancing their writing skills, additional meetings are often required. Second, rather than waiting until the end of the semester to assign a single graded oral presentation, we encourage faculty to integrate short oral briefing opportunities throughout the course to prepare students for the formal oral report that we use as the learning assurances assessment. Our efforts to address the general knowledge skill deficiencies are discussed in the findings.

Finally, the most important aspect of our learning assurances initiative is constant re-evaluation of our assessment techniques. The faculty agreed that to demonstrate continuous quality improvement, we need to fine-tune the assessment process over time to eliminate redundancies and facilitate adjustments. As stated by Brennan and Austin (2003), "including assessment provisions for processes is an extremely important aspect of institutionalizing a commitment to continuous quality improvement" (p. 54). Therefore, the assessment procedures that began in the spring of 2005 were assessed and modified as needed for use in the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006. The AACSB review team visited the university in the fall of 2006 and approved our assessment techniques. To support continual quality improvement and prepare for future reaffirmation visits, the communication assessments will continue to be implemented in the spring semester of every academic year. We will consistently review and revise our instructional opportunities to meet students' needs and assure their learning success.

References

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Biography

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APPENDIX

EVALUATION RUBRIC

BUED 360: TEAM PRESENTATIONS

STUDENT NAME: _____

			
	POOR - OK - GREAT		
ORGANIZATION (9 points / 15%):			
1. Was the introduction unique; did it grab the audience's attention?	1	2	3
2. Were the main points in the body clearly identified and supported?	1	2	3
3. Did the closing summarize the main points and make conclusions?	1	2	3
CONTENT (12 points / 20 %):			
4. Did the presenters clearly articulate their purpose?	1	2	3
5. Did they provide adequate information or supporting evidence?	1	2	3
6. Did they identify how the data impacts the audience (WIIFM)?	1	2	3
7. Did they cite credible sources?	1	2	3
DELIVERY (27 points / 45 %):			
8. Were the words clearly enunciated and at an appropriate volume?	1	2	3
9. Was there an appropriate balance between the two speakers?	1	2	3
10. Were the presenters able to talk without reading from prepared text?	1	2	3
11. Did they use proper vocabulary and grammar?	1	2	3
12. Did they have limited use of fillers (umm, like, ah, etc.)?	1	2	3
13. Was their body language professional?	1	2	3
14. Did the presenters make good use of eye contact with their listeners?	1	2	3
15. Were the students professional in their manner and attire?	1	2	3
16. Did they appear to be well prepared / rehearsed?	1	2	3
VISUAL AIDS (12 points / 20 %):			
17. Was written text easy to read?	1	2	3
18. Was it professionally written (no typos, grammatical errors, etc.)?	1	2	3
19. Was the use of color (text, background) appropriate?	1	2	3
20. Was the use of graphics (clip art, images) appropriate?	1	2	3
TOTAL POINTS =	/ 60		