What Are We Assessing? Program Goals Assessment and Senior Assignment Projects in Criminal Justice

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ABSTRACT

At a university where assessment is strongly valued and senior assignment "capstone" projects

are required of all students, faculty members are faced with an ongoing requirement to measure

student progress towards specific goals. The present study was generated by an administrative

unit within the university to evaluate the continued appropriateness of the goals and senior project

for the Criminal Justice Studies program. Comparison with other schools, interviews with faculty

and focus groups with students generally reflected a need for some reconsideration. Our program

goals were revised as a result and an alternate means of assessment is in the planning stages.

Keywords: Criminal Justice, University, Capstone Assignment, Assessment, Departmental Goals

Introduction

The Criminal Justice Studies program at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is a relatively new program and is housed within the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice Studies. Our university has about 14,000 students and is located near a mid-size city in the Midwestern United States. Our program presently serves only undergraduate students. Ours is a comprehensive university that prides itself on having been a leader in the focus on assessment and senior capstone projects. The value of assessment has been legitimated often (Banta, 1991, 1999: Ewell, 1999), and is endorsed by several professional organizations within the education field, including the American Association for Higher Education (Kelley, 2004).

The practice of reviewing program curricula, goals and assessment has also received attention from researchers and educators of criminal justice. Tontodonato (2006) writes "a critical self-evaluation is important for a variety of reasons, and that this assessment can benefit from the same empirical approach we take in our research" (163). Moreover, Tontodonato (2006) finds that "A review of the scholarly literature reveals that, relatively speaking, little has been published on assessment in criminal justice" (163). This paper examines how a focus on assessment, goals, and senior projects have been conceptualized and re-examined in a criminal justice studies program.

Background of Senior Assignments at SIUE

Within the university, each program is required to select its own set of goals, and these goals are driven by faculty: programs have widely varying goals, depending on the discipline and the unique values of the program's faculty members. It is also a requirement that all students from all programs complete a "senior assignment", which is devised by the faculty members within the program and approved by the university's assessment office (an administrative unit). While the university allows a range of projects to act as a senior assignment, it is mandatory that

programs use this capstone project as one of the tools to assess each student on each of the goals.

Thus, both the goals and the project used for assessment are driven by the department, but the

results are collected each year by the specialized assessment office within the university. The

present study was generated by an administrative unit within the university to foster continuing

discussion among faculty and to re-evaluate the continued appropriateness of the goals and senior

project for the Criminal Justice Studies program.

The Current Senior Project and Assessment Plan

After much consideration, our faculty group decided to use an in-field work experience as

part of the foundation for our capstone senior project. Although not universally endorsed, much

criminal justice and other literature have found value in in-field placement (Lersch, 1997, Stasz

and Brewer, 1998, Flanagan, 2000), and specifically in internships (Stone and McLaren, 1999,

Parilla and Smith-Cunnien, 1997, Ross and Elechi 2002, Gordon, Hage and McBride, 2000,

Fabianic, 1987; Stichman and Farkas, 2005). Bates (2003) points out that placing students in the

professional field and giving them actual work experience creates a number of benefits, including

"the correction of misconceptions about workplace 'reality,' new skills, time management, the

development of self-confidence, and an increased awareness of career options" (305). Ross and

Elechi point out that criminal justice internships afford the opportunity for students to "acquire

valuable and specialized skills, become acquainted with particular criminal justice agencies,

and…close the gap between theory and practice" (298).

Students, in partnership with the University and a group of criminal justice agencies,

work 140 hours at the agency of their choice (from among the participating group). During this

time, they take detailed notes about their observations, honing in on a specific topic area of their

choice. The project culminates in a paper that positions the student to consider their self-selected

topic both from the vantage of a body of academic knowledge, and also from the vantage of their

direct experience with that topic. The literature is analyzed based on the student's experience and

vice versa. For example, a student may be interested in gender equity in a police department. The student must collect information in the form of his/her observations of gender during the internship, and then weigh those experiences against the body of literature that concerns itself with gender in policing.

The project ends with a poster-style presentation of the paper to the full criminal justice faculty, who have either read the paper or a student-created executive summary of it. Faculty members question the student about literature, experience and analysis. Based on these interactions, each faculty member assesses each student on each of the program-selected goals.

Methodology

During the Summer, 2009 semester, our university awarded the authors an internal grant through the assessment office to review the established goals of the Criminal Justice Studies program and its assessment practices, including the senior assignment project. To accomplish this goal, we examined what other criminal justice programs at other universities have identified as departmental goals, and we examined other criminal justice capstone projects. Kelley (2004) stresses the importance of cross-program comparison, arguing that "This method can reveal contemporary trends and unique characteristics in criminal justice curricula" (220). To that end, we identified a list of other criminology programs, based on the *U.S. News and World Report* list of the top twenty programs. We solicited each department head from the top twenty programs to provide information regarding the goals of the programs and the senior capstone assignment. In addition, we also queried two additional schools that were relevant either because of their proximity or their relationship with our program (one is part of our university system and both are geographically close). A total of eleven department heads responded to our solicitation. These data derived from our discussion with other criminal justice departments were intended to give a sense of how our goals measured up in contrast to other criminal justice programs.

In addition to a comparative analysis, we also wanted to learn how our goals measured up to our teaching practices. Were we teaching the skills we had selected as desired outcomes? Were our pedagogical practices in line with the goals we had selected? To learn more about the connection between teaching and intended outcomes, we also interviewed each tenured or tenure-track faculty member in our Criminal Justice Studies program about

1) The objectives each professor has for students[1],
2) The acceptability of our formal goals, and
3) The usefulness of the current senior assignment project to assess progress on those goals.

Finally, we wanted to include students' perspective in our conversations about what we expected from successful students' performance. Kelley (2004) has identified the lack of inclusion of student perspectives as a significant shortfall in program review. We used focus group discussions with students in 300 and 400 level courses. We asked them about what qualities they believed a graduating senior should have in order to be successful in criminal justice, as well as whether or not they believed the senior assignment met their expectations.

Thus, our questions required three data collection efforts: one involving email discussions with criminal justice faculty members in other institutions, a second involving interviews (approximately 45-60 minutes each), and a third utilizing focus groups with our own criminal justice majors. Each of these data collection plans were undertaken, and the results were brought back to the faculty group for consideration. This project was intended to be an applied one: the results were expected to generate discussion and to influence our understanding of what we are (and are not) doing effectively. Program goal selection and assessment is an ongoing process in our department. As hoped, one of the results of these three data collection tasks has

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[1] These objectives may be formal program goals, or other goals for student learning. For example, one of us has an objective that students can apply course material to their everyday lives, and so relies on lots of current events to highlight the issues in lecture—no matter the course. Another of us teaches diversity and consciousness raising in every class. While contextualization is not a formal goal, it is student objective for at least one professor. Sensitivity to power issues, often represented in diversity matters, is a formal goal. We wanted to be sure we had some information on the learning objectives that were not already represented in our formal goals to be as inclusive as possible in re-conceptualizing the formal goals.

been a series of focused discussions among the Criminal Justice Studies faculty about revising

our formal goals, and, ultimately, the revision of our goal set to include seven goals. Another of

the results of this data collection is the beginning of some experimentation with our senior

assignment. One of the things we learned through this process is that we are unable to effectively

assess each student on each goal, which means that our senior assignment ought to be revised in

order to improve our assessment capability.

Results

Departmental Goals

Our Criminal Justice Program resides within the Department of Sociology and Criminal

Justice Studies. When the Criminal Justice Studies program began, a decision was made to adopt

the established program goals of the Sociology program. The goals seemed appropriate to serve

as a beginning point, and the intention was to revisit them later. We adjusted the wording to

apply to criminal justice rather than sociology but kept the spirit of each goal. At the beginning

of this project, our program goals for students were that each graduating student have these

abilities:

1. To communicate effectively both orally and in writing;
2. To effectively review the relevant literature and integrate theoretical ideas;
3. To have an understanding of the issues of diversity in the criminal justice system; and
4. To engage in problem solving and apply critical thinking to complex issues

When we began our review of the goals, we felt that they were appropriate for the learning

objectives we have for our students. Nonetheless, after careful discussion and learning more

about other criminal justice programs, some questions were emerging that we wanted to address.

Comparison to Other Schools' Goals

In order to accurately assess the goals of the criminal justice program and whether or not

the senior assignment achieves these goals, we conducted a comparative analysis of certain other

criminal justice programs from around the nation. Again, the programs were chosen from the list

of the top twenty criminology programs in the United States as identified and published by *U.S.*

News and World Report (2009). All twenty universities were selected for comparison to our own program. Two additional schools were also selected due to the proximity and relationship to our own university. Each university was sent an email requesting information regarding the departmental goals as well as a description of the senior assignment if applicable. Eleven universities responded to the email and were used in the comparative analysis.

Overall, the current goals of our criminal justice system are in accordance to the other universities evaluated in this assessment. A summary of the common goals is presented in Table 1 below. There were a few differences between the goals held by other programs and those we had selected, and this discrepancy has generated a continuing discussion among members of the department about extending our set of goals. The additional goals under consideration for our program are indicated in Table 1 with an asterisk.

One university had a set of goals similar to our department's goals. It had identified the same goals that we did, but also included "recognizing the key components of the criminal justice system" and "the ability to employ research methods." Three of the universities had listed "the ability to employ research methods" as a departmental goal for graduating seniors.

Other goals that were recognized by other programs but were not represented among our own set of goals included: "identifying the interdisciplinary underpinnings of criminal justice studies;" "analyzing the structure and function of the fundamental criminal justice institutions;" "understanding the development of public policy through criminal justice studies;" and "the ability to employ and understand statistical analyses." Three universities did not provide the departmental goals in the email conversation.

Table 1:
Comparison of Goals across Universities

Goals[2]	Our Program	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6	School 7	School 8
Oral communication	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Written communication	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Review literature	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Integrate theory	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Understand diversity	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Problem solving	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Critical thinking	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interdisciplinary Underpinnings	No*	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Research Methods	No*	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Recognize Components of CJ System	No*	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Ethics	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Public Policy	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Statistics	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No

* Not one of our goals at the beginning of this project, but included for discussion about a new set of goals as a result of this undertaking.

Despite the differences, our present goal set is somewhat similar to those of the universities highlighted in this analysis. Although there are certain components that may be added based on our knowledge of other programs (e.g., "identifying the interdisciplinary underpinnings of criminal justice studies" and "analyzing the structure and function of the fundamental criminal justice institutions"), the current goals are substantially equivalent to the group of departments nationwide that were included in our analysis.

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[2] The goal labels in the Table were generated by analyzing the content of the goal, categorized for similarities, and then written in the Table as one or two descriptive words to paraphrase the various goals. We created the terms in order to be able group programs who generally shared a desire to achieve some result with students, such as knowledge of public policy or writing skills, although programs expressed this in different words.

Inter-Departmental Discussions about Goals

Each faculty member in our criminal justice program was interviewed during the month of July 2009. The interviews lasted between 20-50 minutes and were done individually. A transcript for the interview was created and was subject to a brief member checking process during the interview[3]. Faculty responses were closely tied to specific teaching assignments, syllabi, and other potentially identifying markers. A discussion of the results, as well as highlights from the ensuing discussion, is presented. The actual interview questions are available in Appendix I.

Faculty members took no significant issue with the goals that we currently have. There was some variety in the importance accorded to one goal over another, but in general the group supported the current goals. Two of the goals are two pronged, meaning they include two distinct goals within one goal statement. For example, student success with "writing skills and oral communication" currently comprises just one goal, as do "critical thinking and problem solving". One item for discussion concerns dividing these two pronged goals into single goals. Some faculty members encouraged consideration of additional goals, specifically including an "appreciation of the interdisciplinary nature of our field of study", "gaining a more systemic understanding of justice and the components of our justice system", and "appreciating the day-to-day realities of professionals in the criminal justice occupations". These were brought forward to a larger faculty discussion described below.

Faculty members had many diverse teaching practices that contributed directly to our program goals. All faculty members had writing assignments in upper division courses, and many assigned writing even in larger, introductory level courses. The majority of the writing assignments also included oral presentations. Nearly all faculty members consistently require

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[3] Member checking is a process of verifying qualitative data. In this case, it meant obtaining interview responses and reading back the answers that were captured in the interviewer's notes for accuracy and completeness. Respondents were given an opportunity to refine or amend their responses after hearing them.

students to locate, read and interpret articles, requiring students to obtain information from the library[4].

Three of the faculty members teach courses specifically designed to address questions of diversity, but two more faculty members incorporated a specific focus on diversity into courses that were not specifically designed to cover this topic. Moreover, all faculty members were able to talk about specific lectures that encouraged students to consider the role that diversity plays in the justice system.

Problem solving and critical thinking were integrated into pedagogy in numerous ways. From small group assignments resulting in interpersonal problem solving to term projects involving critical assessment of available ideas, these two key goals were integrated by every faculty member in multiple ways every semester. In sum, faculty members had a wide range of techniques and assignments that fostered development of our collective program goals.

Focus groups were conducted in four 300- or 400-level classes over the Summer, 2009 semester. A summary of the student interview questions are included in Appendix II. Overall, students acknowledge that the goals set by professors are appropriate goals. In an independent question, before faculty goals were discussed, students were also asked what skills they believe are important. They listed all or nearly all of the faculty goals, but additionally many students commented on the need to have a strong knowledge of law and knowledge of criminal justice as a system. Other than the goals selected by the faculty group, these two items were the most often cited by students.

The most important theme that emerged from these student comments was that students overwhelmingly affirmed that their criminal justice courses have provided them with the skills

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[4] While writing in larger courses tended to be short, in-class types of assignments and the use of essay questions on exams, 300- and 400-level courses relied heavily on longer term papers (10-15 pages). At least one faculty member used a series of shorter writing assignments (4-5 pages) which culminated in a longer paper.

that are relevant for a criminal justice degree. Not only did they say that they had been able to develop those skills, but they could also articulate which courses had fostered those skills.

As a result of the interviews and focus groups, an email discussion was launched to explore revising the program goals. Based on interviews, it appears that we agree that our current list remains relevant, but the two-pronged goals need to be separated. In addition, the interviews, review of other programs, and focus groups generated a few potential goals for us to consider adding.

A new list of goals for potential adoption emerged from the email discussion. This list was discussed at a recent meeting, and as a faculty, we agreed to revise our current goals as follows. Reformulating the original goals, but separating each item out, we now agree that graduating students should:

1. Have baccalaureate writing skills;
2. Be effective oral communicators;
3. Be able to locate and critically assess current research;
4. Understand and apply theory; and
5. Articulate major or current issues in criminal justice.
6. Understand the major components of the CJS, its activities, functions, case law
7. Understand the power dynamics that create a range of experiences and multiple points of views, often patterned on racial, ethnic, gendered and mental health oriented lines

Developing the departmental goals leads to the second part of the study which is a review of our current capstone assignment. The goals of the department inform how we regulate and administer our senior assignment.

Findings

Criminal Justice Studies Capstone Project and Goal Assessment

Our current Senior Assignment project involves a supervised internship. After completing 140 hours of internship service, students must write an analytical paper, in which they compare and contrast their experience with the academic literature on a topic of their own selection. It must be a topic that they have experienced first-hand in their internship, and about which there has been some academic writing. Other than that, they are free to pursue any area of

interest. When the paper is complete, it is then presented to the full faculty group in a poster session.

One faculty member per semester works with each group of internship students to develop the 12-15 page paper, and all faculty members participate in evaluating the poster presentations of these papers via question-and-answer sessions during the presentations. This evaluation by each faculty member includes both a contribution to a collective grade on the presentation, and also the faculty member's assessment of each student for each goal. These are reviewed by the instructor of record and tallied into a final, collective assessment for each student on each goal. The available ratings are "exceeded expectations for this goal", "met expectations for this goal", and "did not meet expectations for this goal".

Comparison to Other Schools' Projects and Assessment Practices

After an analysis of our capstone project, we have found ourselves to be unique. Of the universities examined in this analysis, no university offers a required internship as the senior assignment. Internship opportunities are offered at a number of the universities, but the internship does not count towards required credit, nor is it considered the primary capstone course.

Of the universities evaluated in this analysis, one did not require any type of senior assignment course or project. Seven of the eleven required a final research paper that would be written throughout the semester in a designated course. The length of the paper averages between 15 and 20 pages. Only two of the seven universities also required a public presentation of the final research paper. At one school, it was noted that the presentation was to last approximately 10 minutes per student. Finally, two universities required comprehensive exams to be taken by graduating seniors. The exams, however, differed in length. One exam was nine pages total while the other was to be completed in two hours. Finally, one school offered a senior capstone course, but the final senior assignment depended on the instructor and was not uniform.

Inter-Departmental Discussion about Senior Project and Assessment Practice

One of the data collection endeavors for this project involved interviews with each of the faculty members in the program. When asked about our current internship course, our faculty members identified two primary strengths related to the project. The first of these is that the nature of the paper requires students to be analytical and to connect theory or literature with real life experiences or data. The second is that the internship allows students to make interpersonal connections that may well translate into an employment opportunity.

The interviews also yielded a number of perceived weaknesses about the internship. Some faculty members noted the number of students who do not really do what the project intended for them to do: analyze real life experience in contrast to academic writing. Sometimes, this may be due to the quality of the internship itself. We cannot control how much activity students will get at any particular internship, and the experiences vary significantly from one student to another. That is, some students are truly immersed in the criminal justice system, while others file paperwork. The failure to accomplish the true task of the paper may also be due to student effort or skill level. Some students are more able to be as analytical as the paper requires or to communicate effectively in the paper or in the presentation while others are not.

One major concern is that faculty members unanimously said that they were not able to effectively assess each student on each of our goals using the current senior assignment. For some faculty members, this is due to the nature of the paper—not all goals will be demonstrated in every paper. For example, not every paper deals with diversity, and not every paper is explicitly theoretical. Even papers that are very good or excellent according to the grading criteria may not have included certain components that we want to assess. Another concern with the assessment strategy is that the professors lack adequate information, and the question and answer session is not sufficient to give a sense of how to evaluate the student. Each professor has

an executive summary of the student's paper and attends the student's poster presentation; even together, these were inadequate to allow other faculty members than the instructor of record to effectively evaluate the students on every goal.

Discussion

As mentioned, due to a unanimous agreement that we cannot effectively assess every student on each of the goals we have selected using the current senior assignment structure, we must discuss other options. We found that the internship and analytical paper are quite valuable, both to us for assessment, and also to students. Nonetheless, the challenges related to inconsistent student experiences and the lack of uniform presentation of skills related to each of our goals requires some rethinking about our assessment plan. We are not able to change the internship experience to make it more uniform. While we could change the paper requirements, this seriously detracts from the freedom of students to explore areas and ideas that interest them. Instead, we sought an additive approach. We wanted to find a solution that would leave the internship intact, but add a consistent, reliable source of assessment information.

One option used by other programs is the exit exam. One possibility is that we could add an exam to the capstone course. It need not be included in the grading structure for the course and could be used exclusively for assessment of program goals. This exam would be crafted by all faculty members, each contributing some questions that cover content from his/her most commonly taught core courses. Also, the exam would be crafted with our seven program goals in mind. Each question on the exam would be linked to a particular goal. Students could then be assessed for each goal using this exam. The two goals of written communication and oral communication could be consistently measured using the established internship paper and poster presentation. While this is not the only possible remedy, it is one that preserves the best of the internship project while simultaneously building a new platform for a more reliable and consistent assessment strategy.

At a recent faculty meeting, the exit exam was discussed and it has been agreed that we will implement the exit exam in the 2010 spring semester. The exam is not a permanent feature, but rather will be in a trial phase. We hope that the exam will stabilize our assessments, but recognize that more thinking and revision almost certainly lie in the future.

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APPENDIX I: Interview Questions for Criminal Justice Faculty

Part I Review of Present Goals
1. We have 4 program goals. These are the things we would like our students to be able to do. We examine whether the student has met each goal by examining each student's senior assignment project. Before we talk about our adopted goals, in your own words, what skills do you think our graduates should have?

2. Our actual goals are as follows:
> *1. Ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing;*
> *2. ability to effectively review the relevant literature and integrate theoretical   ideas;*
> *3. the ability to have an understanding of the issues of diversity in the criminal   justice system*
> *4. the ability to engage in problem solving and apply critical thinking to complex issues.*

Do you think these goals are satisfactory? Are there other goals that we aren't including, or goals that we've included that should be questioned? If so, what are they?

Part II Teaching practices that work toward the goals
3. Can you talk about what activities you do that help students become proficient at any of these goals?

4. Do your teaching practices reflect goals that you have for students that are not represented in the official program goals? If so, what are those practices and what are the goals?

Part III: Our Senior Assignment
5. What strengths do you see in our current senior assignment?
6. What weaknesses?
7. Based on your experiences with senior assignments, are you able to measure the relative success of each student with each goal?
8. If not, what goal(s) is/are problematic?
9. How can we resolve that problem, if you have identified one?

APPENDIX   II: INTERVIEW FOR STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

1. What things should criminal justice students with a Bachelor's Degree know about criminal justice in order to have professional success?

2. Do you feel that you have gotten these skills? Which classes and activities contributed to your development of these skills?

3. How well do you think that the senior assignment allows you to demonstrate the skills you have developed in our criminal justice system?

4. Do you agree with the skills that your professors want for you?

5. Other comments?

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