Featured School:

Kennesaw State University
The Coles College of Business
Kennesaw, Georgia, United States

www.coles.kennesaw.edu

March 2012
AACSB International
Kennesaw State University, Coles College of Business

The Assurance of Learning (AoL) Council at Kennesaw State University’s Coles College of Business oversees a comprehensive process to assess and enhance student learning. In pursuit of its commitment to continuously improve the College’s AoL processes, the AoL Council focuses on the effective integration of various tools, such as the Capsim CompXM® simulation and the Digital Measures repository, as well as the engagement of faculty and students.

Recently, Dr. Kathy Schwaig, Interim Dean and Professor of Information Systems, and Dr. Hope Baker, AoL Director, provided a glimpse into the college’s AoL activities during a discussion with AACSB researcher Hanna Drozdowski. Their insights reveal several of the innovative ways the Coles College uses its resources to gather, organize, and analyze AoL data to make improvements at the school.

The diagram below conveys a general overview of the AoL hierarchy within the Coles College:

Hanna Drozdowski (HD): The Assurance of Learning Council seems to play an important role in the assessment activities at the Coles College of Business. What prompted the creation of the AoL Council and whom does it comprise?

Kathy Schwaig (KS) and Hope Baker (HB): The AoL Council was officially created in the fall of 2004. From 2002 to 2004, ad-hoc faculty committees performed thorough reviews of the MBA and BBA programs and redefined the program goals and objectives for each. As AACSB and our regional accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), moved to an increased focus on direct measures of assessment, the Coles College AoL Council was assembled to develop and oversee a comprehensive assurance of learning process. The current membership includes 11 faculty members: an AoL coordinator for each academic program within the College, a Program Assessment...
coordinator, and the Council chair. All of the departments in the College are represented by at least one Council member and have a designated liaison for communication and compliance purposes. For example, the current AoL coordinator for the BBA Program is also the representative for the Economics, Finance, and Quantitative Analysis Department.

**HD:** What are some of the Council members’ responsibilities with regard to AoL? What other roles do they serve at the College?

**KS and HB:** All members of the AoL Council are full-time faculty. As AoL coordinators for their respective programs, Council members oversee the assessment process and provide guidance for those involved in assessment. They are ultimately responsible for the collection of data results and supporting documents, which are used to create reports for AACSB and SACS, as needed. Within each academic program, course-embedded assessment is conducted within all or a sample of core course sections. Each core course has a designated course coordinator who works with faculty teaching the course to develop assessment plans, vehicles, and rubrics. The course coordinators also lead faculty meetings in which assessment results are discussed and improvement plans are developed for specific courses. The AoL coordinator conducts 1-2 meetings per year at which all course coordinators for the program gather to discuss the overall program. This approach has helped eliminate the “silo” effect within the BBA and MBA programs by initiating dialogue across disciplines.

**HD:** The AoL process at the College seems to be very organized, as suggested by the organization of the AoL Council. It also seems that the College uses a number of tools to help make the process efficient. Can you expand on how the College uses the Digital Measures System, as mentioned in the AACSB Effective Practices Survey and the College’s website?

**KS and HB:** Digital Measures (DM) is the repository for all assessment results and related documents. Before we adopted DM, these results were stored in various Council members’ filing cabinets. Course-embedded assessment vehicles, rubrics, and results are loaded into DM at the course level. In addition, descriptions of the AoL process (who, what, how, and when), plans for improvement, evidence of improvements, and evidence of closing the loop are all loaded into the course AoL sites. This allows for the creation of various levels of reports. We can create reports of assessment results by course, program, learning goal, etc. Over the past year we have been working with Digital Measures to create a new and improved AoL site which should be operational within the next month. With the new format, we will be able to track assessment results by type of course (online, hybrid, or face-to-face), location (on-campus or one of the satellite locations), length of term (semester, 8 week summer term, 4 week summer term, 2 week mini-semester, study abroad, etc.), faculty type (full or part time), time of day a course is taught, etc.
HD: How is the use of Digital Measures organized within the College and when was it implemented?

KS and HB: We use three different modules within DM: One is the module used for tracking AoL, as explained earlier. Another is Activity Insight, which allows our faculty to input information about their activities related to teaching, research, service, and administration. We can use this information for annual reviews as well as our maintenance of accreditation efforts. The third module is Student Feedback, which allows us to collect course evaluations from every student in every course each term.

We implemented the Activity Insight and Student Feedback modules in 2006. Within the system, we can create customized reports that generate annual review documents for faculty each year, which include not only their research and service but also student feedback data. In 2008, we implemented the AoL module which has greatly simplified the collection and compilation of the data. AoL data is not reported, however, with faculty names, and this information does not integrate with the reports generated for faculty annual reviews. The university is now in the process of implementing the Student Feedback and Activity Insight modules across the campus.

HD: The College’s use of simulation tools seems particularly interesting. Can you tell us what prompted the Coles College of Business to introduce simulations, such as the Capsim CompXM® tool, to aid in the assessment of student learning?

KS and HB: When we first began the AoL program assessment process back in 2004-2005, our research indicated that there were only two valid approaches to reliably measure individual student improvement across time – an assessment center approach or a simulation. The literature clearly warned against using standardized tests because of the tendency over time for faculty to “teach to the test.” Initially, we pursued the assessment center approach and contracted with Bill Bommer from the University of Southern Illinois to provide a rather sophisticated 4-hour inbox exercise that also had video recorded individual activity (presentations and group interactions), which were scored by industrial organization psychology graduates and candidates through the Illiad Assessment Center. We were highly satisfied with the process and the results from the assessment center. However, while the assessment center provided excellent measures for three of our learning goals, it was not giving us much insight into three other goals.

Some of the faculty had been using Foundation® and Capstone®, two simulations from MSI Incorporated, in their strategy classes. After further review, MSI Inc’s new assessment product, CompXM®, was selected as an alternative method for assessing across all six of our goals. This approach seemed quite promising in that we had the opportunity to add our own questions specific to our
learning goals to CompXM®. In the summer of 2005, questions were gathered from faculty with the intent of providing a comprehensive review of our Learning Goals in the program.

What we were looking for was an approach to assessment that would allow us to determine for each program (1) whether our learning goals were under control (system consistency and reliability), and (2) whether they were improving over time (continuous improvement). During these past six years we've been able to:

- Overcome both faculty and student resistance to the simulation as a tool of program assessment. Acceptance now appears to be high.
- Establish measures of student performance for specific objectives that are tracked over time.
- Improve the validity of our question set.
- Determine areas in the curriculum that needed change based upon a pattern of low student scores to valid questions.

**HD:** How are the curricular areas that need change identified?

**KS and HB:** Results from CompXM® identify specific areas of poor performance over time. Both the College AoL Council and faculty members review these results to determine if they are the result of poor or confusing questions. If the question is found to be valid, then changes are made in appropriate courses to cover the skills and knowledge needed for students to master this goal. During the past three years 14 curriculum changes in the BBA program resulted from “not meeting expectation” scores in the program assessment. It will take two years for the results of these changes to show up in the CompXM® results. Also, additional questions were developed in 2011 to improve the reliability of scores for certain program goals.

**HD:** Do all program offerings and/or degree levels (BBA, MBA, EMBA, DBA) use this tool, or are other simulation methods also used? Are there significant differences in the assessment processes for each program and/or degree level?

**KS and HB:** The BBA, MBA, and WebMBA use the simulation and CompXM® for program assessment. Undergraduates make use of the Foundation® simulation and the MBA and WebMBA graduate programs make use of the Capstone® simulation (both are part of CompXM®). Processes for all three programs are very similar. The major difference is that the undergraduate program’s program assessment is based upon the Foundation® simulation and the graduate programs are based upon the Capstone® simulation. There are significant differences in complexity and difficulty between the two simulations:

**Foundation®** is a complete introduction to business, demonstrating the cause and effect relationships between functional areas and operations in a competitive, interactive environment.
Students take over a simulated company with one product straddling two market segments. In each round decisions are made in Research & Development, Production, Marketing, and Finance. Additional modules can be activated in Human Resources, Total Quality Management & Sustainability, and Ethics. Foundation® can be delivered as a tournament (team based exercise) or a footrace (individual exercise) and can be used in the classroom, online or both - depending on the course structure and syllabus. Our faculty use both.

**Capstone®** provides a complete, interactive experience in the development and execution of business strategy and tactics. Capstone® is an opportunity to use every key lever of business to build a profitable and sustainable enterprise. Students take over a simulated company with five products, one in each of five market segments. The basic model requires decisions in Production, Research & Development, Marketing, and Finance. Additional modules can be activated in Total Quality Management and Sustainability; Human Resources; Advanced Marketing; Labor Negotiation and Ethics. Capstone® is available as a tournament (team-based exercise) or a footrace (individual exercise) and can be completed in the classroom, online or both - depending on the course structure and syllabus. All of our graduate faculty rely upon the tournament version of the simulation.

**HD:** Can you provide us with an example of a change the Coles College has identified and made through its assurance of learning process?

**KS and HB:** This is hard because there are so many examples we could provide. One example is a change made within a course and is described in our 2008 ACCT 2100 Course Coordinator Report:

“In ACCT 2100, measurement of each AoL objective was built into the three tests planned for Fall 2008. Common questions on all ACCT 2100 tests provided faculty a preliminary view of the level of student learning; this preliminary view helped each faculty member know where to focus future class time with the plan that student learning levels will increase by the time the ‘official’ AoL measurement quizzes were given at the end of the semester. The faculty team examined individual questions on the Spring 2008 AoL quizzes and identified those that were most frequently missed by students and determined that PE and current ratio computations were a problem. This information was used when selecting homework and other common ACCT 2100 activities for Fall 2008.”

A second example deals with an initiative undertaken as a result of a program-wide assessment. In conversations among the course coordinators for the BBA Program, it became clear that we could be doing a better job integrating the curriculum across disciplines. Several initiatives have evolved from this. One of the course coordinators started a research project with several others in which they are attempting to develop a system of linkages between topics covered in the core courses. The goal is to determine where certain topics are currently covered and where we have gaps or opportunities to improve. The
main focus of the Coles College Teaching and Learning Community this year is integration of the curriculum. So, we have several faculty groups working on related tools, techniques, and strategies to be implemented within the next year. The really exciting thing about these groups of faculty is that they are inter-disciplinary; diverse in age, rank, and workload balance (of research, teaching and service); and very committed to improving student learning.

**HD:** It seems as though Coles stresses the importance of maintaining faculty and student awareness of the AoL process. Can you expand on this? Why is this important and how has addressing this benefited the College in its assurance of learning?

**KS and HB:** Faculty-involvement is the basis of the AoL process in the Coles College. As course-embedded assessment is a major piece of our data collection component, we are reliant upon faculty to administer the assessment vehicles and collect the results. Also, without faculty buy-in and commitment, attempts to revise the curriculum for the sake of improving student learning would be futile. We conduct course-embedded assessment in every program during the fall term; this encompasses 55 core courses. In addition to the 11 members of the AoL Council, there are 35 course coordinators (some folks are course coordinators for multiple courses) working to make this happen. We have never counted the actual number of faculty involved in the administration of the assessments, but it is a large proportion of the College of Business faculty.

In 2004, we developed puzzle graphics to promote the learning goals and to illustrate how the goals piece together to encompass an academic program. The puzzles were color-coded by program. Large individual pieces of the BBA puzzle were on display throughout the building. Faculty were required to include the puzzles along with the learning objectives relevant to their course in all syllabi. Thus, we had conversations with students about the learning goals and how they related to the BBA, MBA, etc. curricula. When we revised the learning goals and objectives last year, the puzzles also needed to be changed. We decided to take this opportunity to develop a fresh-look, so we are in the process of developing a new AoL graphic that should be ready to roll out next fall.

**HD:** Can you briefly explain the process through which faculty engage with AoL at the College?

**KS and HB:** Faculty who teach core courses within programs meet multiple times a year to discuss AoL-related issues. In most cases, the course coordinator develops the assessment vehicles and associated rubrics and distributes them to the faculty teaching the course for feedback. Once approved by all, the assessment vehicles are administered in sections selected for assessment. For most courses, we assess in 100% of the sections. Some faculty groups have elected to collect samples of at least 25% of students enrolled. Most course coordinators have created result templates in Excel in which instructors provide the
results of their assessments. The course coordinator then enters the results for all sections into Digital Measures.

In summary, faculty involved in assessment have the following responsibilities:

1. Work with the course coordinator to finalize the assessment vehicles and rubrics;
2. Administer the assessment vehicles during the fall term (usually) and enter the necessary performance information into the results template for the course coordinator; and
3. Meet with all faculty teaching the course once or twice a year to discuss assessment results, improvements that need to be made, the effectiveness of past changes, etc.

Participation in the AoL process is recognized in the Annual Review Process. However, the administration in the Coles College has been very clear that assessment results are NOT to be tied to individuals. Faculty names are not included in the data input. We have also really tried to take a non-intrusive approach to course-embedded assessment by encouraging faculty to use assignments they were already using to assess students. For example, tests in the quantitative courses are problem-based, so the assessment vehicles are problems very similar to ones already included in exams and homework sets. We just ask that everyone use the same three problems on their tests or homework every fall. In the larger sections of the lower-level Economics courses, faculty have always given multiple-choice exams, so the AoL assessment consists of sets of multiple-choice questions to be included in exams in all sections. We can do this because we assess every goal in multiple courses, so we end up with a variety of assessment vehicles for each goal.

**HD:** In closing, can you tell us what you regard as one of the most significant aspects of AoL at the Coles College of Business?

**KS and HB:** The most important aspect of our AoL process is the strong commitment to the process and to continuous improvement on the part of our administrators. This positive attitude permeates throughout the College. We still have many reluctant faculty members but most of them realize the importance of AoL, whether it be for accreditation purposes only or to improve student learning. We had to work hard and fast in the beginning to get the process up and running. After our accreditation maintenance review in 2009, we stood back, took a deep breath and re-examined the entire process. We have made some substantial improvements in several areas: better alignment of learning goals and objectives with program, College and University goals; restructuring of AOL Council to represent academic programs rather than departments; and improvements in the program assessment and major field exam question sets. The most important message we are trying to get out to the faculty now is that “AoL is not about checking off boxes for accreditation. We now have a lot of data and the ability to capture richer data, so we must use this to improve the learning experience for the students.”
Acknowledgements: AACSB International is grateful for the assistance of Dr. Kathy Schwaig, Interim Dean and Professor of Information Systems, and Dr. Hope Baker, AoL Director and Professor of Decision Sciences at the Coles College of Business at Kennesaw State University.