Featured School:
United States Coast Guard Academy
Department of Management
New London, Connecticut, United States

www.uscga.edu

May 2011
AACSB International
United States Coast Guard Academy

The United States Coast Guard Academy (USCGA) is one of the five U.S. service academies whose graduates enter military service as commissioned officers. Although the nature of their educational experience is therefore markedly different from civilian institutions, the academic programs of the USCGA are nevertheless designed to offer their graduates a well-rounded education, applicable to their future careers both in and out of the Coast Guard.

According to Captain Paul Szwed, USCG, Professor of Decision Sciences at the Department of Management, the faculty of the Department have worked for many years to make assessment an integral part of their operations. Their assurance of learning processes have been continuously developed and refined in order to ensure the quality of their cadets’ education. In particular, due to the military nature of education at the Academy, the ability to assess leadership skills and qualities is an important part of their overall mission. Additionally, because the Department is relatively small, the ability to “leverage size to assure success” has become a noted strength of the faculty.

As the USCGA Department of Management includes a total of 12 faculty members, offering a single undergraduate degree program with 40-50 graduates per year, Capt. Szwed notes that their ability to “narrowly focus” their learning goals and outcomes gives them an advantage of agility that larger schools may not have. Because the Department does not have enough faculty to form various committees, all faculty members are necessarily deeply involved in the assurance of learning process.

However, their small size can also be a double-edged sword. Since the faculty is essentially “one deep” in any given discipline, according to Capt. Szwed, each faculty member can easily see the results of his or her individual contributions in the assurance of learning data. When students don’t perform to expectations in a given area, the faculty band together to reinforce that learning outcome across courses. Capt. Szwed says that this collaborative, interdisciplinary aspect of their assurance of learning processes is necessary, and highly beneficial, in creating a high degree of faculty cooperation and ownership of the process.

Beginning the Evolution

Back in 1996, the Department of Management at the USCGA was just beginning to think about the possibility of seeking AACSB accreditation. Capt. Szwed says that the faculty knew that they would be required to assess their ability to meet their learning goals, although they did not initially know what shape that process would take. Therefore, they decided to begin with the popular ETS Major Field Tests and EBI Student Satisfaction Survey, in order to get a sense for where improvements and alterations to goals were needed.
Once the Department’s accreditation journey had officially begun, the faculty began the process of developing learning goals and outcomes to meet AACSB standards. Capt. Szwed says that in 2001, as their initial accreditation visit began to loom closer, the entire faculty agreed that the best way to proceed was by adopting learning goals and outcomes aligned with the Academy’s institutional shared learning outcomes, as illustrated in Table 1 below. The Department chose to combine the Academy’s goals for leadership abilities with those for development of personal and professional qualities, and to interpret “knowledge” as “business competencies,” so as to develop a framework that would give cadets a broad exposure to business disciplines and principles which they could then apply in both Coast Guard and civilian administrative activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United States Coast Guard Academy Shared Learning Outcomes</th>
<th>Department of Management Learning Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership Abilities:</strong> Graduates shall be military and civilian leaders of character who understand and apply sound leadership principles and competencies. This includes the ability to direct, develop, and evaluate diverse groups; to function effectively and ethically as a leader, follower, facilitator or member of a team; and to conduct constructive assessment of self and others.</td>
<td><strong>Leadership:</strong> Graduates of the Management major shall be leaders of character who understand and demonstrate sound leadership principles and competencies. Graduates shall function effectively as leaders, followers, and facilitators. Graduates shall be able to conduct critical self-reflection and assessment. Graduates shall be able to direct, develop, and evaluate diverse individuals and groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal and Professional Qualities:</strong> Graduates shall maintain a professional lifestyle that embraces the Coast Guard Core Values of Honor, Respect and Devotion to Duty, includes physical fitness and wellness, and demonstrates the customs, courtesies and social skills befitting members of a maritime military service. Graduates shall also have a sense of Coast Guard maritime heritage and an understanding of the roles that the Coast Guard and the nation play in the global environment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication Effectiveness:</strong> Graduates shall be able to write clearly, concisely, persuasively, and grammatically; prepare and deliver well-organized and polished oral presentations; read and understand a variety of written materials; listen thoughtfully to oral arguments; respect diverse opinions; and formulate reasoned alternatives and responses.</td>
<td><strong>Communication:</strong> Graduates of the Management major shall be good listeners. Graduates shall be able to write clearly, concisely, and effectively. Graduates shall be able to deliver effective practiced, professional oral presentations and be able to speak confidently extemporaneously.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ability to Acquire, Integrate and Expand Knowledge:</strong> Graduates shall have developed the motivations and skills for “lifelong learning.” Graduates shall be able to create a working conceptual framework that lends itself to continued expansion. To accomplish this, graduates shall be able to efficiently access a broad range of information sources, locate and interpret desired data reliably, employ appropriate technology, and integrate knowledge. Graduating cadets shall also</td>
<td><strong>Business Competencies:</strong> Graduates of the Management major shall understand and demonstrate the following business competencies: (a) accounting, (b) economics, (c) management, (d) quantitative analysis, (e) finance, (f) marketing, (g) international issues, (h) legal and social environment issues, and (i) management of information systems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
have acquired and integrated the specific in-depth knowledge required of both an academic major and an entry-level professional assignment. The Leadership Development Center course graduates shall have accomplished all program objectives.

**Critical Thinking Ability:** Graduates shall be able to accomplish complex tasks in a broad range of contexts by applying the basic skills of critical analysis, systems thinking, quantitative reasoning, risk management, creative problem solving, and value-based decision-making.

**Critical Thinking:** Graduates of the Management major shall be able to effectively integrate their knowledge and skills of/in leadership, communications, technology, and business competencies into a rational decision-making and problem-solving framework.

In 2003, the Department codified its strategic plan, assigned its first assessment coordinator (which had previously been done by the head of the Department), and identified its measures, further refining what Capt. Szwed refers to as the Department’s “first generation” assurance of learning system. He describes this system as a “decomposition model”: learning goals are derived from the school’s mission; learning outcomes are derived from the goals; and from the outcomes, the faculty choose component parts to address during the year. This became part of an annual process. The faculty would hold strategic sessions to identify priorities for the year in the fall, and in spring would look back on the year’s collected data to determine how they did relative to those goals. Through those years until their achievement of initial accreditation in 2005, several faculty also went to AACSB assessment seminars, and brought what they learned back to the Department.

**Continuous Evolution**

The Department developed what Capt. Szwed calls its “second generation” assurance of learning system in preparation for its 2010 maintenance of accreditation visit. By 2008, performance indicators, thresholds, and standard rubrics had been developed, and by 2009 the Department had created a formal assessment plan. Capt. Szwed describes the “second generation” system as more mature, with a stronger selection component, refined learning goals based on previous assessment data, and a codified cycle of activities including regular training, reviews, and outcomes seminars in which all faculty participate.

Having passed its first maintenance of accreditation visit, the Department of Management is now working on a “third generation” assurance of learning system. The third generation system retains the earlier decomposition model, but is intended to be more holistic, involving student review boards modeled on law practice reviews of junior associates to determine if they will become junior partners. Capt. Szwed says the Department pilot-tested the third generation assurance of learning process in 2008-9, but decided to put it on hold for awhile after it did not initially function as smoothly as planned. The Department also tested an online system for collecting and analyzing assessment data in 2010, and they pursued a legal review to ensure concerns regarding privacy would not become problematic.
Now, however, the faculty is examining select case studies of graduating students, and in the spring of 2011 they plan to do a “beta” test on 2nd and 3rd year cadets (rising juniors and rising seniors). Ultimately, they plan to be able to have an array of interventions to facilitate better articulation of performance among faculty and students across years and cohorts, including a writing center, speaking or writing competitions, and the aforementioned review boards.

**Leadership and “Closing the Loop”**

Assessing learning goals related to the nebulous concept of leadership is a perennially difficult endeavor for business schools, and this is no less true for the USCGA. However, because of the military nature of education at the Academy, the ability to assess leadership skills and qualities is an important part of the school’s overall mission. Indeed, according to Capt. Szwed, the assessment of leadership became a textbook example of how the Department’s assurance of learning process effectively “closes the loop.”

The Department tried to plot a cost-benefit analysis of leadership assessment on various points. Capt. Szwed says that, particularly for leadership, they found the relationship to be a linear one, in that benefit to the school and its students rises in conjunction with the cost. The Department’s annual discretionary operating budget (which does not include personnel, support, technology, energy, or other overhead costs) is approximately 75,000 USD, and roughly one-third of that is devoted to assurance of learning. As such, it is vital to ensure that the data gleaned is put to good use.

The Department completed a major curriculum review based on its assurance of learning data in time for its 2010 maintenance of accreditation visit. The faculty quickly noticed they did not have a good unifying model for assessing leadership across classrooms, which created an overly heterogeneous approach for their preferences. They made learning objectives requiring knowledge of and the ability to apply the 28 Coast Guard leadership competencies, creating a model of leadership comprised of knowledge, behavior, and the interaction of the two. The Department put faculty members onto the Academy’s institutional leadership committee, known as the Guide to Officer and Leader Development (GOLD) program, and used this framework to reinforce leadership competencies throughout the business program.

The Department also observed that their cadets did not have sufficient opportunity to reflect on leadership and what it means. To address this, they added a number of assessment measures. A 360 degree feedback program on leadership is now part of the sophomore year. Cadets now have course-embedded opportunities for reflection on leadership and things they have done, both in class and with faculty mentors. Senior-year cadets now stand before a faculty panel and defend why they believe in the importance of a particular leadership philosophy. Capt. Szwed says that the Department is particularly
proud of its leadership assessment processes, and that having this model has shaped how they deliver material for the better.

**Indirect Benefits of Assessment**

Capt. Szwed says that performing the assurance of learning functions for AACSB accreditation also helps the Department in indirect ways. Foremost among them is by allowing the faculty to demonstrate to the Academy’s leadership precisely how their budgetary resources translate to learning outcomes. The USCGA as a whole has only eight major degree fields available\(^4\), and it has an official requirement that 70% of its graduates be from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields. Since management is not a STEM field, the ability to show cause and effect with regard to resources is highly useful to the Department.

This is particularly true given the proportion of its operating budget that is dedicated to assurance of learning activities, such as: the aforementioned ETS and EBI standardized tests as well as the more recently introduced Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Assessment (WGCTA); faculty attendance at AACSB seminars and workshops; and student learning opportunities such as case competitions and forums\(^5\). As a result of their ability to clearly demonstrate effectiveness in “closing the loop,” the faculty has been able to grow its budget 100% over the last five years, according to Capt. Szwed. AACSB accreditation has thus become “a point of pride and validation” of the Department’s efforts, he says.

---

*Acknowledgements: AACSB International is grateful for the assistance of Capt. Paul Szwed, D.Sc. P.M.P., Professor of Decision Sciences, U.S. Coast Guard Academy.*
End Notes