Assessment: Are Grades Enough?

We sometimes hear the phrase, “Grades are not assessment.” Occasionally, this statement generates considerable discussion among faculty members who question why grades cannot be used to determine student success. After all, don’t the grades that students receive at the end of a course indicate what they know or can do? So, why aren’t grades enough? To answer this question we need to first look at the difference between grades and assessment.

Grades are indicators of the extent to which students have met the instructors’ expectations and requirements for a course. They are based on the grading policies of individual faculty members, who may include components not directly related to specific student learning outcomes. Examples of these components are attendance, bonus points for participating in a community service project, and extra credit. Some instructors grade on a curve while others have a fixed standard. Even instructors who teach the same course and have common exams and syllabi may have different grading policies with different weights for the course assignments and tests. One section’s “A” may not be the same as another section’s “A.” Grades may indicate how well a student performs in a course, but they may not clearly indicate what a student knows or can do.

By contrast, assessment places the focus squarely on evidence that students can demonstrate knowledge or a skill linked directly to specific learning outcomes. A numeric score connected to a student’s performance on specific measures represents evidence of the knowledge or skill the student has gained.

So the question remains, “Can grades be used for assessment?”

In order to use grading for assessment of student learning outcomes, instructors should ensure that the assessment tool actually measures the student learning outcome being assessed. The projects, assignments, or tests given for a grade must be measured with a tool that states explicitly in writing the criteria for evaluating the student work, that provides systematic ways to identify student strengths and weaknesses, and that provides information usable for program improvement. Used properly, grading can be valuable for direct assessment of learning outcomes.

When an appropriate grading process is used, the focus is on student achievement of specific learning outcomes, which should lead to better teaching and program improvement.

Dr. Irma Woods
Faculty Coordinator of Assessment of Student Learning
Professor of Child Development/Early Childhood
QEP UPDATE

The Quality Enhancement Plan Research and Design Committee met on Friday, January 15th. The discussion focused on four primary elements of the project: timeline, preliminary plan, budget, and title.

1. Timeline: Throughout Spring 2010, the committee plans to continue reviewing the literature and working on other elements of the QEP. The chief goal of the spring, however, will be to complete the draft of the narrative that describes the QEP implementation and to distribute it to the College’s constituency groups for input. The Developmental Education Council, the Faculty Council, the Chairs’ Council, the Exempt Employees Council, and the Nonexempt Employees Council, as well as other College and community groups, will all have an opportunity to provide their feedback on the QEP. By June, the committee will deliver to the SACS liaison a draft of the QEP, and by fall the project will have its kickoff.

2. Preliminary Plan: The committee has developed a rough plan for each of the next five years, and each plan takes into account the personnel that will be required to implement the QEP, the curriculum, the required professional development, and the necessary facilities.

3. Budget: Budget meetings are currently taking place with Fiscal Services and the Provost, and the QEP budget continues to develop.

4. Title: The committee is working on a title for the QEP that will “sell the product.” Don Craig is asking the Business faculty with marketing expertise to help the committee find a title for the QEP that can be easily “marketed.”

In short, the College’s Quality Enhancement Plan continues to progress, and we anticipate an exciting Fall 2010 kickoff.

Dr. Patricia Walter
QEP Faculty Coordinator
Assistant Professor of Communications, Languages, and Reading

You can find a great deal of information about the SACS reaffirmation of accreditation project at Del Mar College by linking to:

www.delmar.edu/sacs2011/index.html