The consequences of accreditation and outcomes assessment for college foreign language programs
Accreditation and assessment mandates

In the U.S.:

Accreditation in higher education is defined as a collegial process based on self- and peer assessment for public accountability and improvement of academic quality. Peers assess the quality of an institution or academic program and assist the faculty and staff in improvement. An accreditation of an academic program or an entire institution typically involves three major activities:

- SELF-STUDY
- PEER REVIEW
- COMMISSION JUDGMENT

Accreditation and assessment mandates

US Department of Education “DOE”

Council for Higher Education Accreditation “CHEA”

Recognize Regional Accreditation Agencies

Middle States Association - MSA

New England Association - NEASC

North Central Association - NCA

Northwest Association - NWCCU

Southern Association - SACS

Western Association - WASC

Colleges & Universities
Accreditation and assessment mandates

Primary emphasis → Ensuring educational effectiveness

Primary indicator → Student learning outcomes

Primary mechanism → SLO assessment

Assessment mandate, e.g., WASC (2008):

The program has a fully-articulated, sustainable, multi-year assessment plan that describes when and how each outcome will be assessed and how improvements based on findings will be implemented. The plan is routinely examined and revised, as needed.
Accreditation and assessment mandates

**SLO Assessment Approach**
- State program or course learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, dispositions)
- Adopt, adapt, or develop assessment instruments and procedures
- Collect and analyze data on a regular basis (e.g., at the end of the program)
- Use findings for improving curriculum, instruction, and outcomes themselves

**FL Program Example**
- Students will write FL academic essays at college admissions proficiency level
- Portfolio of best works samples presented formally by graduating seniors
- Annual assessment by faculty and community FL teams
- Strength/weakness review by curricular committee; course changes proposed

Assessment operationalized for each program
Accreditation and assessment mandates

Mandate to assess, yes, but...

- Local ownership over what outcomes, how assessed
- Internal focus and use for reform
- Intended to engender a culture of evidence & self-regulation

Institution Reviews
Accreditors Ascertain
Accreditation and assessment mandates

Top 3 sources of pressure for assessment in college FL programs:

1. University administration
2. The dean
3. Accreditation process

“As part of its re-accreditation, the university has required all undergraduate programs to create and implement outcomes-oriented assessment plans.”

(survey respondent)

See also disciplinary discussions about outcomes assessment...

- **MLJ (2006):** “The outcomes of collegiate FL programs: Specifications, assessment, evaluation”
- **ADFL Bulletin (2008):** “Owning up to ownership of foreign language program outcomes assessment”
- **MLA (2008):** “Language and literature in a liberal arts education”
Challenge 1: ‘Valuing’ foreign language education
Mandate: State student learning outcomes

So, we have to agree on what students should be learning by the end of their studies.

The problem is that students aren’t learning the FL well enough to take my literature courses... might as well teach in English!

Isn’t there some set of standards or guidelines that will do the job for us?

The problem is that FL development takes a long time & good instruction if advanced learning is the goal!

What’s an outcome?

Who is that?

When’s lunch?
Mandate: State student learning outcomes

...for example...

Knowledge: Students demonstrate a familiarity with the current events, the popular culture, and the social structures of the countries/cultures in which the target languages are spoken. - U. Evansville, Dept. of Foreign Languages

Skills: Students express themselves clearly, accurately and effectively in a variety of communicative contexts and situations; sustain an advanced level of spoken interaction with native speakers in academic, professional, and informal settings; prepare and deliver a well-organized, logical oral presentation; formulate and support ideas and opinions; respond to complex lines of reasoning. - Notre Dame Spanish

Dispositions: Graduates will view themselves as agents for promoting understanding and dialogue between the Islamic World and the West, with the ability to articulate cultural differences between the two particularly in regard to politeness and interpersonal relations, and to interpret current Middle Eastern events from a variety of viewpoints, explaining how others view those events. - BYU Arabic
Consequences for FL teaching and learning

State SLOs: Positive consequences

- Initiates program-internal and FL professional dialogue about education
- Lays bare intellectual gaps, rifts, challenges to be resolved
- Establishes agreed upon basis for curriculum and instruction
- Enables communication about FL studies value to external audiences
- Creates collaborative community with focus on student learning

“Focusing on student outcomes [...] has resulted in a cluster of new pedagogies [...] Starting with the outcomes that students are to achieve at each course level, we have created evaluation criteria, assessment instruments, and course content that are designed to help them incrementally improve toward those targeted goals in linguistic, cultural, and analytic abilities.”

Windham (2008, p. 35)
Consequences for FL teaching and learning

State SLOs: **Negative consequences**

- Spawns reactionary attitudes, fear, misunderstanding
- ‘Extra’ work encourages simplistic responses
- Supports managerial/industrial model of education, not humanistic
- Waters down what gets taught and learned
- Prioritizes instrumental aspects of FL education

“These emphasis compels us to justify our values and methods by translating them into the quantitative, quasi-scientific methods... We are not asked to identify what we want our students to know or understand or be prepared intellectually to grapple with. Rather, we are asked for the behaviors that our students will exhibit that will demonstrate their learning—and we are told that we must develop a quantitative instrument that will measure these behaviors.”

Berger (2008)
Challenge 2: ‘Doing’ assessment
Mandate: Assess FL learning outcomes

- How do we ‘measure’ ineffable outcomes?
- Commercial or home-made?
- Direct or indirect?
- When do we assess?
- Who collects, analyzes, interprets?

CBTs, IBTs

Student learning outcomes

Portfolios

Performance-based assessments

Essay exams

Surveys, self-assessments

Rating scales, rubrics

Interviews
Mandate: Assess FL learning outcomes

...for example...

Knowledge (current events, popular culture, social structures): Portfolio of written work → Public presentation of portfolio, with Q&A → Internal/external committee review → Survey-based self-assessment. - U. Evansville, Dept. of Foreign Languages


Dispositions (intercultural competence): Study abroad exit interviews on cultural differences, local viewpoints on current events → Survey-based self-assessment of intercultural dispositions outcome. - BYU Arabic
Consequences for FL teaching and learning

Assessing: **Positive consequences**

- Promotes program ownership of assessment, not external
- Demands specificity of expectations for FL development and achievement
- Provides clear targets for teachers and students, exposes fuzzy thinking
- Shows—evidences—students’ actual knowledge, abilities, dispositions
- Encourages critical appraisal, revision of all assessment practices
- Supports FL studies scholarship, professional development

“Assessment in this kind of a context is, I would almost say probably an indispensable aspect in order to clarify any number of things. Because it is in the discourse about assessment and how we would do that that our knowledge became articulated or the holes in that knowledge became clearer to ourselves, or the cover-ups that we had engaged in were no longer possible if we wanted to be honest with ourselves about it.”

Byrnes (personal communication; see also 2002, 2008)
Consequences for FL teaching and learning

Assessing: **Negative consequences**

- Overwhelms or dissociates those not accustomed to assessment activities
- Reverts quickly to behavioral objectives, ‘measurable’ constructs
- Prioritizes traditional assessment formats & mono-methodology
- Advances a ‘just get it done’ attitude
- Narrows the curriculum, where teaching and assessment not aligned
- Identifies weaknesses we are not prepared to deal with

“To design and administer (intellectually honest) assessment plans that will measure such capabilities with a dozen or more standardized ‘learning objectives’ is next to impossible” [leading to] “pestilent repercussions” [for the truly valued learning objectives that constitute the liberal arts, in that it] “discourages teaching such skills because they are difficult to measure”.

Barrington (2003)
Challenge 3: ‘Using’ assessment
Mandate: Act on assessment findings

• How do we interpret findings?
• What do we do with all this data?
• How do we communicate it?
• Who makes decisions about what on its basis?
• Then what happens?

The Dean

The Department

Curriculum committee

Students

The public

Assessment coordinator

Allocate resources?

X  Y  A

Outcomes

Degree value?

Improve assessments?

USERS

USES

Allocate resources?
Mandate: Act on assessment findings

...for example...

Assessment finding (oral presentations): Student performances not reflective of expected levels of speaking ability after 2-year German requirement. Adjust instruction in all classes to 75% spoken discourse. Windham (2008)


Assessment finding (SOPIs): Students meet or exceed oral proficiency expectations in all languages. Request funding and professional development support to sustain program. Bernhardt (2006)

Assessment finding (FL teacher licensure exams): Students need multiple tries to pass the cultural understanding and oral proficiency assessments. Require two cultural content courses, replace English-language content courses with Spanish-only, complete one semester of advanced language course prior to exams. Carstens-Wickham (2008)
Consequences for FL teaching and learning

**Acting: Positive consequences**

- Revises curriculum and instruction on the basis of evidence
- Improves student learning in targeted, valued ways
- Justifies requests for resources
- Demonstrates value of FL studies to students, institution, public
- Supports programmatic, educational thinking in FL studies discipline
- Generates cycles of iterative assessment and improvement

“...[M]ore students are attracted to our program because the improvements in teaching and curriculum that grew out of the assessment process, which include increased emphasis on oral proficiency and culture for all languages, have enabled them to better move toward their goal of communicating fluently in the target language and acquiring an improved understanding not only of the target culture but also of their own.”

Carstens-Wickham (2008, p. 42)
Consequences for FL teaching and learning

Acting: **Negative consequences**

- Consumes considerable time and energy to follow through
- Alienates faculty and students, where not used
- Leads to low, easily achieved standards for learning
- Belies easy identification of what needs to ‘be fixed’
- Reinforces managerial approach to higher education
- Detracts from other scholarly activities

“**But at the same time, new issues have emerged that question the effectiveness of our assessment instruments at giving us the kind of evidence we need for drawing valid conclusions about our program. In other words, we have found program evaluation to be a messier affair than we had anticipated, and we now know that more challenges lie ahead of us with the new evaluation cycle.”**

In pursuit of positive consequences through outcomes assessment
Is it *de facto* language education policy?

**Yes**: Major impetus for FL professional organizations to articulate the values of FL studies in higher education (i.e., a focus on outcomes)

**Yes**: Has brought about changes in how (some) college FL programs think about language teaching and learning.

**But**: The mandate itself is unlike other assessment-driven policies: it does not dictate what to assess or how—it won’t do the work for us—rather it seeks to reform the ways in which FL studies programs are thinking and acting educationally on the basis of locally meaningful evidence.

**But**: More than one way to handle a horse (or a mandate): considerable misunderstanding about outcomes assessment, often perpetuated by accreditors themselves, so the transformative reform potential is often missed.
Assessment changes everything

Gerald Graff, MLA President, on Outcomes Assessment

- What we expect our students to learn: all of them, not just the best
- Requires us to think and act as a team, in relation to our colleagues
- Requires us to create genuine programs, not collections of isolated courses

“Rather than reject assessment and circle the wagons, however, we should actively involve ourselves in the process, not only to shape and direct it as much as possible but to avoid ceding it by default to those who would misuse it.”
Pursuing positive consequences

Assessment is...

→ developed, designed, or at least framed in terms of **locally stated** expectations for student learning outcomes, not vice versa

→ conceived in terms of **information-gathering** activities, not merely measures or tests, and multiple sources of information are sought

→ envisioned from the outset in terms of how assessment information will be **used** to inform what kinds of decisions and actions

→ treated as one piece of the puzzle within an overall **program evaluative** framework that links assessments to other factors in teaching & learning

→ engaged **iteratively**, pursuing priority questions that are posed by stakeholders, finding answers, and moving on to new questions

→ accepted as a valid component of the overall **scholarship** within FL studies, not just a bureaucratic requirement
“The intent is to encourage the foreign language field to recognize program evaluation as indispensable for enhancing student learning and program quality, and to enable the field to articulate and demonstrate—internally and externally—the unique contributions of language studies in a pluralist and globalized world.”