

**College of Letters and Science
Department of Botany
Assessment Report
1997-98**

Department Name: Botany

Chair of Assessment Committee: Prof. Wayne Becker (262-5833/wbecker@facstaff.wisc.edu)

Abstract: Our assessment activities to date have focused on our undergraduate program but we now also have plans in place to extend the evaluative process to the graduate program next year. After careful deliberation, we decided as a department to depend primarily on indirect rather than direct indicators. Specifically, both our undergraduate and graduate assessment procedures are designed to include input from current students and from alumni who received their degrees here.

For the evaluation of our undergraduate program, we invited all of our current undergrads to provide input via (1) a questionnaire, (2) individual interviews, and (3) subsequent focus groups, with invaluable assistance from the LEAD Center in each of these exercises. We found that most of our majors are very pleased with the program and were able to suggest only minor curricular changes.

Their main concerns focused on advising, the logistics of our senior thesis requirement, and a desire to be a more integral part of the department. The department readily recognized the legitimacy of these concerns and has already begun to respond by modifying our program accordingly. To expand the scope of our assessment, we are currently conducting a mail survey of alumni who received their B.S. or B.A. degree during the 10-year period from 1985 to 1995.

To assess our graduate program (1998-99 emphasis), we will also rely primarily on questionnaires and focus groups. Each focus group will involve a moderator (one of several professors) meeting with 6-8 graduate students from different sections of the department, with care taken to ensure that the moderator for a given group is not on the graduate committee of the students in that group. We are currently compiling a list of topics for this purpose, depending in part on input from our Graduate Admissions Committee and our Academic Advisory Committee. Thereafter, we will use mail surveys to solicit input from our graduate alumni, with the survey questions informed in part by the responses we receive from the focus groups.

Assessment Tools Used We are using the following assessment tools:

For the undergraduate program: Questionnaires, individual interviews (30-minute interviews, which were taped, transcribed, and edited), and focus groups (replete with pizza and soft drinks); mail survey of alumni who received their undergraduate degrees from our department between three and thirteen years ago.

For the graduate program: Questionnaires and focus groups of 6-8 students each (with comments to be recorded by a departmental secretary); mail survey of alumni who received their graduate degrees from our department between five and ten years ago.

Narrative

Our assessment activities to date have focused on our undergraduate program but with plans in place to extend the evaluative process to the graduate program next year. After careful deliberation by first the Assessment Committee and then the department faculty, we decided to depend primarily on indirect rather than direct indicators. Specifically, both our undergraduate and graduate assessment procedures are designed to include input from current students and from alumni who received their degrees here.

1. Assessment of Undergraduate Program

We began our assessment by focusing on the undergraduate program, with input solicited from current undergraduates and from alumni who received a B.S. or B.A. degree between 1985 and 1995.

Input from current undergraduates: We began last year (1996-97) by inviting all of our present undergraduate majors (about 40) to participate in a three-phase evaluation process. More than half (23) took part in at least two of the three phases. We began by asking all participants to complete a two-page questionnaire that elicited responses to both general and specific questions. Each of the participants was then interviewed individually in a 30-40 minute interview conducted by several members of the Assessment Committee with the assistance of Dianne Bowcock from the LEAD (Learning through Evaluation, Adaptation, and Dissemination) Center. All interviews were taped, with the tapes subsequently transcribed by the LEAD Center. The questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were then collated and summarized by the Assessment Committee. We were pleased to find that most of our students are quite happy with most aspects of our undergraduate program and that most of the deficiencies they identified were not curricular but procedural -- and relatively easy to "fix" as well. In the third phase of the process, all students were invited to attend one of several "focus groups," in which we explored with them the main deficiencies and problems they had identified, asking for their input on how these problems might be remedied. Their concerns and suggestions focused primarily (though by no means exclusively) on (1) perceived deficiencies in our advising system (including both academic advising and career counseling), (2) a need for more adequate and more timely information on the senior thesis requirement, (3) a desire to feel more "connected" to the department, and (4) several relatively minor curricular issues.

The assessment having been completed late last spring, departmental responses to these concerns have come in the current (1997-98) academic year. Specifically, we have as a department referred some of these issues, as appropriate, to our standing Curriculum Committee and Academic Advisory Committee, expanding the scope of the latter to include undergraduate as well as graduate concerns. We are making changes in our advising system and have created an *ad hoc* committee to provide more adequate and timely information on thesis requirements and possibilities. Already, for example, we've had a "senior thesis colloquium," to which all of our undergraduates were invited to hear about half of our faculty present brief reports on their research programs. We will schedule a similar colloquium in fall, at which students will have an opportunity to hear from the remaining faculty members. We have also put together an information sheet summarizing the process of selecting a laboratory, planning and conducting experiments, and preparing the thesis. This will be upgraded to an information booklet encompassing other informational materials as well. We have also addressed concerns regarding "connectedness" to the department, including inclusion of

undergrads on the mailing list for relevant departmental functions. Plans are also underway for an undergrad bulletin board, an undergrad mailbox, an undergrad site on our departmental home page, and perhaps even a place to study and socialize with each other.

Input from alumni: We are currently conducting a mail survey of alumni who received their B.S. or B.A. degree from this department during the 10-year period from 1985 to 1995 (*i.e.*, from 3 to 13 years ago). A four-page questionnaire will be mailed out shortly, soliciting responses to a broad range of questions, some of which were included because of the concerns expressed by our current undergrads, to see if these are issues that have been perceived by past students as well. We hope to have responses back by June 15, so that we can collate and evaluate the results and bring recommendations for further action to the department as soon as possible in fall.

2. Assessment of Graduate Program

As in the case of our undergraduate program, the assessment of our graduate program will be based primarily on input from current graduate students and responses from alumni who did their M.S. and/or Ph.D. degrees in our department.

Input from current graduate students: Evaluation of our graduate program is scheduled to begin next fall (Semester 1, 1998-99). For this purpose, we will use a process similar to the undergraduate assessment described above except that we will not conduct individual interviews and the assessment will therefore involve two rather than three phases. For the first phase, we are preparing a questionnaire that is intended to provide feedback on how adequately our graduate program is achieving its goals in areas such as critical thinking, research design, and objective analysis, as well as research documentation, scientific communication and computer literacy. Input has been solicited from our Graduate Admissions Committee and Academic Advisory Committee to ensure that questions relevant to recruitment/admissions and graduate advising concerns are included.

All graduate students will be encouraged to complete the questionnaire and will in addition be invited to participate in the focus groups that will constitute the second phase of our assessment plans. Each such group will consist of a small number of graduate students (6-8, most likely) who will meet with a professor chosen such that he/she is not on the committee of anyone in that group. The dialogue at each focus group will be recorded by a member of our secretarial staff and the main discussion points common to most of the groups will be collated and interpreted by the Assessment Committee and then presented to the Department, most likely as a series of recommendations.

Input from alumni: We also plan to survey alumni who have received either a M.S. or Ph.D. from this department within the past 15 years. The questionnaire to be used for this purpose has not yet been prepared because we intend it to be informed by the responses we have in the meantime solicited from our graduate students. This mail survey is scheduled for spring, 1999.

3. Provision for Ongoing Assessment

To ensure that program evaluation becomes a normative part of our department, the Assessment Committee has recommended that we evaluate our undergraduate and graduate programs on a regular basis, probably at intervals of three to five years.