Types of Direct Assessment Methods

The following is an extended discussion from Section 4.4 of direct assessment methods associated with capstone courses and case studies, simulations, and hypothetical situations. A description, in addition to the advantages and disadvantages associated with these methods, is presented in this appendix.

**Capstone Course Assignments or Projects**

Capstone course assignments or projects can be useful tools for program level assessment. The assessment of important program student learning outcomes can be integrated into a capstone course or project. Assessments structured into the capstone experience can include one or more of the following: comprehensive exams, integrative papers or projects, research projects, reflective essays, and presentations. Capstone courses or projects are typically discipline-based and may be designated as a “senior seminar” or an “assessment course.” Graduates from a program demonstrate their competence (e.g., knowledge, skills, etc.) in several areas and their ability to synthesize their learning in the program with a product or performance. Projects are generally judged by a panel using pre-specified scoring rubrics for the purpose of identifying strength and weaknesses in student learning as well as determining opportunities to improve the program.

*Example:* A panel of faculty members acts as evaluators of performances by music students, theatre students, etc., using a rubric that focuses on the important performance criteria and the quality of each. This method of assessment provides the student a chance to demonstrate the ability of absorbing and integrating their experiences and knowledge.

**Advantages:**
- Capstone courses can provide an ideal data collection opportunity because seniors are accessible.
- These courses are typically small in size to maximize the faculty-student interaction.
- Program level assessments administered in these courses can provide an opportunity to motivate students through the program’s curriculum.
- These courses can provide quality data that permit meaningful reflection on the program.
- Seniors generally at the end of the program’s curriculum and can better reflect on their learning experience and the curriculum.
- Students get feedback on their accomplishments and student responsibility is encouraged.
- These courses can be used for both student evaluation (assess seniors’ overall ability and knowledge gained from the program) and program evaluation (annual, continuous evaluation of curriculum from student feedback).
- These courses support program coherence.
- They provide an opportunity to create localize assessment instruments (i.e., rubrics) that can be used in conjunction with other assessment methods, such as standardized tests and surveys.
- Many faculty are engaged in planning the topics and the design of the capstone experience.
- Capstone assignments and projects allow for flexible course content.

**Disadvantages**
- Successfully completing the capstone course may be a requirement for graduation which may generate some anxiety for both faculty and students. For instance, student performance may be impaired due to “high stakes” of the project.
- High costs often are associated with capstone courses because of the small class size required to maximize the faculty-student interaction.
Considerations

- Ensure that the course assignments or projects accurately represent the program requirements and relevant program SLOs.
- The use of checkpoints is recommended to prevent difficulties, especially towards the end, which may affect a student’s graduation.
- To ensure that the assessments are program level, maintain the curriculum and evaluation of assignments across all sections of the course.
- Ensure that students understand and value the importance of the capstone experience and take it seriously.
- Design the capstone course or project to also assess the program’s curriculum, goals, and student learning outcomes.

Case Studies, Simulations, and Hypothetical Situations

A case study is a focused, systematic examination of one instance of a phenomenon such as an event, program, process, or person. Typically, case studies involve a collection of qualitative and/or quantitative data such as critical analysis, research, observations, surveys, and interviews for an in-depth study of the phenomenon. Students can conduct case studies and/or respond to hypothetical situations.

Advantages

- Student work of both a quantitative and/or qualitative nature can be assessed.
- Useful when a program’s student learning outcome includes components that involve comprehensively studying and understanding a phenomenon of particular interest to the field.
- Provides an opportunity for students to apply learned knowledge and skills in context.

Disadvantages

- Tend to be expensive, labor-intensive, and time-consuming, which can be prohibitive within a course.

Considerations

- Single or multiple cases (a collective case study) may be investigated. Different approaches may be used such as a highly structured approach or an unstructured process depending on the focus of the assessment measure.