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.

- 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.