Learning Ventures:

Assessment

Ben Pryor
Assistant Vice Provost, Learning Ventures

June 1, 2010
The Role of Learning Ventures in Assessment

Learning Ventures is responsible for three areas fundamental to student success at the University of Toledo: Online programs and course delivery, scholarship and faculty development in teaching and learning, and program and curriculum development for diverse programs and populations. The office consists of two areas. “LV Student Services,” customer service for students taking online courses as part of an exclusively online program, for students taking online courses as part of a blended curriculum, and for students involved in web-assisted courses. Student services’ responsibilities range from problem-solving with the registrar or bursar, to helping active-duty military students arrange for a proctored examination, to academic support and counseling for students who are struggling in a program or course. These services are distinct from services offered to a campus-based student as students who take courses online present us with distinct technical, academic, and personal needs that take specialized expertise and knowledge to address. The second area of Learning Ventures is devoted to instructional design. Five full-time instructional designers and two instructional developers work with thousands of online and web-assisted courses to ensure that every course is effective, accessible, and consistent with the highest standards of academic excellence appropriate to a regionally accredited research university.

Learning Ventures is dedicated to enhancing the quality of UT’s online courses and programs through a deliberate and intensive approach to course and program assessment. Adapting course content and traditional pedagogical approaches to a mode of engagement appropriate to the online learning environment remains a significant challenge. Learning Ventures must sustain and promote a commitment to excellence, student learning and success, and innovative approaches to delivery that leverage UT’s strengths as a regional and national hub for scholarly engagement with key social issues to which our university must respond. Ongoing assessment of programs and content offered under the aegis of Learning Ventures will allow us to not only sustain our leadership role in online learning, but to take innovative steps toward transforming higher education for the sake of access, affordability, relevance, and success that will draw attention to our institution’s areas of excellence and ensure a quality education for every student we admit.

Assessment: Online Programs and Course Delivery

Online programs and courses are offered by originating departments in collaboration with Learning Ventures. “Content Experts”--faculty members--in academic disciplines currently are responsible for notes, readings, materials, and student assessment in online courses to the same degree that a faculty member would be responsible for course delivery in a
face-to-face course. Instructional Designers are responsible for the “design” of the course: its appearance and structure in the “Blackboard” learning management system (LMS), the design of key instructional elements (the production of “modules” for the LMS, software and techniques associated with student assessment), and the encouragement of pedagogical approaches appropriate to the online learner. While instructor quality and appropriateness of material to subject matter is not under LV’s control, LV must ensure that online courses meet the highest standards for a university-level course. In order to meet this goal, LV will adopt the following procedures:

**Course Delivery:**

- **Quality standards for all online courses:** LV will provide all online faculty members with an online check-sheet that will prompt self-review of that faculty member’s online course in light of standards for online course success and satisfaction. The draft check-sheet is attached as Appendix A. This check-sheet will be filled out and submitted to the lead designer for the online course and completion will be recorded in LV’s “data manager.”

- **Student Evaluations of Teacher Effectiveness:** all students in online courses will be given the opportunity to evaluate the course and instructor. LV will continue to supply departments with a standard course evaluation that can be supplemented and adapted by the department. These course evaluations will be accessed by the lead designer for the online course and revisions to the course will be pursued as necessary. Our current evaluation tool is attached as “Tool #3” in Appendix B. Some departments continue to use earlier evaluation tools (“Tool #1” in Appendix B) and LV will work to transition all departments to the newer evaluation tool and to update the tool to reflect guidelines articulated in Appendix A.

- **Standards for new courses:** All newly designed courses supported by LV will be required to meet minimum expectations for quality in online instruction.
  - Newly designed courses will be required to submit the quality check sheet and will be evaluated by a course designer to ensure compliance.
  - All instructors for newly designed courses will be required to attend a minimum number of training sessions designed to improve technical skills in the online environment and to instill values and approaches that are key to success in the online course.

**Programs:**

LV will engage in an annual review of all courses that are advertised as available exclusively online. That review will involve:

- **Availability:** Can a student complete a degree in the shortest possible amount of time?
- **Affordability:** Is the program pursuing open-source textbooks or alternative sources of information?
- **Quality:** Does the program have an plan for robust assessment of the online program?
- **Accessibility:** Is the program accessible to students with disabilities, to students on active duty in the military, to students with low-quality network access, etc.?
Assessment: Faculty Development, Scholarship of Teaching & Learning

LV conducts and hosts faculty seminars and sessions devoted to aspects of pedagogy and course delivery that are well-studied and known to enhance satisfaction and outcomes. LV assesses these seminars in two ways.

- Faculty satisfaction: Surveys at the end of each seminar measure faculty satisfaction and solicit input designed to improve future seminars and make them more meaningful and effective.

- Effectiveness: Innovation in teaching promoted by LV will be assessed by LV's instructional designers. Online and "hybrid" courses will be assessed throughout the process of development, design, and implementation. Successful courses will incorporate both adequate approaches to student assessment and tools and strategies that enhance engagement and the achievement of identifiable learning outcomes.

- Ongoing Assessment: LV will promote technologies and practices that contribute to a culture of continuous improvement at the level of content delivery, student engagement, student learning and adoption of "best practices," including the use of e-Folios, technologies that encourage peer and self assessment, technologies and activities that promote active learning, and the adoption of "just-in-time" assessment methods. Adoption and successful deployment will be addressed in LV's annual assessment report.

Assessment: Curriculum Development

LV is not an academic unit. However, LV collaborates with programs and departments in the development of curriculum and innovative instruction for existing and new programs. Assessment from LV's perspective will focus on the following measures:

- Engagement: Does development process focus on student engagement with other students, faculty, the institution, and the community as appropriate? Do choices of technology promote engagement, connection, and collaboration?

- Relevance: Does development process factor in "relevance" to the goal of facilitating the achievement of lifelong learning skills? Is technology "open" and accessible or proprietary and "closed"? If the latter, are there compelling reasons for that choice?

- Accessibility: Does development process give proper emphasis to accessibility, affordability, and flexibility in curriculum and scheduling? Has the program considered alternative approaches to scheduling, delivery, and enrollment?

- Modularity: Where appropriate, does development process encourage the development of discreet learning modules with identifiable outcomes that can be measured? This is in anticipation of the development of "UT Connected Learning," an approach based on modules defined by outcomes and aligned by student needs.
Conclusion

Assessment in online learning is the key not only to its credibility as a mode of instruction but to the enhancement of local, regional, national, and international collaboration and connection for UT students and faculty. In addition to course-based models of learning and assessment, LV is dedicated to expanding the boundaries associated with higher education. Our commitment to quality and assessment at every level means that we can effectively focus on outcomes and means of assessment that are truly student-centered, formative, and integrated with our educational mission.