

# **Utilizing External Evaluators: Assessing Student Outcomes in an Adult Education Master's Degree**

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## **Abstract**

Assessment studies were completed on the MS in Training and Development for the years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. The assessment addressed two components of the Comprehensive Project: the student learning outcomes and the effectiveness of the process of the Project. The evaluation of student performance on the Project was completed by two internal reviewers (the student and the academic advisor) as well as by two external reviewers (the mentor/expert and a representative of a sponsoring organization.) Results from the 2003-2004 study were used to make improvements in 2004-2005 in student learning as well as in the process of the Project. Largest gains in student learning were in the use of technology and in skills in verbal, written, and/or presentation communications. The largest gain in the process of the Project was in understanding what was expected. The assessment study showed evidence that students are achieving the stated learning objectives and that the processes of the Project are effective.

## **Background**

There is a growing demand for accountability in higher education. Most assessment conducted in higher education focuses on the undergraduate level, but increasingly, graduate and professional programs are coming under scrutiny (Nichols & Nichols, 2005). While grades provide course-level measurement of student performance, they give little evidence of over all program effectiveness. The MS in Training and Development at the University of St. Francis requires students to complete a Comprehensive Project. Assessment of this culminating project provides an opportunity to study evidence of student learning at a program level. A significant portion of the assessment includes feedback from reviewers in the student's workplace, external to the University.

The MS in Training and Development was established in 1995 as the MS in Continuing Education and Training Management. In 2003, a review of the program led to a name change as well as an up dating of the curriculum. Changes were made to the student learning objectives as a result of consultation with professionals in the field; stated requirements in position postings; and a review of related programs in adult education, human resource development, and training and development. The following program goal and learning objectives were established:

The MS in Training and Development provides educational experiences in an applied curriculum for professionals who design, deliver, and evaluate learning programs for adults. The student learning objectives for the program are, The student will be able to:

- design, deliver and assess educational and training programs uniquely suited to adults
- apply an instructional design system to the development and delivery of meaningful instruction

- develop and apply standards of measurement and evaluation criteria appropriate for the project and the organization
- apply adult learning and development theory to create motivational strategies to increase performance of individuals, teams, and organizations
- practice skills in negotiation, collaboration, and gaining buy-in
- effectively communicate in the workplace and in the classroom
- engage in practical research, needs assessment, and evaluation through the use of systematic data collection and analysis
- develop a basic understanding of the application of learning technologies
- develop awareness and self-reflection on the influence of learning philosophies on professional practice
- demonstrate excellent computer literacy skills
- demonstrate verbal, written and presentation skills
- provide an ethical and humanistic basis for the education and training of adults.

As in most graduate or professional programs, these objectives are stated at the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomies, including application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom, 1969).

Students are professionals from continuing education and training in higher education, health care, community education, and in other public and private organizations. The program follows the standards of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education (CPAE) with courses including history and philosophy, instructional design, program development, and adult learning and development. There are six possible concentrations: Training and Development Management, Learning Technology, Client-Centered Consulting, Health Services, Business Administration, and Self-Design. The Comprehensive Project (TDEV690) is a 4-credit hour course that is taken after completion of 32 credit hours.

### **2004-2005 Assessment of the Comprehensive Project**

Throughout the Training and Development curriculum, students are given opportunities to connect what they are learning to real-life situations. The Comprehensive Project provides a capstone experience that continues to link academic theory to practical application in the work place. It also provides an opportunity for career advancement by helping students to establish new relationships in their own place of employment or in a new organization. It could also provide them with a chance to give back to their community with a service project. Students' Comprehensive Projects have included: a mentoring program to increase the participation of Latino parents in their children's elementary school; a CBT refresher course for an electrical maintenance procedure for a nuclear power plant; and a wound care team training program in a home health care agency. Each student submits a proposal at the beginning of the Project and a binder of documentation along with a reflection of the learning experience at the end of the term. Approximately 26 Comprehensive Projects have been completed to date with an additional eight being completed in summer 2006.

The assessment of the Comprehensive Project sought to tie the student learning objectives to the learning outcomes by providing evidence of student performance. Since the Comprehensive Project is a culminating, self-directed, collaborative experience for the student, it

provides an excellent opportunity to study this evidence.

There are four people involved in the Project: the student, a mentor/expert, a representative of the sponsoring organization, and the academic advisor. The student selects the external mentor/expert who consults with him or her on process and content as well as the representative of the sponsoring organization who supports the Project with the necessary resources. The academic advisor assists in identifying an appropriate project, mentor, and sponsor; guides the process for the student; and assigns a final grade. All four evaluate student performance on the Project.

Kirkpatrick’s (1998) four levels of evaluation were taken into consideration in designing the assessment. Reaction, or learner satisfaction, is addressed in course/instructor evaluations. Learning is measured through assignment and course grades. Behavior, or application, is also measured at the course level, but the Comprehensive Project provides an opportunity to measure behavior at the program level. Results, or the long-range effect in the workplace, is addressed in the Comprehensive Project through the open-ended question, “The anticipated long-range results of this project for the Sponsoring Organization are...” The Results are also assessed (in a process separate from the one being presented) through alumni surveys that ask questions about such factors as employment, involvement in professional organizations, self and social awareness, and communication skills.

The Comprehensive Project has been the focus of assessment for the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years. Using the overall master’s degree program student learning objectives as a guide, questionnaires were designed and data were collected on both student outcomes and on the process of the Project. The results of the 2004-2005 assessment are as follows:

	SA	A	D	Other
1. The student selected appropriate processes and strategies for the project	86.4	11.4		2.3
2. The student worked effectively with other stakeholders in the project	81.8	13.7	2.3	2.3
3. The student’s decisions reflected an understanding of adult learning and motivation	85.4	11.4		2.3
4. The student used effective methods of research, needs assessment, and evaluation	81.8	13.7		4.6
5. The student showed proficient use of technology	90.0	9.1		
6. The student demonstrated excellent verbal, written, and/or presentation skills	84.1	13.7	2.3	
7. The goals of the project were met.	81.8	11.4	2.3	4.6

Figure 1. 2004-2005 assessment of student outcomes.

N=44 100% response SA=Strongly Agree A=Agree D=Disagree Other asked for comments.

The processes of the Project were also assessed with the following results:

	Worked effectively	Was ok	Was ineffective	
1. From my point of view, the process for the Comprehensive Project	88.9	11.1		
	SA	A	D	Other
2. I understood what was expected of me.	77.8	16.7	5.6	
5. From my point of view, the Comprehensive Project was a worthwhile learning experience.	77.8	22.2		

Figure 2. 2004-2005 assessment of Project processes. N=18 56.2% response

Item #3 stated, “What I found most valuable about the Comprehensive Project was:” with most responses focused on application and usefulness. Item #4 stated, “Ways in which the process and/or outcomes of the Comprehensive Project could be improved:” resulted in suggestions involving timelines and communication.

### Comparison of 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 Assessment Results

Analysis was completed on the assessment data from 2003-2004, and a number of adjustments were made to the Comprehensive Project for 2004-2005. Analysis of the data from the second year shows evidence that there were improvements in both the student outcomes and the processes of the Project.

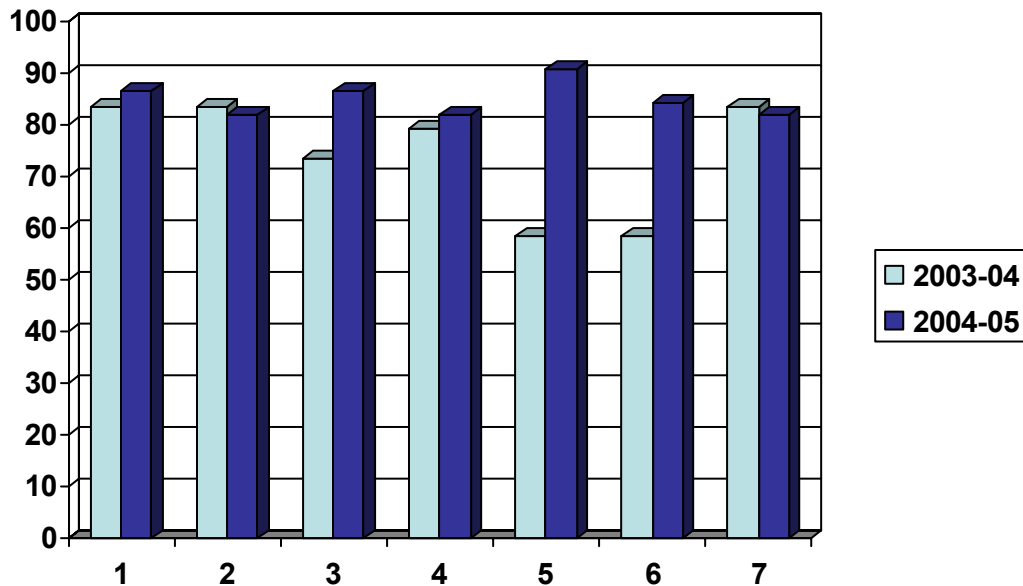


Figure 3. Comparison of 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 assessment of student outcomes.

In comparing the data from the 04-05 assessment of student outcomes to that from 03-04, there was an increase in the percentage of Strongly Agree in five of the seven categories. The largest increase (32.5%) was in the use of technology. Next was 25.7% increase in verbal, written, and/or presentation skills. The two decreases in Strongly agree were 1.6% in working with stakeholders and 1.6% in meeting the goals of the project.

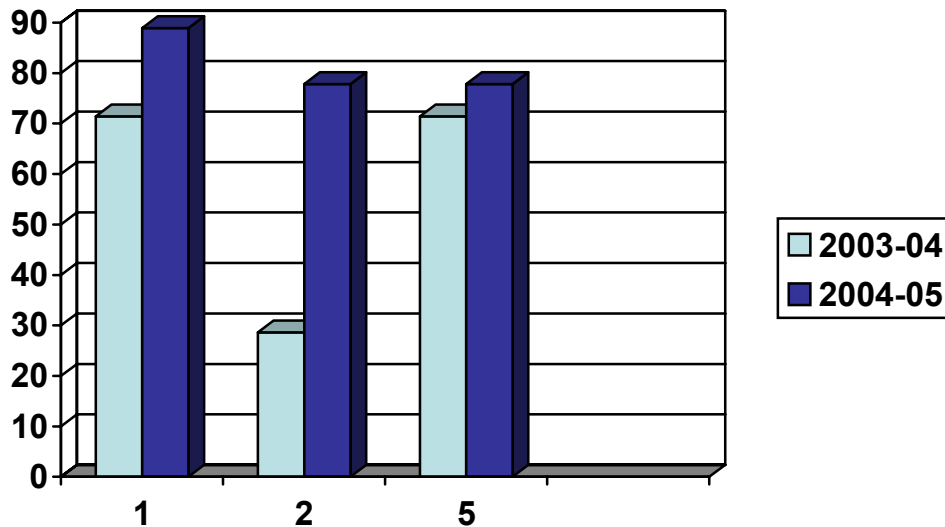


Figure 4. Comparison of 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 assessment of Project processes.

In comparing the data from the 04-05 assessment of Project processes to that from 03-04, the largest increase (49.2%) was in #2, I understood what was expected of me. This dramatic increase resulted from a recommendation from the 2003-2004 assessment to provide a clearer explanation of expectations of the document and reflection. Action in 2004-2005 included placing the guidelines and forms on the Training and Development web page as well as increased academic advising of students. The 2004-2005 recommendation is that there needs to be better communication of expectations with the mentor/expert and the sponsor, particularly coming from the student. Both the effectiveness of the process (#1) and the worthwhileness of the learning experience (#5) also had increases.

A recommendation from the 2003-2004 assessment was to consider how to obtain a higher response rate for assessment of the Project processes, which was 38.9%. As a result, in summer 2005, requests for completion of the assessment forms were made by email rather than post mail. This yielded a 50.0% response rate in 24 hours and a 70.6% response rate in 10 days. This method also saved time and resources. With a fall 2004 response rate of 33.3% and spring 2005 at 44.4%, the over-all response rate for 2004-2005 was 56.2%

A summary recommendation from the 2003-2004 assessment was that, although the process of the Comprehensive Project is basically sound, there needs to be clearer

guidelines for the documentation and reflection. Some students may need more guidance and support throughout the project. It should be noted, however, that since a central focus of the Project is self-directed learning, it is the responsibility of the student to seek that additional guidance. The action in 2004-2005 was to give students more guidance from their academic advisor, both initially and throughout. Most students are able to work independently with the focus on collaborating within their organizations. Overall, the results of the assessment showed evidence that the Comprehensive Project was an effective and positive learning experience for students. The Comprehensive Project is providing an effective transition from being a student to being a professional in the field of adult learning.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The implications of the assessment of the Comprehensive Project of the MS in Training and development are that both student learning outcomes and the Project processes were improved from 2003-2004 to 2004-2005. Further, utilizing external evaluators provides valuable evidence for assessment, particularly at evaluation levels three and four.

Recommendations include repeating this assessment process within the next few years to continue to monitor student outcomes and Project processes. Also students should continue to be advised to provide clear communication, perhaps setting up timelines and agendas, with the mentor/expert and representative of the sponsoring organization to make sure that everyone understands what is expected of them.

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