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WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT RUBRICS?

FACULTY SPOTLIGHT: Vincent Smiles

Theology Department



This month, Theology professor and department chair, Vincent Smiles is our faculty spotlight. Smiles and his department have exemplified the standards of program review, and additionally have a very insightful perspective on the assessment process for program improvement.

“We need program review on a regular basis, not just the periodic every 10 years.” Smiles said. “We definitely need assessment in order to improve, find problems, and meet new situations.”

The Department of Theology completed their program review in 2016, as per the usual every 10 years. However, Smiles says that he has found this most recent process to be much more meaningful towards the institutions’ goals and future.

“In the past, sometimes the amount of work for assessment far exceeded the results which were gained. It’s not because assessment wasn’t essential or that we didn’t work hard at it. We put ourselves through a pretty arduous process for comparatively little results. What the Office of Assessment has now done is find tools to simplify the process and make it more productive.”

This is because the Office of Academic Assessment and Effectiveness has recently gone through a restructuring. The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University have brought in a new director, Carie Braun, as well as a new assistant director, Holly Christie. Both Braun and Christie are incredibly passionate about the assessment process. Both believe that program review is a powerful tool that can make a huge difference in exemplifying the missions and goals of the campuses, and improve the institutions in order to prepare for the future.

“Carie Braun and Holly Christie have found, with the help of administration, the best tools to simplify the process to make it more effective. There is far more product at the end of the process, and it is not so arduous that people resist doing assessment.” Smiles said. “I hope the office will continue working on those tools, and keep encouraging us. I’m really grateful that the Office of Academic Assessment is as effective as it is now.”

On a final note, Smiles has a piece of inspiration to offer programs when they complete the process of program review.

“I would say to focus in on primary issues which emerge. Don’t try to fix everything. That’s almost always far too much for us to accomplish. Focus on one or two of the major issues which arise, and then other things will fall into place as major issues are dealt with effectively.”

Rubrics: How We Stack Up

A very common practice when designing a rubric for an assignment, class, or program (through a capstone experience) is to consider the end result. Ask the question: *What knowledge, skills, and values do we want students to demonstrate effectively and proficiently after their learning experience?* This method is referred to as “backward design” and it is what Carie and the Department of Theology used for their process (see “Rubrics...In a Nutshell”). Here is a great resource (with video and templates) from [Vanderbilt University’s Center for Teaching](#) from Grant Wiggins, one of the authors of *Understanding by Design, Expanded 2nd Edition* (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998).



I have discovered in my time in OAAE that faculty fall into 1 of 3 categories when it comes to rubrics.

- They love rubrics and couldn't imagine life without them;
- They are overwhelmed by rubrics and are paralyzed by the thought of developing one; or
- They don't really see the purpose.

Rubrics... In a Nutshell



My advice is that you should never seek perfection.

Like other assessment measures, the rubric is a "pulse" and not a "biopsy". Here is a story that illustrates this idea.

When working with the Theology Department, they selected an outcome on which to focus their assessment efforts this year. The outcome was to apply theological methods and construct sustained theological arguments. To prevent rubric paralysis, we tried a different approach to rubric creation that I believe worked well. I had the members of the department's assessment committee take some time just to ponder: *What does it look like when a student applies theological methods and constructs sustained theological arguments? How do you know it when you see it?* Through written descriptions (many thanks to Vincent Smiles, see cover story) and guided conversation we were able to identify and refine the essential elements. I was then able to translate these elements into an analytic rubric. Analytic rubrics are useful when faculty are collectively assessing student work and profiles of specific strengths and weaknesses are desired.

My second piece of advice is to use the rubric as all or part of your assignment grading (embedding). This saves a lot of time in the end as your programmatic outcome assessment is complete right alongside the normal grading that needs to occur. Inter-rater reliability is not an issue when you have one rater and no one wants to sit in a room during the summer to assess student artifacts.

My final piece of advice is to borrow rather than create whenever possible. It is much easier to tweak than to start from scratch. This is why the Value Rubrics (<https://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics>) will become an integral part of the Integrations Curriculum assessment plan. The Theology Department's rubric was based on AACU&U's Critical Thinking (Value) Rubric.

Let us at OAAE know how we can help you get past rubric paralysis and take advantage of rubrics as an important assessment tool.

Criteria	3	2	1	0
Identification of Situation or Problem	Asks important theological question(s), critically states the issue and describes the situation comprehensively. Situation or problem is selected based on authoritative evidence from multiple perspectives and sources.	Asks theological question(s), describes the situation so that understanding is not impeded by omissions. Situation or problem is selected based on theological evidence but may not reflect multiple perspectives or sources.	Asks question(s) that is (are) not clearly theological; description leaves some terms undefined, ambiguities unexplored, or context unclear. Situation of problem is minimally based on authoritative perspectives or sources.	Not evident/not applicable.
Method	Methods used are identified and clearly theological; the method is fully explained and utilized in a clear, thoughtful manner; the method is applied appropriately to the identified situation (example: historical-critical, pastoral-theological, comparative, etc.).	Methods used are identified and theological; the method is mostly explained and utilized appropriately given the identified situation; another method may be more ideal given the identified <u>situation</u> but the student carries the method through appropriately.	Methods are identified but are not clearly theological or do not directly match the identified situation; the method is not fully applied to the situation or problem.	Not evident/not applicable.
Argument/Integration	Student takes a position (makes an argument) that is clearly theological and any claims that are made are backed up with strong evidence; demonstrates fluency and agility with theological reasoning; gives credence to counterarguments; illustrates how faith and reason go together; argument extends to how the theological perspective resonates in the modern world.	Student takes position that is theological; claims made are somewhat backed up with evidence; student shows moderate fluency and agility with theological reasoning; mentions counterarguments but does not fully understand how <u>these</u> <u>impact</u> their stance; argument mentions how faith and reason go together or how the theological perspective resonates in the modern world.	Student takes weak position that is not clearly theological; claims made are minimally backed up with evidence; student shows low levels of fluency and agility with theological reasoning; counterarguments not fully illustrated; argument may or may not illustrate how faith and reason go together or how the theological perspective resonates in the modern world.	Not evident/not applicable.
Sources	Student relies on a robust quantity and quality of scholarship and evidence that is clearly theological; demonstrates fluency and agility with utilization of sources and clearly understands the context of the author and historical perspectives.	Student relies on an adequate quantity and quality of scholarship and evidence that is mostly theological in nature; demonstrates some fluency and agility with utilization of sources and mostly understands the context of the author and historical perspectives.	Student relies on a minimal quantity and quality of scholarship and evidence that is mostly theological in nature; demonstrates minimal fluency and agility with utilization of sources but may or may not clearly understand the context of the author and historical perspectives.	Not evident/not applicable.

