

The Community College of Baltimore County Learning Outcomes Assessment Final Report Template

1. Designing and proposing a Learning Outcomes Assessment Project:

General Description

The Legal Research and Writing (PLAW 103) course provides students with the opportunity to acquire a comprehensive and practical knowledge of the research materials and tools available to the legal community. Students learn to develop research strategies based on fact situations and to draft legal documents, pleadings and case briefs. Students enrolled in PLAW 103 were administered a learning outcomes assessment instrument developed by the American Association for Paralegal Education (hereafter, AAFPE) and externally validated. The assessment instrument is a *Case Briefing Project*, comprised of sample instructions, a sample case brief, a court opinion which was graded externally, and a rubric. The evaluation indicated how well students have developed the ability to read and understand a case, analyze its essential elements and to communicate the results of their work in a clear, succinct written format known as a case brief. The subsequent compilation and analysis of the scores enabled us to development a baseline of knowledge so that we could incorporate exercises intended to improve students' performance on these objectives in subsequent semesters and then determine if we were able to increase student learning. Suggestions for changes to the PLAW 103 curriculum and/or course teaching methodology will follow the analysis.

The Course Objectives that were addressed are:

Course Objective 1. "Write a case brief utilizing the Issue, Rule, Analysis, Conclusion (IRAC) method of case briefing."

Course Objective 10. "Prepare properly drafted citations to primary and secondary authority using Bluebook/ALWD Citation manual."

External Validation

The testing tool that was used is a project that has been developed by members of AAFPE. All aspects of the Case Briefing Exercise were reviewed by the assessment team comprised of four members of the legal community, two of whom are adjunct professors and experts in this field based on their legal training and experience.

2. Implementing the design and collecting data:

The case briefing assessment exercise was used in the 2005-2006 academic year. Eight students participated in spring, eight in the fall semester. During each semester, the students received a case briefing handout. Each grader received a copy of the handout, the case and a grading rubric. During the second semester, the students participated in two case briefing workshops prior to completing the case brief.

3. Redesigning the course to improve student learning:

Recommendations

1. Identify the particular skills of full-time and adjunct faculty and feature workshops facilitated by those teachers with “special expertise” to isolate the more difficult but essential skills.
2. Make arrangements for teachers to go into their colleagues’ classes to present workshops where that teacher’s particular skills are relevant to the class material.
3. Create small individual instruction workshops using Tegrity so that the students can review them anytime they feel that they need more practice with a particular skill. A suggestion that grew from this exercise was the idea of using these video workshops when a teacher would otherwise have to cancel class.

Which recommendations were implemented?

The first two recommendations covered a technique we had used previously, for example, bringing in Baltimore County police officers to teach criminal law from their point of view. This focused on basic, introductory skills, a tactic we had not tried previously. More of these opportunities were pursued after finding that this intervention had been fairly successful.

4. Implementing course revisions and reassessing student learning:

There were 30 points possible on the exercise. The average grade for the first semester briefs was 14.5. The average grade during the second semester was 19.5. The class was 30% minority students and 70% white students all in the 19-25 age range.

4. Final analysis and results:

During the spring semester, I gave the students in PLAW 103, Legal Research and Writing, a relatively simple case to brief, a handout about case briefing using the IRAC method, and had the briefs graded by outside graders. In the fall, I visited the same course, different students, for two sessions and gave a workshop on briefing cases, handed out the case briefing instructions mentioned above and then gave the students a similar case to brief. In the first class, the teacher taught the skills necessary to read and brief a case as part of the regular course material. In the second semester, the skills involved in briefing cases was isolated from the regular material and presented during the workshop. These briefs were graded and the efforts of the students in the second semester improved significantly. Other than the typical “Hawthorne” effect, I believe that there are several reasons for the improvement. These results and the proposals drawn from these results are still relevant and would be useful in any discipline.

One of the most difficult tasks for students is reading and understanding case law. It is a skill that is difficult to learn, even for first year law students. By isolating the opportunity to learn this set of skills, and presenting the material during a workshop facilitated by a different teacher served to identify the subject as one requiring particular skill and special attention. The material was presented in a format different from their regular class sessions and, naturally, from a different point of view since the presenter was not their usual teacher. I attribute the improvement in skills partly to the special attention that the students received in the second semester but more so to the fact that the instruction was

presented in a different manner by a different person. That technique emphasized the uniqueness of the subject for paralegal students and evidenced our understanding and the acknowledgement of how difficult a task it is. In addition, it offered the students another method of learning the same material, which helps address the potentially different learning styles our students use.

In summary, a suggestion for the program drawn from these results was to identify the particular skills of the full-time and adjunct faculty and to include workshops facilitated by those teachers with “special expertise” to isolate the more difficult but essential skills. Another suggestion was to have teachers arrange to go into their colleagues’ classes to present workshops where that teacher’s particular skills are relevant to the class material. For example, the business law teacher might teach the business chapters of the Introduction to Law course or, if not the entire section, then a section such as financing of corporations. The business teacher would have specialized knowledge and examples from current practice to share with the students. Another suggestion was that small individual instruction workshops be recorded using Tegrity so that the students could review them anytime they felt that they need more practice with a particular skill. These small workshops could be used by a teacher in his or her classroom, thereby isolating the particular skill or subject and repeating the effort to communicate to the students that these skills are more difficult and require extra attention