

## **Improving Student Outcomes by Instituting a Standards-Based Curriculum: Lessons Learned**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The practice of certifying criminal justice and criminology programs is a relatively new endeavor. In recent years, the field of criminal justice and criminology has moved away from the “seeing what works” method of instruction and has begun adopting standards-based curricula. This standards-based curriculum is oftentimes based on the results of assessment findings paired with the standards currently adopted by the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS). In this study the criminal justice and criminology department at Metropolitan State College of Denver adopted a standards-based curriculum in 2007 and subsequently began assessing students in the program over a period of three years using the Major Fields Test and the Writeplacer Test. The Major Fields Test covers the following areas: law, corrections, law enforcement, the court system in the U.S., theories of criminal justice, critical thinking, and research methodology and statistics. The Writeplacer Test examines writing skills. The results of the Major Fields Test indicated that Metropolitan State College of Denver students are at or above the national average in most of the subfields. However there were some mixed findings in regards to how the introduction of standards-based curricula impacted these results. We also found that our criminal justice and criminology students writing scores were at or slightly below the national average. Implications of these findings and applicability to other criminal justice and criminology programs are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Criminal justice and criminology programs began to debut as a discipline in the mid-1960's and have been a very popular major selected by students (Langworthy & Latessa, 1989; Roth, 1997). In an early study conducted by Langworthy and Latessa (1989), they noted approximately 28,000 criminal justice degrees (associates, baccalaureate, master's, and PhD's) are awarded to students each year. Today there are approximately 1,000 colleges and universities with programs in criminal justice and criminology (Wang & Lumb, 2005). It is obvious, given these figures, that criminal justice and criminology programs are very popular. However, popularity does not ensure a quality program.

Criminal justice and criminology programs have risen out of other fields of study like political science, sociology, psychology, and legal studies programs (Roth, 1997). Professors in criminal justice and criminology have "alluded" to feeling disrespected by scholars in fields where there is the perception that their majors are better defined (Clear, 2000). In recent years, one of the professional associations in the field of criminal justice, the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, has encouraged criminal justice and criminology programs to pursue certification of their programs. The goal of certification is to improve the quality and effectiveness of criminal justice programs through an extensive self-study and program review process (ACJS, 2011).

In the present paper, we discuss Metropolitan State College of Denver's experience moving toward a standards-based criminal justice and criminology curricula. The criminal justice and criminology program at Metropolitan State College of Denver was established in 1965 under the program name "Police Science". It is currently one of the largest majors at the college.

Metropolitan State College of Denver is a midsize open-enrollment college in an urban setting.

We make the argument that assessment of criminal justice programs and a move toward standards-based education is beneficial. First, assessing criminal justice programs provides evidence about student achievement and the needs of students. Next, periodic assessment allows faculty to evaluate their programs and determine if changes need to be made in the future. Lastly, assessment of criminal justice programs in conjunction with external self study results and faculty feedback, can lead to positive program changes.

### **Literature Review**

The importance of assessment in higher education has been a well documented movement over the last several years (Krahn & Silzer, 1995; Liu, 2009). Assessment and the importance of accountability have been recognized as such an important priority that the Commission on the Future of Higher Education was established in 2005 (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Despite a nearly fifty year history of the discipline of criminal justice and criminology, the resulting pedagogy has often been the result of trial and error, and the “seeing what works” method (Roth, 1997). Some criminal justice and criminology programs have adopted the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences Certification Standards for Academic Programs as a general practice standard. The emphasis is on developing standards derived from evidence-based means (ACJS, 2011). Programs are required to provide evidence of quality and effectiveness based on program outcome assessment (ACJS, 2011).

The criminal justice and criminology department at Metropolitan State College of Denver established a new curriculum in the 2007-2008 academic year which coincided with the commencement of assessment of the program. The new curriculum was introduced for two

reasons. The first was to address concerns that were highlighted in the external program review conducted in 2004. The program was described as too narrowly focused and that changes would need to be made if the program wished to remain viable. Second, the faculty had already begun discussing moving toward a standards-based curriculum informed by ACJS standards in an effort to provide a more well-rounded educational and professional foundation for students. Charles Miller, president of the Commission of the Future of Higher Education, identified a need for increased accountability in higher education not only by criminal justice programs, but all types of programs (Arenson, 2006). Some programs look toward certification and utilizing accrediting bodies to evaluate programs based on standards established by program faculty (Palomba & Banta, 2001).

The Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) formed the Academic Review Committee (ARC) in 1989. This is the only nationally recognized review board for criminal justice academic programs in the U.S. (ACJS, 2000). A total of three bachelor's and four master's programs are certified by the ACJS at this time (ACJS, 2011). The president of ACJS stated that the future development of the criminal justice field depends on the use of the ACJS Minimum Standards (Southerland, 2002). She also stressed the importance of having a well-rounded program, which should include the criminal justice and juvenile justice systems, criminology, law enforcement, corrections, courts and the law, and research and statistics. In a study by Southerland (2002), she compared programs over two academic years. She discovered there were deficits in several areas including corrections, statistics and the interdisciplinary foundation of programs.

Wang and Lumb's (2005) research suggested that when programs redesign courses, emphasis should be placed on a regular review of core courses, a balance between theory and

practice, clear student learning objectives, flexible curricula to meet the changes in the field, and an examination of duplication in courses. Providing a balanced curriculum is very important in ensuring that criminal justice programs are offering what they advertise. Students select criminal justice as a major because they find the subject matter interesting and relevant to “the real world” (Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999; Gabbidon, Penn, & Richards, 2003). Payne, Blackwell & Collins (2009) found that students with a high quality of criminal justice education were more satisfied with their careers.

Student opinion and success are very important pieces of this curriculum puzzle. ACJS recommends that a number of direct and indirect measures be utilized to measure student learning outcomes. One direct measure of student learning outcomes is competency exams. The ETS® Major Field Tests are “comprehensive undergraduate and MBA outcomes assessments designed to measure the critical knowledge and understanding obtained by students in a major field of study” (ETS®, 2011). The criminal justice Major Field Test (MFT), allows for comparisons with peer institutions. Moriarty (2006) investigated how criminal justice programs engage in student assessment and found that 44.6 % of all respondents used the MFT. The most common types of student assessment identified in Moriarty’s research include: grades in major coursework (80.3%), surveys of students (78.9%), and internship (75.4%). Standardized tests come with limitations often measuring content retention only (Moriarty & Garrett, 2008). Other assessment tools recommended to supplement standardized testing include: exit interviews, focus groups, enrollment trends, job placement data, evaluation of capstone experience, and/or a portfolio (ACJS, 2011; Lopez, 2002).

## **Methods**

Metropolitan State College of Denver's criminal justice and criminology department evaluated student achievement by administering the ETS®' Major Fields Test (MFT) over the course of three academic years beginning in 2007. During the third year of assessment, Metropolitan State College of Denver added the Writeplacer Test to assess student writing and provide a method to assess student achievement. A total of 432 students were evaluated by the MFT (119 students from AY 07-08; 108 students from AY 08-09; 205 students from AY 09-10). The MFT was administered online to all students enrolled in 17 sections of the Ethics for the Criminal Justice Professional course (CJC 4650) (three sections in AY 07-08; four sections for AY 08-09; nine sections in AY 09-10). The CJC 4650 course is the department's capstone experience for graduating CJC majors. The exams were administered during the fall, spring and summer semesters. All students in each section of the course were required to take the MFT exam as part of their requirements for completing the course. The students were not allowed to decline to take the exam. There were no students who repeated the MFT exam thus controlling for test-retest confounding of reliability.

This exam allows for criminal justice and criminology students to be compared to students graduating from criminal justice and criminology departments around the country. The Educational Testing Services (ETS ®, 2005) produces "A Comparative Data Guide" that shows scores and percentiles for individuals and department mean scores. Over 500 colleges and universities use MFT each year. Scores are reported on a scale of 120-200. Each of the scores on the subfields is reported for the group. The MFT is a two-hour, 150-item multiple-choice test. The exam includes a number of subfields which are closely aligned to the ACJS standards. They include: law (30 questions), corrections (30 questions), law enforcement (30 questions), the court system in the U.S. (30 questions), and theories of criminal justice (30 questions). The exam also

includes critical thinking (15) and research methodology and statistics (37) questions that are drawn from, and overlap the aforementioned content areas. These subfields match up with the ACJS content areas and CJC learning objectives.

In the academic year (AY) 2009-2010, the department approved a pilot test of the Writeplacer assessment examination for two spring 2010 CJC sections. The Writeplacer Test offers a separate assessment tool for CJC departmental members to evaluate technical writing skills of graduating CJC seniors. The Metropolitan State College of Denver Testing and Assessment Center administered the Writeplacer to a total of 28 CJC students. The Writeplacer exam took approximately 30 minutes to administer. Participation in this assessment was voluntary.

### **Hypothesis**

The criminal justice and criminology faculty at Metropolitan State College of Denver hypothesized that students would improve their performance on the MFT each year. This belief was based on the hypothesis that each year more students would be receiving the new “standards- based” curriculum and thus would perform better. More specifically because the previous curriculum focused mostly on law and courts, the old cohort was expected to do better on those subfields while the new cohort was expected to do better on the subfields of law enforcement, corrections, theories, critical thinking, and research methods and statistics. Additionally, it was expected that performance on all of the subfields would be competitive with the national averages. In regards to the Writeplacer results, we expected students to score in the low to average range. This hypothesis was based on faculty reports that student writing skills observed in their classes was often average to below average.

## **Results**

The mean scores of AY 07-08 examinees were equal to or higher than the composite/comparison mean scores for criminal justice majors in 81 departments across the nation, in all seven major assessment categories measured by the MFT. This mean comparison group included 102 departments by AY 09-10. The data in Table 1 represents the average scores of seven different assessment indicators: the law, law enforcement, corrections, the court system, theories of criminal behavior, critical thinking, and research methodology and statistics.

### **Academic Year 2007-2008**

CJC seniors showed moderate achievement associated with six out of the seven major assessment indicators: the law, law enforcement, corrections, theories of criminal behavior, critical thinking and research methodology and statistics, demonstrating percentile scores between 40 and 55. More specifically, within the assessment areas of research methodology and statistics and law enforcement, students earned scores in the 40<sup>th</sup> percentile. Within the assessment area of criminological theory, students displayed a general understanding that ranked in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. In the assessment areas of the law, corrections, and critical thinking, students scored in the 55<sup>th</sup> percentile. Lastly, students demonstrated the highest achievement in the area of “the court system” where students scored in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile.

### **Academic Year 2008-2009**

The MFT results showed percentile increases in six out of the seven major assessment areas and a decrease in the court system area from AY 2007-2008 to AY 2008-2009. CJC seniors showed increased proficiency in the following subfields: law enforcement, corrections, law, theories of criminal behavior, critical thinking and research methodology and statistics. The range of percentile scores was between 55<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup>, demonstrating between a five to fifteen percentile increase in proficiency. The results demonstrated a decrease in proficiency between academic years in the category of the court system, moving from the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile. Within the assessment area of research methodology, students displayed a general understanding that ranks in the bottom 50 percentile of the nation. Within the assessment area of criminological theory and law enforcement, students displayed a general understanding that ranks in the top 55 percentile of the nation. Within the assessment area of critical thinking and corrections students demonstrated a general understanding that ranks in the top 60<sup>th</sup> and 65<sup>th</sup> percentiles respectively.

### **Academic Year 2009-2010**

#### Major Fields Test (MFT)

In AY 09-10, CJC seniors demonstrated knowledge of the law that ranked in the 60<sup>th</sup> percentile thus no change was observed to have taken place between the AY 08-09 and AY 09-10 cohorts. More notably, when comparing the other six assessment areas (the court system, law enforcement, corrections, theories of criminal behavior, critical thinking, and research methodology/statistics), AY 09-10 cohort results declined in six (of the seven) assessment areas. The AY 09-10 MFT results indicated the following percentile declines: the court system (15% decrease), law enforcement (10% decrease), corrections (10% decrease), theories of criminal

behavior (5% decrease), critical thinking (10% decrease), and research methodology/statistics (15% decrease).

### Writeplacer

The Writerplacer was administered to 28 students in AY 09-10. In total, three of CJC students demonstrated *Clear and Consistent Mastery*, earning a score of “8”, the highest score available. One student earned a score of “7”, demonstrating *Consistent Mastery*. A score of “6” (*Reasonably Consistent Mastery*) was earned by five of the students and a score of “5” (*Adequate Mastery*) was earned by nine of the students. Seven students demonstrated a score of “4” (*Developing Mastery*) and three earned a score of “3”, demonstrating *Little Mastery* of technical writing skills. No students scored below “3”. It is important to note that the introduction of the Writeplacer test was merely a pilot test and that minimal conclusions can be drawn from these results due to the small sample size.

### **Table 1**

**Major Fields Test Results, AY 07-08, AY 08-09 and AY 09-10**

Assessment Indicator Title	AY 07-08		AY 08-09		AY 09-10	
	MSCD <i>M</i> (PCTL)	National <i>M</i>	MSCD <i>M</i> (PCTL)	National Mean	MSCD <i>M</i> (PCTL)	National <i>M</i>
The Law	57 (55)	54	58 (60)	54	58 (60)	54
Law Enforcement	53 (40)	52	55 (55)	52	53 (45)	52
Corrections	53 (55)	49	55 (65)	49	52 (55)	49
The Court System	65 (80)	57	63 (70)	57	61 (55)	57
Theories of Criminal Behavior	46 (50)	44	47 (55)	44	46 (50)	44
Critical Thinking	57 (55)	53	58 (60)	52	55 (50)	52
Research Methodology and Statistics	44 (40)	44	46 (50)	44	43 (35)	44

**Discussion**

Research on standards-based curricula and the assessment of criminal justice and criminology programs through use of a standardized test is sparse. This study was designed to contribute to the literature. The conclusions drawn from this research are from Metropolitan State College of Denver. It is important to remember the potential limitations to this study. The first limitation is that students were being assessed primarily by only one type of instrument, the MFT. It was not until the third year of assessment that the Writeplacer Test was introduced. Another limitation of the study is that students may not have been motivated to do well on the MFT since they were not being graded on their results. The only requirement for completion of their capstone course was to take the exam. Finally, a curriculum change was made at the

beginning of the assessment period (AY 07-08) however it is difficult to distinguish which students were matriculating on the “new” standards-based curriculum and which on the “old” curriculum. In the future, we will need to distinguish between these two groups.

The results of the study indicated that by AY 08-09, student achievement in nearly all of seven areas of criminal justice as measured by the MFT was at or above the national average. During the first year of assessment (AY 07-08) students demonstrated a wide range of achievement among the subfields. Most notably achievement on the court system was high (80<sup>th</sup> percentile) and scores on research methodology and statistics and law enforcement were low (40<sup>th</sup> percentile). This was somewhat consistent with our hypotheses that in our “old” curriculum we had a high focus on the court system and less so on other areas including research methodology and statistics. However, Metropolitan State College of Denver has had a sustained focus on law enforcement throughout years so the lack of achievement on that subfield was surprising. During the second year of assessment (AY 08-09), student scores improved in all areas except the court system, which despite experiencing a decline, was still seven percentile points above the national average (70<sup>th</sup> percentile). Most notably achievement continued to climb in all of the other content areas and an “evening out” of achievement scores started to be recognized. This was exactly what we predicted in our hypotheses. Finally, in AY 09-10 we continued to observe a “leveling” of scores across all areas; there were no longer extremely high scores in some subfields and low scores in others. However, overall achievement declined in nearly all content areas.

The decline in scores was surprising and may have been caused by several things. First there was broadening of the national comparison group between academic years. The comparison group changed from 81 in the AY 07-08 to 102 in the AY 09-10, possibly

demonstrating a more diverse and higher achieving comparison mean. Another explanation for the varied scores may be because we did not identify which students were matriculating from the “old” curriculum versus the “new” curriculum thus it may be difficult to attribute the assessment scores to changes in the curriculum if it is unclear how many students from each group took the MFT in each year. For future testing, it would be important to ascertain this information prior to testing.

The last explanation for the varied results particularly in AY 09-10 could also be the result of a lack of investment by the students and/or faculty. It may be possible that students gave changing levels of effort over the years. Perhaps some students did not find getting a good score on the exam motivation enough to put forth effort. In the future we could encourage student engagement in the MFT and Writeplacer exams respectively by having faculty stress the importance of the exam. Another strategy could be to have the MFT and Writeplacer results count as a test score in their respective courses.

It is also possible that faculty, despite being required to alter course learning objectives consistent with ACJS standards, may not have changed their instruction to reflect these differences. Some faculty may also have continued to teach their courses based on what they value as important rather than what the standards suggest. One way to address this issue would be to map our assignments and exams to the specific learning objectives. This would highlight even further the link, or lack thereof, between the learning objectives and the tasks students are asked to complete to demonstrate competence of the course material. This notion of potential disengagement from the learning objectives specifically relates to one of the purposes of the study; that providing periodic assessment assists faculty in making changes that promote student achievement.

The results of the Writeplacer exam were exactly what we hypothesized; that students would score lower than average or average at best. While the Writeplacer is not a specific criminal justice and criminology measure, the ability to convey ideas and think critically through writing is valued. We will continue to evaluate student writing and begin to be more planful as a faculty in promoting and teaching good writing skills. Additionally we offer a “Writing in Criminal Justice” course that teaches students technical writing skills. We have begun revising this course to more adequately address the needs of students and their writing.

Lastly, assessment in conjunction with external review results leads to positive program changes. At Metropolitan State College of Denver, an external review results and our student assessment results were similar. For example, our external reviewer in 2004 identified that our program was much too narrow and our assessment results (MFT) indicated just that. After we changed our curriculum to reflect ACJS standards, a broadening of knowledge was demonstrated by students. While these results were not free from raising even more questions, it gave our program even more evidence to support making curriculum changes. This knowledge provides our faculty vital information into the areas of our curricula that need improvement. The Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology at the Metropolitan State College of Denver will continue to assess and evaluate student achievement. Our goal is to continue to work toward certification. While our program is well-respected and highly successful in attracting students, the ability to provide a clear and consistent education to our students based on national standards is a good path to becoming an even more reputable program.

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