Reflections on the Process Prior to Broad Implementation of the Portfolio Project

Our department embarked on a process of documenting student learning in 2003 that involved discussion and input from the entire faculty involved in the master’s speech-language pathology program. The overarching goal of this program revision was to clearly identify program goals and establish a means of evaluating whether students are meeting these goals, with the ultimate intent of providing feedback to individual students as they progress through the program and to the program to identify areas that need revision. Clearly this has been an iterative process, spanning five years and continuing into the future. We began with a global set of program goals that provided alignment of goals across experiences (i.e., courses and clinical practica) and allowed us to evaluate the breadth and depth of our course offerings. We made an initial attempt to assess learning across experiences through our formative exam and to provide feedback and program revision to individual students through the formulation of action plans. We summarized performance on the formative exam across students and reflected on these data as a group. This reflection yielded a new set of objectives:
1. We needed to create more specific program goals that identified levels of performance from novice to advanced to better track student learning across the course of the program; and
2. Our formative assessment needed to be better integrated with our overall program.

As a result, we developed two program rubrics that incorporate more specific goals and identify four levels of performance for each goal. These rubrics currently are being adapted by individual instructors and supervisors for specific courses and practica. We currently are piloting a more integrated formative assessment through the use of student portfolios. In the future, our goals are to have:
• A common language for evaluating students (i.e., adapted program rubrics for each experience),
• A means for summarizing performance across experiences within individual students (i.e., individual portfolios) to identify strengths and weaknesses across content areas to improve each student’s learning during his or her program, and
• A means for summarizing performance across students (i.e., aggregating information across portfolios) to identify areas for program revision.

National pressure is mounting for universities to document learning outcomes for all students. In many professional degree programs, this pressure already has been translated into policy through revision to accreditation standards. While we may balk at this potential external mandate, our experience is that there are benefits to creating transparency between program learning goals and course/clinic-specific learning goals. Chief among these is alignment of goals across experiences so that both faculty and students can keep their eyes on the prize. Moreover, clearly identified goals lend themselves to program-wide assessment. The benefit of program-wide assessment is that areas of strength and weakness across students can be identified so that informed program revision can be undertaken. Documenting student learning outcomes forces us to close the loop and take action if those learning outcomes are not as expected. Ultimately, this
cyclical practice of identifying learning goals, assessing learning outcome, and re-examining program practices will lead to a stronger program for all students.