



Assessment Spotlight: Book Arts MFA Assessment Rebuild

Fall 2018

In 2017, Professor Anna Embree was asked to rebuild the Book Arts MFA program assessment process. Embree had questions, some about logistics and some about value. She thought, “We’re a small program; we know how students are doing. Why do this assessment work—what if it’s not useful?”

Once she had initial answers and encouragement from her department and OIE, Embree collaborated with Assistant Professor Sarah Bryant to develop components of their new assessment process: program-level student learning outcomes (SLOs), a “map” showing SLO-curriculum alignment, and a rubric to be applied at organic points near the end of the curriculum (the MFA creative thesis project includes a presentation and an exhibition). The rubric articulated the competencies that graduating students should be able to demonstrate.

As it turned out, these preliminary activities had value even before student work was assessed. The SLOs made it easier for faculty to craft a “five-minute elevator pitch” to explain to various audiences the value of a Book Arts MFA. Piloting the rubric helped faculty get on the same page in terms of expectations. The finalized version was added to a Guidelines document that’s distributed to all students. As Bryant noted, “We can clearly describe how projects are evaluated, and what the students can aim for.”

In the pilot phase, faculty applied the rubric as a collective group; tweaks were subsequently made to it. In 2017-18, all full-time Book Arts faculty used the rubric independently. The group then met to discuss their ratings and qualitative observations (the rubric has places for both). Although the data review process confirmed many anecdotal impressions, some surprises were revealed. For example, faculty agreed that students were weak in terms of having articulated plans for disseminating their work. That skill is already receiving more emphasis in this year’s symposium.

Embree is pleased that “...all the work has facilitated our curriculum review and the way we’re approaching our courses.” Bryant is glad that the new process yields data-driven insights: “Because we’re so small, it was too easy to focus on individual students” rather than aggregated patterns of fine-grained competencies. The assessment work/reporting also feeds directly into specialized accreditation activities; a visiting team was recently impressed by the MFA program’s assessment process.



Finally, the Book Arts faculty offered the following advice to other programs hoping to create a fruitful program assessment process:

- *Anyone can do assessment! It’s helpful to consult with OIE to understand the purpose and get over the “I can’t do this” hurdle.*
- *Building the process took some time and thought, but it wasn’t as hard as it sounded.*
- *Have a “buddy” in the department—someone to collaborate with on the assessment components that will eventually be reviewed by other faculty.*