

1-1-2010

## Implementing an Assessment Program: A Faculty Member's Perspective

Robert Becker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj>



Part of the [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Becker, Robert (2010) "Implementing an Assessment Program: A Faculty Member's Perspective," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 19.

DOI: 10.58809/SRHF1187

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss1/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-Reviewed Journals at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal* by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact [ScholarsRepository@fhsu.edu](mailto:ScholarsRepository@fhsu.edu).

# Academic Leadership Journal

## Setting the Stage

In 1999, after several exploratory meetings, the college administration established an ad-hoc interdisciplinary assessment committee to begin a conversation about what students were taught and how faculty knew what was learned and what was not. At the first meeting of this committee, composed of representatives of the college's seventeen teaching departments, the library, student affairs, institutional planning, research, and assessment, and academic affairs, several impediments to a formalized college-wide assessment initiative immediately became apparent. While a culture of informal assessment already existed as instructors daily grappled with effectively teaching their students, the notion of a widespread institutionalized plan was alien. We faculty members posed such questions as: "What constitutes formal assessment? How might we begin to communicate our needs and concerns given the differences between our disciplines?" Simply, we were unsure of how to talk to each other about the very thing that unified us as faculty members, the teaching that we did day in and day out.

Perhaps a greater threat to this newly-formed interdisciplinary committee than unfamiliarity with assessment was mistrust of it. Since the college's administration initiated this project, faculty were concerned about motives and intentions. As faculty, we gave voice immediately and frequently to several questions. "Why are we doing this? What are we to produce? Who will see the results? What impact will an assessment program have on tenure and promotion?" Members of the ad-hoc committee spoke out of concern not only for themselves but on behalf of the members of the departments they were representing. We were justifiably concerned that any mandated assessment might be used to evaluate faculty performance rather than student learning.

Without defusing mistrust, the assessment initiative could not and would not have survived the initial meetings of the ad hoc committee. Indeed, although the fear that the project would be used to assess individual faculty performance persisted several years into the program, it was addressed seriously, vigorously, and respectfully by all. At the outset, it was established that assessment was by and for faculty to learn more about the effectiveness of their teaching. The administration repeatedly maintained that whatever shape the assessment plan would take, no single faculty member would be singled out for either reward or punishment. With these assurances in hand, the ad hoc committee was able to move forward.

### First Steps

By overcoming unfamiliarity and mistrust, the committee was able to achieve a primary goal of a comprehensive assessment program: to enlist and engage faculty in an interdisciplinary discussion of teaching and learning. Early in our first year, we discovered that as faculty members representing all of the college's academic departments, we lacked a common vocabulary to discuss what we hoped to accomplish in the classroom. Moreover, we did not possess sufficient knowledge of assessment to discuss what it meant at both the college and course levels. Consequently, the first two years of the

project we focused upon concentrated reading and discussion of assessment theory and program implementation. With the support of the administration, materials were purchased and distributed to committee members and speakers and workshops were offered. We visited colleges that had established assessment programs and gleaned what we could from them. Conversations in our monthly meetings ranged far and wide, with a tendency toward philosophical discussion of topics and issues that, at times, appeared to diverge from assessment itself.

These ethereal meetings that marked the first years of our enterprise were fundamental to the growth of assessment committee members and the program that we were piecing together. In these meetings, we became a community of learners who explored unrestricted the very essence of what we were doing as faculty, why we were doing it, and what we hoped to achieve. Without these meetings, and the unqualified support of the administration, nothing of substance would have come out of the ad hoc committee and it is doubtful that the initiative would have survived.

## **Early Results**

Tangible results emerged from these conversations of the first two years. In searching for the purpose of our assessment program and a common vocabulary to describe it, we devoted much time and effort to creating generalizable educational objectives, common teaching goals across the curriculum, that concretized our thoughts about what students should be taught in their first two years of undergraduate study. Developing a core of objectives was a struggle that capitalized on the work we had done familiarizing ourselves with assessment in general and our ability to cooperatively engage each other as faculty members.

To produce this list, we gave much attention to studying educational objectives and how to write them. At one point, the college administration sponsored a day-long workshop conducted by an outside expert to help us to achieve this goal. The seeming artificiality of writing these objectives, with their strict structure and specialized vocabulary, prompted the committee to understand and articulate objectives specific to our goals in educating our students. However, the more we talked and the more we read about educational outcomes, the more we questioned the emphasis of our nascent assessment program. When we learned that new standards were being written by state agencies that required external evaluators to examine how institutions supported student learning, it was if a bell went off in our collective mind. How simple and just it seemed to shift the emphasis of our inquiry from what teachers taught to what students learned. This revelation, now obvious, sent us back to the drawing board. We needed to re-think our work in the context of this essential change.

The shift from thinking about what we taught to what our students learned was the most significant occurrence since the actual formation of the committee, and we approached our task anew. Now, however, we did possess a common vocabulary to talk among ourselves and with other members of the college community. We also understood what assessment was and what it entailed. Finally, we accepted the need and value of an assessment program that would have a direct bearing on our understanding of our classroom practices.

Ultimately, this journey brought us a satisfactory answer to the question that had perplexed us from the beginning: "What will be assessed?" The end result of our deliberations was our creation of general education objectives, thirteen attributes that described what our students should have learned in the course of their studies by the time they graduate. This list was the culmination of our conversations

about the nature of learning, what constitutes knowledge, and what is worth knowing that dominated the first stage of the committee's work together. These objectives stand as both a mandate and a promise to faculty and students. As a single document, they were adopted by the academic senate of the college and are printed in the "Profile of the College" section of every catalog, directly following the mission statement.

## **Phase Two**

About the time the general education objectives were formally adopted, the ad hoc assessment committee settled down to an even more daunting task—demonstrating student achievement. How might faculty show that students have achieved the objectives? How could such learning be measured? With learning goals in place, we needed to formulate a plan for the implementation of an actual assessment.

Partially as the result of our desire to replace faculty mistrust of the initiative with faculty investment in it, care had to be taken to preserve the anonymity of involved faculty. Committee members sought out assessment designs that separated an individual faculty member's identity from the assessment data gathered and reported. To best serve the intention of the assessment program (the measurement of student attainment of the general educational objectives), and consonant with the fundamental philosophy behind it, the committee decided to assess courses on a departmental level. Specific courses that demonstrated the presence of an educational objective would be selected to be assessed and data would be reported in aggregate. Only courses with multiple sections would be chosen—no course taught by a single instructor would be assessed. To this end, we would limit this initial course assessment plan to include only first semester freshman courses that traditionally were taught by several faculty members within a department. We also made a point of reiterating a primary understanding of the program that the administration had agreed to early on: It was stressed that assessment is for faculty and their students and is not owned by the administration. The purpose of the assessment was to initiate introspective analysis within each member of the faculty and to stimulate intradepartmental conversation about course outcomes.

The actual vehicle for conducting the course assessment took the form of a self-guiding tool that would lead faculty members step by step through the assessment process. One general education objective was to be singled out for assessment in the specific course that had been chosen. Course objectives were then to be written that showed how the course addressed the general education objective, and specific assignments that demonstrated student learning of the objective were to be listed. Ultimately, faculty were asked to administer to their classes one assignment that embodied the general education objective. Student performance would be measured by a faculty-designed rubric unique to the department and course such that student learning of the objective could be inferred. In this way, and across the disciplines, assessment of the general education objectives would be operationalized and faculty could understand more clearly the relationship between their goals and objectives and what their students learned.

Templates and charts that facilitated the input of assessment data were designed, discussed, modified, discussed again, and finally accepted by the assessment committee. Accompanying explanatory text went through a similar process until a self-guiding assessment manual was produced for use by participating faculty within the college's individual departments. The implementation plan for

course assessment placed each member of the ad hoc committee at the center of his or her department's course assessment. This liaison would disseminate the work of the ad-hoc committee and, it was hoped, bring faculty members who had no previous experience with the assessment program up to speed.

In the long run, the assessment committee hoped that by studying a particular course (e.g. English 101, Biology 140, Health 102), department discussion of assessment results would lead to modification of the course, which, in turn, would lead to another assessment. This cycle, which illustrates the basic, recursive nature of assessment, would serve to introduce the culture of assessment into the college and assure a vehicle by which conscious attention to the learning of students would remain at the forefront of teaching.

### Moving The Assessment Initiative Into Academic Departments

The college-wide assessment plan required each department to assess one course in terms of how it addressed student learning of one general education objective. Learning goals particular to the selected course were to be generated by faculty and a specific assignment that embedded the objective was to be administered to students. Student performance on this assignment would give an indication of how effectively they learned the targeted general education objective.

This ambitious plan was greeted by faculty responses that initially were ambiguous. In addition to questions that had been expressed by members of the ad hoc committee (What is assessment? Why are we doing this? Who will see the results?) were new ones, some of which were perhaps specific to the English department (How technical is the assessment? How can performance on only one assignment assess what we do?). Furthermore, a general lack of familiarity with quantitative research and formalized assessment arose as a potential barrier to fulfilling the departmental assessment mandate.

However, well before deployment of the departmental phase of the assessment project, the chairperson of the English department, the director of the writing program, and I, as the department representative to the ad hoc committee, reserved precious time to include department faculty actively in all aspects of the assessment program. Over the course of two years and about a dozen meetings, English department faculty at large (guided by the members of a newly-formed department assessment committee) participated in: writing course objectives, selecting a general education objective to be assessed, generating assignments to address both the course objectives and the general education objective, creating a rubric by which to measure student performance on the chosen assignment, conducting the assessment, and responding to the results of the assessment with suggestions to improve student learning.

In the end, we chose to assess student learning of the third general education objective, "Students will write, read, listen, and speak clearly and effectively." We then examined student performance on one assignment, the department mandated English 101 final examination (which asks students to negotiate two readings in a formal written response), to determine student achievement of the general education objective.

From my perspective, what distinguished the English department in its involvement in the course assessment project was the nature and degree of collaboration and collegiality. Prior to embarking on

any product-generating activities (designing objectives, completing templates), I conducted workshops to help engage faculty in thinking critically about assessment and approaches to it. At certain times, these discussions mirrored those of the ad hoc committee as we struggled with the vocabulary, concepts, and meaning of assessment. These general conversations were essential to gearing up for the implementation of the assessment plan and articulated what the ad hoc committee had in mind in creating the departmental part of the program.

These vital, initial meetings quickly led to detailed discipline-specific discussions about our courses, course objectives, and student learning. Prior to this time, as involved faculty members, we had often engaged each other in conversation about teaching and student learning; however, often these contacts were spontaneous or fleeting, occurring briefly in the hallway or as a department meeting agenda item. Also, before the implementation of the course assessment program, even when the focus of our discussion was pedagogy or an educational outcome, we did not quite know how to frame our observations in the context of larger questions about student learning. Our department assessment meetings helped us to focus our thoughts and to express our ideas about teaching and learning more precisely and meaningfully. After these preliminary sessions, when the groundwork for the course assessment project was laid, activities that were connected logistically to the implementation of the department plan were then undertaken.

## **The Second Wave**

Reviewing student learning in the context of agreed upon course objectives and outcomes enabled English department faculty to begin a cycle of assessment and response that characterizes effective programs. After assessing our students' performance on the EN-101 final examination in terms of achievement of the targeted educational objective, we engaged in several discussions of the meaning of the results and how the course might be modified on the basis of them. Indeed, concrete changes to the course syllabus were made to enhance student learning.

Assessment of a second course, the literature and composition class that directly follows English 101 and is required of all students, gave the department the opportunity to evaluate the linkage between these courses and presented us with valuable information hitherto unknown. Implementing a second round of course assessment also enabled us, in a sense, to assess the assessment process. This time around, when creating course objectives, selecting representative assignments, and designing a scoring rubric, we were able to capitalize on what we had learned from our initial course assessment. Once again, involving all faculty members through department meetings and workshops ensured their active participation in the project from the selection of a general education objective to assess through to the analysis of data.

Ongoing discussions about our course assessments and their significance to our teaching and our students' learning have helped us to realize the true promise of the assessment program when it was first conceived all those years ago: the potential of an assessment program to involve faculty in conversation about teaching and learning that results in an increased awareness of and more effective pedagogy.

## **Initial Conclusions**

It is essential to mention first the extraordinary time, effort, and commitment required of both

administration and faculty to implement an assessment program. An effective assessment plan cannot be built in a day. Time on task is critical, and those involved in the program must be content with accepting limited initial observable gains. A deliberate ramp-up that places at its center faculty inquiry through the study and discussion of assessment theory, models, and materials may be productive in ways that will not be known for months or even years. Given the importance of building an effective assessment program, there must be a willingness on the part of administrators and involved faculty to go slowly. A product of the assessment—however conceived—will come, but initiation into the world of assessment and immersion in the resulting conversation are themselves fundamental achievements.

What I found to be most valuable throughout my participation in the assessment program was the interdisciplinary discussion and collaboration among faculty members who rarely have the opportunity to engage each other on common ground. Collective goals and objectives emerged, as well as a better understanding of our unique differences. Mostly we came away with a clearer sense of our purpose as educators within our local campus environment. Allowed to run their course, our conversations helped us to understand more clearly what we want our students to learn and how we might help to ensure this learning. Of course, differences of opinion concerning academic content, pedagogy, and even the usefulness of assessment remain; however, for many of my colleagues, the assessment project is viewed as an important and desirable ongoing faculty development program that enhances pedagogy. Cultivating a cadre of informed faculty members from across the campus who in turn involve other faculty members is a worthy initial goal of an assessment plan.

It seems equally essential for any campus-wide assessment program to engage individual departments. In the context of interdisciplinary conversations that have taken place or are ongoing, discipline-specific applications should be formulated. In the end, the ultimate promise of an effective assessment program is a serious ongoing academic consideration of what we teach, why we teach, and, most important, what students learn.

On our campus this conversation has deepened over the ensuing years. Assessment has been the focus of one faculty development colloquium and has appeared on the program of several others. The original ad hoc assessment committee has given rise to several interdisciplinary faculty inquiry groups that explored such topics as general education, pedagogy, cornerstone and capstone projects, project-based learning, and freshman-year initiatives. Most recently, the college has engaged in a formal assessment of the original thirteen general education objectives.

More formally, the first round of course assessments have been included in the college's self-evaluation of academic programs (Associate in Arts, Associate in Arts and Sciences) as well as those of external reviewers (ABET, Middle States). Assessment reports, consisting of the templates used to conduct and document course assessment, contain information necessary for reviewers to understand college and course goals, student achievement, and faculty action plans that have been developed in response to course assessment. Perhaps this aspect of the assessment program fulfills a primary motivation of the administration when it first proposed the initiative in 1999, the desire to provide documentation of what students are learning. Yet, such documentation only partially justifies the role of assessment on this campus. In essence, the deliberate implementation of the course assessment program has led to a deeper understanding of learning and teaching. Extending beyond an academic department, the conversations about assessment terminology and concepts fueled dialogue and debate about how faculty members might best serve the interests of their students. This conversation is dynamic,

changing with different student populations and their needs as well as faculty familiarity with and incorporation of pedagogies. At its best, the ongoing dialogue has led to a reinvigoration of faculty members.

Our assessment program continues to address the inevitable challenges manifest in the implementation of any ambitious initiative. Over time, faculty have benefited from its promise to initiate dialogue, exploration, introspection, and change. Continued support by administrators and faculty working together will ensure a deepening of our commitment to the learning of our students. Much progress has been made, and surely there is more to come.

VN:R\_U [1.9.11\_1134]