Leading Assessment: From Faculty Reluctance to Faculty Engagement

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Assessing college student learning consumes substantial energy, driven or encouraged by accrediting bodies, the Federal and state governments, and other stakeholders. One might think, for these reasons as well as the longevity assessment has displayed as a movement, that it would be celebrating its many successes in transforming higher education.

Yet while it has outlasted many other higher education reforms, assessment of student learning (arguably) seems to have stalled as a vehicle for transforming higher education. Yes, data collection is happening in many places and there are pockets of excellence (e.g., Alverno College, Truman State), but assessment is hardly a mature endeavor, tied in to the planning and budgeting processes, retention and tenure expectations, or the culture of much of higher education (Wright 2002). Much assessment focuses on student satisfaction and post-college success (as opposed to actual learning), while few investigations of learning address high-level or complex cognitive skills (Peterson and Vaughan 2002).

As Ralph Wolff, the executive director of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), explained (Smith and Finney 2008), part of the impetus for reforming WASC’s accreditation process was the realization that institutions were “repeatedly ‘just getting started’” with assessment. Wergin (2005) notes that regional accrediting commissions believe their member institutions have come to view assessment as “mechanistic” and that its value has not been internalized by faculty. The pursuit of “the system” seems to have eclipsed the original idea of an assessment process that informs teaching and learning (Ewell, 2002b; Mundhenk, 2004). Much assessment takes place because of accreditation expectations, conducted with a compliance mentality and doing little to transform faculty or institutional practice.

A common hypothesis for this stunted impact of assessment is the fact that faculty members resist and block the initiative. While a tempting explanation, in my experience faculty typically resist only after the implementation process has started to break down. I have worked with faculty on two campuses who were understandably frustrated over assessment work done only to be abandoned and restarted for various reasons. But in both cases they were nonetheless willing to participate in another concerted effort to develop an assessment system.

While perhaps wary, many faculty members will engage in assessment of student learning if the work receives strong leadership. A scathing critique of assessment by Laurie Fendrich (2007) illustrates this point. After making a good-faith effort to participate for several years, Fendrich came to see assessment as “bureaucratic baloney” and faculty who embrace it as “second-rate teachers” who use assessment as a way to give direction that is otherwise lacking to their courses.

Institutional leaders and assessment professionals have a great influence on whether and how faculty members engage with assessment, and whether a meaningful assessment culture thrives, compliance-focused assessment practice limps along, or the effort fails. How can we facilitate the growth of an assessment practice that does not merely comply with accreditor expectations but adds intellectual energy and improves the student experience?
Leading Assessment Proactively

Angelo (2002) argues that for a scholarship of assessment to thrive, we must align faculty culture, institutional structures, and leadership for change. The importance of this point cannot be overstated. A meaningful assessment program is more than just a new activity to be undertaken, it is a change in how we think about what we do in higher education. This kind of change disrupts normal ways of doing business and, as a result, creates uncertainty and anxiety. Navigating these waters can be challenging, but we can help faculty do so by linking a vision of what assessment can be that is based in faculty culture to structures and supports that facilitate faculty work and leadership that makes all of this possible.

Articulate a Relevant Vision

A clear vision is key to offering faculty a compelling reason to do assessment. On campuses where assessment practice is robust, accreditation may have sparked it, but leaders decided early on to use this external driver to support their own needs and goals (Peterson and Vaughan 2002). It is up to us as leaders to create a climate where it is not accreditation that drives assessment, but rather a process of inquiry (driven and owned by faculty) that also fulfills accreditation requirements.

Achieving this goal is no small challenge. While assessment was “born” from both a desire to improve student learning and calls for accountability and quality control (Ewell 2002a), the latter have come to dominate our view of the practice. Wright (2002, 241) wryly notes that faculty often take the same view toward assessment that we lament in our students: “It’s simple. You figure out what they [accreditors] want, find the quickest, least damaging way to respond, send off a report, and then forget it.” Moreover, the language of accountability runs headlong into a faculty culture that generally values collegiality, autonomy, and the individual professor as the ultimate arbiter of quality (Birnbaum 2000).

As Stiggins (2002) has noted, education is dominated by assessment of learning, but little time is spent doing assessment for learning, despite evidence that assessment used in an educational way can have a substantial effect on student learning. Alverno College, often held up as the paragon of assessment virtue, began their work in this area not for its own sake, but because, having reorganized their curriculum, they wanted to see whether and how it was working. It was a means to a larger end. Emphasizing this point moves the assessment conversation from a focus on accountability to assessment as a tool to improve student learning—an approach much closer to faculty concerns.

Exploring the pedagogical and curricular questions that come from doing assessment can be a stimulating and unifying process that energizes faculty and students. Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, and Hutchings (2007) have noted that the process of reaching agreement on what doctoral students in the School of Education at the University of Colorado should know and be able to do shaped the kind of intellectual community at the core of good doctoral education. When assessment is connected to the academic core and driven by faculty like this, it is more likely to have relevance and be valued rather than viewed as a compliance exercise. And it is in cases such as this, when we move beyond mere measurement, that faculty are more likely to assume responsibility to leading the effort (Palomba and Banta 1999; Wright 2002).

The link between assessment and accreditation is unlikely to go away in the near future. However, how assessment fulfills accreditation requirements should be the concern of a handful of administrators and
barely a question in faculty minds compared to the opportunity to engage in inquiry to improve their programs and student learning.

Provide a Plan and Structure

Articulating an alternative vision for assessment is relatively easy. But if this vision is to be seen as credible and attainable, institutions must plan for and establish the structures necessary to make it real. This means sharing a clear plan, providing professional development for faculty, giving them time and support to meet around assessment planning and findings, providing technical support for data management and analysis, and adjusting structures to tie assessment to decision-making.

The central principle here is transparency. At one institution, we spent a year developing a long-range implementation plan and revising the plan based on campus feedback. We began the following fall term by providing a calendar of activities and a clear statement of goals for the year. Our colleagues responded because they knew where we were heading.

Institutions must also attend to professional development that will help faculty build a common language and practice of assessment. At one institution, we used weekly learning communities to build faculty skills in effective assessment; department representatives learned about assessment together and then mentored their department colleagues. At another institution, we held monthly workshops where multiple faculty from departments came together for skill-building and shared work time. Faculty valued this approach for the time it gave them to collaborate. Whether it is one of these or some other model, institutions should use ongoing professional development to give faculty the tools for assessment success.

We must also provide the time for faculty to meet and discuss student learning outcome results, assessment and pedagogical practices, and program improvement efforts. It takes time to review data, reach a consensus on how students are performing, and identify the steps faculty or others might take to better support student learning. These conversations are crucial to have and easy to facilitate. Supporting them can be as simple as providing funds to buy dinner for a faculty meeting once or twice a year. Given the increasingly prominent role part-time faculty play in many departments, we may want to encourage their participation in these meetings with a modest stipend or gift card of some sort. Still, it does not have to be a high-resource endeavor to show faculty that the work of assessment is a valued part of the organization.

Of course, we should ideally look for ways to encourage the involvement of all faculty in the assessment process given the many demands they have on their time. While release or assigned time is the ideal, this goal is difficult to attain. One option might be to connect assessment work to institutional structures and policies so that assessment work helps faculty members achieve other goals. For instance, institutions might invite or expect that faculty members up for tenure or promotion demonstrate their work with assessment—being careful not to tie recognition to student learning results. They might also find a way to recognize the preparation of annual assessment reports as a form of technical reporting that can contribute to tenure and promotion. Assigning value to scholarship focused on teaching and learning is another mechanism for helping faculty see assessment as relevant to institutional priorities and an effective use of their time. Sending faculty to assessment-related conferences and providing opportunities for grants where faculty can pursue assessment-related research (Palomba and Banta 1999) are also ways to engage and reward faculty.
An additional structural support required for effective assessment is an infrastructure for data collection, management, and analysis (Palomba and Banta 1999; Peterson and Vaughan 2002). Logistical support for faculty around data input is critical. So too is a robust information management system that can help faculty and administrators track and analyze student outcomes data. Even modest assessment efforts harbor the risk of faculty swimming in a sea of outcomes data. Leaders must provide resources to input student outcomes data; faculty time should be spent analyzing and acting upon such data, not entering it. Ideally, staff members will be able to help with basic analysis and reporting needs to allow faculty to focus their energies on interpreting the data and acting on the findings.

A final structural support for assessment is linking the process to decision-making by, for instance, expecting that programs’ support their requests for new resources (e.g., for new courses, faculty lines, staff support) with assessment-based evidence whenever relevant. This act, in turn, may require adjusting reporting schedules to align with budget planning timelines. Institutions might make assessment data a key part of strategic planning process or an element of program review (Peterson and Vaughan 2002). Using assessment findings for decisions is infrequently done (Peterson and Vaughan) but is absolutely essential if faculty are to see the assessment process as legitimate (Palomba and Banta 1999).

Assessment Leadership

Finally, along with vision and structure, institutions must be willing to identify and support leadership of assessment efforts at the organizational level. Faculty must be the ultimate leaders of their assessment efforts. It is up to them as a group to articulate learning outcomes, identify ways to gather meaningful data, interpret the data, and craft and implement program changes.

Still, institutions should identify one or more faculty members to facilitate or coordinate assessment. Assessment leaders do not need to excel in statistics and measurement; this idea is a misconception based on a focus on the mechanics of working with data. Professional staff members can provide this support or individual faculty members with the right skill sets can be enlisted to help. Assessment leaders must be able to conceptualize a system, bring people together around a vision, and build cross-unit partnerships that support faculty work. They should be able to orchestrate the process of assessment, helping faculty see and realize the vision of assessment for improvement rather than accountability.

These assessment leaders should be able to communicate and support the attainment of basic expectations for effective assessment. For instance, that the measures identified must be meaningful and consistent with good educational practice; scoring should be fair and reliable across course sections. In addition, they can take the lead in coordinating central efforts that support faculty assessment work. Providing templates or outlines for assessment plans and reports, or sharing guiding questions to facilitate dialogue around findings, facilitates faculty work while keeping the core decisions about outcomes and interpretations in their hands. To the extent that the institution finds ways to give faculty tools to make possible their success, the message of faculty ownership is amplified.

This assessment leader should also be visible. He or she should be able to communicate the values of assessment and the plan for moving forward, as well as reach out to faculty to engage in professional
development and share resources. Moreover, he or she should be committed to soliciting the feedback of faculty as assessment work unfolds. Giving faculty clear channels through which they can raise questions about assessment, share concerns, and evaluate the effectiveness of the effort is essential to turning reluctance into buy-in.

These leaders cannot be expected to do their work on top of existing faculty duties. The role described above, as well as the kind of visibility and availability required, dictates that whoever is leading assessment be freed of most if not all of his/her other duties—particularly during the years when the assessment efforts are just beginning. The institution must free them up to spend the time it takes to do the job well.

Conclusion

There are many reasons assessment efforts “go bad.” However, more often than not, faculty resistance is a secondary rather than a primary cause. While some faculty will always opt out, most are willing to devote some time and energy if they see the practice as worthwhile, taken seriously by the institution, and likely to be productive.

It is up to assessment and institutional leaders to create a vision and implement a process that captures and maintains the trust of faculty. This means helping faculty see why assessment is important and holds value for them. It also means supporting it with leadership and resources that help faculty use their time wisely. And it most certainly means putting the lessons of assessment to use for program improvement. If we are unable to do so, we may end up with faculty like Fendrich (2007), who came into the process with goodwill and left seeing it as “bureaucratic baloney” to be tolerated.

References


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