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# The Art of Making Assessment Anti-Venom: Injecting Assessment in Small Doses to Create a Faculty Culture of Assessment

Philip I. Kramer

**M**ANY COLLEGE FACULTY REACT to student outcomes assessment the way most of us react when we see a rattlesnake within striking distance. First, we perceive a threat, and then we react. Common faculty reactions to the perceived threat of assessment include metaphorically running away and throwing rocks or sticks at it. Like a hiker in the desert doing her best to avoid being struck when she encounters a rattlesnake, a number of faculty members react to assessment activities by doing what they can to avoid or resist them. I suggest that one way to address faculty avoidance or resistance is to create an antidote. In a way similar to how anti-venom is created for venomous bites or stings—that is, by receiving small doses of assessment over time—faculty may be able to build up their assessment immunity. Put another way, when assessment work is introduced to faculty in a way that is both collegial and collaborative, and when it is given in small, manageable doses while emphasizing the positive aspects of assessment, faculty resistance may be reduced significantly.

## Some Reasons Why Faculty Resist Assessment

Faculty members have many reasons for resisting assessment:

- Assessment is often perceived as a threat to academic integrity, particularly when faculty are asked to provide evidence of student learning.
- Faculty may assume that assessment is a threat to their autonomy as scholars and teachers. Assessment is often seen as encroaching on faculty independence.
- Assessment moves an institution toward becoming more transparent, which may conflict with the belief held by some faculty that teaching, like research, is a semi-private activity.
- Faculty are extremely well trained in their respective disciplines. They are not, however, usually well trained in academic areas related to outcomes assessment (for example, evaluation, higher education policy and politics, quantitative and qualitative research methods, pedagogical and curricular design); consequently, faculty may feel incapable of designing and conducting assessment, analyzing or understanding its results, or knowing how to make changes in their pedagogy and curriculum.
- Many faculty fear they could be punished if their students do poorly on assessments.
- Faculty see assessment activities as uncompensated additional responsibilities.
- Many faculty think that assessment is mostly an externally mandated accountability movement (that is, driven by parents, employers, the administration, trustees, state government, or federal government) and that those behind this movement are not interested in or do not understand how to increase educational quality. Indeed, the assessment and accountability movement in higher education is seen by many faculty as the

higher education version of the No Child Left Behind Act—that is, a perhaps well-intentioned effort that devolves into setting minimum threshold requirements for students instead of agreeing on and creating inspirational goals for college teaching and student learning.

## Creating Faculty Immune Responses: Reducing the Threat of Assessment

I have found that helping to change resistant and hostile faculty attitudes toward assessment is best accomplished when assessment professionals meet with faculty in an individual, departmental, or large-group setting and attempt to find solutions to the assessment-related problems that are most meaningful to faculty. The challenge of the assessment professional is to demonstrate to faculty that

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assessment is valuable, important work that will have a direct, positive effect on the teaching and learning process. This demonstration is the key: faculty must clearly understand the potential value of assessment-related activities for them. Furthermore, conversations between assessment professionals and faculty must be nonthreatening, collegial, and collaborative and must respect the very busy lives of faculty members. My experience suggests that small doses of assessment conversation, repeated over time, seem to slowly build faculty members'

immune response and to reduce faculty resistance to assessment. Specifically, in building faculty immune responses, it is helpful to follow some of these suggestions:

- Talk face to face with faculty who are confused by or concerned about assessment methods or the thought of changing their pedagogy or curriculum or of being punished for the poor results of their students. Talk about the purposes and well-intentioned consequences of assessment.
- Speak to the strength of the faculty by emphasizing to them that one of the main purposes of assessment is to

what the results mean for their teaching and their students' learning.

- Use senior faculty in the design, implementation, analysis, and reporting of assessment results; this adds legitimacy to the assessment process and increases the perceived worth of conducting assessment on campus.
- Socialize brand-new and all tenure-track faculty in assessment policies and practices. Younger tenure-track faculty tend to be more motivated than older faculty when asked to participate in assessment.
- Ask faculty to share their assessment challenges and successes with their colleagues. Such sharing, whether formal

can substantially reduce or even avoid faculty fear of and resistance to assessment and set the stage for healthy immune responses by taking some of the following basic commonsense precautions to protect faculty:

- Ensure that assessment is not an exclusively or even mostly top-down directive. As I mentioned earlier, faculty are the best purveyors of the curriculum. They are naturally positioned to take a significant leadership role in campus assessment activities. Conversely, neither should assessment be only or mostly a bottom-up approach. Assessment works best when faculty, staff, students, and administrators work collegially and collaboratively. Share control with the various stakeholders, and make sure to give faculty a great deal of control over planning, designing, and implementing assessment and, concomitantly, improving teaching and learning.
- Make certain that there are no punitive consequences for poor assessment results; consider only celebrating and rewarding assessment activities and successes. Similarly, if there is strong resistance to assessment, consider disaggregating assessment results only after the faculty fear has been reduced. If your campus is new to assessment, give it some time to reflect on aggregated (less threatening) assessment results. After faculty see that assessment results are used only to make improvements and not to punish, they will be much more open to using disaggregated results at individual course, department, or college or divisional levels.
- If assessment is new to a campus, do not immediately scale up assessment activities across the institution all at once. Implementing assessment activities and institutionalizing a culture of assessment are best done in graduated steps. Consider, for example, whether it would be worthwhile to conduct a few pilot assessment projects in order to allow faculty to begin participating in assessment activities at a gradual pace.

Conversations between assessment professionals and faculty must be nonthreatening, collegial, and collaborative and must respect the very busy lives of faculty members.



improve teaching and learning (that is, to improve pedagogy and curricula). This emphasis does not mean that acknowledging the importance of demonstrating accountability is not important. On the contrary, we all know that accountability is important and that assessment and accountability are intertwined. But faculty know what they can and cannot do, and knowing what their students learn is far easier to appreciate and determine than demonstrating that faculty are being accountable to institutional stakeholders. This suggestion boils down to emphasizing what is most meaningful to faculty: namely, demonstrating that teachers are teaching and that students are learning.

- Get faculty involved in creating their own assessment instruments. More than any other stakeholder group, faculty know the curriculum, curricular goals, course content, and how to measure student learning appropriately. Faculty are the best stakeholders to decide what is to be measured, to determine how it should be measured, and to appreciate

or informal, is the very best kind of assessment-related faculty development. Seeing a formerly recalcitrant faculty member explain to her colleagues how she not only negotiated through the difficulties of implementing assessment but also embraced its tangible rewards is a powerful antidote to faculty resistance.

### Creating Institutional Immune Responses: What Institutions Can Do to Create a Healthy Assessment Culture

While making anti-venom is critical should a victim receive a venomous bite or sting, it is also important, when venturing into territory where one may encounter venomous animals, to create as safe an environment as possible, and to be perceptive enough and act prudently enough to avoid being bitten or stung in the first place. Having institutions make decisions that effectively create a safe environment for faculty (as well as other assessment stakeholders) in which assessment can flourish is akin to taking individual precautions as a hiker in snake country. Institutions

The goal would be to alleviate faculty fear of assessment before scaling assessment up to the institutional level.

- Do not become too attached to using only off-the-shelf, norm-referenced, standardized assessment instruments. Use both standardized and homegrown assessment instruments (see the next item in this list). Assessment is similar in many ways to action research: the primary goal should not be to use (or create) methodologically perfect measures to determine whether student learning happens; rather, the main goal should be to use assessment instruments to determine what students have learned. The point is to use this knowledge of

methodologically defensible as possible yet remains as related to the curriculum being taught as possible.

- Use a mix of homegrown assessment instruments and standardized, off-the-shelf national assessment measures; national tests measure only a portion of what is taught at a given institution. One efficient way to mix national and homegrown assessment is to customize the homegrown instruments to measure what is not covered by national instruments—that is, to measure the learning of course-relevant content.
- Consider using both criterion-referenced and norm-referenced assessment instruments in a complementary way.

Demanding methodological perfection or near-perfection seems shortsighted and serves only to alienate assessment stakeholders, particularly faculty.



student learning to improve teaching and learning. Designing, conducting, and implementing assessment comes with certain compromises, one of which may be that we need to live with assessment instruments and processes that are not perfect. This sacrifice may seem worth making. Yes, it is a possible slippery slope, but demanding methodological perfection or near-perfection seems shortsighted and serves only to alienate assessment stakeholders, particularly faculty. At the possible expense of giving up some reliability, validity, or even causality, it seems reasonable to use an assessment instrument that is as

Both have their advantages and disadvantages. Used separately, they can lead to distorted perceptions about not only results but also the intent to evaluate student learning achievements. Used together, they can complement each other, because criterion-referenced instruments tell a faculty what is happening within the walls of its own institution while norm-referenced instruments tell a faculty how their students compare with students at other institutions.

- Above all else, respect and reward the independence, integrity, and autonomy of faculty members by creating an

intellectual atmosphere that encourages a positive assessment environment in which faculty can participate, share, and grow as creators and consumers of student outcomes assessment.

## Conclusion

During the past several years, I have worked to strengthen the immune system of faculty (and institutions) and lessen their need for fight-or-flight responses to assessment, primarily through helping faculty appreciate how assessment can be used as a primary tool to improve teaching and learning. I have found that helping faculty to plan, design, and implement assessment; helping them to understand analyzed assessment data; and helping them to reflect on the results are activities that are instrumental in mitigating faculty resistance to assessment and laying the foundation for building a campuswide culture of assessment. Similarly, administrators have begun to realize the importance of providing faculty a safe, nonthreatening, and supportive environment in which assessment activities can flourish. These institutional leaders are doing what they can to remove obvious assessment barriers, obstacles, and hazards, thereby reducing faculty fear of and resistance toward student outcomes assessment. ■

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