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“Strengthening the Culture of Assessment Through Faculty Development and Shared Governance”

By

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Abstract

This 75-minute interactive workshop engages participants in a case study of two colleges and their efforts to expand and strengthen faculty assessment activities. A grant from the Teagle Foundation and on-campus conversations between faculty members and the administration have lead to dramatic improvements in the policies, procedures, and practices of assessment.

Workshop Goals

- To actively engage workshop participants in brainstorming how to give faculty members the necessary training to effectively design, conduct, design assessment and to report their assessment results to improve the teaching and learning process.
- To actively engage workshop participants in brainstorming how to create a culture of inquiry, collaboration, and collegiality for effective assessment.

Offering Faculty and Staff a Course in Student Outcomes Assessment

In May 2008, we received a \$149,667 grant from the Teagle Foundation for a 48 month period to increase faculty expertise on assessment, create an institutionalized system of mentoring for good assessment, refine data sharing and communications structures related to assessment, and enhance oversight processes and structures to sustain the momentum for this work.

During the first year, we provided training in assessment for eighteen people via a course titled “Assessment 101.” The group included eleven faculty, four staff members, and three student interns (see attached list). Six serve on our assessment committee, while most of the others have primary responsibility for assessment in their departments. This mix allowed got us off to a good start in developing expertise in multiple areas across the institution.

Assessment 101 was intended to introduce participants to the literature on student learning, help them explore issues in higher education assessment, and teach them about research design. To this end, they read E.T. Pascarella and P.T. Terenzini’s *How College Affects Students*, and B.E. Walvoord and T. W. Banta’s *Assessment Clear and Simple*, as well as several articles and other materials pertinent to their area of specialization. Much of the second half of the course was devoted to a highly interactive exploration of current assessment practices in the areas represented, where we applied our new understandings and pooled information. This training was done in eight meetings of an hour and a half, and one that went two and a half hours.

The other major task accomplished in the first year was to train three student interns so that they were prepared to help the Office of Academic Review and Curricular Advancement and the

Office of Institutional Planning and Research support assessment efforts. The Director of the Office of Academic Review and Curricular Advancement taught a semester-long independent learning project for the interns and supervising some on-the-job training of those student interns.

Assessment 101 Successes

We were quite pleased with the general enthusiasm and commitment, especially since scheduling difficulties meant that Assessment 101 usually met late on Friday afternoon. One senior administrator had too many other duties and withdrew early on, but most of the others came prepared every time.

While most of the participants felt that the pace was rushed, they all indicated that they had learned a substantial amount. Several said they were now much more confident in their understanding of assessment, and a junior faculty member announced that participating in the Teagle course gave her the credibility move her department toward more appropriate goals. The cooperative magic we were hoping for also appeared when a person from a department that “had felt lost and spinning our wheels for quite some time” used information from another participant to create a new approach that the department has accepted. As she noted, “it’s pretty big for us to feel this clear about where to go from here.”

At the end of the course, we asked participants if they would be willing to continue to work on Common Curriculum assessment issues and/or serve as consultants for others in their divisions. We had hoped for a handful of volunteers, but ended up with eleven. We are currently in the process of figuring out how best to use their expertise.

The knowledge and confidence of the student interns has grown enormously. They were full participants in the Assessment 101 conversations, and have already served as consultants to faculty in two departments. One will continue to work part-time on assessment over the summer, and the group is developing a large-scale study of aspects of our First Year Seminar program.

Finally, we have begun the process of sharing our learning outside the institution. The Director of Academic Advising has submitted a proposal to present at his professional organization, a Philosophy professor sent a proposal to the next IUPUI conference on his design for measuring progress toward a “philosophical disposition,” and the Director of Academic Assessment and the Principle Investigator have submitted a proposal to the IUPUI conference on our work to date.

Obstacles Overcome/Lessons Learned

The most important thing we have learned so far is that the goals for Assessment 101 did not conform to the time available. We will rectify this next year by adding two or three meetings and lengthening the time for all of them. In addition, since we will be able to begin in September (this past year we had to wait until we had finished with the Higher Learning Commission accreditation visit), we plan on spreading out the meetings and asking participants to do more outside of class. Our expectation is that this will also allow for deeper, more productive discussions during class time.

We also intend to make significant changes in the Assessment 101 curriculum based on what we have learned about the needs of the participants. This will include deleting or reducing some

readings, while adding others so that we can cover areas that we skimmed like research design. Since the learning was most intense when participants were required to do hands-on work with assessment practices in their area and share the results with the group, we will look for ways to expand this experience.

Conversations between Faculty and the Administration

Not surprisingly, relationships between chief academic officers (CAOs) and faculty governance bodies wax and wane depending on many factors, including, for example, the personalities of individuals, the changing needs and priorities of an institution, the issues being discussed and their salience to the respective participants, available institutional resources, and the structure of the faculty governance system at an institution. In this case study, we highlight the factor we believe had the greatest influence on the increasingly collaborative and collegial relationship between the CAO at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University (CSBSJU) and the faculty committee mandated with the responsibility for assessment and program review oversight. For us, that one factor was the strategic commitment made by the provost and key faculty governance committee members to begin creating an honest and transparent culture of inquiry designed to drive short-term and long-term decision-making. Our commitment to create a culture of inquiry had a number of catalysts.

The first catalyst was part of our preparation (beginning in June 2006) for the October 2008 accreditation site visit by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). As part of our accreditation self-study, we needed to address the assessment and program review concerns described in the 1998 HLC accreditation report. In the 1998 HLC report, the HLC determined (a) there was a lack of faculty understanding of and appreciation for assessment's potential contribution to institutional effectiveness, (b) assessment was being unevenly designed and implemented (and in many cases, not conducted at all) across academic departments and the core curriculum, and (c) there was a serious deficiency of systemic program review evaluation for the purposes of demonstrating program quality or improvement.

We realized that for us to address those concerns and to ensure we did not make similar mistakes, we needed to be frank about both our institutional challenges (while celebrating our successes) and to work hard to address our challenges openly. The provost and the director of academic assessment, for example, held a number of open forums where it was emphasized that our self-study efforts would be an honest and transparent analysis of our institutions. All stakeholders were invited to participate.

Our second catalyst came with a number of significant personnel hires or appointments. Within a four-year period, a new president, provost, associate provost, and director of assessment were hired. Additionally, a philosophy faculty member fascinated by the potential value of using assessment in his own classroom was named as the chair of the faculty committee responsible for assessment and program review. Moreover, a young, recently tenured nursing faculty member--who had been a hard-working member of the assessment committee in the past--was named at the accreditation self-study coordinator. All six individuals understood and appreciated the value of good assessment and program review and knew successful assessment and program review could only occur if a culture of evidence-informed decision-making could germinate into a systemic process to improve teaching and learning.

The third, catalyst came from consideration of transitioning the institutions from the traditional “once every ten years” form of accreditation to a new form of accreditation based on continuous quality improvement. This ongoing discussion about whether to switch the format of accreditation is making us think hard about what quality assurance and quality improvement in liberal arts institutions mean and the positive affects such a transition could have on furthering a culture of inquiry, in general, and effective and systemic assessment and program review, in particular. We knew if we are to make this difficult transition (and even if we didn’t), we would have to begin considering major changes to not only the institutional infrastructure (e.g., strategic planning and budgeting, assessment, program review, curricular coherence) but to institutional culture (e.g., faculty and staff development and rewards, transparency, new approach to shared governance) as well. For example, when this process of institutional self-inspection began in mid-2006, we decided to scrap our long-standing general education curricula (we had done a poor job assessing the courses and declared publically that this old core curriculum could not be assessed). We created a new general education set of courses and decided to embed assessment in our new general education curriculum with clear student learning goals.

Next Steps

We need to institutionalize what we have begun: fostering shared governance based on collaborative and collegial relationships between the administration and faculty governance committees is not easy. Yet, we have built a good foundation. We have established an open and transparent leadership ethos that, we believe, has made a very positive improvement on the relationships between our administration and our faculty. We have a number of “culture of inquiry” projects underway. Current projects include, for example, a major revision of our policies for assessment and program review, a “made from scratch” online annual reporting system that focuses on assessment of student learning, program review updates, and departmental needs, concerns, and accomplishments, and a grant from the Teagle Foundation to create faculty expertise in assessment and program review and to scale-up effective assessment across the institution.

We know many of our successes were made possible through the work of dedicated individuals—personality really does matter. We suspect that were it not for the confluence of these people, their personalities, and the context we find ourselves in, many or most of our accomplishments would not have happened. Because of this, we understand we are not yet at the tipping point—the place where regardless of personality, our policies, procedures, practices, and outcomes would always demonstrate a collaborative and collegial culture of inquiry-informed decision-making where pedagogy and curricula would always improve.

Exercise

Consider how faculty learn assessment and then consider the political, cultural, organization, and learning structures and systems at your institution. Get together with others from your institution, if possible. In small groups, please answer the following questions:

- How do faculty “learn” assessment on your campus?
- Is assessment training “on-the-job” or is there some kind of formal training for faculty?

- What would it take to have your internal stakeholders (i.e., faculty and administrators) discuss some kind of semi-formal assessment training for faculty?
- Who would conduct the training?
- How would it be funded?
- Would there be any faculty rewards for participating in assessment training?
- Do you have open and transparent communication between high-level administrators and the faculty? Why or why not?
- What would it take to have frank and transparent communication between administrators and the faculty?
- What could be some of the catalysts that could change the way communication occurs?
- What are the origins of assessment and program review?
- In general, what are the purposes of assessment and program review? Are they systemic?
- Who has responsibility for assessment and program review? Who has responsibilities for teaching and curricular designs? Are they the same people or units?
- Are assessment and program review supported by faculty, staff, students, and the administration?
- Are they used? Do they lead to improvements in teaching and learning? Are there rewards for good results? Is there punishment for poor results?
- Do assessment and program review evolve? Are they evaluated and improved?
- Are they valued? Are assessment and program review part of faculty, staff, administrative, and student cultures?
- Are they part of faculty teaching, scholarship, and service?
- Would creating a culture of inquiry and evidence informed decision-making jeopardize or enhance the sense of institutional community, academic freedom, and shared governance?
- What could be some of the catalysts that could change how your institution considers assessment and program review?

Debriefing and Discussion

Presenters

Dr. Philip I. Kramer (pkramer@csbsju.edu) is the Director of Academic Assessment at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. He is also an Assistant Professor in the Education Department. He has been at CSBSJU since 2006. Phil was a faculty member at The University of Texas at El Paso in the Educational Leadership and Foundations Department from 2003 to 2006. He has also worked at The University of Utah and Utah Valley University. Phil's research interests include higher education accountability, assessment, accreditation, and program review in higher education, faculty culture, and stakeholder relationships.

Dr. Rita Knuesel (rknuesel@csbsju.edu) is the Provost at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University. Rita is a 1975 graduate of the College of Saint Benedict. She has been on the music faculty since 1977. She has served as the chair of the Music Department and the Associate Provost and Academic Dean of the institutions. In 2006, Rita was named Interim Provost and in 2007, she became the Provost. Rita has been active as a presenter on issues related to faculty development, gender education and development, learning communities, mentoring new faculty members, assessment and program review, and women mentoring women.

Dr. Ken Jones (kjones@csbsju.edu) is a History professor and the Director of the Common Curriculum.