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Improving teaching and learning through shared governance: Creating a culture of inquiry, collaboration, and collegiality

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"Improving Teaching and Learning Through Shared Governance:
Creating a Culture of Inquiry, Collaboration, and Collegiality"

By

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Abstract
This roundtable discussion will engage participants in a case study analysis of two liberal arts institutions where the faculty governance committee responsibly for student outcomes assessment and disciplinary program review has effectively worked with the Provost and the Director of Academic Assessment to dramatically improve the policies, procedures, and practices of continuously improving pedagogy and curricula. Participants will be guided through discussions and exercises to consider how they can bring "lessons learned" back to their respective campuses to improve shared governance and, consequently, their teaching and learning process.

Setting the Mood
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 individual employees, the changing needs and priorities of an institution, the issues being discussed and their salience to the respective participants, the available institutional resources, and the very 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 the political, cultural, organization, and learning structures and systems at your institution. On a pad of paper or on your computer, take a few moments and answer the following questions:

- 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?

Discussion

Presenters
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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.