Notes in Brief

Institutions of higher education are faced with challenges when implementing an assessment initiative. These challenges include constraints on time and resources, the demands of specialized accreditation, and faculty motivation to comply. In addition, the communication of the expectations around assessment must be clear to all constituents in order for such initiatives to be successful. Communication begins with defining what the institution envisions to be the core elements that must be seen in a plan regardless of disciplinary uniqueness or specialized accreditation. When these core elements are developed and evaluated in a systematic and generalizable manner, institutions can move beyond the collection of quantitative data regarding the number of programs that are in compliance with the assessment mandate—i.e., merely counting the number of programs that report outcomes, measures, results, and action plans. Institutions can begin to conduct qualitative reviews of program-based assessment plans, identifying the clarity and value of plan components with regard to their usefulness for the improvement of student learning. Using the work of one regional comprehensive public university, this case study will demonstrate guiding principles for institutional success in both developing a generalizable assessment initiative and communicating this important work to institutional constituents.

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Guiding Principles to Impact an Institution-Wide Assessment Initiative

*I*n light of increasing expectations of accountability for student learning outcomes, student learning assessment continues to be of central importance to institutions of higher education (IHEs). Institutions are looking for ways to implement successful approaches for assessment or the assurance of student learning to ensure it is taken seriously by faculty, and is integrated into the fabric or culture of the institution (Maki, 2004). Specifically, institutions want to actively engage faculty in the work of student learning assessment in order to help them see the value of this work for local, curricular, and pedagogical purposes, beyond merely meeting the requirements of external constituents. A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article entitled "Giving Assessment a Fighting Chance" (Havens, 2013) discusses several guiding principles for institutions to consider when implementing institution-wide change. These guiding principles include the following: (a) avoid conducting institution-wide change under the "gun" of an accreditation deadline; (b) avoid introducing a brand new system or process immediately and, instead, take stock of what programs are already doing and processes already in place; (c) ensure some level of quality control so that plans are not created or implemented in an inefficient or ineffective way; and (d) provide appropriate support to enable the work to be accomplished (particularly time and money). The purpose of this case study is to outline an institution-wide initiative using these guiding principles and to present data that demonstrate a positive change in the quality of student learning assessment as a result of that initiative.

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Avoid Conducting Institution-Wide Change Under the Gun of an Accreditation Deadline

While accreditation visits are the impetus for much of the student learning assessment activity that takes place on campuses, it must not be the only motivation for activities to occur (Lubinescu, Ratcliff, & Gaffney, 2002). The time spent preparing for

accreditation visits allows institutions to reflect on their current practices and validate their work through evidence. During a recent regional accreditation visit, the institution discussed in this report was successful in satisfying the standard related to student learning assessment. Upon further reflection, however, it became clear there was unevenness in the overall state of student learning assessment on campus. In essence, the institution became its own biggest critic. There clearly were pockets of good, even excellent, assessment practices, but there was significant variability across programs and colleges with regard to the quality of assessment practices. Building on the momentum of the regional accreditation visit, the institution implemented a campus-wide assurance of student learning (ASL) initiative to encourage programs to critically evaluate, and revise if necessary, their program-level student learning assessment plan(s).

Avoid Introducing a Brand New System

It was important to listen to a variety of constituents on campus to fully understand existing processes and to avoid duplication of previous or current efforts. At this institution, assessment of student learning is overseen by an appointed faculty member (provided half-time release from the office of the provost), who has the title of Faculty Associate for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, and an associate dean within each of five academic colleges (one of the academic colleges is broken into two schools for a total of six associate deans). Individual departments within each college have faculty-appointed assessment coordinators who provide oversight of the process for individual programs and serve as liaisons between department faculty, department chairs, and associate deans. At the time we were first planning the ASL initiative, departments, faculty, and administrators had just worked tirelessly to put together reports related to student learning assessment for the regional accreditation site visit. Thus, it was very important to listen to their views about the status of assessment efforts in an attempt to best address their needs. Thus, we first initiated a conversation with the associate deans and assessment coordinators to try to understand their perspective about the processes in place and to hear their collective thoughts of the limitations and/or stumbling blocks associated with those processes.

One of the key findings of this exercise was a recognition of the lack of knowledge/ expertise around effective practices in student learning assessment among the associate deans and the assessment coordinators. Many assessment coordinators, it turned out, were junior faculty members and their experience with student learning assessment, as well as that of the associate deans, was dependent upon their disciplinary backgrounds. For example, faculty and administrators within specialized accredited programs had more assessment knowledge and/or experience than faculty and administrators from programs without specialized accreditation. This lack of evenness in key constituents' knowledge around assessment has also been identified as potentially problematic in other studies exploring program-level student learning assessment (Kelley, Tong, & Choi, 2010). In response to this concern, those leading the ASL initiative identified a rubric in the existing assessment literature and modified it (with permission) so that expectations were clear around the institutional expectation for program-level student learning assessment (Fulcher & Orem, 2010). In addition to the rubric, faculty and administrators were sent screencast videos made by the faculty associate that discussed key terms and provided explanations to help increase knowledge of student learning assessment. All academic programs were then asked to evaluate their plans using the adapted rubric. Initially, all programs were given the same deadline to evaluate all elements of their assessment plans (from the articulation of their outcomes to follow-up action plans). But, it quickly became clear that this approach would not be the best way to engage faculty in a thoughtful and reflective process. Some colleges needed more time than others, in part because they had more programs within their departments. Thus, different completion timelines were established but all participated in the same evaluation.

Ensure a Level of Quality Control

As noted above, the rubric adopted for this initiative was a modified version of an existing rubric (Fulcher & Orem, 2010). It was modified specifically to fit our institutional needs and captured what our assessment initiative leaders viewed as the core elements of an assessment plan regardless of discipline. These elements include:

Specifically, institutions want to actively engage faculty in the work of student learning assessment in order to help them see the value of this work for local, curricular, and pedagogical purposes, beyond merely meeting the requirements of external constituents.

Outcomes that are clearly measureable and indicate specifically the knowledge, skills, or attitudes that students are expected to have at a certain point.

- Curriculum maps that specifically identify where program-level outcomes are introduced, practiced, and assessed.

- Assessment measures that correspond to each outcome and include at least one direct measure of each outcome.

- An appropriate rationale for each measure and measurement practice (i.e., information about the specific content of the measure or specific items of a larger measure that are used to indicate performance, about the reliability and validity of the measure, where appropriate, and about the context of the measure including course information, student level, etc.).

- Criteria for success (e.g., benchmarking) for each measure of an outcome that includes a rationale for the selection of the specific criteria (e.g., program, discipline, or regional accrediting requirements).

- Results that include analysis and interpretation of the data, as well as some specific follow-up action plans relevant to student learning (i.e., results that go well beyond the report of merely "criterion met" for all outcomes).

Building on the momentum of the regional accreditation visit, the institution implemented a campus-wide assurance of student learning (ASL) initiative to encourage programs to critically evaluate, and revise if necessary, their program-level student learning assessment plan(s).

Utilization of the rubric enabled the institution to ask faculty to step back from viewing assessment of student learning from primarily a quantitative perspective (i.e., in terms of how many students meet the criteria, or whether it was complete or not complete) and to focus instead on the quality of the process. Each component of the rubric had specific language aligned with numerical scores (1 to 4, with 1 identifying the element as absent and 4 representing the highest quality element) to enable programs to understand how to define quality for each core element. This is consistent with the approach endorsed by Fulcher and Orem (2010), who contend that the quality of the assessment process must be evaluated and considered if institutions are to guide programs toward improving student learning outcomes, which is, of course, the true purpose of student learning assessment. Additionally, the campus-wide rubric began to standardize the language of assessment across the institution and facilitated an increase in the assessment knowledge of individuals who were responsible for this work. Having clear descriptions of the core elements and their level of quality helped to bring faculty across campus to a common understanding of the assessment process, assessment language, and the expectations of the institution around student learning outcomes.

Introduction and completion of the rubric by faculty was the first step to achieve an initial quality check; however, an institution-wide check was also necessary. This was important for two reasons. First, it was important to determine if program faculty were using the rubric correctly and if they were being honest in their evaluations. Second, it was critical to pinpoint the programmatic variability noted earlier within the institution as it pertained to the core elements. Having a more specific idea regarding variability would enable the institution to celebrate the disciplines and/or programs that were doing well and to appropriately address the programs that were not meeting expectations. To achieve these goals, the institution utilized several levels of review.

First, the University Assessment Committee, including faculty representation from each of the five colleges as well as student affairs and student support services, were included in the review process. Their specific responsibility was to evaluate individual plans using the modified rubric. Random assignment of plans to committee members, along with use of an electronic assessment management system, allowed the process to be streamlined. In order for the committee members to evaluate the plans appropriately, norming sessions were held to establish inter-rater agreement. The second level of review was completed by the associate deans who scored all program plans within their respective colleges. All evaluators (committee members and associate deans) were instructed to provide specific qualitative feedback for any scores below 3.5 (on the 4-point scale) in order to provide direction for program improvement. The faculty associate was responsible for reviewing all plans and then compiled the results from the reviewers and the qualitative feedback. The reports were then sent to each of the respective programs. If programs received scores below 3.5, they were provided a time frame to make necessary modifications to their plan based on the feedback. The faculty associate

then went back in to review the plans a final time after programs had time to modify and the programs were scored again, producing a pre-ASL initiative and post-ASL initiative score.

Using these scores, heat maps were developed. A heat map is a graphic representation of data where the values contained in a matrix are shown using colors. In the case of these heat maps, a high score of 4 was illustrated using the color green (good) and a low score of 1 was illustrated using the color red (needs improvement). All numbers in between are variations of those colors. Heat maps were developed using average element scores across the entire institution, within individual colleges, and for individual programs. Presentation of the heat maps at all three levels allowed faculty and administrators to see more clearly where improvement was needed and allowed them to create intervention procedures at multiple levels. Two example heat maps, with pre- and post-scores (i.e., before and after feedback was provided and plans were revised as part of the initiative), across all colleges/schools can be seen in Figure 1. Statistically significant differences (with improved scores) were found for at least some of the core elements across all colleges. The heat maps proved to be very beneficial in communicating a clear visual of the results of this work that was easy for all constituents to understand. In one college, an associate dean indicated that the heat maps were particularly effective in demonstrating areas that needed attention. Faculty did not enjoy viewing an area of red or orange amongst the green. Two assessment coordinators immediately asked, "What do we need to do to get out of the red and into the green?"

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Year 1 ASL Initiative Scores, Fall 2013

College	Outcomes	Curriculum Map	Type of Measure	Rationale for Measure	Criteria for Success	Results	Action Plans
A	3.5	3.7	3.7	3.5	3.3	3.0	2.4
B	3.5	2.8	3.2	2.7	2.3	2.0	2.0
C	3.6	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.8	3.5
D	3.0	2.8	3.2	2.6	3.1	1.7	1.3
E	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
F	2.8	3.3	3.3	2.1	2.2	2.6	2.3
OVERALL	3.4	3.4	3.6	3.1	3.1	3.4	3.2

Year 2 ASL Initiative Scores, Fall 2014

College	Outcomes	Curriculum Map	Type of Measure	Rationale for Measure	Criteria for Success	Results	Action Plans
A	3.6	3.8	3.7	3.6	3.5		
B	3.8	3.0	3.2	3.3*	3.2*		
C	4.0*	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0*	4.0*
D	4.0*	4.0*	4.0	4.0*	4.0	3.1*	2.8*
E	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
F	3.8*	3.7	3.6*	3.6*	3.5*	3.1	2.9
OVERALL	3.8*	3.7*	3.8*	3.7*	3.6*	3.7*	3.6*

Figure 1. College-Wide Heat Map.
Note. *Year 2 means significantly different from Year 1 means ($p < .05$), gray cells post-measure not completed yet.

Provide Appropriate Support and Resources

This qualitative review process now occurs on an annual basis. We continue to see improvement in the quality of the core elements of assessment plans. One key reason this initiative continues to be successful is the continuing support of the academic administration. The provost's budget includes line items for the purpose of supporting student learning assessment on campus. For example, assessment coordinators are provided

some level of course release or summer funding in exchange for their service. The faculty associate is supported by a part-time alternate work assignment to coordinate this (and other) work, including chairing the university-wide assessment committee. Associate deans are charged with supervision of the assessment of student learning within their colleges and are evaluated, in part, on the degree to which programs within their colleges improve with regard to university expectations regarding the assessment of student learning. This level of support is crucial for the initiative to be successful. It is important to note, however, that this support was also in place prior to the implementation of the initiative. What really changed is that we implemented both a comprehensive plan for evaluating assessment quality and a comprehensive communication plan regarding the requirements of this plan. Those appear to be the key to the success of this initiative.

The process was beneficial for both university administrators and faculty. Academic administrators now have a clearer picture of the status of student learning assessment across the campus.

Conclusion

Assessment is about both the process and the end result (improving student learning outcomes). The ASL initiative described in this report was focused on process. It took a year and a half to produce the initial pre- and post-results described. The investment of time and resources was, we believe, a good one. The process was beneficial for both university administrators and faculty. Academic administrators now have a clearer picture of the status of student learning assessment across the campus. Specifically, they are now aware of the quality contained with the program assessment plan rather than knowing a plan exists with "x" number of outcomes, results, and action plans. And, faculty report that they have a better understanding of the expectations of the institution regarding student learning assessment and several of our specialized accredited programs feel this process has strengthened the efforts necessary to meet external mandates related to student learning assessment. There is clear alignment between the guiding principles suggested in the literature and the successful implementation of an ASL initiative at this regional comprehensive institution. These principles, as well as the experience of this IHE, provide a generalizable and practical model for other institutions who are interested in this approach to improving student learning.

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