

FACULTY FOCUS

Special Report

Educational Assessment:
Designing a System for More
Meaningful Results

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Educational Assessment: Designing a System for More Meaningful Results

The past few years have ushered in more strident calls for accountability across institutions of higher learning. Various internal and external stakeholders are asking questions like "Are students learning what we want them to learn?" and "How do the students' scores from one institution compare to its peers?" As a result, more institutions are looking for new, more far-reaching ways to assess student learning and then use assessment findings to improve students' educational experiences.

However, as Trudy Banta notes in her article *An Accountability Program Primer for Administrators*, "just as simply weighing a pig will not make it fatter, spending millions simply to test college students is not likely to help them learn more." (p. 6)

While assessing institutional effectiveness is a noble pursuit, measuring student learning is not always easy, and like so many things we try to quantify, there's much more to learning than a number in a datasheet. As Roxanne Cullen and Michael Harris note in their article *The Dash to Dashboards*, "The difficulty we have in higher education in defining and measuring our outcomes lies in the complexity of our business: the business of learning. A widget company or a fast-food chain has clearly defined goals and can usually pinpoint with fine accuracy where and how to address loss in sales or glitches in production or service. Higher education is being called on to be able to perform similar feats, but creating a graduate for the 21st century workforce is a very different kind of operation." (p. 10)

This special report **Educational Assessment: Designing a System for More Meaningful Results** features articles from *Academic Leader*, and looks at the assessment issue from a variety of different angles. Articles in the result include:

- The Faculty and Program-Wide Learning Outcome Assessment
- Assessing the Degree of Learner-Centeredness in a Department or Unit
- Keys to Effective Program-Level Assessment
- Counting Something Leads to Change in an Office or in a Classroom
- An Accountability Program Primer for Administrators

Whether you're looking to completely change your approach to assessment, or simply improve the efficacy of your current assessment processes, we hope this report will help guide your discussions and eventual decisions.

Rob Kelly
Editor
Academic Leader

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Counting Something Leads to Change in an Office or in a Classroom

By *Gwen Hillesheim, EdD*

Institutions of higher education (IHEs) need inexpensive and easily implemented and maintained processes for 1) the collection of data, 2) data analysis and decision making, 3) reporting and archiving, and 4) communication of results, in an effort to support a proactive culture of continuous improvement resulting in accountability and transparency.

During the past several months, for schools large and small, public and private, 501(c)3 and for-profit, there has been significant discussion at the national, state, accreditation agency, and institutional levels regarding accountability and transparency of institutions of higher education. These conversations are driven in part by the 2007 Spellings Commission Report decrying the traditional use of self-regulation in obtaining measurable results and the resulting hue and cry for postsecondary accountability and transparency. The differences between the past processes and possible future processes and requirements, as well as practical actions and solutions for schools, are detailed in this article.

Historically, key measurements of value in higher education were the following commonly accepted inputs:

1. Perceived ability of incoming students (SAT or ACT scores)
2. Grant attainment ratio of faculty and/or researchers
3. The amount of money donated by alumni to the school's endowment fund
4. The number of books in the school library

More recently, key measures have become the following commonly accepted outputs:

1. Retention/graduation rates
2. Employment
3. Student, employer, and alumni satisfaction

As IHEs struggle to meet the needs of the students, stakeholders, and accreditation agencies, several institutions have selected nationally normed instruments to use as comparative output tools. Popular mechanisms include the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which

measures student engagement, and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), designed to measure multidisciplinary abilities as learning measures. However, these measures are difficult for small career/technical schools, which are primarily skill based and often use subject matter experts over professional educators in both teaching and managing. Schools of this type need a more direct assessment mechanism.

All schools are in the position of collecting data leading to improvement, better dedication of resources, prioritization, and correlation of management practices and planning to student learning. This is improvement based on action, the action of doing something to ensure learning and good management. Therefore, can schools acquire action skill sets even though they are besieged with chal-

Correlation of learning with grading trends and student satisfaction indicated a common occurrence of grade inflation for "well liked" faculty, with the inflation having little to do with learning.

lenges related to time, resources, motivation, culture, and constant change? The affirmative answer is for managers and teachers to "count something."

"Point of Capture" assessment is a grassroots philosophy of data collection and continuous improvement grounded in individuals counting things important to them at the point of usability (Thalheimer, 2007). Each person in the organization chooses multiple measures to correlate within his or her sphere of influence. This is true for managers as well as for teachers and program managers/chairs. Schulman (2007) addressed this in his advice on both designing and combining multiple measures of collection.

The organization used in this study of assessment is a publicly traded, for-profit company owning several schools, including culinary, health, and design colleges primarily at the associate degree level, as well as diverse colleges and universities. Many of the schools in this organization were found to be crisis based and reactive, and to manage expectations at the lowest level. In an effort to move to a proactive and compliant posture regarding assessment, we have designed the Point of Capture process and distributed

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it to multiple institutions. The process involves the following ongoing action cycle:

Count something. **Analyze** data captured for learning. **Develop** and implement intervention. **Discuss** with others. **Repeat**.

1. Each department declares publicly the three items it will "count" for the subsequent year based on the department's mission. The items are likely things being counted or collected already. The document denoting each department's action is called the Commitment Table and is updated annually.
2. The data, learning, and intervention are documented on a Summary Table so that trend data and sustainability can be looked for.
3. The president and chief academic officer develop a cover Executive Summary Sheet for the Summary Table, noting the most critical items identified for prioritization.
4. The information available on the Summary Table for each repeated cycle informs the annual Institutional Effectiveness Report, the annual budget process, and the Strategic Plan.

Educators need to develop assessment, alignment, and rubric tools for use in the classroom.

1. Step one is identification of 10 to 12 program outcomes students should achieve by the end of their program. An example of a program outcome might be Students will demonstrate the ability to manipulate the tools appropriate to the program.
2. Once the outcome is identified, the program chair and faculty will identify a key assignment in a single course that will ensure the outcome, in this case manipulation of the tool.
3. Step three is to develop a learning rubric for the assignment that ensures the outcome. The learning rubric (not a grading rubric) will articulate the desired skill and ability for both process and product.
4. Step four includes collection of the rubric for every student in the course completing the assignment. Capture of the percentage of students completing the learning at an "Acceptable," "Extraordinary," or "Not Acceptable" level documents learning for individual students and also serves as a management tool for the program chair.
5. The learning by students, when compared with other data collected, such as grading trends, retention, attendance, faculty observations, or end-of-course eval-

uations, may lead to identification of an intervention necessary for improvement. (See #2 above in the collection cycle.)

Several schools used these tools in 2007. The following findings were noted:

- Testing students for financial aid knowledge resulted in higher student satisfaction as well as increased packaging rates.
- Correlation of learning with grading trends and student satisfaction indicated a common occurrence of grade inflation for "well liked" faculty, with the inflation having little to do with learning.
- Alignment of course outcomes with program outcomes quickly identified outdated and redundant curricula.
- In a student tutoring lab, hours were reduced, resulting in an immediate increase in dissatisfaction of students with a corresponding decrease in GPA. Reinserting tutor hours reversed these trends.
- Faculty engaged in developing rubrics for key assignments felt empowered.
- Common rubrics across all programs for students developing a paper or a presentation saved content-expert faculty time and established a common expectation among students.

Point of Capture Assessment adheres to Suskie's (2004) principles of good assessment as being: valued, used, customized, cost-effective, truthful, based in appropriate outcomes, and resulting in improvement. Add the opportunity to engage and empower staff and faculty and success can be a reality for schools struggling to manage their required accountability and transparency.

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An Accountability Program Primer for Administrators

By Trudy W. Banta, EdD

These are exciting times to be in the field of outcomes assessment in higher education. Thanks to the spotlight that Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings has placed on collecting and reporting standardized test scores in secondary education, there is a lot of interest in the work my colleagues and I have done to help faculty identify and develop ways to assess student learning and institutional effectiveness and then use assessment findings to improve students' educational experiences. I have devoted much of my career over the last 25 years to this issue.

However, just as simply weighing a pig will not make it fatter, spending millions simply to test college students is not likely to help them learn more. Before you agree to join the current movement and ask your students to take more standardized tests in the name of accountability, I hope that you will consider the following overview of assessment issues.

Opinions about rocket science

Many reasonable people do not have opinions about rocket science. However, lots of people have reached conclusions about assessment tools and measures even though they have not studied methods of measuring with reliability and validity, much less gain scores, residual scores, or repeated measures.

Those familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives know that while remembering data is a low-level skill, evaluation is a skill at the highest level of complexity. Evaluation is very abstract and involves a variety of components that must all be kept in mind simultaneously. In some ways it's like rocket science, which is why it makes sense to start by recognizing that we oversimplify the factors involved at our peril.

Many institutions are considering instituting accountability programs to measure how much students learn while they are in college. One proposed "value-added" method requires freshmen and seniors to take standardized tests of general intellectual skills. The difference between the scores at the two points in time is supposed to be an indi-

cation of how much the students have learned. Sounds simple? It is, but deceptively so. Before committing to this program, I recommend that you consider with campus colleagues the following questions:

- Do the tests have scales that match our goals for student learning? That is, if we aim to develop good writers and critical thinkers, do the tests give us scores for those skills?
- Do students in the norm group come from institutions like ours?
- Have valid techniques been used to draw samples of test-takers on these campuses?
- Are convincing studies available that demonstrate test-retest reliability and construct and content validity?
- Do students who have spent four to six years completing college degrees achieve higher scores on these tests than do individuals of similar ability who have not gone to college?
- Have items been studied to see if they function differently for different groups?
- Are we ready to undertake studies to demonstrate the validity of the tests in our own contexts?

All these questions must be answered in the affirmative before your institution should be willing to have its reputation judged on the basis of test scores.

The difference between testing for accountability and testing for improvement

Let's start with definitions of terms:

Testing for improvement: You set your own goals for students within your institution and then you test to see if they measure up to your expectations. The scores guide your decisions to improve instruction, curricular structure, enrollment decisions, support services, etc.

Central to this concept is the idea that the institution sets its own goals. For example, a Christian college may decide that one of its goals is to enable students to achieve an understanding of religious literature. Let's say that tests developed by instructors at the college reveal that 85 percent of students achieve that goal. Next, the administrators decide if that level of achievement is acceptable or if they need to change the student experience to help them achieve that goal.

Key elements of this type of testing that stakeholders can evaluate are:

- The goals,
- The level of achievement of those goals,

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- The testing instruments, and
- The educational experience.

Testing for accountability: Also known as value-added testing, this is coming to mean a process of offering standardized tests of general intellectual skills to students at the beginning and the end of their college experience and reporting the scores publicly.

For example, you might believe that even though many of your students enter with relatively low SAT scores, they undergo a transformative experience on your campus, and four years later they perform at the same levels as students at more selective institutions. This type of testing could confirm your belief.

Key elements of this type of testing are:

- The standardization feature. Many colleges give the same tests; all tests are administered and scored in the same way.
- The accountability feature. The results are publicly reported and thus provide a basis for comparison.

While testing for improvement asks, "Are our students learning what we want them to learn?" testing for accountability asks, "How do our students' scores compare?" It is not the case that one type of testing is good and the other is bad. If done well, both types can give you valuable information.

The problems begin when administrators try to accomplish both goals with the same test. That works under only two sets of circumstances:

1. The goals of the standardized tests are a perfect match with your school's goals, an appropriate proportion of (or all) students do their best work on the tests, and faculty review the scores to determine direction for improving campus programs and services.
2. In addition to the standardized test, you use a variety of other measures that are customized to match your institution's goals.

This leads us to another question: "How do we create the best ways to measure our students' growth over time?"

An evaluation system that gives you reliable data

Here is a blueprint for designing an evaluation system:

Step one: Decide what you want students to know and be able to do. It's important to be very clear about your goals. Let's say you determine that you want to measure the gains

your students make over four years so that you can use this information to make improvements.

Step two: Involve the faculty. They can evaluate the various standardized tests that are available and find one that measures a large number of the campus's goals for its students. That test can then become a part of the process. However, it's likely the faculty will determine that the test doesn't capture all of the campus's priorities.

Step three: Consider implementing multiple ways to measure achievement. This is the most basic of all principles of testing. Don't rely on just one measure, because no test measures all that you hope students will learn and no test is perfectly reliable and valid. You can feel much more confident if two or more different measures reveal the same student strengths or weaknesses.

For example, you may decide to include the National Survey of Student Engagement's measures of student success. Or you may develop standardized methods for reporting retention and graduation statistics. Student focus groups can yield rich data about the reasons they are not achieving a goal and how a change in teaching strategy can provide a remedy.

Electronic portfolios can provide an authentic assessment tool. On my campus, as at many others, we have developed expected learning outcomes, and students select ways to illustrate their achievement of the expected outcomes by collecting examples of their graded written, spoken, and artistic work from courses throughout their college careers, as well as photographs and videotapes of speeches, work-related events, and other leadership experiences.

Consider adding measures that are based in major fields of study. I have argued elsewhere that standardized testing in major fields will pay far greater dividends than standardized tests of general intellectual abilities, which measure at best only 30 percent of the knowledge and skills we want students to develop. Many professional fields already have such tests, and disciplinary associations in the sciences and humanities are beginning to develop their own.

Finally, some of us must undertake pioneering work in the development of better measures of critical thinking, reflective judgment, and deep learning. Let's collectively roll up our sleeves and show our critics how creative we can be in developing our own instruments to assess and report on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions our mission statements say we value. If we value the creation of knowledge and not just knowledge reproduction, we need to find a way to include creative thinking in the palette of skills we assess.

Step four: Ensure that faculty are involved in interpreting their students' performances on various assessment instruments and determining how scores will be reported to the public. Most important, faculty, staff, and students must work together to determine the changes that need to be made in curriculum, instruction, and support services to improve student performance in the future.

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An Effective Approach to Generating Questions for Guiding Program Assessment and Reform

By Laurie A. Dunlap, PhD

Successful strategies begin with planning. On the wide landscape of departmental assessment and reform, where do you start? As assessment becomes more important in the development of departmental programs, planning is the key to success. A good way to begin is by constructing a list of questions that a department would need to answer in order to determine if they are meeting the needs of their students, and then deciding on which methods will be used to arrive at answers to the questions.

A department may decide to use surveys of faculty, course evaluations, student satisfaction surveys, or surveys of alumni. They may also want to use syllabi reviews, faculty meetings, exit interviews, focus groups, test results, or a combination of one or more of these methods to arrive at these answers. Next, the chosen assessment tools are designed and implemented and the results are tabulated.

From these tabulations the focus for reforms becomes clearer, allowing reforms to be chosen and implemented. Then the cycle begins again, reevaluating the program as an ongoing self-analysis. The step this article focuses upon is the formulation of the questions.

Background and method

A three-round Delphi survey was carried out to reach a consensus on what mathematics departments at smaller two- and four-year colleges across the Midwest should ask themselves to determine whether or not they are meeting the needs of their students. The method described here for constructing questions is a pared-down version of this. The categories generated by the Midwest questions will be used to guide this process by providing a foundation for new sets of questions. First the process used in the Midwest survey will be described, then a scaled-down version using the categories generated by the Midwest survey will be outlined.

The Midwest survey

The participants of the Midwest survey were administrators and faculty at smaller two- and four-year colleges across the Midwest. In the first round of the survey, participants submitted any questions that they thought mathematics departments should ask themselves to determine if they are meeting the needs of their students.

The 472 submitted questions were distilled to a list of 44 questions and returned to the participants. In the second round, participants rated the importance of these questions using the following Likert scale: 1 = not important, 2 = moderately important, 3 = important, 4 = very important, 5 = critically important.

Then, in the third round, the questions were sent back to the participants with their ratings still in place, along with the group's mean response for each question. In this round, the participants were given the options to reconsider and change their previous ratings, and provide rationale for their rating of the questions. Because the ratings between the second and third rounds changed by less than 15 percent, there was no need for a fourth round.

A principal components analysis was used to find 12 categories underlying the 44 questions. These are:

1. Do students believe their needs are met?
2. What should we do to maintain program quality?
3. Can students demonstrate various levels of understanding mathematics?
4. Are we involving influential secondary sources in preparing students?

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5. Do we provide helpful and accurate assessment for students?
6. Do we provide our students with sufficient support?
7. Are logistic essentials in order (such as qualified instructors, adequate scheduling, and general requirements)?
8. Are our curriculum and pedagogy satisfying and current?
9. Are we guiding students through mathematical doorways?
10. How do we compare with other programs?
11. Do students perform well on the mathematics sections of comprehensive exams?
12. Do students transfer their learning into their next endeavors?

In the end, you have not only a list of rated questions to guide your assessment, but also importance ratings for each of your questions to help focus reforms.

Please notice that these categories are very broad in scope and are easily modified to fit other programs and disciplines merely by replacing the words "mathematics" and "mathematical." Consequently, if a department wanted to generate a set of questions to guide their self-assessment, they could use these as a foundation.

Formulation of the questions

The abundant resources of the department faculty and pertinent information published by academic groups associated with the discipline are two good sources that can be used to produce your own questions to fill in these 12 categories. The key is to use a hybrid of the Delphi method to collect and refine questions. As a first round, the 12 categories should be sent to faculty along with a selection of information from relevant professional organizations (such as guidelines and position statements). In this round, the faculty members are asked to submit questions for each of the categories. They can draw upon the resources provided in the survey as well as their own sources to inspire them. It is important to ask at this point if there are any important categories that the members of the faculty

believe may have been omitted.

Once the responses to round one have been submitted, they need to be distilled. Objectivity is critical, so more than one person must be involved in distilling the questions. This process begins by placing the questions that are very similar into smaller, more manageable groupings and then choosing or writing questions that are representative of them.

For the second round, the distilled results should be rated and critiqued by the faculty. Ideally, results should be rated for both clarity and importance, and faculty suggestions are necessary for improving the existing questions. You could use the Likert scale given earlier for rating the importance of the questions and the following Likert scale for rating the clarity of the questions: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Once the results of the second round are submitted, there again must be more than one person involved with incorporating the suggestions. For the third round, members of the faculty are sent the initial (unaltered) questions with the average ratings as well as the altered versions of these questions. This allows them to look at all the data presented so far and make their suggestions for improvements. Any questions that were rated as unimportant should probably be dropped. Likewise, any questions that have a low clarity rating should go back for at least one more round of evaluation until they are improved. Thus the process continues until the questions are clarified and no more suggestions are made.

In the end, you have not only a list of rated questions to guide your assessment, but also importance ratings for each of your questions to help focus reforms. Finally, you need to complete your plan by building your instruments of evaluation. This can be a time-consuming task fraught with and influenced by the varying preferences and opinions of those involved, but it can also yield a timeless framework that can be used year after year to evaluate and improve the landscape of a department's productivity.

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The Dash to Dashboards

By Michael Harris, PhD, and Roxanne Cullen, PhD

Anyone reading *Academic Leader* knows of the pressure being applied from various constituencies for institutions to become more accountable and more transparent. The September/October 2007 issue of *Change* magazine was devoted to perspectives on accountability. In that issue, Judith Eaton's article "Institutions, Accreditors, and the Federal Government" offered insight into the forces that led us to the current situation as well as suggestions for improvement. She wrote, "However valuable, the current good work by institutions and accreditors concerning accountability is not enough. A significant escalation of effort by institutions and accrediting organizations is essential to address the current accountability challenges, a response that is more robust, immediate, and self-reflective." (p. 22-23) Of interest to us is the call for self-reflection. Choosing indicators or measures must be an intentional process for which leaders understand that what they choose to measure is equally important if not more important as the measurements they report.

The difficulty we have in higher education in defining and measuring our outcomes lies in the complexity of our business: the business of learning. A widget company or a fast-food chain has clearly defined goals and can usually pinpoint with fine accuracy where and how to address loss in sales or glitches in production or service. Higher education is being called on to be able to perform similar feats, but creating a graduate for the 21st century workforce is a very different kind of operation, one that has suffered in the past from attempts to compare it with a factory or business enterprise.

In our rush to respond to the call for accountability, we have looked to successful practices from the business world. Business uses a variety of management reporting tools, including such approaches as the Balanced Scorecard, Baldrige Quality Criteria, Six Sigma, Strategic Performance Measures, and most recently, Dashboard Indicators.

The concept of the dashboard is derived from the executive information systems of the 1980s, measures available to high-level executives in order to monitor performance of the organization. (Colin 2004) In short, the

dashboard is intended to function like the dashboard on a vehicle, offering critical information in a succinct and clearly visible format to help drivers (or in this case, viewers) evaluate performance and make necessary decisions.

The Office of Institutional Research at Tufts University examined the dashboards from 66 higher education institutions. (Terkla, Roscoe & Sharkness 2005) Of those, the majority (roughly 75 percent) defined student outcomes measures using four-, five-, and six-year graduation rates as well as freshman retention rates. These are common data that institutions regularly report. However, in reflecting upon this practice, we ask this question: If institutions are routinely being accused by employers, politicians, and the public at large for graduating underprepared students, then is retaining and graduating students a measure of accountability?

While we recognize the importance of graduation and retention rates and recognize the appeal of these easily accessible numbers as possible comparative features between and among institutions, as we reflect upon measures that distinguish our organizations as places in the business of producing learners, we are not convinced that these measures are the most valuable as critical indicators of our organizational performance. For example, Carey (2007) noted that even though graduation rates have remained stable since the 1970s, a National Survey of American College Students (NSACS) revealed a decline in students' proficiency in interpreting complex texts between 1992 and 2003. (p. 29)

Providing the public with graduation rates as a measure of accountability plays upon their misguided assumption that the diploma equates to learning that has taken place. A more cynical way of looking at this is that institutions are not truly seeking accountability but instead maneuvering the pressure for transparency into an opportunity for public relations rather than conducting honest assessment for the purpose of continuous improvement.

In writing about the risks of reporting data, George Kuh identified two common features of institutions that performed unusually well on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Those two features were 1) a focus on student learning and on facilitating the conditions for it, and 2) the use of data to inform policy and improve conditions for learning. He concluded that these institutions understood that "collecting and reporting information is a hollow exercise otherwise." (p. 35) Our motivation for assessment and reporting data must become intrinsic rather than extrinsic. Only when we become intrinsically

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motivated to know that learning is taking place will we develop a true culture of assessment and be truly accountable for our work.

One of the indicators that the motivation for assessment is extrinsic rather than intrinsic is when the assessment loop has not been completed—in other words, when institutions conduct assessment, review, and report the data but stop at that point without taking action. In 2005, Harris and Bennion wrote: "Regional accrediting agencies expect colleges and universities not only to have comprehensive assessment programs in place but also to display their results and demonstrate how they are using these results to 'close the assessment loop' through improvements to academic programs and processes." (p. 7) However, based upon the continuing focus on "closing the loop" at conferences like the Annual Assessment Institute sponsored by IUPUI and in training sessions for accrediting agency peer review teams, the phenomenon of not closing the loop is still pervasive, suggesting that our motivations for assessment are more extrinsic than intrinsic.

If we are intrinsically motivated to assess student learning, we are genuinely interested in knowing whether what we are doing is having an effect, preferably the intended effect. We do so in order to modify and improve our processes. Collecting and analyzing data but never taking action suggests that our motivation is not to make changes and modifications but rather to please accrediting bodies or other outside agencies because of the control those bodies hold over us.

Chickering (2000) defined teaching as "arranging conditions for learning." This same simple definition of classroom teaching holds true at the institutional level, and if we are to be learner-centered organizations we must reflect upon the question of what indicators reveal the conditions for learning that we have arranged as well as indicators that reveal the learning that is taking place. (Harris & Cullen 2008) And if our dashboard is going to be viewed by the public, then our indicators must be comprehensible and aligned with our institutional goals. Choosing indicators for our dashboard will take careful, intentional reflection as well as a resolve to respond and take action when the warning light begins to blink.

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Collaborating on Rubric Development: A Work in Progress

By Sandra Allen

Have you ever wondered if what you teach and how you teach it results in career-ready students? Have you ever wondered if your expectations for student learning outcomes match what the real world requires? In the Public Relations Studies program at Columbia College Chicago, we wondered, too. So, we set out to answer our own questions about the most basic skills professionals expect of entry-level candidates.

There was no question about the importance of PR writing. Public relations professionals and educators

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agree—PR writing is a specialized skill that is essential to a student's academic and professional success, and the ability to write for the media tops the list. As one mid-level professional at a major public relations agency told me, "Writing a news release is the test we give to potential employees. I can teach them about our clients, but I don't have time to teach them to write a news release. That's the job for their college professors."

PR Writing is the foundational writing course in the PR Studies curriculum. It also is a prerequisite to more advanced courses in the concentration. Students who don't do well or who drop out of the writing course, also abandon public relations careers. This is particularly

Observations led to questions. For instance, we wondered now if the grades we gave to student work were consistent across the many sections of the course.

important as we recruit minorities (and males, who are a minority in the so-called velvet ghetto of public relations), who are typically considered "at risk" students.

So, in early fall 2005, professors in PR Studies elected to develop a rubric for teaching and assessing news release writing. As teaching tools, rubrics tend to clarify assignments and help students reach objectives. As a grading tool, a rubric provides a fair, reliable way to assess student writing. We wanted a rubric to identify and include best practices in our industry, and constitute a teaching protocol for instructors of this multi-section course. Connecting the rubric to professionals' expectations mandates that we open the flap door to the tent of academe.

Because Chicago offers a big, broad community richly populated with public relations practitioners experienced in working with students, it was easy for faculty to collect data. We met one-on-one with professionals in agency and corporate practice to glean from them information on the practical, real-world skills and knowledge students must demonstrate to excel in news release writing. We met with fellow academics at other Chicago universities. The Public Relations Society of America's Port of Entry Report also provided significant direction, as did a review of existing literature and research.

Faculty who teach PR Writing met repeatedly to hammer out a uniform pedagogy, including definition of terms and

expectations, and texts and assignments. By fall 2007, we had a rubric structured in five broad categories with a binominal, yes-no rating scale. We subsequently adopted the rubric as a model of in-class instruction. To ensure consistency, we relied upon real-time, in-class observations of one another.

Observations led to questions. For instance, we wondered now if the grades we gave to student work were consistent across the many sections of the course. Some instructors argued that assigning points, instead of yes-no ratings, would result in richer feedback to students, and more reliable assignment of grades and assessment of learning outcomes. Their voices prevailed.

Back we went to the professionals. In spring 2008, we enlisted the support of seven professionals ranging from assistant account executive (an entry-level position) to senior vice president at a highly regarded, international public relations agency in Chicago. Using the Delphi method to facilitate group consensus among the professionals, we developed weights for each of the five categories. The faculty also adopted the Delphi method to reach consensus.

The Delphi method is essentially a method to converge differing opinions on relative weights of concepts. As facilitator, I handed each of the participants a rubric without weights, and asked them to rate each of the five categories with points from one to 20, for a total of 100 points. Then we discussed where there might be consensus on the specific number of points in each category. As we went around the circle, each individual in turn reported his or her determined weights. In five rounds, we had consensus on the weights among the participants.

Though professionals and the faculty were not in the same session, the Delphi process was the same, and differences were negligible. Only perspective varied. Faculty see the rubric as a teaching and learning tool, and professionals have a more go-no go approach. Even so, we are convinced collaboration is key. Ultimately, our combined efforts enable students to demonstrate career-readiness upon graduation, and professionals to hire top quality entry-level candidates.

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Surviving Your Regional Accreditation: A Tongue-in-Cheek Reflection

By Thomas R. McDaniel, PhD

Many academic leaders are involved in regional accreditations, and I am no exception. The six regional accrediting agencies are becoming increasingly stringent in the application and interpretation of their standards, and this can make the accrediting process a difficult one to survive. Our institution was a founding member of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and has been accredited continuously from the beginning. I have been involved in four of the 10-year "reaffirmation" activities, serving as chair of the college steering committee twice and serving as our institutional liaison with SACS for many years.

While I will use SACS as my prototype for a survival guide for fellow academic leaders, I am confident that the strategies I suggest below are equally applicable to any regional—or even specialized—accreditation effort. These experiences are incredibly time-consuming, are increasingly focused on data and student learning outcomes, and can lead institutional leaders to sometimes justified states of paranoia. Nevertheless, you can survive your regional accreditation. This may require you to tap your human resources—diplomacy, organizational skills, patience, and sense of humor, to mention but a few.

Below are five survival strategies I have employed as we have labored through my fourth regional accreditation:

SACS survival strategies

1. Work on your SACS appeal

This strategy requires you to be attentive to allurements. Of course, when the visiting committee arrives on campus, you want to be sure that your buildings and grounds are in their very best shape. It will not hurt to do whatever you can to encourage faculty and students to manifest their best manners and to show extreme courtesy to the honored visitors. But your SACS appeal also can be enhanced by how you present your documents to the accrediting agency even before anyone arrives on campus. Do you have an attractive cover design? Has your formatting followed all the specified requirements? Do your various documents show

your institution in its best light? If not, you may end up making an appeal to SACS to show how you have remedied your weaknesses.

2. Develop Your SACS education program

You should not be surprised to find that many faculty and students are oblivious to the existence of accreditation agencies and have very little idea about their importance to your survival. Both during the self-study process and the follow-up visitation from a committee of your peers, it is crucial that you educate the entire campus to the significance of the enterprise and the nature of its importance to your own survival. Your educational strategies should cover the gamut of your communication processes: regular and special meetings of faculty, students, and trustees; updates and announcements on your campus website; and educational forums to discuss issues and ideas related to the accreditation. Some institutions distribute pencils, mouse pads, coffee mugs, and/or t-shirts with "core values" or quality enhancement plan logos to increase both awareness and enthusiasm for the enterprise at hand.

3. Practice safe SACS

Often, the greatest challenge for academic leaders involved in the accrediting process is the unknown. Will the chair of the visiting committee be reasonable and supportive? Has the steering committee addressed all the standards completely and accurately? Have there been any unanticipated changes in the accrediting agencies' operating procedures—or even the development of new standards not yet contained in the accreditors' manuals? You will want to do everything possible to eliminate unanticipated surprises that have resulted in part because you have not protected the institution to the maximum extent possible. This prophylactic function should not be underestimated.

4. Anticipate SACS harassment

Regional accreditations used to be more social, congenial, and enjoyable than they are now. While you can be reasonably confident that your peers will be highly motivated and will understand your responses to standards from your perspective, this may not always be the case. To be sure, this is a "quid pro quo" relationship with an outside agency that is responsible for a thorough evaluation. If you give them what they demand, they will give you your desired accreditation. Because regional accrediting agencies have attempted to forestall federal takeovers of the accrediting process—an actual proposal afloat in Washington—they

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have become determined to be rigorous stewards of institutional quality. For you, this may create the appearance of a "hostile work environment" as evaluators press you for your information, your cooperation, and your compliance. While you may feel harassed, it is wise to assume the best intentions from those who have "invaded your personal space." After all, they are just trying to do their jobs well.

5. Pursue SACS therapy

At some point, the process will come to an end. Not really an end, you might note, as accrediting agencies will do their best to keep you in line and continually focused on the demands of the agency. This may take the form of "probationary status," "monitoring reports," or "periodic reviews." But once the intensity of the self-study and the visit is over, you should take steps to return the campus to its previous state of healthy equilibrium. Celebrate whatever successes you can identify; assure those who feel wounded that you appreciate their efforts and understand their frustrations. Identify small ways that you can reward those who have participated in the process. It is important to develop healthy SACS relations while also helping those on your campus to conclude that the accrediting process is ultimately a very satisfying one—when you have survived. The stress of an accrediting visit can have negative effects, but strong institutions work to address whatever traumas may result.

Conclusion

It is unlikely that many faculty or administrators have chosen their professions based on the opportunity to enjoy the process of accreditation. Nevertheless, the regional accreditation of your institution is an important mark of success and an essential ingredient in its development. The survival strategies above are intended to help you think through the best ways to succeed in the face of increasingly complex and demanding accrediting policies and practices. The ultimate objective, however, should not just be to survive such processes, but indeed to thrive as you help your institution become the best it can be.

Thomas R. McDaniel is a professor of education and senior vice president at Converse College in Spartanburg, S.C.

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The Faculty and Program-Wide Learning Outcome Assessment

By Gary A. Gigliotti, PhD

If you'd like to clear the room at a faculty meeting quickly, you have a few options. You can shout "Fire!" or you can say "Let's talk about learning outcome assessment!" That will have them heading for the exits. Why? Because faculty usually hold a set of beliefs that make the whole topic of learning outcome assessment seem boring, useless, or both.

This is very unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, the most proficient practitioners of learning outcome assessment are the faculty themselves. Second, faculty members are the designers and developers of curricula, courses, and the core of higher education itself. Third, faculty members are the ones who will innovate and develop new methods of teaching and learning, and will implement any changes based on assessment results developed through the program's assessment methods. Why the resistance to performing assessment in general?

The resistance comes from a lack of understanding of just what learning outcome assessment is and does. And there is resistance to systematizing procedures of ongoing learning outcome assessment that have been done for decades but in loosely organized and not-so-transparent ways.

When I speak at department meetings about learning outcome assessment I usually ask for examples of learning outcome assessment in the department. The response is often silence or a claim that no assessment has been conducted. Then I ask more detailed questions: Do you conduct a survey of your seniors on a regular basis? Do faculty members review the papers or fieldwork reports created in the department's capstone course in order to award honors or to evaluate the quality of the work? Do you speak regularly to recent alumni about their work or graduate school experiences, or bring them back to campus for presentations to current students and the faculty? Do you have a committee of faculty to review the content of the introductory course or the capstone course? To some or all of these questions, the answer is always yes. So why is

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it so important for faculty to participate in assessment? Because they already do, but they often don't realize it as such or recognize the importance of their own efforts.

It's fashionable lately to try to motivate faculty through statements like "If we don't do assessment ourselves, someone else will do it for us." This gets attention at times, but it misses the whole point; we do assessment already, because it is useful to us. If we do it better, it will be more useful and valuable.

Step one is to recognize what is already happening, build a structure for it, and make that structure transparent. Step two is to build on the work that already is being done and focus it into the areas of most importance to the faculty in assuring that their students know, value, and do what the faculty intend. Getting faculty and departments to realize this, and act on it, is of utmost importance. Assessment structures can be imposed, mandates can be made, and penalties for noncompliance assessed from outside the program, but this is a dead end. If program assessment is ever to be taken seriously and used effectively, it must be systematic and built into the very structure of the program or department by the faculty themselves.

How does a department chair motivate faculty to participate in the construction of a systematic and transparent program assessment structure? First, by making the point that assessments already are being conducted, but in a way that is not as useful as it could be. Second, by showing that a systematic approach to program assessment has value to the department, and not just because it helps the students, but because it helps faculty have more valuable, meaningful, and successful teaching experiences.

This second step requires departmental leadership—sustainable leadership—and the role of the chair is the largest obstacle to the endurance of useful program assessment. In many universities, the chair's position is short lived. A motivated chair must build institutional structures within the department that will outlive her or him. These involve the following:

- A clear message on the purpose of assessment
- Making assessment methods simple and useful
- Making assessment collaborative, collegial, and cooperative
- Having an incentive structure that rewards useful assessments and the scholarship of teaching and learning
- Making connections with alumni
- Making connections with the community

Thinking seriously about what students should know, value, and do allows faculty members the opportunity to

think about their own practices, their own work. This not only can lead to a renewed interest in their own department and its curriculum, but can help them refocus their own attention on things that really matter to them in their research and their service. Most important of all, it can reignite the passion for teaching in many by treating research on teaching and learning as valuable and meaningful for the department's health.

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Assessing the Degree of Learner-Centeredness in a Department or Unit

By Roxanne Cullen, PhD, Michael Harris, PhD

Since Barr and Tagg introduced the concept of the instructional versus the learner-centered paradigms in 1995, higher education institutions across the country have adopted the concept in one form or another in an attempt to create learning environments that respond both to the changing profile of our students and recent research on learning with the ultimate goal of improving student success. Many institutions have made incremental progress in moving away from an instructional model that views learning as a passive, receptive act on the part of the student, a model that favors competition over cooperation, individual achievement over collaboration, and divisiveness and control over individual differences and choice. We talk about developing learner-centeredness at our institutions that is characterized by a new focus on active learning, collaboration, and engagement. The focus, however, has been almost exclusively on what the faculty need to achieve. Little has been said in regard to the role that academic leaders need to play to foster a true, comprehensive, systemic shift in paradigms.

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The term *paradigm shift* was originally used by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) to refer exclusively to scientific theory. Since then its use has become more generic, referring to radical changes in thought that require individuals to completely reenvision systems or organizations. We tend to use the term so generically now that we lose sight of the magnitude of the concept. To us, the word *shift* makes the challenge of radical change seem too easy, like shifting gears on a bicycle. Shifting gears on bicycles allows riders to maintain their cadence uninterrupted as the terrain becomes more difficult. This is most definitely not how shifting paradigms works. Our cadences will be interrupted. Shifting paradigms is unbalancing and unsettling because it is about shifting thinking and attitudes. It is an organizational metamorphosis requiring all parties to change, to alter our cadences in response to the new landscape or else fall off our bikes. The shift is not exclusively about classroom practices, and academic leaders have an important role to play in bringing it about.

There are two fundamental concerns for leadership in this enterprise. First is the need to transform administrative approaches to be consistent with the values of the new paradigm. Second is for leadership to lead the way by encouraging, promoting, and supporting the learner-centered agenda, ensuring that policies and practices do not impede progress in order that a true learner-centered institutional culture becomes a reality. This process will be a personal challenge as well as an institutional one. It will call for leaders who can envision the goal while implementing practices that will drive the change in very practical, identifiable ways.

In our roles as academic leaders, we need to take steps to foster and even push the shift toward learner-centeredness, guiding the efforts of faculty who are making attempts to transform their practices and providing support to encourage change. But to do so we need mechanisms to assess our current academic environment in order to have a clear understanding of where we are and the steps that will be involved in making progress toward the ultimate goal. Great strides have already been made in assessing features such as student engagement, one of the features of the new paradigm. The National Survey of Student Engagement is now used by 610 campuses to help them assess good practices in undergraduate education. Other features of the learning-centered paradigm do not have large-scale assessment mechanisms readily available. Until that time, individual efforts at developing assessment of learning-centeredness are necessary. Toward that end, we

have developed a mechanism for assessing the degree of learner-centeredness in a unit/department using course syllabi and a rubric that we developed for this purpose.

Right now, if asked about the state of learner-centeredness in a department or unit, we can usually point to individual faculty members who are making significant changes in teaching practices and experimenting with innovative strategies. We may also be able to point to new technology or new policies that show progress toward making the shift, but we rarely have data that clearly delineates department/unitwide the areas of success or areas of need when it comes to the distinctive features of learner-centered pedagogy.

The results of the assessment provide clear and measurable data regarding specific features of learner-centered practice that can be used to guide professional development. Repeating the assessment over time can provide insight to the progress being made in the unit.

Roxanne Cullen is a professor of English at Ferris State University, and Michael Harris is the chancellor at Indiana University – Kokomo.

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Keys to Effective Program-Level Assessment

By Rob Kelly

Effective program-level assessment requires faculty investment in the process because it's too large a job for one person and because individual faculty members have knowledge and insights about their courses that others don't have. Part of getting faculty buy in is making the process meaningful to them and reminding them of its benefits. "If faculty can find a use for assessment results in their classes and in their interactions with students in their programs, it has more value to them," says Lisa Shibley, assistant vice president for institutional

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assessment and planning at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. In an interview with Academic Leader, Dr. Shibley outlined the following ways to make program-level assessment more meaningful and effective:

Do something with the results. “Oftentimes [information] is collected and reported, but what’s really done with it? So often assessment is focused on improving student learning, but there’s also an opportunity to showcase what a department or program is doing as well. It could be used to help improve the learning opportunities, learning experiences, and curriculum for students. It could also be used to promote the program to students,” Shibley says.

Although indirect measures such as student satisfaction surveys and graduation rates can give some indication as to a program’s effectiveness, assessment needs to include direct evidence of student learning—the skills, abilities, knowledge, and attributes students exhibit as a result of participating in the program.

Define learning outcomes collaboratively. “I think it’s important that faculty work collaboratively with their colleagues to define learning outcomes so that they’re all on the same page,” Shibley says. “And I think that’s a great faculty development opportunity. Sometimes with assessment initiatives, just having the conversation is of value. It helps [faculty] realign how their courses are connected to the overall program. I think at another level it may help faculty help students understand why they might need a particular course as part of a program. I also think that by having faculty involved in the discussion of learning outcomes, they’re able to provide their input and share what they think is important. They may learn from each other. Even within a program faculty are going to come from different sub-specialties within the discipline, and it enhances understanding of each other’s perspective.”

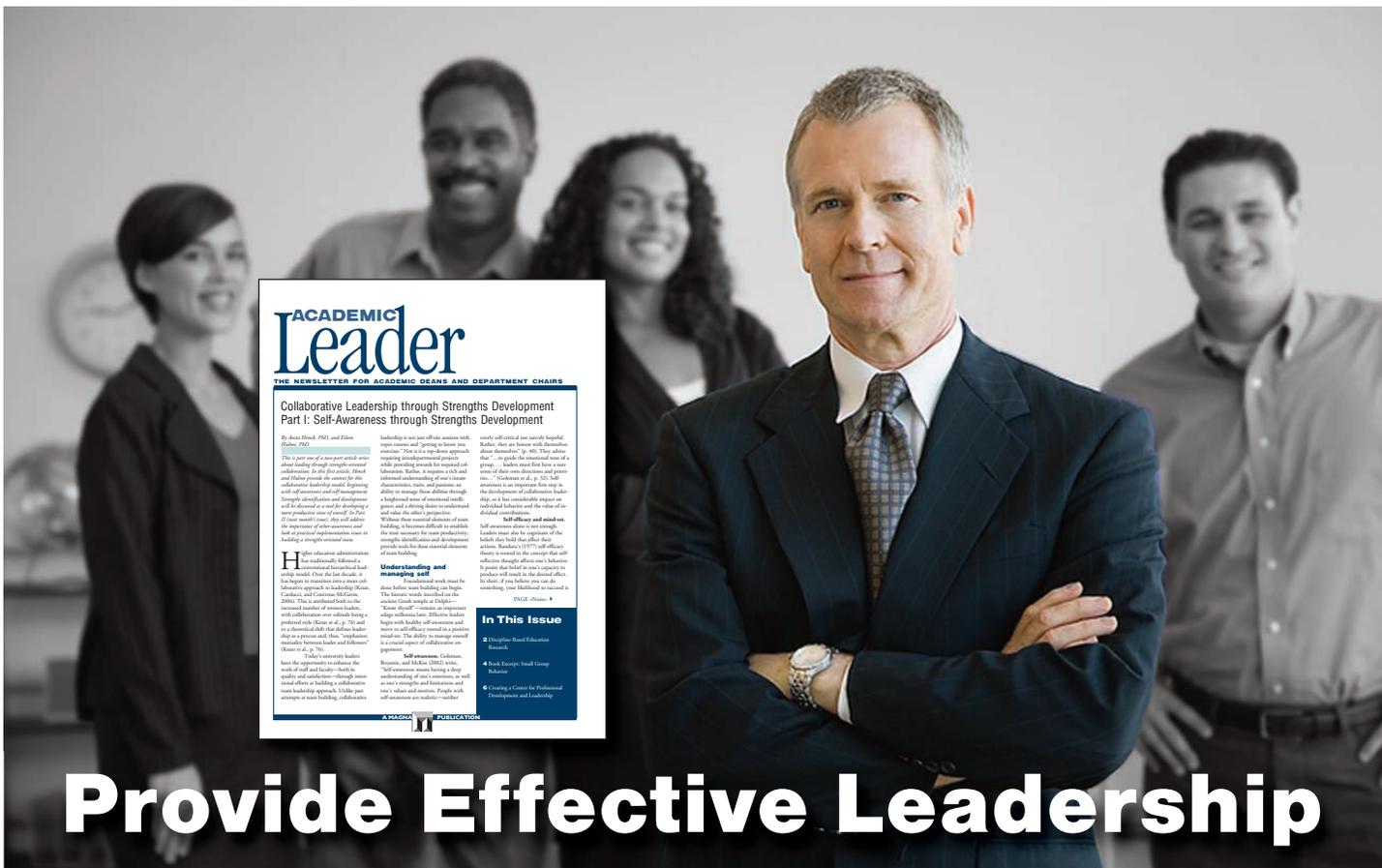
Include assessment of direct evidence of student learning. Although indirect measures such as student satisfaction surveys and graduation rates can give some indication as to a program’s effectiveness, assessment needs to

include direct evidence of student learning—the skills, abilities, knowledge, and attributes students exhibit as a result of participating in the program. Direct evidence could come from embedded test questions, portfolios, or standardized tests in a particular field that gives the outcomes that faculty have determined for the program.

Use a systematic and cyclical approach. “Whatever the cycle is, if that can be defined then I think it’s going to set some boundaries in terms of what the faculty are able to do within a given period of time. It also gives them a framework to shoot for in terms of when they want to be using that information to help make program improvements or to promote the program,” Shibley says.

Use multiple strategies for assessing student learning for each learning outcome. “Direct and indirect evidence goes hand in hand. As long as you have some direct evidence you could also use indirect evidence. This evidence can be qualitative or quantitative. One of the things I hear a lot is that data have to be quantitative to have meaning. Faculty need to understand that sometimes qualitative assessment can have as much value as quantitative assessment,” Shibley says.

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