Assessment in Practice

Triennial Assessment as an Alternative to Annual Assessment

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Christopher Newport University (CNU) has a long history of assessing the extent to which its educational outcomes are achieved. At CNU, faculty members have the primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the University's undergraduate and graduate curricula. Student learning outcomes for new and revised courses and degree programs are developed and reviewed by faculty, under the guidance of the Office of Assessment. Many institutions utilize assessment processes that are faculty-driven. So what makes the assessment process at Christopher Newport different?

THE OFFICE OF ASSESSMENT AND THE ASSESSMENT LIAISONS

The Office of Assessment supports assessment at CNU through the coordination and implementation of an effective and comprehensive assessment process for all academic programs, as well as educating the campus community about best practices in assessment. The coordination of academic program assessment is achieved, in part, by the selection of representatives from each program, by academic department chairs, to serve as assessment liaisons.

The academic programs' assessment liaisons lead their departments in executing the assessment plans, submitting the assessment reports to the Office of Assessment, and they serve as the point of contact for their respective academic programs. To encourage best practices, each fall term, the Office of Assessment offers an Assessment Reporting Workshop to all academic assessment liaisons. Each spring term, the academic assessment liaisons are invited to attend an Annual Assessment Liaison meeting, in which they are led in discussions on current assessment trends and hot topics such as, "What does continuous improvement actually mean in the assessment world?" and, "How do we assess student engagement?"

THE UNIVERSITY ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE

Four years ago, we implemented a shift from annual departmental assessment to triennial programmatic assessment; that is, one report is submitted by each academic program every three years.

Further oversight of the assessment process is provided through peer review by the University Assessment Committee (UAC), which was reconstituted and reimagined (after a brief hiatus) at Christopher Newport during the 2015-2016 academic year. The UAC is tasked with monitoring the overall operation of the University's assessment activities, through a rubric-driven review, using the UAC Assessment Report Evaluation Rubric, of assessment reports and making recommendations concerning changes to the University's assessment activities.

The UAC is comprised of 14 members: two faculty members from each college and five staff members from administrative and student support units. The Director of Assessment serves as the ex-officio committee chair, and the UAC operates under the guidance of the Office of Assessment. After being submitted to the Office of Assessment for a comprehensive review, the assessment reports are then forwarded to the UAC for peer review. In order to maintain this evaluation as *peer review*, the Office of Assessment does not participate in evaluating the assessment reports at this stage. Following peer review, the UAC provides recommendations to the academic programs as needed. Additional information or a revised report may be requested from any academic program as determined by the total points earned on the UAC Assessment Report Evaluation Rubric.

As of May 2018, we will have successfully completed three assessment cycles under our current assessment structure. So what is different about CNU's current assessment process? Four years ago, we implemented a shift from annual departmental assessment to triennial programmatic assessment; that is, one report is submitted by each academic program every three years. To understand why this adjustment was deemed a suitable solution to the observed limitations in our process, let's take a look at where assessment at CNU was prior to that shift.

ANNUAL DEPARTMENTAL ASSESSMENT AT CNU

Prior to the 2014-2015 academic year, CNU conducted annual assessments of academic departments. As is standard in assessment, the departments would begin by developing an assessment plan that detailed the student learning outcomes (SLOs) to be adopted by all academic programs within the department, as well as their methods of measurement, and their defined expectations (targets) for each SLO.

Using the methods of measurement outlined in their assessment plans, the data is/are captured during the fall and spring terms and then evaluated and discussed at the start of the following fall term. The findings generated by these discussions, along with any needed action plans, were reported by the end of that fall term. The annual departmental assessment process across two assessment cycles is illustrated in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, a considerable amount of assessment activity occurred during the fall semester of cycle two: discussing findings, creating reports, and implementing changes, all while capturing data for cycle two. Note that, after completing the first year of an assessment plan (cycle one), each year following would reflect the schedule illustrated in cycle two. While this is a common timeline for assessment employed by many institutions to good effect, its rapid schedule could lead to potential limitations.

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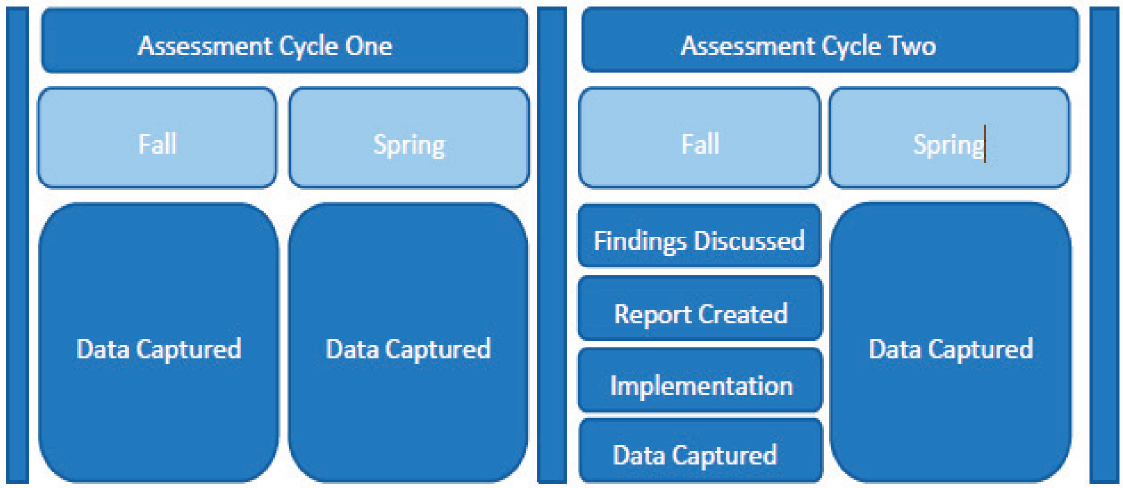

Figure 1: Annual Departmental Assessment at CNU

LIMITATIONS OF CNU'S PREVIOUS ANNUAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

As previously mentioned, the earlier assessment efforts at Christopher Newport were not always effective. As assessment professionals, when something is not working effectively, we look for faults in the process and try to correct them. Some of the limitations that we observed in our previous annual departmental assessment are expressed here:

Limitation 1: Adopting SLOs across departments. How do we make assessment meaningful when SLOs are adopted by academic departments and shared by each academic program within the department? Most, but not all, departments at Christopher Newport house multiple programs. For example, the Department of Physics, Computer Science, and Engineering at CNU is comprised of six different academic programs (Applied Physics, Computer Engineering, Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, Information Science, and Information Systems). While there may be similarities in knowledge, skills, and abilities across those six programs, there are certainly more differences in what students should master, having graduated with a degree in Applied Physics versus Information Systems. Therefore, applying SLOs that were developed at the department level across the multiple academic programs that may exist in that department is problematic at best because SLOs are not "one size fits all." Ultimately, evaluation at this level meant that each individual academic program within a department would not be properly, or accurately, represented in the assessment process. The information gathered in the previous (i.e., departmental) assessment process did not necessarily address the specific learning outcomes of the individual programs.

Limitation 2: No time for change. When an assessment cycle spans a single academic year (in which data are captured over the fall and spring terms), many, if not most, institutions must wait until the fall term of the next cycle to discuss the data captured and make data-driven decisions (action plans). Like many institutions, at Christopher Newport, faculty members are not under contract during the summer. So while they are often on campus, diligently working on their research/projects, they are not likely to participate in discussions concerning assessment. So when would we implement the action plans? Referring to Figure 1, implementation of the developed action plans at CNU could, at best, begin after discussion of the findings, while simultaneously capturing data for the next assessment cycle. However, the timing in this case presents an issue: wouldn't the data captured at that time, at least in part, represent the prior processes that the institution was working to change? Couldn't this add weight to the opponent of assessment's claim that assessment is often meaningless or represents poor methodology? Where does one cycle end and the next begin?

Most assessment professionals would likely agree that one of the most, if not the most, important resources in assessment is the faculty.

Limitation 3: Overutilization of faculty. Most assessment professionals would likely agree that one of the most, if not the most, important resources in assessment is the faculty. Most would also agree that faculty members are a resource that is already heavily utilized by their institution. How, then, can we expect our faculty to engage in meaningful assessment within a condensed time period, when they are already expected to do so much? In an annual cycle, they are required to capture assessment data, analyze that data, discuss their findings and then generate a report, often in the same academic term. All the while, they are instructing students, serving on committees, performing research and applying for funding, among many other things. When would they find time or energy to implement changes to their programs? And, without enough time to gather meaningful information from the assessment process overall, how could we expect assessment to retain priority on the faculty's ever-growing list of responsibilities?

TRIENNIAL ASSESSMENT AT CNU

To address the limitations listed above and provide more meaningful and effective assessments, beginning in the 2014-2015 academic year, CNU shifted its focus from annual assessment of academic departments to triennial assessment of each academic programs within the department.CNU's triennial assessment process spans across three years (one assessment cycle) and is illustrated in Figure 2.

As shown in Figure 2, academic programs are asked to capture assessment data during the fall and spring term terms across Years One and Two. Note that they are not asked to capture assessment data during Year Three. During the fall term of Year Three, faculty are asked to direct their valuable time and energy toward discussing their findings, determining plans of action, and generating a triennial assessment report. The triennial assessment reports, which include the extent to which student learning outcomes were achieved and resulting action plans, are submitted to the Office of Assessment by December 15th. Note that the triennial assessment reports are not submitted at the end of the assessment cycle, nor are they submitted during the first term of the following assessment cycle. Rather, they are submitted *mid-way* through Year Three of the assessment cycle. This affords the faculty time to work toward implementing the changes detailed in their triennial assessment report's action plans, *prior* to the start of the next assessment cycle in the fall (Year One).

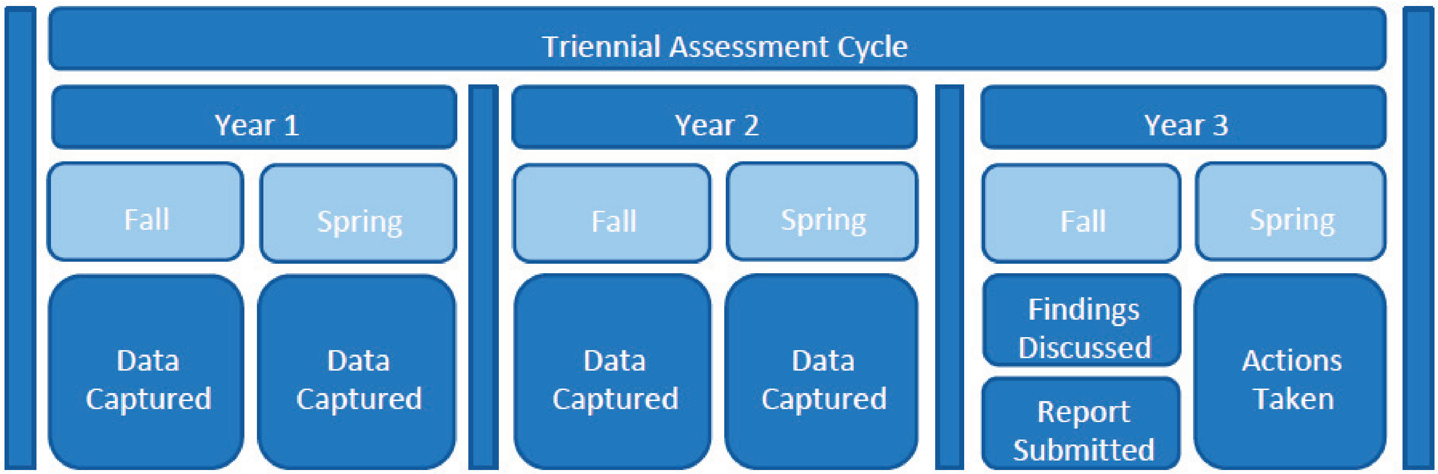

Figure 2: Triennial Assessment at CNU

Finally, because sometimes the changes that are implemented might not reflect exactly what was articulated in their action plans, each academic program is asked to submit an Implementation Memo to the Office of Assessment by May 15th. This follow-up process serves two purposes: 1) it provides the Office of Assessment with documentation on how assessment findings are utilized, and 2) it allows the Office of Assessment to effectively monitor those implementations that are ongoing. This memo marks the end of the triennial assessment cycle. As a final note, each academic program has the choice to capture additional assessment data during Year Three, if they believe it is necessary for their assessment processes; however, they are asked to be mindful of what that captured data would represent.

ADDRESSING THE OBSERVED LIMITATIONS

The shift from annual assessment of academic departments to triennial assessment of academic programs addressed the observed limitations as follows. First, the assessment process now begins with each program identifying their own student learning outcomes (SLOs). This adjustment allows for a proper *representation* of each academic program within its department. Second, the triennial assessment schedule allows each program *adequate time* to 1) capture significant amounts of data, 2) analyze the data, 3) reflect upon and discuss the findings, and most importantly, 4) implement changes *prior* to the next assessment cycle rather than *during* the next assessment cycle. We have found that faculty appreciate having discrete assessment cycles with time reserved for reflecting and discussing their findings to support the development of meaningful and intentional action plans. Finally, shifting from annual to triennial assessment reduces the faculty's assessment fatigue by eliminating the condensed assessment cycle and the requirement to generate detailed assessment reports and plans of action each year. Please note, however, that assessment is not allowed to drift far from the minds of our assessment liaisons and program faculty. Department chairs submit a loosely defined assessment narrative, using yearly updates from their program faculty, offering a brief overview of their assessment efforts to their respective academic deans each summer.

It is important to keep the lines of communication open with faculty and staff, especially those who are more closely involved in assessment (e.g., assessment liaisons, department chairs, and academic deans).

LESSONS LEARNED

The arguments posed here are not meant to imply that a process of triennial assessment is without limitations: that is not accurate.There are, however, supportive factors that facilitate successful triennial assessment. Listed below are a few lessons that we have learned during the shift in our assessment cycle.

1. **Communication is key.** It is important to keep the lines of communication open with faculty and staff, especially those who are more closely involved in assessment (e.g., assessment liaisons, department chairs, and academic deans). Hold meetings, workshops, and send e-mails regularly that emphasize the triennial schedule and its benefits. Consider distributing a newsletter each term, highlighting aspects of triennial assessment that have been successful, such as a spotlight on a particular program. It may be challenging at first to shift from an annual to a triennial assessment schedule, so repeated communication is important.

2. **Semantics matter.** While reading this piece, you may have noticed the use of the term data *capture* instead of the more commonly used data *collection*. This is not unintentional. While interacting with faculty on campus, we find ourselves often reiterating what we think is a basic concept in assessment. We want them to develop an assessment plan based on what they are currently doing in their programs term after term. As faculty, their processes requires *continuous collection* of student data; however, as part of the assessment process at CNU, we ask them to periodically *capture* a representative portion, a snapshot, of this data. We find that when we explain our logic behind the “pause in collecting data” during Year Three, it is helpful to differentiate what they consistently do, i.e., *collect* data, and what we are asking them to do: *capture* a sample of their data. They will always be collecting student data, but emphasizing how the process is different for programmatic assessment may help faculty better understand that it’s not truly a break in data collection.

3. **It is not all about data.** First, note that this is coming from a quantitatively trained scientist. Elaborate assessment plans designed to give us a lot of quantitative data alone are not going to help us implement informed change. We do not have to continuously collect data to inform practice and improve decision making. Remember that we have to periodically step back from incoming data and reflect on what we have found, in order to understand what it actually means. Then, we have to *do something with it*. Don’t be afraid to schedule deliberate breaks from data capture into your assessment processes. Faculty need time to meet and discuss findings, reflect on their implications, and cultivate meaningful action plans that will enhance student learning in their programs.

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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