Addressing Assessment Fatigue by Keeping the Focus on Learning

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It seems everywhere we go, we hear from faculty and staff who are overwhelmed by the number of initiatives they have been asked to implement in recent years. Now sufficiently common that it has acquired a name — *initiative fatigue* — this syndrome is so widespread that many faculty and staff have become jaded toward new initiatives. As one person described the situation to us, her campus has been plagued by a case of CAVE: Colleagues Against Virtually Everything.

Initiative fatigue is real. It takes the form of a heightened psychological and physiological state in which faculty and staff members feel inundated by and conflicted about the number of improvement efforts introduced on their campus. Assessment can exacerbate initiative fatigue for two reasons. First, most new efforts have an assessment component, which adds yet another layer of required effort. Second, many faculty still view assessment as an "add on," an extra set of tasks independent of evaluating class assignments and giving grades, a situation almost guaranteed to produce fatigue. Student affairs staff are similarly at risk when they are asked to produce evidence of the impact of students' out-of-class experiences on valued learning outcomes (Schuh & Gansamer-Topf, 2010). But assessment, as we will see, can also help to mitigate initiative fatigue.

Some Ways to Deal with Initiative Fatigue

There is no single blueprint for ameliorating or avoiding initiative fatigue, but some approaches are promising. Here are three of the strategies we discussed in our chapter in Using Evidence to Improve Higher Education (Kuh, Ikenberry, Jankowski, Cain, Ewell, Hutchings &Kinzie, 2015).

Sell the Merits of the Initiative

When it comes to institutional change, a first-order step is to convince opinion leaders among the faculty, for instance, and department chairs that the idea has the potential to affect student and institutional performance in a positive way. Of course, there are no guarantees that a program or policy successfully implemented at another institution or in even another unit on a campus will have comparable effects when tried elsewhere. But at the least, there should be a strong, persuasive rationale presented — buttressed whenever possible with persuasive, high-quality assessment evidence — before attempting to mobilize human and other resources to launch another set of activities.

Hold Large-Scale Events

Convening large groups can be an effective way to illustrate overlaps and complementarity with campus priorities and to highlight how students and the institution will benefit from the convergence of efforts. Another benefit of such gatherings is clarifying the language used to represent the new work. What, after all, is a portfolio? What is a capstone

or culminating experience? What is meant by the term proficiency? These are matters that must be fleshed out and agreed upon over time, and a public event is a good place to begin to clarify the goals of these various initiatives and to highlight the ways they support one another.

Declare a Fixed Length Moratorium on New Initiatives
Institutional leaders can dampen the effects of initiative fatigue by enacting a moratorium on new initiatives, with the proviso that part of the time (say, an academic year) will be spent taking stock -- deciding what to drop or scale back in order to create some space for worthwhile new ideas and efforts that address pressing, high-priority institutional needs. The campus can still maintain improvement momentum during this time by doing a comprehensive inventory of the variety of initiatives recently implemented and their effects, however measured. Especially at institutions where a small number of faculty and staff routinely are recruited to lead new initiatives, the psychological benefits of a moratorium cannot be overstated.

To have the desired effects, these and other efforts to address initiative fatigue must clearly demonstrate the connections between the initiative and student learning, which brings us to the special role of assessment.

It's About the Learning
Maintaining assessment's laser-like focus on learning outcomes means keeping evidence about student performance in view. Focusing on gathering and using evidence of student accomplishment can help create synergies between functions and roles that often operate independently of one another, a condition that exacerbates initiative fatigue. Most important among these is connecting assessment to the work of faculty in their own classrooms. Assessment was originally framed in ways that distanced it from teaching and learning, positioning assessment as an "exoskeletal" phenomenon, as something added on and external to the interactions between teachers and students (Ewell, 2013). In this scenario, assessment has often and understandably been a point of faculty resistance, cynicism, and fatigue. Fortunately, reports from provosts (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014) and program heads (Ewell, Paulson, & Kinzie, 2011) suggest we may be on the verge of a tipping point as campuses increasingly rely on assessment approaches that draw directly on students' work in the classroom: portfolios, rubrics, capstone projects and performances, and the like.
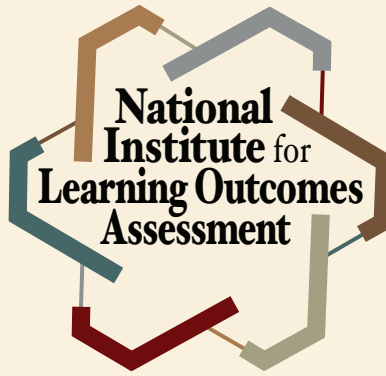
Last Words
Every campus is subject to the potentially debilitating effects of initiative fatigue.

After all is said and done, the best antidote for assessment-associated initiative fatigue is for faculty to see that good evidence about what helps and does not help their students succeed is also the route to more effective, efficient, and gratifying work as teachers. Understood and enacted in this way, assessment is not just the right thing to do — an essential instructional responsibility that only faculty can adequately perform — but also the smart thing.

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