

Assessment *in* Practice

An Assessment Fellows Program Model

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Assessment is an integral component to refining teaching, support services and operations. It informs the choices we make and helps us make continuous improvements to our programs and processes. However, unless there is a strong foundation and institutional support, assessment results cannot be acted upon. At **Bergen Community College (BCC)**, the Assessment Fellows Program provides a systematic approach for college faculty and professional staff to assume leadership in college-wide assessment as well as a unique opportunity to ensure quality of assessment plans for the institution. In this paper, we will provide a brief history of the program, an overview of how it functions, its successes and its challenges.

BACKGROUND

The creation of the **Assessment Fellows Program** was a response to a 2005 citation from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education for BCC not having a clear assessment process in place. Like other institutions, there had been a belief that “assessment would go away”, as well as fear of the unknown. The College responded to the Middle States’ mandate by placing greater emphasis on program assessment and student learning, as well as by restructuring the **Center for Institutional Effectiveness (CIE)**. These actions demonstrated the administration’s understanding of the importance of assessment and its commitment to institutionalizing it. In 2006, under the leadership of the Vice-President of Institutional Effectiveness, the Assessment Fellows Program was created. The original intent of the program was to select two academic fellows, and two Administrative and Educational Support (AES) Fellows to (a) pursue an institutional research or assessment research project, and (b) serve as in-house assessment experts who could assist departments in supporting their assessment work. However, the initial challenge and steep learning curve encountered by the first fellows eliminated

the possibility of working on an individual project. The fellows instead focused on informing and assisting departments with assessment. Over time the program grew and strengthened to where it is today; seven fellows strong serving more than 140 academic programs and 40+ AES departments and units (e.g. Registration, Financial Aid, Continuing Education, Library, Tutoring Center, etc.).

APPLICATION PROCESS

All full-time faculty and staff are eligible to serve as assessment fellows. The application outlines the duties of the fellows and asks applicants to share their interest and assessment Assessment in Practice 2 experience at Bergen and elsewhere, as well as any coursework they have taken in assessment or testing methods. The Vice-President of Institutional Effectiveness in consultation with the current fellows selects new fellows. While the commitment is two years, fellows are encouraged to serve longer because the relationships they develop with their department/unit liaisons are essential to the effectiveness of the program. Academic Fellows receive three hours of reassigned time or an equivalent stipend. AES Fellows receive a stipend.

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

The assessment process is textured. Each department has a designated assessment liaison (academic department liaisons are compensated) with whom assessment fellows provide one-on-one support through all phases of the assessment cycle. A minimum of three contacts between fellows and liaisons are expected each semester. While the fellows work most closely with the liaisons, they also communicate assessment expectations to department heads, deans, and vice-presidents so that assessment is transparent and everyone is informed of the status of assessment at the College.

The fellows maintain the College **assessment handbook**, publish the CIE Update newsletter, serve as members of the Learning Assessment Committee of the Faculty Senate, hold orientation sessions for deans and department heads, attend monthly fellows meetings and attend the assessment fellows' yearly summit. In addition, they design and sponsor **workshops** on specific assessment topics including Writing Student Learning Outcomes, Using Surveys for Assessment, and Closing the Loop. At the end of each two-year assessment cycle (the four-semester assessment cycle is staggered and continuous), they also participate in a meta-analysis of assessment reports in which they evaluate the quality of the assessments themselves.

The roles and responsibilities of the fellows continue to be refined and expand as new fellows take the place of former fellows and bring in new ideas to the assessment process.

BENEFITS OF THE ASSESSMENT FELLOWS PROGRAM

The Assessment Fellows Program has supported Bergen's efforts to create and sustain a culture of assessment by nurturing the growth of data collection and analysis, which drives the decision making process on the path to continuous

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improvement at all levels of the College. As mentors to faculty and staff, as well as the assessment link between departments and administration, the fellows provide support and direction for assessment of student learning and planning initiatives, as well as assistance with the selection and compilation of data in the AES areas. The close and consistent relationships they have forged with their colleagues encourage trust which allows for change.

A strong, collegial, working relationship exists between the fellows, liaisons, and departments/units that develops over time.

Fellows are highly regarded by their peers and serving as a fellow provides an opportunity to distinguish oneself on campus. As a result of their work and leadership, assessment has become visible and more meaningful to the college community.

WHY IT WORKS

The Assessment Fellows Model is the result of a productive collaboration between the 3 administration, faculty, and staff. Academic program assessment is faculty driven. The College, under the auspices of CIE, supports the scholarship of assessment and has committed sufficient resources and incentives such as sponsoring attendance at outside workshops and conferences to ensure ongoing professional development. Administrators, faculty and staff are encouraged to attend conferences and workshops, allowing everyone to gain a broad perspective and establish a network of resources. Another key to its success is the solid foundation of assessment at the College with leadership at all levels of the institution.

The assessment fellows are a team from across the College who coordinate assessment activity, propelling the assessment process forward. The fellows hold monthly meetings to review assessment activities, current articles and trends, reports and other information regarding assessment, which empowers fellows to foster the culture of assessment. The assessment process itself is organized and systematic. All departments/units use a standardized assessment framework; feedback is provided throughout the assessment cycle by the fellows, deans and vice-presidents. A rubric encourage liaisons to review their assessment work to be certain it is clear and complete. The comprehensive meta-analysis review by the fellows at the end of the assessment cycle focuses on improvement, growth, and accountability. Last, a strong, collegial, working relationship exists between the fellows, liaisons, and departments/units that develops over time.

CHALLENGES TO THE PROGRAM

Despite the strengths of the Assessment Fellows Program, challenges remain as some departments/units demonstrate a greater commitment to assessment than others. Within higher education, there is both passive and active hostility to change. Many faculty are resistant to assessment because they fear it may bring unwanted attention to their programs, spotlighting shortcomings. In addition, there is still a lack of understanding of why and how to assess even though the fellows repeatedly emphasize that assessment is a tool that allows for programmatic self-reflection and improvement. Moreover, timing and staffing are issues. Fellows often are told that departments are too busy to assess and because liaisons may change over the assessment period, there is a constant need to review the process. While workshops are offered, attendance is often low.

CONCLUSION

Assessment is an essential component of a high-performing institution and is the standard by which an institution is judged. The Assessment Fellows Program at BCC is an established, systematic and college-wide program which has put us on the right track to build a culture of assessment at our institution. Fellows have the privilege to serve as mentors to faculty and staff, liaisons between departments and administration, and overall advocates of institutional effectiveness. They keep communication open between administration and academic/AES units, and they provide an avenue for all members of the college community to be involved in assessment

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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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