



How Assessment and Institutional Research Staff Can Help Faculty with Student Learning Outcomes

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In a recent conversation about learning outcomes assessment, one colleague I spoke with — a dean at a small, liberal arts college – noted that many faculty members are not trained to state outcomes in measurable ways or to design approaches to assess them meaningfully. She commented: “they look at grades and then in the eyes of their students to know they are learning.”

Institutional researchers can provide support for faculty members as they seek to improve the attainment of student learning outcomes through assessment. Sometimes a few dedicated faculty members drive the process, but increased faculty support is needed to cultivate a culture of assessment on campus. I talked with a few senior-level administrators to find out about practices that they most valued and three emerged.

1. Consider how you generate a sense of purpose. One dean noted that sometimes convincing faculty members that assessment is worth doing is the greatest challenge. “The power and the leverage that can be gained by this level of accountability and documentation is something vastly underestimated.” Another added “it is important to address the lingering sense among some faculty that assessment is externally-driven and not important.”
2. Dedicate the time and resources necessary to act on results. One VPAA I spoke with emphasized the importance of senior-level administrators who invest sufficient resources, taking into account faculty time and “providing professional development to assist in effective course and program development based on assessment results.”
3. Communicate ways you are learning from and acting on results. Jeanne Narum (2008) has noted that “academic leaders taking responsibility for transforming the learning environment ask questions about their current programs, gather data about the efficacy of those programs . . . analyzing and comparing what works.” Related to learning about current programs, one colleague said that in her role as VPAA, “the most important information that has helped me has been the information from our faculty members who are engaged in direct measures of student learning outcomes. . . [Those who] have thoughtfully evaluated the results and written reports on how to improve student learning.”

A few colleagues who work in assessment and institutional research (A&IR) offices also shared their insights. Those I spoke to are at institutions that had been in the spotlight over the past ten years for their curricular innovations in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education. They include Beloit College, Calvin College, Carleton College, Drury University, Elon University, and Western State College of Colorado. With a decade of successful STEM projects related to assessment experience, these institutions provide good examples to learn about how assessment is

Viewpoint

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being supported at the institutional-level. They offered these three suggestions:

Create context and develop a shared language — A&IR can help. “Knowledge in subject areas is increasing... [as is] knowledge of teaching,” noted an associate director, “but there is not a lot of professional development in assessment — in my role I am giving people the common language so they can have conversations with colleagues.” The importance of the A&IR office in describing the context of the student experience beyond the department-level was emphasized.

Honor individuals and bring their successes into a shared story. A&IR colleagues often know the “pockets of success” across campus. A colleague transitioning into a newly-created assessment role pointed out that she sees “pockets of assessment... highly qualified and excellent professors, published in isolation,” and she added, “I am not sure they are getting the recognition.” Colleagues in A&IR can often identify the innovative work being done to assess and improve learning outcomes in the disciplines. They are able to assist senior administrators who seek to notice and share the work of these faculty members. In this way innovations in one discipline may be shared with others. At the same time, faculty and staff look toward senior administrators to tell the overarching story. It is one that incorporates individual successes in the disciplines into one narrative. This is a story that tells all involved in strengthening the student experience: “this is where we are in terms of planning and progress informed by our approaches to assessment — and this is where we plan to go.”

A&IR can help to communicate success beyond the institution. Just as there are “pockets of success” regarding the assessment of learning outcomes that can be woven into a unifying narrative to be told across campus, these shared successes can be communicated to outside audiences. Sharing this work through conferences and publications can help to spread innovations regarding teaching and learning across institutions and demonstrate ways that the university is identifying and meeting student needs. Taken together, these activities show that the institution takes student attainment seriously, which in turn may attract faculty who share similar values. An associate director described a presentation with faculty members at a national conference as a way of telling the story and bringing faculty together across departments in the process. The faculty members “bring a reference letter or two that exemplifies the kind of students they want to graduate from their departments . . . at first they say: ‘we want our students to think like chemists.’ . . . Well, what does that mean?” In the end they discuss the learning outcomes in ways that are applicable across departments and resonate with the audience at the conference.

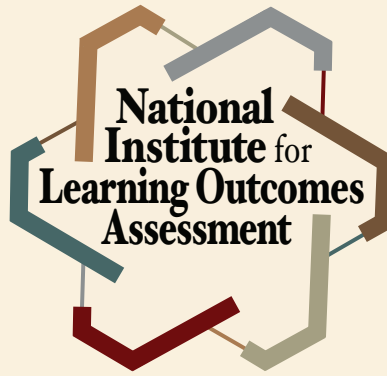
These observations point to the ways that A&IR colleagues are helping to strengthen the culture of assessment at some institutions alongside senior administrators who seek to advance the efforts of the faculty. In conversation it became evident that positions are being created or redefined in A&IR to specifically support this kind of work. Together we learn from the work of individual faculty members — ideally with a clear context and a common language to then create the shared story which serves to move the institution forward.

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Reference

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