



# Bringing Student Voices to the Table: Collaborating with our Most Important Stakeholders

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In her keynote address at the Assessment Network of New York conference (April 2017), Natasha Jankowski, Director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes, challenged participants to develop student-centered assessment processes. She argued that assessment is something we should do in collaboration *with* students, not something we do to students.

Lebanon Valley College, a small, regional college in Annville, Pennsylvania, has involved students in assessment processes since 2013. Their inclusion was a result of modifications made to the faculty committee structure. Prompted by a recommendation from the March 2012 Middle States Visiting Team, the college changed its committee structure to reduce redundancy, better facilitate systematic and organized assessment across the institution, and improve communication among the different policy committees. Prior to 2013, two faculty committees had responsibility for academic assessments: the Academic Evaluation and Policy Committee (AEPC) coordinated program reviews, and the Academic Assessment Committee (AAC) managed annual departmental assessments of student learning. These two committees operated separately from one another, and neither interfaced with the Curriculum Committee. Since assessment is—or should be—central to curricular design, the faculty opted to combine the AAC with the curriculum committee and created the Committee on Curriculum and Assessment (CCA). A sub-committee became responsible for reviewing the annual assessment reports of student learning and reporting back to the CCA. Undergraduates have historically served on the curriculum committee; therefore, following the committee reorganization, they were appointed by Student Government to serve on the assessment sub-committee as well.

The assessment sub-committee, chaired by the Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, includes the Associate Dean for Student Affairs, the Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), three tenured faculty members, and at least one student representative. The Associate Dean for Student Affairs is included because specific operations in his division are required by the institution to assess student learning, and the Director of CETL is involved so that she might identify how assessment results might inform faculty development opportunities.

Though no formal assessment has been done regarding student participation on the assessment sub-committee, faculty—those who served on the committee and those whose departments were recently reviewed by the committee—were asked to share their views on student involvement in the process. The overwhelming majority agreed that having students involved showed that they are central to assessment processes, that students, not Middle States, are at the heart of what we do. An English professor commented, “I like having them there. It

# Viewpoint

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sends a message that we do this for the students, that they're the major stakeholder, and they literally have a seat at the table." Another faculty member observed, "What we as academicians think is relevant and what the students look to get out of [a] class is sometimes at odds. The students on the sub-committee are quick to point out when this disparity exists. They also sometimes ask the 'why' we cannot ask of our colleagues."

While faculty might groan occasionally (just occasionally!) about assessment, students who were asked about their role on the sub-committee voiced positive views. One noted that the experience of serving on the sub-committee allowed her to "make connections and further [her] network with faculty and staff," and a second stated, "I have definitely come to appreciate and see the value behind certain assignments; I may not have seen this before."

Having students included on assessment review committees is only one way to involve them in the process, however. Effective assessment processes involve multiple stakeholders, particularly when it comes to interpreting results and establishing action plans. So, too, is it important to communicate information about student achievement with all relevant stakeholders, including students.

### **Sharing Institutional Data and Collaborating with Students**

Institutional survey data, such as NSSE, campus climate survey results, and findings from a survey on sexual assault, are shared with student leaders by the Director of Institutional Research. Students, in turn, collaborate with personnel in Academic and Student Affairs to create action plans that address specific survey findings. For example, when campus climate survey results indicated that LGBTQ+ students, students of color, and students with disabilities felt disenfranchised at the college, the students sponsored a leadership summit and articulated an action plan which was shared with the college's leadership. Their recommendations included faculty and staff development on matters related to diversity, an assessment of grievance procedures, the creation of a Center for Inclusive Excellence, and improved safety in the residential halls for LGBTQ+ students. In response, a Committee on Inclusive and Intercultural Learning was assembled. This group of faculty, staff, and students has refined the process for reporting incidents of bias on campus; created a residence hall called Stonewall, an affirming housing option for all gender identities that provides support and advocacy for the LGBTQ+ student population; and organizes an annual symposium on inclusive excellence. In addition, the College has increased the number of diversity hires on its faculty and expanded curricular offerings to address issues related to diversity, inclusion, and social awareness.

However important it is to share institutional survey results with students, bringing them to the table and *listening to their voices* are essential to our interpretations of student learning assessment findings, especially those related to institutional goals.

At Lebanon Valley College, direct and indirect measures are used to assess how well students are achieving the institution's learning goals. Indirect measures include course evaluations, NSSE, a graduating senior survey, and alumni surveys (1-year out and 5-year out). Direct assessments are generally course-embedded and scored using customized versions of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) value rubrics.

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Data collected over a period of five semesters provided clear indications that the college was successfully developing students' writing and critical thinking abilities. Other results, however, suggested we were less successful achieving the outcomes inherent in our mission. Specific areas where results continued to fall short of our aspirational targets were integrated knowledge, quantitative reasoning, problem-solving, and intercultural competence. Despite efforts to close the proverbial loop—changes made to curriculum and pedagogy, expanded opportunities for students to develop these abilities—the findings continued to be disappointing. Faculty who were analyzing the results were becoming less sure how to interpret them. It was at that point that the Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs decided to bring the findings to the one group that might be in the best position to explain what they mean: the students themselves.

In Spring 2016, the Senior Associate Dean assembled two student focus groups and shared results from assessments in integrated knowledge, problem-solving, quantitative reasoning, and intercultural competence. She presented a series of open-ended questions designed by the Director of IR and invited students to discuss and interpret the findings.

In summary, students' analyses of the results revealed the following:

- Students and faculty were using different operational definitions for “integrating knowledge.” Faculty typically meant the ability to apply what is learned in one course or discipline to another in order to advance one’s understanding of a single subject; students defined the integration of knowledge as applying classroom learning to real-life experiences.
- Pedagogies most commonly used at the institution potentially prevent students from effectively developing certain learning outcomes, such as problem-solving. Students in the focus groups noted problem-solving is best developed in the co-curricular experience where they are forced to design solutions on their own. According to the students, curricular experiences, particularly assignments, are structured in ways that do not encourage independent problem-solving.
- Faculty may unintentionally be communicating a message to students that is inconsistent with the institution’s mission, values, and learning goals. Students agreed that the college provides ample curricular and co-curricular experiences related to inclusion and diversity, but they did not perceive the institution as being wholly committed to these principles. A lack of diversity on the faculty and staff, the use of pedagogies that do not promote inclusion, faculty jokes about or indifference towards the college’s annual symposium on inclusive excellence, the absence of a global perspective in courses except those designated as “intercultural competence”—these observations explained why less than one-third of graduates agreed the college contributed a great deal to their ability to get along with people who were different from them, and less than one-third reported the college contributed a great deal to developing their understanding of a multi-cultural society.

Assessment findings and focus group comments were shared with the full faculty at an opening faculty development seminar at the start of the 2016 – 2017 academic year. Rather than present the information in a Power Point (and risk death by data), the material was presented in a video where students themselves narrated certain experiences they had or witnessed at Lebanon Valley College that might explain the results. For example, when the video noted that less than one-third of graduating seniors agreed the college contributed greatly to their understanding of a multi-cultural society and their ability to get along with

people different from them, a student voice commented, “A professor asked my roommate what it was like being a Hispanic lesbian.” Others described how their perceptions of faculty bias silenced them in the classroom.

Lebanon Valley College faculty care deeply about their students. Hearing students’ interpretations of the assessment results had a profound and visible impact on the faculty gathered that morning, and it led to professional development opportunities in inclusive learning as well as measureable behavioral changes throughout the year.

## Conclusion

Good assessment is student-centered assessment. Involving students in our assessment practices keeps our most important stakeholder central to the process. Further, healthy collaborations with students when reviewing assessment results brings diverse perspectives to the table and expands our understanding of what the results might mean. It also enhances leadership skills and provides an opportunity for students to work on a team of professionals, traits which employers are seeking in college graduates.

Just recently, our chemistry faculty discussed with the assessment review team their confusion over results on a student survey where students indicated that they did not believe they had adequately developed certain technical skills, but their faculty thought they had. This presents a perfect opportunity to share results with students and engage them in discussions about what the findings mean.

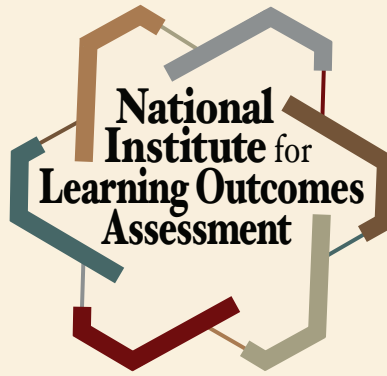
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