

Assessment Benefits and Barriers

Case Study 1

Building a Campus Culture of Assessment through Institutional Support

Many institutions begin the process of establishing a culture and providing institutional support for assessment in response to a review from a National Accrediting body. The case study below details one such example in which a University responded to a call from their accreditor for an increased emphasis on assessment by pursuing and receiving grant funding to “develop a culture of assessment” at their institution.

The overarching goal of this project was to develop a culture of assessment with the following outcomes anticipated at the end of the project:

- Assessment and data collection centralized in one office;
- An institutional assessment plan; and
- 100 percent of undergraduate students involved in assessment activities.

The university established several important steps to meet these goals over the course of the grant. These included: the hiring of an Assessment Director to have responsibility for the overall coordination of the assessment effort; the purchase of an assessment management system and training of departmental personnel on this system; the development of annual programmatic assessment reporting; participation in regional conferences sponsored by the New England Educational Assessment Network (NEEAN); and the creation of the biannual campus-wide assessment forums in January and May of each year.

In order to create a centralized office of assessment and data collection, the University established the new position of Director of Assessment. The Director of Assessment worked closely with programs across the campus to improve program level learning outcomes assessment. The assessment director also worked across departments to develop an exit survey for all graduates that is distributed with applications to graduate, worked with Alumni Affairs on an alumni survey, and with librarians who need to assess library education. The Director of Assessment is housed in Academic Affairs alongside the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Director of Institutional Research, with all three meeting regularly and reporting directly to the Vice President for Academic Affairs. In this manner, not only were assessment and data collection centralized in one office, but assessment results were combined with institutional data

to inform curriculum and instruction through the combined efforts of these three administrators.

The centralization of assessment data collection and analysis was also facilitated by the use of a new assessment management system. The university formed a Steering Committee for its implementation to the departments outside of the Education unit which had already been using the product. The university absorbed the cost of the assessment management system into its operating budget so that no student would be charged for using the product. Members of the steering committee went to national training for the system, and this training was repeated in subsequent years, with teams led by the Director of Assessment. The Faculty Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, the Director of Distance Learning and the Director of Assessment developed training modules and ran training sessions with faculty across the University and with staff in Information Technology on how to use the assessment management system, and how to support student users. While not all programs conduct their assessments using the assessment management system, its broader use on campus allowed for greater centralization of the assessment data.

The development of an institutional assessment plan began with a proposal to the all-University committee that the catalog be revised to indicate that all students, regardless of major would undergo assessment of student learning outcomes. In the revision to the program review cycle, specific language was added to indicate that all undergraduate programs would continue to be reviewed every five years on a rotating cycle, but the report for review had to include student learning outcomes, an outcomes assessment plan, assessment results and changes or planned changes based on those assessment results. In addition, the University began to require annual assessment reports from each of the undergraduate programs that detailed assessment activities in the preceding year, the results of assessments and plans for assessment in the upcoming year. The director of Assessment worked to insure that every program had student learning outcomes and an assessment plan in place, and that all programs were collecting and using the data on student learning outcomes to inform curricular and instructional changes.

As part of the institutional assessment plan, each summer, the Director of Assessment compiled and analyzed the annual assessment reports from each program as well as the results of the Graduating Student Survey. This comprehensive institutional assessment report was shared with the academic affairs team and the Department Chairs at their first meetings of the fall semester for feedback, and posted on the website. In addition, the Director of Assessment, AVPAA and Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Research began to meet in the fall with representatives from each of

the programs in the fifth year of their five-year review cycle, to provide them with data and suggestions for completing their program review report. These programs followed up with the Director of Assessment as needed through the process of completing the report and once it was completed in the spring, the Director of Assessment provided feedback to the program on their assessment process, findings, and the manner in which they were using those findings to inform curricular improvement.

With a few programs still lacking learning outcomes, the campus fell short of the goal of 100% of undergraduate students involved in assessment activities. However, the institution made great strides in this area through comprehensive efforts to provide professional development to faculty in every undergraduate program. Each fall, with grant and institutional support, the University sent teams of faculty to the NEAAN Fall Forum. The grant was also used to support faculty and administrator participation in more topically focused assessment conferences including the NEAN Spring Dialogues in the Disciplines Conferences, the AASCU Conference on Assessment in General Education and the Assessment Planning Conference, the ABET Best Practices in Assessment Forum, the RosEvaluation, the AAC&U General Education and Assessment Conference and the NEEAN Summer Institute.

Throughout the period of the grant, the University held regular campus “assessment days” in January and May of each academic year. Conference presentations were made by faculty, staff, administrators, and invited guests and posted on the Assessment website. Grant funds supported these efforts by providing lunch for all faculty attendees at these day-long conferences. In addition, grant funding supported Assessment Mini-grants to individual departments to provide the resources they need to improve their assessment activities. All mini-grant recipients were required to present their work at one of the two annual assessment days. Professional development opportunities both at regional and national conferences as well as through the two campus assessment days helped programs to develop meaningful outcomes assessment plans.

Departments and programs continued to develop and/or refine their assessments of student learning. The Director of Assessment also began to include assessment training as part of the annual Center for Teaching and Learning summer institutes and New Faculty Orientations. Along with the assessment days, funding for faculty travel to the NEEAN Fall Forum became a regular component of the Academic Affairs budget. The campus institutionalized the costs of assessment mini-grants as well as funds for travel to assessment conferences. In these ways the university has tried to maintain institutional support for the scholarship of teaching and learning as a critical component of building and maintaining a culture of assessment.