Developing Sustainable Assessment Practices

Recognizing Hurdles and Sustainability in Assessment Practices

***Describe a stalled assessment effort at the department program or institution level and discuss why it stalled***

Elizabeth Gordon I am chair of my department and have been involved in the assessment of my department for ever since I began nine years ago and in these nine years we developed a new assessment plan And we had mapped out you know we had developed our learning outcomes we mapped out which courses students would take to make sure they achieved those outcomes and we tried to design an assessment plan where faculty wouldnt necessarily be adding to their load because we have a small department and assessment becomes a difficult thing to as of a few people So we designed an assessment plan so that it would tap into natural assignments so we could capitalize on what we were already doing in the classroom And what we saw as we started to assess was that we were only able to assess a few skills and not really content and there seemed to be a couple of reasons for that One is that we have a small number of majors and so we have our content knowledge assessment and it was hard to get that content knowledge because oftentimes classes would be cancelled and so students werent actually exposed to that content so that became difficult to assess – the knowledge that they were learning We were able to assess oral communication written communication things that they get in many courses but because of the small numbers it was hard for faculty to feel the data were reliable and it was hard to take action based on those data and so it sort of has stalled out at collecting data but then not really knowing what to do with it because it doesnt feel like something we can act on So thats where we are and were kind of trying to figure out how to move forward from there

Melanie Jenkins When it comes to things outside of accreditation everyone gets really excited about you know we got through accreditation and we know that there is data out there so we just need to start using it to you know create new programs or maybe a new first year courses One of the things that we have done recently is something called foundations of excellence and it required that we evaluate our first year programs on various levels from diversity to faculty and staff to diversity of students the type of curriculum that was being presented whether or not they were exposed to real world topics as opposed to just you know college 101 by the institution And it created this motivation to evaluate all these aspects and make significant change to the first year experience so that students would be retained And after the first year what has happened is just a reduction in motivation intrinsic motivation and also faculty by in So faculty either want to absolutely be a big part of it or run the show when it comes to any type of evaluation of their programs or their courses and the other part is trying to make sure that the outcomes do not reflect badly on their ability to teach So what ended up happening was just giving it to the faculty but the faculty dont necessarily want there to be any changes because they are doing a lot already they have heavy loads so all these wonderful ideas that came with a plan to evaluate and constantly track outcomes in these courses and other aspects of the first year experience Ive kind of stopped just because there is still constant discussion about what should and should not be included And so the tracking of information and actually having inputs to expect outcomes is the reason why that kind of stalled

Elaine Beilin University wide we had a Davis grant to start assessment probably five probably six years ago particularly of general education and I was partly involved in that as the English department chair because we wanted to make sure that the first year writing program would be part of it and I was partly involved in it because I was involved in faculty development and for some years now Ive been the director or on the steering committee of The faculty center we called the center we call CELT the center for excellence and learning and teaching scholarship service So the general education assessment turns out to be very difficult I think and Im not sure Im not as directly involved with that anymore as I was done but I think its doing much better now But I think the problem there is that you have to deal with 20 different departments and once we had our set of general education goals every discipline interprets those goals somewhat differently And its hard I think to figure out what kind of data you really want to get so I think it got off to a pretty slow start and I think its doing better now because I think now they figured out what kind of artifacts they want to collect and who they are going to get to look at the artifacts and they remember to ask the instructors for the assignment for those various artifacts But I think general education assessment is very very difficult and if you are trying to demonstrate that students who are in your general education program especially since they all take different courses other than the required math and the required English I think its difficult and I think its one place where we stalled for a while The other place where we stalled I think is as I mentioned we had a system that was much too laborintensive and we were basically asking four faculty members to spend time in the summer when most of us are trying to do our own research and writing Reading students is portfolios and putting them into this rubric so we had we probably had at least 20 to 25 students portfolios that we all had to read we had six department goals and with learning outcomes attached to each of those goals So I myself found that it would take me three or four hours to read one students portfolio and put it into the rubric And so none of us could really complete it so it stalled The other thing I think we came to understand is we werent entirely sure that a summative portfolio was the way to go and we started looking at formative portfolios after that which which dont decrease the intensity of the labor any but I think thats a question we are still struggling with is what we want this assessment to do do we want it to be summative so we can look they have learned what we say we are teaching them or do we want to do it so that we can intervene at key moments for our students and help them to learn better before they get to the capstone course in the end of the major

***What are some of the biggest hurdles on your campus to sustain the assessment process***

Elizabeth Gordon I think faculty load is a big thing faculty do a lot of work and if they see assessment is something they have to add on to work that can be a very difficult thing and I guess that ties in a little bit to seeing the value in assessment I think when you see how they can use the assessment into their own classroom I think that theres a lot more emphasis on or they can tie it into better but yeah I would say the faculty load and being able to see the value in assessment is probably the biggest hurdles for assessment to move forward

Melanie Jenkins One of the biggest hurdles to sustaining it is keeping interest in this project and also reducing the stigma that its overwhelming and its stressful you know the reason why we are here is stellar education on multiple levels to students an opportunity for professional development and experience for faculty and staff So those of the outcomes we have specific outcomes its not just like reporting retention graduation you know whether or not they pass the class but are we providing students an opportunity to gain skills that will allow them to be successful outside So what are we doing whats our plan you know thats one of the things that interferes with sustaining it Too many iterations of a valuation can make it exhausting and people get tired of doing it just like taking multiple surveys And the other part is keeping them aware that there is information available that speaks whether or not the service that you provided to the students was efficient whether or not they were successful because of certain skills that you you know taught and how are you measuring that they acquire the skills its not difficult but doing it it does become daunting so I think thats one of the issues its just keeping interest and motivation and not making it seem like its the end of the world or any valuation of their ability to teach

Elaine Beilin you have skepticism is a very real thing theyre always going to be faculty that are skeptical about assessment and some of them are skeptical because they see it as top down imposed by administrators and some of them are skeptical because either dont understand or really disagree with the need for assessment as opposed to a valuation of students by individual faculty members So I think the concern that it is the top down thing really has to be addressed by showing faculty that this is ultimately of benefit to their students and of benefit to them as instructors and certainly because Ive done so much faculty development work over the years I mean my pitch would always be if lets just assume that all of us always want to be better instructors assessment is actually a way that you can figure out how to be a better instructor so that your students learn more

***Now consider an assessment effort on your campus that has been sustained over time and discuss how its characteristics contribute to its sustainability***

Elizabeth Gordon I think mostly our general education assessment Ive been involved in that about eight years and thats been going on for those eight years and I think what contributes to her that is the stand is that in general I think that the faculty so its part of committee work so we have a university wide committee that is focused on general education and we have several faculty members from all the disciplines on campus or many of them contributing to the work and so it feels like we are a community of educators and so I think that allows for the sustainability of that effort We are all involved in developing or modifying rubrics we all contribute work or most of us contribute work to the assessment process we see the data afterwords we see how we can act on it and so its kind of the ideal closing the loop being able to see the data being able to act on those data adds value to the assessment work

Melanie Jenkins One of the things is trying to create a culture of assessment and evaluation at an institution that did not necessarily have one as structured and organized and on a regular schedule outside of the requirements from Niask or ABA site visits and things with 10 year and fiveyear evaluations So one of the things that has sustained since my arrival which is one of the purposes of me being here which is to create this culture of assessment is creating these committees that are actually focused on creating rubrics and processes and metrics for evaluation And weve been very successful weve created three rubrics for our common core and established a plan for surveying students on global perspectives so that we are able to evaluate and have some actual quantifiable data and qualifiable data that speaks to outcomes for students in these areas You know how do we determine a student has been successful in learning to write appropriately or correctly or theme or thesis or whether or not they are successful presenting information orally or can they you know critically critically analyze information given what are we doing and then we say how do we determine that they you know give them an opportunity to show that they have acquired the scale then how do we measure what theyve shown us is good bad or otherwise so thats actually been a process and we just completed kind of a pilot evaluation of some writing samples in June writing for for the writing rubric and for the critical thinking rubric So these are some of the things that have come to pass in the last three years weve done that well getting a law school on board you know the professional schools are a little bit different because they have a BA learning outcomes that are specific number 302 ANB thats a little bit different than just you know can you read right things like that Thats been pretty successful I think

Elaine Beilin One thing campuswide that has helped us is that with our Davis grant we hired our first director of assessment and so we had someone who was really guiding the campuswide project someone who was a resource someone who actually worked in the institutional resources office so I think it was a way of bringing together resources we already had We now have a really outstanding director of assessment who is very professional and very knowledgeable I think hes been part of this project in fact and one of the very positive things that has happened is we now have lets see if I can get all of the As correct academic assessment advisory group and every department on campus sends a faculty member to this group in that group really has the advantage of talking to our director of assessment of bringing in information from The departments spreading information back across campus I think thats really helped faculty buy in and I know when we work in our department assessment committee I found it very useful that one of the members of our assessment committee also serves on the campuswide assessment group so we can go backandforth and we can say can you check in with Mark the director and talk to him about what we are talking about whats happening on the assessment committee so I think we have a much better sense that we are all working on this and the other way I think weve made improvements is we had our knee ask assessment a few years ago and I was one of the cochairs of that and the principal editor of our self study and what I realized then was that there was no coherence across campus to speakers and all the information was everywhere that we would need for data collection and I think weve made really important progress since then by realizing that we need to share our data we need to have a sense that this is a campuswide project so I think that has been very stimulating for the campus I cant speak for other departments really but my sense is that many other departments are working positively in that direction now

***What are the most important contributing factors to sustaining assessment at an institution***

Elizabeth Gordon I think that based on some of the general education successes so I think that being part of a community thats a big part and having value the value added knowing that your work is being used for something and so that comes you know having administrative support so that they communicate the value of the work that you do being able to use it in tenure promotion those kinds of things So seeing that it supported at the administration level but then also seeing how you can use it in your class room so kind of both levels of the value of the work

Melanie Jenkins The initial thing was just getting people to except that this was something we had to do the second thing was presenting an example of how to get it done or how its been done so bring in people who have talked about assessment evaluation and then to be forced to do it through accreditation and then once we got through a try to keep them motivated was to immediately jump on you know learning outcomes assessment creating a template so that it was standardize this was really simple for you to just say with the learning outcomes are with the inputs are you know what papers are being evaluated who is evaluating them and make it kind of a stepbystep thing as opposed to just go do some assessment and a valuation of your program and not provide any information The other part was letting the faculty know that there is a plethora of data available that they can you know speak to so many different expectations that they have for students song participation and you know performing arts activities is something that maybe and we when we say assessment its not just program review of the different apartment its also for the institution so student affairs you know are our students actually being exposed to other ideas in other cultures through various events and opportunities so thats pretty much what it is its been a short period time but I think that because its been short its been easy not to let it peter out because Im still here you know constantly encouraging to use this information to evaluate whats going on but it may be a challenge as the University goes through a transition to just keep the focus on assessment you know the other part is just its another thing we have to do outside of providing the service to students anyway

Elaine Beilin The number one thing is faculty buy in and its fine if youve got administrators supporting you and giving you secretarial help but until I think faculty really make it part of their teaching practice its not going to work and thats why I think I was so happy when in the English department we had every single member of the department vote positively for our six goals and our learning outcomes and this was already six or seven years ago when that happened And I think we did that by by really showing faculty how the kind of data we were collecting and making available to them was really very helpful so for example we did some curriculum mapping and we got all of our faculty to come in we did it I think on the day before classes started we all sat around a big table and one of our very talented members of the assessment committee had worked out the rubric and so all the faculty members picked the courses that they were teaching simply filled in the curriculum map where they address the goals and the learning objectives in individual courses and when the very talented person on the assessment committee put this all together we were all able to see where students were going to be learning skills abilities that we said that we were teaching them what courses that was going to be happening in so that was useful for all of us to see I think and and one positive thing that came out of the portfolio project which again we shared with all the faculty and I think that very helpful in convincing them that we could become better instructors and therefore have students who were learning better put together was that we were able to put together that curriculum map where they said they were teaching all these things and what the assessment committee was seeing on the summative portfolios and we could see places where we are saying yes the students clearly have learned on the whole to do this quite successfully but here is where they havent learned so in that famous assessment phrase of closing the loop we were able to say to faculty look now we see the areas that we need to step up teaching our majors and we know that our majors take the introductory literary study course they take 300 level courses and they take seminar courses so those are the areas where we need to step up construction of specific things