Gathering Data

Shared Experiences with Planning for Assessment

***Why is it important to plan for the assessment process in advance?***

Soumi Basu: I think the simple answer I like to it is a cliché and if you fail to plan we uh plan to fail And unfortunately in a field such as education I feel very strongly that failure is not really an option we can afford Students are way too important education is way too important And if we recognize that the [inaudible] is on us to invest time and energy in planning A small example that actually happened a few months ago to set up my answer to your question a few months ago the mother of one of our best students this student was very very high academic credentials very good academic credentials she came over to our department and pretty much grilled me for one hour because she wanted to know what exactly her son is going to learn in the program And there was another person in the department at the time and we tried to give some arguments about Oh he will get his degree and after the degree he will do this that and the other and she uh wasnt having any of that She just said Tell me very specifically what he will learn and how is it relevant to industry

Elaine Beilin: Well I think its important because the best assessment programs involve a lot of people And so its a little like organizing the army on a trek so you want to make sure that you dont have everything really done by top down by one person So I think that the first that you have to figure out is how to spread it around as much as possible as early as possible And that means uh thinking about who would be good at various jobs that have to be done um who you can depend on who would know something about data collection So you need to have a plan of battle uh as it were ahead of time and uh you need to have a kind of organizational chart so I think planning ahead is really important

Marc Nicholas: The assessment process is one that one that is on a long on a timeline that involves multiple activities that need to be synchronized across the two endpoints one when you start the research question and one when you actually have data uh to inform uh the question that you know that you started with So uh if you do not plan ahead of time you may end up at the end of it without the kind of data that you needed to start or uh and then it makes the entire process futile So I always think of the assessment process as a research project um that one would do um you know for a publication or a dissertation and uh the need to plan that process ahead of time anticipating um the things that you will need as you go down the line um is so crucial to the success of uh the assessment process And I think too looking at it from my vantage point of a director of assessment I would say um that a lot of faculty and the university um when you go to get buy-in from them for these various aspects of what you do uh you have a lot of eyes that are watching this process and if you engage them in activities that dont yield um the proper results or the stated results at a given point in time you risk losing that buy-in you risk uh your reputation sort of not your reputation but your standing as uh as a professional And so I think youre engaging multiple people multiple processes and a lot of resources and so it is it is important that you plan the process out so that you bring all of these and orchestrate them to you know achieve your end-goal at the end So I think planning ahead of time is very crucial but as we all know with all research projects we cannot anticipate everything that will come up but its best on account of that that you kind of at least cover yourself with things you can potentially plan for uh in that process

***What are one or two important questions that you hope to answer by gathering data?***

Marc Nicholas: Are students learning? You know I think thats the fundamental question uh that drives any any form of assessment um the other the other important um question if I were to choose two uh the other one would be Is the institution achieving uh or is it delivering on its mission and its stated objectives to the students and to uh our stakeholders? And so I think those are two overarching questions that that any assessment professional or that underlies why we do what we do and thereafter you can you know ask questions of you know Are students advancing in critical thinking versus written communication? and those become subsets of your thing but I think if I were to think of two large questions as to why we do what we do I think that would be it

Eilaine Belin: the number one question that the question that uh underpins good academic assessment is are the students really learning what we say were teaching them? And uh you know in a sense going back to the first question I think thats thats something that you have to talk about right away with people you have to think about that because people will say well I already grade the students they theyve got grades and I think the whole idea of what we do in assessment is that we assess programs and we try to see you know by setting goals for the programs um we try to see uh whether our programs are actually uh meeting those goals and whether the students are actually learning what we say were teaching them I think the second part of that is once we have our data um what can we do about it? Um if its if we see areas where oh the students dont seem to be learning as well as we thought they were learning how to write research papers then we have to ask um how do we find out uh ways of improving how do we improve the way that students are learning?

Susan Ouelette: The most important question is you know am I being effective as a teacher? And so first you you set out your learning objectives and so for instance in teaching an intermediate-level history course my learning objectives may include things like um having students read primary sources and learn how to uh critically read them and ask really good questions and so in looking at both what kind of materials I might provide to students how I might suggest to them and guide them in how to use them I can then uh help that process along Um at the same time I can also look at um what my learning objectives are against what theyre doing and be able to sort of measure how that might work um and sometimes its easy to see students sort of the lightbulb goes on the a-ha! moment happens other times not so much but I think its really important starting out to really have a good sense of where you want to take them before you uh begin the journey

***Why is it important to consider the questions you want answered as part of your assessment planning process?***

Susan Ouelette: I think that leads back to uh learning objectives and uh if you uh for instance the example I just used I was probably less interested in content acquisition as much as I was interested in having students learn um skills and so my questions would be focus around the skill acquisition as opposed to the content acquisition which would be more which would really be a different set of questions

Elaine Beilin: From my experience and Ive worked uh across the university and thinking about university assessment of general education for example But the most work Ive done is developing the English departments assessment program and we were very early for our university in developing it uh and um uh and I think there uh the questions really become goals and people need to keep going back to goals because I think you can you know once you start collecting data you can drown in oceans of data and you can look at all those rubrics and sometimes you can forget what it is that youre trying to do with all that data so I think the questions are important because um sometimes they bring us back from the labyrinth of data

***Can you give any examples of instances in which the type of question you wanted answered influenced the type of data you gathered?***

Susan Ouelette: If I am predominantly interested in looking at skills the kind of question I might ask uh the question Im framing when Im preparing my rubric might be something along the lines of uh is the student able to identify an argument? Are they able to um make judgements about evidence? Can they create a counter argument? Whereas with content then thats a very different kind of knowledge and so in that case it would be more important for them to understand say for instance in the case of a primary document um whos creating it? What is the background of that creation? Are there any political economic social um ethnic reason why the person creating the document would frame it in a particular way? You can still look at things like argument and evidence but youre going to look at them very differently If youre assessing for skills as opposed to content and theyre not mutually exclusive you can really look at them together but certainly youre going to frame your questions slightly differently I think

Marc Nicholas: So one of the things I tell my faculty in faculty development workshops are um when you want to ask a question of uh performance right when youre asking that fundamental question did students learn? so youre going to resort to more direct forms of assessment where youre looking at something that is performative something that is observable within a given space and something that is assessable as well um whereas if youre asking as a result of that process if you determine that students did not learn or um then youre going to ask the question why they did not learn? And I think thats when youre going to resort to the indirect forms of assessment which tend to be a little bit more qualitative in their approaches where you could think about focus group discussions you could think about surveys uh post-semester surveys you could do a post-capstone survey where youre asking these questions and asking students what do you think went wrong you know how what do you think we could have done better? Why do you think this did not work for you? So that leads to more indirect forms of assessment because it doesnt tell you where the students learned but it can answer questions as to why

***Can you give any examples of instances in which particularly good or poor planning influenced the effectiveness of your assessment efforts?***

Elaine Beilin: I can remember one very instructive moment this was very early on in the English departments attempt to find a good assessment and this was a very painful experience so I think there were three or four of us on the assessment committee and one of the things I take responsibility because Im the person who kept saying we dont have to reinvent the wheel here there was so much research about assessment and so many other institutions have done assessment all of us should well go out do research well look at websites well you know find out all these different systems So we did and we all got assigned to our research and we ended up being very impressed by a system that was done at a large Midwestern university It was complicated but we thought wow they really ask great questions And I think what happened was the three or four of us who are spending our time looking at all these different assessment possibilities and thinking about what would suit us we got carried away by our own enthusiasm or all these great questions and apparently interesting results So we you know we adapted it and brought to the whole department what I now realize was an excessively complicated and horrendous way of doing assessment and when we brought it to the department the department took one look at it and said were never going to do this Ever And I was I was the department chair for ten years so I was really responsible so I felt this is really bad but the more I thought about it the more I realized the wisdom of the department was right and we were going to get ourselves into the most picky labor-intensive kind of assessment imaginable and I think it probably worked for that big Midwest university because they actually had a huge department and many students so they could probably divide up the work and it probably wouldnt have been so onerous for them We have seventeen tenure-track people in the English department at Framingham State so we needed to home-grow something that was much better-suited for us So after I got home and licked my wounds I realized I just learned something really important That you have to really adjust to your size and who youre working with and you cant just come to the department and say Look at this really great idea were all enthusiastic about on the assessment committee What you have to do first of all is you have to start at the beginning and as I said starting out you really have to go around and talk to people and figure out what people like to do and how that sort of thing can work for the assessment So I think what we ended up doing and its interesting because we often end up doing this sort of thing at Framingham State Ive been involved in a number of other campus-wide projects is we realize at some point that we do have to home-grow

Marc Nicholas: I guess the conditions under which you encounter such problems from my vantage point are sometimes I may inherit an assessment plan from a previous director of assessment that may not have put that much thought into it and so youre encountering uh or trying to implement a plan that leads to a little bit of frustration and futility because youre working So uh sometimes when you do inherit such a plan then you know youre still stuck under conditions that you have to develop sufficient momentum to go ahead and change One such example that I encountered was that uh and this may not have been the result of the plan itself but of the way the curriculum was set up we had identified oral communication as an important skill of gen ed that could be assessed in certain courses um so when I was charged to assess that objective I looked at the curriculum and I looked at the number of courses that the university that were being offered that were linked to this particular objective and what we found was that there were about four or five courses that were offered from the communications department um that were identified with those objectives so when were thinking of trying to do institutional assessment its tied to one particular department and so therefore we had no need to pursue that at that point in time other than to stall that you know prior to – engaging that research that assessment project um to rethink how we offered that and to rethink how we coded our courses with that particular objective and then to also ask ourselves is this objective sufficiently embedded in the entire curriculum for us to claim that it is an institutional objective if it is actually coming out of one department in the university so that was I would say a good example of planning something you know within a plan without giving thought to uh the infrastructure or the curriculum or the conditions that can facilitate the efficiency of assessing that particular objective at that given point in time