Assessment Benefits & Barriers

Shared Experiences with the Benefits of Assessment

***What are the benefits of assessment?***

Regina Doherty: So I think from a program perspective the benefits of assessment are that it really helps to see what the long term outcome of not only a course but a curriculum all linked together are So if we do a better job of assessment we can find out where our gaps are and where we re doing really well and where we need to work on and help our students know what their gaps are as well for their learning   
  
Laura Saunders: The biggest benefit is that we can continue to improve our program Without assessment we don t really know how we re doing and you can take this to a really personal level There are plenty of times where I ve been teaching a course and I m getting this sense that things are going really well or maybe that they re not but either way it s just based on my intuition of how I see people reacting in the class or what I see on discussion boards Until I do something like a midpoint check in or look at my course evaluations or something like that I don t really know And there are definitely times that I ve been surprised Where I ve kind of got this general feeling that things were either going really well or not so well and then found out that by and large the students felt differently And the problem is we re going to be constantly making decisions based on those feelings But when we have actual data we can base our decisions on that data and we can see where there are gaps and we can see when we think we re doing all of this work to achieve this particular outcome so we think we must be doing it right? Students must be leaving with these particular skills and competencies But when we actually assess we can see if that s true or not Or even yes maybe the majority of students are achieving this outcome but we still have this gap of 20% 15% whoever it might be and then we can start thinking about how do we close that gap? How do we keep improving?   
  
Chris Cratsley: Well assessment if it s done really thoroughly think of it as closing the loop if you start out in an assessment process and can actually find a way to make sense of the data and you find a way to actually make recommendations on your program based on that and then implement those recommendations it can have a profound effect on the way we teach and on way our students learn Because at the end of the day when I reach out to individual programs on my campus and try to get them to engage with this process I think that there are two things I tell them: On the one hand I say This is what you do every day Part of what you do as a teacher is you say You know what? this didn t work this or this didn t work I m going to try it different next time If we are at all reflective and I think most of us are about our craft we re constantly doing this and what this is allowing us to do is to be a little bit more systematic about it to try to find a way to really know whether something went well or didn t go well; What do our students really succeed with and what don t they succeed with and how can we change things to improve? And I think the other advantage is that it offers that very natural and normal process of assessing our own teaching It invites in the whole community of our colleagues either at our department level or even at the whole institutional level to say Help me and let s help each other and let s figure out what our students are struggling with and let s use that information that we get to come up with ways together to make improvements And that s unfortunately something that doesn t happen enough We operate so much within our own silos and that can be a departmental silo sometimes or we re not sharing with other departments some of our best practices and exciting things that we re doing and trying but it can also happen on an individual level where we have something individually we have latched onto We think it just works great with our students and we re not taking the time to reach out and talk to our colleagues and say oh turns out you don t do that? you might want to try it and vice versa Sometimes there s something we re struggling with mightily and we don t have the opportunity or time to say to somebody else what do you do about this? How do you deal with this problem? Sometimes we do but this really brings it to the front and allows us to say What is it that we want our students to know? How is it that we can figure out whether they re doing a good job at this and whether they are really learning these things that we want them to learn? And then with that information how can we help each other to make sure that they can learn these things and that we can reach these learning goals and outcomes for them?

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

Regina Doherty: One of the reasons we gather data is to ensure that we have the evidence to show that our students have actually learned not only been taught but that they re learning and that they are understanding and doing so that they have all the pieces that they need for professional practice So that s really the question that we ask: What are the skills that an entry level occupational therapist needs and how do we ensure that our students have those skills? How do we have them show us those skills before they leave us so that we know they have a cheap them and that they don t end up in the clinic or the treatment arena and say "oh I didn t learn how to do that in school "? So how do we put that whole package of practice together for them? That s the question that we ask when we look at assessment across multiple courses is do all those individual skills come together to give them the skills they need to practice   
  
Laura Saunders: Right now we are fairly specifically focused on trying to figure out if students are achieving these specific program learning outcomes that we have set out for ourselves So we have one outcome related to research as I mentioned we have another one that s related to being able to communicate to different audiences using different formats and so one question that I have and I think that most of our faculty have is Are our students actually achieving these outcomes? So by the time they leave are they actually able to communicate effectively to different audiences? Are they able to find and apply research? And I think that in addition to knowing whether or not they can do that at the end of the program there s also some interest to knowing to what extent the program contributed to their being able to do that Because it s certainly possible that students are going to come in having certain skills and especially when we re talking about broad cross disciplinary skills like communication we could have people who are coming from theater backgrounds or marketing backgrounds or things like that where they have definitely learned how to talk to people or how to give a presentation So one of the things that I m interested in learning is what is our program specifically contributing to their development in those skills?  
  
Chris Cratsley: I think there are a lot of tangential questions you can ask as well because at the end of the day if they re not learning it you still need to know why So it s that second question of why? it s probably always equally as important in the way you ask that can be very different It may have to do with how engaged they are but it also may have to do with the nature of the instruction as well

***Tell us a story of how the assessment process has improved how students in your department learn***

Richard Voos: One example of how the assessment process has improved how our students learn at Simmons and example from economics comes to mind and I m not in economist right so let me see if I can get this right so essentially the instructor was looking at two different sets of theories to explain economic phenomenon and they re both highly theoretical and what he learned through the assessment process was that the order of instruction wasn t working It was leaving the students confused about the differences between the two theories rather than clarify and help them compare and contrast if you well and so the change that he made was really an instruction he changed the order of the material in the course so that the students could get a firm grounding in each of them without confusing one for the other   
  
Tracey Riley: We found a few years ago through assessment that that our accounting students written communication skills were not where we wanted them to be I did a lot of research on best practices and teaching writing and I talk to people across the University and our English department and our center for learning and academic success and I discovered something called writing across the curriculum and this was started in the 1980s And it shows that students will learn to write within their discipline are better writers of that discipline and every discipline has a different conventions of writing So we decided to put writing throughout the entire accounting curriculum and every single course has at least one writing assignment and all the professors all know different parts of writing to teach so maybe one professor can focus audience awareness maybe another professor understands how to how to write a memo or letter what audit workpapers look like and so collectively though we re not English teachers were not specialists in writing we are able to give our students a different learning experience and help them learn to write in an environment in which they re going to write when they graduate

***How has assessment helped you make decisions?***

Laura Saunders: We have made a number of decisions based on our assessment data So one of the things we did was to realize this foundations course We realized that this foundations course wasn t meeting The goals that we wanted it to me based on data that we gathered student feedback and things like that so we are still in the process we are continuing to revise it but but we made the decision that this course had to be substantially revised and we ve been working through that Another decision that we ve made is that we recognize through doing gathering some assessment data different kinds of surveys and also from curriculum mapping which is not direct assessment but it helped us to see that there was one program learning outcome in particular that we weren t addressing as well as we needed to And so there was a real gap in terms of what we were saying we expected students to be able to do when they left and how much we were sort of teaching and reinforcing that throughout the program so this has kind of lead us to and we re still in the process of how we re going to address this but we are in the middle of meeting and trying to figure out where can we tie this into existing courses what assignments can we develop what support can we offer in existing courses and to what extent might we need to think about adding in a new course so that we can really achieve this one particular outcome where we are seeing a gap   
  
Tracy Brudvig: I think that there s been some evidence in the assessment you know the data was saying you ve got to do something different either be clear or you have to take a different approach or you have to spend more time or you have to make it more active and that s just when students aren t getting it

***Why is assessment worth the investment of your time and energy?***

Regina Doherty: It s worth my time and energy as program leadership to ensure that the outcomes are there so that I don t have a student at the end of a three year program where a clinical site says to me "I don t know they don t really have the competency " To me that would be a tragedy to have a student go through all their academic work and not be to demonstrate the competencies they needed and I ve seen that happen in other programs one people don t attend to assessment across a curriculum It s very easy to have strengths and weaknesses as a student it s a natural thing but ensuring that everyone has the competencies they need is where assessments have helped ensure that that happens   
  
Richard Voos: The time and energy that I put in assessment as well as the time and energy my colleagues do right so there s a faculty led process across Simmons it comes right back to where I started and that it comes back to student learning that s what we are here for that s what our mission is is to develop our students lifelong learning skills their ability at Simmons we talk always about John Simmons our founder and his desire to enable our students to have an independent livelihood young women right this was his idea in 1870 to have an independent livelihood and so it always to me comes back to the question of what are we doing to give our students again the skills knowledge and affect that they ll need and not just in their first job but 10 years out and that s what we can come back to that s one of the really hard things we can measure when we think about assessment because it s not just about walking across the stage it is about a lifelong experiences   
  
Laura Saunders: It s worth it for a lot of reasons I think the most important reason as I said before is that it allows us to keep improving it s too easy to stagnate I m sure this is true in any job but in particular teaching your teaching the same course is typically over and over again And it s definitely easy to kind of fall into a pattern of doing things the same way over and over especially if you feel like they re working OK but one of the things we ve been trying as a faculty to recognize is that there s always room for improvement and we re really trying to put a positive spin on it but to look at it as it doesn t necessarily mean that we re not doing a good job but there s always a possibility of doing better So I think one of the biggest reasons why assessment is important is that it really allows us to keep pushing the bar a little bit further