



Getting Faculty on Board: Four Suggestions

January 2020

Barbara Walvoord

Assessment leaders may be tasked with “Getting Faculty on Board,” but there is a better way to frame it. Fulcher and Prendergast (2019) conclude, “All else considered, learning improvement does not happen without faculty inspiration and collaboration” (p. 170). Here are four suggestions for fostering faculty inspiration and collaboration.

Suggestion #1: Change the “faculty resistance” framework.

Sociologist Andrew Hargreaves (1988) asked why teachers resist changing the dominant lecture mode. Most current theories, he said, are “psychologistic,” blaming teachers’ personal qualities or lack of competence. Proposed remedies are better selection of teachers and better teacher training. But Hargreaves counters:

The framework I want to propose rests upon a regard for the importance of the active, interpreting self in social interaction...In this view, teachers...are people striving for purpose and meaning in circumstances that are usually much less than ideal and which call for constant adjustment, adaptation, and redefinition. Once we adopt this view...our starting question is no longer why does he/she fail to do X, but why does he/she do Y...how teachers manage to cope with, adapt to and reconstruct their circumstances...what they achieve, not what they fail to achieve (p. 216).

An assessment leader with this sociological approach becomes a listener, a consultant, and a resource, rather than an enforcer of mandates, trying to get recalcitrant faculty “on board” with someone else’s plan.

Suggestion 2: Level with faculty about the assessment mandate and the constraints they face.

When I was invited to lead assessment workshops at institutions other than my own, the leaders sometimes asked me not to talk about the mandate, but only about assessment as a good thing in itself. But failing to level with faculty about the mandate is to disrespect their ability to deal with things as they are. Instead, talk candidly about the national accreditation structures and power relationships, what the institution is being asked to do, and what the consequences are of not doing it.

Acknowledge, as well, that faculty these days face circumstances, as Hargreaves says, “much less than ideal.” Further, acknowledge that despotic regimes always try hard to control education, to enforce their standards and their accountability. Anytime faculty get a mandate that affects how students are taught and tested, faculty SHOULD be

Viewpoint

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

skeptical and wary. But ask faculty to examine what this assessment mandate actually IS, and what it is NOT, and how they can turn this mandate into something good for themselves and their students.

Suggestion #3: Find the movements on your campus, and offer to help them use assessment for their movement.

Across my career, movements like civil rights, women's rights, and writing across the curriculum have led to my own, and other faculty members' inspiration and collaboration. My and my colleagues' participation in these movements powerfully changed our teaching and our relationships with students. These movements arose not from a mandate, but from peoples' conviction that what had been acceptable was now unacceptable. Parker Palmer (2017) calls this the "Rosa Parks decision" (pp. 174-176). Movements at their best are voluntary, passionate, and egalitarian. They empower people and foster community. Assessment, on the other hand, may appear to faculty not as a passion-driven voluntary act, but as a mandate. To capture the energy and passion of a movement, find the movements on your campus and offer to help them.

Helping movements requires doing what Fulcher and Prendergast (2019) advise for assessment leaders: changing from an assessment-focused enterprise which has improvement merely as a final add-on, to a learning-improvement-focused enterprise, which starts with what people most care about—the things about which people form movements—and uses assessment as a tool for that enterprise.

So on your campus, find the initiatives driven by faculty passion—perhaps in a department or college, teaching-learning center, chaplain's office, student group, the diversity center, women's studies program, or the faculty senate. Offer to help these movements, using the resources and expertise you have as an assessment leader.

Suggestion 4: Create movement within your assessment mandate.

When you meet with faculty about assessment, build in the qualities that characterize movements: a sense that the status quo is unacceptable, a voluntary and passionate commitment, and a community that is egalitarian and empowering.

Banta, Ewell, and Cogswell (2016) summarize evidence that, while faculty may start assessment in response to a mandate, their continuing engagement in assessment depends on their being able to use it for their own purposes. Start a faculty workshop, not with a PowerPoint about assessment, but by asking faculty members what they would like to change about learning in their classrooms. Help them examine student work, student characteristics, and their own actions. Guide them to literature about their issues. Support them in planning for change, and offer the resources they need. Help them use assessment to document their results.

For ideas and examples about how to structure faculty communities that are passionate, egalitarian, and empowering, look in the literature for what are variously called faculty learning communities, communities of practice, communities of transformation, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.

Faculty members these days face many constraints and frustrations. They resist "getting on board" for someone else's agenda. But people are still people, trying, as Hargreaves says, to

Movements at their best are voluntary, passionate, and egalitarian. Assessment, on the other hand, may appear to faculty not as a passion-driven voluntary act, but as a mandate. To capture the energy and passion of a movement, find the movements on your campus and offer to help them.

create a sense of self and to realize goals; capable of passion, commitment, and community; capable of taking action to achieve their purposes. By taking the sociological stance, leveling with faculty about the assessment mandate, working with the movements already on campus, and infusing assessment activities with the qualities of movements, assessment leaders can encourage faculty inspiration and collaboration, using assessment as a tool for student learning.

References

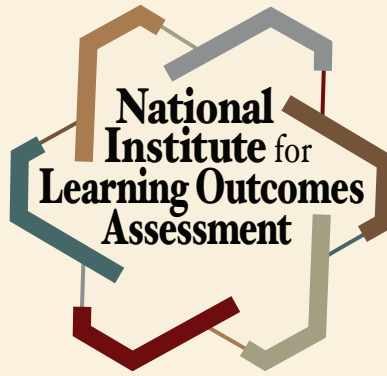
Banta, T. W., Ewell, P. T., & Cogswell, C. A. (2016). *Tracing assessment practice as reflected in assessment update* (NILOA Occasional Paper No. 28). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

Fulcher, K. H., & Prendergast, C. O. (2019). Lots of assessment, little improvement? How to fix a broken system. In S. P. Hundley & S. Kahn (Eds.), *Trends in assessment: Ideas, opportunities, and issues in higher education* (pp. 155-174). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Hargreaves, A. (1988). Teaching quality: A sociological analysis. *Curriculum Studies*, 20, 211-31.

Palmer, P. J. (2017). *The courage to teach, 20th anniversary edition*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

By taking the sociological stance, leveling with faculty about the assessment mandate, working with the movements already on campus, and infusing assessment activities with the qualities of movements, assessment leaders can encourage faculty inspiration and collaboration.



Please Cite As:

Walvoord, B. (2020, January). *Getting faculty on board: Four suggestions*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

Follow us on social media:



@NILOA_web



@LearningOutcomesAssessment

Sign up to receive our monthly **NILOA Newsletter** and stay up to date with our research and publications.

