

# Assessment *in* Practice

## **Assessment Strategies: A Practical Model for a Peer Facilitated Assessment Cycle to Demonstrate Continuous Improvement**

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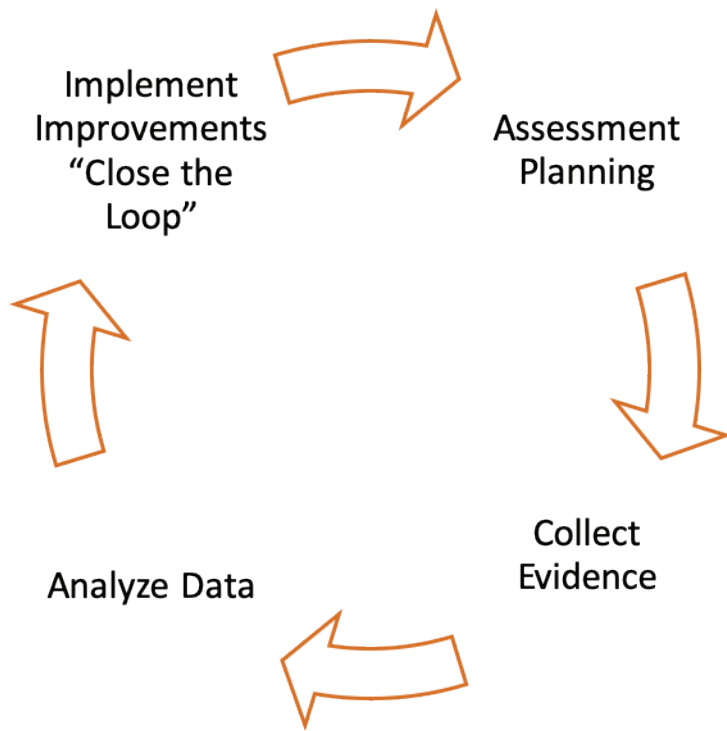
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This Assessment in Practice discusses lessons learned during the implementation of an initial assessment cycle at the New Mexico (NM) Campus of the University of Phoenix.

Campus administrators recognized the key to successful implementation of this initial assessment cycle process was to ensure engagement and buy-in from the faculty members who would be teaching the classes selected to be assessed, an observation echoed in numerous research (Reneau & Howse 2019; Harrison & Braxton 2018; Jankowski, 2017; Perez, McShannon, and Hynes 2012; Chen, Lattuca & Hamilton 2008). The University provided an overall assessment plan, including lists of the classes being assessed for the academic year. It was then left up to the individual campus locations to select a peer facilitator, also known as an Assessment Coordinator (AC), to partner with campus administration in order to introduce this standardized process, conduct initial training for faculty members, and secure faculty engagement to support the new assessment process.

### **THE ASSESSMENT CYCLE**

The assessment cycle used was based upon qualitative research principles first identified by Lincoln & Guba (1985) and involved identifying a problem, gathering data, analyzing and interpreting the data, formulating actions to solve the problem suggested by data analysis, implementing those actions, and evaluating the results. When discussing this process with faculty members, the process was condensed into four basic steps as illustrated on the next page in Figure 1.



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Figure 1. University of Phoenix Assessment Cycle

To meet the University requirement of assessing selected classes, the NM Campus chose an AC from existing faculty members. The AC, who instructed one of the classes in the School of Business to be assessed, had several duties including: introducing the assessment cycle and discussing the rationale behind its adoption during department and faculty meetings; working with selected faculty members teaching the assessed classes in a series of norming, calibration, and data analysis meetings; and conducting a department level analysis on aggregated data after the assessment period was over with campus administration and faculty members to create improvement plans in order to close the assessment loop which was uploaded to the University provided database. Such peer interaction allows for a “...focus on improvement and compliance” (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2016, p. 6), and helps demonstrate the organization’s commitment to continuous improvement.

## **TRAINING FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

Several meetings were held between campus administration and the AC to discuss the numerous requirements in the assessment training, as it had to occur at the beginning of the academic year during scheduled faculty or department meetings. Topics in the initial faculty training focused on explaining the assessment cycle and discussing the use of grading rubrics, as the selected signature assignments included an embedded rubric to be used by all instructors. The first training for all faculty members occurred at the Fall General Faculty Meeting. After providing an overview of the assessment process and the new requirements, the AC formed the faculty into teams of 3-6 members and gave out a written student assignment to read and score with a provided rubric. After each team member finished, they shared with the rest of the team their thinking on how they scored the assignment. The team then examined cohesion or variance

among the scores and evaluated the rubric used in order to give feedback as to clarity and usefulness in helping score the assignment. Since each course contains objectives upon which the rubric is based, this instructor feedback was especially useful to ensure a focused rubric less open to interpretation as to what competencies the student is demonstrating through the assignment.

A second meeting on norming and calibration took place after the release of the list of courses selected by the University to be assessed. This time the AC met with only the instructors whose courses had been selected for assessment. These faculty members reviewed the signature assignment within the course curriculum selected by the University for evaluation and the embedded grading rubric. Since all the invited instructors had taught this class previously, each had a self-designed rubric they customarily used. The AC discussed with faculty members the importance of scoring with the embedded rubric to ensure reliability and validity of data collected. The greatest amount of discussion centered around the rubric categories and instructor interpretations of the elements for a “not proficient” paper, versus a “proficient” paper, an “approaching proficiency” paper or “exceeding proficiency” paper.

Since students submitted their papers electronically, all data collected regarding the score and the comments on the embedded rubric automatically uploaded to the institution’s assessment data site. This ensured the faculty member had no additional administrative tasks in order to collect required data. They had only to grade the assignment with the embedded rubric and post grades to their students as they always did. Having this sort of automatic upload to the assessment data collection site is an important aspect to ensure uniform collection of all required data.

The third meeting, involving the faculty members who taught the assessed classes, occurred at the end of the academic year, after the classes had been taught and scored and the results were available for students at individual campus locations and across the University. The data were aggregated by Campus level, College or School level, and University level. The Campus level results allowed faculty members who taught this course see how their students compared to all students throughout the University with respect to mastery of course objectives on the signature assignment. This information provided campus administrators with topic areas for future instructor trainings and faculty meetings. At the Spring Faculty Meeting, the AC shared the Campus level data with all faculty members, so they could gain a better understanding of the assessment cycle results.

College and School level results provided information on strategic control and evaluation, consistency of course objectives and recommendations for new signature assessments in the future. University level results allowed comparison of campus locations as well as suggestions for improvement over the next academic year cycle. Aggregating data in this fashion allowed the University to demonstrate local campus instructors were participating in the continuous improvement cycle required by HLC Criterion 4B.

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## LESSONS LEARNED

The NM Campus learned several lessons during the first implementation cycle of this new process. First, faculty members were much more receptive to a peer AC leading this effort instead of a member of campus administration. A peer faculty member serving as an assessment coordinator promoted more faculty engagement and involvement. The NM Campus wanted faculty members to understand and engage with the assessment process and feedback received at the Spring Faculty meeting revealed instructors believed having a peer as AC created a willingness to ask questions making faculty members more confident about conducting assessment. Next, realizing all faculty members needed to be aware of a consistent process for assessment early in the academic year was an effective way to socialize everyone to the new process, but identifying those faculty members who would be instructors in the first assessed classes and providing extra training for them was very important to create a better understanding of responsibilities related to the organization's mission and a feeling of satisfaction in taking part in the assessment process, which, according to Troy (2013), is the key to creating employee engagement. Finally, the institution must have a dedicated, centralized data storage system to archive data. This allows for data comparisons across Colleges and Schools, academic years, individual instructors, departments, and campus locations.

As each assessment cycle is completed and this databank grows, more valuable information about assessment is available with which to begin the next cycle of continuous improvement.

## FINAL COMMENTS

Assessment is of paramount importance in higher education. There will remain a constant need to improve curriculum, assess learning, and undertake systematic work to ensure that any given institution and their students are progressing together. The method of assessment presented here is but one solution to the complex problem of ensuring assessment is completed accurately and thoroughly using adjunct faculty members in a mixed delivery method learning environment spread geographically, as well.

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- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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