Assessing Assessment: Successes, Failures, and the Future

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Part I

Origins and What’s Been Accomplished

Origins of the Assessment Movement Almost Thirty Years Ago

- Undergraduate Reform Reports of 1985-86
- Internal Stimulus: Call for More Coherent Teaching/Learning Approaches and Information for Improvement
- External Stimulus: Stakeholder Demands for Information on “Return on Investment”
- Tensions in Motive and Message Ever Since

Why Didn’t Assessment Go Away?

- Pressure to Produce Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes Never Let Up
- By Early 1990s, Accreditors Replace States as Primary External Stimulus to Get Started
- Intermittent Federal Interest in Assessment as an Element of National Accountability
- But Resulting Faculty Ambivalence About a Process Seen as “External” and “Administrative”

Looking Back: What’s Been Accomplished?

- Assessment Is for the Most Part Perceived as Inevitable and Legitimate
- Vast Majority of Institutions Have Statements of Learning Outcomes (General and Programmatic) and Most are “Doing Assessment”
- A “Semi-Profession” of Folks Involved in Assessment
- Steadily Growing Sophistication with Respect to Methods of Gathering Evidence

Looking Back: What Hasn’t Happened?

- Authentic Integration of Assessment into Faculty Cultures and Behaviors
- Assessment Activities Still Largely “Added On” to the Curriculum Instead of Being Embedded In It
- Systematic and Widespread Use of Assessment Results for Institutional and Curricular Improvement
- Proactive and Sincere Institutional Engagement with Accrediting Organizations Around Topics of Assessment
Exercise #1: Looking Back at Assessment at Your Institution

- What Have Been the Two or Three Biggest Successes for Assessment at Your Institution?
- What Have Been the Two or Three Biggest Challenges or Disappointments?

Part II
Addressing Common Challenges

Major Challenges
- Faculty Involvement
- Consistent Support from Top Leadership
- Use of Results in Decision-making
- Lack of Time and Burnout
- Organizational Incentives and Communication
- Keeping Assessment Manageable

Involving Faculty
- Start with the Curriculum
- Work on Real Problems Somebody Has
- Language of Inquiry and Scholarship
- Colleagues Learn from Colleagues
- Remember You Won't Convert Everybody

Top Leadership
- Don't Change the Rules
- Transparent Communication and Decision Processes
- “Packaging” Decisions Around Evidence
- Board’s Fiduciary Responsibility for Institutional Good Standing and Quality of Academic Product

Using Assessment Results
- Use Involves More than Just “Decision-Making”
- Establish Action Expectations Before You Start Assessing
- Avoid the “Perfect Data Fallacy”
- Create Opportunities for Collective Deliberation and Reflection About Results
- Map Out Specific Opportunities for Use in the Decision Cycle
Lack of Time and Burnout

- Don’t Try to Do Everything at Once
- Start Small with a Demonstration of the Complete Assessment Cycle
- Stop Doing Things when you Add New Things
- Develop and Implement a “Succession Plan”

Organization and Communication Issues

- Package Results Around Problems
- Don’t Do a “Data Dump”…Establish a “Data Dialogue” Instead
- Disaggregate
- Emphasize Positive (and Collective) Rewards; Avoid “Gotcha”
- Don’t Hold People Responsible for Things They Can’t Control

Keeping Assessment Manageable

- Harness Existing Opportunities for Assessment Instead of Creating New Ones
- Don’t Try to Measure Everything that Moves
- Sample Whenever You Can
- Drop Things If You Don’t Use Them

Concluding Thoughts

- The Central Tension of “Accountability vs. Improvement” Is Still with Us After Almost 30 Years…and We Have to be Proactive in Meeting It
- Assessment Will Inexorably Become More Embedded and Authentic—and Technology will Help this Progression in Multiple Ways
- Assessment Will Hopefully Link with Standards and the Scholarship of Teaching
- We Will Probably be Back to These Issues 30 Years from Now!