



Assessing Assessment: Successes, Failures, and the Future

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Origins of the Assessment Movement More than Twenty-Five 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
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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: Institutional

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





Major Challenges: Technical

- Truly Authentic Instruments and Evidence-Gathering Techniques
- Benchmarking Against External Standards
- Student Motivation and Involvement
- Managing the Assessment Process





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





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”





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





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





New and More Authentic Assessment

- Electronic Portfolios
- Embedded Examination Questions and Associated Rubrics
- Behavioral Inventories
- Complex Simulations and Assignments
- Authentic Large-Scale Assessments (e.g. RAND/CAE CLA)





Working With Accreditors

- Recent Changes in Regional Accreditation
- Harness the Process for Your Own Ends
- Emphasize “Direct” Evidence of Student Academic Achievement
- Be Proactive: Don’t Be Afraid to Ask
- Don’t Stop When Your Done





External Benchmarking

- Look First at Existing External Examinations (e.g. Licensure)
- Periodic Validation of Local Assessments with National Instruments
- Institutional Partnerships or Consortia
- Stakeholders as External Examiners (or as Partners in Designing Assessments)





Student Motivation and Involvement

- Make It Count
- Transcript Individual Results
- Share Individual Results for Diagnostic Purposes
- Share Collective Results and Actions Taken in Response
- Involve Students in Interpreting Results





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





Exercise #2

Take One of Your Original Challenges and List 2-3 Concrete Ways You Might Attack It When You Get Back Home...





Ten Suggestions for More Successful Assessment

1. Start with important questions.
2. Focus on things you can improve.
3. Plan, but be flexible and willing to adapt as you learn.
4. Start small.
5. Build in success from the start.
6. Get students, faculty, and others actively involved.
7. Set limits on time and effort you'll invest.
8. Collaborate with others who Share your concerns.
9. Remember that assessment may be new to many of your students and colleagues.
10. Enjoy experimentation and risk-taking, not just success.





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!

