

# **Some Things Just Can't Be Measured: Busting Myths, Engaging Faculty, and Closing Loops**

**Presenters:**

**Amanda Brown, Professor  
Cody Reimer, Assistant Professor  
Glendalí Rodríguez, Associate Provost**

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## **Agenda**

1. Address myths and misconceptions about assessment
2. Discuss how we approach assessment from different perspectives: Course-level through the Institutional-level
3. Share successes and learning experiences in communicating assessment data and assessment itself

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## Justin's Assessment Blues

Justin is a new adjunct teaching introductory Public Speaking, a required general education course. The job market is tight, and he really needs this job. During a department meeting, he learns that he will need to choose one of his 5 sections for departmental assessment. Justin's first thought is "Crap...another thing to add to my list. I am already drowning in grading and I don't have time to re-grade one of the speeches. This is dumb. I already grade the speech, so why do I need to do the assessment. Can't I just show them my grades...?"

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## Assessment Myths and Misconceptions

- Assessment is the same as grading.
- Assessment requires a TON of extra work.

## Kim's Plan

After the meeting, Justin and another adjunct, Kim, lament their assessment assignments. Kim tells Justin "I don't know why we do this. We submit the forms every year and never hear anything ever again. They just collect the numbers because administration makes them." Justin responds "This is so dumb that we're quantifying something so subjective. Numbers can't capture what we do. Plus, my classes suck this semester. I'm going to look like I don't know what I'm doing." Kim says, "I know. I always add a bit to my scores. I don't want to get fired or have the chair poking her nose in my class. It's all too Big Brother for me. They just want to everyone's class to be the same. They don't value creativity here at all." Justin nods in agreement at Kim's plan.

## Assessment Myths and Misconceptions

- Assessment is always quantitative.
- The Humanities and Social Sciences cannot (and should not) be measured.
- Assessment requires mass standardization.
- Assessment data are used for evaluative or punitive purposes.
- Assessment data are used to make hiring decisions.
- Assessment data do not improve teaching.
- Assessment data are not used, rendering assessment pointless.

## Course Level Challenges (Communication Studies)

- Lack of consistent curriculum
- Heavy reliance on adjunct faculty
- Norming needed on assessment instrument
- Volunteer assessment coordinator

## Course Level: Growth (Communication Studies)

- Not everyone has to be on board. Focus on the cooperative ones to build a culture of assessment.
- Get your leadership on board. Need a little bit of top down and support.
- Emphasize how this can be integrated into their existing work load.
- Present data as an aggregate.

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## Course Level: Growth (Communication Studies)

- Approach from a perspective of improvement of the course and the process.
- Give instructors freedom, but norm to ensure consistency.
- Use the quantitative data as a jumping off point for conversation and reflection.
- Close the loop!

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## Composition Program

### Rhetoric & Composition as a discipline

- A long history of outsiders questioning students' ability to write has made rhetcomp keenly aware of the need for assessment to defend our work and demonstrate our value. However, not everyone who teaches English or Writing courses has a rhetcomp background . . . and other disciplines have historically seen rhetcomp as inferior, service-based, abandoning the liberal arts tradition, and worse. Of course none of these perceptions are fair or accurate.

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## Course Level - Cody

Charge: "Don't we want to know what our students are learning!?"

- Writing instructors value reflection and recursion from our students. What about from our pedagogy?
- Programs need actionable data to reflect and act on to improve student learning.
- Assessment gives programs the data to understand how well our students are learning and what interventions we might explore.

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## Course Level - Cody

Rejoinder: "We only need to do it every 10 years for accreditation."

- Ten-year lulls can breed complacency.
- Accrediting body expects us to be doing it.
- They want us to get *and act on* data!
- Assessment doesn't work in fits and starts.

## Course Level - Cody

Charge: "Assess yourselves lest ye be assessed!"

- Top-down vs. Bottom-up
- Mandated vs. Voluntary
- Outsider vs. Insider
- Administrative vs. Programmatic

Keep it inhouse, keep it grounded in disciplinary and departmental values.

## Course Level - Cody

Rejoinder: "Ain't nobody got time for that!"

- Faculty teach 4/4; Adjunct/IAS up to 5/5
- Courses capped at 25 (Basic Writing at 15)
- $5 \times 25 = 125$ , yet National Council for Teachers of English says
- No more than 20 per course, 15 for basic, 60 per semester
  - Excerpt from item 11, NCTE Position Statement of *Principles and Standards of Postsecondary Teaching of Writing*, 2015
- Service "dropped" to compensate for load

## Course Level - Cody

Charge: "It needn't be a time sink."

Alternately: "Make time."

- Assessment shouldn't take inordinate amounts of time, and it won't so long as it's done well and routinely.
- Faculty and Adjuncts/IAS are contractually obligated to participate in assessment.
- What we learn from assessment should be used to make everyone's teaching better, their work easier.



## Course Level - Cody

### Rejoinder: "But my academic freedom!"

- There are bigger threats to academic freedom than endeavoring to discern what our students are learning.
- Academic freedom is the nuclear option in these types of arguments. Press the button too often: risk nuclear winter.
- We aren't proposing canned courses, single-syllabus approaches, or required textbooks.
- Programs need consistency. Assessment is one of the best means to support and build that consistency.



## Course Level - Cody

### Charge: "This isn't the Eye of Sauron."

Fear	Aim
Punitive	Actionable
Targeted	Holistic
Disruptive	Streamlined
Invasive	Supportive
Panoptic	Liberating



## Course Level - Cody

### Department Context

- Assessment previously done in fits and starts.
- Over two dozen instructors with varying backgrounds.
- Pushback and lack of buy-in with past efforts.
- Previous Director piloted program AY16-17 w/ support.
  - Funds from Dean for disciplinary expert and pilot group
- I took over AY17-18 and strove to streamline & cultivate.
  - Reduce outcomes assessed, rate holistically

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## Course Level - Cody

### Our Assessment Method

- Portfolios: 2 revised assignments, 1 standardized reflection
- Two random portfolios per section of the 3 comp courses
- Blindly rated twice by faculty and adjunct/IAS volunteers
- Raters trained and normed for inter-rater reliability
- Rated against selected course's Student Learning Outcomes
- Rated on 4-pt Likert scale where:
  - (0 = No Evidence; 1 = Below Expectations; 2 = Meets Expectations; 3 = Exceeds Expectations)

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## Institutional-level Assessment

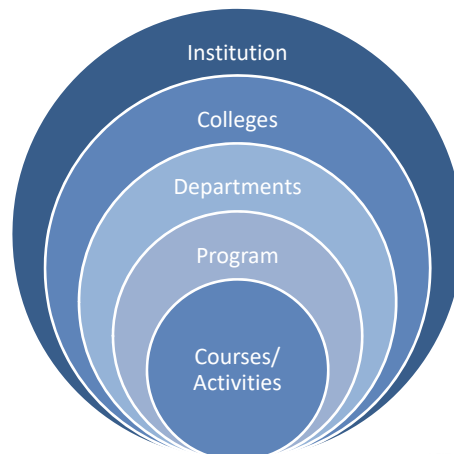
- Assessment for compliance vs. assessment for continuous improvement
- What is the culture at your institution?

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## Institutional System

- Assessment initiatives: working as a system



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## Institutional System

- Assessment initiatives: working as a system

Courses/  
Activities

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## Institutional System

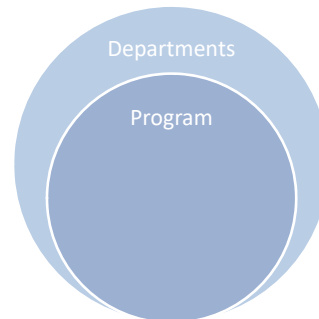
- Myth: Course or activity-level assessment is instructor-specific and doesn't connect to the broader campus.
- Scenario: Adjunct instructors vary term by term – how can they contribute to a sustained assessment plan?
- Strategy: Clearly articulate assessment and continuous improvement expectations as part of every job description. Regularly disseminate the results within the department; facilitated by the unit director and/or a faculty "lead".

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## Institutional System

- Assessment initiatives: working as a system



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## Institutional System

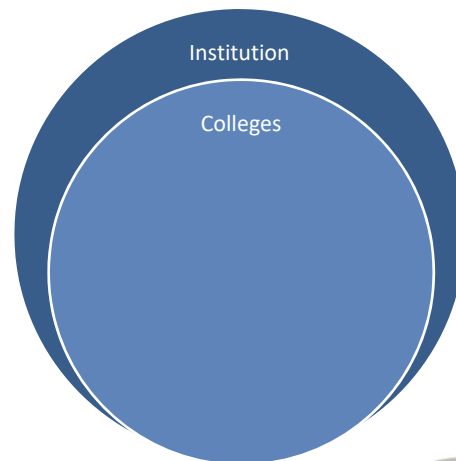
- Myth: The Program Review process doesn't result in program resource (re)allocations.
- Scenario: Often, as part of the program review process, programs align areas of improvement with a request for resources (FTE, facility renovation, etc.) to foster continuous improvement.
- Strategy: The process results in a 4 year improvement plan that requires "sign-off" demonstrating commitment to the actions identified. Difficult conversations occur early and inform the recommendations for improvement.

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## Institutional System

- Assessment initiatives: working as a system



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## Institutional-level Assessment

- Myth: Academic assessment reports are collected annually by “Administration” and not reviewed.
- Scenario: The provost has her/his own disciplinary background and there is an implied bias towards qualitative or quantitative assessment.
- Strategy: Annual feedback for the academic assessment reports is provided by a unit, outside of the academic colleges, that has credibility in evaluation. This feedback is reviewed by the Provost's office, college deans, and the academic programs.

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## Closing Nuggets of Wisdom...

- The myths of assessment run deep and there are some nuggets of truth. However, we can dispel those myths if we dialogue, clarify the intent and celebrate accomplishments.
- It's important to understand the cultural norms of your institution- how much does assessment focus on compliance versus assuring value-added activity is prioritized.
- Sustained communication - amongst faculty, instructional staff, students, and administration- is key
- The job is never "done".

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## Thank you. Questions?

Amanda Brown, Professor, Communication Studies  
[brownama@uwstout.edu](mailto:brownama@uwstout.edu)

Cody Reimer, Assistant Professor, English  
[reimerc@uwstout.edu](mailto:reimerc@uwstout.edu)

Glendali Rodriguez, Associate Provost  
[rodriguezg@uwstout.edu](mailto:rodriguezg@uwstout.edu)

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