



Assessment Leaders: Meeting Faculty Where They Are

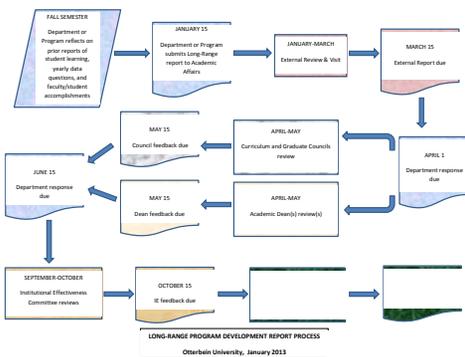
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Background

In preparation for our ten year accreditation review with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), we realized (several years out) that we had lost institutional focus on efforts to assess student learning.

- Between accreditation reviews, the university-level assessment committee had been disbanded.
- Largely due to turnover in the Academic Affairs office, a new committee was never established.
- Meanwhile, we were in the process of converting from a quarters-based to a semesters-based academic calendar, and had undertaken a wholesale curriculum revision as a result – during this time, 5 and 10-year program reviews were suspended.

The necessity of revising and redesigning program review led to a new process that included **an embedded, explicit focus on assessing student learning on an annual basis, with a cumulative review and reflection every seven years.**¹



Preparing for Accreditation Review

In 2012-13, a former Provost asked each academic department to designate an "Assessment Leader," who would commit to monthly meetings, run by the provost, devoted to professional development on assessment.

The next two years, the AVPAA ran the sessions and used them to get the new program review process up-and-running, focusing on:

- aligning department outcomes with the University Student Learning Goals²
- thinking about the appropriate level of specification for program outcomes (some departments just submitted a collection of course outcomes for program outcomes)
- collecting and analyzing assessment data³
- updates on the progress units were making with their reports; and
- demonstrations of our ePortfolio tool which houses the reports.

The range of comfort and familiarity with formal assessment across departments led to some difficulty in starting and sustaining dialogue between ALs. This format resulted in sessions that seemed to include more information transmission than dialogue-driven professional development around assessment topics.

After Accreditation Review

After the HLC visit, we had to determine how to use the AL group moving forward. With people's newfound confidence in assessing student learning, we changed the process to focus more on dialogue and professional development and less on information transmission.

- AVPAA, Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, and Academic Assessment and Accreditation Specialist work as a team to plan the AL meetings.
- Surveyed ALs and review committees to determine topics of interest/need.
- Asked departments and programs who we knew were engaged in work on those topics to lead the discussion.
- Appropriate funds each year to send a few ALs to assessment conferences (like the IUPUI Institute), with the understanding that they will be responsible for sharing what they learned at the AL meetings.

Topics for 2015-16 and 2016-17 included:

- Technical issues with data and record-keeping
- More than surveys: Additional sources of data for program assessment
- Keeping all members of the department involved
- Assessment design
- How assessment led to improved curriculum, instruction, and/or student learning
- Collecting survey data from students and alumni

Our AL success in context

Quotes from an external reviewer (HLC) and a faculty AL participant illustrate success:

"Faculty clearly feel ownership over the assessment processes and have a clear understanding of how their participation in even a single "on-the-ground" assessment measure relates to the bigger picture of decision-making about curriculum. As confirmed during the area of focus meetings, faculty have engaged in a series of extended conversations about the particular aims of their individual and departmental assessment efforts."

"In a meta-way, presenting (and discussing) at AL sessions is an opportunity for me to engage in formative assessment. By showing how our program interprets data, colleagues from other disciplines/paradigms are able to critique our approach to systematic evaluation. That feedback then becomes a catalyst for examining the tools and procedures themselves, promoting improvement for the next cycle of use."

The AL effort has been relatively successful in comparison to another similar effort on campus, "Student Success Leaders" (SSLs). An obvious difference between the groups is the lack of an imminent HLC site visit looming on the horizon in the start-up of the SSL initiative (which was begun in 2015). So, while we would like to attribute the success of the AL group as our ability to 'meet faculty where they are,' we shouldn't overlook the fact of the HLC visit as providing an initial impetus for faculty to attend and participate.

Accreditation

Although they weren't running the way we had pictured them, the AL sessions did result in a level of familiarity with assessment that ultimately impressed the Higher Learning Commission's site visit team.

- During three hours of meetings on the topic of "assessment," the HLC team met with 50 individuals representing department chairs, assessment leaders, and people serving on the Institutional Effectiveness Committee that reads and responds to annual program reports.
- The HLC team's concluding report found the culture of assessment was alive and well at Otterbein, even among departments not accustomed to doing this kind of work on a regular basis.
- The site visit report stated that "Faculty, chairs, and assessment leaders were able to provide examples of specific ways in which assessment data had been used to inform curriculum development and revision."

References

1. Otterbein University Program Review and Student Learning Outcomes Assessment, <http://www.otterbein.edu/public/Academics/CurriculumAssessment/pr ogram-review.aspx>
2. Otterbein University Learning Goals <http://www.otterbein.edu/public/Academics/CurriculumAssessment/k meri.aspx>
3. In these discussions, we relied heavily on Hatfield, S. (2009). *Assessing your program-level assessment plan (IDEA Paper #45)*. Manhattan, KS: The IDEA Center.