

Assessment Tips for the Top

Here are some **points for top administrators** to think about as they work to implement assessment of student learning and defuse resistance on their campus.

1. Be informed

a) Assessment of student learning has evolved greatly in the last 15-20 years. It is not the phenomenon it was when the movement to assess gathered momentum in the mid-80s. As a result, assumptions, methods, purposes, and even the definitions of basic vocabulary have changed. On a campus, this can lead to enormous confusion about what people are being asked to do and why. So first and foremost, know what the options are, and what it is *you* are trying to accomplish on your campus.

b) Plan to promote what experience has shown is best practice.

Assess for quality improvement, not just quality assurance

Focus on student learning, not surrogates

Pursue outcomes that are educationally important, not just measurable

Use authentic methods, not just traditional academic ones

Gather qualitative as well as quantitative evidence of learning

Promote good, inclusive *process* as well as products (i.e. findings, changes)

Close the loop not just with feedback but with action

Support assessment with formal structures, planning, budgeting

2. Communicate

a) Many bodies – state departments of higher education, system offices, regional and professional accrediting associations – require assessment of student learning. However, the *real* reason to do it is because it's the right thing to do if we care about our students and what they learn. This is a reason that makes sense to faculty. It can't be repeated too often.

b) It's OK to leverage the pressure from external bodies, but don't overdo it; otherwise the message in 2.a. is undermined.

c) When there are good things to celebrate, we should do it. When there are less than wonderful findings, we need to acknowledge them candidly, then emphasize that this is a great opportunity for improvement with maximum value added.

d) We need to report on the findings and results of assessment efforts regularly in publications like web pages and the student newspaper or alumni magazine,

e) Assessment expectations should be included in the catalogue and view book as well as mission statements at all levels. Job descriptions, faculty and staff handbooks, employment contracts, and the like should name assessment as a routine responsibility whenever appropriate.

f) Make sure communication is a two-way street.

3. Provide reassurance

a) The campus needs to know you do *not* plan to use assessment as a witch hunt or a thinly disguised ploy to cut lines and terminate programs. This may be the last thing on your mind, but it's the first thing on a lot of faculty minds. Experience shows that if faculty *do* harbor these fears, they will not face problems candidly but rather seek to conceal them. That undermines the integrity and usefulness of the whole process.

b) Faculty and programs need to know that if those external entities demanding assessment have any vile plans for the findings, *you're on the side of your faculty and programs*. You'll protect them if push comes to shove. Again, repetition is key.

c) Give reluctant programs a face-saving way to comply.

4. Provide support

- a) Don't ask your campus to plan for assessment or carry it out without some training
- b) Provide parameters that reflect the conclusions you've come to about the assessment effort on your campus (see 1.a). Allow flexibility – it's OK for programs' plans to reflect their modes of inquiry and the intellectual traditions of their disciplines – but within those parameters. Don't make faculty waste time second guessing you or figuring assessment out entirely for themselves. That just breeds resentment.
- c) Use training as an opportunity to get everyone on campus on the same page regarding assumptions, methods, purposes, and even the definitions of basic vocabulary
- d) Use training to clear away misconceptions, reduce fears, attack obstacles

5. Be efficient, inclusive -- and respectful of what's already going on

- a) Piggy-back onto existing processes whenever possible, e.g., connect departmental reporting on assessment to the annual reports programs are used to submitting. Link outcomes and assessment to routine course approval. But be careful when folding assessment into program review. Traditional program review focuses on inputs and processes in order to increase inputs -- usually faculty lines and budget -- or to protect against cuts in inputs. Redefine the review so that the emphasis shifts to learning *outcomes* and programs are rewarded for revealing a problem and then fixing it, not just for making themselves look good. (See 6. below.)
- b) Draw on existing expertise and models. On every campus there are pockets of assessment activity and faculty expertise to draw on, even if the work has not been labeled "assessment."
- c) Involve existing structures or offices such as the university senate, institutional research, or the center for teaching and learning.

6. Provide rewards

- a) The idea is *not* to buy compliance by paying for every little bit of faculty work on assessment. In fact, that's a vicious circle you don't want to get caught in. However judicious rewards for special contributions can help a lot.
- b) The idea here is *not* to reward the programs that keep coming up with proof that "We're excellent"; the idea is to reward programs that say "Here's the problem, *and here's how we solved it.*" This message must be very clear when the choice of program and the reward are announced publicly. In other words, you're rewarding "quality improvement," not "quality assurance." To put it another way, the reward is for maximum value added, not *status quo*, no matter how good that is.
- c) Whenever possible and appropriate, reward programs rather than individuals. One of the biggest challenges of assessment, but also one of its biggest benefits, is that it requires faculty to act collectively, not as atomistic individuals responsible solely for their own courses or areas of specialization.
- d) It should become institutional policy to expect contributions to assessment as part of reappointment and tenure dossiers. Across campus, assessment efforts must be acknowledged as a form of scholarship and be clearly seen to help faculty earn promotion, tenure, and merit increases.
- e) The flip side of reward is punishment: doing assessment should not be a "punishment" in the form of additional workload without some sort of compensation, either for individuals or the program. In other words, a faculty member who contributes to assessment needs to be relieved of some other ongoing responsibility. (This also sends a message about the value of work in assessment. Add-ons are seldom taken seriously and they never last.)
- f) The fact that a junior faculty member has worked on assessment should *never* be allowed to count against him/her in promotion or tenure proceedings.

7. Provide funding

- a) *People follow the money* and faculty are especially good at this! To be taken seriously, assessment has to have money behind it. Money is both a practical aid to getting things done and a powerful symbolic

message. The pot doesn't have to be big – some highly effective assessment strategies are actually very cheap – but it needs to be very visible.

b) Plan on continued budgeting for assessment, not a one-shot infusion. Money is essential for start-up costs – training, consultants, instrument development – as well as for ongoing activities: retreats, conference presentations, reports and publications, etc.

c) Think about program-level *performance funding*. This phrase has horrible connotations at the state level, but it can work on campus. The key thing here is that “performance” refers to the carrying out of high-quality, high-impact assessment, *not* achievement of high scores or other traditional indicators of quality.

In one model, when departments submit annual budget requests, they have to back up academic requests with assessment findings. The budgets get reviewed by a faculty/staff budget review committee, which makes recommendations before passing the budget up to higher levels. The committee looks for assessment findings to back up requests and bases its recommendations on the quality of the program's evidence, analysis, and plans for improvement. Administration generally follows the recommendations, thus enhancing the status of both the committee and of assessment.

This process is useful for several reasons: 1) it's highly motivating; 2) it underscores the seriousness of the assessment effort – and consequences of failure to engage in it; 3) it exerts powerful negative pressure: the requests of departments not doing assessment really *do* go unfunded and their programs gradually fall behind; 4) it provides transparency; and 5) it educates the campus, from committee members out, in widening circles, about how to do assessment well.

8. Aim for broad involvement

To change campus culture, you need broad involvement or the change will remain superficial and fail to take hold. That means

a) the whole range of campus experience eventually needs to be assessed: not just the major but general education, first-year experience, student government, internships, community service, dorm life, extracurricular opportunities, etc.

b) not just faculty but professional academic staff, students, external advisors, alums, employers, etc. need to participate as appropriate.

c) The whole chain of command needs to be on board and on the same page about the institution's philosophy and purpose in doing assessment, from president and AAVP through deans and department/program chairs

9. Institutionalize

Formal structures will legitimize assessment. Eventually the assessment effort needs to move out of the realm of a special grant-funded project or one program's experiment and become standard practice supported by an office, advisory committee, staff, budget, reporting relationships, and oversight. This can happen gradually and it needn't be elaborate, but it needs to happen.

10. Codify

a) Eventually, appropriate documents need to refer explicitly to assessment. (See the list in 2.d, e.)

b) In negotiations with AAUP or other unions, it may be best to emphasize that assessment is not the end; it is merely the means to a worthy end: better education. Just as computers are a powerful tool, one that no campus wants to be without, so too assessment is our key tool for improving student learning and enhancing institutional quality.

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