Quality Collaboratives (QC) Case Study – September 2015

QC Dyad: Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC) & Fitchburg State University (FSU)
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Leveraging Campus Efforts That Are Already Underway

Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC) and Fitchburg State University partnered on a three-year Quality Collaboratives (QC) dyad project that focused on engaging faculty and staff in defining shared learning outcomes, developing common rubrics, and providing tools for faculty to create appropriate assignments to support and assess these learning outcomes. This change effort has been successful and sustainable because it embedded the work in existing efforts at each institution and was supported at the state system level by the Massachusetts Vision Project (http://www.mass.edu/visionproject/home.asp). The leadership for our “Assessment and Curriculum Scholars” was supported through a constructive framework of professional development workshops and institutes as well as the flexible adaptation of nationally-recognized standards and rubrics, including the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP: http://degreeprofile.org/).

Embedding Our Work in Institutional Goals and Statewide Initiatives

Mount Wachusett Community College Institutional Goals

The QC project built on MWCC’s general education revision efforts beginning in spring 2012 and resulting in new Institutional Student Learning Outcomes in fall 2014. In two short years, MWCC moved from active statewide Vision Project participants to recognized national leaders. The catalyst for this change included (1) capitalizing on previous faculty and instructional librarians’ efforts; (2) selecting full-time and non-tenure track faculty with disciplinary expertise in highly enrolled transfer pathways; (3) integrating instructional librarians, transfer advisors, and administrators on the QC team to provide insights on improving transfer policies and practices; and finally (4) selecting experienced faculty team leaders to bring their QC experiences forward to their academic programs and to the college at large.

The greatest change at MWCC has been developing and implementing assessment tools and practices to increase student success at the course, program, and institutional levels. As part of this ongoing work, MWCC piloted and purchased an assessment system for implementation in fall 2015, refined their civic engagement goals through an AAC&U Bridging Cultures grant (http://www.aacu.org/bridgingcultures),
participated in two statewide civic learning task forces and the Massachusetts Multi-State Collaborative assessment project, and developed its college credit system for life experiences through a state-awarded Performance Incentive Grant (PIF) grant.

_Fitchburg State University Institutional Goals_

General education learning outcomes assessment has been a major focus of Fitchburg State’s assessment efforts, which were initially supported by grant funding from the Davis Foundation. Through this work, Fitchburg State faculty had previously engaged in modifying AAC&U’s LEAP\(^1\) VALUE rubrics (http://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics) to assess Citizenship (Civic Engagement) Ethical Reasoning, Problem Solving (Inquiry and Analysis and Quantitative Reasoning), and Written Communication. The faculty had used those rubrics to assess artifacts of student work, attended AAC&U’s General Education and Assessment and the New England Educational Assessment Network (NEEAN) conferences, and presented the results of their work at these conferences as well as at winter and spring “Assessment Days” on campus. As a result, when we issued a call for faculty and staff applications to serve as “Assessment Scholars” on the Quality Collaborative dyad project, we had a strong pool of motivated and qualified faculty and staff who understood and had been already engaged in rubric-based learning outcomes assessment.

_Collaborative Initiatives_

Fitchburg State and MWCC carefully selected four learning outcomes for which there was some degree of overlap across our two institutions: civic engagement (CE), information literacy (IL), quantitative reasoning (QR), and written communication (WC). This work was strengthened further by a system-level, Davis-funded initiative across Massachusetts Public Higher Education called the Advancing Massachusetts Culture of Assessment project (AMCOA), which was a critical component of the broader Massachusetts Vision Project. Incentive funding from the AMCOA project allowed the two institutions to partner with Quinsigamond Community College and Worcester State University on assessing written communication using both the unmodified LEAP VALUE rubric as well as institutionally-developed rubrics (Slotnick et al. 2014). Furthermore, as part of the Vision Project, Massachusetts used LEAP VALUE rubrics to pilot system-wide assessment of critical thinking, quantitative literacy, and written communication, providing professional development for faculty in assessing student work, which is an

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\(^1\) LEAP, or Liberal Education and America’s Promise, is AAC&U’s signature initiative that champions a twenty-first century liberal education for all students in higher education.

As the campuses began their collaborative work, there were greater barriers between the two institutions in the areas of civic engagement and information literacy than in QR and WC. Each campus was involved in some form of civic learning assessment, but the outcome was considered “Citizenship” and was content-based at Fitchburg State while at MWCC the outcome was considered “Understanding Self” and involved a greater emphasis on engagement with the community. The expertise from our existing efforts on each campus, coupled with the statewide perspective made possible by MWCC staff leadership in the statewide Civic Learning Taskforce, helped our team to recognize civic knowledge versus engagement as an inherent source of tension in any civic learning assessment and to develop a revised, inclusive rubric (Cratsley and Slotnick, 2013). Furthermore, while we faced the barrier that information literacy had not been formally adopted as a learning outcome at Fitchburg State, faculty and librarians had already been engaged in rubric-based evaluation of pilot projects to improve student information literacy (Fielding et al., 2013), so the IL team built on this work along with the IL assessment process developed at MWCC. As our partnership progressed, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes (NILOA) selected four QC faculty members, one for each of the learning outcomes addressed in the project, to participate and publish assignments in the DQP Assignment Library ([http://www.assignmentlibrary.org/](http://www.assignmentlibrary.org/)), and six faculty members from the MWCC and Fitchburg State QC dyad participated as scorers for the MSC Pilot Project in spring 2015, allowing us to further connect to ongoing initiatives.

**Bringing Our Faculty and Staff Together to Promote Engagement with Assessment**

MWCC and Fitchburg State shared one major goal: bring as many faculty members and staff into the collaborative as possible and let them drive the process. We not only met this goal but exceeded it by leveraging every opportunity at the campus, state, and national levels. Together we created a diverse 32-member, cross-institutional team of engaged faculty and staff scholars, practitioners, and leaders. This work culminated in spring 2015 with a shared “Professional Day” hosted by Fitchburg State which brought all faculty from both institutions together in disciplinary clusters. Our institutional change effort

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2 During the MSC Pilot Project, faculty and staff members from 68 campuses across nine states collectively scored authentic student work (from campuses other than their own) using AAC&U’s LEAP VALUE rubrics.
was accomplished by empowering faculty to fully engage in the work of assessment. We accomplished
this overarching goal, by employing the strategies outlined below.

**Appointing and Recognizing Team Leaders**

We appointed four team leaders to oversee each of our four outcome areas, as described above: WC, IL,
QR, and CE. Each eight-member team included representatives of both full- and part-time faculty as well
as at least one professional staff member from both institutions. Two of these team leaders were also
faculty campus leads for the overall QC project for MWCC and Fitchburg State.

*What we learned:* Faculty engagement in assessment must be cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary,
drawing on the leadership strengths of tenure- and non-tenure-track faculty in disciplines representing
potential transfer pathways as well as staff members committed to student learning.

**Communicating, Modeling, and Scaffolding Leadership Capacity**

A second strategy was informed in part by our experiences at the national QC all-project meetings. The
national meetings provided hands-on workshops that could be easily adapted for QC use at the campus
level. Similar activities were introduced at the state-level through the AMCOA project. In each instance,
the project directors reshaped national and state-level activities for QC use, adapted “Protocols”
developed by the National School Reform Faculty ([http://www.nsrpharmony.org](http://www.nsrpharmony.org)) to structure
discussions, and introduced them to the team leaders who imparted these skills to their teams. As the
team leadership’s capacity to use a variety of tools and practices to meet this goal grew, so did the
opportunity for team leaders to replicate and adapt these activities for campus use.

*What we learned:* With the appropriate tools, faculty who are well versed in outcomes-based
assessment at both institutions can lead structured discussions on the merits of using sophomore-level
work as a benchmark to evaluate program and institutional-level success and identify appropriate
disciplinary courses and assignments for collecting student work.

**Harness Opportunities for Scholarship, Faculty Development, and Outreach**

The field of assessment lacks faculty-authored perspectives of the assessment work at the ground level.
The third strategy was giving faculty an external role in scholarship, professional development, and
outreach. Faculty development included four faculty, two from each institution, participating in a one-
day, NILOA sponsored “charrette” held in Portland, Oregon where faculty designed an assignment
prompt with advice and feedback from national scholars and peers to fine-tune assignment prompts. Faculty from both institutions attended several national project meetings, presented at state-wide AMCOA conferences and regional NEEAN conferences, and co-wrote a paper on quantitative reasoning for AAC&U’s Peer Review (Berg et al., 2014).

What we learned: Faculty engagement in the work of assessment is variable by institutional culture and must include support to cultivate faculty participation and scholarship at the program and course levels. Faculty members’ comfort level with being “in the work” will vary—with a typical response moving from limited value and assessment fluency to deeply committed teams of faculty building peer capacity, fluency, and scholarly discussions of student learning.

Adapting the DQP, LEAP ELOs, and VALUE Rubrics to Engage Faculty in Assessment

The DQP, the LEAP ELOs, and VALUE rubrics provided a framework for establishing the potential breadth and depth of which our “Assessment Scholars” and “Curriculum Scholars” engaged in our shared student learning outcomes. We found it critical to communicate to faculty and staff that the wide range of learning outcomes represented by the DQP in particular did not need to be accepted as a “blueprint” for an effective liberal education, but instead provided a set of useful “construction materials” that could be selected and adapted to meet our institutional needs. This perspective was essential to allow us to build on existing faculty work on the course, program, institutional levels, and on the LEAP ELOs in a manner that ensured our faculty and staff adopted leadership roles that drove the process of assessment and curricular revision. Just as we encouraged faculty to revise the LEAP VALUE rubrics to better serve our institutional needs, we asked them to develop DQP-like statements describing the competencies they expected students to demonstrate within a particular learning outcome. In this way, the DQP allowed us to collaboratively develop shared visions and language for specific student learning outcomes within the broader context of a liberal education.

References

