Building Stronger Relationships, Establishing Data Sharing Agreements, and Recognizing when to Change Direction

Project Overview

James Madison University (JMU) and Blue Ridge Community College (BRCC) already had a good relationship and long history of working together productively. So, when we received the AAC&U Quality Collaboratives (QC) call for proposals from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), we thought the project would be a great opportunity to expand our work together and to improve transfer success for students. Unlike many of the QC dyads, therefore, our initial contact was with SCHEV, not with AAC&U, and we were always working within the context of Virginia’s unique approach to higher education coordination.

The project team included key academic leaders from both institutions: the Vice President of Instruction and Student Services, the Coordinator of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, and a well-respected faculty leader (from BRCC), and the Vice Provost for University Programs, the Executive Director of the Center for Assessment and Research Studies, and the Director of the Center of Faculty Innovation (from JMU). The team was stable through the three-year grant period, which was a major benefit.

While not directly related to our QC project, one of the most effective practices associated with successful transfer between the two institutions has been the location of a JMU academic advisor on the BRCC campus to help prospective transfer students make productive choices about courses and academic programs. This has led to smoother transfer articulation between the two institutions, and most programs at JMU express confidence that the majority of students who transfer from BRCC are well prepared to make progress. This advisor was a valuable resource for the dyad as data were gathered and interpreted.

We thought the specific QC project we proposed was a relatively straightforward one, to investigate the performance of students in the major most commonly chosen by students transferring from BRCC to JMU as well as three applied science majors in which we hoped to increase transfer numbers. These four majors were Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies (IdLS, the content major for aspiring
PK-8 and special education teachers), Computer Science, Engineering, and Integrated Science and Technology. The programs shared a sense among the faculty that transfer students who did not succeed in the majors had inadequate preparation in quantitative areas. The two institutions had a shared assessment instrument in quantitative and scientific reasoning and years of data on the overall performance of BRCC transfer cohorts at JMU. We planned to use the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP: http://degreeprofile.org/) in aligning program expectations across the two institutions at the point of transfer, and to use course grades and assessment scores to follow individual students across institutions and discover the major indicators of alignment and success. We always expected that we would plan the next phase after we saw the results from these first two activities.

We think we learned a number of lessons that may be useful to other campuses attempting such work, especially related to faculty development and working with state-level policies. A key conclusion was the recognition that our final success was the result of a very successful pivot midway through the grant.

**First Bump in the Road: Data Sharing**

The two institutions had been sharing data for approximately twenty years in order to investigate the performance of each year’s cohort of BRCC transfer students in comparison with other transfer cohorts, with native freshmen at JMU, and with historical trends. In a climate of growing national concern about privacy issues, the QC project raised new concerns at the state level about the privacy of student academic records. This simply stopped all forward motion in the data-based part of the project. After much discussion, the issue was resolved by crafting and signing a new agreement, endorsed by the Virginia Commonwealth’s Attorney General’s office, which redefined the parameters for data sharing moving forward. Specifically, once received by JMU, record-level data was used after removing student identities from records in the database and creating a linked number for each record. One of our colleagues called this solution the “secret code ring.” We were grateful for the support and leadership of SCHEV throughout the course of the grant project, and their leadership in reaching this revised agreement was particularly helpful.

There were still a number of frustrations related to managing such a large and complex database with grades and assessment test scores for students by major. In the end, we were able to use pivot tables to compare course grades at BRCC with grades at JMU. A careful look at student performance in a first course at BRCC and a follow-up course at JMU demonstrated that almost all
students who made grades of A or B in the first course at BRCC were also successful after transfer. In other words, the data generally indicated that there was in fact fairly good alignment in expectations across the two institutions and that success at BRCC was a good indicator of continued success at JMU.

Finally, both institutions have historically only tested a sample of graduates in quantitative and scientific reasoning. Even after BRCC altered their practice to test all students, we discovered there was simply not a large enough number of students in the four majors who had assessment scores on file to make valid comparisons across institutions.

**Good Start, Now What?**

In addition to pursuing student performance data across the two institutions, we also started to work with faculty teaching in those departments. Our first joint activity, a two-day workshop for faculty from both institutions to discuss alignment of expectations in the four programs, was a great success. Faculty enjoyed using the DQP as one tool to stimulate their thinking about student learning and developed a matrix matching some DQP and local outcome statements. They discovered a great deal of common ground, forged new relationships, and expressed satisfaction with their work. While productive new lines of communication were opened between the two institutions, there was not a groundswell of interest in additional faculty workshops or in further work with the DQP.

Also, because the data sharing between institutions demonstrated that successful students generally continued to be successful, at least one JMU department said they were really not interested in continuing the project. They believed there was simply no problem to fix. So, at project midpoint, having spent less than half of the grant funds, we found ourselves in a position of either declaring victory and returning the remaining funds, or drastically redirecting our efforts.

**Redirecting Our Focus**

In retrospect, it is clear that the major turning point in our project was the participation of two team members, one from each institution, in an “assignment charrette” sponsored by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes (NILOA). They found the experience both inspirational and helpful in thinking about their own teaching. At the time, it took a while for the impact of this experience to transform the project.
We continued to be plagued by some structural problems, one of which was the very different sizes of the institutions. BRCC is relatively small, and JMU is a large, highly decentralized university. Both institutions employ adjuncts in a number of disciplinary areas. At a large institution like JMU, with a new president and a major institution-wide strategic planning effort underway, it proved difficult to garner any sustained interest from faculty, especially in the four majors we originally targeted. BRCC had real success in working with a smaller group of faculty and using the DQP in discussions of their general education learning outcomes overall, but the demands on the time of a few faculty were becoming onerous.

In the face of these realities, the team leaders made two important decisions—to refocus on aligning signature assignments across the two institutions and to encourage broad participation from interested faculty from a wider variety of disciplines.

**Our Collective Successes**

Beginning in summer 2014, JMU and BRCC collaborated to host a series of events matching faculty with similar disciplines or areas of interest cross-institutionally. Leaders at both institutions recruited faculty partners in similar disciplines so that everyone involved had at least one natural colleague from the other institution. Cross-institutional faculty pairs or groups had the opportunity to apply for mini-grants to perfect aligned assignments between the two institutions. The goal was to increase alignment overall in the preparation of students in lower division courses so that they would be similarly prepared for continued success in upper level courses.

Because of the positive experience that team members had at the NILOA assignment design charrette, we hosted a similarly modeled event at JMU with guests Paul Gaston, Trustees Professor of English at Kent State University and Natasha Jankowski, Associate Director of NILOA. Participants included faculty from both JMU and BRCC, and again represented a wider array of departments and disciplines than had been included in earlier phases of the project.

All team members came to believe the most important positive outcome from the grant was the new bonds formed between the faculty of both institutions. Another benefit was the demonstration of similar standards in some courses, which increased JMU faculty confidence in the preparation of transfer students. From the earliest workshop of the QC grant project, productive faculty development projects led to changes in pedagogy and course content and increased cooperation among faculty at both institutions. In a number of instances, course materials and assignments used at one institution were adapted for use at the other—and this worked in both directions. Also, BRCC’s campus developed,
and will continue to use in courses, numerous assessment rubrics based on AAC&U’s LEAP VALUE rubrics (http://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics) with input from the DQP.

**How to Spend the Money**

Each institution received $40,000 over three years from AAC&U. Another lesson learned was that this sum of money was actually a significant driver of our eventual success. With a larger grant, we probably would have been able to hire a person to oversee some of the activities, but would not have had the opportunity for the truly beneficial pivot midway through the project. In the end, it was the fact that we still had money we were committed to spend, that led to the creative refocus of activities.

**Lessons Learned**

- Data sharing between partner institutions allows robust investigation of student success, but requires a strong relationship based on trust, and it also requires careful attention to the privacy of student academic records and to managing and interpreting large data sets.
- Faculty will be engaged in the process if they believe there is positive benefit for their teaching and their students’ learning.
- Faculty on both campuses perceived the opportunity to interact with faculty colleagues from transfer partner institutions to share signature assignments and student performance expectations as a real benefit to their professional development.