Chapter 6
Developing an Assessment Program to Measure Critical Thinking:
A Case Study at a Small, Online College

Caulyne N. Barron
Dunlap-Stone University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter posits that the assessment cycle is a valuable part of the discussion of teaching critical thinking skills in post-secondary settings. Acknowledging that critical thinking is a crucial skill for post-secondary students, the chapter ties accreditation mandates to the need to include robust outcomes assessment measures in college programs that teach critical thinking. The chapter traces one small, nationally-accredited online college's efforts to develop a robust assessment plan to measure how well students met general education and program objectives, particularly those related to critical thinking skills in a business program. The efforts to comply with accreditation standards and to demonstrate a culture of assessment resulted in a culture shift that sought meaningful data about how well the college was educating its students and meeting its mission.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes how one small, nationally-accredited online college incorporated accreditation mandates centered on outcomes assessment into a successful and robust assessment program. Beginning in 2009, Dunlap-Stone University's accrediting body, the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), incorporated standards requiring member institutions to demonstrate

compliance with specific outcomes assessment measures. Beyond completion rates and student satisfaction rates, a written document and evidence of data collection were required to meet the intent of the standard. The college used this requirement as an opportunity to formalize assessment across the program, particularly in the general education and business program outcomes. This chapter describes the process the college used to 1) evaluate accreditation requirements, 2) develop a

plan to meet the requirements, and uses a specific outcome, critical thinking skills to illustrate 3) the operationalization of the assessment cycle and 4) the change in organizational culture.

BACKGROUND

Higher education is moving towards an outcomes assessment model, often triggered by accreditation requirements (Lubinescu, Ratcliff, & Gaffney, 2001; Peach, Mukherjee, & Hornyak, 2007). Pedagogical changes, particularly in distance education, have required the development of defined outcomes to assure the quality of the programs offered (Swail & Kampits, 2001). Yet, often it is the institutions themselves that define the course and program outcomes most appropriate to their institution and their mission. The need to assess specific outcomes is rooted in accreditation mandates (Bresciani, 2006; Driscoll & Cordero de Noriega, 2006; Taras, 2005). Accrediting bodies therefore seek evidence that there is a process of reflection that led to the establishment of the outcomes and that there is an assessment cycle in place to measure, meet, and revise those outcomes when necessary.

This chapter describes these processes as they were operationalized at a small, nationally accredited online institution, Dunlap-Stone University (DSU). Founded in 1995, the college was first accredited by the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) in 2003. In 2009, DETC revised its standards surrounding outcomes assessment, and the college sought to revise its assessment program to comply with accreditation standards. According to the DETC Accreditation Handbook, Policy C.14. (2013), "Institutions are expected to have in place a formal written and actively executed plan for conducting outcomes assessment and satisfaction studies…" While DSU had informally measured industry-related outcomes, retention, student satisfaction, and progress through courses and

programs, few specific measures were in place that would meet the DETC standard. At the time, the Phoenix, Arizona based college offered a single bachelor's degree program, a Bachelor of Science in International Trade Management. This chapter documents the process of compliance through the development of an outcomes-based assessment model centering on student critical thinking skills.

Methodology

This case study was developed from a series of notes, interviews, and documents reviewed by those involved in the process of developing an assessment plan for the college. The college leadership approved the inclusion of the institution without conditions of anonymity. Case studies pull different sources of data to create the most complete picture of a specific context (Yin, 2009). Aligned with Creswell (2007), clear boundaries were created to narrow the scope of the case. As Woodside (2010) recommended "asking participants for explanations and interpretations of 'operational data'" key players were interviewed and the researcher kept reflective journals throughout the process (p.6). Using Stake's (1995) process of categorical aggregation, the study distilled the essence of the experiences and trends within the case boundaries. "Stakeholders checks enhance the credibility of the findings by allowing participants and other people… to comment on or assess the research findings, interpretations, and conclusions" (Thomas, 2006, p. 244). Further, Creswell (2007) suggested that researchers can develop "naturalistic generalizations" to present an in-depth picture of the case (p. 157).

It should be noted that case studies are not gereralizable to different contexts or populations because the studies are inductive, naturalistic, and not intended to be representative of other settings (Yin, 2009). The findings are specific to the context of this college and this subject matter at a specific point in time. Therefore, no assumptions should be made about the transferability of

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