

Chapter XX

Engaging Faculty as a Strategic Choice in Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces methods that can be used to engage faculty in the assessment process, working within a shared governance structure in institutions of higher education. It begins by identifying assumptions about including faculty in the assessment process, placing special emphasis on social capital and networking theories often used in communication and sociological research. The chapter then proceeds to identify six methods that might be used to engage faculty strategically in the assessment process, and then used three case studies to help explain these methods. The author hopes that an understanding of these assumptions and methods will empower assessment professionals wishing to develop and sustain assessment on their own campuses, and will lead to further discussion about how to include faculty in the assessment process.

INTRODUCTION

For years, government officials at both federal and state levels have been calling for greater accountability in higher education. The U.S. Department of Education Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006) submitted a final report which castigates the U.S. higher

education community for not developing a culture of accountability that uses assessment measures to demonstrate that student learning is occurring and is being sustained over time. State governments have been even more specific about their expectations regarding the assessment of student learning at program levels, such as New York's focus on the use of rubrics to assess the quality

of student work (Francis, Salins, & Huot, 2006). Other organizations, such as the Educational Testing Service (Millett, Payne, Dwyer, Sticker, & Alexiou, 2008) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (McPherson & Schulenburger, 2006), have also provided input into the national conversations about assessment and accountability, recommending that colleges and universities begin assessing the “value added” of higher education.

At program levels, accrediting organizations have responded to the pressure to assess student learning by insisting that assessment focus both on learning objectives and use of such assessments for continual improvements in student learning. Most program and regional accreditors believe that faculty must collaborate to create statements of student learning objectives, measure students’ achievement of these objectives, and specify actions that address program weaknesses revealed through the assessment process. For example, the Western Association of Colleges and Schools ([WASC] n.d.) offers an assessment guide that stresses the need for linkages between clear assessment of student learning and how such assessment leads to improvements in student learning. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools ([NCACS] 2003) has also indicated that institutions should generate evidence of a “mature” level of assessment, linking the usage of student learning outcomes assessments from institutions’ boards of directors down to department and program levels. Even programmatic accrediting organizations such as the National Council for Accrediting Teacher Education ([NCATE] 2002) advise departments and programs to prepare evidence of well-developed assessment methods that link student learning assessment to the improvement of student learning.

This insistence upon assessment and accountability has been met with resistance from many faculty, mainly because of their awareness of the pressures experienced by K-12 educators as local school districts have had to deal with implications

of the No Child Left Behind Act. When I have discussed assessment with faculty in higher education, they mention that they feel they are being mandated to assess how their teaching impacts student learning, despite a lack of consensus about which assessments can be used to assess student learning in ways that are sensitive to the differing missions and visions of their home institutions. Those who are experienced in student learning assessment also mention that standardized tests can provide some basic information, but the results of such tests are vague and do not contribute the kinds of information that can lead to faculty discussions about student performance, and thus to a focus on how to help students enhance their learning (McMillan, 1997). In essence, faculty feel that the assessment movement really constitutes an effort by political leaders to bypass the natural faculty role as the primary assessors of student learning.

Furthermore, resistance from faculty has led to frustration on the part of assessment professionals (Eisenman, 1991; Grunewald & Peterson, 2003). While administrators insist that meaningful assessment occur, faculty are often suspicious and resistant because they do not understand how they might be part of the process. As Linkon (2005) suggests in her own reflections on assessment in the humanities, and Joao Rosa, Joan Tovaes and Amarel (2006) note in their wider study on assessment, one way to address this suspicion and resistance is to recognize that faculty need to see the benefits of assessment on their own terms, be the primary assessors of student performance, and work on the process together.

Having worked on assessment at several collegiate institutions over the years, I often encounter the challenge of helping faculty move from identifying student learning goals, to meaningfully assessing those goals, to acting on this information to improve student learning (Allen & Bresciani, 2003; Lorenzetti, 2004). The greatest obstacle is not that faculty blatantly refuse to participate, but their concern that participation in the process will

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