

Chapter 17

Developing an Assessment Plan for the Arts and Sciences Division of a Comprehensive Community College

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ABSTRACT

Assessment of student learning outcomes at institutions of higher learning has become a strategic initiative as accountability discussions continue to stir within the academic environment. This case study looks at the various aspects of developing, implementing, and evaluating an assessment plan for the Arts and Sciences division of a comprehensive community college. Discussions include how to instill an “assessment” focus within an institution, the importance of identifying appropriate leadership and establishing assessment committees, how to get faculty buy in, how to develop an assessment plan, how to utilize technology for data collection and analysis, and how to continuously improve assessment activities, are all explored. The institution of discussion has completed the first two years of its four-year assessment process. The case study reflects on the first two years of the process.

BACKGROUND

Large State Community College is a large rural-serving, comprehensive institution located in the plains of Texas. It is a Hispanic serving institution. In the fall of 2010, its enrollments escalated to

over 10,000. The college offers course work for transfer, career, developmental, continuing, and workforce development training. The college, like many institutions of higher education, faces the need to establish an assessment plan to evaluate institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes in its general education core curriculum of its Arts and Sciences division.

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Large State Community College is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). SACS comprehensive standard 3.3 addresses institutional effectiveness and quality enhancement and outlines expectations of institutions in assessing both:

- 3.3.1 The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas:
 - 3.3.1.1 educational programs, to include student learning outcomes
 - 3.3.1.2 administrative support services
 - 3.3.1.3 educational support services
 - 3.3.1.4 research within its educational mission, if appropriate
 - 3.3.1.5 community/public service within its educational mission, if appropriate
- 3.3.2 The institution has developed a Quality Enhancement Plan that (1) demonstrates institutional capability for the initiation, implementation, and completion of the QEP; (2) includes broad-based involvement of institutional constituencies in the development and proposed implementation of the QEP; and (3) identifies goals and a plan to assess their achievement. (*Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 2009, p. 25*)

In order to comply with accreditation standards, Large State Community College began the challenging task of developing a process to assess student learning outcomes in their general education core curriculum of their Arts and Sciences division.

SETTING THE STAGE

Like most community colleges, Large State Community College faces meeting the external demands of public accountability. The challenge

is to maintain dynamic curricula, updated state-of-the-art equipment in technical programs, a qualified faculty and staff; all while experiencing decreasing state funding and escalating operational costs. To ensure that institutions are meeting the needs of their constituents, accrediting agencies are requiring colleges to evaluate themselves through assessment. The challenges faced by community colleges in establishing assessment models are faced most effectively when all stakeholders come together as collaborative partners to determine how to best accomplish this task. These are the challenges presented in this case study.

Public community colleges within the state of Texas require their students to take general education core curriculum classes in various areas, in addition to the courses for their specific majors. General education requirements include subjects in mathematics, oral and written communications, critical thinking, and problem solving (Seybert, 2002). The Texas general education core curriculum consists of “significant intellectual skills and content intended to contribute in specific ways to excellence within the undergraduate experience for all students” (“Essential Core Curriculum,” n.d., para. 2). Texas law defines “core curriculum” as (TEC §61.821):

...the curriculum in liberal arts, humanities, and sciences and political, social, and cultural history that all undergraduate students of an institution of higher education are required to complete before receiving an academic undergraduate degree. (“Essential Core Curriculum,” n.d., para. 3)

Traditionally, assessment in postsecondary education occurs at the course level. Rarely do institutions evaluate whether students graduating with a certificate or degree have truly attained the skills identified in institutional-level student learning outcomes. At the course level, often community college faculty measure student performance with multiple-choice testing, which is not always a good predictor of student knowl-

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