

A Culture of Assessment: What is it and how do we achieve it?

Frederick Burrack, Ph.D.
Director of the Office of Assessment
Kansas State University

Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission's 2011 Annual Conference

Documentation of student learning is increasingly becoming recognized as the identifier for success of higher education, in contrast to documenting dissemination of content through curriculum. Although it remains a challenge for some universities to develop a culture that values assessment of student learning as a mechanism to define academic success, others have found an assessment process that is affirmed by academic programs, faculty, student-life, and administration. This article will focus on how to establish a culture that emphasizes program improvement in response to student learning assessment results and as an essential component of education.

A culture of assessment has to be unique to each perspective institution, but there appears to be some common themes. Kansas State University is a public, 4-year, land-grant University with very high research activity located in rural Kansas with an enrollment averaging about 19,000 undergraduate and 4,000 graduate students. A campus-wide initiative of student learning assessment was instituted in 2004 and we continue to build upon a culture of assessment into a sixth year. This article will share a process that has found a good deal of success at K-State.

Alignment of program missions with university student learning outcomes

The most important foundation that leads to a university-wide culture of assessment is recognition of the academic uniqueness and value of programs' curriculum and mission. A 'one-size-fits-all' assessment system will inhibit a culture of assessment. When documenting student achievement of university-wide learning goals, it is important that assessments authentically represent how learning is uniquely applied. Application should be defined by program goals. For example, one of K-State's five undergraduate Student Learning Outcomes (*Knowledge, Critical Thinking, Communication, Diversity, and Academic/Professional Integrity*) is Critical Thinking - Students will demonstrate the ability to access and interpret information, respond and adapt to changing situations, make complex decisions, solve problems, and evaluate actions. Demonstration of critical thinking is, and should be, applied and demonstrated differently from one discipline to another. It is essential in student learning assessment to value the variety of ways learning is applied and represented in each disciplinary area. A mistake often made is

choosing only one mechanism for assessment or one way of representing this outcome. When this is done, student learning will most certainly be misrepresented by the assessments.

Assessment at K-State focuses on student learning that occurs within academic and non-academic programs. Each program identifies appropriate student learning outcomes, develops direct and indirect assessments for each outcome, and establishes minimum competency and expected achievement levels requisite for all students completing the program. Assessments that document student achievement in any of the five university undergraduate outcomes are identified and documented as such. The process is designed to provide information authentic to student learning that is valued by the program and at the university level.

A university-wide assessment system should center its attention on the assessment opportunities that exist within programs and are authentic to how students are expected to demonstrate achievement. Then support these findings with other forms of assessment such as standardized testing or indirect measures. Assessments that do not represent the form of application integral in a students' discipline often document something other than authentic learning and should be used with caution. Faculty are more likely to support an assessment process if a clear connection or perceived purpose is evident. With perceived purpose comes a paradigm that engenders culture. A culture of assessment is built where the learning occurs.

Documenting, analyzing, and reporting learning outcomes

A culture of assessment is developed through ownership of the process. Assessments that exist within programs are often perceived as purposeful and relevant. This is especially true when those involved with instruction are directly involved with the analysis of data. Each area is involved in the K-State assessment process, by selecting relevant and appropriate direct and indirect assessment instruments, collecting, analyzing, and discussing student learning data. These activities occur within a structure designed by each program/unit and often lead to self-directed enhancement of assessment plans. Each undergraduate program and unit reports annually to the Office of Assessment documenting findings pertaining to student learning. Faculty are expected to be involved in discussions leading to program improvement decisions and enhancements in the assessment process. Assessment data reflecting the university outcomes are combined to provide a summary of university-wide student learning achievement in each outcome. In this assessment system, the relevance of assessment data is directly tied to the learning activities. Responsibility is accepted by those directly involved with instruction with ownership of the process as an essential element of a culture of assessment.

Shared responsibility across campus

All programs: majors, minors, certificate; and student life units are involved in assessment of student learning for the purpose of program/unit improvement. Each program/unit has an assessment committee organizes and oversees the assessment efforts. These committees annually report the assessment activities and findings to a college/division assessment review committee. These committees assess the annual reports, provide feedback to the program/unit, and summarize the college/division assessment activities for the university Office of Assessment. Each program/unit and college/division report is reviewed annually by the Office of Assessment with additional feedback provided as a report and through face-to-face meeting, to enhance the assessment process and the campus culture.

Representatives from each college/division discusses assessment issues and share effective approaches to assessment at monthly meetings of the University Assessment Facilitators Committee. The committee plans and oversees initiatives to enhance the culture of assessment across the university. This committee also works as a conduit between college/division assessment committees and the Offices of the Provost.

The Office of Assessment hosts an annual assessment showcase every fall to during which programs share examples of best-practice with their colleagues. The showcase recognizes effective assessment efforts with a framed certificate presented by the Provost and Senior Vice President. To further establish a culture of shared assessment, faculty and unit representatives are intentionally asked to attend conferences on assessment of student learning and effective learning. The paradigm we are hoping do develop is that assessment of student learning is an organized mechanism for self-review and program improvement. Implemented for the purpose of enhancing student learning and not as an activity that is requested by external reviewers or a university initiative.

Evaluating and improving the effectiveness of the assessment efforts

K-State's Office of Assessment maintains aannual records of student learning assessment for each program/unit/college/division. A rubric is used to identify the level of student learning assessment achieved by each program/unit in the following areas: (1) the quality of student learning outcomes, (2) variety and appropriateness of direct/indirect assessments, (3) documentation of annual assessment results, (4) faculty involvement, (5) program initiatives resulting from the assessment findings, and (6) student involvement. Annual feedback and discussions with assessment facilitators strive to continually move the university toward stronger rigor in assessment.

Annual progress reports focus on decisions made at the program/unit level and documentation of effective program improvement as a result of student learning assessment. With student learning as the focus, programs/units are encouraged to evolve their assessment paradigm. The ownership of the assessment process remains with programs and units, although suggestion and guidance from the Office of Assessment provides direction and focus. When the focus remains on student learning, and the mechanisms of assessment, educational environment, curriculum, and instruction are viewed as the means toward that end, a culture of assessment develops through faculty ownership.

Summary

The culture of assessment desired for higher education must be centered on providing evidence to document learning authentic for the discipline, and not from generalities obtained from assessments unrelated to what a student learns and how the learning is represented. A unified understanding associated with student learning assessment is essential for any system to result in significant improvements. Elements of understanding that support a culture of assessment include:

- assessment of student learning as an essential element of education.
- the primary purpose of assessment being program improvement.
- involvement of everyone associated with student learning.
- an understanding that content presentation should not presume the occurrence of learning.
- application of knowledge, cognitive skills, dispositions, and workplace readiness.
- ownership of the assessment process belongs to the programs and units associated with student learning.

When the purpose of assessment is clear and respectful of the instruction that leads toward student learning, a culture of assessment will develop and flourish.