Institutional Culture Change Process: Assessment of Student Learning

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Focus and Audience

In this paper, we discuss a model of institutional change that is being used to build a "culture of assessment." Our goal is to share the model in hopes that readers will apply it to their own settings, reflecting on the strengths, challenges, and pockets of resistance at their institutions, and be better able to create an action plan for their own change process. The presentation is intended for persons involved in organizational change efforts, especially those related to assessment of student learning, and in particular those who are looking for a model from a large, comprehensive public research university.

Mandates for Institutional Change

Demands for improvement in higher education are coming from within and from outside of our institutions. Students, parents, legislators, the business community, boards of trustees, boards of regents, and the general public, are expecting us to be more accountable for what we say we are doing. These pressures have created a mandate that universities provide measurable evidence that: (1) we know what we are attempting to teach students; (2) there is some form of validation of student learning; and (3) changes and improvements are based on data, not solely on intuition (e.g., the "trust me" approach) Many of us welcome the challenge of these mandates and see them as opportunities to make significant and positive changes within our institutions. Innovations and improvement, however, no matter how creative and well formulated, will only happen if the change strategy works. The change process itself is critical in determining whether the institution will experience a true culture change or whether there will merely be program revisions that are based on process or procedure and are more structural than substantive. Some aspects of an effective change process include a careful identification and acknowledgement of the stakeholders and plans to include them, the identification and engagement of enthusiastic and credible leaders, and initiating the process with those most eager to participate, rather than waiting until the broader university community is completely ready.

Very Brief Description of Our Context

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) visited Kansas State University in the Fall of 2001. The accreditation report, containing prescription language with regard to assessment of student learning, was received on campus in the Spring of 2002 and the change process began that summer. In 2000-2001, each of our departments had submitted an assessment plan to the Provost. The great majority of the plans consisted primarily of indirect measures of student learning. When data were collected, there was little clear evidence that it had been considered by faculty and used as a basis for program improvement. Today, in the Fall of 2004, virtually every department has approved and submitted a list of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for each of their degree programs. An Assessment of Student Learning Plan for each degree program was due to the respective Dean of each college by November 1st and to the Provost on December 1st of 2004. Training and templates were made available throughout the year to assist departmental faculty (and key administrators) with the writing of their assessment plans based upon the SLOs that were created the previous year.

Each of the colleges has established a committee that functions to facilitate the assessment of student learning efforts in their college. Each college also has appointed an Assessment Review Committee that will review the assessment plans and make recommendations to the dean for any necessary revisions to those plans. In an attempt to encourage the on-going nature of student learning, we are setting in motion a process by which each department will provide an annual report of progress to their dean, specifically including what has been learned through assessment efforts and

how those results have been used to improve student learning. Those annual reports will be integrated into the program review cycle, in which each degree program makes an extensive report to the Board of Regents every eight years.

The Paradox of Individual Involvement

There is a paradox in the involvement of individuals in institutional change. On the one hand, effective cultural change has to be "all about me" for faculty who participate. A critical dimension of the change effort involves key faculty change agents who believe that their contribution is critical to success. Otherwise, they will think that somebody else will do the most important work. On the other hand, effective change has to be very much NOT "all about me." If change is dependent on only one person, it is not a true culture change. If that person leaves or becomes less involved, the change disappears. If one person insists on having the credit for the change, that also will likely inhibit the process. For effective change to occur, it has to not matter who gets the credit; the most important thing is that the change happens. As a "capacity-builder," the challenge is to reinforce everyone's efforts with periodic affirmation or "giving credit where it is due," without focusing too much on any one person or group to the exclusion of others. These considerations guided us at Kansas State University as we embarked on the major culture change process that is described below.

Successful Organizational Culture Change

Initial assessment of university culture

For us, the initial assessment of university culture focused on attitudes toward assessment of student learning. The first step was to hold many conversations with deans, department heads, and professionals in the area. We asked them about what was happening in their units and what they thought ought to be happening. At the end of two months of discussions, we had an idea of the current environment and, at least as important, we had engaged people through these conversations, which helped them to begin a crucial reflective process related to the importance of student learning.

Identifying and gaining the commitment of leaders for the change effort

It was clear to us from the start that this particular change, which was focused on student learning, had to be faculty led and faculty driven. The next step, then, was to identify a person or persons in each of the units, at least one of whom was a member of the faculty, who was credible, well-respected, had reasonable social skills, and who was enthusiastic about the change, in this case, assessment of student learning. Once this person made a commitment to leadership, then the university invested in her in tangible ways, e.g. funding her attendance at a major assessment conference, paying summer salary, including this work in performance evaluation, providing adequate professional and clerical support. Not only did these kinds of support make the work itself possible, but they also demonstrated to the greater campus community that the administration was serious about the success of this effort.

The "early adopter" approach – gaining commitment from individuals

At a conference like this one, some years ago, a presenter drew a bell curve on which he indicated three groups of faculty and their position on innovation or change. On the left were the fifteen percent who he called the "early adopters." On the right were the fifteen percent who would not change come hell or high water. In the middle were the remaining seventy percent of faculty, many of whom would agree to become engaged in a change process if it were presented in a reasonable way. Based on this, we decided early in the process that we were, (1) going to find the early adopters and start capacity building with that group and that (2) we were not going to hold back progress or lose momentum waiting for the recalcitrant fifteen percent. We would gather faculty who wanted to be engaged and use the Tom Sawyer approach: what we were about was going to look like so much fun and so intriguing that a good portion of the seventy percent would want to get in on the action.

Identifying and building on strengths versus criticizing deficiencies in past efforts

Major change efforts are often undertaken in response to some identified deficiency or failing. While acknowledging the need for change, successful capacity-builders will focus on the good things that already exist at an institution and the potential for the future based upon known strengths. Telling faculty and department heads how misdirected they were in their previous efforts is usually not helpful in engaging them in a change effort. In

beginning presentations and conversations, while we did point out that we could have done better at assessment of student learning before, we suggested that much of our apparent deficit was the result of the target moving in response to changes in national trends. This approach allowed us then to focus on the parts of previous assessment plans that did have merit and suggest that we build our new model of assessment of student learning around those key ingredients from the past.

Acknowledgement of and engagement with resistance v. ignoring or fighting it

Resistance to change, any change, does and will exist. Our experience suggests the following with regard to resistance:

- Expect it.
- Attempt to identify the sources of resistance.
- Respect and affirm the reasons that people feel resistant.
- Engage leaders/ambassadors who are faculty or professionals who have some credibility with faculty and department heads.
- Talk with people one-on-one or in small groups about their feelings.
- Share enthusiasm and assurance, address questions and concerns honestly.
- Work around pockets of resistance that seem to be (at least for the foreseeable future) unmovable.

We found through our experiences that some of the specific sources of resistance related to assessment of student learning are the following:

- This is just another demand for work and will have, as usual, no helpful outcome.
- We will find deficiencies in our programs and then will be penalized for them.
- This is just another way to identify program for elimination or down-sizing.
- The process will require large investments of time, money, expertise, etc. that we don't have.
- We're the experts in our fields and we know what we're doing and we resent the demand that we prove this.
- Is this "No Child Left Behind" extrapolated to higher education?

Unilateral command for change from the top versus engaging faculty in conversations up front

It is imperative that the change effort have absolute, publicly-stated support from university administration. It is often true that a particular project may have been initiated (or jump-started) in response to an edict from an accrediting agency or governing board. Given that, the effort will be more likely to succeed if conversations with critical faculty leaders begin as early in the process as possible. The extent to which faculty feel that they have a part in defining the conditions of the change (even if the change itself has been imposed on them) will determine their level of genuine engagement. When the details of the change effort are made more widely known on campus, the message should come jointly from university administration and the faculty leaders who have been involved from the start and who have the authority to speak definitively about the parameters.

Flexibility – local (colleges, departments, …) control over process and format of product

As our change processes evolved, we at Kansas State University had to decide at several junctures about the need for uniformity. When that decision was made, leaders were in a position to explain to faculty and departments why the uniformity was required. For everything else, we tried to allow for greater local autonomy, in essence letting departments practice a local option. In general, we found that people feel more comfortable when they think that they have some control over their own processes. Some departments, for example, had already produced documents that addressed assessment of student learning for an accrediting agency or other outside constituency. The university administration and oversight committees accepted those reports if the critical information that we needed was included.

The university leadership community (including both administrators and faculty leaders) decided early in the process that degree program faculty would define the student learning outcomes for each of their degrees and would design and implement assessment of student learning strategies. We did require that, by a specific date, student learning outcomes for each degree program be submitted that had been formally adopted by the faculty of that program. From that point, the faculty had complete control over their assessment plans, as long as four questions could be answered as the plans were implemented: (1) What were the students expected to learn in the degree

program?; (2) What forms of evidence were gathered to assess the extent to which students learned?; (3) How has the evidence or information gathered been used for improvement?; and (4) In what way have the improvements affected student learning?

We provided templates for plans and reports, rubrics for evaluating those plans and reports, multiple training workshops, extensive web-accessible instructions and guidelines, and opportunities for in-person consultation. Of course, the extent to which departments engaged in this process was another local option, although we established certain minimum expectations for all units.

Sense of humor/perspective

In J.K. Rowling's *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry Potter and his classmates at Hogwarts are introduced to an evil entity called a boggart. A boggart is a very adaptable being that manifests itself to each person in the form of whatever is most terrifying to that person. In their Defense Against the Dark Arts class, Professor Lupin teaches them that the only defense against this apparition is to cast a spell that consists of conjuring up, in their own imaginations, a picture of the boggart dressed up in a ridiculous get-up so they can laugh at it, thereby stripping it of all power.

There are known to be many boggarts in the university institutional change process, among them are immovably resistant faculty, bureaucratic inertia, administrators who are long on edicts and short on tact and patience, faculty and others who seem to thrive on challenging any innovation, and people who insist that their views have not truly been heard unless everyone agrees with them. Whereas we are not suggesting that you picture your recalcitrant provost in green leggings and a fig leaf, we are recommending that university leaders develop a sense of perspective. Not taking ourselves too seriously is a good thing. Most of our own boggarts just want assurance and affirmation.

Conclusion

Institutional change in higher education remains a most challenging endeavor. There is comfort in knowing that none of us is alone. Educational transformation at every level is happening and will continue to happen. Of particular focus for many major comprehensive research universities is the need for more effective assessment of student learning. We believe that administrative and faculty leaders at Kansas State University have developed an approach for organizational and cultural change that is transforming our university toward more successfully measuring student learning and developing strategies for using such results to improve learning outcomes. Fortunately, universities can learn from each others' experiences and profit from the knowledge of some things that have worked. This example at Kansas State University provides such a workable framework for successful cultural change.

References

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