

Strengthening Foundations for Assessment Initiatives through Professional Development

Frederick Burrack and Christopher Urban

Introduction

Many whom oversee university assessment face challenges when working to enhance student learning assessment across campus. Issues often confronted include: a) faculty and programs that focus on content dissemination as a primary goal of instruction; b) faculty that are familiar with only a few traditional assessment measures; c) difficulty sharing effective assessment practice due to departmental or institutional silos; d) programs addressing assessment issues with little foundation from best practice research; and e) resistance from those that see student learning assessment as one more thing to do and unrelated to teaching and research.

One way to address these issues is to alter the foundational instructional paradigm that challenges assessment goals. Broadly, this refers to a shift from content coverage to a focus on identifying how students make sense of and apply what has been taught (Miller 2012). Other times the issue that hinders implementing assessment initiatives is not a difference in educational understanding but lack of assessment strategies. Many involved in teaching are familiar with traditional content knowledge assessments but have not learned more effective and efficient techniques of developing and administering these assessments. Other forms of alternative and authentic assessments remain unused or unknown to many. Training on the utilization of a variety of student learning assessment measures is important.

Assessment coordinators observe many effective assessment processes that are nearly invisible to others on campus that might benefit from these best practice examples. A challenge is finding ways to break down disciplinary boundaries so all educational units can benefit. Through sharing best practice, many challenges can be eliminated. There are also many programs that implement student learning assessments for compliance but do not use the process to identify student learning needs or to implement improvements to their programs. This is a problem because closing the assessment loop—making programmatic alterations that result in enhanced student learning—is the ultimate purpose of student learning assessment. Sometimes compliance is in response to resistance but as in all education, the need to learn is an opportunity to communicate the purpose and value of student learning assessment.

Overview of our assessment process

Kansas State University is a large research institution with three campuses, enrolls more than 24,000 students from all 50 states and more than 100 countries, and includes ten colleges and a graduate school. It began implementation of a campus-

wide student learning assessment process in 2004 as a result of recommendations from the Higher Learning Commission's accreditation. Each academic program documents the student learning outcomes essential for diploma credentials, identifies appropriate and specific assessments for each, administers assessments in outcome-level courses, annually collects student achievement data to be discussed among their faculty, and reports assessment results, interpretations, and programmatic decisions. Although all undergraduate and graduate programs report on their assessment plans, our goal is to progress toward a greater number of programs using the assessment process to effectively lead toward discussion and decisions for possible program improvement.

Each program has an assessment coordinator who collects the assessment data designated by the assessment plan and creates a report that is presented to and discussed by the program's faculty. The faculty discussions are added as the narrative for the report, which is submitted to the College Assessment Review Committee (CARC). Each CARC includes a representative (usually the assessment coordinator) from each program. The Annual Progress Reports (APR) are peer-reviewed by the CARC that provides feedback to the program. Simultaneously, the Office of Assessment reviews the electronically submitted reports and provides feedback. Each program has an opportunity to reply to feedback and make revisions to their report. The feedback and the programs' responses are sent from the Office of Assessment to each college Dean with a summary, and a university summary is submitted to the Provost.

Professional Development as a Foundation

The assessment structure of your university will determine the goals upon which to design professional development. In our situation, assessment that is student-centered as well as authentic to the discipline serves students, faculty, and staff best. Inculcating this paradigm across the institution is crucial to ensuring that student learning assessment is of value to our constituents and leads to continual, meaningful improvement. Professional development on assessment contributes to the gradual shift toward this paradigm. It is natural for academic programs to be at various stages when it comes to assessment, some at more advanced levels while others are in the beginning stages. Professional development helps programs make their assessment processes to be more efficient and meaningful.

We identified several professional development outcomes for participants that, taken together, will help our assessment process succeed to its fullest. Participants will possess a student-centered philosophy and knowledge of assessment techniques in order to apply skills to improve assessment processes. Participants will demonstrate skills in specific topics of need, such as learning to write SLOs, developing and using rubrics, and assessment planning and mapping. Participants will

engage in collaborations, both among internal and external partners, to implement ideas beyond one department or institution. Resistant participants will grow less so as they gain assessment knowledge—what it is, who it is for, and why it is important. Knowledge is key to moving faculty from resistance through compliance all the way to active involvement in assessment processes (Miller 2012). Tying professional development to specific outcomes provides the foundation for strengthening assessment practice university-wide.

Professional Development Examples: Conferences

Conference attendance can provide an individual or team with training in assessment, opportunities for collaboration, and knowledge that can help develop an assessment paradigm and overcome resistance. It is not uncommon for resistant individuals to return with enthusiasm to strengthen their program's processes.

For many years, our university's Office of Assessment has supported faculty to attend conferences with the mission of bringing back updated information and strategies to their areas. In 2013, these opportunities were formalized and more effectively marketed through the creation of a mini-grant program. These grants pay for 50% of funding up to \$1000 for conference expenses. Preference is given to those presenting a session on assessment or completing other assessment professional development. Each recipient is required to share what they learned with their program and report to the Office of Assessment how they integrated the knowledge to improve assessment in their program or unit.

Support to attend assessment workshops focused on developing an assessment project have led to several campus-wide improvements over the last few years. In 2012, a team was sent to a week-long institute to develop a project focused on introducing High-Impact Practices across our campus. What developed was a set of sessions presented at our Institute for Student Learning Assessment. In 2013, a second team was sent to create an introductory professional development workshop series, *The Academy for Student-Centered Learning*. This team consisted of five people, and two were unfamiliar/resistant to newer assessment ideas. The information and conversations offered at the workshop noticeably altered their views on assessment.

Professional Development Examples: The Academy for Student-Centered Learning

To formalize what in the past had been scattered attempts at professional development, a set of workshops and trainings were organized within a formal structure of professional development, titled the "Academy for Student-Centered Learning". Partnering with curricular and co-curricular units to plan the Academy provided guidance on content, speakers, scheduling,

and marketing. Participants gain membership in the Academy by completing four introductory workshops (find additional information at www.ksu.edu/assessment/academy):

1. *Student-Centered Learning and the Whole University*. This first workshop covers the student-centered paradigm in both the curricular and co-curricular realms.
2. *Student-Centered Learning Outcomes*. Participants learn how to write and map student learning outcomes at the course and program levels, as well as how student learning outcomes can be student-centered.
3. *Measuring Student Learning*. In the third workshop, participants learn practical ways to measure student learning in and outside the classroom.
4. *Continual Improvement of Student Learning*. Participants put all their knowledge together and begin to think about how they can improve student learning using effective assessment processes in their area.

Incentives for attending Academy workshops are provided to drive attendance as well as promote additional assessment initiatives. Participants are given a book, provided free lunch at the annual Institute for Student Learning Assessment, and preference for mini-grant funds. The audience for the workshop includes new faculty, graduate students, and faculty wanting to learn about assessment in a student-centered paradigm.

Over 80 participants completed at least one workshop in the first year of the Academy, while over 50 completed three or more to become recognized as Academy Scholars. These participants are now primed to become more active members in their department/unit assessment process. Future plans for the Academy are to increase the focus on assessment strategies and provide targeted workshops on topics identified by participants. In addition, workshops will be restructured to allow participants to choose those that meet their needs but still attain membership. Faculty and staff will be able to earn membership through a combination of attending workshops, attending the Institute for Student Learning Assessment, or by receiving an assessment award. This allows multiple paths to become recognized for involvement with assessment.

Professional Development Examples: Targeted Workshops

One-time targeted workshops are useful to meet the needs of a large population of faculty and staff with a diverse range of assessment knowledge, as well as to promote specific assessment initiatives. As part of a larger pilot project to promote use of the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics, a day of workshops was planned. An author of the AAC&U book on the VALUE Rubrics (the same one distributed to Academy for Student-Centered Learning participants) presented workshops for those

participating in the pilot, for those with a general interest in the VALUE Rubrics, and for a specific department that expressed interest.

Another example is from 2013, when the College of Business brought in a speaker to prepare for the assessment part of an upcoming accreditation visit. The two-day training allowed the entire college to meet, learn, and discuss assessment issues—something which is limited to assessment committees otherwise. In addition, because the discussion was discipline-specific and couched in accreditation, faculty appeared less resistant to change (Ewell, Paulson, and Kinzie 2011).

Professional Development Examples: Institute for Student Learning Assessment

With the goal of providing advanced training in student learning assessment, data analysis, and record keeping, in 2008 we initiated our own assessment conference, currently titled “The Institute for Student Learning Assessment”. The conferences have consisted of a keynote speaker on a topic relevant for issues selected by the Office of Assessment and two sets of break-out sessions by representatives from programs that have exhibited best-practice assessment. In 2013, the Institute was expanded into a state conference inviting session leaders from college and universities across the state of Kansas and a national keynote speaker. This year the keynote was a representative from the Lumina Foundation speaking about the Degree Qualifications Profile.

This year’s state-wide Institute included four sets of break-out sessions: Best Practices of Assessment for University Level Issues; Best Practices of Assessment for Faculty; Best Practices of Assessment for Program Assessment Coordinators; and Best Practices of Assessment for Student Life Units. At www.ksu.edu/assessment/institute2013, you will find how we called for proposals, how we encouraged registration from across the state, a detailed description of the program, sponsors that helped finance the institute, and handouts from all sessions.

The purpose for expanding to a state-wide conference was two-fold. The first was to bring new ideas to expand the foundation of understanding student learning assessment that has been developed thus far. The other was to bring together assessment coordinators from other Kansas institutions to learn from each other and share in discussions of the assessment issues and solutions that are common.

The Institute was expanded beyond a one-day conference to periodic video-conference discussions among Kansas college/university assessment coordinators. Future plans are to develop an internet-based site to share assessment ideas, issues, discussions, and best-practice among all Kansas assessment coordinators.

Professional Development Examples: Assessment Showcase

The Assessment Showcase is an opportunity to recognize outstanding efforts put forth by programs toward enhancing student learning assessment and progress made in closing the loop toward program improvements. These awards are selected by the Director of the Office of Assessment from two sources: recommendations from each college's assessment coordinator and observations from the annual progress reports from programs. Awards recognize efficient assessment processes implemented by programs, improvements made to the program's assessment process, program improvements implemented in response to assessment results, and clarity in assessment reporting. Seven to ten assessment awards (framed certificates) are presented each year by the Provost to individuals or programs. These awards are often seen hanging in the offices of recipients, indicating their perceived value. This year we are asking each recipient to present a short description of their efforts as a means to share best-practice of student learning assessment. These awards have been presented since 2008.

Professional Development Examples: In-service meetings specific for programs

One important element of developing a paradigm of assessment across campus is meeting each program and its faculty on their own terms. Autonomy is one of the most important conditions for success of a university-wide assessment system, and with it comes respect for the academic uniqueness and value of each program's curriculum and mission. It is important that assessment processes reflect the unique ways that students demonstrate learning in programmatic areas and not be forced into a 'one-size-fits-all' assessment system (Ewell, Paulson, and Kinzie 2011).

Dictating one mechanism for assessment or one way of representing learning within an outcome can cause programs to lose ownership of their assessment process and student learning to be misrepresented by non-authentic assessments. The Office of Assessment has worked hard at meeting annually with individual programs to collaborate on assessment processes, encouraging programs to choose best-practice assessments that suit their curricula, accreditation requirements, and faculty culture. We have seen involvement in student learning assessment reporting increase from 60% to 100% of our programs as a result of individual attention and respect for programmatic needs.

Conclusion

The culture of assessment desired for higher education must be centered on providing evidence to document learning authentic for the discipline. This culture can be enhanced through focused professional development. 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 component of education.
- reporting of student learning assessment should result in program improvement.
- content presentation should not presume the occurrence of learning.
- 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.

References

Miller, M. 2012. From Denial to Acceptance: The Stages of Assessment.

www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/Miller.pdf

Ewell, P., K. Paulson, and J. Kinzie. 2011. Down and In: Assessment Practices at the Program Level.

<http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/NILOAsurveyreport2011.pdf>

About the Authors

Frederick Burrack joined the Kansas State music faculty as a music education specialist in fall 2005. He oversees the graduate studies for the Music Program and is Director of the Office of Assessment associated with the Provost Office. Prior to Kansas State, Dr. Burrack taught instrumental music education at Ball State University from 2002-2005 and instrumental music in the Carroll Community School District in Carroll, Iowa from 1982-2002. At Carroll High School he initiated student self-assessment and portfolio development into the performance program. Dr. Burrack's research interests include student learning assessment methods, cross-disciplinary instruction, and instructional thought development in music teachers. He is on the advisory board for the Music Educators Journal and chairs the Kansas Music Educators Association and Kansas Alliance for the Arts advocacy committees. He has numerous publications in music educators' journals and has presented nationally and internationally.

Chris Urban joined K-State's Office of Assessment as Assistant Director in spring 2013 and is currently working toward a Ph.D. in Higher Education Administration. He served the two years prior in national service as an AmeriCorps*VISTA volunteer at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska. During his time as a VISTA, Chris worked to improve educational outcomes of military and veteran students by establishing a one-stop student services office. Chris has been a life-long K-Stater, having earned both a B.S. in Economics (2008) and M.A. in English-Cultural Studies (2011) from the university. His interests include behavioral science, theatre, cultural theory, and volunteering.