

## Lessons learned while conducting educational program assessment

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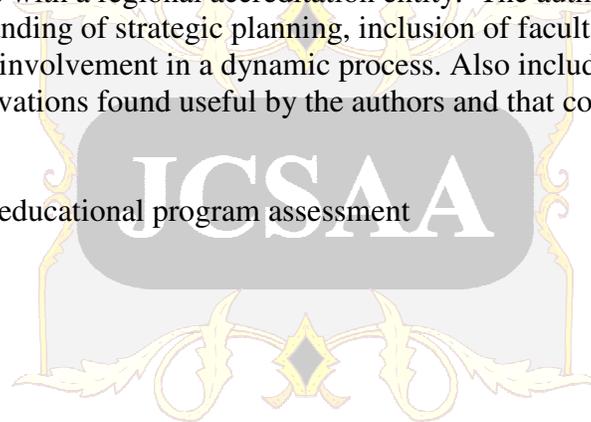
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### Abstract

Assessment, accountability, and strategic planning are all processes that are included in accreditation for colleges and universities. For most colleges and universities, starting the reaffirmation process means identifying current assessment practices and reports from academic units and programs. This paper discusses the lessons learned during a successful completion of the reaffirmation process with a regional accreditation entity. The authors will present a model that includes an understanding of strategic planning, inclusion of faculty at all levels and affirms continuous learning and involvement in a dynamic process. Also included in the paper are additional tips and observations found useful by the authors and that could be useful to the reader.

Keywords: assessment, educational program assessment



## **Introduction**

Assessment, accountability, and strategic planning are all processes that are included in accreditation for colleges and universities. For most colleges and universities, starting the reaffirmation process means identifying current assessment practices and reports from academic units and programs. This paper discusses the lessons learned during a successful completion of the reaffirmation process with a regional accreditation entity. The authors will present a model that includes an understanding of strategic planning, inclusion of faculty at all levels and affirms continuous learning and involvement in a dynamic process. Also included in the paper are additional tips and observations found useful by the authors and that could be useful to the reader.

### **Lesson # 1: An Articulated Assessment Model is Needed.**

As part of institutional effectiveness, institutional assessment models need to focus on assessment of both unit goals and program student learning outcomes. The articulation of the assessment process on how a campus best moves forward in its academic programs is integral to institutional effectiveness.

A uniform assessment model in an institution greatly facilitates the gathering and use of data. However, assessments should not represent merely an institution's response to external demands (Hollowell, Middaugh, Sibolski, 2006) such as meeting the expectations of regional accreditation, but should keep in mind that information gathered is to be used to improve decision-making and student learning. An assessment model that is articulated should consider the following: 1) purpose of assessment 2) data required 3) data collection method 4) intended audience and 5) inclusion of appropriate faculty and staff (Walvoord, 2004; Aloï, Gardner, & Lusher, 2003).

The initial development of an articulated academic assessment model at the institution began with a small task force of three faculty members who had the expertise in academic planning, including goals setting at different academic levels, writing and assessing student learning outcomes, and strategic planning experiences. This task force reviewed unit (departmental) goals and student learning outcomes from all academic units and concluded with the recommendation to develop an articulated assessment model that could be used by all academic units to assess goals and program student learning outcomes.

### **Lesson #2 Long- and Short-Range Academic Department Goals Should Reflect a University's Strategic Plan.**

Typically, strategic planning is an ever-evolving process that encompasses all areas of a university and which may be undertaken by appointing different administrative committees of faculty and staff to study the diverse areas of the university. It is these different committee reports that may blend diverse objectives into a common vision for the university and then is transformed into a written document known as a strategic plan. Because this strategic plan is created with considerable input from a large number of university personnel, this familiarization allows for division and department goals to be closely linked to the plan.

Within a university's organizational management structure, academic departments exist as instructional components of the university. Within these instructional components, the

academic standards of instruction, service and research converge and are assessed. Academic departments define their mission and formulate department goals by linking to the college and university strategic goals. Difficulties arise when a university strategic plan is developed with little involvement of the university community and thus is not embraced as readily as when wide representation is employed. Also, strategic plans that are not examined at least biennially should be reviewed by faculty before academic departments begin their annual review of departmental goals in order to reacquaint themselves with university goals.

### **Additional Tips for Lesson #2:**

Standardize a calendar for review of university strategic plans and departmental missions and goals. Decide at the beginning of each assessment cycle when strategic plans and department goals will be reviewed and updated. Keep to that schedule in an effort to always be current.

Embrace wide faculty and staff representation in whatever model is used to review these plans and goals. Be careful to draw upon these same committees annually or biennially whenever updating these plans in order for ideas to transcend academic years and eliminate the re-teaching or relearning that must accompany the creation of new committees with different faculty. This is especially true if there is a standardization of formats or forms for reporting. To change personnel on these committees may mean the deletion of important sections due to lack of information as to why sections were included or not included in reports. Do not change formatting until one complete assessment cycle has been completed.

Departmental goals should be created with entire department faculty involvement. This involvement will ensure not only diverse knowledge but also faculty buy-in for the goals that will need to be assessed. As the goals are created, faculty can also begin to develop objectives for completing those goals and thus proceed with the assessment cycle.

### **Lesson #3: Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes Should be Aligned with the “Standards of the Profession” as Set by External and/or Discipline Specific Accrediting Agencies.**

Student learning outcomes are statements that describe the skills and knowledge sets that students must have obtained by the end of a program of study. Often these student learning outcomes are found in the standards set by accreditation agencies of the respective discipline. Faculty are key to the development of student learning outcomes because of their knowledge of these skill sets along with program requirements and faculty expectations of students (Palomba and Banta, 2001).

Palomba and Banta (2001) notes that academic departments must have a clear understanding of the purpose of assessment and its direct link to improving student learning and development. Importance is placed on several different areas: 1) how the outcomes are taught, 2) in which course(s) they are taught, 3) what data is collected, 4) how results are to be used for planning and decision-making, and 5) how student learning will be enhanced as a result of the assessment process (Guskey, 2000; Palomba, 2001). Bresciani (2006) also notes that results should be able to improve future assessment thus ensuring change and program improvement.

A first example of “standards of the profession” can be found in *The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business* (AACSB) web site. The preamble to AACSB International accreditation states: “accreditation focuses on the quality of education. Standards

set demanding but realistic thresholds, challenge educators to pursue continuous improvement, and guide improvement in educational programs. It is important to note that accreditation does not create quality learning experiences. Academic quality is created by the educational standards implemented by individual faculty members in interactions with students. Accreditation observes, recognizes, and sometimes motivates educational quality created within the institution (AACSB, 2008).

A second example taken from the *National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education* (NCATE) web site states: “the standards measure an institution’s effectiveness according to the profession’s expectations for high quality teacher preparation. The education profession has reached a general consensus about the knowledge and skills educators need to help P–12 students learn. That consensus forms the basis for NCATE’s unit standards and specialized program standards. The specialized program standards are an integral part of the NCATE accreditation system as they describe the specialized content that teacher candidates should master” (NCATE, 2008).

As faculty discussions about the evaluation of program goals and student learning outcomes ensued, each department was asked to consider reviewing the appropriate accreditation standards for their discipline. This exercise provided valuable insight to some academic areas that had not reviewed changes in accreditation standards.

### **Additional Tips for Lesson #3:**

Some disciplines do not have external groups that have set such standards. In those cases, the faculty, using their collective expertise, can develop the standards that they believe should be used as the student learning outcomes for their discipline. In most cases, disciplines will have external professional organizations if not accrediting bodies that have set national standards. Having identified the student learning outcomes, it is useful for the faculty to reference the alignment of the outcomes to the standards of the profession in the course objectives found in their syllabi. Aligning their syllabi objectives to the student learning outcomes as set by national standards will assist when conducting future regional accreditation self-studies as well as conducting periodic program reviews required in Academic Affairs.

### **Lesson # 4: Standardizing the Assessment Process.**

The diversity of assessment information across the institution led the task force to recommend a standardized assessment process for unit goals and student learning outcomes. The task force found differences in many areas including assessment timeframes, documentation records, formatting of documentation, and data collection methods. Faced with such diversity of information, the task force developed a standardized process that was presented to various constituents beginning with the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Deans, Department Chairs, and faculty. The standardization of forms and reporting was tested initially with two departments and programs and results were presented to the various campus constituents. General acceptance of standardized forms for achieving assessment information was embraced by the various campus components.

The major challenge faced at the department level was the issue of technical skills needed to write appropriate departmental goals and student learning outcomes. Professional development was provided and continues to be available to faculty.

An example of standardizing the assessment process was introduced in the College of Education with teacher education preparation programs. Programs aligned student learning outcomes with national standards, best-practices, and with conceptual framework for teacher preparation.

### **Lesson #5: Empowering the Talent Within and Continuously Teaching Others.**

Luna and Cullen, in their article *Empowering the Faculty: Mentoring Redirected and Renewed*, maintain that at the university or college level, both quality improvement and empowerment of faculty together result in faculty employing their special abilities and expertise to their professional responsibilities and encourage their professional development. This same concept has been applied by businesses to improve and develop the value and achievement of individual employees as well a business' efficacy (Luna & Cullen, 1995).

At the institution, the task force of faculty developing the assessment model had extensive expertise and knowledge in developing department and program goals, writing student learning objectives, writing assessment procedures and training individuals on each. In addition, the task force had credibility among their peers thus allowing the group to "hit the ground running" as ideas flowed easily about the type of assessment models and data collection processes needed.

As faculty in the different academic units were taught or reacquainted with the process of writing student learning objectives and program goals, the task force became mentors to these faculty who then mentored other faculty in these processes. A small group of individuals can start a process, but it can only be maintained with the assistance of others who are mentored in that process. Allowing individuals to become empowered strengthens the process considerably and encourages inclusiveness.

It is interesting to note that throughout the developmental work of the task force, it was necessary to keep colleague faculty, chairs and deans informed and involved in the process. Although terms and processes were clear to the task force, they were not as clear to others when implementation of the assessment model began. Thus, a continuous training component was required to teach others exactly what and how the assessment process should be implemented. While it had not been the intention of the task force to teach others in the writing of mission statements, writing measurable objectives, creation of activity statements, and teach assessment methodology, it was quickly recognized that for this assessment model to succeed, continuous training, sample documents and professional development on assessment was needed. Faculty with expertise in specific areas were assembled and a training module was soon developed along with Web resources and assessment handbooks. The task force became mentors to other faculty who then mentored additional faculty in these processes. The success of this assessment model for the university was due to the inclusiveness of many in the process.

### **Additional Tips: for Lesson #5**

When starting the re-affirmation of accreditation process, it is important to be inclusive. The depth and breadth of the committee composition is essential. Taking time to do some team building and allowing committee members to know each other and gain respect for each other brings about an abundance of untapped talent. It was found that the shy members of the group

often had the most to contribute but they just had not been asked to do so. If in the process of discovery you can build ownership of the collective product you find that individuals make extraordinary efforts to be successful. Peterson and Deal (2009) state “that the key to successful performance is heart and spirit infused into relationships among people, their efforts to serve all, and a shared sense of responsibility for learning.”

### **Lesson #6 Standardizing the Assessment Language to Have One Common Meaning.**

It is interesting to note that each university that undergoes reaffirmation or accreditation of some sort, at some point in the process, develops a glossary of terms. It becomes glaringly obvious as the assessment process gets under way, that not all people involved in assessment use assessment terms alike. As this process continues, the lack of a common definition or interpretation of terms may lead to incorrect information being reported. Therefore, one of the first documents that may be created, with the assistance of faculty that traditionally teach the writing of student learning outcomes, mission statements and objectives, is an official glossary of assessment terminology.

Once a glossary of assessment terminology is developed, it should be disseminated widely to all faculty and staff at the university to ensure everyone understands the terminology and definitions. Review and input should be sought for additional terms or clarification of definitions. This glossary then becomes a dynamic document that is posted electronically and updated and revised as new terms or processes are encountered.

#### **Additional Tips for Lesson #6**

Use expert faculty that teach educational assessment and the writing of student learning objectives as they will have the most commonly misunderstood terms readily at their fingertips from their experience with student teachers. This will thus shorten the debate of which terms and definitions to be included in the glossary. Not only does it shorten the debate, it also provides the university with a set of people that can expertly teach faculty and staff how to develop the different sections of the assessment process, thus killing two birds with one stone.

Use technology as much as possible by creating a website specifically for assessment and the assessment reports. Post the dynamic glossary of terms on that website for all personnel to use as needed. Not only will the posting of reports and documents be readily available to each committee, it will also eliminate duplication of effort when a task is complete and information needed by another committee.

By creating a single website, most, if not all, information will be located in a centralized area with one office or committee in charge of uploading and updating that information. This will create uniformity in information and one standardize format.

#### **Additional Overall Observations**

The following are some additional observations made one year after the reaffirmation processes was completed:

1. When selecting an assessment steering committee or assessment director, reflect on the strengths and weakness of personnel at the university. The assessment process requires someone with historical perspective of the institution, with strong organization skills, with

persuasive and compelling communication skills and with a solid commitment for contributing to the university.

2. Empower these individual or individuals with the ability to ask or lead other university administration, faculty and staff in the assessment process and reporting needed.
3. Create a position and appoint a person to an assessment, reaffirmation or accreditation office and charge them with continuing the assessment processes annually. Many times, much valuable work is begun with reaffirmation or accreditation that is just not continued by universities due to lack of responsibilities being assigned for the continuation of that process. Yes, an institution may have begun a two-year cycle of assessment, but yet, no one might be assigned to ensure that second year reporting is actually completed by departments or division all over the university. It is this constant reminder by a person or position in charge of assessment that keeps the assessment momentum ongoing. If someone isn't keeping the processing going, complacency sets in immediately.
4. Provide a full-time office or position that can address questions and clarifications that ultimately arise during years that follow the assessment. This allows for information that was generated and processes that were put in place continue being conducted and that the original concerns not be perpetuated. Sometimes, inadvertently, area experts are perceived by university personnel and these experts surface when questions arise. Whether these perceived experts are empowered to answer these questions or not, they are ultimately empowered by default. An office of position eliminates the empowerment of individuals by default.
5. Care should be taken to ensure that the standardization process runs a full cycle prior to making any changes to the process or forms. For example, standardization of the process and reporting forms was a two year cycle and included all departments across the university not just in academic affairs. Now, a year into the first assessment cycle, plans are underway to transfer the reporting forms to an online format and a different group is charged with that process. Unfortunately, this new group does not have the historical perspective of why certain items were included in the original reporting forms, and since the online forms are not able to include all the data as the original forms, some decisions are being made to change the information requested. The university is just beginning the second year of the two year assessment cycle, the entire process has not been completed before a change is being made. What this means is that all the training that has been done previously will have to be redone and confusion may ensue for those individuals that have been exposed to both plans. It is an observation that an institution should wait until one full assessment cycle has been completed before making changes to the process or forms without full information of what did and did not work.

## Summary

Faced with reaffirmation of accreditation, the institution found itself taking a good look at its assessment procedures for its academic programs. Understanding that such procedures should encompass both the assessment of academic departments as well as that of student learning outcomes by degree program, the task of designing a model that would standardize the process in terms of timelines, documentation, and assessment vocabulary became a priority. Along with the development of this model, an understanding of strategic planning, inclusion of faculty at all levels and an affirmation of continuous learning and involvement in this dynamic process was

attained. Another benefit of this model was that the design was flexible enough to be incorporated into the total institutional assessment plan. The lessons learned by the institution are not ones that are “extraordinary” by any means; however, had these lessons been known at the beginning of the assessment process, these lessons might have made the process a little easier.

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