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**If Assessment is so Wonderful,
Why Aren't More People Engaged In It?**

By Marilee J. Bresciani, Ph.D.

Academic units engaged in continuous assessment testify to its many meaningful applications. Assessment can

- reinforce or emphasize the academic unit's mission or the mission of the university,
- modify, shape, and improve programs and/or performance (formative),
- critique a program's results, quality, or value compared to the program's previously defined principles (summative),
- inform planning,
- inform decision making,
- assist in the request for additional funds from the university and external community, and
- assist in meeting accreditation requirements, models of best practices, and national benchmarks.

While the many benefits of assessment seem clear, Karla Brown illustrated several reasons that faculty may not want to participate in assessment in her recent article from the March-April 2001 edition of Assessment Update titled, *Why Aren't Faculty Jumping on the Assessment Band wagon - and What can Be Done to Encourage Their Involvement?*

Brown states that many faculty do not join in assessment for one or more of the following reasons. Faculty may

- be convinced that assessment is just another fad and may not want to take time away from their already overcommitted schedules to check out the "latest rage,"
- have no more time to give to yet another project,
- wonder what the direct, personal benefits are for them,
- believe that they are already conducting assessment and wonder why others don't recognize that,

- fear that the results of their assessment could be used against them in their tenure process or merit review, or be used to harm their reputation,
- think that assessment results would be meaningless and thus the steps to conduct assessment are a waste of time,
- think they are doing just fine and thus do not need a “formal” process to prove that they are,
- think that what they do in their own classroom is their own business (i.e., academic freedom) so no one else needs to know about it, or
- feel that if they conduct assessment, the responsibility and role of the student in the learning process are disregarded.

In the same issue of Assessment Update, Miriam Fultz and Leslie Wong wrote about four areas of faculty concern regarding assessment in their article titled, *Creating and Sustaining an Assessment Culture*. Some of their reasons were echoed in Brown’s article. In addition, Fultz and Wong state that faculty may resist assessment because they may be uneasy with initiatives that may change their academic lifestyle or culture.

After discussing these two articles with my supervisor, Dr. Jo Allen, it struck us that these reasons for resisting assessment may also apply to university administrators and staff.

Additional reasons could include that they

- do not have access to the resources to help them conduct assessment (research assistants, analysis tools, assessment administration and analysis support, etc.),
- may not know what to do with the results,
- may resist changing/improving those programs that the assessment results show need changing (similar to that posed by Fultz and Wong),
- may be concerned with the political implications or the public relations issues caused by the assessment findings,
- may simply not feel empowered to enter into the assessment conversation, especially if they are surrounded by assessment experts, and, finally
- may feel that their authority or credibility will be compromised because they are unfamiliar with assessment terminology, standards, processes, and instruments. Fear of “saying the wrong thing” can be stifling and can cause assessment conversations to falter before they even begin.

Other barriers to participation in assessment can come from the assessment professionals themselves. Some may

- fear that by clearly and concisely defining assessment to faculty and administrators, the assessment professional’s expertise and terminology will be trivialized by people not recognizing its complexities,
- feel that “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing” and the non-experts empowered to participate in the assessment process may actually end up making a bigger mess of things, and
- fear that if others begin doing assessment, they could lose their value and academic credibility among their colleagues as well as lose their jobs.

Brown's article addresses solutions to the concerns that she raises. She emphasizes that acknowledging that these reasons exist and communicating that understanding and concern with faculty may alleviate some of the anxiety surrounding assessment. She further points out that institutions can move assessment forward by providing resources, professional development, institutional support, rewards, and evidence that the organization is committed to assessment. Fultz and Wong state the importance of understanding the faculty culture and lifestyle first before introducing assessment.

These are very helpful solutions indeed. I extend them by recommending that we also equip faculty, administrators, and staff with the language to enter into the assessment conversation. While this approach might pose the danger of excluding an assessment professional's preferred definition, it may also provide the catalyst that is needed for those who are standing on the sidelines to enter into the conversation; to feel safe about asking questions; to feel the support they desire to succeed or fail in their assessment efforts; and to feel empowered to move forward in their assessment efforts.

Defining a common language and a shared conceptual understanding of assessment is not an easy task. However, engagement in assessment is not an easy undertaking. It takes conversation, understanding, a willingness to question and be questioned, and, as Trudy Banta cautions, a great deal of time. While North Carolina State University is just now undertaking the task of defining a common language and a shared conceptual understanding of assessment in relation to the Council on Undergraduate Program Review (CUPR) guidelines, other universities such as the University of Southern Colorado (USC) have already produced a simple assessment language. Therefore, we can be encouraged by USC's accomplishments in assessment as we move forward with our own initiatives.

References:

Banta, T. W. (1993). Making a difference: Outcomes of a decade of assessment in higher education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brown, K. (April-May, 2001). Why aren't faculty jumping on the assessment bandwagon - and what can be done to encourage their involvement? Assessment Update (13), 2, p. 8-9 and 16.

Fultz, M.L. & Wong, L.E. (April-May, 2001). Creating and sustaining an assessment culture. Assessment Update (13), 2, p. 12-13.

The Council on Undergraduate Program Review (CUPR)

The Vice Provost for Undergraduate Affairs charged the Courses and Curricula Committee (UCCC) to develop guidelines for the qualitative review of portfolios submitted as part of the undergraduate program review process.

In 2000, under the advisement of the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Affairs, a separate subcommittee of the UCCC was established to craft the procedures for program review. To achieve balanced college representation within this group, each college will be represented with members from the UCCC and the Council on Undergraduate Education (CUE). If a college lacks representation from either of these groups, the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs from that college will appoint a faculty member to the committee. This subcommittee, now functioning as a task force, is the Committee on Undergraduate Program Review (CUPR).

Program review cycles will be coordinated with accreditation cycles whenever possible. CUPR will consult with faculty at the college and department levels on preparing portfolios for review and will review submitted portfolios. CUPR will determine whether the portfolios are complete, whether quality issues have been adequately addressed, and whether the required activities [assessment of outcomes, course actions at the various levels (departmental, college, cross-college, etc.)] are being carried out. CUPR will submit an annual report on its activities to the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Affairs via UCCC.

CUPR Guidelines

Guidelines to inform the development and review of portfolios were developed this past year by CUPR and can be found at

http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/governance/Ad_hoc/CUPR/fyi/guidelinesrev0101.pdf

Through the guidelines, CUPR works to respect and retain individuality among departments in program reviews. In other words, different departments need freedom to conduct reviews in unique ways relevant to the specific program. Because of this individuality, posted guidelines offer suggestions rather than requiring specific data to be collected in a specific way.

Common Language and Shared Conceptual Understanding

CUPR members and NC State assessment professionals are currently drafting the Common Language and Shared Conceptual Understanding document for CUPR. Look for it in the near future on the CUPR website at www.ncsu.edu/provost/governance/Ad_hoc/CUPR/

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