

North Carolina State University
Undergraduate Assessment Symposium
April, 2006

Overcoming faculty resistance to assessment

Fred Koslowski Ed.D., M.B.A.
Temple University College of Education
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
Philadelphia, PA
Koslowsf@temple.edu

Introduction

- The interest in assessment in higher education emanates from many different constituencies. Policy makers, the higher education consumer, and advocacy groups, continue to call for an increased assessment of the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of America's institutions of higher education
- While measurement and assessment seem reasonable and appropriate to those in almost every other profession, college and university faculty continue to resist the ideas, processes, and outcomes of educational assessment

Introduction .

- In some cases, those who try to invoke practices and terminology from industry are met with various forms of resistance
 - *Are campuses becoming battlegrounds? Business-minded leaders draw fire from some professors* (USA Today, 2006)

Introduction . .

- Despite evidence that the enterprise of education is (and is becoming) an increasingly economic activity as much as an intellectual one
 - *State higher education funding has fallen sharply, a report by public college finance officials says, from \$7121 per student in 2001 to \$5833 in 2005* (Wall Street Journal, 2006)

Continuum

- The historical basis/need for assessment in higher education is well documented but rarely considers the larger "system"
 - E.g. Assessment is inextricably linked to post WWII economic, political, and industrial conditions; in particular, consumer and Quality movements (Koslowski, in press)

Continuum .

- Understandably, the undertones of corporate managerial styles like Total Quality Management, and Continuous Quality Improvement are neither easily applicable, nor endearing to academic professionals
- However, the assessment movement – an explicit outcome of quality thinking, whose goals it would seem, have been inadequately communicated and/or understood throughout higher education – is sufficient enough to induce campus wide anxiety and confusion (Koslowski, 2005)

Continuum ..

More recently:

- **(Renewal of the) Higher Education Act**
 - Focus on greater accountability from colleges including holding them more accountable for the performance of their students and curbing tuition increases (Burd, 2003)
- **NCLB Legislation (2001)**
 - Takes center stage in the national k-12 quality, assessment, and accountability debate
 - ❖ Palpable, systemic effect on Higher Education environment

Continuum ...

- **Measuring Up 2004**
 - Published bi-annually by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education reiterates that America's colleges are especially "under performing" with regard to quality assessment and measurement of student learning
- **The National Assessment of Adult Literacy**
 - "Revealed distressing declines in literacy, especially among those with the most education" (NY Times, 2006)
- **The Commission on the Future of Higher Education & U.S. DOE**
 - Exploring standardized exit exams for college students (Arenson, 2006)

* Voices of resistance

- **A professor of Humanities explains why he perceives that an inherent conflict exists between measuring learning, and the tenets of a quality education:**

"Assessment it seems to me is interested in the kinds of learning that can be measured on multiple choice tests and scored by machine. Assessment is interested in electronic scoring for essays. These are frightening things because they require everyone to think alike; which is they require everyone to not think"

* Adapted from the author's previously published and unpublished work.

Voices of resistance.

- **A Faculty member:**

"What's the substance of [assessment]? What's the reasoning behind it? Why isn't it being communicated universally so that everyone is on the same page everyone is working from the same set of definitions and everyone can therefore contribute. How am I expected to contribute to something whose definition I don't understand? I mean what am I supposed to do? . . . And then you want me to put all this time to dedicate myself to a proposition which I will never see the fruits of, which isn't putting any more dollars in my paycheck. And in addition, you want me to go through something that benefits the college without any recognized benefits to me?"

Voices of resistance ..

- **A top administrator with a background in the k-12 public school system:**

"I don't know what [the faculty's] problem is. . . [outcomes assessment merely] establishes criteria for success. . . it proves what we've been doing all along"

Voices of resistance ...

- **Veteran (10+ years, avg. age 55+) faculty are heard to say:**

"You never know when, or where, or how you affect a student. It may be 30 years from now. How do you measure that?"

- **Before storming out of a committee meeting on curricular coherence, a math professor stated:**

"What do I care what they're doing in the English department? I'm a Math teacher!"

Voices of resistance . . .

- **One professor illuminated the conflicts metaphorically:**

"Administrations tend generally in my experience to buy the business model; I think it's because they're infected with business in their fund raising. . . and I use the term infection deliberately. The business model is designed to [invest] in products; that's what business is about, it's a product. It can be an intellectual product but it's still a thing; a specific discrete thing that everyone who looks at it will understand exactly the same about it; you know a shoe, a water bottle. . . ideas aren't that. Ideas are not products"

Themes

- **A Misunderstanding**

- Misunderstanding of the goals of quality and assessment. For faculty, expanding their role (whether implicitly or explicitly) and implementing quality and assessment principles are seen as mutually exclusive activities

- CQI (and related assessment) terminology grossly misunderstood to mean: *"nothing you ever do will be good enough"* (Linkon, AAUP, 2005)

Themes .

- **Class Warfare**

- The faculty feels that all activities that have to do with the transmission of knowledge – teaching, learning, assessment, etc. – are their domain exclusively

- Outcomes assessment is especially incendiary because it is thought of as an instructional matter that is not emanating from the faculty but rather, is perceived as being imposed on them from the top down

Themes . .

- **Entrenchment**

- Tenure (and its accompanying conventions) is also an impediment to quality and change in higher education as it limits individual and collective flexibility and exacerbates the bureaucratic tendencies of the organization (O'Toole, 1978)

- Administrators typically not trained in organizational change management/business; efforts to date lack proper command and control

Question:

- ❖ *In the collegial, loosely-coupled, unionized world of academia, what sequence of actions should an administrator take in order to increase the likelihood that assessment will be accepted, or at the very least, not resisted?*

Strategies

1. **Communicate**

- Tell it like it is; what are the goal(s), how will it be used, etc.
- Don't intentionally obfuscate key points, but do resist the urge to comprehensively "frame the issue". Comprehensiveness can open the floor to a pedagogical debate and faculty, regardless of prior training and knowledge, will use this as a way to stall or slow the process
- This straightforward approach can be used to constructively engage willing faculty

Strategies .

2. Advocate

- Don't dictate or mandate too early, rather, advocate and persuade. This may take decidedly longer to have a noticeable effect, but over contentious issues, it will inspire long-term engagement rather than further fragmentation
- A note about culture: Don't make it a matter of culture or – even more dangerous – *culture change* to early. Faculty will fall back to a position of cautious retreat and reduced participation as a matter of survival and territory protection

Strategies ..

3. Educate

- Effective education about assessment is essential to an organizations health and is a powerful mechanism for eradicating fear and resistance; at a minimum gaining compliance, and at a maximum, affecting transformational change
- Capitalize on alternative avenues to engage faculty about assessment (penalty & logistic “free”)
- Bring in “other voices” (moderate and conservative legislators, etc.) in order to emphasize the broad systems perspective

Strategies ...

4. Mandate

- There is a reality to organizational life no matter what the industry or enterprise, no matter what the product or service
- At some point, in the face of monumental resistance – of the type that can threaten an organizations survival – it will be necessary to move beyond discussions and debates in the faculty senate, and towards universal implementation

Strategies

4. Mandate .

- The ultimate responsibility for the management, adaptability, and survivability of an institution of higher education falls squarely on the shoulders of the administration – *not the faculty*
- E.g. The seriousness of Accreditation – while a soft form of external quality control – should be explained to the faculty in terms that “move” them (continued employment, pay, state funding, productivity, reputation, etc.)

Strategies

4. Mandate . .

- The continuum is most likely something that faculty may not fully understand as their day to day activities are carried out almost entirely independent of the administration and the external environment
- This compartmentalization leads to a false sense of security and inconsequentiality
- It is up to the higher education administrator to build in consequences and create an environment where self-interest is not paramount

Strategies

4. Mandate . . .

- *“Being responsible sometimes means pissing people off”* - attributed to Colin Powell, Chairman (Ret.) Joint Chiefs of Staff
- Administrators need to fully accept the burden of leadership and be prepared to make unpopular decisions
- Additionally, faculty need to realize that Mandate is a legitimate aspect of all organizations (esp. those who are increasingly accountable in one form or another to the public)

Strategies.....

4. Mandate

When asked how to engage the resistance to assessment (especially from faculty) a colleague at a regional accrediting body told me bluntly:

"Tell them it's coming and it's not going away"

Strategies.....

4. Mandate

- A word of warning for academic leaders especially: mandating is the one category/step that, ideally, should be done last.
- If Communicate, Advocate, and Educate are done and done reasonably well, this will lessen the autocratic undertones of Mandate and/or negate the need for it all together
- ❖ Faculty can avoid or lessen its effects as well by proactively addressing the issue of quality and assessment at the course and program levels

Epilogue

- Thank you to the session attendees for their excellent comments and observations; there is still much to do.

Thank you!