

COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION: CONNECTING ASSESSEMENT TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

In the real estate profession, the mantra is “location, location, location.” In most other pursuits, an advisable mantra might be “communication, communication, communication.” The prudence of academic leaders adopting such a mantra in the instance of assessment of student learning is easily illustrated by even the most fleeting review of institutional case studies where false starts, strong beginnings accompanied by equally strong fizzles, and outright “no-go’s” are evident.

In the vast majority of such cases, communication was a prime suspect in what might be termed “institutional sabotage.” Sometimes, this sabotage occurs unintentionally, in others with quiet subtlety or benign neglect. Strong assessment programs are nurtured and sustained over time with careful, clear, continuous communication that welcomes dialogue, is multi-directional, and invites broad participation. Clear communication, coupled with consistent action, is the foundation for the building of trust that is key to a successful assessment program.

Trust is the lubrication that makes it possible for organizations to work.

— Warren Bennis

If assessment of student learning is to succeed, it must be clearly communicated to each of the constituents- students, faculty and administrators- that assessment makes a positive contribution to their work. This suggests an important theme for a strong communication strategy: constructive intentionality. When there is collective understanding that something is being undertaken for positive purposes, the potential for damage (or an outright “no-go”) is greatly reduced. When positive benefits are not communicated and discussed, the community can feel threats, real or perceived.

*Trust not the horse, O Trojans. Be it what it may, I fear the Grecians
even when they offer gifts.*

— Virgil (attribution)

Academe is a highly political environment populated by intelligent, autonomous stakeholders. The very word “assessment” has several potentially rival meanings for different constituents. Faculty, for example, might hear “audit,” when assessment is uttered by an administrator. Academic administrators might be equally concerned by the connotation of “accountability” to external constituents when assessment is under consideration.

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KEY SUGGESTIONS TO CATALYZE COMMUNICATION:

- ◆ clear communication of intentionality
- ◆ broad involvement
- ◆ clear communication of the process of planning
- ◆ a formal policy statement
- ◆ institutional context.
- ◆ wide-spread support
- ◆ adequate resources.



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Particularly when presented as a mandate from the public to “improve the quality of education,” many leaders legitimately assume a defensive posture, if not feel outright rage: the implication is a lack of quality, a failure to recognize competent stewardship and a disregard for evident outstanding teaching, learning and service to the institutional mission.

Thus most externally-imposed assessment programs result in failure because they tend to breed a “compliance mode” of participation, rather than meaningful engagement throughout the campus.

What can be done? How can the academic community build trust in an assessment program by clear communication that leads to a shared vision and commitment to the process? Here are some suggestions, not an exhaustive list, but offered to catalyze communications on campuses exploring new or reshaped assessment programs.

Clear communication of intentionality.

Begin with a strong statement of why an institution-wide assessment program is to be established and how it will serve the mission of the institution.

Broad involvement.

Convene a task force of all campus constituents, including faculty, academic administrators, student affairs administrators and students. All have important contributions to make and any group that is left out- formally or informally has the power and autonomy to sabotage the very best efforts of others.

Clear communication of the process of planning.

The task force should establish a mechanism to keep the larger community informed about and involved in the process and progress of planning an institution-wide assessment effort.

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A formal policy statement.

The task force should craft a formal policy statement that outlines how constructive assessment serves the institutional commitment to student growth and development, and how it offers further enhancement of a campus community with shared values, with leaders assuming their intellectual and professional responsibility. Drafts of the statement can be vetted by the larger community, as appropriate.

Faculty members and other professional staff are legitimately skeptical in regard to campus-wide initiatives that seem to have no clear pathway or goal. Most have survived past efforts that have failed and believe they can easily outlast another.

This policy statement should demonstrate institutional commitment at all levels. How the assessment data and outcomes will be used, perhaps for program review or resource allocation and reallocation, needs to be stated explicitly in the policy statement.

Institutional context.

Every institution-wide assessment program will take time to ‘get it right.’ This is not an easy task; there are no easy formulas, and the complexity of the task cannot be understated.

Further, every campus needs to shape an assessment approach that fits its particular circumstances, even though much can be learned from the work of colleagues.

One of the strengths of American higher education is its diversity and recognition of this strength is critical if local assessment efforts are to succeed.

Take time to:

- ◆ *talk about program goals and objectives.* Ask about the goals and objectives of the academic programs. Ask how you want students to change while they are on your campus, what skills and competencies you expect them to achieve.

Though this may generate only a few sheets of paper per program and be an arduous undertaking, the process of talking about what is important to the community in regard to student learning is rewarding.



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- ♦ *design assessment methods appropriate for your goals and objectives.* Gather information and materials about current assessment instruments, those currently used by faculty on your campus and those developed elsewhere.

Most likely, in their current form, they will not fully serve your needs. It takes time to design assessment plans with the right content. It takes even more time and effort to create and test a method for assessment that works for your community.

- ♦ *consider congruence.* Communicate and demonstrate the congruence of assessment methods with course content, with instructional methods, and with student opportunities to learn and practice the skills and competencies that are your goals for their learning.

This is a key part of the communication effort, because without linking student curricular and co-curricular experiences with objectives of specific courses and programs, assessment will occur in a void and results will not be used.

- ♦ *test components.* There are many distinct parts to a successful assessment effort:
 - ♦ goals and objectives
 - ♦ measurement methods
 - ♦ data collection, analysis, and interpretation
 - ♦ reporting of information to relevant stakeholders.

The value of each component to the success of the whole must ultimately be clearly understood by all, through a process of piloting and refining, and communicating the outcomes of those efforts.

- ♦ *review regularly.* Assessment programs must be expected and allowed to evolve, based on the experiences of the various stakeholders.

Engage the community in regular discussions about the opportunities and obstacles to building a robust assessment program, and about ways to inform and improve assessment practices on your campus.

- ♦ *assess systematically and continuously.* Build a systematic agenda for assessment of student learning over the long-term; do not consider a one-shot effort. Without a continuous flow of data, patterns about student learning cannot be discerned.

Seeing improvement in student outcomes over time is the lifeblood of assessment programs in higher education. This commitment to the long-term should be part of the policy statement and clearly communicated to faculty, administrators, and others involved from the beginning of the planning process.

Wide-spread support.

It is imperative to have visible and consistent support for the assessment program by senior administrators, but it is equally important to have a balance of support from faculty and other staff.

To build confidence and trust, administrators should follow the “Goldilocks Rule:” their support and ownership should be neither too strong nor too weak- it must be just right. A good administrator knows the difference, and knows how to gain faculty’s trust and ownership through a meaningful charge and consistent support, both well communicated.

Faculty need to test and to develop confidence in the practice of assessment on your campus. Similarly, students must be actively involved, because any lack of student understanding about how assessment contributes to the quality of their learning can lead to disastrous outcomes, such as unmotivated participation in the process.

Adequate resources.

While the benefits of vibrant assessment programs are well-known, it is not always understood that they require many resources: of time, energy, materials and well-qualified professional personnel.

Many campuses can relate stories about painful and unproductive episodes of attempting assessment, due most often to inadequate resources.



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One responsibility of the assessment professional on a campus is to build and sustain the communications process that results in the provision of adequate resources. At every stage, do not underestimate or ignore the importance of communication.

While it may be tempting to put program development on a fast track, the ultimate benefits of the process and the program will be severely diminished.

Without active communication and engagement with honest and direct realignment, minor setbacks will lead to, and accelerate, the diminution of trust needed to sustain a strong program.

With active communication about each observed success as well as the minor setbacks, however, the trust necessary for a meaningful assessment program to evolve will appear. ■

Assessment at James Madison University

James Madison University has developed an institution-wide assessment program that crosses academic and student affairs, recognizing a common interest in the development of the student as a whole individual.

The program, which began in the late 1980's, includes assessment at four stages:

1. Matriculating student assessment during summer orientation for all entering freshman
2. Mid-point assessment of all undergraduates in early February

3. Assessment of graduating seniors in conjunction with their academic major
4. Regular surveys of alumni.

Assessment covers general education, the major, and programs sponsored by student affairs. The program is designed to evaluate learning outcomes by establishing a baseline for entering freshman and following their development over time.

For general education courses, assessment is developed from learning outcomes set and measured by faculty.

From the James Madison University experience, we believe the following are characteristics of an effective assessment program:

- ◆ clear, specific and measurable objectives for student learning at the level of department and course that fulfill the intent of institutional goals
 - ◆ multiple methods (selected, developed or adapted) to properly assess each of the objectives for student learning
 - ◆ regular procedures to scrutinize the reliability and validity of the assessment methods
 - ◆ a proper design to ensure that internal and external threats to the validity of the assessment program have been minimized
 - ◆ agreed-upon standards for assessment such as "cut-off" scores for student performance
 - ◆ carefully planned and monitored procedures to collect assessment information, including suitable and comprehensive statistical procedures
- ◆ a plan for interpreting assessment results (outcomes concerning student learning) relative to institutional goals for student learning
 - ◆ a means to gather evidence of curricular, instructional, and/or modifications to serving students in response to the interpreted assessment results
 - ◆ a means to gather evidence that resources have been allocated or reallocated in response to the interpreted assessment results
 - ◆ regular, accurate and objective reports to the community about statistical findings and evidence of the use of such findings to shape institutional future
 - ◆ continuing leadership of administrators, faculty and staff engaged in ongoing discussions about the assessment of student learning
 - ◆ trustworthy and competent staff responsible for conducting assessment, so that findings achieve maximum credibility, acceptance and trust of the broad campus community.