

Comments on Assessment

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Perhaps one of the issues significantly inhibiting the creation of a culture of assessment is the Path of Least Resistance approach adopted by many administrations in order to implement assessment on their campuses. Recognizing that they had fallen behind in the implementation strategies set forth in the Assessment Plan submitted to the Higher Learning Commission back in the mid 1990s, campuses scrambled to catch up as their re-accreditation visits approached. Low Impact assessment strategies were implemented, essentially urging faculty and staff to "Just Do It " do anything -- in order to appease the Higher Learning Commission and the site visit team. The implicit agreement was that as soon as the team left, faculty could return to business as usual.

This Let's Make a Deal approach generated data for the self study and resource room, though usually resulted in follow up reports and focus visits on assessment.

Winona State University has adopted a culture-building approach to building our assessment initiative. WSU was aware that building a culture would be an evolutionary, time consuming process, but the eventual result would be one that would create a long lasting commitment to assessment.

Our early efforts to create a culture of assessment were through education and incentives. Educating faculty and staff created a common language from which to discuss and debate. Financial incentives were given to the departments and programs that volunteered to be early adopters. While both of these strategies began to establish the foundation of an assessment culture, it wasn't until we empowered faculty to use access data in real time through the development of a web interface to our database that faculty really began to understand and embrace assessment.

Like most colleges and universities across the country, Winona State's assessment activities were severely limited by the inability to efficiently and effectively store and access data. Data was stored in collection silos, with a separate silo for each type of data (student survey data, financial aid data, admission data, student records, etc.). These silos were located in different offices throughout the campus (Admissions, Registrar's Office, Housing Office, Academic Affairs) and had no interconnectivity as each database came online at different times and without universal data collection standards. Compounding the problem was that in many cases data dictionaries were non existent and data definitions resided only in the minds of those few who had actually entered the data. The result was that much of the existing data was un- interpretable (except by a few individuals who knew what the data elements represented), and could not be linked together. The ability to explore relationships was, for all practical purposes, impossible.

An improved technological infrastructure was required. The rationale was multifold. First, creating a structure -- as opposed to a procedure -- would be more likely to have a long lasting impact on campus and really move us toward the creation of a culture of assessment. We knew that we could quickly and easily design assessment

procedures which might be impressive to a site visit team who was not very astute in assessment, but procedures alone would not have the cultural impact as a structure for data collection and analysis. Secondly, a solid technological infrastructure would move some assessment activities away from the department to the university level, allowing departments to focus on student learning issues. Issues such as study habits, student satisfaction, and many indirect measures of student learning can be easily measured on the university level, freeing the departments to focus their energies on direct measures of student learning. Third, a smartly designed technological infrastructure would position us well to respond to relevant questions for either a traditional re-accreditation self study or, should we chose, create an AQIP portfolio. Finally, the creation of a robust technological infrastructure would allow faculty and staff to access assessment in action, and thus create a sense of understanding, interest, ownership, and investment in assessment.

The technological infrastructure that we created with the assistance of a US Department of Education Title III Strengthening Institutions grant consisted an integrated database and four software applications, a student information tool, a faculty information tool, an ad-hoc query tool, and a report tool. The first three applications are not assessment tools but information tools, as they query existing university records. We began with their development in order to have faculty and staff become familiar with the software by providing them direct access to the kind of database information that they would routinely request from the Institutional Research office. These applications were first introduced to office managers and administrative assistants who offered invaluable assistance in their development.

The Report Tool application, completed and introduced to campus in August, 2002, allows secure access to student self-report survey data (behavioral and observational) from our www based student survey modules. These survey modules, completed by students every spring as part of our Assessment Day activities, consist of a series of question modules related to individual behaviors (social behaviors, study habits), background, perceptions (quality of instruction, campus climate) and satisfaction. When students log in to the assessment WWW page, they access specific modules depending upon the number of credits they have earned, their major, and their home campus. In addition to the university wide survey modules, several departments and programs have also included questions specifically designed and delivered only to their majors. As a result, a second semester sophomore nursing major would receive a different set of survey modules than a second semester junior biology major.

The reporting tool also allows access to department learning outcome data which is also included in the database. For instance, if a department is using a standardized test as a learning outcome measure, those scores can be entered into the system and available to be accessed along with the student self report data. This self report data provides faculty with a context in which to understand outcome data, adding life and meaning to a set of results. For example, a list of test scores on the CAAP exam become more interesting if analyzed in relation to how the scores of first generation students compared to the scores of students for whom higher education has been a family tradition.

Unlike the other applications we developed which report line item data, the reporting tool only reports aggregate data for the user specified population. Controls are in place to protect student anonymity. Specifically, if the population or comparison group

selected contains less than five students, data is not returned for that population. This prevents the identification of individual students by gender, race, and age.

The reporting tool allows the user to identify a specific population (by year, college, department, or campus) to be studied. Following the identification of the population, the user identifies the (self report) process module or outcome module as the object of analysis. As data only as meaning in relation to other information, system users have the opportunity to identify two levels of comparative variables, including background and demographic information. As such, the user may wish to compare study habits for upper division students to those of lower division students for each of the past three years. Or they may investigate whether or not female students who study more than 15 hours per week perform better on an outcome measure than males who study less. Users can also identify up to four aggregate numbers to be reported for each response quadrant, choosing from the number in each response quadrant, column percent, row percent, total percent, or mean of ACT of the population who reported in that category. This allows for a single report to contain a significant amount of data for the user in their investigation of their research question. While not proving causality, the report does allow for the investigation of correlations between processes and perceptions and learning outcomes, providing for richer interpretation possibilities than would be possible from studying process or results data in isolation.

Faculty and staff training on the report tool began in late August, 2002. Since then, over 150 faculty and staff have participated in the training and are regular users of the system.

We have several observations as to how the reporting tool has assisted in developing a culture of assessment:

1. Once faculty learn how to access the report tool, they are asking increasingly complex questions related to our students' learning.
2. Faculty are starting to recognize the importance of sample size and are strongly encouraging -- and in many cases requiring -- students to participate in assessment activities.
3. More departments are providing outcome data for inclusion in the database because they want to be able to analyze the data using the online report tool.

Our report tool has played a critical role in further developing Winona State's culture of assessment. Enabling faculty to access assessment data in an easy, convenient, and intuitive way we have promoted their interest, understanding, investment and ownership in assessment.