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The Integration of Student Learning Outcome Assessment, Teaching, and Learning

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Abstract: This qualitative inquiry examines the extent to which assessment is integrated into curricular and instructional planning and analysis at higher education institutions. To accomplish this purpose, the researchers conducted interviews with assessment leaders using semi-structured questions at eight different higher education institutions, selected from a larger pool of institutions recommended by four well-known and respected assessment scholars and practitioners. Following a thematic analysis of the qualitative results, the researchers advocate an assessment integration model that includes seven components: leadership, assessment purpose, assessment process, reward and recognition, collaboration, and accreditation. For each of these components, the researchers describe challenges and best practices. The project aims to enhance assessment beyond reporting and accountability, to focus instead on planning, implementing, and integrating practices to maximize learning and improvement.

Keywords: *Integration, Assessment Integration Model, Teaching, Learning, Leadership, Accreditation*

Introduction

Originally, this project’s fundamental goal was to identify, through an interview-based qualitative study, characteristics associated with institutions that have integrated curriculum, instruction, and student learning assessment planning and implementation institution-wide for maximizing student learning. The intended outcome of this inquiry was and is to positively affect institutional assessment practices by providing examples and contributing factors for enabling institutions to pursue a cohesive and interconnected student-learning-focused assessment process. Researchers reasoned that if practiced throughout the institution, evidence should be apparent on the institution’s website. However, after gathering preliminary information, the researchers modified the study’s focus slightly away from describing fully realized integrations to examining institutions with significant evidence of student learning assessment for cultivating and supporting desired student learning within many academic programs. By exploring the approaches, processes, and practices institutions have implemented for integrating student learning assessment with curricular and instructional practices, the investigation aims to enable the enhancement of assessment beyond accountability and reporting to focus on planning, implementing, and integrating practices that maximize learning and improvement.

More specifically, researchers are targeting how current assessment practices across higher education institutions of various classifications: (a) focus on and influence curriculum design and redesign; (b)

deliberately use assessment for instructional planning, professional development, and implementation of effective pedagogy; and (c) emphasize continual support for and enhancement of student learning.

Literature Review

To study the assessment integration across higher education institutions in the US, it is important to trace the literature on the purposes and goals of assessment. As chronicled by Peter Ewell (1987, 2020), a highly regarded assessment pioneer, assessment's inception and development of the assessment movement began with two purposes: one for documenting and reporting student learning, mostly for accountability and the other for fostering student learning. Although assessment is no longer a movement, these two purposes resulted in different approaches and attitudes toward assessment. Even though these approaches and attitudes have lingered, these two camps have joined forces, with assessment leaders understanding the importance of both maximizing student learning and reporting to accreditors (e.g., Blaich & Wise, 2018; Kuh et al., 2015; Jonson et al., 2014; Pope & Fulcher, 2019). There have been examples in the literature on institutions, programs, and individual faculty utilizing student learning assessment to inform improvement strategies; scholars and practitioners have been studying how assessment could be and should be impactful (e.g., Wyse et al., 2015; Ewell, 1987, 2009). This literature review was undertaken to explore and identify effective practices of assessment to inform decision-making. Our focus was assessment practices which are integrated into curricula and instructional planning and improvement as a foundation for the present study. Synthesis of reviews revealed a wide range of focal areas and perspectives, which have been grouped into the following categories:

- Connecting assessment with curriculum and instruction,
- Collaborations between faculty development, assessment, and other stakeholders, and
- Institutional commitment.

Connecting Assessment with Curriculum and Instruction

Many authors have written about assessment activities at a program level or by individual faculty, informing the curricular and instructional planning and improvement (e.g., Aguayo-Hernández et al., 2024; Kinzie et al., 2019; Miller, 2019; Smith et al., 2019; Stark et al., 2018; Stitt-Bergh et al., 2018; Timperley & Schick, 2024). In these scenarios, assessment is not just viewed as a reporting tool for compliance and accountability but rather as intentionally designed to help improve the curriculum design and instructional strategies. For example, researchers at James Madison University (Smith et al., 2019) examined six different courses at the institution in which they implemented an educational intervention to improve students' ethical reasoning skills. They integrated their outcome assessment data on ethical reasoning with the implementation fidelity data, which were collected on the multiple aspects of curricular and instructional interventions experienced by students. By analyzing and interpreting this information in an integrated manner, the researchers identified components of curriculum design and delivery that might have contributed to student learning improvement. This integrated approach helped them make focused and targeted improvements.

In Stitt-Bergh et al. (2018), Computer Information Systems (CIS) faculty conducted an assessment of students' competencies in interviewing CIS clients to understand client needs to achieve a better

understanding of the construct, as well as students' current skill level. Based on findings from the assessment, the CIS faculty added significant requirements to the program's curriculum. Upon the implementation of the curricular changes, subsequent assessment revealed a significant increase in the student competency that was measured.

In another example (Kinzie et al., 2019), Psychology students became an integral part of the program assessment process through a course activity. The authors rightfully titled their study *Assessment for Learning*, as the Psychology undergraduate students were engaged in program assessment activities, ranging from collecting to analyzing and interpreting assessment data related to their academic program. This first-hand experience in assessment helped students improve their information literacy, data analysis, and interpretation skills.

Collaboration Between Faculty Development, Assessment, and Other Stakeholders

The collaboration between faculty development, assessment, and other stakeholders is a critical component in assessment-related literature, probably due to a common focus on educational quality and improvement (e.g., Bartholomew et al., 2018; Kinzie et al., 2019; Green & Hutchings, 2018; Maki, 2010). Kinzie et al. (2019) explored different models for collaboration, such as CSUMB's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (TLA), which provided faculty with significant help in various aspects of assessment, including initial assessment activities such as developing and assessing student learning outcomes, as well as designing course activities to support those outcomes and ongoing course improvement strategies and approaches. Other collaboration models highlighted included the Center for Teaching and Advising at Gonzaga, the Office of Assessment of Teaching and Learning (ATL) at Washington State University, as well as the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) at the University of Kansas. Despite the different organizational structures and contexts, Kinzie et al. (2019) noted that the distinction between faculty development and assessment is getting increasingly blurred, supporting the need for more integrated and less siloed approaches in using assessment to inform decision-making.

Bartholomew et al. (2018) reported on a collaborative evaluation project, resulting from the partnership of three entities at the University of Michigan, including the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, the School of Art and Design, and the University's Teaching Center. To ensure the success of the evaluation project, the authors employed the following strategies, which were drawn from a framework developed by Welsh and Metcalf (2003):

1. Emphasize that the primary goal of institutional assessment projects is improvement.
2. Involve faculty and administrators throughout the entire evaluation process, from planning and designing evaluation activities to interpreting and discussing evaluation findings.
3. Keep a focus on learning outcomes in designing the data collection methods, including surveys, focus groups, and interviews. As a result, the assessment findings were aligned with learning outcomes; students and faculty also developed more awareness of outcomes.
4. Communicate on both the process and results to gain support from faculty and administrators for assessment activities.

Institutional commitment

Beyond individual faculty's practices and collaboration between various stakeholders, overall institutional commitment is essential to the integration of assessment, teaching, and learning (e.g., Hersh & Keeling, 2013; Kinze et al, 2019; Maki, 2010; Pope & Fulcher, 2019). In a comprehensive guide for assessment for learning, Maki (2010) recommended viewing assessment as an inquiry into teaching and learning and advocated for an institutional commitment to inquiry about student learning for the purpose of improving program effectiveness and ultimately benefiting student learning. Maki argued for establishing relationships among campus stakeholders and creating opportunities across different institutional areas for a systematic approach on learning improvement. She suggested "developing communication structures and processes that channel assessment results into program- and institutional-level planning, budgeting, and decision making" (p.21).

Using a systems model, Collins et al. (2010) proposed that the entire institution, from top management to faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders, be involved and included in the student learning and assessment process. The authors made specific propositions for the roles of different stakeholders. For example, institutional leaders should "invest in the desired culture as well as model the behavior they desire to see in the faculty" (p. 157). Involvement from top leadership is critical for cultivating a learning-centered culture. As an important part of the systems model, Collins et al. (2010) also proposed an adequately designed compensation system for rewarding faculty's effort in conducting assessment and using assessment to improve.

Other researchers advocated for shifting the emphasis from an assessment-focused culture to an improvement-focused one, either explicitly or implicitly (e.g., Baker et al., 2012; Bartholomew et al., 2018; Hersh & Keeling, 2013; Pope & Fulcher, 2019; Stanny, 2018; Stitt-Bergh et al., 2018). For example, Stitt-Bergh et al. (2018) emphasized starting an institutional assessment or a program-level assessment with "a laser focus on what is to be improved" and then identifying specific strategies to improve student outcomes and assessment data that can demonstrate student learning changes (p.31). In another example, to ensure success of the collaborative evaluation project in Bartholomew et al (2018), the number one strategy that was highlighted was to focus on improvement and clearly communicate that improvement was the goal of the project. Finally, in the case studies conducted by Baker et al. (2012), an important lesson learned from the case study institutions was to concentrate on improving student learning, building a comprehensive approach, and taking the time to reflect and examine an institution's assessment practices.

Overall, the literature highlights the critical role of integrating assessment into curricular and instructional planning for improvement of teaching and learning. The present study, through an exploration of assessment practitioners' views and experiences, aims to illustrate how institutions establish and enhance assessment integration. It identifies contributing and debilitating factors to the integration, offering insights that are crucial for managing the ongoing tensions between assessment for improvement and accountability, a challenge that Ewell (1987) described nearly four decades ago.

Method

To explore assessment integration statuses in higher education institutions (HEIs), the research team adopted a qualitative framework, aiming to conduct a deep dive into the perceptions and experiences of assessment leaders who work in HEIs. The team used interviews as the data collection tool. Throughout the entire research process, the researchers kept their focus on exploring the meaning that the participants held about assessment integration. The research question was: What assessment practices and institutional processes guide student learning across institutions that hold firm to curricular, instructional, and student learning improvements as its purpose?

To identify participants of the study, the researchers used a 3-pronged approach. First, they conducted a comprehensive review of the literature searching for evidence of integration of assessment with curriculum and instructional planning and improvement, using keywords such as assessment, integration, teaching, learning, and curriculum improvement. The search resulted in twenty-eight articles on topics related to higher education assessment integration with curriculum and instruction, published between 2009 and 2019. The literature review provided valuable insights on important aspects of assessment and assessment integration but did not reveal much evidence of institutional-level assessment integration, which was the original intention of the study.

Secondly, the researchers solicited institutional recommendations from well-respected assessment experts to identify interview participants, which led to twenty-eight institutions being identified as the initial pool of potential assessment leader participants (Table 1).

Table 1

Institutional Website Review Details

Accreditor	#
• Higher Learning Commission (HLC)	10
• Southern Association for Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)	5
• Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	7
• New England Commission on Higher Education (NECHE)	2
• Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)	3
• WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)	2
Institution Type	#
• Private	6
• Public, 4-year	16
• Public, 2-year	6
Total	28

Lastly, the researchers analyzed these institutions' websites to locate compelling evidence of assessment integration through venues such as the assessment office, strategic plan, provost's office,

faculty development, center for teaching and learning, instructional design, and student affairs assessment. As a result of the website review, the research team narrowed the participant list to eighteen institutions (Table 2). The researchers invited the respective institutional assessment leaders to participate in the study, which involved a one-hour interview. Completed consent forms were received from assessment leaders of eight institutions, including six large public research-intensive institutions, one community college, and one small private institution. Table 3 provides more details on the eight participating institutions, including their respective institutional accreditors.

Table 2*Targeted Sample Institution Details*

Accreditor	#
• Higher Learning Commission (HLC)	6
• Southern Association for Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)	3
• Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	2
• New England Commission on Higher Education (NECHE)	3
• Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)	2
• WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)	2
Institution Type	#
• Private	5
• Public, 4-year	8
• Public, 2-year	5
Total	18

Table 3*Participant Institution Details*

Accreditor	#
• Higher Learning Commission (HLC)	3
• Southern Association for Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)	1
• Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	2
• New England Commission on Higher Education (NECHE)	0
• Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)	1
• WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)	1
Institution Type	#
• Private	1
• Public, 4-year	6
• Public, 2-year	1

Total

8

The research team conducted the interviews following a semi-structured interview protocol. The guiding questions, shown in Appendix A, were carefully drafted by the research team to allow participants to share their experiences and perceptions and to address the research question. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Field notes were documented for each interview.

Using an inductive coding method, transcripts and field notes were coded and analyzed, leading to the identification of themes and subthemes (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The research team engaged in multiple sessions of peer debriefing to ensure the credibility of the findings and interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Themes and subthemes are listed in Table 4.

Table 4*Themes and Sub-themes*

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Leadership	• Institutional and academic leadership support, including messages sent from the leadership • Faculty Leadership
Purposes	• Improvement and data-based decision making • Leadership direction, promotion, and tenure expectations • Accreditation requirements • Research and grants
Processes	• Meaningful, flexible, manageable, and less prescriptive • Various strategies, including a focused communication strategy • Providing feedback for assessment work • Curriculum maps • Resource constraints • Aligning assessment practices with curriculum and instructional planning
Recognition and Reward	• Including assessment accomplishments in promotion and tenure criteria • Awarding assessment mini-grants and gifts • Lacking in widespread impact
Collaboration	• With Center for Teaching and Learning, instructional designers, writing center, etc. • With institutional research offices for data aggregation and disaggregation • With student affairs offices on co-curricular programs to help enhance student learning

Faculty Development and Support	• Faculty training on learning improvement projects • Faculty workshops
Accreditation	• Professional Accreditors' Impact • Accreditation standards need to be "open and non-prescriptive"

Results

The interviews provided additional clarifying information collected through website reviews and revealed details about the assessment practices implemented across the institutions. Most of the institutions' assessment leaders interviewed indicated their institutions had not yet reached institutional-level integration of assessment, curricular, and instructional planning, implementation, and review processes, although each had various degrees of *pockets of excellence* identified in specific programs or colleges. All respondents mentioned using data for program-level decision-making as one of the primary purposes of assessment, especially to inform decisions about curriculum and/or instruction. Even though accreditation was discussed, assessment leaders primarily focused on professional or disciplinary accreditation.

While accountability and accreditation were mentioned as purposes of assessment, they were not singled out as the *primary purpose* of assessment. More often, participants point to improvement as a key component of their institutional purpose for assessment.

The seven themes (see Table 4) emerging from the transcript analysis are described below and include relevant comments from the assessment leaders interviewed.

Leadership

The successful institution-wide integration of assessment practices for the improvement of student learning is dependent on or greatly enhanced with the support of leadership at all levels, as suggested by Welsh and Metcalf (2003) and echoed by the assessment experts who recommended reviewing specific institutions. When assessment leaders were asked what key practices or processes were in place contributing to the purposes of assessment on their campuses, participants pointed to institutional leadership's support of campus-wide processes to enable integrated and effective assessment practices, often demonstrated through personnel and monetary resource allocations. Also, participants highlighted the type of messaging about assessment coming from campus and assessment leadership and discussed the role messaging plays in the implementation of strong assessment practices on campus. For example, one participant stated that it was important to "Communicate the message that faculty drive it, that assessment is for student[s], and not onerous, [it is] mission-driven, meaningful to drive program forward." Faculty members in assessment leadership roles and committees also were mentioned as a form of leadership support. Another assessment leader described leadership support: "First, we have an assessment leadership team that is for the academic assessment piece here, and that is comprised of an executive leadership team and then faculty and some staff of a faculty representing every department and then some staff."

Several participants specifically emphasized that campus or university provosts were supportive of assessment across campus. The impact of their support was underscored by many of the assessment leaders as a key component of the successful implementation of strong assessment practices. More than half discussed the importance of leadership support at the upper levels, including deans, and mid-levels, including chairs. As one participant stated, “while assessment offices generally do not have any sort of supervisory role for faculty and staff who would do assessment, support from campus leadership can assist assessment leaders in building a culture of assessment.”

In short, leadership appears to be key to effective and appreciated assessment practices.

Purpose of Assessment

Participants all agreed that the ultimate goal for assessment is to support teaching and learning. Five out of the eight institutions’ assessment leaders explicitly discussed improvement and data-based decision-making as key components of their institutional purposes for assessment. For example, one participant stated that assessment is “designed to align with the curriculum and to support the improvement of student learning via student experiences or curriculum.” Another participant suggested that “the purpose of program assessment is to provide an accurate and honest appraisal of the extent to which students fully meet program level learning outcomes, where there is room for improvement and the strategies faculty, departments, colleges, and the university are using to support and improve student learning.”

Alongside the commonly recognized purpose of improvement and data-informed decision making, three assessment leaders also reported that assessment could be driven by accreditation requirements, specifically from professional or disciplinary accrediting bodies. Participants also cited leadership directions, promotion and tenure expectations as to why assessment integration may occur. One participant from a large public institution suggested that assessment should extend beyond the mere completion of assessment reports and be approached like research projects or fulfilling grant proposal requirements.

Even though assessment was recognized as essential to student success, institutional assessment was not typically regarded as essential faculty work but instead as exemplary “extra” work for faculty. Faculty’s engagement in assessment work does not always help advance their careers toward promotion and tenure. Furthermore, one participant stated that “Our tenure and promotion guidelines do include assessment more prominently than most probably, but I think that there’s still a perception that faculty won’t be rewarded for doing this kind of work. There are some disciplines where assessment, or formal assessment at least, has not been a disciplinary tradition.”

Process

Employing different approaches, participants cited common characteristics contributing to assessment integration. These included having processes that were meaningful, manageable, less prescriptive, and flexible. A participant from a large public institution stressed the importance of flexibility stating, “let a thousand flowers bloom.” This statement indicates that assessment processes and approaches do not have to follow one method but rather should be flexible and diverse to reflect different contexts and

varying purposes. Another participant, also from a large public institution, highlighted the value of using approaches that were feasible for different programs, stating, “I tell them this is the platinum standard for assessment, but I understand that given your situation, you'll be happy with, well, the bronze medal at the Olympics.”

Participants suggested that assessment should be approached as “shared responsibility” and “standard practices,” rather than relying on the “hero model,” where only a few individuals are engaged.

Furthermore, a focused communication strategy was deemed crucial for success in assessment integration. For example, one participant stated: “Communicate the message that faculty drive it, that assessment is for student[s], and not onerous, [it is] mission driven, meaningful to drive program forward.” Another participant said it was vital “from day one, [to have] a focused communication strategy on assessment for improving curriculum.”

Related to communication, participants also emphasized the importance of receiving feedback from campus committees, including the assessment and program review committee. Additional potential communication strategies include creating a repository, such as in SharePoint sites, where faculty could access helpful information, including an assignment library and course design resources.

Moreover, participants reported using varied strategies including assessment days, assessment leadership institutes, and seminars from teaching and learning centers to educate and promote assessment integration across an institution. One participant also mentioned that their institution implemented the academic policy that supported the use of assessment integration as evidence of effective teaching, which contributed to the institutional culture of assessment integration.

Further, three out of the eight participants affirmed the significance of curriculum maps in establishing a foundation for assessment integration. One institution requested the construction of curriculum maps prior to assessment, while another required curriculum maps to be included in assessment reports. The third institution focused on educating faculty by conducting seminars on curriculum maps through its teaching and learning center.

While the aforementioned processes contributed to assessment integration, participants highlighted various integration challenges faced by higher education institutions. The most frequently cited inhibiting factor was resource constraints, reflected in limited faculty bandwidth and competing interests and priorities. Seven out of the eight participants identified this as a significant challenge. Specifically, two participants pointed out that their institutions lacked incentives for faculty to engage in assessment and curricular improvement.

Moreover, participants found it challenging to align assessment practices and curriculum and instructional planning, which often operated in disconnected silos. For example, one institution noted that “the process to review and approve curricular changes does not involve the Assessment Office, not closely looking at outcomes and scaffold[ing] curriculum.”

Participants also observed that insufficient training among faculty hindered their ability to effectively use assessment findings to inform teaching and curriculum improvement strategies. Finally, one participant asserted that the absence of a central office dedicated to assessment or institutional effectiveness was a barrier to integration at the institutional level, because without a centralized entity to take ownership, organize, and promote assessment efforts, coordination and consistency across the institution may be lacking.

Recognition and Reward

Within the theme of recognition and reward, four out of the eight assessment leaders reported various rewards for assessment integration efforts, such as awarding mini-grants or gifts for assessment and categorizing assessment as a contributing factor for teaching during faculty reviews. Two assessment leaders mentioned that assessment is included in the promotion and tenure considerations. One participant stated that their office would “give out rewards to say thank you, to recognize people publicly.”

Despite efforts to acknowledge and incentivize faculty for conducting and integrating assessment, these endeavors did not appear robust or consistent enough to yield a widespread impact. As previously mentioned in the *Purpose* section, one participant highlighted, “Our tenure and promotion guidelines do include assessment more prominently than most probably, but I think that there's still a perception that faculty won't be rewarded for doing this kind of work. There are some disciplines where assessment, or formal assessment at least, has not been a disciplinary tradition.”

Faculty Development and Support

Because faculty development and support typically necessitate collaboration with professionals not associated with assessment offices, relevant examples may be described in both this and the Collaboration theme.

One clear theme emerging from the interviews was the emphasis on the need for faculty support and development, illustrated by one comment from a participant: “DATA meaningful data: letting faculty know this data is going to tell you something about your students and you can use that data...however you want.” This assessment leader stressed assisting faculty in some departments with data interpretation to facilitate using results for planning and addressing student learning weaknesses. While faculty were reported as engaging in the assessment of student learning in all the institutions in this study, it appears the degree to which they valued and understood these efforts was influenced and enhanced by faculty development and support, typically provided by assessment offices and/or teaching and learning centers. Although only one assessment leader mentioned collaboration with the center for teaching and learning in response to a specific question inquiring about collaboration, most assessment leaders emphasized the teaching and learning centers’ role in their assessment processes and practices or need for such resources on their campuses at some point during the interview. In fact, one assessment leader indicated, “This [not having a center for teaching and learning] is a weakness on campus.” Another leader stated: “We will collaborate with CTL to link the work together; we need to develop a workshop/information exchange and perhaps work with other colleges to develop mini-courses for faculty”. One leader pointed to the realization:

The faculty development office was helping individual faculty work on the individual sections that they taught. And so, the faculty development was being done at the section level, whereas we were assessing at the program level. So, we realized that there was a level disconnect between our two offices. Assessment--my office--is doing program level work, the faculty development office is doing section level work to help them teach better in their own sections.

This assessment leader then underscored the value of working together with the faculty development office.

These interviews confirmed and reinforced the importance of collaborating with teaching and learning centers or of including this function for integrating student learning assessment and curricular and instructional planning and revision. Even in the institution without a faculty development office, “Every year there's probably some special initiative from the provost's office that supports faculty development.” In the same institution, they have facilitated “assignment design workshops. We've used the NILOA charrette model, in terms of designing assignments so that you get good teaching, learning, and assessment.”

One assessment leader began de-emphasizing “assessment” and stated:

I started off with the question of how do we use assessment results for improvement, and we switched that around to be how do we improve whatever you want because by framing the question that way, then you're thinking about ...interventions at the program, we're going to change the learning environment and then we're going to wrap the assessment around it as opposed to having the assessment as a starting point.

Another leader described a rather extensive collaboration with the teaching and learning center: “These are bi-weekly or monthly meetings you know, two to four hours a month over the course of a whole semester or a whole year and the cycle really of those is to introduce the topic or the area. We reinforce it through readings and other kinds of academic work. It's conversations with each other.”

In addition to collaborating with these *centers*, a variety of additional support services are offered: one-to-one consultations, workshops, assistance with interpreting assessment results, reformatting programs' results and descriptions of their assessment activities into an institutional format, mini-grants available for assessment, or teaching, learning, and assessment projects, more flexibility in reporting such as telling assessment stories about introducing curricular and/or instructional changes to address outcome weaknesses and the benefits of this change.

Collaboration

Although collaboration was discussed in the faculty development theme, assessment leaders also suggested that one key to regular and successful integration efforts included collaboration with other units and offices in the institution. This is especially important for faculty who are disciplinary experts, most having only limited training and experience with teaching – learning theory, scholarship related to instructional strategies, or curriculum development and revision. Several assessment leaders

suggested the importance of collaboration with other units such as student affairs/engagement offices which can provide support for co-curricular programs to help enhance student learning. One assessment leader stated,

We also have a really great relationship with student affairs, and I think that having sort of more hooks into the university helps out with the sustainability of the assessment process. For example, if you only have one champion up at upper-level administration, and that person leaves, then assessment is sort of floating out there and can kind of change with the whims of a particular leader. In our case, we work with student affairs, we work with academic affairs, we've often done some projects that relates to the President's office.

In addition to teaching and learning centers and student affairs offices, other possible key collaborators within an institution include instructional designers, and other supporting units such as the writing center and library for student learning faculty for planning assistance, and institutional research for supplying aggregated and disaggregated institutional and program-level data. Assessment leaders also emphasized partnering with academic standing committees and institutional processes, including associate deans or similar groups, undergraduate councils, and building assessment into the program review process. Reinforcing the need for these partnerships, one assessment leader stressed that assessment is focused on and is “in service to the curriculum.”

Accreditation

Assessment leaders from three institutions agreed that accreditation helped drive the assessment effort, particularly citing the influence of professional accrediting standards. One assessment leader pointed out that all professional accreditors for their institution's academic programs mandate learning outcome assessment. Another noted a higher level of engagement in assessment integration activities among programs that are professionally accredited. However, another assessment leader expressed concerns regarding overly prescriptive requirements from accreditors, because institutions might be compelled to sacrifice meaningful assessment integration practices in order to meet compliance standards. This assessment leader emphasized accreditation standards that are “open and non-prescriptive” for fostering meaningful assessment integration practices.

Barriers

In addition to the challenges previously mentioned, assessment leaders identified other barriers and hurdles preventing a more effective or widespread integration of assessment, curricular, and instructional planning. Commonly mentioned was the lack of designated and sufficient resources (e.g., time, priority, recognition, and budget). Other challenges identified included the general perspective that assessment and integration represented add-on responsibilities to the major or more important work of faculty, lack of incentive to engage in assessment and curricular improvement (e.g., no recognition for the work in annual reviews, merit, tenure, promotion, or post-tenure assessment, etc.), an “overemphasis” on research and extramural funding. Interestingly, some assessment leaders reported that “faculty autonomy” and existing curriculum and instructional mechanisms (i.e., curriculum review and approval processes) presented a challenge. Additionally, one participant stated: “The idea of coordinating across faculty or student affairs professionals is tough because many

programs are kind of built on this faculty is very individual and having a lot of autonomy within their different courses or within their programs they develop...The idea of developing a cohesive integrated curriculum is really tough for a lot of faculty too.”

Conclusions and Suggestions

After analyzing the responses, several themes emerged. Interviewees offered suggestions that address ways to foster themes and to circumvent and address barriers.

Leadership

Leadership at the highest institutional levels emerged as a primary driver of assessment for the purpose of advancing student learning, crucial for cultivating a valuable and integrated curriculum, instructional, and assessment process. Although it was equally clear that assessment leaders need institutional leadership support; flexible processes and reporting seem key for faculty to support assessment.

Assessment leaders interviewed further indicated that direct institutional support from the highest leadership levels is essential for integrated processes and must be demonstrated by providing meaningful resources such as budget and personnel. In addition, essential are tangible and beneficial recognition and rewards for faculty, such as advocating the inclusion of integrated processes to foster student learning in their annual review and tenure and promotion reward structure and offering grants for integration projects to more effectively foster student learning outcomes.

Equally important and contributing to integration, assessment leaders might embrace de-emphasizing assessment as the primary driver while stressing it as a key component within the integrated process and encouraging this change into the organizational structure or communicating the benefits of the collaborative process to the chief academic officer. Having a consistent message that assessment is primarily focused on the student learning process without the primary emphasis on accreditation, sends a different message when providing support, including budget and time, forthcoming only when the accreditors “are coming”.

Gaining upper administrators’ support, especially when the assessment leaders do not have direct access to these leaders or the institutional leaders’ mindset is on accreditation may require other approaches such as building partnerships with associate deans or general education councils to gain a voice with leadership for obtaining necessary resources. These partnerships could help promote an understanding that assessment is a collaborative process, thus minimizing that assessment is the driver.

Purposes of Assessment

All institutional assessment leaders reported that the primary goal of assessment is to support teaching and learning. In addition, most assessment leaders emphasized improvement and data-based decision purposes. An additional purpose pertained to accreditation, especially professional or disciplinary accreditation. However, the attitude that seemed to prevail at most institutions is that scant appreciation of, or much emphasis or credit is provided for, this work.

Although supporting student learning is the primary purpose expressed by assessment leaders from institutions who have some evidence of integrated curricular, instructional, and assessment processes and purposes, they also reported that many faculty members do not fully understand integrated processes, indicating that more faculty development is necessary. Several practices offered by these leaders may be useful to readers, such as: 1) facilitating longer-term seminars in collaboration with centers for teaching and learning, 2) creating an assessment leadership or mentoring institute, 3) offering charrette events for faculty to receive feedback on assignments for cultivating a specific outcome from faculty colleagues in a non-threatening environment, 4) encouraging assessment stories describing how specific instructional or curricular changes were effective for promoting outcome achievement as an alternative to the more typical assessment reporting structure, or 5) providing mini-grants to develop integrated instructional and assessment projects or curricular, instructional, and assessment projects to scaffold outcome development. Gaining resources for these grants might be challenging; however, if presented as an instructional and student learning benefit and the institution does not have a center for teaching and learning, funds may be provided if a proposal helps fill this void. If the institution has a center, partnerships could be forged possibly to offer mini-grants, which communicates that assessment can be an integrated process. These mini-grants could be supported and developed by offering workshops or seminars to write grant proposals in partnership with the centers. If the assessment office or practitioners do not have a budget, the assessment office may attempt to gain funding by articulating that these resources can be used to build greater capacity for improving student learning and demonstrating the importance of integrating curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices for maximizing student learning.

Consistent communication throughout the institution about the purposes of assessment also will promote the message that it is not solely a reporting mechanism but primarily serves the student learning process, requiring integration practices. This communication might be enhanced and distributed by meeting with leaders from key units, offices, and academic programs.

Processes Used in Assessment

The processes used to support assessment and integrated practices at most of the institutions in the study were less “cookie cutter,” providing flexibility within the institution. These supportive events and activities included: offering semester or year-long seminars conducted in partnership with the center for teaching and learning to cultivate integrated processes across the institution, providing assessment leadership institutes, and initiating conversations about including examples of integration into the annual review or tenure and promotion process, thereby providing faculty members with tangible and beneficial rewards. Meaningful and manageable processes were encouraged and were adjectives used to describe assessment processes. Assessment leaders emphasized that assessment should be a shared responsibility and should not rely on a “hero model”, with one faculty member assigned this task. Communicating that assessment’s primary purpose is to support student learning and improvement and maintaining this messaging was emphasized in the interviews. Curriculum maps were stressed and described to be effective for promoting integrated processes. However, essential is an understanding that curriculum maps include curricular and instructional planning to achieve the level of outcome achievement desired, rather than a map pertaining primarily to where in the

curriculum an outcome is going to be or is being addressed and measured in the curriculum. In this mapping process, instructional strategy details to foster the desired level are key.

To gain support, an assessment practitioner should consider allowing and encouraging more flexibility in assessment reporting, such as constructing assessment stories that highlight one or two targeted outcomes. Practitioners should consider providing assistance to programs for understanding how their student learning results can be interpreted for program and student learning benefits and how proactive and intentional curriculum and instructional planning should achieve deeper learning. Realizing though in some institutions only one person is responsible for institutional-level assessment, building partnerships is especially important and cultivating a group of assessment leaders and mentors spread throughout the institution can assist to communicate the purposes of assessment, promote this understanding, and build integrated processes. Support from an advocate or leader from a higher institutional level may be needed to accomplish these types of partnerships.

Faculty Development, Support, and Building Collaborations

This theme may have been emphasized in these interviews because although faculty members are typically experts in their field, they receive little education or development in their graduate programs for teaching. In addition, often at research institutions, the older two-tier model of a teaching track versus a research track was standard, and the teaching track was the lesser valued of the two. However, the perception of the significance of instruction in institutions has been growing. That said, additional faculty development is necessary to communicate and demonstrate that assessment is beneficial for them and their students and is useful for their programs to achieve desired outcomes by intentionally designing or revising appropriate instructional strategies throughout the curriculum.

Realizing that in many institutions however, a divide exists between the assessment office and the centers for teaching and learning; therefore, bridging this divide by building partnerships may be necessary. Emphasizing the teaching-learning process or integrated processes, while de-emphasizing assessment, may be effective in these situations. Other institutions, however, have a more integrated structure with the center for teaching and learning that includes assessment and other related activities. Information provided in the interviews stressed that collaborations are vital to integrated processes, with one approach to reach out to the centers for faculty development and student learning and centering the discussions on the teaching-learning process rather than assessment. One leader described intensive collaborative projects with their center lasting a semester or year. Readers could focus these projects on a specific student learning outcome a group of faculty hopes to address or a program that wants to improve a learning outcome collaboratively in which best instructional practices are central. In addition, assessment practitioners and faculty development representatives could collaboratively offer workshops or assessment practitioners could invite faculty development representatives to participate in assessment events, thus focusing on curriculum and instruction. This sends a clear message that assessment is a participant in these processes but is not the *driver*, thereby deemphasizing assessment as a stand-alone reporting process.

Collaborations with other key units on campus are essential for demonstrating and affirming that assessment is not the driver and is only a component of integrated curricular, instructional, and assessment integration for planning and implementation. Although the centers for teaching and learning are fundamental to this process, student affairs units and librarians are, or can be, major contributors to these integrated processes.

Recognition and Reward

Providing tangible rewards to faculty is not typical at most institutions. Further, even in the institutions that have a policy for providing credit in the faculty tenure and promotion structure, faculty are not always confident that this work will be accepted as evidence of effective teaching, underscoring the importance of consistent communication from the top and possibly, the rationale for why integrated practices should be accepted in the reward structure. One suggestion might be to identify a faculty senate advocate to encourage creating a policy for including faculty members' participation in integrated projects focused on improving or cultivating problematic student learning outcomes in their annual reviews and tenure and promotion reward structure. Also essential is communicating with deans or other unit leaders to advocate for this meaningful recognition and rewards.

While several specific strategies were noted, they were not consistent nor prevalent through institutions. Moreover, the value of the rewards and recognition may vary from institution to institution and may be different as assessment practices evolve.

Accreditation

Comments related to the accreditation question were mixed, although professional and disciplinary accreditation seem to have a stronger emphasis or impact on programs. However, due to the prescriptiveness of specific accreditors, there is value in easing programs' workload by not requiring them to rewrite their reports in a specific format. An effective solution for presenting the assessment process and results, as previously suggested, might be to write an "assessment or learning story" in which the program can highlight a problematic learning outcome with a description of changes made and the benefits to learning. In some institutions with well-staffed offices or possibly with an eager assessment committee, disciplinary accreditation reports could be reframed into an appropriate form for national accreditation reporting.

Collaboration

While collaborations were stressed by assessment leaders, they did not discuss how these collaborations were formed. They did, however, emphasize that collaborations were key to assessment practices, and to integrating assessment with instruction and curriculum. Realizing that processes for achieving these collaborations probably vary widely from institution to institution, the importance of building these relationships and partnerships is essential for fostering integrated processes.

In addition to collaborating with teaching and learning centers and other similar units, additional units are potential, effective partners for cultivating integrated practices and enabling the transfer of learning from the classroom to other environments. One suggestion for cultivating these

collaborations is to reach out to student affairs leaders to co-sponsor projects for building student learning outcomes comprehensively throughout the institution and assist with the transfer of skills beyond a course and courses into post-graduation environments. Also, collaborations and partnerships may be stimulated by inviting representatives from units including student affairs, libraries, career centers, teaching and learning centers, or faculty members who study pedagogical literature and apply these practices, to attend assessment workshops to benefit from their expertise and/or to lead or co-lead workshops.

Something as fundamental as beginning with a conversation in a person's office or inviting the person to discuss the possibilities of building partnerships and collaborating on small, or any size, projects of mutual benefit may be effective. An assessment practitioner might invite a representative from a relevant unit or office to a session, workshop, or event and ask the representative to talk about something similar being pursued in the representative's unit or office.

Finally, because most of the institutions participating in the study were four-year public institutions and specifically, assessment leaders were from research-intensive institutions, the next phase of the research is concentrating on broadening the scope of the project to ensure wider relevance of the study's impact.

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Appendix A Knowledge Development Task Force Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. As we explained in our invitation, we are conducting interviews with selected directors of assessment at institutions of higher education across the United States to inform a study we are conducting on how institutions develop and implement student assessment practices that are integrated with and impact processes related to curriculum design, pedagogy, and improvement of student learning.

The interview will take 30-45 minutes. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You can decline to answer any question and are free to stop taking part in the interview at any time. As we indicated on the consent form, we will be audiotaping this interview and taking notes. [Remove reference to audiotaping if participant did not agree.]

Your statements will be confidential. If results of this study are published or presented, names and other identifiable information will not be used unless we have obtained your explicit consent to do so. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. [10 min] I'd like to start with a few questions to get a better understanding of how student learning assessment is viewed and practiced on your campus.
 - a. First of all, please describe the purpose or purposes that undergird the assessment practices at your institution.
 - b. What are some of the key practices or processes you have in place that support your intended purposes for assessment?
 - c. What factors or characteristics do you believe are present on your campus that help you achieve your intended purposes for assessment?
2. [5 min] Next, I'd like to ask some more specific questions about assessment practices on your campus.
 - a. First, please describe how your institution's assessment practices directly or indirectly support curricular design and redesign. [Ask for examples if needed.]
 - b. Next, please describe how your institution's assessment practices support faculty development and enhance instructional quality on your campus. [Ask for examples if needed.]
3. [10 min] To conclude,
 - a. How successful would you say your institution is at integrating assessment with curricular and instructional planning and improvement processes?
 - b. Would you say or do you think that this integration is institution-wide or in some or most colleges and departments?
 - c. What barriers exist that prevent you from achieving a more effective or widespread integration of assessment and curricular and instructional planning and improvement processes? What would you like to change?
 - d. Before we wrap up, is there anything else you would like to share about student learning assessment at your institution that we haven't discussed?

Thank you for participating in this interview and helping us understand how student learning assessment is practiced and supported on your campus.

Total time: 30 minutes

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