

## The Transition from Annual to Triennial Assessment and How Faculty Feel About It

Jason C. Lyons, Ph.D.

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**Abstract:** Beginning in the 2014-2015 academic year, Christopher Newport University (CNU) transitioned from annual assessment to the triennial assessment of academic programs. This shift was largely motivated by observed limitations to annual assessment such as ineffective use of student learning outcomes, a lack of time, and overutilized faculty. By making this shift to a triennial cycle, it was assumed that faculty would experience a reduction in assessment fatigue, that there would be more time to capture and utilize assessment data, and more time to implement change. Using the meta-assessment scores generated by comprehensive reviews of triennial assessment reports conducted by CNU's University Assessment Committee (UAC), this paper will demonstrate how the assessment process at CNU shows continuous improvement. In order to address faculty perception relative to our assumptions, this paper will also share the results of a survey on faculty's perceptions of triennial assessment.

**Keywords:** *Triennial Assessment, Faculty Perceptions, Meta-Assessment*

### Introduction

With the struggles that academia has faced over the last year, schools across the country have found maintaining their assessment processes challenging. However, many of these same challenges existed prior to the pandemic (albeit in a less exaggerated form). In 2018, Lyons and Polychronopoulos published an *Assessment in Practice* piece that outlined the shift from annual departmental assessment to triennial programmatic assessment at Christopher Newport University (CNU), and promoted the triennial assessment process as a viable alternative to the more common annual assessment process. To understand why this shift occurred, common limitations to the annual assessment process experienced at CNU are elaborated below.

### Limitations to Annual Assessment at Christopher Newport

The first limitation reported by Lyons and Polychronopoulos (2018) was the institution's use of department-level assessment rather than program-level assessment. As is often the case, department-level assessment meant that student learning outcomes were developed across whole departments, many of which housed multiple academic programs conferring distinct academic degrees. Assessing student learning outcomes at the department level meant that the extent to which the individual program's outcomes were being met was likely misrepresented.

In addition, it has been suggested that faculty involvement in program-level assessment leads to positive organizational culture change

(Regjo, 2014), with organizational culture defined as a shared collection of learned behaviors, interactions, practices, and values that guide normative behavior in the accomplishment of work (Detert et al., 2000). Not only does department-level assessment obscure the measurement of programmatic student learning outcomes, but it limits at least one aspect of the institution's organizational culture. While not the main focus of this paper, the need to shift away from department-level assessment was one of the initial issues serving as a catalyst for the larger changes that followed.

As assessment professionals would likely agree, determining what needs to change to allow improvements to the learning environment and then implementing those changes is an important goal of the assessment process. A second limitation, therefore, was that in the annual assessment process there was very little time to implement the desired changes. It is a common practice for institutions to engage in an annual assessment process spanning a single academic year. Professionals engaging in the assessment process at these institutions must often wait until the fall term, when the next assessment cycle has begun, to hold discussions of the assessment data and to use that data to drive decisions. This is especially true for institutions with the majority, or all, faculty on 9-month or 10-month contracts and unavailable over the summer months.

Following discussion, which may very well have occurred across the entirety of the fall semester, the individuals engaging in the assessment process must move through the often bureaucratic and usually long process of implementing those data-driven decisions. If implementing change is a major goal of the assessment process, it can also be one of the

most challenging parts of the assessment process. This challenge may be compounded if the very people responsible for the implementation of these changes are simultaneously required to begin the process of capturing data for the assessment cycle that had begun that fall. Wouldn't the data captured at least partly represent the prior processes that the institution was working to change? And, wouldn't this just add to the claim that assessment is often meaningless or representative of poor methodology (Lyons & Polychronopoulos, 2018)?

The third limitation involved the overutilization of faculty. Simply stated, effective academic assessment is not possible without engaged faculty. However, this is also true for most university functions. In performing these functions, faculty are in their classrooms, in their lab/creative spaces, meeting with their committees, or are otherwise engaged with students. It can be argued, therefore, that faculty tend to be overutilized by their institutions. Now to that list we add annual assessment and increase their initiative fatigue (Kuh & Hutchings, 2015). For the assessment process, the overutilized faculty are asked to engage in meaningful assessment within a specific, often short, time period in which they capture, analyze, discuss, and then disseminate their findings in an assessment report. Finding time to do this over the course of a single academic year frequently poses a significant challenge for faculty.

### **How Is It Working at CNU So Far?**

The triennial assessment process at CNU was implemented to help reduce deficiencies in the assessment process caused, at least in part, by the above limitations. Other than the three-year cycle, the process is fairly typical of the assessment process. Every academic program is

required to have an assessment plan that details their Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs), describes the methods by which those outcomes are measured, and sets the program's targets for those SLOs. The assessment process within every academic program is managed by an assessment liaison, appointed by that program's department chair, who ensures that the process is maintained, enlists the aid of the program's faculty, and serves as a point of contact for the Office of Assessment.

Following the capturing of data and the program's analysis of the results, the assessment liaison for each academic program submits a triennial assessment report. This report details the extent that their targets were met and provides an action plan in response to those findings at the end of the fall term of the third year in the cycle. Requiring the triennial

assessment report midway through the third year allows the academic programs to reserve the spring of the third year for the implementation of assessment driven changes. Another aspect of CNU's process that is not typical of other institutions is the requirement to submit a follow-up implementation report which details what changes were made at the end of that spring term. Since the actions planned in academia do not always resemble the actions implemented, this implementation reports allows for a more precise tracking of changes than does the action plans alone.

CNU faculty are largely off-contract during the summer, therefore assessment data is not captured. However, assessment narratives from each program are included in the department chair's annual report to their deans each summer. This is timeline is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Triennial Assessment Timeline*

| YEAR ONE   |                                                                  |                 |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Fall:      | Assessment Data Capture - Fall 1                                 | Sept - Dec      |
| Spring:    | Assessment Data Capture - Spring 1                               | Jan - May       |
| Summer:    | Annual report with assessment narrative submitted to Deans       | ---             |
| YEAR TWO   |                                                                  |                 |
| Fall:      | Assessment Data Capture - Fall 2                                 | Sept - Dec      |
| Spring:    | Assessment Data Capture - Spring 2                               | Jan - May       |
| Summer:    | Annual report with assessment narrative submitted to Deans       | ---             |
| YEAR THREE |                                                                  |                 |
| Fall:      | Programs meet to develop Triennial Report                        | Sept - Dec      |
|            | Triennial Report Submitted to Office of Assessment               | <b>Dec 15th</b> |
| Spring:    | UAC review of assessment process utilizing the Triennial Reports | Feb - April     |
|            | Programs meet to implement Action Plans                          | Jan - May       |
|            | Programs Submit Implementation Reports to Office of Assessment   | <b>May 15th</b> |
| Summer:    | Deans & Chairs receive Triennials, Imp Memos and UAC reviews     | May - July      |
|            | Annual report with assessment narrative submitted to Deans       | ---             |

The question now is: How does it work?

Academic programs at CNU are on staggered triennial cycles, with one of three groups reporting each year. The triennial assessment reporting groups were established based on alignment with CNU's academic program review calendar. As of May 2021, each academic program has completed two triennial assessment cycles. With the completion of the two assessment cycles, observed improvements in CNU's assessment process can now be observed using meta-assessment scores.

The meta-assessment scores were generated through a comprehensive assessment of CNU's assessment process conducted by the UAC. The UAC at CNU is made up of 14 members (half faculty, half administrative) with the Director of Assessment serving as the committee chair. Each member serves two, two-year terms and these terms are staggered to prevent mass turn-over.

The UAC is tasked with monitoring the overall operation of the University's assessment activities. This is accomplished through a rubric-driven review of triennial assessment reports and then making recommendations concerning changes to academic programs. In effort to maintain reliability, the UAC chair trains new UAC members on this rubric each fall and keeps the committee, as a whole, in line with best practice. See Appendix for the UAC Assessment Evaluation Rubric.

After a review by the Office of Assessment, every submitted triennial assessment report

receives a thorough, comprehensive peer review by the UAC in which the Director of Assessment does not participate. Each report is reviewed by two UAC members; one "veteran", to the extent possible, and one new or relatively new UAC member. Reviews are initially completed independently of one another and followed by a joint discussion between co-reviewers to reach a general consensus.

The UAC then provides recommendations to the individual academic programs based on achieved rubric criteria and the meta-assessment score (meta-score) generated by the rubric. In turn, the meta-scores earned through the peer review dictate the level of response required by the academic program. If a triennial report receives a score between 71 and 100, no further action is required from that program. For scores between 51 and 70, the academic program must submit an assessment plan to the Office of Assessment containing the revisions suggested by the UAC or a rationale for why the suggested revisions are not appropriate. For scores between 0 and 50, an additional assessment report must be submitted to the Office of Assessment by December 15<sup>th</sup> of that year.

Note that given the staggered reporting schedule and the need to incorporate assessment data from the annual process at the time the triennial assessment process was implemented on campus to maintain compliance with SACSCOC, each reporting group had varied time in the new triennial assessment process as shown in Table 2 and 3.

Table 2

*Staggered Group Schedule at Implementation of Triennial Assessment*

| Group 1      |         |           | Group 2      |         |           | Group 3      |         |           |
|--------------|---------|-----------|--------------|---------|-----------|--------------|---------|-----------|
| Fall13-Spr16 | Fall 13 | Spring 14 | Fall14-Spr17 | Fall 14 | Spring 15 | Fall15-Spr18 | Fall 15 | Spring 16 |
|              | Fall 14 | Spring 15 |              | Fall 15 | Spring 16 |              | Fall 16 | Spring 17 |
| Fall16-Spr19 | Fall 15 | Spring 16 | Fall17-Spr20 | Fall 16 | Spring 17 | Fall18-Spr21 | Fall 17 | Spring 18 |
|              | Fall 16 | Spring 17 |              | Fall 17 | Spring 18 |              | Fall 18 | Spring 19 |
|              | Fall 17 | Spring 18 |              | Fall 18 | Spring 19 |              | Fall 19 | Spring 20 |
|              | Fall 18 | Spring 19 |              | Fall 19 | Spring 20 |              | Fall 20 | Spring 21 |

  

|                       |
|-----------------------|
| Triennial Reports Due |
| Implementations Occur |

The first triennial assessment report from Group 1, for example, contained two years of data from the previous annual assessment process while Group 3 had three complete years within the new triennial assessment

process. As shown in Table 3, as the amount of time spent working within the triennial assessment process increased, the average meta-score received by the UAC's review also increased.

Table 3

*First Triennial Report Meta-Scores from Each of the Three Reporting Groups*

| Group 1 – Fall 2015   | Group 2 – Fall 2016   | Group 3 – Fall 2017 |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| 2 Annual /1 Triennial | 1 Annual /2 Triennial | 3 Triennial         |
| 75.3                  | 91.5                  | 84.8                |
| 66.5                  | 59.8                  | 79.6                |
| 60.1                  | 86.1                  | 67.4                |
| 41.1                  | 62.3                  | 44.5                |
| 83.8                  | 51.0                  | 68.8                |
| 62.3                  | 79.0                  | 70.1                |
| 69.5                  | 42.3                  | 85.3                |
| 51.5                  | 63.9                  | 67.5                |
| 21.5                  | 50.8                  | 86.5                |
| 20.0                  | 85.5                  | 26.3                |
| 16.5                  | 51.1                  | 74.5                |
| <b>Avg: 51.6</b>      | <b>65.7</b>           | <b>68.6</b>         |

Table 4 shows how much each program's meta-scores improved between their first and second triennial assessment reports. Some of the measurements employed by individual programs in Group 3 proved to be untenable in the COVID-19 environment. In short, this

resulted in incomplete assessment reports causing a reduction in meta-scores compared to the program's previous triennial cycle. Other programs in Group 3, however, were able to use representative data captured earlier in the triennial cycle, prior to the COVID-19 shutdown

of operations resulting in completed assessment reports. It appears that they were not only complete, but despite COVID-19, the triennial assessment reports demonstrated improvement in the assessment process employed by those programs. This allowed the trend towards improvement in scores from the

previous triennial cycle to continue. The programs in Group 3 that had increased meta-scores (55% of Group 3) seemed to benefit from a data buffer offered by the triennial cycle, which allowed the average meta-scores to remain constant, rather than showing a decrease.

Table 4

*Triennial Reports from Each Reporting Group across Two Cycles*

| Group 1                                     |                    | Group 2                                     |                    | Group 3                                    |                    |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Triennial 1 Scores                          | Triennial 2 Scores | Triennial 1 Scores                          | Triennial 2 Scores | Triennial 1 Scores                         | Triennial 2 Scores |
| Fall 2015                                   | Fall 2018          | Fall 2016                                   | Fall 2019          | Fall 2017                                  | Fall 2020          |
| 75.3                                        | 97.0               | 91.5                                        | 73.4               | 84.8                                       | 64.8               |
| 66.5                                        | 61.8               | 59.8                                        | 84.3               | 79.6                                       | 55.9               |
| 60.1                                        | 77.8               | 86.1                                        | 77.3               | 67.4                                       | 51.8               |
| 41.1                                        | 74.4               | 62.3                                        | 89.6               | 44.5                                       | 69.8               |
| 83.8                                        | 92.3               | 51.0                                        | 86.0               | 68.8                                       | 70.0               |
| 62.3                                        | 66.5               | 79.0                                        | 90.8               | 70.1                                       | 82.6               |
| 69.5                                        | 51.1               | 42.3                                        | 87.5               | 85.3                                       | 92.8               |
| 51.5                                        | 56.1               | 63.9                                        | 94.1               | 67.5                                       | 73.5               |
| 21.5                                        | 83.1               | 50.8                                        | 90.4               | 86.5                                       | 53.8               |
| 20.0                                        | 35.3               | 85.5                                        | 90.4               | 26.3                                       | 79.9               |
| 16.5                                        | 41.8               | 51.1                                        | 90.8               | 74.5                                       | 70.0               |
| <b>M: 51.6</b>                              | <b>67.0</b>        | <b>65.7</b>                                 | <b>86.8</b>        | <b>68.6</b>                                | <b>69.5</b>        |
| <b>SD: 23.6</b>                             | <b>20.0</b>        | <b>17.0</b>                                 | <b>6.3</b>         | <b>18.4</b>                                | <b>12.7</b>        |
| <b><math>t(10) = 2.42, p = 0.018</math></b> |                    | <b><math>t(10) = 3.33, p = 0.004</math></b> |                    | <b><math>t(10) = 0.12, p = 0.45</math></b> |                    |
| <b>29.75% Improvement</b>                   |                    | <b>31.97% Improvement</b>                   |                    | <b>1.25% Improvement*</b>                  |                    |

#### But How Do CNU Faculty Feel About It?

Based on the observed limitations detailed previously, several assumptions could be made about the benefits faculty would perceive in a triennial assessment cycle (Lyons & Polychronopoulos, 2018). First, it was assumed that faculty would experience a reduction in assessment fatigue. As previously noted, academic programs are not “free of assessment” between reporting periods at CNU. Each summer, department chairs submit

reports to their respective deans which offer a narrative account of how assessment is proceeding with each of their academic programs. So, while it is intentionally kept in their view, they are not required to consistently engage in the capture, analysis, and dissemination of their assessment data, thus reducing the time they are engaging in activities specific to the institutional assessment process.

Second, it was assumed that there would be more time to capture representative data, especially from those courses not offered annually, and allow for more time to discuss the captured data. When assessment data comes from one academic year, that data is limited to two terms, three if summer is included, likely from a single student cohort. In a triennial cycle, depending on how an institution employs it, data may be collected from six to nine terms, allowing for greater flexibility in capturing representative data across student cohorts. This also allows data sampling from those courses that are offered one term a year, or in the case of smaller institutions, less than annually. Finally, sometimes things happen that make the collection of data difficult (like a pandemic). Having the flexibility of multiple data points improves the likelihood of capturing representative data, as was demonstrated in Table 4.

Third, it was assumed that a triennial assessment cycle would offer more time to develop substantial action plans and more time to execute those action plans. With the flexibility for capturing data, more time could be spent discussing assessment findings with colleagues. More time could be spent developing plans of action and implementing data informed decisions.

### Method

#### Participants

To determine the reality of these assumptions, all faculty at CNU were asked to complete a survey, as all faculty are expected to be involved in the assessment process.<sup>1</sup> Using Qualtrics, the survey, “Faculty Perceptions of Triennial Assessment”, was created, and administered to 456 faculty (FT=285, PT=171) receiving 95 completed responses (21% response rate). Of the 95 respondents, 75 had been at CNU five years or more (79%), leaving 20 that had been at CNU for less than 5 years (21%). In addition, 33 respondents reported having experience with academic assessment (35%), with 11 of those indicating experience with CNU’s UAC and 4 indicating experience with another institution’s assessment committee of similar scope. “No academic assessment experience” was reported by 62 of the survey respondents (65%).

#### Survey

Since institutional assessment policies and experience with assessment vary, it was important to understand how much experience faculty have had with assessment at CNU. Therefore, to gauge each faculty member’s time at CNU and their experience with assessment (at CNU or at another institutions), the survey led with the following demographic questions.

- How many years have you taught at CNU?
- Have you served as an assessment liaison at CNU?
- Have you served as an assessment liaison at another university?

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<sup>1</sup> Assessment liaisons are in place to guide the process within a program and are asked to enlist the other faculty members in the program. In addition, we make an intentional effort to make sure faculty are all exposed to

the process to various degrees. Since the liaison duty is often passed around, many have had that specific exposure.



As previously stated, several assumptions were made about the benefits faculty would perceive in a triennial assessment cycle. Likert scale questions were used to address these assumptions. Faculty were asked to indicate whether they *definitely agree*, *somewhat agree*, *somewhat disagree*, *definitely disagree*, or are *not sure* with the following statements.

- Triennial assessment gives me more time to capture data.
- Triennial assessment gives me more time to analyze data.
- Triennial assessment gives me more time to reflect on my program's findings.
- A triennial assessment cycle gives me the opportunity to make meaningful conclusions from our findings.
- A triennial assessment cycle reduces assessment fatigue for faculty.
- I prefer a triennial assessment cycle to annual assessment for academic programs

Finally, the following open-ended questions were included to give faculty the opportunity to express their opinions about the current triennial assessment process.

- What *advantages* do you perceive about triennial assessment for academic programs, in comparison with annual assessment?
- What *disadvantages* do you perceive about triennial assessment for academic programs, in comparison with annual assessment?

## Results

### Survey Responses

Faculty responses to the Likert scale questions were grouped by time spent at CNU and by assessment experience, shown in Table 5. After the responses were grouped by assessment experience (prior experience vs. no experience) and length of time at CNU (five years or more vs. less than five years), several interesting patterns emerged. Faculty that had been at CNU for five or more years were more likely to “*Somewhat Agree*” or “*Definitely Agree*” with all statements than those at CNU less than five years. The one exception to this was for the statement, “A triennial assessment cycle reduces assessment fatigue for faculty.” For this statement, those faculty at CNU less than five years were more likely to “*Somewhat Agree*.”

Faculty with assessment experience were more likely to select “*Somewhat Agree*” or “*Definitely Agree*” with most statements than those that did not have assessment experience. For two statements, faculty without assessment experience were more likely to “*Somewhat Agree*” than those with assessment experience who were more likely to “*Definitely Agree*.” This was true for the statements, “Triennial assessment gives me more time to analyze data” and again, “A triennial assessment cycle gives me the opportunity to make meaningful conclusions from our findings.”

Of the 95 survey respondents, 55 (58%) provided responses to the open-ended survey items. Table 6 shows the advantages and disadvantages perceived by faculty. Using thematic analysis, common themes among these responses were determined. The frequency with which these themes occurred is also shown. The perceived advantages reported



made up a combined 63% of these responses, with the most common theme being “Increased time for data capture”. Only 37% of the open-ended responses were dedicated to disadvantages. Among these, the issues with the cycle length made up 22% of the overall

open-ended responses. Specifically, the concern over cycle length was most commonly reported as a concern for potential data loss, and delays to curricular changes.

Table 5  
*Faculty Responses to Assumptions of Perceived Benefits*

|                                                                                                                   | All | > 5 years at CNU | < 5 years at CNU | Assessment Experience | No Assessment Experience |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------------------|------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| N                                                                                                                 | 95  | 75               | 20               | 33                    | 62                       |
| <b>1) Triennial assessment gives me more time to capture data.</b>                                                |     |                  |                  |                       |                          |
| Def Agree                                                                                                         | 45% | 50%              | 33%              | 60%                   | 36%                      |
| Smwt Agree                                                                                                        | 27% | 27%              | 8%               | 17%                   | 34%                      |
| Not Sure                                                                                                          | 5%  | 3%               | 17%              | 7%                    | 4%                       |
| Smwt Disagree                                                                                                     | 5%  | 6%               | 0%               | 7%                    | 4%                       |
| Def Disagree                                                                                                      | 17% | 13%              | 42%              | 10%                   | 21%                      |
| <b>2) Triennial assessment gives me more time to analyze data.</b>                                                |     |                  |                  |                       |                          |
| Def Agree                                                                                                         | 39% | 40%              | 33%              | 43%                   | 36%                      |
| Smwt Agree                                                                                                        | 31% | 34%              | 8%               | 23%                   | 36%                      |
| Not Sure                                                                                                          | 6%  | 6%               | 8%               | 13%                   | 2%                       |
| Smwt Disagree                                                                                                     | 9%  | 10%              | 8%               | 10%                   | 9%                       |
| Def Disagree                                                                                                      | 14% | 10%              | 42%              | 10%                   | 17%                      |
| <b>3) Triennial assessment gives me more time to reflect on my program's findings.</b>                            |     |                  |                  |                       |                          |
| Def Agree                                                                                                         | 39% | 42%              | 33%              | 37%                   | 40%                      |
| Smwt Agree                                                                                                        | 38% | 39%              | 17%              | 43%                   | 34%                      |
| Not Sure                                                                                                          | 8%  | 8%               | 8%               | 7%                    | 9%                       |
| Smwt Disagree                                                                                                     | 5%  | 6%               | 0%               | 7%                    | 4%                       |
| Def Disagree                                                                                                      | 10% | 5%               | 42%              | 7%                    | 13%                      |
| <b>4) A triennial assessment cycle gives me the opportunity to make meaningful conclusions from our findings.</b> |     |                  |                  |                       |                          |
| Def Agree                                                                                                         | 38% | 40%              | 33%              | 40%                   | 36%                      |
| Smwt Agree                                                                                                        | 34% | 34%              | 17%              | 27%                   | 38%                      |
| Not Sure                                                                                                          | 10% | 11%              | 8%               | 20%                   | 4%                       |
| Smwt Disagree                                                                                                     | 9%  | 10%              | 8%               | 7%                    | 11%                      |
| Def Disagree                                                                                                      | 9%  | 5%               | 33%              | 7%                    | 11%                      |
| <b>5) A triennial assessment cycle reduces assessment fatigue for faculty.</b>                                    |     |                  |                  |                       |                          |
| Def Agree                                                                                                         | 49% | 55%              | 25%              | 50%                   | 49%                      |
| Smwt Agree                                                                                                        | 22% | 18%              | 33%              | 27%                   | 19%                      |
| Not Sure                                                                                                          | 8%  | 10%              | 0%               | 7%                    | 9%                       |
| Smwt Disagree                                                                                                     | 6%  | 8%               | 0%               | 7%                    | 6%                       |
| Def Disagree                                                                                                      | 14% | 10%              | 42%              | 10%                   | 17%                      |
| <b>6) I prefer a triennial assessment cycle to annual assessment for academic programs.</b>                       |     |                  |                  |                       |                          |
| Def Agree                                                                                                         | 77% | 84%              | 42%              | 80%                   | 75%                      |
| Smwt Agree                                                                                                        | 9%  | 10%              | 8%               | 3%                    | 13%                      |
| Not Sure                                                                                                          | 3%  | 0%               | 8%               | 3%                    | 2%                       |
| Smwt Disagree                                                                                                     | 3%  | 2%               | 8%               | 7%                    | 0%                       |
| Def Disagree                                                                                                      | 9%  | 5%               | 33%              | 7%                    | 10%                      |

*Note:* Most respondents had been at CNU for five or more years (75 to 17). Of those reporting assessment experience, all have been at CNU for five or more years but only 5% had assessment experience at another institution

Table 6

*Faculty Perceptions of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Triennial Assessment Cycles*

| Advantages - Categories and Themes                                         | #         | %            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| <b>Reduced Assessment Fatigue</b>                                          | <b>9</b>  | <b>11.7%</b> |
| Less fatigue                                                               | 8         | 10.4%        |
| Less pressure on faculty                                                   | 1         | 1.3%         |
| <b>Increased time for data capture</b>                                     | <b>30</b> | <b>39.0%</b> |
| Interpret data across years                                                | 11        | 14.3%        |
| More data                                                                  | 10        | 13.0%        |
| More time to collect and analyze data                                      | 6         | 7.8%         |
| More time                                                                  | 3         | 3.9%         |
| <b>Program faculty have time to discuss the collected data</b>             | <b>14</b> | <b>18.2%</b> |
| More time for curricular change                                            | 8         | 10.4%        |
| More meaningful data                                                       | 6         | 7.8%         |
| <b>More time to develop substantial action plans</b>                       | <b>5</b>  | <b>6.5%</b>  |
| More meaningful changes                                                    | 5         | 6.5%         |
| <b>Time to execute the action plans within a discrete assessment cycle</b> | <b>4</b>  | <b>5.2%</b>  |
| Better assess program outcomes                                             | 3         | 3.9%         |
| Supports importance of assessment                                          | 1         | 1.3%         |
| <b>Less time from faculty duties</b>                                       | <b>14</b> | <b>18.2%</b> |
| More time for faculty activities                                           | 4         | 5.2%         |
| Less time on paperwork                                                     | 3         | 3.9%         |
| Less frequent                                                              | 3         | 3.9%         |
| Less busy work                                                             | 2         | 2.6%         |
| Less disruptive for professors                                             | 1         | 1.3%         |
| Less administrative overhead                                               | 1         | 1.3%         |
| <b>Disadvantages - Categories and Themes</b>                               | <b>#</b>  | <b>%</b>     |
| <b>Cycle Length</b>                                                        | <b>26</b> | <b>59.1%</b> |
| Delays curricular changes or improvements                                  | 11        | 25.0%        |
| Could be even longer than three years                                      | 3         | 6.8%         |
| Challenge of maintaining consistency with faculty changing                 | 2         | 4.5%         |
| Not enough time for feedback                                               | 1         | 2.3%         |
| Forgetting deadlines                                                       | 1         | 2.3%         |
| Assessment might have less influence within longer cycle                   | 1         | 2.3%         |
| Too long between reports                                                   | 1         | 2.3%         |
| Potential for data to be lost or miss important information                | 6         | 13.6%        |
| <b>Increases burden</b>                                                    | <b>6</b>  | <b>13.6%</b> |
| Too much paperwork                                                         | 2         | 4.5%         |
| Puts greater pressure on the assessment                                    | 1         | 2.3%         |
| Makes the task of assessment bigger                                        | 1         | 2.3%         |
| Takes away from other faculty activities                                   | 1         | 2.3%         |
| Having to do it all                                                        | 1         | 2.3%         |
| <b>No disadvantages to triennial</b>                                       | <b>12</b> | <b>27.3%</b> |

### Discussion

Making the shift from an annual to triennial assessment cycle is not an easy transition. However, once accomplished, it resulted in significant improvements to the assessment process at CNU (Table 4). As reported by Lyons and Polychronopoulos (2018) the shift was a response to several observed limitations with the annual assessment process that was employed prior to 2014.

One limitation outlined was the institution's use of department-level assessment rather than program-level assessment, which 1) lead to a misrepresentation of program-level student learning outcome achievement, and 2) possibly served as a hindrance to the advancement of organizational culture relating to assessment, following arguments made by Regjo (2014). As a future direction, the specific impact that the shift to triennial assessment has had on CNU's organization culture, as defined by Detert et al. (2000), should be investigated. The second limitation was the lack of time given to implement data-driven decisions using a methodologically sound process, preventing the goal of the assessment process. Third, given their already busy schedules (Lyons & Polychronopoulos, 2018), faculty at CNU were overutilized, possibly resulting in initiative fatigue (Kuh & Hutchings, 2015), which may have limited their engagement in effective academic assessment.

Based on the observed limitations, several assumptions were made about the benefits faculty would perceive in a triennial assessment cycle (Lyons &

Polychronopoulos, 2018). It was assumed that faculty would experience a reduction in assessment fatigue, that there would be more time to capture representative data and allow for more time to discuss the captured data, and that a triennial assessment cycle would offer more time to develop substantial action plans and more time to execute those action plans.

To determine if these changes were working, meta-assessment scores generated through a comprehensive assessment of CNU's assessment process conducted by the UAC were used. This data was available following the completion of two assessment cycles, by each academic program at CNU. It demonstrated that with the academic program's increased time in the triennial assessment process, the meta-scored derived from a review of their individual assessments improved.

However, as would be expected, this does not mean that all academic programs showed a consistent individual improvement. Some programs, in fact, had decreased meta-scores. This is especially true for programs completing their triennial cycles in 2020, dealing with the challenges caused by COVID-19 shutdowns. In a relatively normal academic year, longer assessment cycles such as this are susceptible to other difficulties such as faculty/staff turnover which could also result in meta-scores lower than would have been the case had the individual assessments employed by those academic programs had consistent leadership.

Despite these difficulties and others not mentioned here, the average meta-scores collected over more than six years of assessment at CNU demonstrated improvement in all years except 2020. However, while not demonstrating significant improvement, the average meta-scores collected from the 2020 UAC reviews held constant (showing a non-significant increase of 1.25%). The fact that, overall, the meta-scores increased, particularly in the case of extreme difficulties faced by so many institutions during the COVID-19 shifts in activity, demonstrates a robustness inherent in a longer assessment cycle such as the one presented here. Triennial assessment serves as an exceptional buffer to many issues complicating shorter assessment cycles such as an annual process.

To determine the extent that the assumed benefits of a triennial cycle were true, the faculty at CNU were surveyed. Faculty that had been at CNU for five or more years were indeed more likely to agree with all statements than those at CNU less than five years, supporting the assumptions being evaluated. Faculty at CNU for five or more years were likely to have some level of experience with CNU's previous annual assessment process and were likely able to directly compare that experience to experiences with the triennial assessment process.

This was found to be true for all but one statement. Faculty at CNU for less than five years were more likely to *"Somewhat Agree"* to "A triennial assessment cycle

reduces assessment fatigue for faculty."

Given that the faculty at CNU for five or more years were more likely to *"Definitely Agree"* with this statement, it is possible that since these faculty were not exposed to CNU's annual assessment process, they may not have experienced the same level of assessment fatigue. It should be noted, however, that only 17 of the 95 faculty respondents had been at CNU for less than five years at the time of survey. This may limit the generalizability of these findings.

All of the survey respondents that had been at CNU for five or more years reported having assessment experience. Of these, only 5% reported that they had gained this experience at a different institution. The results showed that the respondents with assessment experience were more likely to agree with most statements than those that did not have assessment experience, again showing support for the assumptions being evaluated. Again, since these faculty had all been at CNU for five or more years, they were all at CNU prior to the shift to triennial assessment. Therefore, with the exception of 5% of the respondents, their experience with assessment included both annual and triennial assessment.

Interestingly, for the statements, "Triennial assessment gives me more time to analyze data" and again, "A triennial assessment cycle gives me the opportunity to make meaningful conclusions from our findings", faculty without assessment experience were more likely to only *"Somewhat Agree"* than those with assessment experience, while those with assessment experience

were more likely to “*Definitely Agree*”. Again, it may be easier to agree with these two statements if you have experience with assessment than if you did not.

The perceived advantages reported by faculty fell in line with the initial assumptions. Two-thirds (63%) of the faculty responses to the open-ended questions described advantages to triennial assessment with the most common theme being “Increased time for data capture”, compared to 37% describing disadvantages.

As previously reported, 22% of the reported disadvantages described issues with the cycle length. Specifically, the concern over cycle length was most commonly due to potential data loss, and delays to curricular changes. These are valid concerns with often overlooked solutions.

As previously discussed, faculty/staff turnover resulting in data loss can be a potential problem. However, it is a problem that can be mitigated by having more than one individual in a program responsible for the assessment process. This is not often the case, unfortunately. The problem, therefore, is not a result of the assessment

cycle, but due to staffing issues. Delays to curricular changes do not have to occur, though this is a common misconception. In a triennial assessment process, academic programs submit their assessment reports once every three years. This does not mean that academic programs are encouraged to only consider their captured assessment data every three years. At CNU, ignoring assessment mid-assessment cycle is prevented by requiring an annual assessment narrative be included in their annual reports to their respective deans. While this does not contain a detailed analysis of assessment data, it does include the program’s view of what is, or is not, working so far. If a problem develops that needs immediate attention, that program is encouraged to fix it at that time. Rather than this being a disadvantage, it could be argued that the flexibility inherent in a three-year cycle allows for course correction without derailing the entire cycle in a way that an annual process could not.

Of the reported perceived disadvantages to triennial assessment, we can find comfort in the fact that only one person responded with “Having to do it at all!”

### References

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- Kuh, G., & Hutchings, P. (2015, March). *Addressing assessment fatigue by keeping the focus on learning*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
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#### About the Author

Dr. Jason C. Lyons is the Director of Assessment at Christopher Newport University in Newport News, Virginia. He can be reached at: [jason.lyons@cnu.edu](mailto:jason.lyons@cnu.edu)

**Appendix:**

**UAC Assessment Evaluation Rubric**

| <b>MISSION STATEMENT:</b>                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>EXEMPLARY - 2.5 pts each</b>                                                                                                                                                          | <b>ACCEPTABLE - 1.25 pts each</b>                                                                                                                                  | <b>DEVELOPING - 0 pts each</b>                                                                                                                                          |
| Very clear and concise statement of program's or unit's intent.                                                                                                                          | Reasonably clear and concise statement of program's or unit's intent.                                                                                              | General statement of program's or unit's intent.                                                                                                                        |
| Clearly and concisely states the program's or unit's purpose and who it serves.                                                                                                          | States the program's or unit's purpose and who it serves reasonably well.                                                                                          | Identifies the functions performed but not the greater purpose.                                                                                                         |
| Clearly identifies what it does that separates it from other programs or units.                                                                                                          | General statements that distinguish the program or unit.                                                                                                           | Too general to distinguish the program or unit.                                                                                                                         |
| Aligns with the university's mission statements and addresses the larger impact of the program or unit.                                                                                  | Aligns with the university's mission statements.                                                                                                                   | Fails to demonstrate clear alignment with the university's mission.                                                                                                     |
| <b>STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES (SLOS)/KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIs):</b>                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>EXEMPLARY - 4 pts each</b>                                                                                                                                                            | <b>ACCEPTABLE - 2 pts each</b>                                                                                                                                     | <b>DEVELOPING - 0 pts each</b>                                                                                                                                          |
| Clearly Observable and measurable.                                                                                                                                                       | Observable and measurable but may require interpretation from reviewer.                                                                                            | Not observable and measurable.                                                                                                                                          |
| Describes the SLOs/KPIs.<br>Language is focused on student learning or unit accomplishments.                                                                                             | Adequately describes the SLOs/KPIs but language needs more focus on student learning or unit accomplishments.                                                      | Describes a process, rather than SLOs/KPIs (i.e. language focuses on what the program or unit does, rather than what the student learns or unit accomplishes).          |
| Encompasses a discipline-specific body of knowledge for academic or administrative units (may also include general competencies); focus on the cumulative effect of the program or unit. | Encompasses the mission of the program or unit and/or the central principles of the discipline but does not focus on the cumulative effect of the program or unit. | Does not encompass the mission of the program or unit and/or the central principles of the discipline.                                                                  |
| Evaluator can clearly determine whether the SLO/KPI has been met without question. Use of appropriate language (i.e., action verbs.).                                                    | Evaluator can determine whether the SLO/KPI has been met, but language may be vague or need revision.                                                              | Unclear how an evaluator could determine whether the SLO/KPI has been met. The language is too vague and needs revision.                                                |
| A precise number of SLOs/KPIs identified: the mission is fully expressed while still being manageable to evaluate and assess.                                                            | An adequate number of SLOs/KPIs identified: enough to adequately encompass the mission while still being manageable to evaluate and assess.                        | Does not address the breadth of knowledge, skills, or services associated with the program or unit. Inadequate number of SLOs/KPIs. Inappropriate use of multiple verbs |
| <b>MEASURES:</b>                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>EXEMPLARY - 3 pts each</b>                                                                                                                                                            | <b>ACCEPTABLE - 1.5 pts each</b>                                                                                                                                   | <b>DEVELOPING - 0 pts each</b>                                                                                                                                          |
| Multiple measures for some or all outcomes.                                                                                                                                              | At least one measure per SLO / KPI.                                                                                                                                | Not all SLOs / KPIs have at least one measures.                                                                                                                         |



## TRANSITION FROM ANNUAL TO TRIENNIAL ASSESSMENT

|                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Various types of measures used with only minimal use of indirect measures.                                               | Each SLO / KPI employs at least one direct measure.                                                                                 | Few or no direct measures are used.                                                                                                          |
| Measures are clearly defined with purposeful detail. Clear how the results will be used to address the outcomes or KPIs. | Measures are described with sufficient detail but results may not clearly address the outcomes or KPIs and may need later revision. | Methodology is questionable: measures are vaguely described and/or may not be fully developed.                                               |
| Clearly articulates the “end of experience” effect of the program or the key purpose of the unit.                        | The “end of experience” effect of the program or the key purpose of the unit can be inferred.                                       | Does not capture the “end of experience” effect of the program or the key purpose of the unit.                                               |
| Exceedingly Feasible – practical use of existing practices where possible. External measures are used where appropriate. | Acceptable feasibility - practical use of existing practices where possible.                                                        | Questionable feasibility - the feasibility of some or all of the measures is questionable (e.g. course grades used as an assessment method). |
| <b>TARGETS:</b>                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>EXEMPLARY - 3 pts each</b>                                                                                            | <b>ACCEPTABLE - 1.5 pts each</b>                                                                                                    | <b>DEVELOPING - 0 pts each</b>                                                                                                               |
| Targets are identified for each measure.                                                                                 | Targets are identified for each measure.                                                                                            | Targets are not identified for each measure.                                                                                                 |
| Targets represent a reasonable level of success.                                                                         | Targets level of success is unclear or some seem off-base (e.g., too low/high).                                                     | Targets do not appear to have reasonable levels of success, or may not be attainable                                                         |
| Targets align with measures and outcomes without question.                                                               | Targets align with measures and outcomes reasonably well.                                                                           | Targets do not align with measures.                                                                                                          |
| Target language is clear and concise.                                                                                    | Target language is relatively clear.                                                                                                | Target language is vague or subjective (e.g., “improve,” “satisfactory”).                                                                    |
| Targets are readily identified as met or not met, or they can be easily determined to be met or not met by the reader.   | Targets are not all readily identified as met or not met, or they cannot all be determined to be met or not met.                    | It is difficult to tell if the targets have been met.                                                                                        |
| <b>FINDINGS:</b>                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>EXEMPLARY - 3 pts each</b>                                                                                            | <b>ACCEPTABLE - 1.5 pts each</b>                                                                                                    | <b>DEVELOPING - 0 pts each</b>                                                                                                               |
| Complete, concise and well organized.                                                                                    | Complete and organized.                                                                                                             | Incomplete or too much information.                                                                                                          |
| Exemplary data collection/analysis to arrive at conclusion.                                                              | Acceptable data collection/analysis to arrive at conclusion but all data might not be considered in conclusion.                     | Questionable data collection/analysis; may “gloss over” data to arrive at conclusion.                                                        |
| Align with the language of the corresponding achievement target without question                                         | Align with the language of the corresponding achievement target reasonably well.                                                    | Do not clearly align with achievement targets.                                                                                               |
| Provide solid evidence that targets were met, partially met, or not met.                                                 | Address whether targets were met, partially met, or not met.                                                                        | Questionable conclusions about whether targets were met, partially met, or not met.                                                          |
| Data is thoroughly and concisely represented.                                                                            | May contain unnecessary or misleading detail or stray slightly from intended data set.                                              | Findings do not present enough detail. Data is not represented.                                                                              |
| <b>ACTION PLANS:</b>                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                              |

## TRANSITION FROM ANNUAL TO TRIENNIAL ASSESSMENT

| EXEMPLARY - 5 pts each                                                                                                                                                                   | ACCEPTABLE - 2.5 pts each                                                                                     | DEVELOPING - 0 pts each                                                                                                                           |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Provides at least one detailed plan of action to be implemented following the current findings for each outcome or KPI                                                                   | At least one action plan is in place for each outcome or KPI, but not all action plans are well detailed.     | Not all outcomes or KPIs have an action plan or entries are just explanations for results rather than plans of action                             |
| Action plans directly state which finding(s) was/were used to develop the plan.                                                                                                          | Action plans do not always directly reference the relevant finding(s).                                        | Action plans do not reference the relevant finding(s).                                                                                            |
| Reflect with great depth to what was learned during the assessment cycle. (e.g. compares new findings to past trends).                                                                   | Reflect with sufficient depth to what was learned during the assessment cycle.                                | Reflection on current findings are too general and lack details (e.g., time frame, responsible party, Not clearly related to assessment results.) |
| Provide a concise summary of the changes implemented following previous assessment cycle findings.                                                                                       | Provides a general summary of the changes implemented following previous assessment cycle findings.           | Does not provide a summary of the previous changes or the summary is inadequate.                                                                  |
| Where needed, all action plans identify any area that needs to be monitored, remediated, or enhanced. If monitoring, remediation, or enhancement is not needed, a justification is given | Where needed, not all action plans clearly identify areas that need to be monitored, remediated, or enhanced. | Action plans do not clearly identify areas that need to be monitored, remediated, or enhanced.                                                    |