Building a Culture of Assessment in the Arts and Sciences

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Assessment Update is replete with stories about the difficulties of building cultures of assessment (Bubb et al. 2010; Ennis 2010; Wong, Campos, and Buxton, 2008) at institutions of higher education. If a culture of assessment does not already exist on campus, cultivating that culture is one of the most difficult activities a director of assessment will face. Some faculty advocate the practice while others sabotage every effort attempted. This article describes the experience of developing program assessment plans for five programs in the School of Arts and Sciences at a small, public, historically black college as it conducted its self-study for reaffirmation of regional accreditation.

Cultural Imbalance

There seems to be an imbalance in our campus culture of assessment. All of the programs at Bluefield State College that have disciplinary accreditation are on track with assessment of student learning as the program faculty fulfill the requirements of their accreditors. However, programs housed in the School of Arts and Sciences were found to be deficient in this area after the previous comprehensive evaluation by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association.

The accredited program faculty are already experienced in identifying student learning outcomes, systematically tracking assessment, utilizing advisory boards, and sharing assessment data with a variety of internal and external stakeholders. When deans in accredited units were asked by the assessment coordinator to share the assessment processes that had led to successful reaffirmations of accreditation in order to educate faculty in other disciplines, one dean advised, “We can’t be prophets in our own land. They just won’t listen to us.” As disheartening as that seemed at the time, it was probably true. The culture of assessment existed in programs that held disciplinary accreditation, but faculty in the non-accredited programs did not identify with the need for assessment because there were no immediate consequences for resisting.

Correcting the Deficiency and Identifying Setbacks

In an effort to correct the assessment deficiencies identified by the previous HLC consultant evaluators, the college hired a director of assessment. Promising strides toward building a culture of assessment were made in the School of Arts and Sciences; however, analogous to the Myth of Sisyphus described by Wong et al. (2008), there was a setback when the director of assessment left and the newly created position was vacant for more than a year. Progress on assessment activities (data collection, administration of standardized assessments, Assessment Committee meetings, etc.) stagnated or ceased altogether. The culture had just not matured enough at either the faculty or administrative levels for the assessment activities to continue without the director’s leadership.

Though assessment may be administratively led or guided, it must be faculty driven and faculty owned (Banta and Associates 2002; Huba and Freed 2000). Without that culture of assessment, plans may be waylaid when non-faculty assessment positions are vacated. If momentum is lost, it inevitably leads to an attitude and mindset among faculty of having “been there and done that,” and that it didn’t work last time and there is no use to try it again. It didn’t last, so it must not be valued by the institution.

In hopes of fully mobilizing the assessment process, the president converted the vacant position to one called director of institutional research and effectiveness reporting directly to the president. Finally, five years prior to the next HLC comprehensive evaluation, the college filled the position, and the countdown to the next regional accreditation self-study began. It was time to accelerate the culture of assessment momentum and not let the boulder roll over us again.

Team Training

The dean of arts and sciences, the dean of engineering technology and computer science, and the director of...
institutio nal research and effectiveness attended one of the assessment workshops sponsored by the HLC. This college team examined six fundamental questions about assessment:

1. How are your stated student learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs, degrees, and students?
2. What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?
3. In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of student learning?
4. How do you ensure shared responsibility for student learning and for assessment of student learning?
5. How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your efforts to assess and improve student learning?
6. In what ways do you inform the public and other stakeholders about what and how well your students are learning?

While at the workshop, the team was able to work with HLC mentors to develop a plan of action that would be implemented in the School of Arts and Sciences. When the team returned to campus, the trio shared this information with arts and sciences faculty and key administrative personnel. Although discussions about the implementation of the action plan continued among these constituents, the faculty buy-in the team hoped for was not immediate.

Creating the Program Plans

The dean and director worked with arts and sciences faculty to review student learning outcomes, revising them as necessary or creating them if they did not exist. Faculty created assessment matrices similar to those developed by Huba and Freed (2000) that identified student learning outcome, assessed course(s), assessment tool(s), performance goal, and timetable. In addition, faculty identified assessment tools (such as rubrics, portfolios, pre- and post-tests) and mapped student learning outcomes to the curriculum using as guides the program alignment grids found in Driscoll and Wood (2007).

The dean and director helped faculty identify student learning outcomes by asking the question: What do you expect students to know or be able to do at the end of the program? Faculty were also reminded of Bloom’s revised taxonomy and the hierarchical nature of learning. The process each group worked through was varied as the content of the programs (variances in the number of outcomes, levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, and what constituted a student learning outcome). For the most part, the conversations about what faculty expected students to know and be able to do were civil; however, sometimes individuals became quite adversarial and territorial. As the dean and director continued to redirect the discussions, faculty worked through areas of contention and were able to come to varying levels of consensus. The result was the creation of assessment matrices and curriculum maps for multiple arts and sciences programs.

The process faculty implemented to review programmatic student learning outcomes spurred the review of the general studies outcomes as a direct result of the HLC assessment workshops. This college’s general studies outcomes were renamed the Institutional Student Learning Outcomes. The revised outcomes accepted by the Assessment Committee were shared with the president’s cabinet, the vice president for academic affairs, and the Deans’ Council. Each academic program is now responsible for ensuring that students achieve the Institutional Student Learning Outcomes within each program prior to graduation.

Creating the Institutional Plan

Now that the individual program plans were in place for the arts and sciences assessment, it was time to merge all programs into one institutional-level assessment plan to promote a clearer reporting and analysis structure. The director of institutional research and effectiveness presented the Assessment Committee with a Plan to Assess (continued on page 14)

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Building a Culture of Assessment in the Arts and Sciences
(continued from page 4)

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required in the plan were described. The plan was approved by constituent groups and fully implemented.

Resistance to Change
Summer assessment workshops for faculty were designed to help them develop program assessment plans; but they were not embraced by all, and resistance was strong among a few. The hope was that if faculty created the program assessment plans, this would assist in the further development of an assessment culture within the school. To show support and illustrate the college’s commitment to assessment, faculty were provided a stipend; however, even the stipend was not enough to persuade all faculty to participate.

Educating and gaining the participation of faculty who did not join the summer workshops was difficult. Programs experienced several challenges, resulting in a delay in assessment collection and analysis. Some faculty did not feel that assessment was important and chose not to submit data. Several were confused about the collection and submission processes and expressed strong resistance to assessment, viewing it as an infringement upon their academic freedom.

To assist in the development of an assessment culture, a social science faculty member was assigned the title of associate dean of assessment in arts and sciences and charged to provide guidance on the new assessment process. In addition, the college provided resources to bring an HLC consultant to campus to provide feedback on the progress made following the assessment workshop. Based on feedback from the consultant, the director of institutional research and effectiveness and the dean and associate dean of assessment of arts and sciences worked to determine where the communication breakdowns occurred with faculty, ways in which the processes could be enhanced, and how to revise matrices for clarity.

The plan of action included mandating that faculty who failed to submit data be provided a plan of action to assist them in collecting and analyzing data so that these processes could become more standardized. The plan of action directed the associate dean of assessment to meet individually with faculty who seemed to have difficulty with the process. In addition, the associate dean attended department meetings to review the assessment matrices and developed a reporting system for the school’s programs.

A Reinforced and Continued Culture of Assessment Building
The college successfully weathered the most recent comprehensive evaluation, and the programs within the School of Arts and Sciences are no longer found to be deficient regarding assessment. It is expected that the efforts to collect assessment data put in place during this process will significantly improve program reviews from arts and sciences. Faculty need to have ownership of and embrace meaningful assessment activities in an effort to improve student learning. Only then will a long-lasting culture of assessment fully develop.

References

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