PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER: ASSESSMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 2010 ASSESSMENT SYMPOSIUM

Friday, May 7, 2010
Preface

The goal of the Nassau Community College Annual Assessment Symposium is to provide a forum for faculty to share methods of assessment that have been successfully employed in the classroom and to demonstrate how these have led to improved student learning outcomes. This marks the twelfth year of the Symposium and the third year that we have produced this *Highlights of the Annual Assessment Symposium*. The objective of *Highlights* is to make the information provided at the Symposium available to the college community at large.

The main topic this year was the role that assessment plays in institutional effectiveness. If the primary goal of institutional effectiveness is to deliver quality education to our students, then assessments of student learning outcomes are the principal source of data by which we can measure it.

The importance of supplying assessment data to the administration to inform the process of institutional effectiveness was emphasized by Professor Bogin, who called for improving the linkage of student learning outcomes assessments to the planning and budget process. Professor Spengler described the activities of the Academic Senate Assessment Committee which, through its many subcommittees, assists faculty to conduct student and course level assessments, works toward integrating this information with other assessments at the College, and assists in the smooth transfer of this information to the administration.

Professor Marcus and Professors Ludmar and Alvarez-Ortiz discussed issues that can stand in the way of improving student learning outcomes. Professor Marcus emphasized the idea that while different cultural backgrounds might interfere with student learning, multiculturalism is only one of the hurdles our students must overcome to achieve academic success. Many of our students are overly burdened with daily hardships and responsibilities that curtail the time they can spend on their studies, and these other factors must be considered as well. Professors Ludmar and Alvarez-Ortiz described some of the special services provided by the college’s Center for Educational and Retention Counseling that are specifically designed to assist our students to overcome some of these barriers to learning.

We sincerely thank all the members of the Academic Senate’s Assessment Committee and the Symposium speakers for their contributions, but especially for their dedication to their students. We know that the information shared at the Symposium and documented here will prove invaluable to the assessment process at the college.

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THE ULTIMATE FIT: STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Esther Bogin, M.S., C.C.C.
Professor, Communications

For the last 16 years, Professor Esther Bogin has been a proponent of the pedagogical study of learning outcomes assessment as it relates to quality education at the class, department and institutional levels. She is a Professor of Communications, teaching and assessing courses in public speaking, interpersonal communication, voice and diction, persuasive speaking, introduction to speech, and hearing therapy. Professor Bogin served on the Academic Senate Assessment Committee for over 12 years. She chaired the Committee for seven years. Currently, she serves as Second Vice Chair of the Academic Senate as well as on her Department’s P&B, Assessment and Marketing, and Public Relations Committees.

Abstract

The main objective of an institution of higher learning is this ultimate outcome: the students' highest levels of academic achievement. This presentation connects the interchangeable components of learning outcomes assessment at the course, program, department, and institutional levels. A few topics of interest are: outcomes assessment and institutional planning, outcomes assessment across curricula and institutions, and the accountable institution.

Summary of Presentation

A review of the literature on institutional effectiveness reveals a broad listing of descriptive terminology and phrasing such as: quality assurance; fulfillment of the institution’s mission; achieving goals; actually does what it says it does; meaningful documentation of
performance; informing all constituents of the institution about goals and strategic planning; accountability; transparency; money being spent wisely; and ongoing assessment using an organized institutional plan at all levels of the institution. Nassau Community College, an institution that is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and is part of the SUNY system, is expected to meet the clearly defined standards and criteria of both agencies. We must become smarter and more skillful at assessing learning outcomes and using collected data to influence and inform resource allocation, curriculum planning, scheduling, teaching methodologies, institutional planning, faculty development, student services, and learning outcomes—all in the spirit of continuous improvement.

Accordingly, ninety percent of institutional effectiveness is dependent on academic assessment. Students at NCC are expected to strengthen the kinds of qualities, competencies, and attitudes required for lifelong learning, such as: college level literacy as writers, speakers, thinkers, problem-solvers, researchers, and readers; technological competence; ability to transfer textbook information into life knowledge; independent and responsible work habits; effective discussion and interpersonal interactions; prioritization of their goals; and the expectation of more than mediocrity from themselves when achieving these goals. Accordingly, divisions at all levels of the college (courses/programs/departments/area disciplines/administration/operational offices/student services) should be seeking answers to the typical academic assessment questions:

1. What do we expect students to learn to make them achieving and lifelong learners? (i.e., a student who completed one course and/or a few courses in a department, or a degree program, or courses across curricula, or a student who graduates from NCC?)
2. What outcomes must students exhibit/demonstrate for us to conclude they have met our expectations?

3. How do we measure these outcomes at different levels of the institution?

4. What are the results? How do we use this information as a teacher or a department or an institution? All in the spirit of continuous improvement.

We at NCC conduct lots of assessments and collect lots of data from all parts of the institution. However, unless there is a clear connection and a definite interfacing, a kind of 360° connection between data reporters, data collectors and data users who influence and inform each other, any kind of assessment is just spinning wheels. Now is a good time to ask: what can we do at the course level and the institutional level to make the ultimate fit between student achievement and institutional effectiveness and strengthen that 360° connection between data reporters and data collectors and data users? Let’s assume that we expect students to have the basic qualities and skills for academic achievement even if we do not teach them these in our classes. At this point, it is important that we differentiate course teaching/learning goals (which we do assess) from those learning aims that we embed in course developments, grading rubrics, and assignments. We need to do this in order to reinforce the transfer of basic competencies needed for academic achievement, such as writing proficiency at the college level, intelligent discourse, information literacy, etc. How then can we weave these teaching aims into the classroom across curricula? If we don’t teach writing, reading or small group discussion competence, then how can we hold students in our classes responsible for these very basic skills?

Here are a few suggestions with which to start the ultimate connections at the class level:

1. During the first days of class the instructor could ask students to submit a writing sample to assess whether or not they meet expectations of writing proficiency for
the course. If they do not meet these basic expectations, then a requirement of getting assistance (let’s say 5 hours) from writing labs and help centers could be added to the activities necessary to fulfill the course requirements.

2. For every assignment students could be informed that grammar, spelling, demonstration of proofreading, demonstration of making changes utilizing feedback on previously written submissions, etc. will be included in the calculation of their final grade.

3. The use of student opinion surveys encourages students to assess their own learning responsibilities, strengths, or weaknesses. I personally tend to use them before and after assignments or exams and at the very beginning of the semester. These customized surveys could be administered at the time of assignment of the term project. Samples of survey questions are: how do you feel your writing competence will help you to meet expectations of the project? Can you rely on your experience to do online research at levels to meet expectations? What concerns you about the assignment? Do you need help? Do you know where to get it? Why is spell check not helpful? Which instructor criticisms helped you the most?

Now in the ideal NCC world that kind of information would reinforce institutional effectiveness. If course and department level assessment data showed that students required more help in writing across curricula and/or assistance with information literacy, then institutional planning would be influenced to allocate resources to expand student services and/or college-wide and department writing labs, and/or customize tutorial interactive online study guides, and/or schedule more learning communities, and/or limit class sizes for more
individualized attention, and/or possibly expand the course descriptions in our catalog to indicate the level of course demands for proficiency in writing, speaking, researching, reading (so students would know what to expect in order to achieve.) Also in the ideal NCC world of institutional effectiveness, we at the course and departmental levels then would be asked to assess the impact of any initiatives into which the college poured resources to document improvement due to these investments of resources, and initiatives. The final outcome would be to inform and influence institutional effectiveness (a 360° interfacing) in the spirit of continuous improvement. By pulling together all the “pieces” NCC would continue to evolve into an outstanding teaching/learning institution. We would continue to evolve as a haven for excellence in student achievement that attracts quality students and quality faculty. NCC would be the kind of institution in higher education that requires all of its parts to work as a connected whole--all in the spirit of continuous improvement.

HELPFUL RESOURCES


Professor Genette Alvarez-Ortiz’s primary area of focus is educational counseling. For the past seven years, she has been teaching the freshman seminar courses and, along with her class work, has also facilitated stress management workshops throughout the College. Prof. Ortiz earned a Master’s Degree in Student Personnel Administration with a concentration in Counseling from New York University.

Professor Molly Phelps Ludmar has worked in the Center for Educational Counseling for six years. In addition to her duties in the Center for Educational and Retention Counseling, she facilitates the Academic Motivation workshops each semester. She has a M.S. in Counselor Education from East Carolina University.

Abstract

The Center for Education and Retention Counseling (CERC) works with students to maximize their academic success and meet their educational, social, and personal goals. This presentation discusses how the CERC helps students recognize their potential through workshops and individual counseling. Additionally, we discuss how we assess these services as well as some new assessment initiatives we are developing. Our retention initiatives include conducting outreach and follow-up with at risk students, conducting campus-wide workshops to enhance student success, and directing students to appropriate resources on campus. Our services are essential to institutional effectiveness in that we work with students to explore academic opportunities to adjust to the often conflicting demands of college, and to discover ways to succeed in higher education.
Summary of Presentation

When the Center for Educational and Retention Counseling (CERC) first approached the task of linking institutional effectiveness to assessment, we began by reviewing the Mission Statement Goals of the College and determining which goals pertained specifically to our unit within our department, Student Personnel Services. We determined that the following five goals related directly to the services that we offer NCC students:

- To maintain developmental programs which upgrade student skills for success in college level courses, and to provide special courses of study which enhance general education.
- To support and strengthen academic programs which best prepare students for transfer to senior institutions, and to prepare students for regional and global employment opportunities.
- To create educational programs that respond to and satisfy diverse community needs.
- To provide the support services necessary for students to realize their maximum potential.
- To create a wide variety of activities and programs to enrich student and community life.

The ways in which we contribute to institutional effectiveness via these goals include:

1. Individual Counseling for:
   - Students on academic probation
   - Students dealing with academic difficulty
   - Students wishing to create an academic plan
   - Students in need of referrals to other campus services

2. Conducting workshops each semester on the following topics:
   - Time Management
   - Academic Motivation and Goal Setting
   - Test Anxiety and Relaxation Techniques
• Listening and Taking Notes
• Studying for Courses
• Reading Textbooks
• Taking Tests
• B Status Student Workshops
• New Fall 2010: Academic Planning

3. Teaching the SPS 093 Counseling Seminar which includes topics such as:

• Values Clarification
• Identification and Application of Individual Learning Styles
• Time Management/Self Management
• Problem Solving
• Career Exploration
• College Policies and Expectations

In recent years we have assessed our effectiveness through a student satisfaction survey as well as a course evaluation. However, in light of the need to better link our effectiveness to assessment we piloted a program in the Spring 2010 semester, which tracked each student who attended a workshop. We collected information about the student’s GPA prior to and following attendance at the workshop, as well as whether or not the student enrolled in the following semester. Ideally we would like to track each student who passes through our doors. However at this time the sheer number of students we see makes that difficult without the help of technology. From November 2009 through January 2010 we had over 2100 students pass through our doors. Additionally, each semester we counsel between 800 and 1000 “D” students who are on academic probation. We are working with experts in MIS to determine ways in
which we can electronically track these students. In the meantime we will run a pilot program in the Fall 2010 Semester which will manually track 200 “D” status students. We will collect information on how many times the student visits our office for individual counseling, whether or not they attend academic workshops, and the types of issues they are dealing with which have prevented them from succeeding academically in past semesters. The results of these pilot projects will be helpful to us in determining if we are providing students with the skills they need to enhance their social and personal development.

Additionally, The SPS Assessment Committee is currently working on a uniform student development survey which will be used in all SPS units. This survey will allow us to assess student abilities to take the information they gather while working with us and apply the techniques and skills to their academic lives. The survey is expected to be ready for use in the Spring 2011 Semester.

The CERC is also in the process of creating a course for students on Academic Probation. We would like to offer the course as a counseling seminar to help students on probation return to good academic standing. The course is currently in the development stage and we hope to be able to offer it in future semesters.

In conclusion, it is imperative to student success that CERC counselors and classroom faculty work together to make students aware of our services. Classroom faculty are always encouraged to refer students to our offices and workshops whenever appropriate. Classroom faculty and CERC counselors often work together to promote student success and provide students with the necessary support to succeed. This collaborative approach is in the best interests of student success and the overall mission of the College.
BEYOND MULTICULTURALISM: THE MANY “MULTI’S” OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Hedda Marcus, M.A.
Professor, English

Hedda Marcus is Professor of English, Women’s Studies and modern cultural studies at Nassau Community College. She is the Coordinator of the Teaching and Learning Project, leading faculty seminars in student-centered pedagogy. She also coordinates the NCC S.E.E.D. (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) Project, which focuses on issues of inclusiveness, examining such matters as racism, classism, homophobia, sexism, ageism, and invisible systems of privilege and their effects on the classroom. She has won several awards for teaching and a Nassau County Martin Luther King Celebration award for her leadership in diversity work.

Abstract

Multicultural projects and practices at NCC can help students feel welcome in our classrooms, open their minds to different perspectives, and move towards understanding the complex nature of the world. But multiculturalism has its limits. There are differences among our students beyond their cultural diversity that we must address if we hope to provide the intellectual and social development traditionally associated with the college experience.
Summary of Presentation

While multiculturalism is an important part of a rich college experience, it cannot solve some of the most challenging barriers to our students’ success. What really gets in the way of greater success is a “multi” other than multicultural. It is the multiple qualities students have always needed in order to learn consistently and well: age-appropriate intellectual development, academic preparedness, psychological sturdiness, physical health, time to study and a stable environment. The problems of our students across their cultures—above and beyond their cultural differences-- are multilayered.

At an open admissions, commuter school, the student population comes to college with greater academic deficits and more severe adjustment issues than students at colleges with competitive admissions requirements. Open Admissions, I continue to believe, is an exalted democratic ideal. But the consequences of admitting students of all academic levels are enormous, and when we talk about drop-out rates, retention efforts and assessment, these facts must be constantly acknowledged and recognized as the critical realities that they are.

To me, the crux of our current problem with retention is a different kind of diversity than the one that multiculturalism addresses. As professors, we are faced with the problem of having to offer a college level curriculum for which only a very few students are ready and having to constantly re-teach skills that, not having been learned in 12 years of school, seem not to stick despite remedial classes and/or prerequisites. It’s not simply that every class we teach, no matter how advanced it is supposed to be, requires remedial work for the majority of students in reading and writing; it’s that the levels of remediation some students require are simply overwhelming and the numbers of students who need remediation are daunting. When vast numbers of students.
have not had strong reading and writing skills for 18 years or more, the issue is not just whether they can make up in a year or so skills they should have learned from elementary school through high school: It’s also that without those skills in place for all those years, the students have missed out on the psychological development, the cultural understanding and the intellectual development that being literate facilitates for a growing child.

In addition, it’s clear that many of our students struggle with economic problems that require them to work for so many hours a week that little time is left for studying; a variety of physical illnesses and disabilities; emotional problems that have prevented them from going away to school and living more independently; and, often, responsibilities in their homes that the out-of-town student avoids simply by being away. Some are single parents with full-time jobs.

Without a doubt, we help students when we make them feel welcome and offer them curricula that imply that they belong here. But the problem with trying to assess the efficacy of multiculturalism is that it is only one thread in a complex skein of conditions we address in our classrooms. Among the multiple variables of our student’s lives, their cultural backgrounds are only one. Should we spend time and money trying to extract—if that were possible—and study one aspect of an incredibly complicated, multi-layered problem? Let’s continue to support and develop a multicultural approach. But must we formally assess it? Wouldn’t the time and effort involved just be a distraction from the very real conditions we face in the classrooms of our Open Admissions school? I think we’d do better admitting that we need smaller, not larger classes; required substantive orientations and study skills programs for freshmen; required tutoring in reading, writing and math; much more easily accessible psychological counseling; a continued commitment to the values of a liberal education; and an honest acknowledgment that we cannot perform miracles.
Prof. Gregory Spengler has been a member of the Department of Mathematics, Computer Science, and Information Technology at Nassau Community College for over fourteen years. He has served on the Academic Senate Assessment Committee for ten years, previously as its secretary, and currently as its chair. In addition, he is the chair of the Department of MAT/CSC/ITE Assessment Committee. He earned his B.S. in Mathematics and his M.A. in Mathematics from St. John’s University.

Abstract

The Assessment Committee of the Academic Senate works to maintain a faculty-driven process by which individual departments are performing assessments that yield meaningful results. In light of the recent emphasis being placed on the need for NCC to link course and program level assessments of learning with institutional effectiveness, the Academic Senate Assessment Committee will focus on encouraging and assisting the departments in their efforts to use course-level assessment results to address their department and program level learning goals. The members of the committee will work with their department assessment coordinators to ensure that student learning assessment is better integrated with other areas of institutional assessment. This will help the college in its attempt to demonstrate that course-level assessment results can be used in its strategic planning process.
Summary of Presentation

Assessment is an ongoing endeavor on the campus of Nassau Community College (NCC). Our college has embraced course-level assessment with the vision to:

- Meet quality assurance mandates directed to institutions of higher learning
- Ensure value in the intellectual and personal development of our students
- Inspire faculty to engage in a community of scholarship and interdisciplinary discourse.

The State University of New York (SUNY) Board of Trustees adopted a new assessment resolution effective at the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year designed to streamline the course-level assessment process. The most pertinent aspects of the resolution are as follows:

- The resolution updates SUNY’s policy on assessment by acknowledging their long-standing commitment to assessment as a means of enhancing academic excellence.

- The resolution rescinds the previous assessment approach (passed in 2003) and now allows each campus to develop assessment plans that are consistent with its mission and goals within the context of SUNY’s mission and goals.

- It eliminates unnecessary duplicative assessments (specifically, the SUNY-mandated General Education Assessment Review [GEAR] and Strengthened Campus-Based Assessment [SCBA] mandates—Basic Communications [Written], Math, and Critical Thinking, est. 2005).

- It allows for each campus to develop its own GenEd assessment plan, as long as it conforms to the SUNY GenEd requirements.

- The University Provost will issue guidance for campuses and consult with campus leaders and faculty to identify ways to support assessment efforts.

The Academic Senate Assessment Committee (ASAC) supports this resolution (as did the Faculty Council of Community Colleges), and in fact these bodies have been supporting several of the ideas presented in the resolution for years. It is important to understand at this
juncture, however, that with more freedom comes increased responsibility. Specifically, it is imperative that we understand that we must adhere to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) standards.

For many years the ASAC has been in charge of organizing the effective course-level assessment process at NCC. According to the committee’s by-laws, the ASAC serves to:

- Foster the implementation of course-level assessment (which includes the measure and evaluation of student learning outcomes)
- Encourage and assist departments with the assessment process
- Communicate the findings of course-level assessment processes with the college community. (This is the twelfth consecutive year that the Annual Assessment Symposium has been conducted.)

In light of the recent MSCHE evaluation, the ASAC will be taking on new responsibilities in the upcoming years. There will be a focus on department-level and program-level learning goals in the interests of ensuring that course-level assessments are meaningful. MSCHE Standard 14\(^1\) refers to the college’s need to address institutional level goals through their course-level assessment process. Next year (2010-2011) is the sixth and final year of the current assessment cycle at NCC, during which each department was scheduled to have assessed every course it offers at least one time. The ASAC will ask departments to identify their new plans for the next cycle, and has taken the first step in addressing the need for the college to identify and assess the learning goals for each department and the learning goals for each program offered by each department. **NCC needs to provide evidence that assessment of student learning and the use of its results is an ongoing institutional activity.** Assessment is

\(^1\) **MSCHE Standard 14**: Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution’s students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals.
designed to demonstrate that a college is fulfilling its mission and achieving its goals, which makes assessment essential to the accreditation process.

In the spring 2010 semester, the departments were asked to identify each of their program’s learning goals and how they are measured (if a department does not have any discrete degree or certificate programs, they were to identify broader learning goals integrated throughout the curriculum for students taking department courses). The ways in which the learning goals are linked to and support the college mission and institutional level goals were identified in their descriptions.

In 2010-2011, the ASAC, with its members acting as department representatives, will provide guidance to help the depts. organize their course-level assessment data and fit this data into their assessments of department and program-level goals. There will be criteria (i.e., exceeding, meeting, or not meeting expectations) used to delineate levels of performance for each learning goal. It is imperative that the assessment reports include modifications to any courses, programs, or departmental activities that were recommended on the basis of assessment results. Departments will explain how these assessment results will allow them to identify what is needed to ensure that the modifications can be implemented. This will enable departments to justify their claims for monies/resources, etc. when they ask for them in the interests of improving the learning outcomes, which ultimately leads to the improvement of their departments’ programs and services. This will also serve in part to address MSCHE Standard 7, which relates to the overall effectiveness of the institution2.

2 MSCHE Standard 7: The institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals and its compliance with accreditation standards.
The Department Annual Assessment Reports (ADARs) to the Office of Assessment and Program Review (OAPR) will specifically address these course, program, and department-level results (with the aid of OAPR’s feedback). The ASAC has begun to review software that may potentially be acquired by the college in the interests of helping the faculty in each department organize their assessment data and help them compile their annual ADARs.

It is worth mentioning the following additional efforts taken by the ASAC to ensure the assessment of student learning is comprehensive and meaningful.

- The ASAC has worked to aid in the transition of the Administrative Office that serves to coordinate assessment activities. The Office for Assessment and Program Review has taken over the responsibility of what had previously been done in the Office of Institutional Research. Among these responsibilities, OAPR is in charge of ensuring continued college-wide compliance with the external requirements and internal procedures that formalize assessment of student learning. The ASAC will be helping this office in attempts to reduce excessive work load, attain more efficient methods of reporting and collecting assessment data, and addressing needs of specific departments as they conduct their assessments.

- The ASAC has conducted its annual Assessment Symposium for twelve years running. The symposium has allowed faculty members to share best practices of assessment from across the disciplines, as well as present a forum for discussing any pertinent topics relating to the assessment process and the external assessment requirements placed on the college.

- The ASAC Publications Subcommittee works to compile findings of assessment and disseminate information so that faculty can better use the results of assessments from
all the disciplines. It prepares a synopsis of the presentations made at the annual Assessment Symposium. It will also be working to update the ASAC Assessment Manual to include more current practices and findings, including those associated with the GenEd Assessments and the areas of information management and critical thinking.

- The Student Responsibility Subcommittee of the ASAC conducted a study completed during the current academic year to investigate the role of students in the process of assessing their learning, and some members of that subcommittee will be presenting as part of one of the symposium’s panels.

- On Feb. 8, 2010, the New Faculty Orientation Subcommittee of the ASAC held its 7th Orientation Seminar. These seminars, held since 2002, are designed to introduce new faculty members to the process of assessment and to explain the responsibilities involved in conducting the assessment in their classrooms. The 2010 event was attended by about twenty new faculty members.

- The Faculty Resources Subcommittee of the ASAC has begun investigating new software options that would be used to generate assessment reports.

- A newer initiative that is being undertaken by the ASAC is to work in collaboration with the Planning Committee to explore ways in which these two vital processes (Planning and Assessment) are related and how they can be used in conjunction with each other to benefit the college’s Strategic Planning efforts.

In closing, it is important to recognize that the meaningful results of the assessment of student learning remain an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness.