Building the Campuswide Culture of Assessment

“Building a campuswide Culture of Assessment requires construction of shared meanings, a process that is facilitated by collaborative interactions around assessment practices.”

Before we talk about collaboration around assessment, the topic for the 2009 Assessment Symposium, we need to re-visit our conversation of the 2008 Symposium. At that time, we talked about building the campuswide culture of assessment through construction of shared meanings. Our vision for the future: A campuswide culture of assessment that aligns with and informs the institutional planning process and supports the mission of the College in meaningful and substantive ways. We began our discussion by envisioning the construction of a philosophical “home” to serve as the framework for assessment activities at our institution. We agreed that our goal should be the elegant simplicity Albert Einstein had in mind when he said, “Any intelligent fool can make things bigger and more complex. It takes a touch of genius, and a lot of courage, to move in the opposite direction.”

Foundation: Shared Meanings

The foundation of our assessment culture is shared meanings, and we begin with the most basic keystones. *Culture* is defined as the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular group, in this case, the behaviors and beliefs we share regarding assessment. Within the college Culture of Assessment may be found assessment sub-cultures based in disciplines, historic practices and shared beliefs. For example, assessment history and practice is very different in mathematics from that found in the Arts. As in the larger culture, these sub-cultures provide
richness and depth as well as conflict within the community. A community is defined as a group sharing common characteristics or interests. Communities, like cultures, often contain subgroups nested within the larger group. For example, the faculty and administrative communities are subgroups within the larger college community. Members of each subgroup share common characteristics and interests with other members of their subgroup, but they also share many characteristics and interests with the members of the larger community. Unlike the “silos” that are sometimes described in organizational literature, social communities overlap and intersect, sometimes in surprising ways. One of the most essential attributes of the culture of assessment is inclusiveness. Within an inclusive culture, the conversations and the processes are structured so as to encourage an atmosphere of tolerance, respect and inclusion across disciplinary and philosophical communities, with plenty of room for sharing--and learning from--diverse perspectives and practices.

Our culture of assessment is predicated on the shared understanding that our teaching and assessment practices are learning-centered. We define this quality as a focus on the process and outcomes related to the acquisition by the learner of knowledge or skills through study, instruction or experience. This philosophy is at the heart of modern educational assessment. The questions modern educators ask have evolved from teaching-centered concerns (What am I teaching? How can I improve my teaching?) into learning- and learner-centered concerns(What are students learning? Are students learning what I think I am teaching? How can I help my students learn?). In order to answer these new questions, we use outcomes-based assessment of learning. This practice yields results through a systematic process of data collection to assess observable and measurable behaviors. In other words, our teaching and assessment practices are
focused on student learning that is observable and can be measured, quantitatively and/or qualitatively, in some valid, reliable, and systematic way.

Framing: Shared Goals

With the foundation in place, we can agree on shared goals to frame the “structure” of our shared practice and culture of assessment. First, whatever our discipline, as a community of professional educators we can agree that our shared goals are to facilitate student learning through the process of teaching, and to improve teaching through observation of how and what students learn. The foundational text, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, is recommended reading for professional educators who would like to improve their own practice of teaching and assessment.

Second, we can all agree on the importance of planning the assessment of our students’ learning outcomes, as an integral part of instructional planning. Just as we all know that in our personal lives planning keeps us on track to achieve our goals, so, too, do we all agree that careful planning for assessment helps to define and refine our goals, and then to achieve them. Assessment practice without thoughtful planning makes for a chaotic process, poor data, and unreliable results. We all share the frustration of learning outcomes assessment processes that are unclear or not well-designed, and we share the goal to structure outcomes assessment in ways that make the process more meaningful and less burdensome.

Last, but certainly not least, an essential component in structuring the academic assessment process is defining its role in the process of institutional (strategic) planning. We all agree that this is a complex and dynamic linkage; we also know that this connection is essential to accomplishing the mission and goals of the College. Our shared goal is a practical alignment between assessment and planning, recognizing that each process informs but does not drive the
other, and that the relationship will always be less straightforward and simplistic than we might wish it to be.

Raising the Roof: Results

Planning for achieving valid, reliable and meaningful results is the finishing touch on our Culture of Assessment structure. To ensure the “roof” is sound there are several essential components to our assessment practice.

Results we can count on and therefore disseminate with confidence grow out of an evidence-based practice. Effective courses and programs are based in good practice models, our own and those of others, that have demonstrated effectiveness. We will be looking to increase the use of evidence-based practice models at all levels in order to improve and streamline our assessment process.

Reliable results inform the integration of course- and program-level assessments. Course goals and outcomes are nested within, and should be closely related to, programmatic goals and outcomes. This has the happy effect of indirectly aligning the goals and outcomes of all courses within a program or department, while preserving the autonomy of teaching faculty.

Results that are derived from evidence-based models and that are valid and meaningful, inform the institutional planning process when used by individual programs and departments to build cases for increased or re-allocated resources.

Valid, reliable and meaningful results satisfy stakeholders. SUNY, GEAR, Middle States, College Trustees and the public are external stakeholders; faculty, staff, students and administrators are internal stakeholders. Stakeholder constituencies have unique perspectives and assert various demands on the process and practice of assessment. Most of the time, we are unable to “just say no,” and if we disagree with the perspective or believe the demands are
unreasonable, we negotiate. But meanwhile we work creatively, within the constraints imposed both internally and externally by various stakeholders, to do what needs to be done.

Tools of the Trade: Interaction and Planning

When human interactions go fairly smoothly we can accomplish a great deal, but when they don’t, progress can come to a screeching halt. To succeed, we need to embrace the idea that diversity of perspectives and perceptions, and the conflicts that ensue, are normal components of viable cultures. While we often think of conflict as a negative, in fact, when met with constructive action it can be the catalyst for positive change. Constructive action includes criticism that is thoughtful, respectfully presented and accompanied by presentation of reasonable alternatives.

Consensus-building and negotiation are processes that are essential to a Culture of Assessment. We do need to guard against the emergence of groupthink which can occur when the perceived need for agreement takes priority over the motivation to obtain accurate information and make appropriate decisions. This need to achieve concurrence can overrule an accurate assessment of the situation by shutting down divergent perspectives and discouraging careful critical thinking. Instead, we need to make it a habit to step back and observe, especially when conflict arises, but even when things appear to be going smoothly. When conflict arises, we can assess opportunities to facilitate negotiation and be open to compromise. Most importantly, we must understand the power of consensus, which can be reached even in the most contentious of discussions if all understand and agree that the goal is not for some members of the group to “win” but rather to achieve a group solution that all the members can accept and live with.
The hardest part of building the Culture of Assessment is making sure the eventual plan includes courses, departments, programs and the college in functional harmony and that it reflects our shared purpose for assessment; which is educational effectiveness. We desire to help students learn, to guide them to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to succeed as individuals. The challenge to realizing our shared purpose is to imagine how assessment and planning will interact on an ongoing basis, in an atmosphere of continuous change, and in an environment where we cannot control all of the elements. The idea of tasking is often met with a mix of responses, including not only relief and hope, but also suspicion and resistance. We need to overcome negative responses because we know that nothing will actually come of all the planning without individuals assuming responsibility for the work. Accountability, when practiced well, ensures that the work is shared equitably and that it gets done well and according to plan.

**Collaboration Around Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes**

Now that we have reviewed the construction of our Culture of Assessment, we can discuss how we will use collaborative interactions to (1) maintain and strengthen the culture and practice of assessment and (2) “close the loop” on assessment to make it a source of positive change.

Collaboration thrives on transparency, knowledge-sharing, and shared results that may be good, bad, or even ugly. Transparency creates a mechanism for knowledge-sharing that encourages collaboration among stakeholders within and outside the campus community. We encourage collaborative relationships when our assessment plans and processes are shared with colleagues, students, the public, other institutions, accrediting bodies and others. Knowledge-sharing with colleagues and others around the methodology and practice of assessment generates
a shared context, which supports a feedback loop that thrives on and encourages further transparency. Sharing of results, including successes and challenges, is the heart of collaboration and the interactive process that closes the loop for our assessment activities.

**Practicing Collaboration**

Those who wish to begin collaborating assume a leadership role by joining the ongoing conversation around assessment in the broader community of professional educators. The leadership can begin in the individual’s home department, where disciplinary colleagues are invited to join, or on a higher, cross-disciplinary or even institution-wide level. One individual can make the first step toward the collaborative environment where sharing and reflecting on assessment processes results in improved assessment practice.

Communication about assessment can save time and effort that might be spent “reinventing the wheel” or it might demonstrate to a discouraged practitioner that a particular assessment approach need not be abandoned. For example, brown bag lunches provide opportunities to invite colleagues (within and outside your discipline) to present their own assessment challenges and successes and to open discussions with others who may have faced similar challenges and have discovered unique ways to overcome them. Sharing stories of success and disseminating practice models that have demonstrated track records is a way of reinforcing the culture of assessment both locally, on your home campus, and more broadly, in the wider community of professional educators.

Often our communications around the process of assessment take place among our colleagues at our home campus. However, participation in discipline-specific and other professional meetings offers opportunities to share your assessment practice and to learn from colleagues in the broader community of your own discipline and across disciplines. Professional
organizations and societies are increasingly making the assessment of student learning an important component, a separate workshop track or even the main focus of annual meetings and conferences. Be aware of these opportunities to share your own assessment practice and don’t feel that because you have just begun you have nothing to share. The community of professional educators as a whole is in many ways just beginning to appreciate the essential nature of systematic learning outcomes assessment. Every assessment practitioner has something to contribute to this conversation, no matter where you are in the process.

Another way to enter the broader conversation about assessment is to present and/or publish results of classroom assessment practice. For example, if you are trying a new approach to teaching and assessing critical thinking skills, document your planning, measurement, data collection, and analysis. In the end, what you’ve done can be written up and presented at a conference or submitted for publication in a teaching practice journal.

Why Collaborate Around Assessment?

Through its potential to enhance student learning outcomes, collaboration around assessment benefits every stakeholder in the education process. Students benefit from implementation of systematic and consistent learning assessment practices that help them to be better able to understand what is expected of them as learners. With this understanding come the ability and the desire to be responsible participants in assessing their own learning.

Teachers benefit from shared assessment practice which augments and expands both their knowledge and their skills related to learning outcomes assessment. As they become more confident in their ability to systematically assess their students’ learning, teachers become more inclined to experiment with teaching and with assessment, and to identify more creative, innovative modifications designed to enhance learning outcomes.
Disciplines benefit from shared practice which enriches disciplinary traditions, opening new avenues for learning outcomes assessment practices adapted from other disciplines. Shared practice across disciplines contributes to “closing the loop” on assessment, providing access to cross-disciplinary knowledge and skills that can contribute to the transformation of assessment results into instructional modifications to improve outcomes. Occasionally, shared assessment practice can transform an entire discipline.

Institutions benefit from shared practice which increases the reliability of learning outcomes assessment. With increased reliability of systematic learning assessments, the results of assessment acquire greater potential to effectively inform the planning process. Collaboration that leads to excellence in assessment practice makes the institution highly competitive in attracting external funding as well.

How is a Collaborative Culture Fostered?

As we embark on establishing a collaborative culture around learning outcomes assessment, we do so in full recognition that “one size does not fit all.” However, the framework we need is one that will foster collaboration, and to build it there are several ground rules on which we must agree.

First, we agree to recognize and formalize the shared goals of collaborative assessment. Student learning through enhanced teaching practice is the ultimate shared goal of professional educators. Achievement of this goal fulfills the potential of our students and by so doing fulfills the mission of the institution. For example, annual departmental assessment reports provide a mechanism for reflection and sharing around teaching and learning assessment.

Second, we embrace our shared responsibility to stakeholders, including students. Assessment of student learning is the single most fully shared responsibility in an educational
institution. As faculty, administrators and staff we share a responsibility to meet expectations of stakeholders regarding student learning and to document the accomplishment. For example, students (and their families) expect to realize a return on their investment of time and money in higher education through students’ acquisition of knowledge and skills to help them succeed in life, while system administration and institutional accrediting bodies expect that we will demonstrate we are succeeding in our mission through our ability to assess learning outcomes in a systematic and reliable way.

Third, we acknowledge the need to respect and appreciate diversity in disciplinary learning goals and assessment practices. Disciplinary learning goals and assessment practices vary in meaningful ways. The variety of disciplinary traditions results in a shared and richly diverse assessment practice from which we all benefit. When we collaborate respectfully, every discipline contributes and every discipline benefits. For example, critical thinking as a global competency offers many opportunities for cross-disciplinary reflection and collaboration.

Collaboration around assessment begins not with a single individual but with each of us, individually and in groups. Each of us can lead; each of us can participate. Opportunities abound for collaborations within and across academic departments and disciplines, for college-wide collaborations and for cross-institutional collaborations. Be a leader, be a participant, but be proactive--don’t be just a spectator in this exciting professional adventure.