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Why are faculty wary of assessment?

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Outcomes-assessment practices in higher education…are in fact scams run by bloodless bureaucrats who, steeped in jargon like "mapping learning goals" and "closing the loop," do not understand the holistic nature of a good college education. (Fendrich, 2007)

I vividly recall reading the quote above as part of a commentary in
The Chronicle of Higher Education roughly two years ago. What struck me, apart from the direct language, was that it was written by a faculty member who made an effort to learn about and be involved in assessment on her campus. If not a "believer," she had at least come to the table with an open mind and a willingness to do the work. She left the table with neither.

While the above is an extreme example, we hear stories all the time about individuals and groups of faculty who will not "come on board" with assessment. They seem intent on keeping it at arms length. If they do not resist outright, neither do they embrace assessment and seek to make it work in the way administrators, accreditors and, now, the Federal government, typically hope.

Yet why is this the case? As faculty we already assess student learning all the time. We do it thousands of times a year, with everything from scheduled papers and tests, to pop quizzes, to glances during lectures that allow us to see, "They really aren't getting this," and take immediate corrective action. It seems hard to believe that most faculty are actually anti-assessment.

What faculty often seem wary of is a
system of
program assessment to guide programmatic, college, and university decisions. In another article in this journal (Haviland, 2009), I have argued that faculty members typically resist assessment only when leadership of the effort breaks down. In this piece, I explore why faculty are often hesitant to embrace program assessment and suggest some responses that might be useful.

The Reasons for Wariness

Explanations for faculty hesitancy may be practical or principled, based on experience or hearsay, emerge from more general concerns about change, or be related to assessment in particular. Ultimately the reasons fall into four main categories: worries about the new work assessment presents, a "culture gap" in the way assessment is presented, poor word of mouth about assessment systems, and concerns about academic freedom.

Workload Worries

One of the most general and common claims is that assessment at the program level is new work–and too much work for already busy faculty to take on. On the one hand, this argument can be hard to accept. Focusing on teaching and learning is a core part of what faculty members are expected to do. In this sense, assessment is not new work; it is a way to be more systematic about what we already do.

Yet this claim has merit. Faculty members experience increasing demands from many areas. One senior professor, speaking to the growth in committee work, ad hoc task forces, and other obligations, said (in, of course, a committee meeting), "I am confident, I know it in my bones, that there has been an expansion of work [for faculty]." His is not an isolated sentiment: a recent article in this journal focuses on assessment as one of the many and growing demands on faculty time (Kulmala, 2008).

Assessment programs add to that sense by asking faculty to think in new ways and do things they have not done before in terms of collecting data, meeting with colleagues, and acting on findings on an annual basis. Good assessment requires creating assessment plans and reports, coordinating assignments and scoring, meeting to discuss results, and changing practices based on these findings.

Given these requirements, it is not uncommon for faculty to see assessment as something new and burdensome, rather than as a process for systematizing and doing at the program level what we already do at the course level. Indeed, I had one colleague, earnestly and with a straight face, described assessment as a fourth area of faculty work–beyond teaching, research and service.

While assessment is worthwhile, we must also acknowledge the obvious: that it asks for more time from already busy colleagues. We can meet this challenge in part by finding ways to support assessment work with technology, staff help, funding, and recognition. At the same time, we must try to help them see how good program assessment can pay dividends for their students, for them, and for their programs.

The Culture Gap

Another major contributor to faculty wariness of program assessment is that much of the current work in assessment is driven by a language foreign to faculty: the language of external accountability.

Program assessment is often driven by administrators and linked to concerns about accreditation. This notion, with its roots in the structural or bureaucratic paradigm of higher education organizations (Birnbaum, 2000; Bolman and Deal, 2003), means that the conversation usually is focused on proving student achievement or merely demonstrating that an assessment system is in place. In contrast, faculty culture is much more concerned with collegiality and accountability within one's discipline or field of study. Moreover, it is assessment for institutional, programmatic, and individual improvement that is a greater motivator than accountability to faculty to participate in institutional effectiveness activities (Welsh and Metcalf, 2003).

The result of this culture gap is that faculty often hear "assessment" and become anxious about losing control of their work and their curriculum. They worry assessment results will be used to cut faculty lines or eliminate programs, see program assessment as further evidence of the business model encroaching on higher education (Welsh and Metcalf, 2003), or complain about the nature of the work (Kulmala, 2008).

Several examples might illustrate how this anxiety is manifest. In one recent conversation I had, program faculty mocked our accreditation agency's expectation that the professional community would be involved in the program's assessment system, an indicator of their concern about losing autonomy. In addition, Kulmala (2008) has argued that faculty are more involved in education management than in actual education. This sentiment is also evident when faculty argue that it is

impossible to define and measure what is really important in the discipline, and/or that what can be assessed is merely bean counting compared to what truly is important.

The most obvious retort to this last point is: if we cannot define "it," then how can we teach it? Moreover, assessment is not about precise measurement, it is about using data for program improvement. However, the fact that faculty see program assessment as focused on measurement, bean counting, and external accountability illustrates the culture gap that leads many faculty to pull back from robust engagement with assessment.

Poor Word of Mouth

The assessment movement in K-12 and in higher education has been around for some time. Long enough, in fact, for it to develop a reputation among faculty in higher education. That reputation is (in general) not good. In many ways, this reputation derives from the culture gap discussed above, yet it also comes from poor implementation and the perception of a poor cost-benefit ratio.

Higher education faculty have watched as their K-12 colleagues have been swamped by standardized testing, largely in the name of accountability. They talk with their university colleagues at conferences about top-down articulation of student learning outcomes, cumbersome and confusing assessment systems, little recognition for a substantial amount of work, and lack of meaningful data for program improvement.

We should not underestimate the power of this word of mouth. Fundamentally, the diffusion of any innovative practice (and assessment is one) is a social activity (Berquist, 1992; Rogers, 2003). New ideas and practices thrive or collapse as individuals share with each other the relative merits or drawbacks of the innovation. When assessment is framed as an exercise in accountability rather than program improvement, when faculty tell each other of increased workload, faculty are likely to pull back from assessment activities.

Academic Freedom

A final reason for reluctance to participate in assessment is the claim that the practice infringes upon academic freedom. Expecting faculty to coordinate a common assignment across course sections and score it with some consistency, for instance, constrains faculty members' freedom to teach content they think is important and relevant, the argument goes.

We must always be vigilant to protect academic freedom, but in this case the claim is simply not accurate. The 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure (American Association of University Professors, 1970) protects the faculty's right to speak freely in teaching and research related to their field. However, this statement does not suggest that faculty are exempt from providing a coherent and cohesive program of study, coordinating its implementation, and determining its effectiveness.

What the academic freedom objection reveals is how assessment challenges elements of traditional faculty practice. Most of us are not used to maintaining and refining a program of study after it has been created. In this sense, our curriculum is very much like our attics: once we have stashed our items, we are disinclined to clean them out. We teach our individual courses, and we may add or revise a course

here and there, but we seldom return to look at the program as a whole to see that it adds up to the learning outcomes we hope for our students.

One indicator of this reality is what happens when faculty members working on assessment map their newly created learning outcomes to their existing core curriculum. They almost invariably find that some desired outcomes are not addressed in any core courses while others are covered so many times as to be redundant. I know of one program that revised its entire curriculum in part because the assessment process helped faculty realize that years of evolution had resulted in virtually no core curricular structure.

By asking faculty to think and act regularly at the
program level, assessment can certainly seem to restrict individual autonomy – and this may translate into calls that it violates academic freedom. However, a fundamental assessment principle is that faculty, as a group rather than individuals, are the ones to define program learning outcomes and the methods for assessing them. It is from this foundation that each academic program is able to construct its own narrative about its goals, strengths, and areas for improvement. And it is from this foundation that faculty retain control over their programs. Implemented in this way, assessment no more violates academic freedom than does the practice of having proposed new courses reviewed and approved by colleagues on curriculum committees. The principle of faculty ownership of assessment aligns with academic freedom while enhancing transparency and meeting calls for accountability.

Conclusion

There are, of course, other reasons faculty are wary of program assessment systems. For instance, a portion of our colleagues have been around for some time. They have seen numerous reforms emerge, take large amounts of time, and ultimately be abandoned; for them, assessment is the latest fad and they make an experience-based decision to sit on the sidelines. Frustrating? Yes, but also highly rational.

Still, none of this necessarily means that faculty are opposed to program assessment nor does it mean that they will actively resist involvement. There is even evidence (Welsh and Metcalf, 2003) that many faculty value institutional effectiveness activities such as assessment.

However, to the extent that faculty might value program assessment, they often come to do so in a way that is different from administrators and external entities. If we want assessment systems to thrive, we must find ways to allay faculty concerns about workload and academic freedom, present the work of assessment in the language of collegiality and program improvement, and influence word of mouth so that the practice of assessment spreads rather than dies on the vine.

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