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Creating Student Outcomes Assessment and Program Review Dashboards: Does Stakeholder Context Matter?

By

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Abstract

Accountability in higher education is an increasing high stakes activity. The demand continues by both internal and external stakeholders of postsecondary education for demonstrable evidence that students are learning and that professors are having an effect on student learning. The use of dashboards in higher education—a concept borrowed from the business world—grows daily. In higher education, dashboards are being used as tracking tools from the departmental to the institutional level to monitor performance and support data-informed decision-making. The term "dashboard" refers to a scorecard data display using indicators to present the status of key performance indicators, often including some kind of formative or summative performance evaluations.

This roundtable discussion will engage participants in a case study analysis of key stakeholders involved in creating institutional dashboards for student outcomes assessment and disciplinary program review at two private liberal arts institutions in central Minnesota. The case study explores how the various contexts of the faculty, the administration, and members of the boards influenced the creation and use of institutional dashboards. Participants will consider how they can bring "lessons learned" back to their campuses to better understand the homogeneous and heterogeneous nature of different stakeholder contexts in creating a measure of institutional effectiveness.

Case History

The Provost and key faculty governance committee members made the strategic commitment to begin creating an honest and transparent culture of inquiry designed to drive short-term and long-term decision-making. This commitment to create a culture of inquiry had a number of catalysts.

The first catalyst was part of our preparation (beginning in June 2006) for the October 2008 accreditation site visit by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). As part of our accreditation self-study, we needed to address assessment and program review concerns described in the 1998 HLC accreditation report. We realized that for us to address those concerns and to ensure we did not make similar mistakes, we needed to be frank about both our institutional challenges (while celebrating our successes) and to work hard to address our challenges openly.

Our second catalyst came with a number of significant personnel hires or appointments. Within a four-year period, a new President, Provost, Associate Provost, and Director of Academic Review and Curricular Advancement were hired. Additionally, a philosophy faculty member fascinated by the potential value of using assessment in his own classroom was named as the chair of the faculty committee responsible for assessment and program review. These individuals understood and appreciated the value of good assessment and program review and knew successful assessment and program review could only occur if a culture of evidence-informed decision-making could germinate into a systemic process to improve teaching and learning.

The third, catalyst came from consideration of transitioning the institutions from the traditional “once every ten years” form of accreditation to a new form of accreditation based on continuous quality improvement. This ongoing discussion about whether to switch the format of accreditation is making us think hard about what quality assurance and quality improvement in liberal arts institutions mean and the positive affects such a transition could have on furthering a culture of inquiry, in general, and effective and systemic assessment and program review, in particular. We knew if we are to make this difficult transition (and even if we didn’t and we have yet to switch), we would have to begin considering major changes to not only the institutional infrastructure (e.g., strategic planning and budgeting, assessment, program review, curricular coherence) but to institutional culture (e.g., faculty and staff development and rewards, transparency, new approach to shared governance).

The fourth catalyst is about the relationships between the different stakeholder players. We understand relationships between different groups of institutional stakeholders wax and wane depending on many factors, including, for example, the personalities, changing needs and priorities of an institution, issues being discussed and their salience to the respective participants, available institutional resources, and the very structure of the governance system at an institution. For a variety of reasons, inter-stakeholder relationships are very good. Currently, there is significant trust between and among stakeholder groups. Communications and actions are mostly transparent.

Viewpoints of Board Members

Members of the boards, frustrated with a perceived lack of evidence of student learning, in general, and armed with anecdotal information about the poor academic quality of a few departments, in particular, asked the Provost, the Associate Provost, and the Director of Academic Review and Curricular Advancement (OARCA) to construct dashboards for student outcomes assessment and departmental program review. The board members were concerned the following be addressed in constructing the dashboards:

- Define performance and academic quality
- Obtain quick win for all stakeholders
- Clearly establish steps to take to complete the dashboards in a timely manner
- Use inputs (demographics), process (e.g., assessment plans, annual assessment reports, Major Field Test), and outputs (improvements to teaching and learning)
- Eventually compare our schools to peer and aspirant institutions
- Keep the first stage simple and follow with other stages
- Consider a pilot dashboard
- At least 80% of all students covered in a report with colors
- Have simple, transparent buy-in from faculty
- Don’t call it performance dashboards; instead, call them “quality indicators”
- First pass has to be simple-must be limited

- Program review: Where are departments? Have they completed it? Are they at a point of improvement? When is the next review? Are they on track with previously agreed upon action plan?
- Develop quality indicator report
- Review draft with key constituents
- Ask for input: what goes into a quality indicator report?
- Next, develop performance dashboard system
- Consider the definition, design, and implementation phases

"I am in complete agreement that the faculty needs to buy in. Bringing them the first highest level of the dashboard that has been already blessed by the Academic Affairs Committee [of the Boards] should help all of you [provost, associate provost, me] create the momentum we all seek and desire. Quality is an iterative process. It never gets better until you start the process by executing the first time. CSB/SJU's students will be well served by us reviewing and discussing the highest level of the dashboard in our committee meeting this December. It will not be the complete product, it will be rough but it will give us the momentum we seek."

--To the Provost, Associate Provost, and Director of OARCA from the Chairman of the Academic Affairs Committee of the Boards

Viewpoints of Administrators

- Dashboards are a reporting tool for the board members
- Boards are charged with the fiduciary responsibility to ensure quality
- Dashboards are part of a shared responsibility between faculty, boards, and administration--a balance act that must occur
- Dashboards are a simple snapshot—a "see at a glance" account
- Dashboards are indicative of the Provost's pledge to uphold academic rigor (Provost, for example, recently withheld advertising for three new faculty lines in a department because the faculty failed to submit annual assessment reports or to take program review seriously)
- Dashboards are a snapshot in time
- There is concern about faculty buy-in and faculty resistance
- There is concern board members could "micro-manage" academic affairs
- Want to support work of faculty governance
- Dashboards may help faculty governance leverage action
- Provost and Associate Provost want to help leverage the work of the committee
- Committed to transparency and accountability

"As we know, dashboards and other institutional performance indicators, in general, are good summative, quantitative, measurements we can use to distill and therefore understand (as we have defined it) whether students are learning. We do want something that is easy to "digest." But [one board member's] admonition about not getting lost in the spreadsheet and staying focused on the moving targets of performance is important; we do want something easy to digest but we don't want something that could lead to incorrect judgments or rash decisions—one set of numbers can never tell the entire story. [Faculty] must be very involved from this point forward. Their insight is valuable."

--From the Director of OARCA to the Provost

Viewpoints of Faculty

- Dashboards indicators could be seen as idiot lights, not dashboards indicators
- If we are going to use the metaphor of a car's dashboard, we could use the gauges of the fuel tank (will board members see when faculty energy, time issues, and overall demands run the tank dry?), the temperature gauge (to indicate when faculty are hot about being judged and overworked?), and Revolutions Per Minute (to denote the pace as which faculty run) as dashboard indicators.
- Should dashboards be made public?
- How can dashboards leverage committee's work when it is in hands of administration?
- Dashboards are subjective now; how can we help administration make dashboards more objective?
- Asked Provost and Associate Provost to speak to poor performing departments
- Don't want dashboards to be used punitively

"Thanks very much for your informative and encouraging presentation [by the Provost, Associate Provost, and Director of OARCA] to members of [our committee] yesterday afternoon. While members of the committee were clearly alert to the potentially controversial nature of the dashboard indicators that have been developed, I think it is safe to say that those in attendance at the meeting understood their value as guides to administrative decision-making and as appropriately scaled information sources for the Academic Affairs Committee of the Boards.

I also very much appreciate your concern to find ways to assist [the committee] in carrying out its work. We discussed what I think would be an extremely valuable use of the dashboards, which is that you could arrange for meetings with representatives of non-performing departments, meetings to which the Chair of [the committee] and the Director of OARCA would be invited as well. Scheduling such meetings is on my list of things to do, and I would be grateful if your staff could take over that particular task.

If introduced and conducted in a spirit of collaborative problem solving, such meetings could be (I think) extremely effective. If we are not to be punitive in our exercise of oversight, then collegial discussions of how performance could be improved (along with some carrots) is the best approach to oversight."

--From the chair of the faculty governance assessment and program review committee to the Provost and Associate Provost.

Discussion Exercise

Consider the political, cultural, organization, and learning structures and systems at your institution. On a pad of paper or on your computer, take a few moments and answer the following questions:

- Does your institution have performance dashboards or is it considering creating dashboards? Why or why not?
- Are there internal or external pressures for having dashboards? If so, then what are those pressures?
- What are (or would be) the costs and benefits of having dashboards?
- Would dashboards be used to punish and/or to reward departments? How?
- If you have or are considering dashboards, who potentially wins and loses? Why?
- Why should academe use this tool? Can dashboards really work in higher education?

If you are struggling answering the questions above, consider answering these questions first:

- Do you have open and transparent communication between board members, high-level administrators and the faculty? Why or why not?
- What would it take to have frank and transparent communication between board members, administrators, and the faculty?
- What could be some of the catalysts that could change the way communication occurs?
- What are the origins of assessment and program review?
- In general, what are the purposes of assessment and program review? Are they systemic? Are they for accountability *and* the improvement of teaching and learning?
- Who has responsibility for assessment and program review? Who has responsibilities for teaching and curricular designs? Are they the same people or units?
- Are assessment and program review supported by faculty, staff, students, and the administration?
- Are they used? Do they lead to improvements in teaching and learning? Are there rewards for good results? Is there punishment for poor results?
- Do assessment and program review evolve? Are they evaluated and improved?
- Are they valued? Are assessment and program review part of faculty, staff, administrative, and student cultures?
- Are they part of faculty teaching, scholarship, and service?
- Would creating a culture of inquiry and evidence informed decision-making jeopardize or enhance the sense of institutional community, academic freedom, and shared governance?

Presenter

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