An assurance of learning success model: toward closing the feedback loop

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Abstract
This paper provides a systemic approach to building and sustaining a solid assurance of learning program using the framework of Kotter's (1995) Strategic Model for Transforming Organizations. A comprehensive model for launching and sustaining a systemic approach to program review that ''closes the loop'' is shared step by step. Particular attention is paid to the organizational behaviors and processes that accompany each step, and to sharing important lessons that were learned. A review of the assessment literature in higher education and recent Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB) contributions to this body of knowledge identifies a critical gap regarding models that ''close the loop'' and make a compelling case for the Simmons College model.
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Introduction
A strong foundation to an assurance of learning (AoL) program within management programs is essential to its ultimate success. Assuring that the loop between assessment and program improvements takes place is a vital yet frequently missed step, and one of the biggest problems in institutionalizing Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB)-based AoL programs today. Program goals and learning objectives get assessed but improvements do not always make it back into program offerings. Viewing the institutionalization of the AoL process as a major cultural organizational transformation informed by the change management literature of Kotter (1995) and others, helps to close the loop, and to produce AoL programs that result in continuous improvements in management programs. This paper provides a systemic approach to building and sustaining a solid AoL program, using the framework of Kotter's (1995) Strategic Model for Transforming Organizations. A comprehensive model for launching and sustaining a systemic approach to program review that ''closes the loop'' is shared step by step. Particular attention is paid to the organizational behaviors and processes that accompany each step, and to sharing important lessons that were learned.

Review of literature

Why outcomes assessment?

Educational assessment is the ''systematic collection, interpretation, and use of information about student characteristics, the educational environment, and learning outcomes to improve student learning and satisfaction'' (Gainen and Locatelli, 1995). In simple terms, assessment is the process of determining whether expected results of a program are being achieved through a system of observation, measurement, reporting, and revision. Stivers *et al*. (2000) and Calderon *et al*. (2004) define assessment as a multistep process. The process includes: (1) development of a mission statement, (2) definition of goals and objectives, (3) alignment of curriculum, (4) determination of methods and measurements, (5) setting expectations, (6) collecting and evaluating evidence, and (7) reflecting on and using data to identify opportunities to improve student learning. All of these assessment components share a common focus on improving student learning.

The outcomes assessment movement started in the 1980s. It was driven by the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Assessment Forum. The AAHE Assessment Forum developed a set of principles to guide learning assessment. These principles begin with educational values. Assessment works best when the program it seeks to improve has clear, explicitly stated purposes. In this context, assessment is viewed as most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multi-dimensional and integrated, and when it reveals performance over time. Further, assessment requires attention both to outcomes and to the experiences that lead to those outcomes. Effective assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about. Because of this, assessment works best when it is ongoing and not episodic. In addition, assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved. Assessment is most likely to lead to program improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change. These principles result in assessment by which educators meet their responsibilities to students and to the public (Astin *et al*., 2007). In 1988, the Department of Education published regulations requiring accrediting agencies to include outcomes assessments in accreditation requirements (Dudley and Marlow, 2005).

That same year, The Commission on Higher Education (CHE, 1988) published six essential criteria for outcomes assessment plans that could be used for program assessment. These criteria are well aligned with the AAHE principles. According to the CHE, assessment should be rooted in the institution's mission at both program and course levels. It should consist of collaboration between faculty and administrators, and use qualitative and quantitative measures of outcomes. Assessment should lead to improvement, consist of realistic goals and resources, and provide evaluation of the program itself (Commission on Higher Education, 1988: 13–16).

Among the many professional accrediting agencies that have re-orientated themselves toward this movement in outcomes assessment is the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, now known as Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB). AACSB started a review of business standards in the late 1980s not only in response to this movement, but also due to general criticism of management education programs and the perception that management program graduates were inadequately prepared for the workplace. Historically, AACSB assessment programs focused on specific sets of inputs such as faculty sufficiency, including the number of faculty with terminal degrees and student/faculty ratios, among others (Kimmell *et al*., 1998). Critics of management graduates felt that they lacked writing, interpersonal, and other skills that were critical to career success. AACSB addressed these criticisms by changing to a new set of accreditation standards in 1992 emphasizing assessment of student outcomes rather than faculty inputs. By 2002, the AACSB drafted new accreditation standards with a curriculum component that emphasized ''AoL'' and continuous improvement. This represented a shift from a focus on structural inputs to a focus on learning outcomes (Black and Duhon, 2003).

Assurance of learning

AoL requires faculty to adjust their view from assessment of teaching to a model of learning effectiveness and accountability. The focus on AoL rather than assessment addresses a variety of constituency concerns. An AoL perspective has the power to demonstrate accountability to the public, to students looking for value-added education, to employers as end users of institutional products, and to state legislative requirements.

An AoL could be used to demonstrate that educational programs are consistent with a program's learning goals. It could also facilitate continuous improvement and institutional decision making and satisfy the requirements of regional and professional accreditation agencies, such as AACSB accreditation (Zhu and McFarland, 2005).

AoL programs have additional benefits for both faculty and students. Graeff (1998), for example, identified several advantages of clear outcome objectives. They help in the articulation of appropriate learning experiences that support effective goal-directed teaching. AoL facilitates curriculum development, as an AoL plan clarifies what a graduating major should be able to do after completing a set of core courses. It also fosters inter-curriculum communication: for example, having information about desired outcomes and skills helps faculty map course content across an entire program to ensure adequate student preparation. Writing good outcome objectives provides a clear framework for assessment as well as transparency for the students. Likewise, they make progress more visible and motivating for the students. Clear and measurable learning outcomes also help students manage their study time and effort, and provide structure and practical relevance.

As AACSB incorporated AoL in its accreditation standards, Eder and Martell (2004) developed and presented AACSB seminars that offered a process model for assessment. Martell and Calderon (2005) codified this framework by specifying the steps for a well-designed assessment program. They suggest starting by defining learning goals and objectives, and aligning curriculum with goals. The next steps include identifying instruments and measures, and collecting, analyzing, and disseminating assessment data. Finally, they stress the importance of using assessment data for continuous improvement. Their model also includes consideration of university and administrative support, resources, shared values, and information technology. Although their framework addresses the process of generating learning goals and assessments specifically, it does not show how this process fits in the overall context of an ongoing program review or an ongoing strategic plan.

Even though there is no real consensus on what tools one should use for assessing learning outcomes, in general, tools used for assessment are well documented in both general education and business education literature. Tools such as student and alumni surveys, student evaluations, tests, portfolios, simulations, capstone experiences, and internships have been used and reported on in education and business education literature (Dudley and Marlow, 2005). In a presentation at an AACSB conference in 2004, Eder and Martell added content analyses, debates, retention studies, service learning, interviews, reflective essays, study and activity logs, and transcript analysis as acceptable measures of learning outcomes. Martell and Calderon (2005) make a further distinction between indirect and direct assessment. Direct assessment methods are based on students demonstrating knowledge and skills, whereas indirect assessment collects student, alumni, and/or employer opinions through surveys, focus groups, and exit interviews.

The assessment literature in general has not focused on how the assessment of learning should inform improvements in the business curriculum. In 2005, Dudley and Marlow presented the complete assessment program from Eastern Illinois University, where the assessment of general education is university-wide, with each individual department or academic unit responsible for assessing student learning within their own programs. Assessment tools that Eastern Illinois University uses to measure learning in the general business curriculum are alumni surveys and senior surveys.

Stivers *et al.* (2000) discuss their assessment program for the Department of Accounting at Kennesaw State University, which includes a statement of each learning objective, the assessment method, and the frequency of assessment. Assessment techniques were numerous, including both direct and indirect methods and standardized tests, student, alumni, and employer surveys, College Base Academic Subjects Examinations, Achievement Tests for Accounting Graduates, CPA exam scores, and Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisals for Managers and Professionals. Nicholson *et al.* (2005) examined outcomes assessment in 331 marketing programs in AACSB-accredited universities, and found that the Educational Testing Service Business Exam, capstone course review, and in-house exams were chosen most frequently to assess learning at the program level.

Martinson and Cole (2002) found that there was no one central unifying theme in the various accounting program assessment practices they identified. They found a heavy reliance on standardized tests, which were of very little value for students or faculty because the content was not particularly appropriate and the students were not motivated to do their best. Martell (2005) also notes

that the lack of good fit between program goals and assessment approach is a problem. She explains that each school should base its assessment plan on its individual mission statement. Faculty members should choose their own learning goals, create their own measurements, gather the data, and deductively ascertain what they know about student learning. Because there is a lack of regularization, the development of an assessment plan can be a painful and arduous process meeting with faculty resistance (Martinson and Cole, 2002; Martell, 2005).

Martell (2005) identified systematic factors important in overcoming faculty resistance require some pre-planning for the development of an assessment plan. The factors she identified include getting a commitment from the organization's leadership and anointing an assessment "champion." Once a champion is identified, the organization needs to develop a critical mass of faculty who buy in to the process. This can be accomplished by providing necessary support, developing reward and evaluation systems that support assessment, and socializing newly hired faculty.

Although there is ample literature on writing learning goals and assessment tools, there is a gap in the literature in regard to giving sound practical advice on the importance of planning for implementation or, in other words, the value of "planning for the AoL plan." Stout *et al.* (2005) recognize that a "framework" is necessary to guide the development of an implementation plan. Three attributes were highlighted as appropriate for a comprehensive assessment plan. An effective plan requires: (1) broad-based involvement of faculty, students, and administrators; (2) multi-trait, multi-method assessment approaches (similar to a "balanced scorecard"), which include both direct and indirect assessment measures; and (3) follow-up activities to inform key stakeholders and motivate continuous improvement. Sampson and Betters-Reed (2008) present a conceptual model that demonstrates how an ongoing AoL program can be put in the context of program review and continuous improvement. This approach, which is more strategic in nature and is directly tied to curriculum change, alters the perception of assessment work from short-term compliance to an embedded model of continuous curricular improvement.

In addition to missing the strategic link between assessment and program review, the literature also fails to highlight the extent to which the adoption of the AoL process represents a strategic cultural change in management education programs. From a framework where individual professors focus on departmental learning, AoL requires faculty and departments to take a more global view. The change management literature provides a helpful framework for viewing the AoL process in this light. Although the inception of an AoL implementation plan is a required activity for accreditation, it can be a powerful tool for program improvement. To realize the potential of AoL, it is helpful to view it in the context of a major culture change. Kotter's (1995) Strategic Model for Transforming Organizations provides an excellent framework for conceptualizing this change process.

Change management
Given that AoL is a departure from what was considered normal "AACSB standards management" in the past, and a different way of looking at management curriculum and academic programs, it is helpful to view the process through the change management literature. One of the most important changes required in the new AoL perspective is the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered education. Kotter's (1995) Strategic Model for Transforming Organizations provides a framework to view the cultural shift from "business as usual" to learning and outcome assessment.

Change management literature has focused on chronicling major organizational and cultural changes within corporations. In the management discipline, changes have come under many different recognizable banners, such as total quality management, re-engineering, restructuring, and turnaround. The basic goal is to make fundamental changes in how business is conducted to cope with a new or more challenging business environment. Kotter (1995) observed, through numerous company consultations, that the change process goes through a predictable series of phases, which he has codified in his Strategic Model for Transforming Organizations. The steps of the model are straightforward and include: (1) establishing a sense of urgency, (2) forming a powerful coalition, (3) creating a vision, (4) communicating the vision, (5) empowering others to act on the vision, (6) planning for and creating short-term wins, (7) consolidating improvements, and (8) institutionalizing new approaches. All of these steps are consistent with the change management needed

to establish a strong foundation for an AoL program.

The model that follows builds on the Kotter (1995) framework, and constructs a solid foundation for implementing an AoL plan by addressing both the necessary complex context of AoL and the cultural transformation that it requires.

The Simmons College AoL model

Simmons College is a women's college founded in 1899 to help women establish an "independent livelihood." The undergraduate management department, one of the original programs of the college, merged with the Graduate School of Management program in 2001. The Graduate School of Management is also a single-sex program and was established in 1975.

Market forces and competitive realities in the school's geographic area forced Simmons College to seek AACSB accreditation in order to become more competitive. Mission-based initiatives adopted by the AACSB in the early 2000s allowed Simmons College to consider itself a viable candidate for accreditation. The newly consolidated School of Management (SOM) became a candidate for AACSB accreditation, and began to consider requirements for accreditation. During that period of the school's AACSB candidacy, assessment was becoming increasingly important. At the same time, the focus shifted from input assessment to outcome assessment and AoL. Although the Simmons College School of Management had a history of effective program review, which has been rooted in the undergraduate program for the last 25 years, the model of assessment needed to be expanded across all academic programs and aligned with the AACSB requirements.

Step 1: operating assumptions and establishing that "Sense of Urgency"

Establishing a sense of urgency is Kotter's first step in orchestrating organizational change. Kotter (2007) states that most organizations fail in this first phase of change because of lack of patience. He points out that organizations underestimate how difficult it is to create a sense of urgency and how hard it can be to drive people outside of their comfort zones. The sense of urgency must be "enough to get on with the preliminaries" but not so much that everyone is paralyzed by the downside possibilities. A frank discussion of unpleasant facts about competition, decreasing market share, lack of revenue growth, or other

relevant indices must take place. When the degree of urgency is not firmly fixed, the transformation cannot proceed. Simmons College had this frank discussion with its faculty and staff, and everyone fully understood the consequences of lack of action. Consolidation of the undergraduate and graduate management programs, along with seeking accreditation, made sense to the faculty and staff, and a sense of urgency was created.

Given that the undergraduate and MBA programs were consolidating for the first time, it made sense to make sure that those in charge of the AoL efforts were well aware of the current systems in place that would provide already established points of entry for assessment, and forums for education, communication, and implementation related to AoL. This assumption that faculty should be diligent with opportunities for synergies and economies in existing systems and with future plans for AoL became an important driving force for assessment work. It was also assumed that faculty engagement would be easier if the process were consistent with current operations.

Several other operating assumptions and approaches were important to the ultimate successful establishment of the Simmons College AoL program. Perhaps most critical was the fact that program review and AoL were not decoupled; in fact, because of the undergraduate college's commitment to program review and the management department's leadership in assessment, it was assumed that AoL was part of the current systemic program review process, which had been conducted annually and monitored in every faculty meeting. The policy of the College of Arts and Sciences Curriculum Committee (which had governed the undergraduate management curriculum before realignment) specified that thorough programmatic review and strategic planning should occur on a 5-year rotating basis. This culture, which valued teaching and learning and relied on faculty local control, was a good foundation for the new SOM to integrate the AACSB AoL standards.

Yet, as part of a re-aligned SOM, the mission to educate women for power and leadership, was relatively new, providing opportunities to assess alignment of both MBA and undergraduate courses and programs to the institutional mission. And although the SOM was still a small organization, it was not assumed that the entire faculty agreed upon curricula that implemented this mission, nor was it assumed that all faculty would embrace the new expectations of AACSB accreditation,

particularly AoL. It was, however, assumed that organizational processes for faculty involvement, commitment, and change would be important. Open communication and transparency were essential, including listening to the faculty who wanted no part of what they perceived as useless activities and middle school ''rubrics''.

In summary, an AoL program that is tightly aligned with current systems and structures can provide great economies of scale, and can therefore be perceived as accessible and useful. Most schools in accreditation candidacy or review with the new standards emphasizing AoL need to find ways to simplify the process while ensuring completion and closing the loop. Although Simmons College SOM is a small school with less than 25 full-time faculty and constrained resources, the model that was developed, which leveraged economies and synergies, would be both applicable and beneficial to most management programs.

Step 2: creating a common understanding and putting together the ''powerful coalition''

The initial AoL committee considered the importance of faculty development, including the education of an AoL committee to ensure a common understanding and platform from which to launch a plan for the plan. The ''founding'' AoL committee was chaired by an assessment expert, who initially shared seminal articles about the scholarship of teaching and learning from a variety of sources that had intellectual grounding and appeal. The Chair, approaching AoL ''work'' from a scholarly perspective, relied on the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and Ernest Boyer's Scholarship Reconsidered. Boyer (1990) argued that the application of knowledge needs to be understood as an act of scholarship equal to the discovery, integration, and sharing of knowledge. In other words, teaching and learning has a scholarly foundation and, as AACSB recognizes, is an important type of intellectual contribution.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) advocates six standards for all scholarship work: (1) clear goals, (2) adequate preparation, (3) appropriate methods, (4) significant results, (5) effective presentation, and (6) reflective critique (Glassick *et al.*, 1997). Essentially, the Simmons College model, which sets the stage for ''closing the loop,'' implements the first three steps of these six standards. Inherent in the SOTL assessment work was a shift from teacher to learner (Shulman, 1999). Other important resources were found through

AAHE, a leader in the assessment movement in higher education, which has since disbanded. Their model of program assessment is presented in Table 1. It was used by several regional accreditation associations including the New England Association for Schools and Colleges (NEASC). NEASC and other accreditation organizations pushed higher education institutions toward improved accountability for learning and increased expectations of outcomes assessment throughout the 1990s.

Working the perception of the need for change (Schein, 1978) and appealing to intellectual curiosity were important motivators, but creating change requires, in Kotter's words, putting together a powerful coalition. Martell (2005) reinforces the need both to ''anoint a champion'' (p. 220) and to obtain buy-in from faculty as well as to increase awareness and socialization in order to secure a critical mass.

The structure of the AoL committee is very important in creating this social change. In successful transformations, Kotter (2007) states that the initial coalition must come together and develop a shared commitment to excellent performance. The coalition should be powerful – in terms of titles, information and expertise, reputations, and relationships. The coalition should include members of faculty and administration that operate outside the normal hierarchy. A leader also needs to bring this coalition together, help them assess their strengths and weaknesses, and create a minimum level of trust and communication. In the Simmons College model, it was the goal of the initial AoL committee to keep faculty focused on the ultimate objective of improving student learning. The committee built on faculty pride for the unique mission of the school and their long-standing commitment as a teaching institution. AoL was a good strategic fit. Realistically, this perspective did not resonate with all faculty members. The goal of accreditation and the leverage it would provide in the market place was equally, if not more, important to some faculty.

Enthusiasm on the AoL committee was also a great catalyst for change, and connecting this group to other AACSB efforts and standing committees within the school engendered support and integration. Specifically, the Chair of the AoL committee also sat on both the Curriculum Committee and AACSB Continuous Improvement Committee. The make-up of the founding AoL group, while functionally diverse (accounting, economics, organizational behavior, leadership), did not need

Table 1 Modified AAHE (Peggy Maki, 1998) model of program assessment

Part I: Determine your institutions expectations

Identify the desired outcomes	Identify where expected outcome is addressed	Identify methods to assess the desired outcome	Identify the expected level of performance
This may include • Program goals • Course objectives • Observable traits	This may include • Specific courses • End of semester • End of program	This may include • Papers • Tests • Projects	This may include • Rubrics which identify target proficiency for each trait • Minimum grade

Part II: Determine the timing and assigning responsibility

Lay out a schedule	Determine who will be assessed	Determine who will assess
This may include • Annually • By semester • By course	This may include • All students • Cohorts of students	This may include • Entire faculty • Faculty teaching course • Teaching assistant

Part III: Sharing results and enhancing institutional effectiveness

Determine with whom the results will be shared	Determine how results will inform teaching and learning	Determine how you will follow up on implementation
This may include • Program faculty • School faculty • College faculty • Curriculum committees	This may include revisions in • Pedagogy in one class • Course sequencing • Degree requirements	This may include • Changes in committee structure • Systematizing assessment • Faculty support

to be convinced of the value of good education, and enjoyed the conversations around the scholarship of teaching and learning. In retrospect, however, a committee with a balance of tenured and non-tenured faculty and with faculty with other sources of power such as referent power (McClelland, 1966) would have been more effective to jumpstart the AoL process, as perceived power had an impact on initial buy-in.

Also instrumental to faculty ownership was engagement of faculty with AACSB seminars and rotating faculty on the AoL, AACSB, and Curriculum Committees. This enabled the process of creating a common understanding while creating a critical mass of converted faculty. Other faculty development included making sure that the AACSB and AoL committees were benchmarking comparable schools, learning from the best practices and approaches of others. One school in particular, although not AACSB-accredited, is a national leader in portfolio development and assessment. Alverno College's highly formalized and accessible resources serve as a benchmark of strategic excellence in assessment.

Steps 3 and 4: creating and communicating the vision that directs change

A. Operating guidelines. In leveraging the current models of AoL, the AoL committee identified three constraints that would inform all decisions about planning for and developing an AoL plan. The first guiding principle was that the faculty would be charged with building the plan from the ground up, which would result in faculty engagement and ownership of the process. This involved grounding faculty with exposure to the assessment literature, educating them in best practices, and engaging them in developing a shared vision. The second guiding principle was that the assessment plan would require no new assessment instruments. Students felt that they were already completing enough assessment measures, and faculty felt they were already evaluating enough assignments. Therefore, the objective of the assessment plan was to leverage work that was already being done. The third guiding principle was that programmatic assessment should be low cost. Given the small size of the school, throwing money at assessment

through outsourcing or standardized testing was not considered a viable option.

To develop the AoL plan, the faculty built on the school's mission statement and developed a statement of the core competencies or goals that graduates would possess. These goals were fleshed out in terms of specific learning objectives that would be embedded across the program curriculum. The faculty then audited the academic programs for alignment with the mission, goals, and learning objectives that were identified. Once the faculty developed a picture of the target graduate and accounted for the current program status, the committee worked with the faculty to develop the initial assessment plan. Every step of the process was faculty-driven and faculty-approved.

Kotter (2007) states that this stage is critical because this vision helps clarify the direction in which an organization needs to move. It may take some time for the vision to become clear, and working at it for a year or more is not uncommon. Eventually, the vision emerges through analytical thinking and a little dreaming. In failed transformations, there are usually a lot of directives and plans but no vision. What is usually lacking is a clear and consistent statement of where all this improvement is going. Schaffer and Thomson (1992) call these "results-driven" transformations. Results-driven transformation is optimal and aims at accomplishing measurable gains rapidly. It is a subtle shift of mindset, but an important one.

B. Creating the vision for the school and AoL. The original school mission statement that guided the AoL plan was in place for several years before AACSB candidacy. Recently, the school's mission statement was revised, and a process for improvement was created that included input from all stakeholders – faculty, administrators, alumni, and community leaders. Surveys, focus groups, and open discussions empowered each stakeholder group to be involved and provide input to a revised mission statement. A subcommittee of faculty refined the inputs from all the stakeholders, and the revisions and final mission statement were vetted back to each stakeholder group and approved by the faculty (see Table 2).

In order to elevate the role of AoL and to facilitate faculty engagement in the process, the AoL committee developed a mission statement for the AoL process. Framing the process in this way helped create a psychological contract with the faculty.

Table 2 School mission statement

The mission of the Simmons College School of Management is to educate women for power and principled leadership. We are committed to the advancement of knowledge and practice in management through excellence in education and research. Our academic programs offer rigorous, applied, management education designed for women. We focus on leadership, and our programs integrate the strategic, functional, and behavioral aspects of management. SOM students gain the knowledge, analytical skills, and confidence that they need to manage successfully in dynamic and global environments. We are invested in our students' success and support them as they launch, advance, and change their careers.

Table 3 AOL Committee mission

As faculty members in an institution dedicated to teaching, we are committed to developing expertise in the scholarship of teaching and learning through continual improvement of our pedagogical methods and development of a wider repertoire of assessment techniques in order to assure learning. Furthermore, we strive to make the teaching and learning expectations transparent to our students in both the graduate and undergraduate programs.

Since Simmons College, as an institution, has always been dedicated to teaching, the mission statement reflected the faculty commitment to developing expertise in the scholarship of teaching and learning through continual improvement of pedagogical methods. In addition, it reinforced the faculty commitment to development of a wide repertoire of assessment techniques in order to assure learning. Finally, there was an agreement to make teaching and learning expectations transparent to students in both graduate and undergraduate programs (see Table 3). Constructing an AoL mission statement created a clear, common understanding across faculty, and articulated the shared goals and values of the faculty.

Step 5: Empowering others to act
Once the mission statement for the AoL committee was agreed upon, the real tactical work of the AoL committee began. The approach taken was to leverage the methods that had been used in the past with program review. In past program reviews, faculty defined the core competencies of the programs, fleshed out the core competencies with learning objectives that helped create a composite picture of the skills a graduate should process, and

audited the program for alignment with the mission, goals, and learning objectives of the program. Using this methodology pushed the process into Stage 5 of Kotter's (1995) model – empowering others to act on the vision.

A. Defining core competencies. Once the AoL mission statement was defined and approved, the AoL committee planned faculty meetings where the faculty were charged with defining a set of five core competencies for graduates of each of the school's programs. (1) A BA in Business with majors in Management, Finance, Marketing, and Retail Management and (2) a general MBA. The undergraduate management program was designed to empower women to be entry-level leaders with core competencies in Learning and Thinking, Problem Solving, Leadership, Women and the Workplace, and Cross-Cultural Communication and Management. The MBA Program was designed to prepare women for management positions by educating them for power and leadership with core competencies in application of theory to practice, analysis and decision making, exercise of leadership and power, gender strategies for work and career, and leveraging diversity. Each of these core competencies was further fleshed out and defined in order to present a composite picture of knowledge and capabilities. For example, as an undergraduate core competency, "learning and thinking" was defined as the ability to analyze, think critically, and reason quantitatively in response to complex professional issues in the increasingly global and technologically sophisticated workplace (see Table 4, for definitions of all of the core competencies). The core competencies, like the mission statement, were approved by the entire faculty during regular faculty meetings.

B. Adding learning objectives to create a composite picture. To further create a composite picture of a target graduate, a set of learning objectives was developed for each core competency. The learning objectives became the framework for assessment and AoL. It was decided that three to five learning objectives were sufficient to flesh out each core competency. Learning objectives were written in language based on Bloom's Taxonomy, which framed them in terms of observable behaviors. These program-learning objectives were then embedded in course syllabi, linking course learning and course content to specific program goals. For example, for the undergraduate "learning and thinking" core competency, graduates would be assessed on their ability to (1) understand the underlying management theories in a variety of functional areas within an organization, (2) use a variety of sets of analytical tools in various functional disciplines, and (3) integrate management theories and tools with their own perspectives (see Table 5, for more examples of learning objectives).

C. Auditing the program for alignment with the mission, goals, and learning objectives of the institution. The next step was to audit the current program for coverage and assessment of the program goals, competencies, and learning objectives. Before making changes, the AoL committee wanted to know whether the learning objectives that the faculty had identified were covered and assessed in the current program. This would provide the programs with a baseline for identifying gaps both in terms of coverage and assessment, so that program faculty could make appropriate suggestions. Faculty started with course-level analysis, where the focus was to determine the degree of coverage of the learning objectives and how they were assessed. Faculty then moved to evaluating assessment on the program level.

The goal of the course-level analysis was to reveal coverage and discover the extent of direct assessment activities currently used across the program. To conduct the course-level assessment, faculty were asked to map the various program-learning objectives back to the courses they taught as part of the common core curriculum. The common core included 10 courses that all business majors completed. Faculty were asked to rate each learning objective on a 1–5 scale and to jot down what assessment tools they used. Faculty used "1" as a rating if the learning objective did not apply to their course, "2" if it was not assessed at all, "3" if it was assessed informally, "4" if it was assessed as part of an individual assignment, and "5" if it was assessed as part of a group assignment. The mapping showed not only where the various learning objectives were taught, but also where and how they were assessed. For example, the first undergraduate learning goal associated with the "learning and Thinking" core competency was to understand underlying management theories in a variety of functional areas within an organization. For example, this learning objective was covered and assessed in the following courses: MGMT100, MGMT110, MGMT250, MGMT260, MGMT340, MGMT370, and MGMT390. Most of the courses

Table 4 Translating the mission statement to program goals (core competencies)

Academic programs	
Undergraduate	*Graduate*
The Undergraduate Management Program prepares women to become entry-level business leaders. This requires students to develop core competencies in the following areas: ● *Learning and thinking*: Simmons College graduates can analyze, think critically, and reason quantitatively in response to complex professional issues in the increasingly global and technologically sophisticated workplace. ● *Problem solving*: Simmons College graduates bring a high level of management expertise to society and the workplace as creative, ethical, and versatile problem solvers. They are adept at initiating, implementing and managing issues across different functional areas within an organization. ● *Leadership*: Simmons College graduates can compare and challenge traditional and contemporary perspectives of leadership and can lead effectively in an organizational setting. ● *Women and the workplace*: Simmons College graduates are prepared for the opportunities and challenges facing women in the workplace and have developed personal career strategies to respond to a complex work environment. ● *Cross cultural communication and management*: Simmons College graduates appreciate diversity and are committed to managing it effectively in the workplace.	The Graduate Management Program prepares women for management positions by educating them for power and leadership. This requires students to develop core competencies in the following areas: ● *Application of theory to practice*: Simmons College graduates recognize the value and limits of theory and can apply the relevant functional, behavioral strategic knowledge and theory to the complex issues found in a global, gendered, diverse and technology-rich and shifting working environment. ● *Analysis and decision making*: Simmons College graduates are capable of making innovative, ethical, and responsive decisions within the gendered, political, global, and cultural context in which the decisions may be implemented. ● *Exercise of leadership and power*: Simmons College graduates demonstrate leadership skills including the ability to seek out and define significant problems, challenges, and opportunities. They are prepared to lead individuals and teams in increasingly diverse work settings. ● *Gender strategies for work and career*: Simmons College graduates understand the role of gender in organizations, and develop effective leadership skills and person career strategies that allow them to overcome systemic barriers while seeking to remove them. ● *Leveraging diversity*: Simmons College graduates celebrate global diversity and lead to include others in the workplace. They recognize that diversity arises from many dimensions and understand the dynamic contribution diversity brings to organizations.

used either individual or group assignments to do the assessment. Types of assignments included research papers, exams, homework, case analysis, and course projects.

This mapping process was beneficial on a number of fronts. First, it promoted transparency about the program. Using the mapping, faculty members were asked to go back to their course syllabi and to align them with program goals and learning objectives. For the sake of transparency, faculty members were also charged with adding linkages between their assignment and the program learning goals. This resulted in syllabi that not only presented the learning objectives for the specific course, but also presented how each specific course fed into the program as a whole. Second, the mapping identified gaps that could be immediately corrected. The early identification of gaps led to early wins in terms of closing the loop on program improvements. For example, the mapping identi-

fied gaps in the undergraduate program around technology literacy. It was found that students were not being asked to individually create spreadsheet models, thereby missing the opportunity to develop competency in spreadsheet skills. In the last 5-year program review, the undergraduate faculty added a lab section to the introductory accounting course to provide instruction, opportunities to apply learning, and opportunities for assessment. Finally, the mapping became an integral part of the undergraduate program review. The data collected provided the rationale for adding and dropping courses, and for curricular changes within the current course structure.

The goal of the program-level analysis was to create a baseline of activities and methodologies currently used to assess overall program effectiveness, and identify opportunities for leveraging current assessment activities. This analysis revealed a wide variety of program-level assessment activities

Table 5   Translating the program goals to learning objectives

Academic programs	
Undergraduate program goal	*Graduate program goal*
Learning and thinking: Simmons College graduates can analyze, think critically, and reason quantitatively in response to complex professional issues in the increasingly global and technologically sophisticated workplace	Analysis and decision making
Undergraduate learning objectives	*Graduate learning objectives*
Students will be assessed on their ability to • Understand the underlying management theories in a variety of functional areas within an organization • Use a variety of sets of analytical tools in various functional disciplines • Integrate management theories and tools with their own perspectives	Students will be assessed on their ability to • Grasp the range of contemporary theories and frameworks of management • Seek out alternative perspectives to gain a balanced, fully informed point of view • Articulate connections between management theory and its practice in different contexts • Develop abilities to apply the relevant frameworks to practical situations

including course-based assessment and administrative-based assessment. For example, in the undergraduate program, course-based program assessment was conducted through the senior seminar capstone course and an internship experience. As part of the senior seminar, student groups developed and publicly presented a business plan before a panel of faculty and peers. The business plan provided faculty with an opportunity to assess students' ability to integrate various business disciplines. As part of internship, supervisors were asked to provide feedback on students' ability to apply programmatic learning to a work environment. In addition, students used their internship experience to write a business analysis in which they analyzed the management, marketing, human resources, finance, accounting, operations, and strategy functions within their placement. Administratively based types of programmatic assessment included surveys by the career placement center, data collected by the curriculum committee, and data from student focus groups. See Table 7, for other examples of program-level assessment.

As with the mapping of learning objectives to course content, the baseline analysis was beneficial as a step in moving to a systematized approach to program-level assessment across academic programs. Collecting the data revealed the wealth of assessments already in place, but highlighted two flaws in the process. First, it illuminated the need for better communication within and across departments, and across the academic and administrative units of the school. Data collected by one unit were

not always shared with other units and so never made it into program review discussions. For example, data collected from exit interviews with students were never shared with faculty. Analyzing the program level data also revealed that much of the data that were already being collected did not meet the standards set by AACSB. Much of the program-level data on the undergraduate side were group-level data that did not allow for determining the extent to which individual students attain the defined program learning objectives. Much of the data on the graduate side were indirect data such as course evaluations, career services surveys, exit interviews, or employer data. Though the information was interesting and valuable, like the group data on the undergraduate program, it again did not allow for determining whether individual students mastered identified program-learning objectives.

D. Lessons learned. Kotter (1995) found that successful transformations involve large numbers of people as they progress. Obstacles (the biggest ones at least) must be removed as faculty take risks, try new ideas, and try new approaches. Faculty must feel motivated and empowered to take the programs they have and move toward the shared vision. Each of the exercises above empowered the faculty to own the programs and the outcomes, and maintained credibility of the change effort as a whole (Kotter, 1995).

Table 6 Mapping learning objectives to coverage and assessment in core course

Undergraduate program goal: learning and thinking: Simmons College graduates can analyze, think critically, and reason quantitatively in response to complex professional issues in the increasingly global and technologically sophisticated workplace

Undergraduate learning objectives: students will be assessed on their ability to	Course where learning objective is taught and/or assessed	How learning objective is assessed
Understand the underlying management theories in a variety of function areas within an organization	100	Research paper
	110	Exams, homework
	250	Marketing plan
	260	Projects, quizzes, homework
	340	Case analysis, group project
	370	Internship journal
	390	Industry analysis and business plan
Use a variety of sets of analytical tools in various functional disciplines	100	Exam
	110	Exam, homework, project
	250	Marketing plan
	260	Quizzes
	340	Written and oral case analysis
	390	Business plan research report
Integrate management theories and tools with their own perspectives	100	Research paper
	110	Exams, homework
	221	Learning paper
	234	Paper, in-class exercise
	250	Marketing plan
	260	Projects, quizzes, homework
	340	Case analysis, group project
	370	Internship journal
	390	Industry analysis and business plan

Step 6: the implementation plan – creating short-term wins
The steps outlined above set the stage for moving to a systematic program-level approach to AoL. On the basis of an extensive analysis of AoL models and on the operating assumptions previously discussed, the AoL committee developed an assessment plan based on a model proposed by Peggy Maki (1998) and supported by the AAHE (see Table 1). The model has three parts that align well with the type of assessment plan required by AACSB. In addition, this model was consistent with the more comprehensive program review perspective of Simmons College. With the model, Maki (1998) provided a method for systematically defining and collecting data that would augment the anecdotal data used historically in the undergraduate program review model. The three parts of the model in the model included (1) determining the institution's expectations; (2) determining the timing, identifying the cohorts, and assigning responsibility; and (3) sharing results and enhancing institutional effectiveness.

The first part of the assessment plan was to define the institution's expectations (see Table 8, Part I). This part of the plan married the pre-work, outlined above, with methods of and standards for assessment. As part of the pre-work, the faculty identified the desired outcomes. This included the program goals, core competencies, and learning objectives outlined above. For the undergraduate program, these included goals around learning and thinking, problem solving, leadership, women and the workplace, and cross-cultural communication. Next, using the mapping of program goals to specific courses, the faculty identified opportunities for assessing the identified goals. Using the available opportunities, the faculty identified where the goals would be assessed and what method would be used to assess the desired outcome. For example, "learning and thinking" would be assessed during the senior internship experience using an internship journal project, whereas "problem solving" would be assessed in strategy using a case analysis. Specific assignments were also identified

Table 7   Types of programmatic assessment

Undergraduate	Graduate
Sources of direct program assessment data	
Anecdotal data from	Anecdotal data from
• Senior seminar capstone course	• Course embedded techniques
• Business plan presentations	• Classroom assessment feedback
• Internship journals	• Course exams, presentations, and projects
• Senior portfolios	• Capstone course in strategy
• Classroom assessment techniques	
• Course exams, presentations, and projects	
Sources of indirect program assessment data	
Career placement data	Career placement results
Graduate surveys	Focus group student exit interviews
Student focus groups	Lunch discussions with the dean
Internship supervisor evaluation	Student services survey
Faculty feedback	Faculty feedback
Course evaluations	Course evaluations
Venues for sharing program assessment data	
Bi-weekly faculty meetings	Curriculum committee
Curriculum committee	Faculty workouts
Annual faculty retreats	Director meetings
Focuses problem solving meetings	Task forces
Annual curriculum review	

for "leadership," "women and the workplace," and "cross-cultural communication." In each case, the assignments were those that were already part of the course. Transitioning from using the assignments as components of grades to using them as part of assessment required one last step. The faculty, working together, defined the expected level of performance to each of the learning objectives. For each objective, the faculty defined the level of performance, which indicated that the student met, exceeded, or did not meet expectations.

The second part of the assessment plan was to determine the timing of assessment and to assign responsibility for assessment (see Table 8, Part II). In laying out an assessment schedule, a decision was made to assess each of the five core-learning goals once every 2 years. So starting in fall 2004, a schedule was laid out so that each semester one or two learning goals would be assessed. The faculty also made decisions around who would be assessed and who would collect the assessment data. The faculty decided that all relevant assignments would be used for assessment. For example, the journals of all of the students enrolled in internship during the relevant semester would be used to assess the "learning and thinking" goal. Further, the

faculty decided that in most cases, the individual faculty member who teaches courses with course-embedded program assessments would complete the assessment using the rubrics developed by the program faculty.

The final part of the assessment plan was to share the results and use them to enhance institutional effectiveness (see Table 8, Part III). A plan was developed to share the results on a number of levels. First, the faculty completing the assessment would share the results with faculty teaching in the same academic program. This resulted in undergraduate program assessments being shared with undergraduate program faculty, and graduate program assessments being shared with graduate program faculty. To improve the communication within the school, a plan was also instituted whereby a summary of the results was presented to the AoL committee and the AACSB taskforce at the end of each semester, and to the School of Management Curriculum Committee annually. The results informed teaching and learning across the curriculum. Some of the actions were quick and easy to implement, involving only the faculty teaching one course. For example, sharing assessment results with peers resulted in faculty making pedagogy changes to courses across the curriculum.

Table 8 Laying out the Simmons College assessment plan

Part I: Determine your institution's expectations

Identify the desired outcomes	Identify where expected outcome is addressed	Identify methods to assess the desired outcome	Identify the expected level of performance
Program goals: • Learning and thinking • Problem solving • Leadership • Women and the workplace • Cross cultural communication and management	Assessed in • Internship experience • Strategy course • Capstone course • Managing the diverse workforce • Capstone course and strategy	Through • Internship journal project • Case analysis • Business plan • Learning paper • Oral presentation and written case analysis	Using goal-specific rubrics approved by the faculty which describe characteristics that demonstrate • Exceeding expectations • Meeting expectations • Not meeting expectations

Part II: Determine the timing and assigning responsibility

Lay out a schedule	Determine who will be assessed	Determine who will assess
Every program goal will be assessed once every other year • Fall 2004: Learning and thinking (Next: Fall 2006) • Spring 2005: Problem solving (Next: Spring 2007) • Fall 2005: Leadership and cross cultural communication and management (Next: Fall 2007) • Spring 2006: Women and the workplace (Next: Spring 2008)	The entire cohort of students enrolled in the course and completing the deliverable will be used for assessment purposes	Individual faculty members teaching the relevant course will use the rubrics created and approved by the entire faculty to complete most assessments. Some assessments will be completed by the entire faculty

Part III: Sharing results and enhancing institutional effectiveness

Determine with whom the results will be shared	Determine how results will inform teaching and learning	Determine how you will follow up on implementation
Results will be shared • Between faculty at the relevant program faculty meetings Summary of results will be shared with • AoL committee • AACSB committee • School of Management Curriculum Committee	Past results have been used to motivate • Pedagogy changes in one class • Embed service learning projects across courses • Develop suggested course sequencing • Add and drop courses • Change degree requirements	Team leader and associate dean will follow up with faculty at periodic program faculty meetings

Some changes involved developing a suggested course sequence to better integrate learning across the program. These changes informed the advising process, as well as changes in prerequisites. Other changes were larger. Holes in the curriculum were identified and courses were added and dropped.

More globally, the information gathered informed changes in degree requirements during periodic program reviews. Following up on implementation of changes depends on the level of change. Pedagogy changes were generally left to the individual faculty member, whereas follow-up on

adding, removing, or changing courses generally fell under the responsibility of the curriculum committee or the deans.

The final steps in the change management plan – consolidate and instutionalize

Within the AoL implementation plan, there were opportunities for all faculty to be empowered and to act on the vision. The AoL committee encouraged new ideas and worked to remove whatever barriers stood in the way of these curriculum changes. The curriculum committee took up each change and brought ideas back to the faculty for discussion and decisions. Faculty members were rewarded for improvements, and short-term wins were celebrated. Celebration of short-term wins was essential, as this was a transformation that took several years to accomplish. Without seeing some improvement, change transformations are difficult to sustain (Kotter, 1995). New faculty and staff who could implement the vision were hired, which in turn produced more change. Finally, new approaches were institutionalized and made part of the newly emerging culture of the school.

Conclusion and insights from the process

There were several critical lessons that the AoL committee took away from the process of writing the initial plan. First, it is helpful to frame this process in the change literature, and to realize that this will be a sustained change transformation and that models of the change process can be very helpful. Although this approach was deliberate at the AoL committee level, it was not transparent to all faculty. Program assessment requires a programmatic view, which is truly a cultural shift for faculty. Whether employed by a research or teaching institution, faculty members are generally accustomed to thinking of themselves as individual contributors with sole purview over the courses they teach. At most, they may think of themselves as part of a department such as accounting, finance, or organizational behavior, with input into departmental course offerings and course sequencing. Programmatic review requires faculty to share ownership of the program offerings of their institutions and to be responsible for the quality of the program as a whole, not just their courses. The cultural shift goes beyond faculty perceptions of their responsibility. Structurally, incentives and compensation must motivate this team effort and

include participation in assessment as an input, in addition to the traditional focus on research, teaching, and service. This requires institutions to think about AoL through a strategic change lens. It is important to remember that as developing a programmatic view requires cultural change, it will not happen overnight. Changing an institution's culture must be orchestrated over time, and faculty and institutional expectations need to be managed over the long term.

Second, leadership and the formation of a powerful coalition to create the vision are important. The members of the coalition can make or break the effort. Think about membership in this group in terms of power with the faculty and their level of open-mindedness. Rotation of committee members and ongoing training of faculty help extend and expand the coalition.

Third, empower the faculty to create the vision and own the implementation plan. Plan for short-term wins to keep the effort going and remove obstacles to programmatic change so that the changes can be institutionalized. Getting the work done during meetings and sharing the results of these sessions helps faculty own the process and feel productive. AoL and program assessment is an ever-evolving process. Being integrally linked to continual improvement, by design it is neither linear nor static. It requires continual looping between the institutional mission, the program goals, and objectives on one side, and course content and assessment on the other. It also requires continual updating as the mission, program goals, and objectives of all institutions change over time to reflect newer, better understandings. Because of this, it is important to get started and not wait for perfection. Aim for some early accomplishments and realize that they are stepping stones. In the end, assessment not only informs program improvements and innovations, it also changes institutional perception of the AoL process. It is more effective, therefore, to realize up front that the process is neither linear nor sequential, and that it is a continual moving target. Conceptually, it is much more like a whirlpool flowing toward the center of continual program improvement; but rather than hitting the target, the whirlpool continually reinvents itself.

Finally, keep in mind that faculty time is precious and moving toward accomplishments is essential. This involves differentiating between when the entire faculty needs to be brought into the process versus when a sub-group of faculty or committee is

adequate for moving the process forward. It is therefore important to use faculty meetings strategically. For example, as previously mentioned, it was efficient to use meetings as working sessions where actual tasks were completed, rather than to talk about the tasks and send faculty off to complete the tasks as "homework." Accompanied with this was providing faculty with concrete examples. For example, the AoL committee provided materials on how to write learning objectives, and then invited faculty to bring their course syllabi to a meeting where faculty worked with each other to rewrite their course objectives in language that aligned with both assessment and programmatic goals and objectives. These small aids were important interventions and levers for change. In summary, this approach not only got the job done, but also helped build faculty ownership of the assessment process, as well as creating a sense of faculty responsibility for the institution's academic programs.

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