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Brief 13: The Critical Connection: Department Chairs' and Associate Deans' Strategies for Involving Faculty in Outcomes Assessment

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The Critical Connection: Department Chairs' and Associate Deans' Strategies for Involving Faculty in Outcomes Assessment

Assessment, with a capital "A", has become in the academy a politically loaded buzzword that closes many more doors than it opens. Assessment, with a small "a", however, is a necessary part of any attempt to find the best path forward in environments that change. At meetings this spring, Members of NERCHE's Departments Chairs Think Tank and Associate Academic Deans Think Tank discussed this controversial issue, focusing on ways to foster climates in which faculty and administrators are collaborative partners in assessment with the intention of strengthening teaching and learning.

Assessment is formally integrated into most of the academy's work. Journal articles are subject to peer review. Students are evaluated on their performances. Faculty undergo evaluation for promotion and tenure. The task for administrators is to encourage institutional participants, especially faculty, to think about teaching and learning in this way.

Outcomes assessment came into being in part to shift the focus from teaching to learning and to meet the public demand for accountability, a circumstance that raised suspicions about its purposes. Many faculty distrusted the motives of those who championed its use, believing their true intention was to judge faculty performance or to diminish faculty's ownership and control of their work. Further skepticism was engendered by beliefs that assessment attempts to reduce complex classroom dynamics to data points that fail to capture the nuances of learning, which can take place over many years, or that much precious time would be spent collecting data of questionable significance. In recent years, however, assessment has gained greater acceptance in academic circles fueled by accrediting agencies and their insistence on assessment for program improvement and enhanced student learning.

With the focus on student outcomes rather than faculty inputs, assessment compels us to ask what we want students to know and how we will know that we have succeeded. Key to these successes is that faculty are involved in the development of assessment tools. At one institution, faculty drove an assessment process that included conducting focus groups by departments to determine what to assess, establishing the means to obtain information, and developing feedback loops to departments to facilitate informed programmatic decision making. At another, administrators and faculty are collaborating to develop meaningful assessment tools that are sensitive to agreed-upon learning outcomes reflective of the college's mission, while at the same time have comparability with external measures.

Yet some Chairs with high aspirations for their departments report difficulties in penetrating the armor of faculty with entrenched negative views about the utility of assessment. In such instances, a Chair may need to make her case individual by individual. Associate Deans, often called upon to implement academic directives, find that personal relationships with faculty go a long way toward persuading them to consider the value of approaches that may at first seem pointless. To shift perceptions of assessment from a "capital-A" to a "small-a" issue also involves finding a way to show that there has been change in the environment that drives a need for change in old assumptions. For example, the reality of technological innovation is that campuses are in a permanent state of revision as continuous upgrading is essential for remaining competitive. Built into this new reality are implications for teaching and learning that require experimentation and testing. Campus communities have also changed with the arrival of new and diverse populations of students who bring with them different ways of learning that may

not be adequately measured by traditional means. Faculty are often the first to spot these variations and are, in many ways, best suited to develop ways to assess them.

It may take time to dispel notions of assessment as externally generated and arbitrary and to cultivate a common understanding of assessment as a means to improve the process of education for students and faculty alike. Once the commitment to assessing student outcomes is established, faculty are better positioned to use these outcomes to modify programs in a process of ongoing assessment suited to an ever-changing environment. The process offers opportunities for change that remain under faculty control. In the early stages, it is important to distinguish program assessment from personal assessment, emphasizing that it is not a back-door evaluation. However, just as peer-reviewed articles reflect faculty's scholarly work, whether students learn or not ought to be, to some degree, a reflection of the program and of the instructors.

Assessment can be a process of collective reflection that seeks to answer the question: Why this and not something else? The dark view is that if higher education does not employ the means to assess itself, it is made vulnerable by other providers that have implemented comprehensive assessment mechanisms that demonstrate clear results that propel them to better keep pace with changing demands and needs.

Associate Academic Deans and Department Chairs offer the following suggestions.

- Encourage faculty to discuss assessment in a non-combative way. It may be possible to partially diffuse the capital-A worries if it is obvious that data are sought for purposes that are clearly explainable.

- Discuss assessment in the context of what the institution wants to accomplish, linking the conversation to the strategic plan so that participants are able to drop their battle stances and allow commonalities to emerge. Once the climate is right, leave discretion and choice to the faculty, who will, in most cases, respond creatively. It is important that there be consensus on approach so that change is managed rather than imposed. If there is strong attachment to the status quo, it may be necessary to employ a process consultant to help sort through the obstacles.

- Support faculty to attend conferences to learn how to collect good baseline data and obtain information on the appropriate instruments to use for their purposes. This could include developing internal instruments that have external comparability with existing instruments such as the SAT writing sample. Work with faculty to devise systems of assessment that are designed to parsimoniously illuminate important student and programmatic issues.

- Introduce assessment using a two-stage approach at the departmental level. In the first stage, the data are owned only by the department. This kind of security allows skeptical faculty to get involved. Encourage faculty to elicit outcomes based on their notions of their ideal student. The data should reflect the objectives that faculty want students to meet. Once faculty are comfortable with working with assessment data that are not associated with evaluation, they may feel freer to identify, without any finger-pointing, those faculty who may need assistance in meeting assessment goals. Eventually, departments will be ready to share the data more widely and to link them to program assessment.

- Develop ways to include all members of the institution in assessment. A method that directly ties students into the assessment process is electronic portfolios, which allow students to determine their own goals and begin assessing ways to meet them through course selection and programs, such as study abroad or internships. Support faculty to collaboration across departments and divisions, including Student Affairs.

- Encourage faculty to participate in accreditation teams, which will expose them to a broader context for assessment.

- Preserve adequate time to implement and improve assessment processes.

The American Association for Higher Education's Assessment Forum provides an abundant source of assessment resources. Visit their web site at (www.aahe.org/assessment).

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Do you have a response to the issues raised in this Brief? NERCHE welcomes responses to this Brief. Would you like more information on Nerche think Tanks and other programs: Please contact us at:

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