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Brief 3: Making Assessment Work

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NERCHE BRIEF

New England Resource Center for Higher Education
July 2000

The following Brief from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) is a distillation of collaborative work of members of NERCHE's ongoing think tanks for administrators and faculty in the New England region. NERCHE Briefs emphasize policy implications and action agendas from the point of view of the people who tackle the most compelling issues in higher education in their daily work lives. With support from the Ford Foundation, NERCHE disseminates these pieces to a targeted audience of legislators, college and university presidents and system heads, and media contacts. The Briefs are designed to add critical information and essential voices to the policy decisions that leaders in higher education address.

Making Assessment Work

Assessment and accountability are embedded in the context in which most colleges and universities operate. In the current climate, one is deeply entwined with the other. Originally, assessment in higher education meant assessing students. The broader appeal of the concept quickly claimed the attention of a multitude of constituents within the academy, each with a different goal in mind – from program review to public relations. Those whose relationship to the academy was once or twice removed, such as trustees, accreditors, and legislators, saw assessment as a simple and cost effective means to report information about the effectiveness of complex organizational processes as a way to hold institutions accountable. Especially in times of economic upheaval, “accountability” held much promise for those watching the bottom line.

Politics or educational philosophy aside, it is reasonable to want to know whether students are learning. And it is reasonable to want to know if institutions are performing, that is, teaching well. Assessment operates on many, nested levels. Student learning assessment is one factor in assessing a program; assessment of both student learning and programs are components of institutional assessment.

Assessment and accountability can complement each other to inform decisions and actions to improve the course, program, or institution – depending on the level at which the assessment is being done.

Assessment Management on Campus

Academic leaders are looking seriously at the uses of assessment on their campuses. The value of assessment data can turn on one simple question: In the case of assessment results that are less than glowing, is the next step constructive action or punishment? Colleges and universities are finding ways to measure the impact of education on students and student learning that does not shortchange the complexity of the enterprise, that improve learning, and that satisfy the needs of multiple constituents. Offices of academic affairs must take the lead in assessment efforts because faculty members directly carry out the mission of the institution. Academic leaders recognize that they can look to their own campuses for the expertise to do quality and meaningful assessment. More and more provosts, deans, and department chairs are calling upon institutional research offices to facilitate assessment and to join them at the planning table.

In New England, heads of institutional research (IR) offices are answering this call. Recently, a group of them discussed their roles in assessment within their institutions.

Resources of IR Offices

Typically, IR offices respond to multiple requests – and demands – for institutional data from constituents inside and outside the college or university. IR offices are in the best position to know the potential uses and misuses of institutional data. They see ways in which this information can serve the educational purposes of the institution as well. Some of the data that IR collects can inform the educational process. And IR's skills with methods of analysis can be deployed to facilitate assessment processes, whether a program or institutional review.

For faculty to get to the point where they ask questions that will help them make programmatic decisions, they need to operate in an environment that neutralizes the static charge around assessment data and that supports educational improvement. Building a culture of assessment happens one step at a time. At one New England college, the IR office facilitated a process for departmental assessment – assisting faculty and departments in formulating questions and offering to gather data for program review. The IR office assured faculty that their office would not publish the results, and they kept the focus on program improvement. This led to faculty forming probing questions to generate valuable data. While IR's work was practical, their impact endured beyond the specific review: They developed relationships with faculty that helped shape their experience of assessment into something meaningful and useful for improvement of student learning. As a result, faculty from across the institution are more involved in the assessment process. They follow up with students by phone, provide IR with data, and write up reports. Now every program has measurable outcomes.

At another local university, the IR office teams up with the offices of student assessment and student services to share resources and pool data to produce richer institutional information. For example, these offices collaborate on ongoing telephone surveys of students about a range of topics including advising, residential academic programs, and students' reasons for leaving the institution. IR approaches assessment from the perspective of formative program improvement. In addition, this institution is invested in supporting faculty involvement in assessment. Faculty can receive release time for assessment training through an Assessment Fellows program.

Heads of IR offer the following recommendations to academic leaders and decision makers:

- Facilitate cooperative relationships with faculty and provide them with assistance in developing questions for program review and thinking through methodological

issues – without delving into the minutiae of methodology, or “statistical correctness.”

- Build an assessment-friendly environment by demystifying data – by making its collection routine, and by making data publicly available. This helps assessment efforts to become part of every-day life on campus.
- Give primary ownership of data to departments and units while insuring mechanisms for sharing appropriate information with academic administrators and other stakeholders. Internal, formative assessment that is carefully conceptualized and carried out feeds into quality data for external agencies and has long-term benefits for the institution. Assessment data that is misused or used out of context can fracture an evolving culture of assessment. No one benefits from just “keeping score.”
- Capitalize on ways that data can serve multiple purposes to avoid redundancy and duplication of effort. Encourage data sharing and collaboration among various units of the institution – IR offices, academic affairs, and student affairs.
- Supply IR offices with adequate personnel and resources. With the inundation of requests for data from multiple external agencies and internal constituents, most IR offices are not staffed to be able to do the proactive education and facilitation of ongoing and decentralized assessment processes.
- Provide release time for faculty development on assessment issues. Educate various stakeholders and constituents about the appropriate uses of data, including how to choose the best data to meet their informational needs. A “quick fix” mentality can produce simple and misleading information.

The higher education community knows that the issues of assessment and accountability will not go away because methods and outcomes are perceived as

cumbersome, time-consuming, invalid, or threatening. Assessment is here to stay. Educational purposes and outcomes are not necessarily at odds with each other. In fact, the goal of educating can align with the goal of providing educational information to stakeholders, such as trustees, accreditation associations, and, in the case of public institutions, legislators. The key is to design effective assessment tools. Meaningful assessments can illuminate the student learning process and outcomes and can revitalize the academic enterprise. These recommendations will take an institution a long way down the path to institutional improvement.

NERCHE welcomes responses to this Brief.

Do you have a response to the issues raised in this Brief?

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Please see our website, www.nerche.org, to read NERCHE Briefs previously published. Available are; The Technology Challenge on Campus from the Perspective of Chief Academic Officers (January 2000) and Benchmarking from the Perspective of Chief Financial Officers (April 2000).

