Developing a Culture for
Continuous Assessment of Student Learning

Melissa Dreyer and Daniel Claborn

Introduction

Understanding the hesitation felt by the many individuals not directly participating in the assessment process, we wish to share our experiences with faculty and administrators encountered while revitalizing the Oklahoma State University-Okmulgee (OSU-Okmulgee) approach and philosophy in assessing student learning. Among the many meetings, training sessions, activities, collections of data, and analysis of those data, we feel that we have finally achieved acceptance of, tolerance of, and appreciation for the assessment process and for what it can provide for our campus and various constituencies.

Our campus initiative was revitalized in the spring of 2003 with the formation of the Campus-Wide Assessment Committee. This committee has been working continuously since its inception to identify, develop, and initiate activities for the assessment of student learning on our campus. To date, we have identified a common core (general education), a reporting mechanism, and the data collection activities, data analysis, and feedback processes utilized on our campus. In addition, we have selected various computer-based software tools for use in the classroom and as part of the data warehousing for this system. The methods our assessment committee initially developed and their eventual refinement based on data collection, process evaluation, and campus activities formed a culture for continuous assessment of student learning that is an evolutionary process for our campus.

History of Assessment on the OSU-Okmulgee Campus

1990 Visit

In-service for academic administrative personnel designed to broaden and enhance their management perspective and create a stronger team approach to planning, implementing, and assessment is encouraged. (Boenisch et al. 1990)

As a result of this visit, the creation of an administratively driven assessment effort was dictated to all academic programs by the Institutional Assessment and Research office. However, this proved to be unsuccessful.

2000 Visit

The lack of a clear and concise plan for the assessment of student academic achievement is apparent. This concern was listed by the 1990 NCA Team and has not been addressed successfully. (Bordner et al. 2000)

As a result of this visit, an administrative committee formed. The committee consisted of personnel from the Institutional Assessment and Research office and division chairs. At this time, a system of pretest-posttest processes was developed. This again proved to be unsuccessful.

2002 Focused Visit

The Team recommends that the institution submit a Monitoring report due on May 3, 2005, that documents assessment of student learning has been implemented in each program area including general education. (Guengerich, and Thiede 2002)

With the unsuccessful attempts at administratively designed processes driven from higher administration down to the program levels, it was decided in the spring of 2003 that our campus would shift the focus of the assessment processes to a faculty-designed system.

2004 Focused Visit

The team does believe that effective leadership is in place and that good progress has already been made in addressing the organization’s assessment challenges. (Devier et al. 2004)

The assessment process was recognized and received conditional approval from the visiting team.
Steps for Developing a Culture for Continuous Assessment of Student Learning

While developing our campus’s plan for assessment, we faced the same dilemmas that many other educational institutions have had to come to grips with: lack of interest, time, and initiative in the assessment process. There had been attempts in the past to develop an assessment process for our campus; they had failed, and we were faced with starting over and overcoming the remnants of hesitation present on campus. Following are the steps in our development of a culture for continuous assessment of student learning.

Step One: A Faculty-Driven Assessment Committee

In the spring of 2003, the higher administration of the campus decided that it was time to take a new approach to developing an assessment system for our campus. Realizing that former attempts at collecting data for assessment of student learning were not working, the administration selected individuals from each academic division for a roundtable discussion concerning current assessment processes and how to improve them. The participants were selected by division chairs to represent the divisions, along with the newly hired director of assessment and research. During the roundtable discussion, additional faculty members were identified as additional representatives for a campus-wide assessment committee.

Step Two: Selection of Divisional Liaisons

The selection of the divisional liaisons for the campus-wide assessment committee came in two parts. The initial group of representatives consisted primarily of technical program faculty members with only one representative for the entire general education area of the campus. Additional general education and technical program faculty members were identified by the initial group based on favorable recommendations and a lack of predisposed notions about past assessment processes on our campus.

With the formation of our committee, setting regular meeting times and locations became imperative. We had approximate four months to prepare a plan because of both the procrastination of our campus and the deadline for an interim report to be submitted to the Higher Learning Commission. It was decided to initially meet weekly to discuss, design, and submit an assessment plan to the higher administration for approval.

Step Three: Common Working Vocabulary

With regular meetings, a common working vocabulary of assessment terms became a critical necessity for both the committee and the campus population in general. Terms such as **objective** and **outcome** were defined with examples of their intended use through the new processes.

Step Four: Identifying Program Educational Objectives

One of the first tasks that the committee asked the campus to complete was for each academic division to identify program educational objectives. This proved to be particularly challenging for many academic programs. It was determined that there were measures being utilized that needed to be formalized and recorded, but there were many instances in which assessments were neither identified nor measured. The committee members also worked with program liaisons and other program representatives to narrow and combine technical objectives into a more workable and reasonable set of objectives that would become the programs’ educational foundation.

Through this process, each program independently focused on and identified its initial program outcomes. The assessment committee then used the group of program outcomes from all of the programs on campus to identify common factors.

Step Five: A General Education Core (Common Expectations)

To identify a common core, each division chair was asked to submit current expected program outcomes. Initially, nine common core areas were found to be universal among all programs on campus:

1. Effectively communicate electronically, verbally, and in writing
2. Demonstrate logical, systematic problem-solving techniques
3. Analyze and solve problems using basic mathematical computations
4. Develop and display a sense of personal, social, and professional work ethics
5. Work effectively as part of a team
6. Explain the cultural heritage and primary elements of the history and government of the United States and its people, especially as it impacts one’s industry or field of study
7. Apply interpersonal and leadership skills that value diversity among people, and promote the achievement of personal and industry goals
8. Access and use technology appropriate for one’s industry or field of study
9. Follow safety policies and procedures as defined by industry

Each of these core areas represented outcomes of coursework from the general education division.

Through several heated discussions and initial use, it was found that the original core outcomes overlapped and needed to be refined. The nine were narrowed and expanded to five:

1. Communications
2. Ethics and diversity
3. Problem solving
4. Cultural and industrial history
5. Technology

These five areas represented a common foundation required of each graduate regardless of program or degree. With the new requirement concerning service learning, the committee is again in the process of discussing how to implement and assess another core area.

**Step Six: A Standard Recording Practice for Program: Mission, Objectives, Assessments, Measurements, and Data Collection and Use**

To standardize the assessment of not only the core outcomes but also each individual academic program’s technical outcomes, the assessment committee determined that a three-step method for the identification, definition of goals, and reporting of data would be utilized. The system consisted of

1. Form A: Identification of the academic program and its reporting period
2. Form B: Identification of the program mission and a listing of the educational outcomes
3. Form C: Definition of each educational outcome, a means of assessing it, criteria for success, data collection methods, and assessment results

This standardized method of reporting enabled the campus’s academic programs to become aware of the current forms of assessment or lack thereof. Each of the academic programs was also encouraged to rethink its strategies for assessing the core outcomes at a more advanced level.

**Step Seven: Training for Academic Division Chairs and Faculty**

With the identification of a working vocabulary and initial program objectives, the selection of the core outcomes, and the development of the standardized mechanism, the committee determined that it was time for training to take place. The first group selected for training was made up of heads of divisions and key administrative members. The first training session consisted of familiarization with the initial charge of the committee and work completed by the committee up to that point. Subsequent training sessions also included faculty and support staff. The training was divided into three components. Each of the components dealt with not only the understanding of the identified vocabulary and materials but also the application and utilization of the standardized forms.

**Step Eight: Divisional Subcommittees**

Early adopters, recognizing the amount of work involved and the importance of the entire assessment process, developed subcommittees within their individual academic divisions. These subcommittees consist of the liaison and content-specific representatives who meet to discuss and refine the assessment activities of the division.

**Step Nine: Selection of Technologies to Be Used for Data Repositories and Analysis**

Initial attempts to develop spreadsheets and database for use by all programs on campus were unsuccessful. It became apparent that a tested and proven system to manage data storage and analysis activities needed to be identified. After a thorough search, the committee identified the TracDat system developed by Nuventive.
Step Ten: Campus-wide Assessment Activities

The committee realized that individual program assessments did not represent the entire campus. In addition to our normal activities, course and faculty evaluations, student satisfaction inventories, and other surveys, the committee decided to dedicate one week per academic year to assessment activities.

Realizing the lack of campus-wide interest in generic assessment discussions, we drew on an idea provided at one of the Higher Learning Commission Annual Conference meetings: to focus on a specific core objective for the entire campus and to utilize it as the theme for the assessment week and the academic year. Our first assessment week theme was critical thinking; our second theme was diversity; and our theme for this year is service learning.

Step Eleven: Required Reporting

Realizing the importance of the entire assessment cycle, the committee determined that an annual report would be generated internally to not only satisfy external bodies requiring this information but also to assist our campus in the identification of successes and areas for improvement, thus completing the loop of the assessment cycle.

Conclusion

While it may appear that we have accomplished the feat of developing a campus-wide tolerance and acceptance for assessment, we are far from that. We have only scratched the surface, and we continue to struggle with converting the nonbelievers on our campus.

Of the original fifteen committee members who began this faculty-driven committee only four still remain. Although there has been large turnover of divisional liaisons throughout this process, new members quickly acclimate and continue to educate the campus.

To further stress the importance of assessment of student learning on our campus, assessment committee members routinely provide education at new faculty workshops and campus-wide professional development workshops.

In recognition of the work being done by the committee and the importance of having a dedicated space with appropriate equipment, the administration has provided the committee with a workspace equipped to carry out the functions it performs.

In addition to our own campus activities, our institution applied for and was accepted into the Higher Learning Commission Assessment Academy. The team participated in the June 2007 roundtable activities and came back to campus with new ideas to be presented to our assessment committee. We will continue with this process through our membership in the Assessment Academy.

References


Melissa Dreyer is an Instructor of Communications in the Arts and Sciences Division and the Arts and Sciences Division Liaison and Daniel Claborn is an Instructor of Information Technologies in the Information Technologies Division, the current chair for the Campus-wide Assessment Committee, and the IT Division Liaison at Oklahoma State University-Okmulgee in Okmulgee.