

**Academy for Assessment of Student Learning
November 18-20, 2009
Roundtable Pre-Work
New Mexico State University**

Institutional Needs Related to Assessing and Improving Student Learning

New Mexico State University has, in recent years, initiated many forward movements in the development and advancement of student learning outcomes assessment. Like other institutions nation-wide, the current economic climate is a concern in respect to the continuation of budding programs. Additionally, the proverbial “elephant in room” is that our current institutional climate is one where the only consistency seems to be the continuous transition of upper administrative leadership. Both of these, over time, wear on the morale and commitment of faculty and staff to continue forward movement on endeavors that they perceive can easily be dismissed or thwarted by new leadership. The team, as well as the current administration (which will change in January), believes the answer to this underlying challenge lies in cultivating an institutional climate and driving force at the grass-roots that identifies and upholds institutional values, including assessment. When assessment becomes a value that is inherent in the institutional culture, it is more likely to be perceived as something that will transcend administrative change and agenda.

As such, one critical task for this team at this time is to establish ways and means to support, sustain, and ensure the prosperity of assessment initiatives already in play. Likewise, the solidification of an effective institutional structure that ensures continuity in assessment is necessary to sustain gains and to convey to the campus community that even in changing climates, the place of assessment within the institution stands firm. Finally, normalization and consistency of assessment as a natural part of campus life, in all areas on campus is critical, as is the perception by the campus community that assessment is useful and contributes to the success of students and programs.

Within this context, specific needs include 1) Continued efforts in faculty and staff development in understanding, developing and implementing assessment; 2) An increased understanding and contextualization of the implementation, use and viability of our state common core general education assessment on our home campus and in relation to our system-wide community colleges; and 3) The mapping of objectives from the course or unit level up through the institutional mission – this is key to integrating assessment in the minds of faculty and staff. Currently, concerns about the progress and implementation of general education transfer and assessment across our system present a sense of urgency. It appears that dealing with pertinent issues surrounding general education assessment is in line with the overall priority focus of the team.

Both internal and external forces contribute to the needs identified here. Commitments made to the HLC about our assessment practices, as well as state-mandated general education common core assessment are relevant. Likewise, many colleges and departments on our campus fall under professional accreditation standards that also require ongoing assessment of student learning. More significant though, is the institutions internal commitment to its student body and its constituents to provide the best education possible for its students.

Good Practices

While we continue to face significant challenges in the landscape of student learning outcomes assessment, we believe we have many good practices already in play at our institution. One is the development of our University Outcomes Assessment Council. This Council brings together representation from all areas of the institution, and strives to promote a philosophy of assessment that is holistic in nature, and serves to guide and oversee the development of assessment university-wide.

Additional good practices include 1) The Division of Student Success engagement in strategic planning that implements use of direct learning outcomes, and ties all outcomes to the institution's "Living the Vision" mission statement; 2) The development of a campus newsletter on assessment; and 3) Significant changes in the Academic Program Assessment process that have made it possible for academic programs to receive timely and substantial feedback on assessment plans, as well as on implementation, often in face-to-face meetings where questions and misconceptions can be immediately addressed. There is also support available in assessment training and in the development and implementation of assessment plans.

Fostering Discussion and Interest in Learning and Assessment

Our Teaching Academy has been exemplary in providing opportunities for discussion and reflection on student learning and assessment. The Teaching Academy continuously brings in experts from all areas of teaching, and brings to campus at least one major assessment expert each year. Peggy Maki, Mary Allen, Susan Hatfield, Janice Denton, and Tom Angelo have all given workshops in the Teaching Academy over the last three years. The Academy also provides venues for assessment forums and local assessment experts, and has facilitated training in assessment for new faculty hires.

Another activity that has engaged the campus community in thinking about and discussing student learning and assessment is the development of university-wide baccalaureate outcomes. In this process, the community was first engaged through departmental faculty, staff unit, and student meetings (approximately 50 meetings total) to solicit input in the development of these comprehensive academic and life-experience learning outcomes. Continued discussion is occurring in the Faculty Senate, in Student Support Service areas, and is planned in the Associated Students of NMSU for endorsement and adoption of the baccalaureate mission, goals, objectives and outcomes.

The Advancing Leaders program, a mentoring program for faculty who are entering or considering entering administrative positions, adopts a topic of interest each year that is pertinent to our institution, researches the issue, and submits a recommendation to the President and the Provost at the end of the year. This year program participants, at the encouragement of the Provost, are considering institutional values and assessment as their project topic.

And finally, the significant restructuring of our former Academic Program Assessment committee is serving to facilitate sharing of ideas and techniques of student learning assessment. What originally was a committee that reviewed academic program assessment reports, has become a committee designated to promote classroom assessment. The committee strives to increase visibility of assessment, and is now offering incentives (including instruction and prizes) for faculty to try a classroom assessment technique and submit a one-page report to the larger community on the results of that experience. In the future they will offer similar incentives for using rubrics and other appropriate classroom assessment tools and techniques.

Assessment Instruments

We are currently using no standardized assessment instruments. At this time we would not be interested in leading discussions on assessing student learning.

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