
ENGAGING FACULTY IN THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST FLORIDA

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The University of West Florida (UWF) is a relatively young institution, founded in 1967 as an upper-level institution enrolling juniors, seniors, and graduate students. The university became a full 4-year undergraduate institution and admitted its first class of freshmen in 1983. A significant number of undergraduate students transfer to UWF after beginning their studies elsewhere; nearly 50% of students who graduate with a bachelor's degree from UWF matriculate with an A.A. The university admitted the first cohort of graduate students in an Ed.D. program in 1996. The university currently enrolls approximately 11,200 students. This enrollment allows for relatively small class sizes (the average class enrollment is 25 students). The student population is drawn largely from Florida (89% of students are Florida residents, and 11% are non-Florida residents), although the student population includes students from all 50 states and 92 countries. Approximately 23% of UWF students identify themselves as members of a cultural/ethnic minority group.

We became engaged in assessment at UWF through our contributions to institutional efforts to establish a culture of assessment. The assessment initiative at UWF was instigated by two major

forces that converged in 2003. First, the university was engaged in a self-study in preparation for a reaffirmation-of-accreditation site visit by the regional accrediting body (the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools). In addition, the board of governors of the state of Florida established a mandate to create and adopt academic learning compacts for undergraduate degree programs. Academic learning compacts describe desired student learning outcomes for each program and the methods that departments use to assess student learning. This mandate includes the expectation that departments routinely collect assessment evidence and use that data for continual improvement of student learning and their programs. Most of the authors began their assessment work in the role of assessment liaisons to a department chair. We developed our expertise by learning about assessment practices and assisting with the development of program-level student learning outcomes for the department's academic learning compact and the assessment of student learning for undergraduate programs, departmental contributions to the general education curriculum, and the assessment of student learning in graduate programs. Those of us from the School of Allied Health and Life Sciences (Mbizo, Stewart, and Sutton) experienced assessment through the additional lens of disciplinary accreditation during our preparations to use ongoing assessment work to document compliance with accreditation standards established by the Council on Education for Public Health for the newly established master of public health (MPH) program. Eman El-Sheikh and Claudia Stanny became more deeply engaged with assessment work in their efforts to develop institution-wide faculty skills in assessment through their faculty development roles at the Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.

Establishing a culture of assessment is a winding road. Accreditation needs and mandates from the state of Florida were addressed against the backdrop of discussions originating with the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education. External pressures serve as motivators ("We have to get this done!") but they also inspire resistance ("What business do these outsiders have telling us how to do our work—we're professionals, we should be trusted!"). Moreover, initial organizational efforts were interrupted when the campus was forced to close for 3 weeks following a direct hit from Hurricane Ivan in 2004. Attention was necessarily redirected toward the removal of over 2,000 toppled trees and repair of storm-damaged buildings on campus as well as personal recovery efforts to the homes of faculty, staff, and students. As we were catching our breath the following year, the university received a second, although less devastating, direct hit from Hurricane Dennis. Nevertheless, faculty and staff pulled together and the cohesion that supported us with personal and institutional efforts toward hurricane recovery also fueled efforts to meet deadlines related to assessment of student learning. Administrators leading the effort to create a culture

of assessment realized that the university could not create an entire system overnight, especially in light of these other pressing demands on time and resources. The university adopted a deliberate strategy of implementing assessment practices in a slow but methodical manner that enabled faculty to acquire the skills needed to do this work well without feeling overwhelmed.

Assessment of General Education

Within the College of Arts and Sciences, individual departments have taken responsibility for assessing student learning outcomes in four domains (critical thinking, communication, integrity/values, and project management) by embedding assessments in courses that the departments offer as part of the general education curriculum. The Department of Government chose to assess student learning in two domains: critical thinking and integrity/values. Information literacy learning outcomes, which are included in the critical thinking domain, are assessed in the course titled Introduction to Comparative Politics. Civic engagement learning outcomes, which are included in the integrity/values domain, are assessed in Introduction to American Politics. Both courses are offered every semester. Students may select these courses from a menu of courses that fulfill specific lower-division requirements in the general education curriculum. These courses have some of the highest student traffic in terms of departmental enrollment and attract a diverse group of students from a variety of academic majors.

Data are collected in both courses every semester. Course instructors determine the most appropriate techniques to assess student learning in each skill domain. The information literacy assessment is based on a module of 10 graded exercises that build skills over the course of the semester and culminates in a research paper in which students demonstrate these skills. Civic engagement skills are assessed through an exercise in which students write an editorial piece for publication in a news outlet and write an informed letter on a matter of public policy to a congressperson. Performance on these assignments is used to provide a basis for assigning assessment ratings on a scale ranging from high- to low-level skill demonstration.

Ensuring that assessment data are used for course improvements remains a challenge. However, a number of positive changes have resulted from the assessment process. The process of creating skill-building activities and assignments to serve as embedded assessments seems to drive higher grading standards on key assignments in which information literacy and civic engagement skills are an important component. In other words, had the same assignment been given in a course in which these skills had not been explicitly developed, the instructor might have reluctantly been more lenient with grades, making allowances for the lack of student preparation while focusing

on the evaluation of content learning outcomes. For instance, students are expected to pose a strong research question and thesis, describe an analytical structure designed to answer the research question, and demonstrate superior scholarly source utilization and citation and the ethical use of intellectual property in research papers that incorporate information literacy. Papers failing to exhibit these characteristics receive low grades. Similarly, the course in which civic engagement is assessed had not previously included a practical exercise that required civic engagement, even though this topic is central to the course discussion of the democratic political process. The course now includes a civic engagement module that teaches students to craft an editorial position on a contemporary issue, using knowledge gained about these issues over the semester. Students also learn strategies for bringing an issue to the attention of a public official in a way that gains reception and possibly produces results. The instructor now uses a practical assignment to assess student learning, whereas this concept had previously been evaluated only as content in an exam. In summary, instructors now apply greater levels of scrutiny to student learning outcomes when these skills are emphasized as part of assignments included in the course.

Assessment of Undergraduate Degree Programs in Computer Science

The Department of Computer Science experienced several challenges and obstacles to the development of its assessment plan that were encountered in many other departments across the university: the need to integrate institutional and state requirements, minimal knowledge of assessment practices within the department, and faculty resistance. These challenges were addressed through the use of a phased approach to assessment. The department focused first on developing learning outcomes and assessment methods for undergraduate programs, followed by the assessment of graduate programs. General education learning outcomes and assessment methods were implemented in the final phase when the Department of Computer Science began to offer its first course in the general education curriculum. This phased approach kept the assessment process manageable.

As part of the first phase of undergraduate assessment, the department developed program learning outcomes documented in the departmental academic learning compact with faculty participation. Initial assessment efforts focused on learning outcomes in the domains of critical thinking and project management, because these outcomes were considered to be critical to students' success in the undergraduate computer science program. The department identified courses in which learning outcomes could be assessed and developed embedded assessments for these outcomes that were included in

several senior-level courses. Assessment efforts included the creation of rubrics and worksheets for collecting assessment data. This approach minimized effort, provided feedback to students, and kept data collection consistent across courses. Assessment results were beneficial when the department evaluated its existing programs and planned the creation of future programs. Early assessment evidence revealed similarities between existing undergraduate programs and provided a rationale for subsequent curricular revisions that were implemented in new programs.

Several recommendations and best practices emerged from the undergraduate assessment process in computer science. When one is implementing assessment at the departmental level, it is useful to develop an effective plan before starting and to monitor the plan regularly.

- Think about the questions you really want to answer about your program or your students' learning.
- Determine the types of assessment methods and measures (e.g., embedded assessments, exit exams, student portfolios) that will work best for your program.
- Develop your assessment plan as necessary to refine the learning outcomes, assessment processes, and measurement methods. Most important: Keep the assessment process simple.
- Use a phased process and identify a subset of outcomes to assess in each phase.
- Identify or develop rubrics that will provide meaningful and easy-to-use assessment data. Involve faculty in all stages of the process.
- Keep faculty informed about all aspects of assessment (requirements of internal and external audiences, deadlines, potential benefits to department, scholarly potential).
- Create opportunities for regular feedback from faculty on the appropriateness of current desired student learning outcomes and rubrics used for assessment.
- Schedule regular meetings for faculty to discuss assessment results and determine how the results will be used.
- Remember to close the loop: How can the department use assessment results to improve student learning or update its programs? How can the results and feedback from faculty be used to refine the assessment plan and process?

360-Degree Assessment to Improve Faculty and Student Engagement in Online Programs

The School of Allied Health and Life Sciences used assessment in the design, implementation, and maintenance stages of launching online courses for the

creation of an online MPH program and the self-study undertaken to prepare that program for accreditation (Council on Education for Public Health, 2005). The school used characteristics of the 360-degree feedback model to create a multisource approach to assessment (Armstrong, Blake, & Piotrowski, 2000; Sachdeva, 2005; Swain et al., 2004). This model emphasizes faculty engagement as the driving force to create high-quality courses in which students respond with similar levels of engagement.

Through the use of a variant of the 20-item Client-Centered Care Organizational Assessment instrument (Center for Health Care Training, 2000), the self-assessment process motivated the school to set the following organization priorities:

- Develop university/school communication systems, policies, and protocols to support effective learner-centeredness training
- Increase efficiency of training services through periodic examination of faculty/adjunct flow studies compared to course evaluations and student complaints
- Develop intervention protocols to address training bottlenecks and student complaints

The school implemented peer-to-peer networking to provide formal and informal confidential and comprehensive peer-based assessment of course design and implementation decisions to promote these priorities. Examples of these initiatives follow.

- Traditional didactic training in course management features was supplemented with roundtable discussions driven by needs assessment (faculty posing questions), discussion of potential solutions to problems provided by peer faculty, and peer/staff demonstrations of student-tested, engagement-reinforcing strategies or use of innovative communication tools (Gercenshtein, Fogelman, & Yaphe, 2002).
- The director of the school and lead peer faculty implemented and tested new instructional strategies in their courses with the expectation that they would then provide ongoing and follow-up peer-to-peer training on best practices (Weber & Joshi, 2000).
- Subgroups of peers were cross-enrolled in similar courses to facilitate additional peer-to-peer discussions and mentoring opportunities (Watson & Groh, 2001).
- Avenues for voluntary but formal and confidential peer-based interventions were created to provide a comprehensive assessment of course design and implementation decisions to correct subpar levels of student engagement.

Finally, the school established mechanisms for using solicited and unsolicited feedback from students about their level of engagement. A sense of community is an important contributor to effective learning and student engagement and can be more difficult to establish in online courses than in face-to-face courses (Rovai, 2002). The online environment provides many mechanisms for increasing engagement. One of the innovative communication tools included in faculty training was the virtual world Second Life. Class participation in a virtual scavenger hunt for course-related information through the use of Second Life was offered as an extra credit activity in selected courses. In fall 2007, approximately 30% of the students enrolled in courses with the virtual scavenger hunt assignment used Second Life to complete the activity. Approximately 50% of these students experienced technical difficulties related to installation or initial problematic navigational issues. Among students who were able to install Second Life successfully and explore the virtual world for course-related content, course feedback regarding Second Life was extremely positive. Students reported that the experience of locating, visiting, and describing multiple virtual sites enhanced or reinforced their learning of course topics.

As a result of peer-to-peer training, faculty with initial subpar student evaluations showed sustained engagement over time and noted improved course evaluations, increased student engagement, and overall improvement in course quality when their courses were revised and offered in subsequent terms. The success of the 360-degree approach thus far is based on a willingness to offer multiple types of blended process-oriented and product-oriented training interventions and strategies in addition to moving from a hierarchical organization to a team-oriented organizational structure that has worked well in other domains emphasizing technology or change adoption without loss of quality and public accountability (Hoogveld, Pass, & Jochems, 2005; Leung, 2002; Weber & Joshi, 2000).

Individual Professional Growth

Michelle Williams's work with assessment emerged from earlier work on information literacy. The reference librarian assigned to political science faculty invited Williams to attend a summer workshop on information literacy at which about 10 subject-specialist librarians responsible for disciplines within the College of Arts and Sciences were paired with one professor from the academic area corresponding to their subject expertise. Library faculty worked with teaching faculty to construct information literacy applications and assignments for the various academic disciplines. Based on work that emerged from this workshop, the Department of Government decided to assess information literacy as one aspect of its contribution to the assessment

of the critical thinking domain in the plan to assess the general education curriculum. Williams described how her approach to teaching writing skills has changed as a result of the information literacy and assessment work as follows:

I now spend some time early in the semester talking about the paper project with emphasis on the grading criteria. I explain how the exercises build toward the paper project and that by taking the exercises seriously, students are improving their chance of achieving a higher grade on the culminating project for the course. I have found that their desire to learn improves the impact of my module and ultimately has enabled me to see greater learning as an outcome through my assessment tool.

Similarly, Eman El-Sheikh's engagement in assessment evolved out of her interest in improving computer science education. In her role as the department assessment liaison, El-Sheikh developed assessment plans for her department, kept colleagues up to date on the evolving assessment requirements at UWF, and helped faculty incorporate embedded assessments into their courses. She served as the instructional strategies and assessment fellow at the Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, where she consulted with faculty to develop useful and sustainable assessments of student learning and planned workshops and mini-conferences on innovative teaching strategies and assessment of student learning before being appointed as the Associate Dean for the College of Arts and Sciences. El-Sheikh's faculty development experience enabled her to expand her scholarship activities to include teaching, learning, and assessment.

Institutional Progress on Assessment

The learning curve for assessment can be steep. A few departments were familiar with assessment practices because of long-standing expectations for assessment from discipline-based accrediting bodies. However, for faculty in many departments, the language of assessment was completely new. UWF now has assessment practices in place in all departments for undergraduate and graduate programs and procedures for assessment of the general education curriculum. As might be expected in a developing culture of assessment, the quality of assessment methods across departments varies. Some departments have found that early assessment data may have gaps or not address the questions posed, thereby limiting their use. Initial efforts at measuring student learning frequently fail to provide information that is as useful as faculty would like. These departments are now thinking about refining their rubrics or developing new measures to improve the quality of generated data. Other departments are beginning to see tangible benefits of assessment and

report implementing changes to their curricula leading to improved student learning. Both processes fuel continued improvements in subsequent assessment efforts and increased commitment to a culture of assessment.

Work is underway to recognize and reward faculty for their assessment efforts. Faculty have discovered that they can publish their findings as scholarship on teaching and learning. A joint task force of the Faculty Senate and the Office of the Provost developed new guidelines for tenure and promotion. Publications in the scholarship of teaching and learning and other evidence of meaningful engagement in the assessment of student learning are now given explicit recognition as important elements for the documentation of excellence in teaching in tenure and promotion evaluation. Implementation of these guidelines is now underway through the revision of individual departmental bylaws that incorporate these new criteria. In addition, recognition of quality work in the assessment of student learning outcomes is being woven into the fabric of routine evaluation of departments (Stanny, El-Sheikh, Ellenberg, & Halonen, in press).

Summary and Lessons Learned

Assessment practices at UWF evolved to address the demands associated with two external mandates in one overarching program of assessment. Jane Halonen, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, wisely promoted the idea of using these mandates as an opportunity to showcase aspects of education at UWF that distinguish it from other institutions in the region. As a result, UWF chose to develop academic learning compacts that define student learning outcomes for the three domains of student learning mandated by the Board of Governors (content, communication, and critical thinking) and include two additional domains (integrity/values and project management) that are valued by the university community. UWF takes pride in the quality of student-faculty interaction made possible by its relatively small size. The project management domain highlights distinctive opportunities for students to acquire specific learning skills when they engage in collaborative work with faculty and complete significant projects as part of their course work at UWF.

Getting the assessment process rolling at UWF has not been without its challenges. Many faculty members are unfamiliar with assessment terminology, methods, and requirements for accreditation. In addition, many faculty members feel overcommitted and are reluctant to add assessment tasks to their busy agendas. This challenge can be overcome when the assessment process is kept simple. Computer science faculty focused initial assessment efforts on student learning in the core capstone courses, so that maximum benefit could be derived from the inclusion of embedded assessments in

only a few courses. An annual meeting at which faculty in the department collectively review the assessment data and decide on curricular revisions helps keep all faculty involved in the assessment process and evidence-based decision making without requiring a lot of effort on everyone's part. We believe that the best way to motivate others to join the assessment revolution is to continue to present and discuss the benefits of assessment, whether in improving teaching practices and curriculum or in pursuing publication and funding related to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Assessment can quickly become overwhelming. Rather than trying to assess everything, focus on answering questions that are important to faculty. Don't try to collect masses of data. Focus on specific points in the curriculum where the data collected will provide the most useful information and target the most important elements of the curriculum. Use a phased implementation process rather than trying to initiate undergraduate, graduate, and general education assessment at the same time. The lessons learned from early phases of implementation will make implementation of successive phases easier. Create shared responsibility for assessment and keep the assessment process open. Faculty are more likely to contribute to assessment efforts if they have a sense of ownership of the plans and practices that emerge. Open discussions lead to a better understanding of the opportunities for improvement within an academic program among faculty and increase support for implementing strategies that address these issues.

The School of Allied Health and Life Sciences implemented a learner-centered faculty training program as part of the development of a fully online MPH program. Faculty who participate in these training activities experienced improved course evaluations, increased student engagement, and improvement in course quality in subsequent offerings. A multi-perspective 360-degree feedback model appears to be effective in improving faculty engagement in assessment initiatives. If assessment can be accomplished without disenfranchising faculty or adjuncts, these activities enhance the quality of courses and programs.

Whatever the skill or learning being assessed, faculty development is important. Development activities might include training in the articulation of student learning outcomes, development of credible direct measures of student learning, practice with new strategies for instruction, and creation of learning activities that promote achievement of student learning outcomes. Faculty benefit when they collaborate with an expert in the content or skill domain and when they are provided with appropriate instructional resources that support the achievement of desired student learning outcomes.

We have learned and grown through our engagement with the assessment process. We have learned the value of collaborative learning, as when faculty work with reference librarians to develop course activities to promote information literacy or when peers assist one another in the development

of learning outcomes. Curriculum development in an online environment presents unique challenges to faculty to develop pedagogies that engage students. The assessment process is proving to be a useful tool by which faculty can evaluate the benefits of new instructional strategies in both online and face-to-face environments. Departments need to keep their assessment procedures simple enough to allow time to process the meaning of their assessment findings and implement meaningful changes to the curriculum and instructional strategies. We are learning to ensure the sustainability of meaningful assessment by weaving this work into the fabric of everyday faculty work and recognizing the value of this work in the tenure and promotion process. Faculty are beginning to experience professional benefits associated with effective assessment practices. These benefits include the publication of their work and conference presentations in the scholarship of teaching and learning, funding opportunities and grants related to curriculum enhancement (especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and improved student engagement and learning.

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