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As assessment work matures, campuses increasingly focus on how to develop structures and processes that facilitate the use of assessment findings and identify opportunities for improvement of curricula, teaching, and student learning.

Putting Assessment into Action: Evolving from a Culture of Assessment to a Culture of Improvement

Claudia J. Stanny

Efforts to develop a culture of assessment in higher education have been characterized as slow and challenging processes that have produced mixed results. Banta, Jones, and Black (2009) describe structures, processes, and resources that support sustainable and effective assessment activities for academic programs ranging from general education through graduate programs and learning in the co-curriculum. However, researchers have questioned whether faculty engagement with program-level assessment has produced significant changes in the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (AAC&U 2008, Banta 1996). More recently, researchers paint a rosier picture and describe examples of institutions that model effective assessment practices and produce benefits for student learning (Kuh et al. 2015).

Documenting the impact of assessment work presents a number of challenges. In the early stages of assessment, faculty may focus on how to improve the quality of assessment processes, increase the credibility of assessment data, or refine reporting structures to accurately capture and describe ongoing assessment work. An ongoing concern is that institutions only use assessment evidence to implement minor changes that represent “tweaking” around the edges instead of substantive, large-scale transformations of curriculum (Suskie 2015). When institutions do make changes to teaching or curriculum, they often fail follow up and evaluate whether the changes made a difference for student learning (Fulcher et al. 2014). However, two recent reviews describe assessment programs that are not only sustainable and employ high quality assessment methods, but also provide

evidence for tangible impacts on student learning (Kinzie et al. 2017; Kuh et al. 2015).

Roscoe (2017) proposes that higher education should devote more attention toward efforts to create a culture of improvement (Suskie 2015) in which assessment evidence informs ongoing faculty conversations about student learning, encourages the promotion of high-impact teaching practices, and guides the creation of improved curricular structures. Similarly, Suskie (2015) suggests that campus leaders should create processes that focus on defining and supporting the pursuit of academic quality across the institution (in both academic and support units) as part of institutional effectiveness.

Institutions face several challenges that impede development of a culture of improvement. Done well, meaningful assessment requires time, resources, and expertise. A common challenge arises when the costs of gathering assessment data and documenting assessment processes leave little time and few resources for faculty to reflect on their findings or implement changes to instruction or curriculum (Roscoe 2017). Faculty discussions of assessment results can get mired in debates about the reliability and validity of the data. The quest for perfect data can undermine progress toward the overarching goal to use assessment evidence to improve programs. When we encourage faculty to reflect on imperfect but actionable findings, they can identify areas where even small changes can produce benefits for student learning (Stanny, 2015; Suskie, 2009). Multiple small changes, implemented systematically over time, can produce substantive impacts on teaching and learning (Stanny, Gonzalez, and McGowan 2015). Moreover, large-scale changes to curriculum will not happen quickly, even if they are supported by psychometrically strong assessment findings. Substantive curriculum changes require time to plan. Faculty governance processes for the approval of even small curriculum changes require time and may be tied to annual updates to the academic catalog. Successful implementation also requires resources, including professional development for faculty to ensure that changes to courses and instructional strategies are implemented as intended.

Campuses that have embraced assessment and made progress toward developing a culture of improvement manifest “positive restlessness,” a persistent tendency to ask questions about the status quo, combined with a curiosity about alternative approaches (Kuh et al. 2005). “Restless” faculty are curious about new strategies that engage students and hold promise for better student learning. They are curious about whether the changes they make to their teaching or to the design of courses and curriculum produce improvements in student learning. Without the drive generated by positive restlessness, campuses might have difficulty overcoming structural challenges that encourage inertia, stymie efforts to revise curriculum, and create disincentives to experiment with novel approaches to teaching. Institutional leaders nurture positive restlessness when they provide

opportunities for professional development and resources for faculty who engage in effective assessment, reflect on assessment findings, and plan to implement changes.

The authors who contributed chapters to this issue describe structures and processes on their campuses that support assessment processes and engage faculty in reflective, meaningful conversations about student learning. Their work underscores the value of creating a time and place for faculty to engage in deep, meaningful conversations about student learning and effective teaching. The chapters illustrate how various campuses facilitate broad faculty discussions, either through large-scale campus initiatives or through the lens of assessment and revision of general education. Their work reflects the qualities required to promote assessment that matters for student learning and identifies factors that motivate change and produce tangible impacts on student learning (Kinzie, Hutchings, and Jankowski 2015). The authors describe processes that produce broad faculty engagement and integrate discussions of assessment evidence and student learning into faculty governance and day-to-day faculty work. The institutions make significant commitments to assessment. They create formal structures, including policies and procedures, and provide resources to support assessment work, professional development, and efforts to improve.

Lessons Learned for Engaging Faculty and Ensuring that Assessment Evidence Informs Efforts to Improve Curriculum and Student Learning

- Ensure broad faculty engagement in meaningful discussions of assessment findings and regular conversations about teaching practices.
- Create processes and strategies that make assessment practices and assessment findings visible.
- Develop assessment projects that ask questions faculty care about. Discussions of assessment findings create valued, intellectually engaging activities that center on student learning.
- Faculty should experience assessment activities as opportunities for their own learning and professional growth as teachers and assessment scholars.
- Engage students in the analysis and interpretation of assessment findings. The student voice can serve as a powerful motivator, encouraging students to take assessment tasks seriously and encouraging faculty to implement meaningful change to curriculum and teaching strategies.

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CLAUDIA J. STANNY is the director of the Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment and an associate professor of psychology at the University of West Florida.