



Association for the Assessment  
of Learning in Higher Education

# INTERSECTION

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# President's Letter

By Catherine Wehlburg



Catherine Wehlburg is President of the AALHE and Assistant Provost for Institutional Effectiveness at Texas Christian University. She can be reached at [c.wehlburg@tcu.edu](mailto:c.wehlburg@tcu.edu).

Greetings, assessment colleagues! Welcome to the winter edition of the AALHE Intersection.

The theme for this issue is faculty engagement and perspectives on assessment. I know that many of us wear faculty hats as well as our (quite lovely!) assessment hats. Unfortunately, when talking about faculty, I sometimes hear assessment professionals expressing some love of the “us” versus “them”. It should be understood that without faculty leading and fully participating in assessment, higher education may have data for accountability, but lack the critical data necessary for improvement in teaching and learning. We need our faculty to be a part of our work. There is no “us” or “them.” It’s just “us.”

We realize this need for collaboration, but it may be difficult at times to include faculty in assessment discussions and decisions. In addition to assessment work, faculty teach, advise students, lead campus and departmental committees, and often have vibrant research and creative activities that earn them critical professional recognition. And yet, we keep going back to the faculty to get them to “do” more assessment work. We have to find ways to change the paradigm. For those of us whose primary responsibilities include assessment and accreditation, we need to find ways to include faculty that provide them with leadership, but that do not pull them away from their other obligations. While there are no easy answers, these articles written by faculty and those working closely with them, may help to provide perspectives needed to address this challenge.

AALHE aims to provide you the support, the ideas, and the space to move assessment forward as a field. We have several new initiatives to support this goal. For example, I hope that you have had the opportunity to view the new website at [www.aalhe.org](http://www.aalhe.org). If you are a member of AALHE (and I hope that you are!), the new website has additional tools to encourage you to connect with other assessment professionals and to find resources easily. On the website you can find the archives of our past webinars and a searchable collection of slides and handouts from past AALHE conferences.

We have also created a new category of membership – Institutional Membership. This allows institutions to have either

# President's Letter

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five or 10 individuals who are members for one basic institutional cost. This new Institutional Membership includes the ability to post job openings, search member resumes, and register for events at often discounted rates.

AALHE has also worked to provide even better support for our graduate students. The annual Graduate Student Member rate has been reduced from \$90 to \$40. We hope this enables more graduate students to fully participate in AALHE.

You may have seen that AALHE has responded to the many inquiries of our members and made possible the purchase of AALHE mugs, t-shirts, and other things through <http://www.cafepress.com/aalhe>.

I am looking forward to seeing many of you at our June conference in Louisville, KY (<http://www.aalhe.org/mpage/2017Conference>)! For the first time, the AALHE conference will host pre-conference workshops prior to the official start of the 7th annual conference – these will be longer format sessions that will provide more in-depth information.

Thank you for all the work that you do for assessment and enjoy this issue of the AALHE Intersection!

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## Note From The Editor

By Jane Marie Souza



Jane Marie Souza,  
Editor-in-Chief  
Winter 2017 Edition

Late last fall, the call for papers went out for this winter edition of *Intersection*. The theme was announced as “faculty perspectives on assessment”. We were looking for articles focused on collaborative efforts with faculty, faculty leadership in assessment, or faculty perspectives on assessment and accreditation processes. The response was tremendous and yielded articles that touch upon all these areas. The articles in this edition collectively offer information on faculty rubric calibration activities, assessment as inquiry, suggestions for removing faculty barriers to assessment, and faculty experience with accreditation processes. The context ranges from university to community college settings. This edition also includes the results of a study conducted by Tasksteam related to faculty experience with assessment and concludes with another installment in our series of interviews with accreditors. This time we hear from a Senior Vice President at the New England Association of Schools and Colleges.

We would like to thank all the contributors to this edition. We hope their work informs you as well as inspires you to consider how you may contribute to future editions of *Intersection*.

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Editorial Board: David Eubanks, Lisa Mehlig, Gray Scott, Jane Marie Souza, and Josie Welsh

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# Calibration:

## Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

By Erin A. Crisp

### The calibration process

Assessment programs are similar across academic programs, accreditor requirements, and international structures. First, there are outcomes that students must master. Second, students are taught and participate in learning. Third, students are assessed and produce a demonstration of the knowledge or skill they have acquired (the demonstration of learning). Fourth, an evaluator compares that demonstration of learning with the pre-established outcome to determine its degree of acceptability. This simple process can become complicated at any one of a thousand points, but this article tackles one concern that occurs in the fourth step: the reliability of ratings.

What can be done to improve the likelihood that multiple evaluators will make similar judgements when comparing students' demonstrations of learning to pre-established goals and evaluation criteria? Suggested solutions include tuning (Lumina Foundation, 2014), calibration (Gunnell, Fowler & Colaizzi, 2016; Rhode Island Department of Education, 2011), interrater reliability process (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009, p. 244) or "consensus moderation" process (Bloxham & Price, 2013). These four terms are all variations of the one theme that for the purpose of this article, we will call calibration.

Regardless of the language used to describe it, the basic calibration process is the same. Several individuals read the same piece of student work, compare that work to a rubric or defined criteria, evaluate it, and share their results with one another, discussing discrepancies until consensus is reached. The process is often repeated with other samples of student work to help identify the features that differentiate various categorical levels of competence. The goal is that interrater reliability is improved, and the resulting data is therefore more useful for the evaluation and subsequent improvement of courses or programs. Calibration is the process of comparing several individuals' evaluations of student work for the purpose of establishing common thresholds for pre-determined levels of successful learning demonstration.

### The calibration purpose

There are several positive byproducts of calibration activities for faculty. These are provided anecdotally in the narrative feedback from faculty later in this article. The initiating goal, though, is improved reliability. In a recently published, experimental study, Australian postsecondary researchers found that a calibration workshop among accounting faculty members significantly reduced interrater reliability issues, although they noted that variability is still a concern. "While a 50% reduction in the variability indicates a large problem still remains, we contend that the process described in this paper delivers a significant improvement in the problem of grader variability" (O'Connell et al., 2016, p. 345). The 2016 publication represents the initial result. Further cycles of calibration are expected to increasingly improve interrater reliability (O'Connell et al, 2016).

# Calibration: Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

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An additional benefit of calibration, according to history faculty members at St. John's University, is that the process afforded faculty the opportunity to engage in meaningful assessment and work toward a culture of data use. Specifically their efforts were concerned with documenting the extent to which students were achieving learning goals and also to evaluate the effectiveness of an effort to increase student internships (Carey & Cooper, 2016). The tuning activity of the faculty members at St. John's moved the history department into a culture that values continuous improvement based on the use of student learning outcome data.

A final benefit is an increase in a shared understanding of what constitutes proficiency. When several or many different faculty members are assessing the same student demonstrations for the purpose of evaluating proficiency, it is important that those instructors are all operating from a shared understanding of the expectations for proficiency (Gunnell, Fowler & Colaizzi, 2016). This process of arriving at a shared understanding benefitted faculty instruction and the ability to provide specific student feedback.

Conversely, assessment is a socially constructed task between a teacher and a student, and will therefore be somewhat subjective. Higher reliability is not always the goal in assessment (e.g. raters can legitimately disagree about aesthetics). In such cases, calibration serves the purpose of creating a shared understanding of the variables to be assessed instead of achieving the goal of improved reliability (Gunnell, Fowler & Colaizzi, 2016). This case study in calibration addresses the common need of establishing fundamental thresholds to improve reliability.

## Our story

In the College of Adult and Professional Studies (CAPS) at our institution, full-time faculty members and administrative program administrators are primarily responsible for developing and revising online, undergraduate and graduate programs for adult learners. These programs are primarily delivered online, with some onsite cohorts who meet at regional sites. Courses are facilitated by industry experts who serve as adjunct faculty members. Adjunct faculty are expected to use the fully complete course curriculum developed by the CAPS full-time faculty members. Full-time faculty members teach, but they are also engaged in continuous development and improvement of course content and program curriculum.

After establishing general education outcomes for the entire college, subcommittees of the CAPS general education committee met to develop rubrics (borrowing heavily from AAC&U's VALUE rubrics) for the assessment of general education outcomes across all programs. Key faculty members who teach in each discipline were members of the subcommittees to ensure alignment between the rubrics and course-level assignments. The rubrics were developed to be assignment agnostic. They are tightly aligned with the general education outcomes but do not contain assignment specific criteria. They can therefore be applied across a variety of assignments in the program. At the assignment level, faculty may choose to assess assignment-specific criteria in addition to the general education criteria being assessed.

## Calibration:

# Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

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After several iterations of rubric development, key general education full-time faculty members engaged in a calibration exercise to replicate with the faculty members they each lead. The associate dean describes the need for the calibration as follows:

Without a specific rubric orientation and training event for your raters, you'll be investing in a substantial amount of academic capacity with very little hope of value-adding return. Raters must agree in principle on the skills, responsibilities, and integrations that should be resident in each signature assessment according to the rubric along with its gradations. With this in place, the assessment data becomes extremely valuable and useful (F. Ponce, personal communication, November 14, 2016).

One participant describes the process as follows:

In a recent program assessment, three faculty persons reviewed a single student paper from an online course. The aim of this exercise sought to gain perspective on how each of these would grade student work based upon a program learning outcome. The grading perspectives of the three faculty varied in their assessment of the quality of the student work, and how closely the student work accomplished the Key Assessment Rubric. The challenges demonstrated in this exercise created a platform to later discuss the variations as a group. The follow up conversation allowed each of the three to articulate their rationale behind their assessment of the student work in relation to the program learning outcome. The value of the follow up conversation helped each person consider the perspectives of others and evaluate their assessment. This fostered positive synergy and expanded thoughtfulness in their rating process. An exercise like this proved to be helpful in more closely aligned, yet independent inter-rater reliability (P. Garverick, personal communication, November 12th, 2016).

Finally, a third faculty member offers both some affirming feedback for the experience and also some ideas for continued growth. He first addresses the structure of our college that relies primarily on adjunct faculty members to deliver instruction. He states that, "adjuncts are not institutional insiders with the creation and deployment of rubrics for assessment. Therefore, many variations in communication and interpretation open up even with a very clear rubric" (B. Bruehler, personal communication, November 11th, 2016). Furthermore, he rightly reminds us that because our adjunct instructors are often familiar with other institutions, they also bring that outside context into our culture of assessment. Dr. Bruehler also addresses the sometimes nuanced differences between levels established for certain criteria (personal communication, November 11th, 2016). There is a need for authentic examples (i.e. anchor documents) to show the differences between the levels on our four point rubric.

# Calibration: Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

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Overall, the calibration exercise resulted in a few minor adjustments to the rubric in question. These adjustments had more to do with consistent use of language and were less concerned with adding new clarifications. For example, instead of pronouns like “more” or “sufficient,” raters suggested numeric qualifiers (i.e. > two). Also, consistent formatting features were noted as essential (i.e. always use 4 criteria, list them from highest to lowest, left to right) The general consensus seemed to be that additional verbiage in the rubric sometimes resulted in greater opportunity for misinterpretation. Calibration seemed, to the group, to be more valuable than verbose criteria.

After our calibration protocol work session, one faculty member remarked that this 1.5 hour exercise was more beneficial than the entire day of assessment related professional development he had experienced the year before. Through conversations with his colleagues, he was better able to envision what was expected from students, and he felt better prepared to provide program evaluation data related to student learning outcomes.

There are several calibration protocols published by accrediting organizations, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, and other educational organizations. Increased time spent discussing results and repeating the calibration process will generally lead to more reliable scoring, but even a one to two hour calibration process, as was modeled with these three faculty, will yield positive results. The process that was followed is detailed in Appendix A.

## Appendix A

### 5.1 PURPOSE OF CALIBRATION

When scoring is well-calibrated and rubrics are well-written, a piece of student work receives the same score regardless of who scores it. The purpose of calibration is to increase inter-rater reliability. All rubrics are subject to interpretation, regardless of the level of detail provided. In fact, some research suggests that calibration training with holistic rubrics is more effective than the use of detailed, analytic rubrics (Bloxham, den-Outer, Hudson & Price, 2016).

### 5.2 PROCESS OF CALIBRATION

The following protocol is meant to be used with a group of faculty members who are responsible for assessing student work in a particular discipline. The protocol can be used across disciplines and levels, and faculty who experience the protocol should be able to implement it with other faculty who are also responsible for scoring key assessments.

## Calibration:

# Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

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The calibration facilitators should plan a 2-3 hour meeting, virtually or face-to-face, to lead a group of raters through the calibration protocol. Each person in the group will need the following materials:

- The student assignment or task
  - The assignment rubric or outcome rubric
  - Student work samples (try to use a proficient, medium and lower example)
  - Score sheets (1 per sample)
  - Score sheet for recorder
- Process
    1. The facilitator reviews this protocol process with the group and describes the context of the task.
    2. Examination: Group members silently examine the prompt (including any associated texts or graphics), student work samples, the rubric (paying particular attention to the differences in performance descriptors for each level), and the score sheet but assess nothing.
    3. Clarifying questions: Group members ask clarifying questions about the materials and process.
    4. Rubric Clarification: If it didn't come up during questioning, facilitator briefly describes rubric categories so that everyone understands what attributes of the work each criteria is intended to address.
    5. Read and score:
      - a) Scorers independently and silently read all (usually 3) samples of student work.
        - i. Note words and phrases from the rubric's performance level descriptions that best describe the qualities of the work; use the scoring sheet.
        - ii. Make notes on the student work samples to explain and justify the scores.
        - iii. There won't always be an example of every score point within a given set of student work samples. (Ex: You may not have any sample that is particularly strong or weak in each criteria on the rubric.)
      - b) Each scorer records his/her ratings on score sheets and passes completed score sheets to the facilitator.

NOTE: The scoring rubric and evidence in the student work should always be the basis for the score. Therefore, it shouldn't matter whether the student is a freshman or senior, previously strong or weak student.
      - c) Score sharing: The recorder collects scores from each group member, completes the group's score sheet and projects it or shares it on chart paper for the whole group to observe.

# Calibration: Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

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6. Discussion:

- a) Facilitator: Consider where the differences in the scores occurred and why people scored differently for each rubric area – particularly the highest and lowest scores.
- b) Group members explain and justify scores by pointing to specific language in the rubric and evidence in the student work.
- c) Discuss each piece of student work, resolving issues centered on either the meaning of the rubric or the merit and validity of the evidence in the student work until consensus is reached.

7. Debrief: Discuss the following questions after calibration

What did we notice about scoring student work and using the rubric?

What would be the next steps for building assessment inter-rater reliability among faculty?

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## Calibration:

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# Using the Inquiry Process to Promote Faculty Engagement in Assessment

By Elizabeth E. Smith

## Introduction

While faculty are critical to collecting, analyzing, and using student learning assessment data, determining how best to engage them is an ongoing concern for assessment professionals. In the past, researchers have suggested many solutions, including connecting the work of assessment to the intellectual curiosity typically displayed by faculty for their content areas (Cain & Hutchings, 2015). Applying an inquiry-based approach to faculty engagement in assessment may help faculty better see the connection between assessment activities and their classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to consider the application of the inquiry process to the assessment process as a method for promoting faculty engagement.

## What challenges can prevent faculty engagement in assessment?

Cain and Hutchings (2015) describe a number of factors that may prevent faculty engagement in the work of assessment. First, faculty, though trained as experts in their content areas, may feel that they lack expertise in assessment. Second, faculty may already feel overburdened with administrative responsibilities on top of their teaching, research, and other forms of service (as applicable within their institutional context). Additionally, faculty may not see the benefits of their involvement in assessment work because it may not be considered in promotion and tenure and because results may not be used to improve student learning (Banta & Blach, 2011). Resistance to participation in assessment activities may also stem from feelings of resentment toward the role of assessment in accountability (Haviland, Turley, & Shin, 2011). To combat these challenges, assessment professionals and researchers have suggested connecting assessment work to faculty members' "dedication to inquiry" but have not yet provided descriptions of what that might look like (Cain & Hutchings, 2015, p. 104).

## What is inquiry?

Within the context of education, inquiry—sometimes called learning by doing, active learning, or learner-centered learning—gives students opportunities to investigate topics that interest them (Dewey, 1933; Kember, 1997; Spronken-Smith, 2007). With roots in constructivist learning, inquiry can be defined as "a form of active learning that emphasizes questioning, data analysis, and critical thinking" (Bell, Smetana, Binns, 2005, p. 30). Dewey championed the inclusion of inquiry in science standards in the early 20th century after his time as a science teacher when he noticed that students were too dependent on rote memorization and not engaged in scientific discovery (Dewey, 1916). Today, inquiry is included in the Next Generation Science Standards (adopted by 16 states thus far) and is recommended as a teaching strategy by the National Science Teachers Association (Academic Benchmarks, 2015; National Science Teachers Association, n.d.). While four types of inquiry exist with scaffolded roles for learners in each, this paper focuses on open inquiry, in which learners formulate questions, collect and analyze data, and make recommendations (Banchi & Bell, 2008).

# Using the Inquiry Process to Promote Faculty Engagement in Assessment

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## Why apply an inquiry approach to assessment?

Inquiry as a method for learning appeals to intellectual curiosity and inquisitiveness, giving learners opportunities to investigate questions that interest them and devise methods for collecting and analyzing data to answer their questions. Whether faculty are primarily research-oriented or teaching-orientated (or a combination of both), they use inquiry frequently in their work. Researchers pose and investigate research questions based on what is unknown, typically determining what they want to study and designing their own methods. Instructors also conduct frequent inquiry, more commonly known as formative assessment, constantly adjusting their teaching styles, classroom environments, assignments, and course content based on student feedback. Because these types of inquiry are natural to faculty members within the contexts of their disciplines, extending inquiry to assessment work could engage faculty more deeply and authentically than other methods do.

## How might the inquiry process be applied to assessment?

While assessment cycles are unique to each institution, Jankowski (2013) provides an iterative assessment cycle that comprises five steps commonly used by institutions: create student learning outcomes, select measures, gather data, analyze data, and use the data to improve. Typically, assessment activities begin with determining goals, outcomes, or objectives. In best practice, this is a collaborative, consensus-building process that takes time and a deep consideration of what an institution or program expects students to learn (Allen, 2004). Next, assessment methods are selected to determine how learning will be measured. Data to measure student learning is gathered and then analyzed. Finally, a plan is created for using the data to improve student learning. Closing the loop occurs when assessment data are used to improve student learning, a step mastered by very few institutions (Banta & Blauch, 2011).

Justice, Rice, Cuneo, Warry, Inglis, Miller, and Sammon (2007) developed a model of the inquiry process based on their research of inquiry courses in higher education, identifying eight steps in an iterative inquiry process (see Figure 1 next page).



# Using the Inquiry Process to Promote Faculty Engagement in Assessment

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faculty may be frustrated to have extra duties (as anyone would) and authentic engagement is unlikely.

Engaging a topic and developing a basic knowledge (step two of the inquiry process) implies that faculty need a basic understanding of assessment processes at the institution before they can partake in deeper exploration. Establishing a basic understanding of assessment processes might take place during assessment days or all-faculty workshops in which all faculty learn about the assessment cycle employed by the institution, the types of institutional and program-level data collected, and how they are used. Faculty who are familiar with classroom assessment can relate how they use formative and summative assessment to institutional efforts to measure student learning. In this step, the role of assessment professionals is two-fold: they should communicate the value of the faculty involvement in the assessment process and how using assessment can improve student learning (Ikenberry & Kuh, 2015).

Up to this point, the inquiry process described here mirrors what may already occur at institutions that have made concerted efforts to engage faculty in assessment. Many campuses invest in faculty development efforts by providing workshops that highlight formative and summative assessment techniques as well as opportunities for faculty to learn more about institutional assessment efforts. However, the inquiry method being described here takes this opening discussion as a starting point and moves forward in a deliberate process to engage faculty in conducting their own assessment inquiry, involving faculty beyond workshops.

After faculty have a basic understanding of program and institutional assessment efforts, they are ready to develop a question to guide their inquiry. This process may be a collaborative one that involves entire programs or departments or may lead to an individual investigation of something that interests one faculty member. This step is an opportunity for faculty to take charge of their learning by investigating questions that intrigue them. What do they wonder about their program? What patterns have they seen about which they wish they knew more? Are students struggling to find jobs after graduation or internships during their program? What do students, graduates, or employers think about their program or institution?

Such questions generate opportunities for assessment professionals to connect with faculty over their appreciation for research. Faculty who conduct research may already be adept at creating specific, measurable research questions, experience that is transferable to creating a question to guide their inquiry in assessment. Justice et al. (2007) suggest that good questions to guide inquiry are interesting, analytical, problematic, complex, important, genuine, and researchable. Faculty can develop any question that interests them. Giving faculty the opportunity to investigate topics that interest them is key to applying concepts of inquiry to assessment. If assessment professionals or other administrators create the questions for faculty to investigate, they have abandoned an opportunity for faculty voice and buy-in and have voided the process of open inquiry (Banchi & Bell, 2008).

# Using the Inquiry Process to Promote Faculty Engagement in Assessment

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After developing a question, faculty anticipate possible answers and determine relevant information. Faculty should consider what is known and what is unknown related to their question to determine their next steps. This may involve greater support from assessment professionals or institutional research or other offices on campus who have access to student learning data and other sources of information. Perhaps faculty are interested in an institution-wide question that may require the assistance of multiple offices or perhaps they are interested in a phenomenon they have noted within their own program. Either way, assessment professionals can support faculty by connecting them to resources on campus as needed.

Assessment professionals can also use their expertise to support faculty using inquiry in assessment as they identify resources, gather data, assess data, weigh evidence, and synthesize data. While faculty may have reached a basic understanding of the process for program and institutional assessment, they may need assistance to create a plan for gathering and analyzing data related to their questions. Assessment professionals have knowledge about a variety of ways to measure student learning and can also be helpful by reaching out to colleagues at other institutions for ideas.

Once faculty have reviewed findings and are ready to share them, communicating new understandings should be done in their voice, not from the perspective of assessment professionals or other administrators. Faculty should decide with whom to share the information and what should be done with it, which could take a variety of forms including discussing findings in a faculty meeting, writing a white paper about their findings to share with the campus, or presenting their findings at a campus-wide assessment fair. Assessment professionals may be particularly helpful during this step by providing faculty access to data visualization and other tools used in assessment offices to communicate new findings. Assessment professionals may also have greater access to campus administrators (depending on the institutional hierarchy) and may be able to help faculty members disseminate their findings to the appropriate groups.

Evaluating success is seen as the final step in the inquiry process, but self-reflection and self-evaluation should be ongoing throughout the cycle so that both faculty and assessment professionals understand and evaluate their roles in the process, reflecting on how it can be improved in the future. Assessment professionals can encourage reflection and evaluation among faculty by engaging them in conversation about their experiences, providing opportunities to reflect through discussion. The final step of the cycle evaluates the success of answering the question developed by faculty, but the process is iterative (like the assessment cycle) such that the evaluation may lead to additional questions and the process of inquiry can begin again.

# Using the Inquiry Process to Promote Faculty Engagement in Assessment

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## Conclusion

The inquiry process, like the assessment cycle, appears to be a neat, clean procedure with steps that occur in a particular order. However, in practice, both the assessment cycle and the inquiry process may occur in different orders or at a variety of paces. Utilizing the inquiry process to engage faculty in assessment work encourages faculty to view the work as research and an opportunity to investigate the success of their students. Assessment professionals can use the inquiry process as a tool for promoting authentic faculty engagement in assessment.

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# Using the Inquiry Process to Promote Faculty Engagement in Assessment

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# Faculty Perspectives On Assessment

By Lee Ann Smith

Benedictine University enjoys a great reputation for science education and boasts strong graduate school placement of its pre-professional students. Our alumni share publicly how well Benedictine prepared them for graduate school and employment. However, requirements for assessment data often squelch our enthusiasm as we find ourselves bogged down with accreditation demands and assessment jargon. Professors in the hard sciences would benefit greatly from an assessment process that capitalized on experimental design and procedure familiar to researchers in the physical and life sciences. As faculty members, we have a large knowledge base of domain-specific facts and theories that we excitedly impart to our students. When students perform poorly, we analyze answers to exams as a correction measure to improve our own teaching. However, we rarely share with our colleagues what we found or what we are doing to improve learning. We may include our work within our promotion portfolios, but these data are not routinely collected to evaluate a program or curriculum.

Professors would benefit from an assessment process that incorporates a theoretical framework from their specific fields. For example, undergraduate biology programs are beginning to embrace the Vision and Change guidelines<sup>1</sup> which require connections across courses, use of real data, and inquiry-based learning. A standardized test associated with the expectations of the core biology concepts has been designed for assessment; however, most of the questions involve concepts based on factual information (i.e. concept inventories) with some higher level cognitive questions. A number of studies indicate that pedagogical techniques recommended by Vision and Change not only improve retention of information but also hone the skills and competencies necessary for successful careers (i.e. lab research in the sciences or leadership skills in business). Measurement tools designed to assess these core competencies have not yet been created. Construction of assessment processes that evaluate how a course or program accomplishes one of the core competencies, such as integration of interdisciplinary of science and society, will require faculty development in the area of interdisciplinary assessment. With more complex evaluations necessary for assessment, we need education and assistance to support our endeavors to assess our student learning objectives.

At our core, faculty recognize that we should be assessing our courses, curricula, and programs. Assessment terminology creates a bottleneck as we evaluate student performance. To remove this barrier, our institution adopted a framework in which faculty were asked to discuss and share different ways in which we are already doing assessment in courses or within programs. As accreditation approached, our institution systematized assessment by assigning a faculty member to be the assessor representative. The assessor representative built an assessment plan in conjunction with the faculty members in the program. Faculty were encouraged to continue to collect data as before, but were strongly encouraged to provide the data and analyses to the program assessor for inclusion in the yearly report. A next step that we should institutionalize in order to create a continuous, effective, and comprehensive assessment process, would be to include assessment in annual portfolios and those for faculty promotion.

# Faculty Perspectives On Assessment

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Along with the data and analyses, our faculty share a narrative explaining how the data support effective teaching and their role in the student learning objectives for the course and program. We are currently required to demonstrate teaching effectiveness through indirect measures, such as student surveys and peer evaluations. Direct measurements of student learning should also be included as important evidence of successful teaching. Faculty will better appreciate how the courses that they teach fit in the curriculum and what the student learning objectives are for the course.

With faculty sharing a larger ownership of assessment, the institution needs to ensure we have support for all of our questions. There needs to be a dedicated, well-staffed office that will create and support workshops, seminars, conferences, and individualized help sessions for the faculty to learn more about assessment and how we can seamlessly incorporate it into our courses. Newer formats in teaching are being suggested, such as online, blended formats, and shorter number of weeks in a term. We need the tools to be able to evaluate these changes. In the end, we all want the data to support what we are doing well and know that our data can be used to bring changes if needed. I am encouraged that assessment of our students' learning and progress will become the norm in higher education and that faculty will be partners in the process.

1 AAAS (2011). Vision and Change in Undergraduate Biology Education: A Call to Action. Washington, DC: AAAS. Available online at <http://visionandchange.org/finalreport/>.

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# Talking Ourselves Into It: Faculty Perspectives of Student Learning Outcome (SLO) Assessment, Learning, and Equity

By Lillian E. Marrujo-Duck

## Introduction

In October of 2015, national leaders in outcomes assessment announced that seven years of research on student learning outcomes (SLO) assessment in higher education yielded only “embarrassingly modest” results (Kuh, Ikenberry, Jankowski, Cain, Ewell, Hutchings & Kinzie, 2015, p. 1). After decades of outcomes-driven changes to the delivery of education, the desired evidence of learning improvements remained lacking. Still, leaders expressed confidence that SLO assessment worked, provided that institutional leadership supported it as a collaborative, faculty-driven process; recognized it as action research embedded in local practices of teaching and learning; and used data to inform changes to the delivery of instruction.

Meanwhile, Bensimon (2005) advocated for the use of SLO assessment to drive educational improvements specifically aimed at closing achievement gaps. As a result, in California, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) included in its 2014 Accreditation Standards a requirement to disaggregate SLO assessment data at the program and course level (ACCJC, 2014). In response, colleges in California attempted to find ways to record and disaggregate SLO assessment data by student group and use the results effectively. These efforts required that faculty members engage in a change process aimed at improving teaching and learning in ways that created greater equity in higher education.

This study explores the beliefs of faculty at California community colleges about the potential effectiveness of the use of SLO assessment to improve learning and close achievement gaps.

## Literature Review

Fullan (2006, 2008) provides a framework for effective change that addresses a common critique of education reform, namely that too often the change, while well-intentioned, never makes it into the classroom in a manner that is effective. In this framework, successful change includes intentional reflection on local data to increase faculty capacity to challenge assumptions about teaching and learning. SLO assessment fits Fullan's definition of a promising reform with potential to impact instructional practice.

Bensimon (2005) further theorized that faculty members' beliefs about student learning, specifically beliefs about gaps in the performance of different student groups, affect their responses to assessment data. Bensimon and Malcolm (2012) hoped that faculty participating in action research could develop a greater awareness of the inequalities created by local practice, including their own, and learn to view the problem as one for which they could help find solutions.

A review of empirical studies on the implementation and effectiveness of SLO assessment (MacDonald, Williams, Lazowski, Horst, & Barron, 2014; McClellan, 2016; Turner, 2015) reinforced

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the findings of Kuh et al. (2015) that both more evidence and more faculty engagement is needed. A similar search of the empirical literature for faculty beliefs and attitudes about the use of SLO assessment to close achievement gaps revealed little research. However, examples of faculty practitioners gaining awareness of and acting upon inequities created by local practice are found in a collection of research edited by Bensimon and Malcom (2012).

## Methods

This article summarizes a portion of a larger study on the experiences of faculty engaged in the SLO assessment process with the intention of using it to improve their teaching practice, course design, and program development. A sample of eight faculty members from the Social and Behavioral Sciences and five institutional SLO coordinators was selected from community colleges across California. The participant sample was well-educated (almost 50% held Ph.D.s), 77% white, 68% female, with an average age of 46 and an average of 13 years of full-time teaching experience. Two filters were used to purposely identify participants who were intentionally engaged in SLO assessment. First, SLO coordinators were assumed to be intentionally engaged in SLO assessment by virtue of their institutional role. These SLO coordinators nominated faculty members that they identified as engaged SLO assessment practitioners. In addition, all SLO coordinator and faculty participants, acknowledged that they intentionally used SLO assessment to improve their practice with the goal of improving learning. Participants came from a total of 10 colleges that represented six of the seven peer groups established by the California State Chancellor's Office (CCCCO, 2012) plus one college not included in the peer groupings. Faculty members and SLO coordinators participated in hour-long semi-structured interviews about their experiences with SLO assessment. Faculty and SLO coordinator interview data were analyzed for common, emerging themes to address the research question, "How does engagement in SLO assessment affect faculty beliefs and perceptions about teaching and learning?" To encourage candid responses during the interviews and protect confidentiality when reporting responses, aliases have been used for all participants.

# Talking Ourselves Into It: Faculty Perspectives of Student Learning Outcome (SLO)

## Assessment, Learning, and Equity

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### Findings

This experienced and engaged group of participants revealed that SLO assessment works to improve teaching practices. However, they were reluctant to assert that SLO assessment improved learning. While they identified larger societal circumstances as contributing to student learning results, they were open to further discussions about how to use SLO assessment to address achievement gaps. The findings are divided into sections that focus on specific areas of belief about teaching and learning. Better understanding these beliefs, shared by a group of engaged and experienced faculty members, may inform institutional efforts to further improve teaching practices while at the same time focusing intentional dialogue on effective ways to translate improved teaching methods into improved learning for students.

#### Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) Assessment Improved Teaching Practice through Dialogue

As a logic model for driving improvements to the teaching practice and aligning faculty practices with research-informed best practices in a particular field of study, SLO assessment worked (Kuh, 2008). Athena's experiences with SLO assessment supported this logic model; she stated, "...the programs here on campus that are [talking about SLO assessment] are the ones we see growth in... the struggling departments on campus are the ones where people are just not talking to each other about how they can focus and direct students in a positive manner." Summer, concurred that, "...focusing on outcomes assessment ... really takes your awareness of the process and the goals of teaching to a new level."

SLO assessment kept the attention on the student learning environment. Richard noted that, as a result of SLO assessment, he had made changes to his teaching to facilitate student needs. He shortened lectures, created collaborative assignments, and focused on topics more relevant to students. "This tool, student learning outcome assessment, allows [a student-centered focus] to occur. I'm not sure what else does." Starbuck used SLO assessment to identify student reading challenges and incorporated strategies into her class activities, saying, "I have to teach them ... and I have to do it step by step." Mary agreed, "SLO assessment helps to create an environment where you're student-centered... You can learn a lot about how to teach effectively." Furthermore, participants noted that SLO assessment enhanced course and program planning with Stephen stating that it's, "...the voice of the student actually showing up in your program evaluation."

# Talking Ourselves Into It: Faculty Perspectives of Student Learning Outcome (SLO) Assessment, Learning, and Equity

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## SLO Assessment Did Not Improve Student Learning

Several circumstances informed participants' reluctance to declare that SLO assessment had improved student learning. Participants identified a lack of empirical data that learning had improved. John served on an assessment review committee and did not see evidence of improvements in student learning. For Summer, the data was, "not necessarily anything statistically significant." Michael insisted, "The answer is no. Put that down."

SLO assessment did identify gaps in student knowledge, including a lack of preparedness for college-level coursework that could not be overcome in one semester. For Laura, "if students don't have those ...basic skills, they are not going to be able to meet any of those outcomes for my class." Summer shared similar sentiments, stating, "[Not] every student coming into my classroom was starting out at the same place. A lot of them have deficiencies that could be traced all the way through their education."

## A Reluctance to Assume Responsibility for Student Outcomes in the Classroom

While participants accepted responsibility for improved teaching practices, they were reluctant to assume responsibility for student learning. The faculty participants noted that the type of learning they valued, such as critical thinking, advanced reading skills, and writing fluency, required more than one semester to develop. They also indicated that factors outside of class also influenced student learning, especially presenting a challenge in general education classes with wide ranges of student preparation. Laura stated, "If the college is sending the message that coming in with college-level reading and writing expectations is optional, then ... I either have to remediate what I expect in my ...class, or I have to teach those skills..." Laura indicated that what she really needed was for "students to come in with a college level" in reading, writing, and critical thinking. Without them, she indicated that her assessment efforts were less useful, saying, "If students don't have those three basic skills, they are not going to be able to meet any of those outcomes for my class if your outcomes are set at a college level."

Toni summed up the participants' overall doubts, saying "They're placing too much burden on faculty to solve a lot of ills ...There's homelessness. There are health issues. We're finally going to get a health center, I think, next year. It's just the problems are enormous."

## Location of Achievement Gaps

While faculty participants described teaching practice improvements that resulted from dialogue about SLO assessment and reluctance to claim that it improved learning, they acknowledged they faced an additional challenge, namely that not all students were

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equally successful in their classes. Participants were all familiar with information about achievement gaps in success rates between student groups on their campuses. As Bensimon theorized, the participants did not at first assume responsibility for creating these gaps. Instead, they placed the cause of achievement gaps outside their classrooms. For example, John stated, "The changes in our overall college [success] rate are swamped by factors that have nothing to do with what faculty do... We have a much greater number of first-time-in-family college goers... the percent of students who are at college level in both English and math when they enter is only ten percent now." Toni agreed, "A lot of the stuff that affects student learning has nothing to do with SLOs. It has to do with stuff outside of campus -- life."

### Disaggregating Student Learning Outcomes Assessments Data

Responses to direct questions about the use of disaggregated SLO assessment data were the most variant. While most participants initially expressed strong doubts about the need for or importance of disaggregating SLO assessment data, participants' answers also evolved. A few felt that disaggregation of SLO assessment data could be a useful tool, but only if the data was used alongside a sophisticated conversation about the meaning of the data – the type of conversation that was not yet happening at their institutions.

For John the assumption that instructional changes could narrow achievement gaps had the potential to trivialize other causes of low student achievement. The entrenched and complicated difficulties associated with poverty were overlooked and, as Toni at first pointed out, this placed "too much burden on faculty to solve a lot of ills" beyond their means. But as the conversation continued, Toni's answer evolved. Faculty who "have been at it for 30, 40 years, they get it.... [For] new, young faculty... this could be transformational..."

Several other participants responded in a similar fashion. When asked about the potential of his teaching methods contributing to achievement gaps in his own classrooms, Michael's first response was graphically negative, "If I found out that there were demographic differences in achievements, I would be abhorrently throwing up in the bathroom... I would have to really rethink who I am." With additional consideration, Michael's response evolved to, "Well, maybe I'll take that back... maybe I'm fumbling around... You know if we find those kinds of things happening ... you have to pay attention to it." Laura too felt, "uncomfortable if this is where it's headed." But she also advocated for the investigation of "institutionalized discrimination and privilege."

Other participants were immediately open to the idea of disaggregating SLO assessment data. Mary instantly began considering changes she could effect. Starbuck answered "definitely" yes. Richard was already doing things, "slightly differently... It really has impacted

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me.” Stephen, CJ, and Athena directly connected disaggregated SLO assessment data to solving achievement gaps. Stephen said, “It can really open your eyes to something you had no idea was an issue for you.”

## Recommendations

This study found a contradiction between participant reluctance to assume responsibility for student learning and both demonstrated teaching improvement in response to SLO assessment and willingness to explore the potential of disaggregated SLO assessment to close achievement gaps. This contradiction indicates a need for further dialogue about the purpose of SLO assessment and sustained professional development in assessment, instruction, and achievement gaps. Participants shared years of teaching experience and were engaged in SLO assessment that led to improvements in teaching methods, yet they revealed a lack of fluency in how to improve learning and close achievement gaps. Summer pointed out that at the institutional level, “There are just so many layers of dysfunction that keep people from participating in the process.” While SLO coordinators described witnessing a growing acceptance of and use of SLO assessment on each of their campuses that amounted to a cultural shift, all participants stated a desire for greater institutional engagement. SLO assessment and the disaggregation of these data provide the opportunity to have those constructive conversations and facilitate a trajectory of change regarding equity similar to the cultural shift already seen in the use of SLO assessment. Athena was confident that it could be done, saying, “From my intellectual standpoint, it’s hard to lose faith in the belief that if you identify a problem and you put a bunch of creative, smart people toward trying to solve that problem, that you are not going to move the needle....”

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# How Faculty Experience with Assessment Relates to Views, Values, and Practice

By Matthew Gulliford, Lauren O'Brien, Michelle Curtis, and Courtney Peagler

This past summer, Taskstream conducted extensive research into the "state of affairs" of assessment in higher education. Through focus groups, interviews, and an online survey, the research explored perceptions among faculty, institutional leaders, and assessment professionals about various assessment topics, such as the nature and perceived value of assessment, terminology in the field, and technology to support the work.

In this article, we will discuss findings from our national online survey, which received over 1,000 responses from institutional leaders, assessment professionals, and faculty members at institutions of all types and sizes across the country. The survey was restricted to full-time employees at higher education institutions in the United States and distributed via email and in a newsletter from the online news service Education Dive.

A total of 359 faculty members responded to the survey, the majority of which came from public institutions (58%) and private not-for-profits (36%), with a small percentage from the private for-profit sector (6%). In terms of discipline/area, a large proportion of respondents were from schools of education (47%) and arts and sciences (26%), while the remainder were associated with business, health sciences, general studies, IT, nursing, and social work departments.

With this article, we aim to provide insight into how faculty perceptions of their personal experience with assessment relate to their involvement in assessment, views on its importance, and their specific needs for professional development. For this examination, we focused on a comparison of responses from faculty who rated their personal level of experience with assessment as "beginner/intermediate" (55% of the faculty respondents) to those from faculty who rated their experience with assessment as "advanced" (45% of the faculty respondents).

## Results

### Involvement in assessment

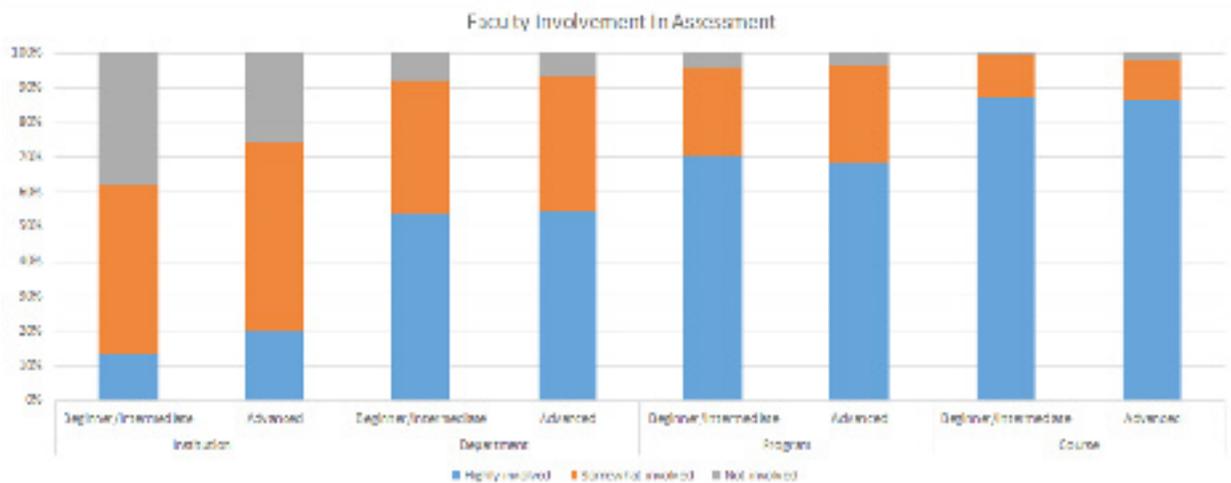
Faculty members who identified their personal level of experience with assessment as beginner/intermediate indicated that they are highly involved in course (87%) and program (70%) level assessment at their institutions. Likewise, faculty members who rated themselves as advanced indicated that they are highly involved in course and program level assessment at their institutions (87% and 69%, respectively). At the department level, beginner/intermediate and advanced level faculty also indicated comparable levels of involvement in assessment, with both groups rating their participation at 54%.

The most notable difference between the two groups appeared in their involvement at the institutional level: 38% of beginner/intermediate faculty members said they are not involved in assessment at the institutional level, compared to 26% of faculty who rated themselves advanced in assessment. Only 13% of beginner/intermediate faculty said they

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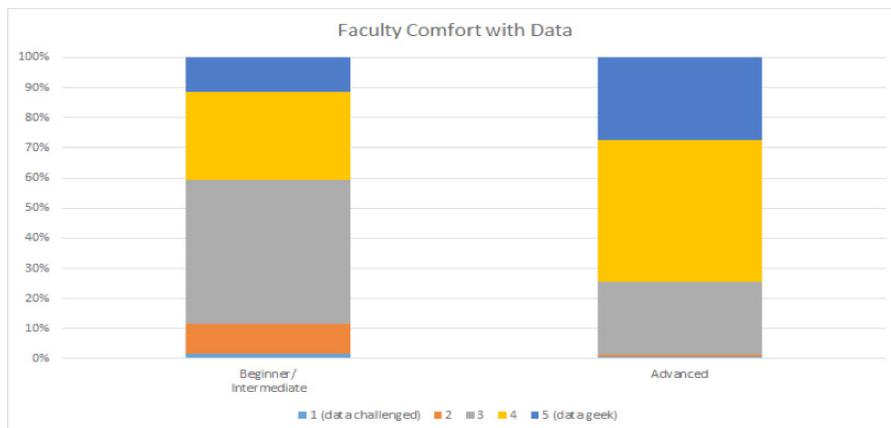
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are highly involved in assessment at the institutional level, compared to 20% of faculty who rated themselves advanced in assessment.



## Comfort with data & the use of technology to support assessment

When faculty respondents rated their comfort with data (based on a scale of 1-5 where 1=data challenged and 5=data geek) those who identified themselves as advanced in assessment were more likely to view themselves as "data geeks." Nearly 28% of this group rated their comfort with data at this level in comparison to 12% of faculty who identified themselves as having beginner/intermediate levels of experience in assessment. Further, approximately 74% of the advanced group selected either a "4" or "5" on the scale, showing a high degree of comfort with data, compared to 41% of the beginner/intermediate group.



# How Faculty Experience with Assessment Relates to Views, Values, and Practice

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When asked to rate how important it is for their institution to support assessment efforts with technology, nearly all of the respondents across both groups indicated that they think it is either “somewhat important” or “very important” for their institution to support assessment with technology (98% of the beginner/intermediate group and 99% of the advanced group). A higher percentage of the advanced group indicated that technology to support assessment is very important than those in the beginner/intermediate group (85% compared to 77%, respectively).

## Institutional assessment maturity and the importance of assessment

When faculty were asked to rate their institution’s level of assessment “maturity”, 83% of the beginner/intermediate group said their institutions were also at a beginner/intermediate level, and only 16% believed their institutions were advanced when it came to assessment. However, 45% of faculty members who rated themselves as advanced in assessment also rated their institution as advanced. In other words, both groups were more inclined to rate their institution at the same level they rated their own personal experience with assessment.

When it comes to their personal opinion on the value of assessment for an institution, faculty respondents with an advanced level of experience with assessment were more likely to indicate that it is important for an institution (92%) in comparison to those at the beginner/intermediate level. Likewise, when asked how important assessment is to the future of higher education, the advanced group of faculty members were more likely to indicate it is very important (88%) in comparison to those at the beginner/intermediate level (80%).

## Professional development interests/needs

Respondents were asked to what extent they felt they needed, or were interested in, professional development (PD) in the following areas: rubric design; data analysis and interpretation; scoring calibration/norming; developing/selecting assessment assignments; assessment terminology; documenting assessment results and reports; the benefits of assessment; inter-rater reliability; and curriculum mapping. These topics were rated on a 1-5 scale (1=not at all interested to 5=very interested).

The top two topics of most interest/need for beginner/intermediate faculty — as indicated by a “4” or “5” on the scale — are: 1) developing/selecting assessment assignments and 2) rubric design. Curriculum mapping and data analysis and interpretation tied for third most interesting to this group. The top three topics for advanced faculty are somewhat different: 1) documenting assessment results and reports, 2) inter-rater reliability, and 3) curriculum mapping.

# How Faculty Experience with Assessment Relates to Views, Values, and Practice

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Although both groups rated curriculum mapping as the third most interesting topic for PD, a larger percentage (36%) of those who identified themselves as advanced showed little to no interest in the topic — as indicated by a “1” or “2” on the scale — than those who identified themselves as beginner/intermediate in their assessment experience (28%).

When comparing ratings between the two groups, the beginner/intermediate group indicated greater interest than the advanced group in the following topics: developing/selecting assessment assignments; rubric design; and assessment terminology. On the other hand, advanced faculty were more interested than the beginner/intermediate group in these topics: inter-rater reliability; documenting assessment results and reports; and scoring calibration/norming.

## Discussion

Based on our survey findings, advanced faculty are more inclined to view assessment as very important both for an institution and the future of higher education. They are also more likely to be involved in assessment at the institutional-level, more comfortable with data, more likely to view technology to support assessment as very important, and more likely to perceive their institution’s assessment maturity as advanced.

Our research indicates that one’s personal level of experience with assessment affects the professional development topics of most interest. According to our survey, those who see themselves as beginner/intermediate were most interested in PD focused on developing/selecting assessment assignments; rubric design; curriculum mapping; and data analysis and interpretation. Meanwhile, those who rated themselves as advanced in assessment are most interested in PD on documenting assessment results and reports; inter-rater reliability; and curriculum mapping. Considered another way, faculty with less experience with assessment are interested in topics related to the beginning phases of the process (i.e., developing/selecting assignments that will provide evidence for assessment and creating rubrics to assess that evidence); whereas more advanced faculty are interested in working on documenting results and more advanced practices and data analysis (i.e., inter-rater reliability). It’s worth noting that curriculum mapping was one of the top areas of interest to both groups. This finding is in line with our experience working with a wide variety of institutions: we find that there is a greater interest/need for professional development around more strategic, planning-related topics among institutions at all levels and stages in the process.

As with all research, this study raises additional areas for further investigation. For example, our sample was limited to full-time faculty members; it would be interesting for further research efforts to focus on part-time adjunct faculty, exploring their personal experience with assessment, the level(s) in which they are involved with assessment on their campuses, and the specific professional development areas they are most interested in. We can see from our

# How Faculty Experience with Assessment Relates to Views, Values, and Practice

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initial examination of our survey data that like assessment, “one size does not fit all” when it comes to planning professional development activities on college campuses. Institutions need to consider not only their faculty’s perceived level of experience in assessment, but also the different faculty groups who are engaging in assessment practices on their campuses. Our data shows that curriculum mapping seems to be the common denominator for all levels of expertise and it is an integral step in the beginning stages of systematic assessment effort. We encourage institutions to focus their initial professional development activities on this topic and build out more advanced sessions from there.

What are your thoughts on these findings? We’d love to hear from you. Email us at [research@taskstream.com](mailto:research@taskstream.com).



# Faculty Engagement in Accreditation

By Andrew B. Wolf

Last year I volunteered to serve as part of a faculty member evaluation team for a regional accreditation site visit to a peer university. Among the faculty, the accreditation process has a reputation of being a dry, regimented, and bureaucratic exercise involving boxes of dusty documents and clipboards with endless checklists. However, my experience was considerably different. After completing the site visit, I immediately signed up to serve again, because I found the experience to be one of the most professionally rewarding experiences of my academic career. I would like to share why this was the case and in doing so encourage other faculty members to become actively involved in accreditation processes.

I experienced my involvement in accreditation as meaningful and rewarding for three primary reasons: it connected me with a diverse team of experts in higher education who share my passion for student learning, it provided a rich and meaningful opportunity for professional development, and it empowered me to take part in a process central to shaping the context in which I teach and my students learn.

Working on an evaluation team allowed me to meet and collaborate with exceptional people with a diverse range of expertise and experiences in higher education. My team included a former university president, a library director, a leader in student life, a finance administrator, and myself—a faculty member. By working intensely together before and during the visit we developed meaningful professional relationships and a deep mutual respect. We began collaborating via email, carefully reviewing the institution's self-study and writing preliminary reports about each accreditation standard. We discussed potential areas of concern and reached consensus about tentative conclusions and lingering questions. As a result, when we arrived on campus, although we were meeting each other for the first time, we already felt like colleagues.

The site visit was intense and fast-paced. We worked in pairs, spreading out across campus to meet with administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Our team met several times each day and shared observations, discussed areas of excellence or concern, and developed strategies for further investigation. Through these debriefing sessions a picture began to emerge from which the final report developed like a collaborative work of art. Each team member contributed his or her unique perspective, which was refined through group discussion until agreement was reached. We celebrated our accomplishment informally at first when our team gathered for a dinner at a local restaurant and later more formally when we shared our findings in a final report with the university community.

The second—and for me the most tangible—benefit of serving on the evaluation team was what I learned through the experience to bring back to my own institution. Through reading the self-study and interacting with students, faculty and administrators, I was exposed to new ideas and the best practices utilized at an outstanding peer institution. By viewing these practices through the lens of the accreditation standards, and by discussing them with the experts on my team, I developed an in-depth knowledge about what does and does not work to support student learning. For example, by reviewing assessment practices at schools and departments within the

# Faculty Engagement in Accreditation

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system, I learned many new practices for assessing and analyzing student learning outcomes in disciplines outside of my own. I learned about new assessment management systems and how to systematically assess and track student learning through activities such as student writing and service learning assignments.

Finally, serving on an evaluation team allowed me to make a meaningful difference in terms of improving student experience and learning. Having that kind of impact is why I became a professor of nursing; I want to make a difference by empowering students to achieve their dreams of becoming compassionate and competent professionals. Over the years I have become aware of how teaching and learning are shaped by the social context created by accreditors, government regulators, and business interests. Participation in the accreditation process allows me to play an active role in shaping the context in which I teach in accordance with faculty values such as self-governance, academic freedom, and student learning.

As a team evaluator I realized that my opinions and contributions really mattered. I wrote a significant portion of the resulting accreditation report which will have an influence on the future of a university. For instance, I helped to draft language highlighting outstanding practices for distance learning at one department and encouraged its dissemination and adoption throughout the institution. I also assisted with drafting a suggestion encouraging the university to improve self-governance processes to empower faculty in one of its departments. After sharing this report with the university community, I was left with a feeling of satisfaction that I had made a practical and real-world difference in terms of improving higher education by supporting the values shared by faculty.

The American Association of University Professors (Scholtz, Gerber & Henry, 2013) urges faculty members to become involved in the accreditation process in order to shape the context of higher education and ensure that academic values remain paramount. I agree. However, my experience demonstrated that there are many other benefits as well. Knowledge gained on site visits through my own observations and from those of my expert team members can be directly applied to improve teaching and learning at my own school. I can also connect with other professionals and together celebrate our work to foster a culture of excellence in higher education.

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## Reference:

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# Interview Questions with Dr. Pat O'Brien, Senior Vice President of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE), New England Association of Schools and College (NEASC)

Interview Conducted by: Debra Leahy, Provost, New England College of Business

What have been some of the more effective practices you have witnessed among higher education institutions toward engendering a comprehensive culture of assessment?

I think the approaches that are most successful integrate assessment into already established practices and structures so that assessment does not become bolt-on but rather much more integrated into the ongoing organization and government structure of the institution. Another effective strategy is linking the internal work to external efforts, and here I think a good example is the Vision Project. In Massachusetts, for example, it is an initiative of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, so all public colleges and universities are a part of it, and, again, sometimes that external impetus can be helpful to internal efforts. Assessment work as we know costs money and the acquisition of external funding can be helpful in engendering that comprehensive culture. I think there are some of the tried and true models: the naming of champions or the identification of assessment champions, who then take the good work and take the enthusiasm about the efforts and help it to trickle down a little bit. Finally, I think what I would say is a defining characteristic of an effective system is it's manageable. It's not so complex, and so big, and so busy, that it looks like it will collapse under its own weight.

From the Commission's point of view, what are the some more prevalent obstacles that higher education institutions face when devising assessment practices? What are some of the more effective practices the Commission has used to aid these institutions?

The two major obstacles are money and time. I think that each institution, in keeping with its own culture and its own resources, needs to figure out how to overcome those obstacles. Also helping people to understand that they are not the only institution in the world facing those obstacles, and as unique as they are, they're not necessarily unique in that regard. Sometimes not even using the word assessment can be helpful because faculty always love to talk about effective teaching, and they always love to talk about helping students be successful, and those are assessment conversations. As soon as you label them assessment conversations, some faculty will say, oh no, I don't do assessment. Well, actually they do assessment every single day. How can the institution support them in codifying their work in a way that makes it clear to everyone the good assessment that is occurring?

# Interview Questions with Dr. Pat O'Brien, Senior Vice President of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE), New England Association of Schools and College (NEASC)

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With the recent revision of the (NEASC) CIHE Standards, what were some of the more significant considerations regarding assessment, whether these were considerations of the Commission or the higher education institutions that participated in the revisions?

When we had eleven standards, assessment was spread out a little bit: a little bit in planning and evaluation, a little bit in the academic program, and a little bit in students. Now it's all in educational effectiveness and there's no place to hide. When it was spread out you could be so busy talking about planning that you never really got to assessment. Part of the reason for "no place to hide" is the increased expectations in Washington with respect to accountability. College has gotten more necessary and more expensive. And, as it has gotten both of those things, and as tax payer dollars are used increasingly to pay for it, the expectation is that it will be clearer for colleges to demonstrate that they are effective and to demonstrate what and how students are learning. As you read Standard Eight (Educational Effectiveness), you'll find much more emphasis on quantitative measures of success. The Commission still talks about a balance of measures, and I would add that the judicious use of anecdotal evidence can absolutely enrich the telling of the story of student success. As institutions have become more complex, so have their student bodies. Consequently I think the Commission would argue so need to be their approaches to the understanding of student success and the assessment of the student body. The outcomes, perhaps, need to be same, but how you understand student acquisition of those outcomes may be different from various populations. Another stronger emphasis in the standards: all students, all modalities, all locations. And, here's where the Commission pushes back against some of what we are hearing, that there ought to be a single measure of student success and every institution ought to adopt it. When you read the standards you're going to see very clearly the expectation for mission-appropriate student learning outcomes and the exhortation to institutions to be explicit about what those are, about how they are measured, and about how those data are used to make improvements on the campus. Finally, what I would say in terms of the standards with respect to assessment is that there is a clear shift in the Commission's expectations and emphasis away from process to outcomes. So it isn't enough to say that we administered the survey, but instead, we administered the survey and here is what we've learned.

# Interview Questions with Dr. Pat O'Brien, Senior Vice President of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE), New England Association of Schools and College (NEASC)

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In one of the Standards, the Commission mentions the involvement of “relevant constituencies.” Do you foresee greater involvement by any particular stakeholders (i.e., employers, parents, Boards) in relation to assessment of student learning?

Each institution in its uniqueness will have particular constituencies or stakeholders. Public institutions may have somewhat different, or different emphasis, among the stakeholders. One of the groups you called out in your question is boards. I would say it's a fine line to walk with respect to the governing board. Because you want the governing board to be aware, you want them to be supportive, you want them to be interested, but you don't want them micromanaging. And, I think the effective President knows how to walk that line and how to make sure that the board is appropriately supportive and challenging. If we are trying to get some folks to do some work on assessment than some well-placed encouragement from the board can be helpful. You don't want the board writing the assessment plan or determining what the outcome should be. So, I think an appropriate role for the board is absolutely essential in fostering the assessment work on the campus.

The Commission has emphasized innovation and accountability as not being mutually exclusive. From an accreditation standpoint, in what ways do you believe innovation to help or hinder the assessment of student learning?

Accreditation often gets criticized as putting the kibosh on innovation. This is a criticism that I find hard to understand because I don't see a lot of places, at least not in New England, where innovation has been stifled. Not every innovation is a good idea, and I think sometimes institutions, in hindsight, realize it or perhaps they don't, but the Commission has to weigh everything that comes to it, in light of the standards. Clearly, innovation can feed assessment work. To some extent innovation can hinder assessment if it takes folks away from the established outcomes or makes it harder to articulate the outcomes associated with it or it becomes an excuse (ie. we can't assess the program because it's a new innovation. Even innovations have to be assessed. And, I think as institutions come up with ideas that they believe are innovative, factoring in how to assess those and how to evaluate those against the mission of the institution, and against standards, is also important.

# Interview Questions with Dr. Pat O'Brien, Senior Vice President of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE), New England Association of Schools and College (NEASC)

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The Commission has always emphasized candor through peer review and working with the Commission. In what ways have you seen candor help institutions develop practices for assessment of student learning?

I cannot state strongly enough the importance of candor in assessment work. It's as true in assessment as it is throughout any other part of the institution. What the Commission has seen over time is very healthy evaluations on the part of institutions of their assessment practices where, again, candidly a certain initiative didn't work. And I think the ability for institutions to say, or the freedom for institutions to believe that they can say, that we tried it and it didn't work, is an important part of this process. We know that not everything is going to work the first time, not everything is going to get you the information that you need. So we need to be able to evaluate it and say we tried it and we moved away from it and here's why and here's what we're doing instead. To be able to say that candidly and to talk about who made that determination and what you're doing instead, I think is critical to the assessment process.

Looking into the future, what are some of the regulatory changes that you foresee that will affect how we think about and report assessment activities?

It is absolutely this notion of quantitative measures of student success that are primary, such as this very facile, very simplistic, understanding that it's whether you have a job within six months at a certain salary seems to be the defining measure. For some institutions, that's great, it's absolutely the right measure for them, but for many others, it's not. I also think there's tremendous attention to debt. Tremendous attention to student debt in Washington doesn't relate necessarily to the assessment of student learning, although it may tangentially because of this notion of other ways of progressing through a program. Demonstrating competencies as opposed to seat time is the simplistic way of saying that. I think that we have an extraordinary opportunity now to inform this discourse about student success because everyone that I talk to believes that it is more than who has a job within six months at a certain level of salary. Student success is more complex, it's more nuanced, and to the extent that institutions undergoing self-studies or fifth year reports can, as we say, step up to the plate and be very explicit about that, then I do think we have an opportunity to inform the discourse. I'm hopeful that institutions will indeed embrace this challenge, embrace this opportunity and that together we can have an impact.



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