

FACULTY BUY-IN AND ENGAGEMENT: REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION AROUND FACULTY ROLES IN ASSESSMENT

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Overview

- What do we think about when we say faculty engagement?
- Challenges to / constraints on engaging faculty
- 2013 Survey Data: Challenges
- Counters to some sources of resistance
- 2013 Survey Data: Signs of progress
- Engagement of Students in Assessment

- What do we mean when we talk about faculty engagement in assessment?

Faculty Engagement

- Faculty engagement has long been recognized as a central element in successful assessment programs
- Advocates argue that it:
 - Allows for authentic engagement
 - Ties assessment to the classroom experiences
 - Makes it more likely that assessment will be used for improvement
 - Centers learning, and faculty ownership of learning, in assessment
 - Can affect institutional culture and change the nature of conversations on learning
- “Building faculty ownership is the key to successful implementation, since assessment is about teaching and learning, for which faculty are primarily responsible.” (Gray, 2002, 58)

- What are the challenges in engaging faculty in assessment?
What are the sources of faculty discontent with assessment?

Faculty Engagement: Difficulties to Overcome

- Fear over misuse of results and data
- Fear over lack of use of the data
- Skepticism over the ability to assess student learning
- Worries that it might affect standards
- Concerns related to simplicity / complexity
- Concerns over workload of faculty / that it is an add-on

Faculty Engagement: Difficulties to Overcome

- Concern that it is a fad
- Concern that it is an external mandate
- Concern that it is a top-down administrative mandate
- Concern over the corporatization of higher education
- Challenges to academic freedom / shared governance
- Misalignment in language / difficulty in communication

2013 National Provost Survey

- Sample: All regionally accredited, undergraduate degree-granting institutions (n=2,732)
- Announced via institutional membership organizations, website, newsletter, mailing
- Online and paper
- 44% response rate (n=1,202)
- 725 schools participated in both 2009 and 2013

2013 National Provost Survey: Worries

17. What are you most hopeful about in terms of assessing student learning at your institution? [OPEN ENDED]

18. What are you worried about in terms of assessing student learning at your institutions? [OPEN ENDED]

19. What is the most positive outcome of your institution level student learning assessment activities? [OPEN ENDED]

20. With what issues or topics regarding assessing student learning does your campus need assistance? [OPEN ENDED]

2013 National Provost Survey: Worries

Generic Engagement

- “Complete faculty buy-in.”
- “Maintaining faculty interest”

Lack of Use

- “That we are continually bombarded by requirements for more assessment of student learning and I don't really know that, in the long run, all this time and effort, has really improved educational quality. I also don't believe that institutional student learning outcomes are worth the time and resources (at the two year level) There are more important things that faculty and staff at the college could be spending time on.”
- “Continued faculty and administrator cynicism of the usefulness of the assessment process. Not seeing enough tangible results from a healthy cycle of assessment evidence. “

2013 National Provost Survey: Worries

External Influences

- “That faculty think of this as something we do for accreditation and not because it is the right thing to do.”
- “We have not yet discovered a method of supporting assessment that makes the process seem anything but a top-down initiative. Were the accreditation mandate to go away today, faculty would cease assessing student learning in any organized way.”

2013 National Provost Survey: Worries

Language / Cultural Issues:

- “Counting trees and missing the forest - the mundaneness that attends to ‘assessment talk’ that turns off most faculty.”
- “The assessment culture has shifted dramatically over the course of the past decade. Theoretically, this has been for the good (i.e. moving away from compliance and toward the authentic measurement of student learning to improve the educational experience). Unfortunately, there can be culture lag with faculty who may have successfully mastered the compliance model and feel no reason to move on to a more authentic model.”
- “We have to do a lot of work on helping faculty see the value of assessment, which has been seen as an oversight and compliance activity. I am worried that we will continue to have to redefine it on our own campus in opposition to a national conversation that is often disrespectful to faculty expertise and institutional efforts.”

2013 National Provost Survey: Worries

Workload:

- “Faculty carry heavy teaching and service loads; institution is understaffed. Both assessment and using the results of assessment compete with time for the basic functioning of the institution and time already focused on teaching and learning. To put it another way: I worry that faculty are teaching too much to reflect on and change their teaching.”
- “The ever-increasing workload placed on faculty ... related to assessment. Nearly every one of our initiatives requires additional faculty time, and we have no system in place to diminish faculty members' other responsibilities. We have no staff dedicated to assessment and a poor mechanism for compensating faculty who take on assessment-related administrative work.”
- “The perception that assessment creates excessive time demands on faculty and staff.”

2013 National Provost Survey: Worries

- “Even when assessment is integrated into other programmatic activities, it still takes time and energy. Faculty are stretched thin with heavy teaching loads. Even the faculty who are motivated and interested are at high risk of burnout based on the following challenges: (1) lack of time to do assessment in ways that provide information they value; (2) lack of buy-in from other faculty in their departments, which increases the workload for those who do see the value; (3) lack of reward structures within faculty evaluation for promotion and tenure (faculty decide what "counts" and if other faculty don't value the work, it won't be recognized); and (4) feeling overwhelmed by the work required to design and make improvements when they discover something isn't working.”

2013 National Provost Survey: Worries

Conditions of Work

- “Faculty union opposition to standard learning outcomes.”
- “We should have regional or national requirements for professional development for any future faculty, otherwise they too soon get caught up in cultures that talk about academic freedom, loads, etc...”
- “We have many adjunct faculty who are well intentioned about increasing the gains in student learning. However, it is not always easy to impart to them the best practices for assessment and using the data toward continual instructional improvement.”
- “Faculty disgruntled with the inefficiencies and ineffectiveness of the current campus-wide plan; language in the labor agreement that lays a foundation for faculty to see consistent assessment practices as a violation of academic freedom.”

2013 National Provost Survey: Worries

Turnover / Generational Issues:

- “With the aging population of faculty at the College, and the number of new faculty hired over the last two years, training the faculty to maintain the progress on assessment that has been made will be difficult.”
- That more established, experienced faculty will communicate to early career faculty, that assessment of student learning is not necessary for their professional success.

Fad

- “Many faculty see an ‘assessment push’ as another in a long line of academic change initiatives. If they just hold out long enough, the initiative will go away...”
- “Sustainability of the value of assessing student learning and avoiding the belief by some faculty members that assessment is just the latest ‘fad’ with higher education.”

- How might institutions overcome these difficulties and constraints?

Faculty Engagement: Countering the Resistance

- Framing assessment for improvement, rather than as external mandate
- Locating assessment as a core element of teaching and learning
- Respecting and utilizing disciplinary differences
- Meeting faculty where they are
- Creating spaces for conversations around assessment
- Providing resources / development opportunities to support faculty assessment efforts
- Cultivate leadership and stability
- Take advantage of key transitions
- Engaging students in assessment

Faculty Engagement: Appealing to Academic Values

- “Academic values also affect the efforts of campus leaders to maintain and improve their universities. Proposed reforms that offend these values often meet with resistance from the faculty and ultimately fail. What is less understood is that academic values can also be a powerful force for constructive change, since faculties will usually experience discomfort and agree to reforms once they are persuaded that existing practices conflict with the principles and responsibilities that help define their professional identity and that shape the aspiration that give meaning to their lives.”

-Derek Bok, 2013, p. 8

2013 National Provost Survey: Positive Signs

Evidence of Engagement:

- “Faculty care about student learning and understand that they must assess at the course, program or general education level.”
- “Faculty are excited about helping students. It drives what we do and the ways in which we do it.”
- “At my institution, the faculty buy-in is what I'm most hopeful/thankful for....we have a culture of assessment here.”
- “I believe that faculty finally see how this process will help the curriculum and aren't as afraid as they once were that it will be used in their personal evaluations.”

2013 National Provost Survey: Positive Signs

Ownership:

- “Our process undergoes regular review and continuous improvement. It is faculty led and is perceived by many to be a best practices model.”
- “Our philosophy of assessment is that it should be driven by real faculty questions and should support faculty governance. Efforts should be focused on active curricular and resource allocation questions in which evidence of student learning can inform decision-making. This has helped to assuage faculty fears about the use of assessment data, and I am hopeful that it will become standard practice to make curricular and resource arguments with student learning data as that data becomes more available to faculty.”
- “A system is being designed from the faculty ranks up. The faculty have ownership of most of the criteria (other than what is mandated by the state).”

2013 National Provost Survey: Positive Signs

Workload Issues:

- “Increased acceptance by faculty that assessment is at least necessary as part of their job responsibilities. We seem to have made it that far.”
- “That faculty are finally seeing that the process is not onerous.”
- “The faculty have developed a thoughtful, realistic approach to looking at sample student work”
- “Faculty recognition that they have been engaged in assessment and part of teaching & that formalizing assessment has positively impacted programs.”

2013 National Provost Survey: Positive Signs

Reframing / Changing Culture:

- “The focus has shifted from ‘assessment’ to student learning - what faculty are interested in talking about.”
- “Every year I see an increase in faculty doing valuable assessment and using the information to positively impact student learning. The cultural shift from resistance to embracing assessment is very encouraging.”
- “Among faculty, there has been a strong and constructive cultural shift toward supporting assessment of learning outcomes and accepting responsibility for improvement learning.”

Fad:

- “As the myth that assessment will ‘go away’ is dispelled, more faculty are engaging in assessment and appreciating the information they get from it.”

2013 National Provost Survey: Positive Signs

- “I think we have begun to achieve the culture shift among faculty necessary to view assessment as part of our ongoing commitment to student success rather than as a compliance item, resurrected every five to ten years for external review by regional and programmatic accrediting bodies. We have also incorporated student learning outcomes centrally at the heart of the new academic program review process, with the active support of the Faculty Senate, and we will use that process to drive the change, making assessment of student learning outcomes a routine part of the normal business of departments and programs, rather than an episodic activity.”

Faculty, Students and Assessment

- “Will we be able to engage many of the long-time faculty members? Can we engage students in this work, to improve learning strategies?”
- “A culture of assessment has been established. Students are fully on-board with assessment from their K-12 experience and they most likely will lead the way. Almost all of the faculty are on board.”

Engagement: It's Not Just for Faculty Anymore

Engaging Students in Assessment

- A route to more and deeper faculty engagement
- A way to make assessment more integral to teaching and learning—less an add-on
- A good thing for students



*“It flipped a switch,
and once it’s flipped,
it can’t be turned off.”*

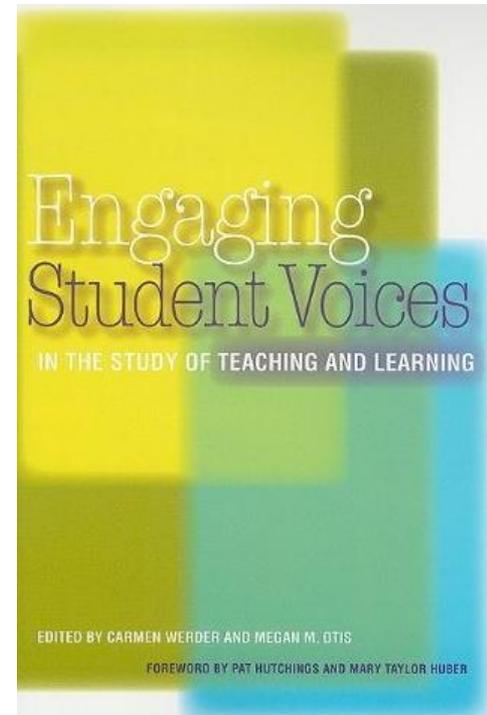
--Eric Skogsberg, Student,
Western Washington University, 2004

A Flexible Idea

- Focused on the classroom
- Focused on course design or curriculum
- Involving selected students
- Or all students
- Not necessarily using the language of assessment
- Not necessarily yielding “data” but supporting attention to improved learning

Teaching and Learning Academy Western Washington University

- CASTL Program: How to involve students?
- TLA—regular meetings with students, faculty and staff to discuss a theme about learning.
- Morphs into a course
- “Flips a switch”
-but for faculty as well.



Provost's Scholars

North Carolina A&T State Univ.

- As part of Wabash Study: to make assessment data more actionable, clear
- Students conduct focus groups, interview peers to drill down into assessment results
- Also present assessment findings in various public settings on campus and beyond
- Students get research and leadership experience.
- Campus gets better data, more attention to results, more improvement action.

Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT)

Bryn Mawr

- Faculty request a student consultant to help analyze and improve their teaching approach
- Student sits in on a class a week
- Meets with the faculty member weekly
- Meets with/interviews students in the course
- Student consultants meet *together*, facilitated by staff from T&L Institute.
- T&L Institute facilitates other occasions for partners to talk, debrief, learn from one another.

Course Design Teams

Elon University

- 1-3 faculty members, 2-6 undergraduate students (who apply), one faculty developer
- Backward design approach: course goals – strategies - assessments.
- Often focuses on pedagogical challenge: bottlenecks, a “problem” course...
- Students observe, interview, gather data, become real partners in remaking the course.
- Product: a redesigned syllabus, but also “enhanced engagement and metacognition”

Student Self-Assessment Alverno College

- Across the curriculum, all courses, all students
- Example: In writing
- Case of a growing phenomenon of greater explicitness with students, sharing criteria, rubrics, attention to metacognition, reflective e-portfolios...
- Assessment integrated into teaching and learning
- Not an add on or “exoskeleton”

Take Away

- The challenges regarding faculty engagement with assessment remain and are apparent in the provosts' worries
- There are positive signs and positive outcomes, with many respondents both hopeful about the future and able to talk about positive results
- Assessment needs to look beyond itself to more fully engage faculty and students.

For more information on Students and Assessment

Alverno College Faculty. (2000). *Self Assessment at Alverno College*. Milwaukee, WI: Alverno College

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Werder, C., and Otis, M. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Engaging Student Voices in the Study of Teaching and Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.