

Engaging Faculty and Administrators in the Assessment Process at a Distance Learning Institution

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Abstract

This article focuses on strategies that have been utilized at a distance learning institution to engage faculty and administrators in the ongoing assessment process. As a result of these strategies, faculty and administrators are increasingly integrating assessment information into daily decision-making processes to improve on academic courses and programs.

Background

Engaging faculty and administrators in ongoing assessment processes at a distance learning institution can pose unique challenges. Given that our faculty members are geographically dispersed throughout the nation, an effort has been made to create a more cohesive faculty community. Academic learning outcomes assessment at the American Public University System (APUS) begins with a process in which faculty and academic administrators identify the institution's most appropriate learning outcomes at the institutional, program, and course levels. Each level is designed to complement each other, providing a comprehensive view of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students will acquire upon graduation from the institution. Guided by the sharing of assessment results to continuously improve on student learning, the assessment process is designed to answer a broad question: How well are we accomplishing our mission? To engage faculty and administrators in this evolutionary process, one that has no specific end other than continuous improvement, the following five strategies were implemented: (a) developed a committee to lead the assessment process; (b) promoted accountability among faculty and administrators through the documentation of student learning outcomes evidence; (c) informed internal and external stakeholders on the achievement of student learning outcomes; (d) established a reciprocal relationship among the institution and appropriate stakeholders; and (e) incorporated data into daily decision-making processes at the institution.

Strategy #1: Develop a Committee to Lead the Learning Outcomes Assessment Process

A Learning Outcomes Assessment (LOA) Council, comprised of academic and administrative representatives, was created to spearhead the effort of engaging faculty and administrators in the assessment process. The goals of the LOA Council are to: (a) develop heightened awareness among faculty and administrators of the understanding, discussion and buy-in of learning outcomes assessment; (b) engage faculty to integrate assessment measures into curriculum for course and program improvement; (c) advance the learning outcomes assessment process that will result ultimately in the institutionalization of outcomes assessment and a culture of assessment; and (d) develop specific guidelines and procedures so that assessment results will be used for continuous improvement in a timely and regular manner.

Strategy #2: Promote Accountability among Faculty and Administrators

The Learning Outcomes Assessment Council developed and implemented the following tools to ensure that faculty and administrators are held accountable for student learning in their courses and programs. These tools assist in demonstrating how student learning outcomes are achieved and how this information is used for continuous improvement.

Student Learning Assessment Reports. On a yearly basis, faculty and academic administrators develop student learning assessment reports to document the extent to which learning is being achieved in courses and programs. These program specific assessment reports require that faculty, department chairs, and deans: (a) identify the goals and objectives of their program, that is, their priorities for student learning; (b) establish methods that can assess

their student learning outcomes; and (c) use the results of their assessment in the decision-making process regarding their curriculum and curriculum delivery to maximize student learning opportunities. The reports keep records of: (a) program profiles; (b) program level student learning outcomes; (c) curricular mapping of institutional and program learning outcomes with required courses; (d) direct and indirect measures of assessment; and (e) specific evidence on how assessment data are used for continuous improvement of the program. Faculty, staff, students, and the general public have access to these reports.

Departmental Data Portals. Departmental data portals serve as a clearinghouse of data for each academic department. Faculty, staff, students, and the general public have access to these portals where they can view departmental specific data from end of course surveys, end of program surveys, national testing scores, and student learning assessment reports. For comparison purposes, the portals also make available program level and institution-wide survey data.

Academic Family of Measures. The academic family of measures is a set of indicators used to determine whether specific outcomes have been achieved for each academic department. This newly developed initiative consists of quarterly meetings where faculty and academic administrators will discuss, analyze, and interpret data. Each department will have an established baseline for each of the indicators, and department chairs will be required to develop an action strategy if indicators fall below baseline levels. Indicators will include, but are not limited to: book costs, budgetary compliance, program growth, student continuation rates, average class sizes, effective course completion rates, withdrawal rates, passing rates, end of course survey ratings, end of program survey ratings, student complaints, national test scores, full-time faculty contract management, faculty performance metrics, and faculty management data.

Strategy #3: Inform Internal and External Stakeholders on the Achievement of Student Learning Outcomes

To inform external stakeholders on the achievement of outcomes, a learning outcomes assessment website has been developed, and can be viewed at the following address (<http://www.apus.edu/learning-outcomes-assessment>). The website serves as a clearinghouse of assessment data. For example, national testing results are posted on the website, allowing the public to compare institution and national norm scores. Student survey data enable the public to view what students are saying about courses, instructors, support services, and the institution as a whole. Student learning assessment reports report on how data are being used for continuous improvement at the course, program, and institutional levels. In addition, the website provides information on assessment resources, learning outcomes, and updates on ongoing assessment initiatives.

To inform internal stakeholders, it is the responsibility of the Director of Learning Outcomes Assessment, in collaboration with the LOA Council, to clearly communicate specific evidence that outcomes have been achieved. A year-round schedule is followed to regularly collect and interpret evidence of these outcomes, consisting of monthly, quarterly, and yearly milestones to be met. For students, assessment results are posted in student newsletters and the student lounge. Faculty members review assessment results in the faculty newsletter, faculty lounge, email correspondence, and meeting presentations. Staff members are presented with assessment results in all-staff meetings and email correspondence.

Strategy #4: Establish a Reciprocal Relationship among Stakeholders and the Institution on the Sharing of Information

The regular dissemination of data to stakeholders has led to the increased recognition that a reciprocal relationship must exist between the public and the institution on the sharing of assessment information. On a regular basis, APUS provides evidence to the public on the success of achieving outcomes, the soundness of the operation, and overall effectiveness of the institution. Similarly, the institution listens, involves, and responds to the feedback the public provides. Feedback from constituents is used for both day-to-day activities and long-range endeavors. In addition to shaping the curriculum, student feedback and assessment data have led to a number of policies, procedures, systems, services, and features to accommodate the interests and needs of our constituents.

Strategy #5: Incorporate Assessment Data into Daily Decision-Making Processes

This culminating strategy, the incorporation of assessment data into the daily decision-making processes at the institution, has been made possible because of the success of the preceding strategies stated. Evidence of student learning outcomes and the use of that information for continuous improvement is now shared across the institution in daily operations meetings, all-staff meetings, academic staff meetings, learning outcomes assessment council meetings, curriculum committee meetings, full-time faculty meetings, student and faculty lounges, monthly newsletters, the learning outcomes assessment website, and routine email correspondence to faculty and staff. The sharing of this information for decision-making purposes promotes the continuous improvement of teaching and learning, and assists in assuring quality at all levels of the institution.

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