Assessment Management Strategies at Community Colleges

Custom Research Brief

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I. Research Methodology

**Research Approach**

- **Structure and Responsibility for Conducting Assessment**: How do other institutions integrate different forms of assessment? What different committees or individuals are involved in providing oversight for assessment and conducting assessment? How do committees and individuals interact to identify and execute assessment tasks? How do institutions structure assessment initiatives to avoid duplicating efforts?

- **Stakeholder Engagement and Responses to Assessment Data**: How do administrators engage individuals across the institutions with assessment initiatives, especially when responsibility for assessment initiatives resides elsewhere? What successful professional development and training practices have other institutions implemented? How do institutions leverage findings to initiate change, especially when the changes are costly in terms of time, money and institutional resources? How do administrators manage data and coordinate data assessment across the institution? How do administrators inform the campus community of assessment activity?

- **Effectiveness and Efficiency**: What successful assessment initiatives have other institutions conducted? What assessment initiatives have other institutions abandoned? How and why did institutions determine when to abandon assessment initiatives? How do institutions determine when continued assessment is no longer necessary because results are ‘good enough’? How have other institutions increased the efficiency of assessment initiatives to decrease overall workloads? What lessons have other institutions learned from conducting assessment initiatives? How have other institutions managed to keep their assessment efforts simple and sustainable?

**Project Sources**

- Education Advisory Board internal and online research libraries (www.educationadvisoryboard.com)
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (http://nces.ed.gov)
- Contact institution Websites
The Forum interviewed institutional assessment and institutional effectiveness administrators at other suburban, mid-sized, two-year institutions in the Mid-Atlantic and the Northeast:

**A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College A</td>
<td>Mid-Atlantic</td>
<td>Associate’s–Public Suburban-serving Single Campus</td>
<td>7,100</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College B</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>College C</td>
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<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College D</td>
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<td>Associate’s–Public Suburban-serving Single Campus</td>
<td>10,300</td>
<td>Public</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
II. Executive Overview

Key Observations

Institutional research and effectiveness offices manage assessment of institutional effectiveness, while faculty and academic affairs administrators manage learning outcomes assessment; this division of responsibility limits duplication of assessment efforts. Assessment committees and process improvement teams coordinate efforts across multiple departments and constituencies.

Administrators facilitate faculty engagement and participation in assessment initiatives by incentivizing successful assessments, connecting assessment to job responsibilities, removing financial barriers to conducting assessments, and simplifying responsibilities. At one contact institution, administrators require faculty to conduct assessment as part of position responsibilities. Job descriptions, hiring processes, and faculty contracts articulate responsibilities, and merit reviews then recognize successful assessment initiatives. Faculty members also receive institutional funding to obtain resources necessary for effective assessment, such as external expert assistance for rubric creation or student performance evaluators in the arts. At another contact institution, administrators ask faculty to conduct only one assessment initiative each year and to correlate the initiative to improvement in one performance goal, which limits faculty time commitments and reduces workload.

Effective assessment initiatives result in course redesign, program standardization, institutional policy changes, and changes to staff and resource reallocation. Institutional surveys gather faculty, staff, and student data, which administrators benchmark against national and peer institution data; benchmarking helps identify relative success by examining enrollment trends, graduation rates, retention, persistence, and internal satisfaction across constituencies. Successful assessment initiatives identify inconsistencies across program sections, ineffective curricula, unmet learning outcomes, and underperforming student groups.

Administrators rarely abandon assessment initiatives but modify processes by changing assessment methodologies or reexamining inaccurate data. Some student populations, such as low-income students or degree-seeking students, prove difficult to assess due to challenges obtaining useful and accurate data. For example, administrators encounter difficulty defining degree-seeking students because some students inaccurately identify as full or part-time students or transfer prior to expected degree completion. Assessment timeframes also change depending on whether initiatives produce useful results prior to expected completion or whether useful trends do not appear within the original timeframe for assessment. Some initiatives may result in changes that address a set of problems identified through assessment, but subsequently cause a new set of challenges; contacts acknowledge that some challenges, such as unmet learning outcomes, result from new cohorts that possess different competencies, which new assessment initiatives may not effectively address.

Publicly accessible websites and intranet sites publish institutional effectiveness reports and data, while technological assessment databases facilitate collection of course assessment data. Board and senior executive meetings, institution-wide convocations, and faculty training sessions provide opportunities for faculty to present successful assessment initiatives to community stakeholders.
III. Assessment Structure and Communicating Results

**Institutional Effectiveness**

*Institutional Research and Planning Offices Typically Oversee Institutional Effectiveness Assessment*

Institutional research offices typically maintain responsibility for conducting institutional effectiveness assessment, collecting data, and publicizing results. The Assistant to the President for Institutional Quality at College D maintains a database of performance targets and key performance indicators for the institution, contributes to strategic planning, and helps to develop performance goals. The Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness Office at College A manages assessment for administrative and service units but does not manage program and learning outcome assessment.

**Central Office Indirectly Facilitates Assessment:** The Office of Planning, Research, and Assessment at College C does not maintain direct responsibility for any initiatives, instead advising faculty on relevant assessment initiatives.

**Intranets and University Websites Publicize Reports and Data**

The Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness Office at College A provides enrollment, graduation, retention, and employee data for the intranet; only members of the college community maintain access to the information. Several contact institutions also present institutional effectiveness data and reports on publicly accessible websites.

**Board and Executive-level Meetings Provide Forum to Present Data**

College B holds six board meetings annually to discuss institutional effectiveness initiatives and key performance indicators; each board meeting also begins with work sessions during which board members examine successful assessment initiatives from across campus. The Vice President of Finance also leads a monthly meeting for the presentation of institutional financial reports.

**Learning Outcomes and Unit Assessment**

*Faculty, Academic Affairs Administrators, and Learning Outcomes Offices Manage Learning Outcomes Assessment*

Across contact institutions, faculty members and academic affairs administrators manage assessment initiatives for courses and academic programs:

- Contacts at College C explain that because faculty members develop the institution’s curriculum, they also manage assessment initiatives and identify where assessment will be most useful.
- Academic divisions and Academic Affairs administrators at College A manage student learning outcomes, classroom assessment, and program assessment.
- The Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at College D manages learning outcomes assessment and helps to implement a five point assessment plan.
- College B’s assessment council, supervised by faculty, approves potential projects.
Database Systems Facilitate Program Goal and Assessment Data Collection

Administrators and faculty at College A use the TracDat database system to organize assessment data; for academic programs, faculty input program goals and assessment data. Administrators hope to extract assessment data from the system to inform future program reviews. Currently, academic units use TracDat more formally than student services units and support units, although contacts note that administrators intend for all units across campus to use the system.

Faculty and Unit Presentations Promote Successful Initiatives to Community

In addition to faculty presentations about successful assessment projects at board meetings, contacts at College B suggest that the institution’s three annual convocations and three annual faculty development training periods could provide additional forums for faculty to promote successful initiatives. Campus units also present unit vital signs to the President’s Cabinet at a meeting that occurs once a month; one unit typically presents at each publicly open meeting, which approximately 30 individuals from across campus attend.

IV. Assessment Initiatives and Responses

Institutional Surveys and Peer Benchmarking

Implement National Surveys to Regularly Assess Student, Faculty, and Staff Engagement and Satisfaction

The Personal Assessment of the College Environment (PACE) Survey and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) facilitate the collection of faculty, staff, and student satisfaction data. Contacts recommend institutional effectiveness administrators conduct surveys every few years in order to measure progress and identify areas of weakness.

Division of Responsibilities

Dual Reporting Structures Effectively Divide Responsibilities...

Contacts at several institutions report that the division of responsibility between institutional effectiveness offices and academic affairs effectively avoids duplication of assessment efforts. Institutional effectiveness staff also liaise with faculty and academic affairs administrators to coordinate assessment.

...But Committees and Central Offices Foster Collaboration When Necessary

Approximately 20 process improvement teams at College D have assessed topics ranging from developmental education to e-learning over the past five years, bringing together stakeholders from across the institution. Administrators in College C’s Office of Planning, Research, and Assessment consult with faculty members and academic affairs administrators on initiatives, discuss data and lead assessment committees.
Benchmark against Peer and Other State Institutions to Provide Context for Data

Contacts at College D explain that institutional data requires context in order to determine overall institutional success. For example, an institution’s graduation rate may appear low but be comparatively higher than other state institutions; this demonstrates that another assessment area poses a greater concern to the institution and allows administrators to direct attention to more urgent problems.

College A’s Performance Accountability Report (PAR) Assists Benchmarking Efforts

The state higher education commission requires College A to submit the Performance Accountability Report, an annual report that contains three components detailing institutional goals and progress. All community colleges within the state complete similar reports, which allows administrators to compare data across institutions.

Three PAR Components

Degree Progress Report, which measures the following percentages of total enrolled students:
- Students graduated
- Students transferred
- Students demonstrating progress towards

Four years of data analyzed for different student groups:
- College-ready students
- Developmental students
- Students by race and ethnicity

Articulation of state goal fulfillment

Groups Assessed

Analysis of five years of data across more than 30 categories, including:
- Enrollment
- Persistence
- Student success by demographic

Response

Administrators compare data to other institutions within Maryland to contextualize success.
Responses to Assessment Initiatives

Successful assessment initiatives help administrators adjust individual courses and academic programs, establish institution-wide programs, and meet institutional performance targets.

Sample Assessment Initiative Results and Responses across Contact Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Results</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Course Level Assessment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Insufficient Student Preparation for Some Courses: At College A, an assessment initiative analyzed the correlation between placement test scores and success in courses; the results indicated that some students lacked sufficient preparation in reading and writing.</td>
<td>Pilot Program for Prerequisites: Administrators recognized that very few courses maintained prerequisites, and will recommend a pilot program for prerequisite courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program Level Assessment</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Completion and Success Rates Low for a Specific Program: College A’s developmental math program did not maintain sufficiently strong completion rates or success rates in college-level math courses for students who completed the developmental math program.</td>
<td>Program Redesign: Administrators redesigned the developmental math program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistencies across Program Sections: An assessment initiative at College C identified inconsistencies in student evaluation and course outcomes across the 20 sections of the institution’s public speaking course. Administrators realized that the reliance on adjunct instructors for many sections resulted in the inconsistencies.</td>
<td>Program Standardization: Full-time public speaking instructors developed a standardized course outline and rubrics for evaluating major projects. Instructors watched videos of student speeches to test rubrics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional Level Assessment</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Rates Steady Rather than Increasing: An initiative at College A identified that some students transferred early to four-year institutions without completing associate’s degree requirements, skewing graduation rates and preventing rates from increasing.</td>
<td>Retroactive Degrees: The institution now partners with Towson University to retroactively grant an associate’s degree to qualified students after reviewing a student’s Towson University transcript.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low E-Learning Success: A process improvement team at College D identified a need for better e-learning resources and support.</td>
<td>Increase Staff and Improve Technology: The institution hired an executive director for e-learning and selected a new Pearson LMS.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
V. Process Improvement

Adjusting Assessment Initiatives

*Initiatives Rarely Abandoned but Sometimes Modified*

Contacts at all institutions indicate that administrators and faculty rarely abandon an assessment initiative. Instead, methodologies, data sought, or assessment goals might change in order for initiatives to deliver useful results.

- **Assessment Methodology Unable to Provide Useful Results**: At College B, initial assessment of the accounting program proved ineffective because of a lack of standardization across sections. Faculty subsequently changed the accounting tests and curriculum used across sections in order to first standardize course material and evaluation, obtaining useful and accurate assessment results after modifying the assessment methodology.

- **Student Data Unreliable**: College D contacts report difficulty effectively identifying degree-seeking students. Contacts stress the need for more useful data to distinguish between full-time and part-time students and to account for students who transfer prior to degree completion. Inaccurate identification of degree-seeking students skews assessment results that analyze degree completion.

**Assessment Timeframes May Change Depending on Initial Results**

Although administrators and faculty may initially plan for a certain timeframe for an assessment, some initiatives take more or less time to complete depending on initial results. An initiative that garners useful data prior to expected completion time may conclude early, allowing assessment efforts to focus on new areas. Conversely, some initiatives may require additional time in order for administrators to identify useful data trends.

**Responses to Assessment Data May Focus Attention on New Concerns**

Contacts at College D indicate that trends are difficult to determine when initiatives assess new cohorts each year. For example, one cohort may demonstrate weaknesses in several learning objectives; following modification of a program, future cohorts may improve in those learning objectives but subsequently demonstrate weaknesses in other objectives.

Improving Stakeholder Response

*Incentivize Participation in Assessment Initiatives*

- **Remove Minor Cost Barriers**: Contacts at College B explain that faculty conduct more effective assessment when they can access additional resources; however, resources may cost more than faculty wish to pay. Contacts recommend that institutions help fund faculty assessment initiatives when necessary. For example, a faculty member might want to create a rubric but lacks the expertise to do so; additional funds can support the use of an external expert to develop the rubric. Dance faculty must evaluate student performances with a judging panel; judges could be paid for with assessment funds.

- **Link Successful Assessment to Merit Review**: Faculty at College B can assume larger assessment tasks in order to fulfill promotion criteria.
2 Simplify Assessment Responsibilities and Requirements

Contacts at College C explain that administrators encourage faculty to conduct simple yet useful assessment initiatives. In order to ensure that initiatives remain manageable and effective, faculty conduct assessment to answer one question or meet one performance goal each year; for example, an instructor of a general education course may evaluate student coursework against one learning outcome across a year, followed by assessment of a second learning outcome the following year.

3 Communicate Benefits of and Need for Successful Assessment

- Establish Assessment as Job Responsibility: College B academic administrators expect all faculty to conduct assessment; job descriptions, faculty contracts, and the faculty handbook identify assessment as a job responsibility. Faculty must identify an element of their courses that they will improve through assessment and must identify core work accomplishment goals.

- Demonstrate Benefits of Technological Assessment Tools: While contacts at College A recognize the benefits of the TracDat system, they acknowledge that faculty inclusion in the adoption process would have resulted in more acceptance and buy-in. Contacts note that the operational benefits and customizable components of the system required more demonstration and promotion to users, who instead felt left out of the adoption process.