

**Relationship between Faculty Perceptions of Institutional Participation in Assessment and
Faculty Practices of Assessment-Related Activities**

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Abstract

Using data from 3,335 faculty members across 46 institutions that participated in the 2009 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, this study found faculty who were more actively involved in assessing their own classrooms also believed more strongly in their institutions' assessment efforts. Thus, these faculty serve as potential 'champions' and agents of assessment for institutions. Developing faculty awareness of institutional assessment efforts and appreciation for the utility of assessment results is important because faculty play key roles in improving the quality of curriculum, teaching and learning. Our findings serve as a starting point for discussion among faculty and administrators involved in institutional assessment and self-study initiatives.

Since the 1984 report, *Involvement in Learning*, assessment has been discussed as a means for improving the learning environment in higher education (National Institute of Education, 1984). Current political pressures to increase accountability, quality assurance, and global competitiveness have revived concerns over the assessment of student learning (Brooks, 2005; Ewell, 2008). To address these issues, academic organizations have attempted to better align assessment with institutional improvement (Borden & Pike, 2008). These organizational responses often come in the form of top-down decisions to institute some type of campus assessment initiative (Ewell, 2008). Messages aimed at improving student learning get lost in the translation between the principles (administration) and the agent (faculty) (Burke, 2005a).

One known communication barrier between institutions and faculty is the language of assessment itself (Hutchings, 2010). The word ‘assessment’ lends itself to a variety of faculty responses, “from religious fervor to extreme distaste to complete cynicism” (Gelmon, 1997, p. 51). Assessment has been described as less than welcoming and something that, “from the faculty point of view, [looks] a lot like someone else’s agenda” (Hutchings, p. 8, 2010). Creating a shift in assessment practices is difficult because faculty view assessment as intrusive of their educational expertise (Palomba & Banta, 1999), taxing on their already stretched availability (Hutchings, 2010), and an ‘add-on task’ for institutional purposes unrelated to the work in their discipline (Suskie, 2004).

The first step in promoting a shift in assessment practices requires an institution to understand student patterns of learning (McClenney, McClenney, & Peterson, 2003), which are best understood by engaging faculty in conversations about what students learn (Banta, Griffin, Flateby, & Kahn, 2009). The second step is “to foster an environment where planning and decision making at all levels of the organization are data-driven” (McClenney, McClenney, &

Peterson, 2003, p. 26). McClenney and McClenny (2003) refer to this as a “culture of evidence” (p.3). A culture of evidence is achieved by having faculty, amongst other campus stakeholder groups, buy-in to the rationale for collecting data and the relevancy of that data to future plans and decisions.

Current pressures to improve student learning through assessment create a window of opportunity for institutions to engage faculty in conversations about assessment. These discussions are essential for making faculty aware of campus assessment initiatives, encouraging faculty to increase their own involvement in assessment-related activities, and ultimately generating a culture of evidence. Savory, Burnett, and Goodburn (2007) note that engaging in discussions about student learning beyond the classroom helps increase faculty motivation to improve student learning. As noted by Priddy (2007), by “cultivating the abilities of faculty and academic administrators to assess and improve student learning, institutions intentionally and persistently develop deep institutional commitment to, shared responsibility for, and collective capacity for improving student learning, educational effectiveness, and organizational quality,” (p. 62). Faculty and administration can make improvements in curriculum, instruction, and student support services if assessment data suggest the need for such changes. Having their perceptions towards assessment actively reflect their institution’s values towards assessment could lead to better quality education.

Purpose

Huba and Freed (2000) suggest that a learning centered culture cannot be developed without support of faculty’s personal assessment efforts and an equal desire to improve at the institutional level. Borden and Pike (2008) suggest collaboration and understanding is needed between all constituents to develop a commitment to improvement. When an individual

professor takes on the challenge of being the lone reformer on their campus, their efforts may fizzle if the institution does not support and encourage reflective teaching. Likewise, when institutional leaders institute top-down assessment initiatives aimed at evaluating student learning, they are not likely to see results if faculty members are not on board.

Clarity regarding institutional assessment efforts—what the institution is measuring and how—is important in framing the faculty view of assessment. While most faculty have a general sense of assessment as a concept (Ewell, 2009), many struggle to see the applicability to their own work (Hutchings, 2010). Even amongst faculty, Wood (2006) suggests there is confusion about what learning outcomes mean and how they should be assessed. Faculty often assume they are ‘speaking the same language’ with other faculty when it comes to assessment without consideration of the contextual variables of their disciplines. Intervention by an institution becomes essential for building shared language and understanding across disciplines (Hutchings, 2010).

There is little empirical evidence about faculty perceptions of institutional participation in assessment and nothing that we know of connecting these perceptions to faculty participation in assessment activities. So, the purpose of this study is to look at the relationship between faculty perceptions of institutional participation in assessment and faculty level of involvement in assessment-related activities in their courses. We were guided by the following research questions: How do faculty perceptions of their institutions’ involvement in assessment relate to their own involvement in assessment-related activities in their courses?

Data Source

Data for this study come from the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), an annual survey designed to collect information about faculty members’ expectations and

perceptions of students, as well as information about how they structure their classroom activities, and how they divide the time devoted to professional activities (e.g., teaching, advising, and research). The FSSE instrument is administered online, and takes about 15 minutes to complete. Faculty members are contacted up to four times and their responses are kept anonymous to their institutions to encourage participation and ensure confidentiality of faculty members.

Specifically, we draw on faculty responses from 46 FSSE 2009 participating institutions that administered a set of extra questions regarding perceptions of institutional assessment efforts and faculty involvement in the scholarship of teaching and learning. These institutions vary by Carnegie classification, regional location, and size of enrollment.

Measures

We measured perceptions of institutional involvement in assessment using responses to the following questions.

- To what extent is your institution involved in student assessment efforts?
(4 = Very much, 3 = Quite a bit, 2 = Some, 1 = Very little)
- How effectively does your institution disseminate the findings of its assessment efforts to faculty? (5-point scale; anchors: 5 = Very effectively, 1 = Not at all effectively)
- In general, how useful to you are the findings from your institution's assessment efforts?
(5-point scale; anchors: 5 = Very useful, 1 = Not at all useful)
- To what extent are results from your institution's assessment efforts used to inform the following? (4 = Very much, 3 = Quite a bit, 2 = Some, 1 = Very little)
 - Institutional activities aimed at improving teaching and learning
 - Your department's activities aimed at improving teaching and learning

Combined, these items form a reliable scale of faculty perceptions of the quality of their institutions' assessment efforts ($\alpha = 0.85$).

The key independent variable of interest was faculty members' own involvement in assessment in their courses, which we measured using the extent to which they systematically collected information about the effectiveness of their teaching beyond end-of-term course evaluations. Faculty members responded to this item on a four-point scale (1 = Very little, 2 = Some, 3 = Quite a bit, 4 = Very much) and were grouped by their responses, with those answering "Very much" serving as the reference group. Faculty and institutional characteristics were used to examine differences amongst responses.

Sample Population

After deleting cases for missing data, the sample for this study consisted of 3,335 faculty members. About 45% of the respondents were female. Three-fourths (76%) were White, with 5% African American, 1% American Indian, 6% Asian, 3% Hispanic, 1% Other, 1% Multiracial, and 8% indicated a preference not to identify race/ethnicity. Nearly one-tenth (8%) were non-U.S. citizens and 28% did not have a doctorate. Various ranks were represented with 12% of the respondents being part-time instructors, 10% full-time instructors, 28% assistant professors, 25% associate professors, and 24% full professors. The number of courses taught by faculty during the academic year ranged from 1 to 18 with an average of 6 courses. Faculty primarily came from the arts and sciences (33% in arts and humanities, 7% in biological sciences, 13% in physical sciences, and 17% in social sciences), with about 31% in the professional fields of interest (11% in business, 9% in education, 5% in engineering, and 5% in nursing).

Analysis

We used descriptive statistics to examine differences in faculty responses to the specific perception items by their level of involvement in assessment. Due to the nested nature of our data (faculty within institutions), we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to partition the between and within institution variance (thus accounting for institutional differences) and examined differences in a standardization of the overall perception of assessment efforts scale by level of involvement with assessment controlling for a host of faculty characteristics (gender, race, citizenship status, age, whether one had a doctorate, rank and employment status, course load, field, whether one taught graduate students, and the average time one prepared for each course taught).

Limitations

A couple of limitations are worth noting for this study. Generalization of the results beyond the faculty and institutions who participated in the study should be exercised with caution due to the fact that participants volunteer to be a part of the study and are not randomly selected. Fortunately, the 49 institutions included in this study represent a wide cross-section of U.S. four-year colleges and universities where, in nearly all instances, all undergraduate teaching faculty or simply all faculty members were surveyed. Also, the study is based upon a secondary analysis of an extra item set devoted to ‘the scholarship of teaching and learning’ with questions focused on assessment practices; therefore, findings do warrant some caution. Given our findings, it appears that faculty assessment practices are shaped by institutional efforts around assessment.

Results

From the descriptive analyses, faculty were spread fairly evenly across the four levels of involvement in classroom assessment: 17% indicated “Very little,” 33% “Some,” 28% “Quite a bit,” and 23% “Very much.” In terms of faculty perceptions, we found, for example, that 40% of faculty members indicated that their institutions were “Very much” involved in student assessment efforts, while 35% indicated “Quite a bit,” 22% indicated “Some,” and only 3% indicated “Very little.”

Among those faculty members that reported that they were “Very much” involved in systematically collecting information about their own teaching effectiveness beyond end of course evaluations, 59% thought their institutions were “Very much” involved in student assessment efforts, while only 12% indicated “Some.” Among those who were involved “Very little” in classroom assessment, over half (55%) indicated that their institutions were involved “Very little” or “Some” in assessment efforts. The full results from this item are presented in Table 1. Similar relationships were evident for each of the perception items and faculty levels of involvement in classroom assessment. See Tables 2 through 5 for complete results of the other perception items.

The differences by classroom assessment level hold up even after controlling for faculty characteristics. According to our HLM modeling, 91% of the variance in the perceptions of institutional assessment efforts was at the individual level (9% was between institutions). The model accounted for 19% of the individual level variance, with the strongest relationship existing between classroom assessment level and faculty perceptions of institutional assessment efforts. Compared to faculty who indicated that they were involved “Very much” in classroom assessment, those that indicated “Very little” in classroom assessment scored nearly a standard

deviation lower ($B = -0.99, p < 0.001$). The relationship is nearly linear with successive groups being separated by about a third of a standard deviation ($B = -0.64, p < 0.001$, for those that indicated “Some” involvement in classroom assessment, and $B = -0.36, p < 0.001$, for those who indicate “Quite a bit” of involvement), suggesting that the faculty who were more involved in assessment in their classrooms believed more strongly in their institutions’ assessment efforts. Complete results from the HLM model are presented in Table 6.

Discussion & Conclusions

The connection between faculty perceptions of institutional involvement in assessment efforts and faculty’s level of involvement in assessing their own teaching effectiveness is telling. It suggests that faculty members who perceive an institutional culture of evidence—signified by high institutional involvement in assessing student learning—also incorporate assessment into their own work. Welsh and Metcalf (2003) found that motivation to participate in assessment activities was highly correlated with perceptions of how these practices would benefit stakeholders. In addition, there are institutional circumstances that impede the development of a culture of evidence. Many colleges struggle with the process of actually collecting and analyzing data (Priddy, 2007). Institutional turnover and staffing are common issues that often contribute to the difficulty of gathering useful data. When new hires arrive, the emphasis placed on data-driven decision making may be overshadowed by the desire to ease into a job. Even when faculty buy-in to the concept, a lack of training or professional development can discourage faculty from pursuing innovative ideas; this makes it difficult to advocate for a culture of evidence as an institutional priority (Priddy, 2007). Our results suggest that faculty who are able to see an institutional commitment to assessment practices, are more likely to practice assessment-related

behaviors and/or their involvement in assessment practices helps breed institutional practice and commitment.

Institutional encouragement is often cited as the primary obstacle for engaging in the work of assessment (Hutchings, 2010). An emphasis on research in the tenure process is seen as discouraging the prioritization of assessment in the faculty agenda (Daly, 1994; Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997; Henderson & Buchanan, 2007), which decreases faculty engagement in their own teaching practice (Hatch, 2006). Developing faculty awareness of institutional assessment efforts and appreciation for the utility of assessment results may help spark faculty interest and engagement in assessment work. If institutions want to improve student learning, faculty must be key players in that discussion (Banta, Griffin, Flateby, & Kahn, 2009).

Given the findings of this study, we offer the following:

1. Institutions should demonstrate the value of assessing student learning to internal audiences (Hutchings, 2010). External demands for accountability make it is easy to lose focus on internal stakeholders, but it is this group that is able to help ingrain a culture of evidence on campus (Palomba & Banta, 1999).
2. It is important to note that a culture of evidence does not have to begin at the top. The connection between faculty perceptions of institutional involvement in assessment and faculty's own assessment practices suggest that faculty members may adopt institutional values. However, it may also suggest that faculty have the power to influence institutional values (Driscoll & Wood, 2007; Wood, 2006).
3. A shared commitment to assessment work and student learning requires shared responsibility on the part of everyone involved (Burke, 2005b). Effective teaching entails more than just reflecting on one's teaching practices. It requires sharing information with

others and engaging in dialogue about student learning (Astin et al., 1996). Conversations about student learning help build a reciprocal ‘teaching connection’ and shared responsibility for student learning between the institution and faculty (Angelo, 2002; Gardiner, 2002).

4. Findings from this study suggest the variation within an institution is greater than the differences across institutional type. This is not surprising given the common need for quality assurance across most institutions, even with differences in contextual variables (Adelman, 2008; Atlbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Ewell, 2009). This suggests that, so far, institutions are not so different in their approach to assessment work.

Finally, it is unclear, from our results, who mirrors whom. It may be that the amount of institutional emphasis on assessment encourages faculty to incorporate assessment into their own work. Alternatively, faculty involvement in assessment work may enhance their awareness and knowledge of institutional assessment initiatives. Further research should be done to clarify this relationship.

This paper offers a point of discussion for one major concern that has risen to the top of the public agenda; what factors contribute to the success in assessing student learning? While the question appears very simple in nature, looking at this problem with one viewpoint cannot be the only mechanism by which these items are analyzed and judged. Therefore, this study served in an exploratory capacity to tackle such a question. Faculty can make improvements in curriculum, instruction, and student support services with the support of institutional decision makers who place emphasis on assessment as a core concept of scholarly practice.

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Table 1: Faculty perceptions of institutional participation in student evaluation by self-reported involvement in classroom assessment.

		To what extent is your institution involved in student assessment efforts?			
		Very little	Some	Quite a bit	Very much
Extent faculty incorporated systematically collecting information about the effectiveness of their teaching beyond end-of-term course evaluations	Very little (N=549)	6%	33%	36%	25%
	Some (N=1098)	3%	26%	38%	32%
	Quite a bit (N=918)	2%	18%	38%	42%
	Very much (N=770)	3%	12%	26%	59%

Table 2: Faculty perceptions of effectiveness of institutional distribution of assessment practices by self-reported involvement in classroom assessment.

		How effectively does your institution disseminate the findings of its assessment efforts to faculty?				
		Not at all effectively	2	3	4	Very effectively
Extent faculty incorporated systematically collecting information about the effectiveness of their teaching beyond end-of-term course evaluations	Very little (N=549)	24%	29%	26%	17%	5%
	Some (N=1098)	13%	25%	36%	19%	6%
	Quite a bit (N=918)	11%	19%	31%	28%	11%
	Very much (N=770)	10%	16%	25%	26%	23%

Table 3: Faculty perceptions of usefulness of institutional assessment findings by self-reported involvement in classroom assessment.

		In general, how useful to you are the findings from your institution's assessment efforts?				
		Not at all useful	2	3	4	Very useful
Extent faculty incorporated systematically collecting information about the effectiveness of their teaching beyond end-of-term course evaluations	Very little (N=549)	30%	30%	24%	11%	4%
	Some (N=1098)	14%	28%	35%	18%	5%
	Quite a bit (N=918)	12%	22%	29%	28%	10%
	Very much (N=770)	10%	15%	25%	28%	22%

Table 4: Faculty perceptions of departmental use of assessment results to improve teaching and learning by self-reported involvement in classroom assessment.

		To what extent are assessment results used to inform your department's activities aimed at improving teaching and learning?			
		Very little	Some	Quite a bit	Very much
Extent faculty incorporated systematically collecting information about the effectiveness of their teaching beyond end-of-term course evaluations	Very little (N=549)	37%	38%	17%	8%
	Some (N=1098)	20%	41%	28%	11%
	Quite a bit (N=918)	14%	31%	37%	19%
	Very much (N=770)	13%	21%	22%	45%

Table 5: Faculty perceptions of the extent assessment results are used to improve teaching and learning by self-reported involvement in classroom assessment.

		To what extent are assessment results to inform institutional activities aimed at improving teaching and learning?			
		Very little	Some	Quite a bit	Very much
Extent faculty incorporated systematically collecting information about the effectiveness of their teaching beyond end-of-term course evaluations	Very little (N=549)	28%	44%	20%	8%
	Some (N=1098)	16%	49%	26%	8%
	Quite a bit (N=918)	13%	36%	37%	14%
	Very much (N=770)	10%	26%	26%	38%

Table 6: Faculty perceptions of the quality of their institutions' assessment efforts (full model)

Faculty Characteristics	Coefficient	Institutional Characteristics	Coefficient
Race		Institutional Type	
African American	0.410 ***	Research University	0.128
Asian	0.313 ***	Master's University	0.235
Hispanic	0.054	Bachelor's University	reference group
Other	-0.018	Private	0.125
No race indicated	-0.203 ***	Size	-0.003
Foreign	0.306 ***	Competitiveness	-0.031
White	reference group	Region	
Female	-0.079 *	Great Lakes	0.114
Age	0.009 ***	Plains	0.197
Doctorate Degree Achieved	-0.183 ***	Southeast	0.293
Rank		West	0.141
Full-Time Lecturer	-0.094	Mid East	reference group
Assistant Professor	-0.178 *		
Associate Professor	-0.281 ***		
Full Professor	-0.295 ***		
Part-Time Lecturer	reference group		
Number of courses taught	0.000		
Teach graduate courses	0.058		
Discipline			
Arts & Sciences	-0.131 **		
Biology	-0.067		
Physical Science	-0.149 **		
Sociology	-0.126 *		
Business	-0.022		
English	0.053		
Nursing	0.161		
Engineering	reference group		
Preparation time per course	0.001		
Involvement with classroom assessment			
Very little	-0.985 ***		
Some	-0.639 ***		
Quite a bit	-0.357 ***		
Very much	reference group		

Note. Intercept = -0.212. Variance Components: variance between institutions = 0.104; variance within institutions = 0.747; reliability-intercept = 0.862.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$