Assessment for Improvement: Faculty Perceptions of Institutional Participation in Assessment by Field

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Abstract

Using data from 3,377 faculty members that participated in the 2009 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, this study found that faculty perceptions of institutional participation in assessment greatly differed by field. Specifically, disciplines that have a program accreditation tied to it were typically more aware of institutional assessment practices. Findings serve as a point of exploration for researchers and practitioners involved in institutional assessment and self-study efforts. Implications for future research include a need to look at a broader range of disciplines and explore perceptions of assessment efforts at the discipline level.

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Assessment by Field

In a study of 264 colleges and universities that participated in accreditation assessment workshops, it was observed that institutions that were successful in improving student learning through assessment, "intentionally and persistently develop deep institutional commitment to, shared responsibility for, and collective capacity for improving student learning, educational effectiveness, and organizational quality" (Priddy, 2007, p. 62). Borden and Pike (2008) suggest that a shared responsibility for student learning helps build an understanding between institutions and their faculty of the role of assessment. The gap that exists between these two parties—those who make decisions based on assessment data and those who implement the results of those decisions—reflects distrust towards the opposing party's interest and an occasional misperception of the other's responsibility (Ewell; 2009; Trow, 1996). Those who "work on both sides of the fence" tend to have a better understanding of what motivates and encourages each side to engage in the work of quality assurance as a means of improving the student experience (Borden & Pike, 2008, p. 85). Programmatic accreditors not only work on both sides of the fence, but they also choose the colors, materials, and layout of this metaphoric fence. Professional degree programs (e.g. nursing, business, etc.) with program-specific accreditation processes have defined outcomes, assessment measures, training and development expectations for faculty, and knowledge of employment opportunities awaiting their graduates (Bresciani, 2006; Ewell, 2008b). For these disciplines, faculty practices in the classroom are easier to tie to institutional planning and accreditation efforts (Ewell, 2008b; Palomba, 2001). Conversely, assessing student learning in the liberal arts and sciences has not proven to be as easy (American Council on Education [ACE], 2006; Borden & Young, 2007).

Government agencies have become less interested in sponsoring art and social science research and more interested in the assessment of "relevance" or direct applicability (Ewell, 2008b), which in turn influences institutional goals (Milam, 2005). Faculty, however, have differing opinions from institutional leaders about what students should learn and how the quality of those experiences should be judged or measured (Palomba, 2001). Critical thinking in Biology cannot be measured the same as it would be in English (Borden & Young, 2007); consequently, connecting course level learning outcomes to big-picture, institutional perceptions of assessment may prove to be difficult. It is unclear if perceptions of institutional commitment to assessment influence liberal arts and science programs the way specialized accreditation requirements have influenced the assessment practices of professional fields. Therefore learning if faculty perceptions of institutional participation in assessment differ by discipline would contribute to the growing public interest in assessment and accountability in higher education. To address this topic, this paper explores faculty members' perceptions of institutional assessment by conducting secondary analysis of items from the Faculty of Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE).

Review of Literature

Assessment has been a part of accountability mandates since the 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which required accrediting bodies to incorporate learning outcomes assessment into their standards in order to comply with U.S. Department of Education demands for quality assurance (Ewell, 2005). Fueled by the former Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (Spellings Commission), demands for greater accountability and effectiveness have resurfaced in higher education circles (Adelman, 2008; Borden & Pike, 2008; Borden & Young, 2008, McCormick, 2009). To make sense of accountability, one must

first understand institutional assessment systems (Banta, Griffin, Flateby, & Kahn, 2009; Wolff, 2005). Ewell (2009) suggests that assessment initiatives usually fulfill two complementary but often conflicting purposes: continuous improvement and external accountability. Higher education has struggled with these two purposes of accountability and has subsequently focused on compliance (Ewell, 2005). External pressures for institutional accountability force campus leaders and senior administrators to respond. This response often comes in the form of top-down decisions to institute some type of campus assessment initiative without the support and investment from those most responsible for the quality of the educational experience, the faculty (Ewell, 2008).

Assessment practices in higher education have been called cyclical, inconsistently evaluated, and loosely enforced (Burke, 2005; Ewell, 2009; Ewell & Jones, 2006; Hutchings, 2010). It has been described as an add-on task asked of faculty for the purpose of public accountability (Suskie, 2004). Gelmon (1997) notes that assessment and accountability are topics that promote a vast range of faculty responses "from religious fervor to extreme distaste to complete cynicism" (p. 51). Creating a shift in assessment practices has proven to be difficult because faculty see these mandates as intrusive of their educational expertise (Palomba & Banta, 1999) and too demanding on their already stretched time and energy (Hutchings, 2010). The cultural gap that exists between faculty values and institutional values can only be closed by building trust, respect, and a shared responsibility towards student learning (Trow, 1996). Developing faculty awareness of institutional assessment efforts and appreciation for the utility of assessment results is inexplicably important because faculty play key roles in improving the quality of curriculum, teaching and learning (Banta et al., 2009; Burke, 2005b; Ewell, 2002).

Regardless of the reasons for resistance towards assessment, there is a clear indication that assessment mandates are a solid part of the public agenda (Borden & Pike, 2008; Burke, 2005; Ewell, 2002) and institutions must respond. The need for quality assurance and the calls for increased external accountability are common to all institutions, despite differences in size, purpose, and structure (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Dill, 2000). Banta, Black, and Kline (2001) note that institutions of higher education, "like every other service in which the public invest, need to provide credible evidence of the value and effectiveness of its program" (p.1). Credible evidence comes from having an improvement-centered mindset towards the assessment of student learning (Banta, 2004).

The ultimate goal of assessment is to produce evidence that can be used for both reporting and improving student learning (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Care must be taken to develop a meaningful assessment plan that decides both what will be collected and how it will be used. When the assessment practices at the department level are aligned with mandated reporting mechanisms, it is easier to tie to institutional planning, budgeting, and strategic efforts (Ewell, 1994). In essence, the relationship between the faculty and the institution becomes reciprocal; awareness of both institutional and departmental commitment to assessment is born.

Pressures for more external accountability represent an important opportunity for higher education to engage faculty in conversations about student learning and campus assessment practices (Borden & Pike, 2008). These conversations are essential for getting faculty to take charge of student learning and suggest ways to improve the process of assessment (Burke, 2005b). One known communication barrier between institutions and faculty is the language of assessment itself (Hutchings, 2010). It 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).

How can faculty see the value of assessment if they don't understand how it fits into improving their discipline? This question becomes particularly important when considering the liberal arts and social science disciplines; conversely, specialized (program) accreditors specify resource requirements including faculty qualification, equipment resources, and assessment practices in order to maintain accreditation and seek licensure (Ewell, 2002). Faculty need more than just intended outcomes of students in their program. Ewell (1997) posits assessment is valuable when collective information about student learning can be benchmarked, assessed longitudinally, and used to determine which patterns work best.

Program accreditors are at the forefront of the assessment movement and in their position, exert great influence over program and institutional improvement efforts (Palomba & Banta, 2001). When professional accreditators establish expectations and standards, those understandings tend to trickle down from the national level to the state, the institution, the department, and into the classroom (Diez, 2001). Therefore, the institution and faculty share a similar understanding of the assessment practices of that discipline. A discipline tied to program accreditation is required to show evidence of engagement in continuous self-assessment of its entire program and demonstrate evidence that the results of the assessment efforts are used towards program planning and curriculum design (Ewell, 2008b). The relationship between an institution and the faculty becomes inherent through the assessment practices (Baskind, Shank, & Ferraro, 2001). In accredited disciplines, faculty are typically supported with budget resources that assist in attending professional meetings and remaining current in accreditation nuances (Baskind, Shank, Ferraro, 2001). While the primary purpose of these meetings is to engage in the work of accreditation, these meetings allow for professional development and strengthen

disciplinary investment. It is unclear if these same types of support systems exist or are encouraged in disciplines where program accreditation is not required.

Purpose of the Study

Assessment, when focused on improvement, invites faculty to help determine the extent to which students are acquiring the knowledge and skills the academy collectively deems important for the department or discipline (Palomba, 2001). Very few accountability initiatives have involved faculty in conversations about the use of assessments as evidence of institutional effectiveness (Banta et al., 2009; Borden & Pike, 2008). As Banta et al. (2009) write, "this seems almost incomprehensible since it is faculty who determine students' learning experiences and who continuously assess students' learning" (p. 6). As institutions of higher education answer the call to incorporate assessment into their institutional culture, the value faculty place on assessment becomes critical to quality assurance (Banta et al., 2009; Suskie, 2004). True assessment starts and finishes with faculty having conversations about what students should know, be able to articulate, and accomplish as a result of completing the program or major (Palomba, 2001). Understanding faculty perceptions of assessment initiatives can provide guidance in the process of instituting assessment initiatives.

The purpose of this study is to better understand differences by field in faculty perceptions of institutional assessment efforts. We were guided by the following research question: How do faculty members perceive their institutions' involvement in assessment and how does this vary by field?

Methods

Data Source

The data for this study come from the 2009 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE). FSSE is 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 to encourage desirable learning outcomes and behaviors, and how they divide the time devoted to professional activities (e.g., teaching, advising, and research). In 2009, close to 19,000 faculty from 148 baccalaureate-granting institutions responded to one of the two survey options FSSE offers to participating institutions. For this study data come from institutions that selected either option (for information about FSSE survey options visit www.fsse.iub.edu). In addition to the core FSSE instrument, participating institutions had the option to administer an additional set of items related to the institutional assessment efforts and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL). Specifically, we draw on faculty responses from 46 institutions that participated in FSSE 2009 and administered these extra questions. We focus on the following questions faculty members were asked as a part of the extra item set:

- To what extent is your institution involved in student assessment efforts?
- How effectively does your institution disseminate the findings of its assessment efforts to faculty?
- In general, how useful to you are the findings from your institution's assessment efforts?
- To what extent are results from your institution's assessment efforts used to inform the following?
  - Institutional activities aimed at improving teaching and learning

o   Your department's activities aimed at improving teaching and learning

Data Analysis

Combined, these items form a reliable scale of faculty perceptions of the quality of their institutions' assessment efforts (alpha = 0.84). The items and combined scale were the dependent measures for this study.

The key independent variable of interest was field. Since accreditation is thought to be a driver of assessment efforts (Ewell, 2002), we sought to determine whether faculty perceptions of assessment varied between fields that had their own accrediting bodies (business, education, engineering, and nursing) and traditional disciplinary areas that generally do not have field-specific accreditation (arts and humanities, biological science, physical science, and social science).

We used simple descriptive statistics to examine differences in faculty responses to the specific items by field. 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 by field for a standardization of the overall perception of assessment efforts scale controlling for a host of faculty characteristics (gender, race, citizenship status, age, whether one had a doctorate, rank and employment status, course load, whether one taught graduate students, and the average time one prepared for each course taught). See Table 1 for descriptions of the independent variables. With only 46 institutions, effects at the institution level were difficult to detect (preliminary modeling at level 2, with institutional type, control, selectivity, and region, yielded no significant differences).

Limitations

There are three primary limitations that pertain to this study. First, institutions and faculty volunteer to participate in FSSE. This suggests that generalizations beyond the institutions and faculty in this study should be viewed with caution. Second, by drawing data from both survey options, variables that appear on both options were the only variables that could be used. Third, the fact that this study is a secondary analysis of an extra item set with questions focused on faculty perceptions of institutional behavior, does warrant some caution. Given our findings, it appears that faculty perceptions of their institutions are shaped, in part, by field. However, it is also possible that faculty do not separate well distinctions between, for example, university, college, and department level actors. If they do not, this obviously complicates the meaning of our dependent measures.

Sample Population

After deleting cases for missing data, the sample for this study consisted of 3,377 faculty members. About 44% of the respondents were female. Three-fourths (75%) were White, with 5% Black or African American, 6% Asian American or Pacific Islander, 3% Hispanic, 3% Other, 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 lecturers or instructors, 10% full-time lecturers or instructors, 28% assistant professors, 25% associate professors, and 25% full professors. The number of courses taught by faculty during the academic year ranged from 0 to 18 with an average of 6 courses. Faculty primarily came from the arts and sciences (34% in arts and humanities, 7% in biological sciences, 14% in physical sciences, and 18% in social sciences), with about 28% in the

professional fields of interest (12% in business, 9% in education, 5% in engineering, and 3% in nursing).

Results

From the descriptive analyses (see Table 2), we found that 75% of faculty members believed their institutions were involved in assessment efforts quite a bit or very much. This varied from 70% in the social sciences to 80% in business, education, and engineering. This split between the arts and sciences and the professional fields was generally apparent across the other measures as well. For example, 28% of faculty members in the biological and social sciences responded with a 4 or 5 on a five-point scale (5 = Very effective) indicating how effective their institutions were at disseminating assessment findings, while the similar percentage for engineering faculty was 44%. Additionally, while only 26% of arts and humanities and biological science faculty responded with a 4 or 5 on a five-point scale (5 = Very useful) indicating how useful institutional assessment findings were to them, the similar percentage for business faculty was 43%.

Interestingly, the proportions of nursing faculty who felt that assessment findings were used "Quite a bit" or "Very often" by their institution (60%) and their department (69%) to improve teaching and learning was much higher than other fields. The similar percentages for other professional fields were around 50% and around 40% for the arts and sciences fields.

The differences by field are significant and of modest size, even after controlling for faculty characteristics. According to our HLM modeling, 91% of the variance in the perceptions of assessment efforts scale was at the individual level (9% was between institutions). While only accounting for 7% of the individual level variance, our model (see Table 3) suggested significant variation in faculty perceptions of assessment efforts by field. Using education as the reference

group and controlling for numerous faculty characteristics, all of the arts and sciences fields scored about a quarter of a standard deviation below education ($B_{arts \& humanities}$ = -0.28, $B_{biological sciences}$ = -0.23, $B_{physical sciences}$ = -0.29, and $B_{social sciences}$ = -0.25; all $p < 0.001$). However, no significant differences were found among the four professional fields, though it is worth noting that business scored below education ($B = -0.14$, $p = 0.07$) and nursing scored above education ($B = 0.09$, $p = 0.54$).

Discussion and Implications

Given the relationship between program accreditation and assessment (Ewell, 2008b), it is expected that institutions need to seek better ways of making evidence gathering a regular practice in the liberal arts and sciences. However, resistance and obstacles that can impede the success of an institution's goals may accompany promoting change in assessment practices (Maurer, 2006). This is because a shift in processes requires embracing new ways of operating and getting outside one's comfort zone (Hutchings, 2010).

Day and Klein (1987) argue that an increased interest in assessment also leads to greater confusion about who should be held accountable and for what purpose assessment is enacted. Many disciplines struggle with the process of actually collecting and analyzing data (Brock et al., 2007; Priddy, 2007). Institutional assessment is made sense of under the direction of two types of stakeholders: (1) the faculty and (2) the institution. Higher education has operated in a "knowledge vacuum" (Adelman, 2008). By acknowledging that faculty perceptions of institutional assessment vary by discipline, it is evident that a 'one size fits all' approach to assessment may not equally benefit different disciplines, faculty, or students. Aligning faculty attitudes toward assessment with institutional values toward assessment could improve the quality of undergraduate education (Palomba & Banta, 1999).

Hutchings (2010) concludes that "there is no single best way to support greater faculty engagement with assessment" (p. 17), yet offers several tactics that campuses can use to both peak faculty interest in assessment and better prepare faculty members to complete assessment initiatives. The results of this study are useful for campus administrators, faculty and assessment experts who are charged with the task of incorporating assessment efforts into a campus community, and struggle with the issue of gaining faculty support of assessment efforts. By understanding how faculty perceive assessment efforts and how these perceptions vary by discipline, administrators can gain a better understanding of areas where they can improve their communication with faculty regarding the assessment process.

Based on the findings from this study, we offer the following recommendations for improving the relationship between faculty and institutional assessment efforts:

1. Continue or start to use discipline-specific accreditation as a lever to improve use of and demand for institutional assessment in fields that have their own accrediting bodies.

2. Start a dialogue about what kinds of processes could be put in place in liberal arts and sciences fields (e.g., using disciplinary associations) to increase pressure on faculty to understand and use assessment findings.

3. Find ways for faculty to collaborate on projects that invite questions about departmental and institutional effectiveness (e.g., examining department or institutional requirements). These experiences will promote dialogue about assessment and conversations about what students should learn.

4. Invite skeptical liberal arts faculty to participate in discussions about institutional assessment and student learning. Involving faculty in institutional assessment efforts strengthens institutional commitment to and promotes shared responsibility for

improvement (Priddy, 2007). Winning some converts from among the skeptical could prove to be a powerful incentive for other faculty to pay attention.

5. Aim for institution-wide consensus on assessment goals by being clearer about educational learning outcomes and choices regarding how to assess them. Faculty and administrators should work together to make the changes warranted by assessment data.

6. Encourage faculty, particularly those in the arts and sciences, to share their own assessment initiatives more broadly at the institution level. Huba and Freed (2000) caution 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. As suggested by Priddy (2007), institutions must have champions and advocates of assessment as well as processes in place to support locally developed assessment tools. When institutional leaders institute top-down assessment initiatives aimed at evaluating student learning, they are not likely to see results if faculty members and academic administrators are not on board.

7. Assure faculty that exposing inconsistent links between discipline and assessment practices will be targeted for improvement rather than punished.

8. Embed measures promoting assessment into institutional practices and policies in a way that allows for disciplinary variation.

9. Sponsor faculty development programs to help faculty build a greater understanding of how assessment can facilitate improvement.

Conclusion

This paper presented findings related to faculty perceptions of institutional participation in assessment and compared these perceptions across disciplines, finding that fields with external

accrediting bodies appear to have more positive perceptions of institutional assessment efforts. This study was primarily exploratory in nature. The findings presented should serve as a starting point for further examination of institutional assessment efforts by field of study and the connection between discipline-based processes with attention to assessment (e.g. accreditation), as well as faculty perceptions and practices. Active discussion with faculty, administrators and staff about student learning could benefit those responsible for accreditation and self-study efforts. Faculty can make improvements in teaching and learning while also aligning with the values, goals, and assessment efforts of the institution. Having accountability actively reflect their institution's values towards assessment could lead to better quality in higher education.

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Table 1
Variable Descriptions

Variable	Description
Female	1 = Female (44%), 0 = Male (56%)
Race/ethnicity[a]	Black or African American (5%); Asian American or Pacific Islander (6%); Hispanic (3%); Other (3%); Preferred not to answer (8%); White* (75%)
Non-U.S. citizen	1 = non-U.S. citizen (8%); 0 = U.S. citizen (92%)
Age	Age in years (mean = 50, sd = 11)
Doctorate	1 = Doctorate earned (72%); 0 = No doctorate (28%)
Rank and employment status[a]	PT lecturer/instructor* (12%); FT lecturer/instructor (10%); Assistant professor (28%); Associate professor (25%); Professor (25%)
Course load	Number of courses taught in 2008-09 (mean = 6, sd = 3)
Hours of prep per course taught	Hours of prep in a typical week divided by average course load per term (mean = 3, sd = 3)
Taught graduate students	1 = Taught graduate courses (37%); 0 = Did not teach graduates (63%)
Field[a]	Arts and humanities (34%); Biological sciences (7%); Physical sciences (14%); Social sciences (18%); Business (12%); Education* (9%); Engineering (5%); Nursing (3%)

[a] Each category coded dichotomously with reference group indicated by an asterisk.

Table 2
Faculty Perceptions of Institutional Assessment Involvement, Dissemination, and Usefulness

Field	Percentage of faculty who believed…				
	Institution involved in student assessment efforts a lot[a]	Institution effectively disseminates findings[b]	Institutional assessment findings were useful[c]	Institutional assessment findings used a lot by institution[a]	Institutional assessment findings used a lot by department[a]
Arts and humanities	75%	31%	26%	43%	45%
Biological sciences	73%	28%	26%	39%	44%
Physical sciences	71%	30%	27%	37%	42%
Social sciences	70%	28%	30%	41%	42%
Business	80%	43%	43%	52%	56%
Education	80%	42%	41%	52%	58%
Engineering	80%	44%	35%	48%	50%
Nursing	79%	34%	42%	60%	69%
Total	75%	33%	31%	44%	47%

[a] Percentages represent those that responded "Quite a bit" or "Very Much
[b] Percentage represents those that responded 4 or 5 on a scale ranging from 1 = "Not al all effectively" to 5 = "Very effectively."
[c] Percentage represents those that responded 4 or 5 on a scale ranging from 1 = "Not at all useful" to 5 = "Very useful."

Table 3

Level-1 Findings for Regression Model Predicting Faculty Perceptions of Institutional Involvement in Assessment (n = 3,377)

	Coefficient	Robust Standard Error	P-value
Constant	0.01	0.05	0.865
Female	-0.04	0.04	0.202
Race/ethnicity			
Black or African American	0.50	0.08	0.000
Asian American or Pacific Islander	0.42	0.07	0.000
Hispanic	0.08	0.09	0.393
Other	0.09	0.12	0.454
Preferred not to answer	-0.12	0.06	0.047
White	*reference group*		
Non-U.S. citizen	0.38	0.05	0.000
Age	0.01	0.00	0.000
Doctorate	-0.21	0.05	0.000
Rank and employment status			
PT lecturer/instructor	*reference group*		
FT lecturer/instructor	-0.09	0.08	0.243
Assistant professor	-0.15	0.09	0.104
Associate professor	-0.27	0.09	0.005
Professor	-0.25	0.09	0.005
Course load	0.01	0.01	0.147
Hours of preparation per course taught	0.01	0.01	0.026
Taught graduate students	0.08	0.04	0.026
Field			
Arts and humanities	-0.28	0.06	0.000
Biological sciences	-0.23	0.06	0.000
Physical sciences	-0.29	0.06	0.000
Social sciences	-0.25	0.07	0.001
Business	-0.14	0.08	0.071
Education	*reference group*		
Engineering	0.02	0.10	0.855
Nursing	0.09	0.15	0.543

Note. Dependent variable standardized prior to running model. 91% of the variance in the dependent variable was at level 1. The level-1 predictors explained 7% of the level-1 variance.