

DEPARTMENT CHAIR

INSIDE ▼

A RESOURCE FOR ACADEMIC ADMINISTRATORS

**Mindful Leadership Development:
Investing in the Academy**Christy Crutsinger, Angela K. Wilson,
Eugene Martin, Alan B. Albarran,
and Dawna Wilson | **3****Trends and Issues for Chairs:
An Eight-Year Study**Robert E. Cipriano
and Richard L. Riccardi | **5****The Challenges of Chairing Today**Domenick Pinto | **7****Informal Support Groups for Chairs**Emily Detmer-Goebel | **8****Technology Survival Tools for Chairs**Pamela D. Wash | **11****Things I Miss (and Not) About Being
a Chair**N. Douglas Lees | **13****Unbundling, Disruptive Innovation,
and the Chair**Jeffrey L. Buller | **16****CATS: A New Take on "Herding"
Faculty**R. Kent Crookston | **18****SPECIAL TOPICS:****DEPARTMENT CULTURE**

- Strategies for Enhancing
Diversity in the Academic
Department

Edna Chun and Alvin Evans | **20**

- Academic Leaders Shaping
Work-Life Culture

Laura Koppes Bryan
and Cheryl A. Wilson | **21**

- New Faculty Induction:
More Than Orientation

Mary C. Clement | **23****Lawsuits and Rulings | 26****Book Reviews | 29****Supplemental Charts | 18, 24, 27**

Assessment: How to Survive It and Benefit from It

ROBERT A. BLUMENTHAL

Assessment of student learning outcomes is something with which every chair must grapple. Colleges and universities are under increasing pressure from the various regional accrediting agencies to demonstrate that students are, in fact, learning what we claim they are learning. This requires that each degree program identify a set of desired outcomes, design a means of assessing each outcome, determine a desired standard of achievement, report the results of the assessment, and interpret the results.

All too often, faculty see this exercise as just another hoop through which to jump in order to satisfy the requirements of accreditation. As a result, it becomes a mindless activity for the purpose of satisfying what are felt to be arbitrary bureaucratic regulations. This then becomes an unfortunate waste of time and energy on the part of those faculty members who were unlucky enough to have been asked by the chair to serve on the department's assessment committee. Everyone concerned feels put out, and the department has derived no benefit from the enterprise.

It doesn't have to be this way. It is essential that a department give some thought as to how it might benefit from an assessment strategy. Regional accrediting agencies generally allow a great deal of flexibility with regard to assessment strategies and their implementation. Departments must take advantage of this flexibility to devise assessment mechanisms that will truly enable them to obtain a better understanding of their degree programs and ways to improve them.

In my department, we have struggled with this for several years, and we have moved from a climate of compliance for the sake of satisfying institutional and accreditation regulations to a genuine appreciation of the value of an assessment mechanism that has been constructed for the purpose of program improvement. This article discusses that evolution. The aim is to provide guidance to department chairs on how to meet some of the challenges associated with assessment and to achieve faculty buy-in, as well as to offer some suggestions for constructing and implementing a meaningful assessment plan.

My department offers one degree program, the BS in mathematics. For this program we have a mission statement, a set of goals that speak to the mission, and various student learning outcomes that address these goals. It is these learning outcomes that are the focus of the assessment of our major program. For example, we feel it is important that our students acquire appropriate communication skills, and so one of our learning outcomes is: *The student will communicate mathematical ideas with clarity and coherence through both writing and speaking.* Our assessment task is then to determine if our students are in fact achieving this outcome as well as the other learning outcomes we have identified for our major program.

A few years ago, we addressed an issue that had become increasingly apparent to us during several cycles of the assessment of our student learning outcomes. Namely, our assessment efforts were needlessly complicated and not

as useful as they might be due to the fact that our major program had ten learning outcomes, which was far too many. Further exacerbating this matter was the fact that some of these learning outcomes were essentially not measurable, and so there was no way to determine if the outcome had been met. After a careful review by our department's assessment committee and in consultation with the faculty, we revised the learning outcomes to focus on what we consider to be four essential outcomes, all of which are measurable. This was a valuable exercise that involved careful consideration by the faculty of the outcomes they consider essential to our program. The sense of ownership of the outcomes that resulted from this led the faculty to be much more interested in determining if we are in fact meeting those outcomes. This, in turn, has led to greater faculty buy-in with regard to our annual assessment process.

In order to construct a coherent and useful assessment process, a department must come together to identify a set of learning outcomes that it deems essential to the program, that are measurable, and that are relatively small in number (my suggestion is three to five). For each outcome, the department must devise a means of assessing that outcome. For example, with regard to the communication learning outcome stated earlier, we chose a course that is required of all of our majors and embedded some problems into the final exam on which students will be evaluated not only for the correctness of their solutions but also for the clarity of their mathematical writing. A 0–4 scaled rubric was developed that is used by the department's assessment committee to assess the quality of this written work. For the speaking portion of the outcome, students are required to present the results of their senior research papers at our annual department student conference. The assessment committee evaluates the quality of these oral presentations using a 0–4 scaled rubric created for this purpose.

Once a means of assessment has been determined, the next step is to give some

thought to the level of achievement the department desires. For example, in the case of the communication outcome, the assessment committee determined that the desired standard of achievement is that at least 75% of the written solutions to the embedded problems will be rated 3 or higher. For the evaluation of the presentations, the desired standard is that at least 75% of the students' oral presentations will be rated 3 or higher. The committee felt that in each case this level of achievement would indicate that a clear majority of the students are meeting expectations.

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Once the data are collected and analyzed, the committee will easily be able to determine if the results indicate that the outcome was met. Either way, the next step in the process is the crucial one—the interpretation of the results. This is important for the purpose of institutional compliance with the requirements of the regional accrediting agencies, but even more so this step enables a department to gain a better understanding of the program and to develop meaningful strategies for its improvement. In assessment parlance, this is known as “closing the loop.” The department needs to analyze the data and undertake a consideration of which program changes or modifications will be made as a result of the analysis of the assessment data. The department might determine that no changes are needed, but

this determination will have resulted from an intentional process as opposed to just letting things go on as they have without examination.

The interpretation of the results is not the sole province of our assessment committee. We bring the whole department together to analyze and discuss the assessment data. These conversations have proved to be very fruitful, and out of them have come some useful ideas and strategies for improving our program. This has led to a high degree of faculty buy-in to our assessment efforts and to the use of assessment data as the primary driver of curricular change.

While this approach has greatly assisted our assessment efforts, there is still work to be done. Although each annual assessment report gives us meaningful information about our major program, we feel that each one represents a kind of isolated snapshot and that what is lacking is a sense of continuity from one year to the next. The reports do not allow for easy and natural comparisons from year to year. We want our assessment efforts to take a broader view that will allow us to monitor various important aspects of our program over time. As a result, our most recent assessment plan was constructed in such a way as to lay the groundwork for a more consistent approach to annual assessment with the aim of being able to track progress over an extended period. This approach will focus on a small set of key courses in the major and on the means of assessment that are consistent from year to year to enable us to track progress over a multiyear period. For each student learning outcome, the plan will provide annually a set of bullet points regarding possible future action based on the results of the assessment of that outcome. Subsequent assessment reports will address the effect of any such changes that were made.

There are many ways to construct an assessment mechanism from which a department can derive useful information about its program. No two departments are alike, and what works for one may not work for another. Here are some guiding

questions, based on an assessment evaluation rubric we use at Georgia College, that may be helpful to chairs as they work with their faculty to develop a system for annual assessment of student learning outcomes:

- Do the learning outcomes describe the knowledge, skills, and dispositions the department wishes the students to acquire?
- Is the number of outcomes relatively small?
- Are all of the outcomes measurable?
- Has the means of assessing each outcome been clearly described?
- Has a desired level of achievement been identified for each outcome?
- Does the assessment report “close the loop”? Does it provide evidence that assessment has led to program improvement?

It is hoped that a careful consideration of these questions will help departments produce assessment mechanisms that will facilitate continuous program improvement based on the annual analysis of data.

It is important to involve the faculty in key stages of the process, including:

- The identification of the program’s student learning outcomes
- The determination of the desired standard of achievement
- The analysis of the assessment data
- The use of this data in formulating and implementing program modifications
- The analysis of subsequent data to determine whether the program changes have been effective

This process will help remove some of the negative associations that faculty have regarding assessment. Instead, faculty will come to appreciate that the assessment of student learning outcomes is an indispensable part of any academic program and that a well-constructed assessment plan provides an excellent faculty-driven mechanism for sustained and continuous program improvement. ▲

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their complex roles at the University of North Texas (UNT).

Faculty Leadership Fellows

The Leadership Fellows program targets individuals who have shown interest in or talent for academic leadership. The overarching goal is to develop a cadre of leaders who are capable of catalyzing and sustaining change both at and beyond the university. Participating fellows include current university leaders who are relatively new in their roles, such as the department chair, associate chair, assistant chair, and assistant dean, as well as faculty who have been identified by their deans as having leadership potential. Candidates for the program must be nominated by their dean, with the support of the faculty member’s home department. Selection of faculty fellows is coordinated centrally and is based on a record of scholarship, significant university service, and/or strong leadership potential.

The program supports both individual and organizational skill building where fellows meet monthly with the vice provost for faculty. Specific activities include training workshops, executive coaching, book discussions, and opportunities for self-reflection. Faculty fellows engage in better understanding of their personal strengths and how these relate to their leadership styles. Fellows also meet with key university leaders, including the president and provost, to gain insight into strategic planning and budget priorities. Perhaps one of the most positive outcomes is the opportunity for fellows to visit one another’s departments to learn about the successes and challenges that exist across campus. With the demanding schedules of many chairs, they may never leave their department home. This exposure promotes leaders who can work toward consensus and compromise as well as collaboration. As a cohort, fellows also attend the Academic Chairpersons Conference, where they can select sessions to aid them in further development as leaders.

The program has resulted in leaders with increased self-awareness and confi-

Mindful Leadership Development: Investing in the Academy

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While universities need leaders capable of initiating and sustaining change, few institutions provide the requisite training and development programs that equip academic administrators to effectively lead departments. According to Gmelch (2013), only 3% of higher education institutions offer formal leadership training. Faculty are often placed into leadership positions after spending years focused on their teaching, research, and service responsibilities, leaving little opportunity to cultivate the leadership and

management skills needed for academic administration.

Rather than taking a hit-or-miss approach and leaving success to chance, we offer a comprehensive approach to leadership development that addresses the needs of faculty across the university. Under the auspices of the Office for Faculty Success and with support from the provost’s office, the programs described here provide academic leaders, including chairs, deans, and senior administrators, with the resources and support needed to be successful in