

ONE QUESTION/ONE ANSWER –
A METHOD FOR ORGANIZING AND ENCOURAGING
STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT

Provides an overview of the process by which The College of New Jersey (TCNJ):

- 1) Started our formal student learning outcomes assessment initiative;
- 2) The framework we had in place prior to commencing;
- 3) Where we are now;
- 4) What we plan to do next;
- 5) Lessons learned.

INTRODUCTION

In the Fall 2005 semester The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) made an institutional commitment to the assessment of student learning outcomes within all undergraduate programs by naming a half-time Assistant Director of Assessment. This position was within the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA), reporting through the Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs. The creation of this position coincided with the formal commencement of the *One Question* assessment initiative. The desire of the administration was not to dictate what, when or how faculty and programs should assess student learning, but rather to allow programs to develop their own, unique assessment strategies driven by their curiosity. In this way our assessment activities would become a “means of increasing the mutual engagement of faculty members, staff, and students in providing an optimal learning experience,” (Middle States, 2003, p. 6) and not just another “hoop” to jump through.

In her book *Assessing Student Learning*, Suskie (2004) defined assessment as an iterative process in which one:

- 1) Establishes clear, measurable expected student learning outcomes;
- 2) Ensures that students have sufficient opportunity to achieve these outcomes;
- 3) Systematically gathers, analyzes and interprets evidence that students are meeting these outcomes;
- 4) Uses the evidence gathered to improve student learning.

While these steps can apply to either course-level or program-level assessment, we are focused on student learning outcomes at the *program* level. All undergraduate programs at TCNJ had articulated their learning outcomes during a three-year curriculum transformation process completed by the Fall 2004 semester in a *Learning Goals Matrix*¹. While creating the matrices, programs indicated which courses would cover which goals. Many even attempted to quantify achievement levels of the goals, such as “elementary,” “intermediate” and “advanced” or “introduction,” “developing” and “deep understanding.” Thus, in the Fall 2005 semester, the institution was ready to start Step

three (above) – systematically gathering, analyzing and interpreting evidence of program-level student learning.

A website² was created to store assessment documents in an easily-accessible electronic format as we embarked on our *One Question/One Answer* student learning outcomes assessment initiative. This website was designed to provide four things:

- 1) A source of information about resources that could be used for outcomes assessment already present at TCNJ – this included items such as an annotated list of surveys and results (internal and external), rubrics and information from the writing program, reports and summary data from institutional research³;
- 2) A source of links to examples from outside TCNJ for various disciplines – for example, links to the Mathematics Association of America, American Psychological Association, Bowling Green State University, North Carolina State University, and others⁴;
- 3) An archive of our communications about assessment – including memos, handouts from presentations, our new *Assessment Update* Newsletter⁵;
- 4) A central repository for assessment documentation.⁶

At about the same time, the Provost charged each program to come up with one burning question concerning one learning goal. They then communicated to OIRA this question, their hypothesized outcome and the method they planned to use to assess the student learning outcome. An on-line form was created to simplify submission⁷, but we also accepted email, and email attached documents (in other words, we let faculty do what they felt most comfortable doing)⁸. All forty programs submitted questions in the first year. Departments then had the remainder of the academic year to conduct their research and answer their question. At the end of the Spring semester, answers were collected in a similar manner⁹. 85% of programs submitting questions answered them (34 programs). For the first cycle, departments received very supportive feedback from OIRA. We simply encouraged them to participate, answered questions as promptly as possible and thanked them for their efforts. Types of support included assisting with the creation of alumni or current-student surveys for indirect assessment of achievement of student learning outcomes and retrieving specific student-level data from our student information system (SCT SIS+), such as course-grades in particular courses, or pattern of enrollment in sequenced courses.

WHERE WE ARE NOW

We repeated the process in the 2006-07 academic year. The format for the *One Question* was the same, but we added the requirement of articulating how the information gleaned was likely to be used by the program. Twenty-five programs, or 68% submitted questions in the second year. The three departments in the School of Engineering were exempt from participating in *One Question*, as they were undergoing their ABET reaccreditation visit. This year each department received a bit more elaborate constructive criticism of their submissions in a timely fashion from the Director of Assessment. In some cases this led to different questions being submitted (especially when questions did not relate to stated learning goals), in other cases it led to great improvement in the methodology. Overall, program faculty seemed very receptive to

learning more about assessment, so we invited three outside experts to campus for faculty/staff development workshops.

The series of workshops moved from a more general overview of student learning outcomes assessment to more specific, concrete methods of assessment. The first was in mid-September of 2006 when Dr. Peter Gray, Director of Academic Assessment from the United States Naval Academy, came to campus for four presentations:

- 1) Formal presentation with discussion to the President's Advisory Council, entitled: "Organizational structures to sustain a culture of assessment: Are we meeting our stated mission?"
- 2) Formal presentation with questions at the end to the entire campus community (faculty and staff), entitled: "Assessment: making it meaningful, manageable and sustainable"
- 3) Two informal discussion sessions to small groups of faculty interested in the topics: "Course embedded assessments – using the capstone experience" and "Assessment in the arts and humanities (qualitative) and articulation of the results"

In late February Dr. Gloria Rogers, Associate Executive Director of Professional Services from the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) joined us and presented two workshops:

- 1) A half-day hands-on workshop for faculty and program leaders entitled "How to Assess Program Learning Outcomes"
- 2) A round-table discussion entitled "Assessing Liberal Learning Outcomes"

Finally, Dr. Virginia Anderson, Professor at Towson University and self-proclaimed "classroom assessment activist," visited campus in mid-May and discussed:

- 1) "Introduction to Effective Grading Strategies" a workshop with activities providing time for reflection
- 2) "Using Grading Strategies to Enhance Grading and Save Time and Energy" a more in-depth examination of this tool
- 3) "Developing Assessments for Accredited Programs and Grants" a small discussion centered on assessments to examine program goals.

This last event was co-sponsored by the Faculty Senate, an important partnership to continue building the campus culture of assessment.

NEXT STEPS

In the 2007-08 Academic Year the Director of Assessment will have more time to devote to student learning outcomes assessment, as this is now a full-time position. This will allow increased focus on the framework of six *Guiding Principles* outlined by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2003):

- 1) Campus culture of assessment;
- 2) Realistic plan with appropriate investment of resources;
- 3) Involvement of faculty and students;
- 4) Clear goals;
- 5) Appropriate methods;
- 6) Useful data.

Continuing to build a campus culture of assessment will be achieved by working individually and through scheduled workshops, presentations and “drop-in” hours with faculty and staff from each program. A campus-wide committee, chaired by a faculty member and including staff and students, will be formed to provide oversight of assessment activities. During this academic year, particular focus will be placed on clarifying the relationship between course- and program-level assessment (and when you can kill two birds with one stone) and moving from “learning goals” to measureable program/course outcomes with performance indicators (Rogers, 2002). In addition, an increasing focus on indications of assessment results usage will begin in the Spring semester.

LESSONS LEARNED

After creating the learning goal matrix, and in the semester prior to asking the first *One Question* each program was asked to create a draft *Program Assessment Plan*. In retrospect I would have had most programs, specifically those not accredited by an outside agency, work on a question or two first, and then move to creating the assessment plan (and re-writing learning goals if necessary). Because most faculty were not familiar enough with program assessment, many were frustrated by this sequence, and as a result, many of our posted assessment plans are not reasonable. I would also recommend a slightly faster pace for the *One Question/One Answer* process – one question per semester. Although I anticipate there would be complaints about the workload, this would do two things:

- 1) give programs results from two assessments per year, which yields more to think about when using results to inform curriculum discussion and decision;
- 2) place a focus on small, “do-able” questions and methods, in order to keep the workload reasonable, which is what is needed for a sustainable assessment plan.

An annual informal event to share assessment results, best practices and creative solutions to common assessments efforts among faculty and staff would have been a great forum for celebrating our early efforts and creating a “buzz” around student outcomes assessment on campus. And finally, I have learned that creating a “culture of assessment” is about conversations – it can’t be done sitting at my desk in my office with bits and bytes in the ether, but must be done by participating in department meetings, having lunch with faculty and department chairs, extending personal invitations to workshops and discussions, and ultimately sharing an infectious enthusiasm for ensuring that our students are achieving our student learning outcomes.

REFERENCES

- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2003). *Student learning assessment: Options and resources*. Philadelphia, PA: Middle States Commission on Higher Education.
- Rogers, G. (2002). The language of assessment: Humpty dumpty had a great fall... *Communications link, Summer, 6&8*.
- Suskie, L. (2004). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

ENDNOTES with websites referred to in text and shown during the presentation

¹ Sample Learning Goal Matrix:

Sociology: http://www.tcnj.edu/~assess/documents/lgm/cs/SOCA_LGM.pdf

Mathematics Education: http://www.tcnj.edu/~assess/documents/lgm/sci/MATT_LGM.pdf

² Main TCNJ Assessment website : <http://www.tcnj.edu/~assess/>

³ Resources at TCNJ: <http://www.tcnj.edu/~assess/tools.html>

⁴ Links to External Examples: <http://www.tcnj.edu/~assess/links.html>

⁵ Archive our Communication: <http://www.tcnj.edu/~assess/archives.html>

⁶ Central Repository: http://www.tcnj.edu/~assess/docs_amm.html

⁷ One Question Submission Form:

<https://jedi.tcnj.edu/webteam/cgi-bin/formgenie/formgenie.pl?form=21555>

⁸ Use of form not required: <http://www.tcnj.edu/~assess/onequestion.html>

⁹ One Answer Submission Form:

<https://jedi.tcnj.edu/webteam/cgi-bin/formgenie/formgenie.pl?form=21581>