CHAPTER ONE

PLANNING EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT

Effective assessment doesn't just happen. It emerges over time as an outcome of thoughtful planning, and in the spirit of continuous improvement, it evolves as reflection on the processes of implementing and sustaining assessment suggests modifications.

Engaging Stakeholders

A first step in planning is to identify and engage appropriate stakeholders. Faculty members, academic administrators, and student affairs professionals must play principal roles in setting the course for assessment, but students can contribute ideas and so can trustees, employers, and other community representatives. We expect faculty to set broad learning outcomes for general education and more specific outcomes for academic majors. Trustees of an institution, employers, and other community representatives can review drafts of these outcomes and offer suggestions for revision based on their perspectives regarding community needs. Student affairs professionals can comment on the outcomes and devise their own complementary outcomes based on plans to extend learning into campus environments beyond the classroom. Students have the ability to translate the language of the academy, where necessary, into terms that their peers will understand. Students also can help to design data-gathering

strategies and instruments as assessment moves from the planning phase to implementation. Finally, regional accreditors and national disciplinary and professional organizations contribute ideas for the planning phase of assessment. They often set standards for assessing student learning and provide resources in the form of written materials and workshops at their periodic meetings.

Connecting Assessment to Valued Goals and Processes

Connecting assessment to institution-wide strategic planning is a way to increase the perceived value of assessment. Assessment may be viewed as the mechanism for gauging progress on every aspect of an institution's plan. In the planning process the need to demonstrate accountability for student learning may become a mechanism for ensuring that student learning outcomes, and their assessment, are included in the institutional plan. However assessment is used, plans to carry it out must be based on clear, explicit goals.

Since 1992 assessment of progress has been one of the chief mechanisms for shaping three strategic plans at Pace University (Barbara Pennipede and Joseph Morreale, see Resource A, p. 289). In 1997 the success of the first 5-year plan was assessed via a survey of the 15 administrators and 10 faculty leaders who had been responsible for implementing the plan. In 2001, in addition to interviews with the principal implementers, other faculty, staff, and students, as well as trustees, were questioned in focus groups and open meetings and via e-mail.

By 2003 the Pace president had decided that assessment of progress on the plan needed to occur more often—annually rather than every fifth year. Pace faculty and staff developed a strategic plan assessment grid, and data such as student performance on licensing exams, participation in key campus programs, and responses to the UCLA freshman survey were entered in appropriate cells of the grid to be monitored over time.

Likewise, at Iona College 25 dashboard indicators are used to track progress on all elements of Iona's mission (Warren Rosenberg, see p. 262). Iona's Key Performance Indicators, which are called KPIs, include statistics supplied by the institutional research office on such measures as diversity of the faculty and student body (percentages of females and nonwhite constituents), 6-year graduation rates, and percentage of graduates completing internships. Student responses to relevant items on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) are used in monitoring progress toward the mission element stated "Iona College graduates will be sought after because they will be skilled decision-makers . . . independent thinkers . . . lifelong learners . . . adaptable to new information and technologies."

According to Thomas P. Judd and Bruce Keith (see p. 46), "the overarching academic goal" that supports the mission of the U.S. Military Academy

is this: "Graduates anticipate and respond effectively to the uncertainties of a changing technological, social, political, and economic world." This broad goal is implemented through ten more specific goals such as ensuring that graduates can think and act creatively, recognize moral issues and apply ethical considerations in decision making, understand human behavior, and be proficient in the fundamentals of engineering and information technology. Each of these goals yields clear, explicit statements of student outcomes. Faculty at West Point set performance standards for each outcome and apply rubrics in assessing student work. The ten goals provide guidance for the development of 30 core courses that are taken by all students at the Military Academy.

Outcomes assessment cannot be undertaken solely for its own sake. Assessment that spins in its own orbit, not intersecting with other processes that are valued in the academy, will surely fail the test of relevance once it is applied by decision makers. Assessment will become relevant in the eyes of faculty and administrators when it becomes a part of the following: strategic planning for programs and the institution; implementation of new academic and student affairs programs; making decisions about the competence of students; comprehensive program (peer) review; faculty and professional staff development; and/or faculty and staff reward and recognition systems.

Creating a Written Plan

As Suskie (2004, p. 57) puts it, planning for assessment requires "written guidance on who does what when." Which academic programs and student support or administrative units will be assessing which aspects of student learning or components of their programs each year? Who will be responsible for each assessment activity?

A matrix can be helpful in charting progress. As illustrated in Table 1.1, we first set a broad goal or learning outcome in which we are interested, then develop aspects of the goal in the form of specific measurable objectives. A third consideration is where the objective will be taught and learned. Then how will the objective be assessed? What are the assessment findings, and how should they be interpreted and reported? How are the findings used to improve processes, and what impact do the improvements have on achieving progress toward the original goal? Since 1998, a matrix similar to that in Table 1.1 has been used in assessment planning and reporting by faculty and staff in individual departments and offices at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (see www.planning.iupui.edu/64.html#07).

TABLE 1.1. PLANNING FOR LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT.

1. What general outcome are you seeking?	2. How would you know it (the outcome) if you saw it? (What will the student know or be able to do?)	3. How will you help students learn it? (in class or out of class)	4. How could you measure each of the desired behaviors listed in #2?	5. What are the assessment findings?	6. What improvements have been made based on assessment findings?	7. What has been the impact of improvements?

Walvoord (2004) has provided a useful set of standards for judging an effective assessment plan. She envisions the plan as a written document that

1. embeds assessment in high-stakes and high-energy processes.
2. considers audiences and purposes.
3. arranges oversight and resources.
4. articulates learning goals.
5. incorporates an assessment audit of measures already in place and how the data are used in decision making.
6. includes steps for improving the assessment process.
7. includes steps designed to improve student learning. (p. 11)

The assessment plan at St. Norbert College embodies these standards. It was developed with support from a Title III Strengthening Institutions Grant after insufficient progress in implementing assessment was identified as "an urgent institutional need" (Robert A. Rutter, see Resource A, p. 290). College administrators established the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and the assessment committee was expanded to include campuswide representation. The assessment committee produced the "Plan for Assessing Student Learning Outcomes at St. Norbert College," which was subsequently endorsed by every division of the college as well as the Student Government Association. The institution's mission statement was revised to include student learning outcomes, a comprehensive review of the general education program resulted in a continuous evaluation process that repeats on a four-year cycle, and a rigorous program review process was implemented for academic units. As a result of assessing learning outcomes in general education and major fields, general education course offerings in some areas have been refocused, major and minor programs have been reviewed and improved, a few programs have been terminated, new strategies to support and retain students have been implemented, and a student competence model in student life has been developed.

Timing Assessment

Timing is a crucial aspect of planning for assessment. Ideally, assessment is built into strategic planning for an institution or department and is a component of any new program as it is being conceived. If assessment must be added to a program or event that is already under way, time is needed to convince the initiative's developers of the value of assessment for improving and sustaining their efforts. Finally, because effective assessment requires the use of multiple methods, it is not

usually resource-efficient to implement every method right away or even every year. A comprehensive assessment plan will include a schedule for implementing each data-gathering method at least once over a period of three to five years.

At the University of Houston main campus every academic and administrative unit must submit an institutional effectiveness plan each year. Institutional research staff assist faculty with program reviews, surveys, and data analysis. Part-time and full-time assessment professionals are embedded in the colleges to provide day-to-day support. Libby Barlow (see Resource A, p. 293) describes the evolution of the current plan as slow, but asserts that "genuine assessment . . . takes time to take root. Higher education is a slow ship to turn . . . so pushing faster than faculty are willing to go will inevitably cause backlash and be counterproductive. Time has allowed us to go through several structures to discover what would work."

Building a Culture Based on Evidence

Outcomes assessment can be sustained only if planning and implementation take place in an atmosphere of trust and within a culture that encourages the use of evidence in decision making. Bresciani (2006) notes the following characteristics of such an environment:

1. Key institutional leaders must demonstrate that they genuinely care about student learning issues.
2. Leaders must create a culture of trust and integrity through consistent actions that demonstrate a commitment to ethical and evidence-based decision-making.
3. Connections must be established between formative and summative assessment and between assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability.
4. Curriculum design, pedagogy, and faculty development must be connected to delivery and evaluation of student learning.
5. Faculty research and teaching must be connected so that they complement each other in practice and in the campus reward structure. (pp. 144–146)

At Agnes Scott College the faculty-staff Committee on Assessing Institutional Effectiveness recommended that the president integrate a report on assessment activities in the template for annual reports that all academic and administrative units must submit. Laura Palucki Blake (see Resource A, p. 280) believes this integration of assessment in a report long expected of each unit helps to create

a positive culture for assessment. If the president expects it, assessment must be important. Moreover, because each vice president sees the reports from his or her units, assessment evidence takes on added importance in decision making at Agnes Scott.

In subsequent sections of this volume we will describe additional characteristics of the culture in which assessment can thrive.