Making Assessment Manageable

Based on Fall 2007 conversations with faculty who've been doing assessment at CSU-Fresno for quite awhile: Terry Miller, Theatre Arts; Marianne Jones, Child, Family and Consumer Sciences; Marilyn Wilson, Psychology

Use What You Already Have; Take a Different Look at What You Already Do

If possible, use what you already have available (e.g., existing mission statements, values or goal statements.) Consensus has already been gained on these. What projects or assignments are you already doing that you can turn into assessment activities, perhaps with a little modification or just by seeing them in a different way. For example, instead of looking at assignments in terms of individual student results or a particular class, look at the results across all students to get an idea of the effect of your program. This will also help reduce any anxiety that results will be used for evaluation of individual faculty members.

Make It Manageable; Let It Change

A good assessment plan doesn't have too many goals and objectives. Five goals is sufficient. Embed assessment activities into classes or ongoing projects. What can your students do? How do they show what they know (through analysis of it or practical application)? Assessment activities should be direct measures. They should reflect what a good percentage of your students are doing, not just what they know. Students should show what they know by applying it in some form.

Make it manageable. Instead of reading all the papers, read and rate a sample. Keep the activities and scoring relatively simple.

Assessment plans should be jargon-free. Don't use the terminology of your discipline. Write it such that the objectives can be understood by prospective students and their parents. Plain English is good.

Approach developing a SOAP knowing it will change all the time and should change as you evaluate and use your results. Don't reinvent the wheel. Modify what already exists.

Building Consensus and Implementing Activities

Get faculty members working together on assessment. It doesn't have to be a major production. Everybody can take a little piece. You can do small-scale projects.

It's important to reach consensus on goals. One way to do that is to start with goals that already exist. When developing objectives, it works best to talk with smaller groups such as those who teach particular courses. Then when developing the actual assessment activities that will be used to gauge the degree to which these goals and objectives are being reached, the Assessment Coordinator (AC) will likely need to just make a decision and implement. Developing an Assessment Plan should be consultative, but consensus isn't always needed on everything. AC's should feel free to make these decisions after goals are established.

Get colleagues behind assessment. An Assessment Coordinator who is a senior faculty member has an advantage, but a good way for a junior faculty member to facilitate assessment and get more seasoned colleagues on board is to approach it by asking them to help you understand the values of the department. Use as little of their time as possible. Establish a time limit. Set a clear agenda and use the time with colleagues effectively. After establishing good relationships with some people, they may be able to help you figure out how to get others on board.

Developing and Using Rubrics

When developing rubrics, make an economical statement that represents a student who's got this quality and then degrade it from there. What's acceptable? What's got some ways to go? What shows a long way still to go? Students will give you feedback on rubrics. Rubrics give students a clearer idea of what they should be shooting for. You can find rubrics on the web that will give you a place to start (http://www.csufresno.edu/irap/links/assessment_help.shtml). Some of them are freely offered for you to modify and use in your own program. Some rubrics developed by Fresno State faculty can be found in the Rubrics Library (http://www.csufresno.edu/irap/assessment/rubric.shtml) on the IRAP website.

Documenting and Developing Continuity Makes the Work Easier and Meaningful

Write regular assessment reports to show what you've done and how results were used. This develops continuity so that others can pick up the process when needed and changes can be tracked. Reporting can be simple. It doesn't require a lot of data, although to a degree the actual data will need to be shown as part of the results because WASC (our regional accreditor) is requiring it. Develop and implement activities that can be looked at across time so you can tell if change has occurred.

Start Discussions

Ask people what they're doing. You can do this on a one-to-one basis or sometimes in a small group, by phone, by e-mail or in person on an impromptu basis. For example, how are you teaching writing? What's working? These questions can prompt good discussion and sharing that lets faculty know that the same students are giving them all headaches or that the specific problems or challenges aren't just theirs. Others are experiencing them too.

Get the lexicon into the program so that it becomes a natural, integrated part of discussion every time you talk about the program. It becomes easy to focus conversations on what we want to do. How will we know if we are? Are we framing things such that we'll be able to tell what students do? How can we tell what students can do? Weave the language into daily conversations so it's not a separate thing that's done at a specific time of year but is integrated, expected and just part of what we do.

We need to demystify assessment so it's not seen as something that's out there and different than what we ordinarily do. As faculty, we love to ask questions and do research. Assessment is the same thing.