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ABSTRACT

A "formal information inventory" survey method was used to help educate a university campus about outcomes assessment while identifying assessment activities already being undertaken. The survey was sent to 102 individuals identified as being responsible for, or having knowledge of, any assessment activities within a department or area, with 93 responses for a response rate of 91%. The survey was designed to be brief, educational for the respondent, and effective in collecting information for the outcomes assessment coordinator. The survey uncovered 265 assessment activities being currently conducted or recently completed. In addition, 49 campus units expressed a willingness to participate in a pilot project in outcomes assessment. The survey also identified "Student Evaluation Studies", "Student Needs Studies", and "Student Evaluation of Teaching" as the three types of studies which could most effectively be used to make improvements to the programs or services of the respondents. One major area of concern was the relative lack of cognitive measures; efforts should be continued to develop and provide these outcome assessments as well. The value of this approach lies in the educational aspect of the instrument, the construction of an institutional statement regarding outcomes assessment, the project's high level of visibility, and the involvement of high level administrators. Contains 7 references. (GLR)

Taking Inventory: Identifying Assessment Activities

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Jean Endo
Chair and Editor
Forum Publications Editorial
Advisory Committee

Abstract

Those embarking on development of an assessment program are encouraged to identify assessment activities already being undertaken. Although this is excellent advice, it is not as simple as it sounds, particularly on larger campuses, and the method of identifying current assessment initiatives is usually not addressed. This paper presents a method whereby a simple survey was used to help educate the campus about outcomes assessment while identifying assessment activities already being undertaken. The results of the survey are discussed although the focus is on the process, content, and application of the survey.

Introduction

Institutions confronted with initiating a comprehensive assessment program are often overwhelmed by such a seemingly monumental task. Advice found in the literature on outcomes assessment, while well intentioned, may be incomplete or inapplicable due to the uniqueness of each institution's operation, student make up, and mission. A commonly recommended starting point, applicable to most institutions, is to identify assessment activities which are already taking place on the campus and to build on those activities (Astin, 1987; Ewell, 1987; Ewell, 1988; Ewell & Lisensky, 1988; Jacobi et. al., 1987; and Nichols, 1989). Although this advice is obviously sound, it is not as simple as it appears and few of the authors give a clear indication of how such activities should be identified although Ewell (1983, 1988) is probably the most comprehensive and practical.

Ewell and Lisensky (1988, p. 54) suggest the use of a "formal information inventory" as a simple method of determining what outcomes data are already in existence and include examples of inventories which have been previously used. Inventories such as these are useful but require some prior knowledge of existing information. Rather than downplay the utility of such an inventory, a useful approach would be to conduct a survey such as the one advocated in this paper and use the information obtained from the survey to complete a formal inventory.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe the procedure used to identify assessment activities on a campus of over 14,000 students while at the same time educating segments of the campus about outcomes assessment and identifying those campus units who would be interested in participating in a pilot assessment project.

Methodology

The first step in this project was to develop an institutional statement regarding outcomes assessment. Preliminary efforts to develop an institutional statement included reviewing the university mission statement, discussing objectives with the outcomes assessment task force, reviewing the last accreditation self-study report, and holding discussions with various campus leaders. It was important that the institutional statement on outcomes assessment reflect the philosophy of the coordinator of outcomes assessment and at the same time meet with the approval of an outcomes assessment task force which had been previously appointed by the Academic Vice President. The statement, which was accepted and approved, specified two purposes for instituting outcomes assessment on our campus:

(1) to improve student learning and performance, and

(2) to improve programs, program planning, and program development.

The statement of purpose was written into a one page document which pointed out the imperfect nature of outcomes data, introduced the new coordinator of outcomes assessment, and outlined the approach which would be taken in establishing a coordinated program of outcomes assessment. The idea of imperfect data was introduced at this point to avoid what Ewell (1988, p. 20) calls the "perfect data fallacy". The resulting one page document was then used as a cover page to introduce the instrument.

The survey was designed to be brief, to educate the respondent, and to collect information for the outcomes assessment coordinator. The educational aspect of the instrument was particularly important since most people tend to focus only on testing when the term "assessment" is mentioned. To enhance the educational purpose, a list of assessment activities was provided along with an option to add additional activities to the list. See Table 1.

No attempt was made to further define the activities although many of them were very similar. The purpose of this item was to identify activities other than testing that are part of assessment, and to determine which activities, including testing, are currently being undertaken.

Table 1

List of Assessment Activities

If information from any three of the following assessment activities could be provided to you for the purpose of improving programs or services for which you are responsible, which activities would you choose? (Please choose only three)

a. Student Satisfaction Study
b. Student Attitude Study
c. Student Perception Study
d. Student Need Study
e. Faculty Need Study
f. Faculty Perception Study
g. Faculty Satisfaction Study
h. Student Evaluation of Teaching
i. Service Evaluation Study
j. Program Evaluation Study
k. Withdrawing Student Study
l. Program Attrition Study
m. "High Risk" Student Study
n. Job Placement Study
o. Employer Satisfaction Study
p. Alumni Activity Study
q. Transfer Tracking Study
r. Program Accreditation Study
s. Diagnostic Placement Testing
t. General Education Testing
u. Major Field Testing
v. Program Admission Testing
w. Pre-licensing Testing
x. Certification Testing
y. Minimum Competency Testing
z. Other (Please Specify)

Once the instrument was developed, the coordinator scheduled time on the agenda of the Outcomes Assessment Task Force, the Deans Council, made up of the deans from all colleges, and the Deans Advisory Council, made up of all the Associate Deans. A short presentation about outcomes assessment was made at each of these meetings and the instrument was distributed for discussion.

This process, although time consuming and often frustrating, was used to educate, to add to the visibility of the coordinator position, and to elicit cooperation and a feeling of joint ownership in the instrument and the outcomes assessment program. Only after these various groups reviewed the instrument and presented their comments was the instrument considered ready for use.

After examining a current organization chart of the university, all vice presidents, deans, department heads, directors, provosts, and other professional administrators were selected to receive the questionnaire. This entire population, rather than a sample was queried since the size was manageable, and to increase visibility and enhance participation. Administrators were chosen in the belief that they would have more knowledge of activities taking place within the units for which they were responsible.

A cover letter was developed and signed by the Academic Vice President, the Chief Executive Officer, giving the project the high level of visibility suggested by several authors (Ewell, 1988; Nichols, 1989; Rossman & El-Khawas, 1987). The cover letter was designed to be educational inasmuch as it talked about the task force, the new position of coordinator, and it asked that the statement on outcomes assessment be carefully read and the survey completed. The names of the vice presidents and deans were used in a mail merge, personalizing the letters. Labels were generated for the other respondents and attached to the top

of the institutional statement page to identify the individual from whom a response was desired.

Although the instruments were individually labeled with the name and address of the person from whom a response was desired, packets consisting of the cover letter, the statement on outcomes assessment, and the instrument, were mailed directly to the appropriate Vice Presidents, Deans, Directors, Provosts, and Department Heads. These top level administrators were given responsibility for delivering the packets of information to the designated individuals, collecting the completed forms, and returning them to the coordinator of outcomes assessment. This method was used in an effort to increase the response rate and to re-emphasize the high level of involvement in the process.

Results

The instruments were sent to the entire population of administrators, both academic and non-academic, on the campus. The population consisted of 102 individuals who were identified as being responsible for, or having knowledge of, any assessment activities within a department or area. A total of 93 responses were received for a response rate of 91%. The titles of those responding to the survey are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Titles of Respondents

Title	N
Dean	6
Director	22
Department Head	49
Provost	3
Other	13
Total	93

Those falling into the category of "other" had titles of assistant director, coordinator, specialist, or assistant provost.

Responses were received from all colleges within the university as well as numerous administrative units. Table 3 provides details of the various groups within the university from which returns were received.

Table 3

Respondents by Group

College	N
Arts and Sciences	27
Agriculture and Home Economics	11
Business Administration	7
Education	7
Engineering	5
Human and Community Services	12
Graduate School	1
Administration	23
Total	93

The category of "Administration" contained respondents from areas such as admissions, registrar, financial aid, placement and career services, etc..

Item 4 of the survey asked the respondent to choose three types of assessment activities which provide the type of information they could use to improve their programs or services. A list of the activities chosen and the number choosing each appears in Table 4.

Table 4

Choices of Activity Information

Choice	N
Student Satisfaction Study	29
Student Need Study	26
Student Evaluation of Teaching	22
Job Placement Study	21
Program Evaluation Study	17
Faculty Need Study	16
Employer Satisfaction Study	15
Alumni Activity Study	15
Withdrawing Student Study	12
Student Perception Study	11
Student Attitude Study	10
Program Attrition Study	10
Faculty Satisfaction Study	8
"High Risk" Student Study	8
Major Field Testing	7
Service Evaluation Study	7
Other (Please Specify)	7
Transfer Tracking Study	5
General Education Testing	5
Program Accreditation Study	4
Minimum Competency Testing	3
Program Admission Testing	2
Certification Testing	1
Pre-licensing Testing	1
Total	271

In addition to the above choices there were 11 which fell into the category of "Other". Responses classified as "Other" are detailed in Table 5.

Table 5

Choices Categorized as "Other"

Choice	N
Standardized Student Opinion Survey	1
Employer Satisfaction Survey	1
Student Satisfaction Survey	1
Tracking Study Comparing Goals vs. Outcomes	1
Faculty Evaluation of Teaching	1
Alumni Satisfaction Study	1
Value Added Testing (Faculty Developed Subject Test-Rising Junior)	1
Credit Articulation Study	1
Impact of Minority Student Study	1
Standardized Test for Multi Sectioned Courses	1
Review of Clientele Needs	1
Total	11

There are several interesting findings related to Tables 4 and 5. First, one of the three most frequently selected types of information is the student evaluation of teaching. This is of particular interest inasmuch as the focus appears to be more on evaluating teaching than evaluating learning. This is almost the

reverse of the normal focus of outcomes assessment activities where the student is measured rather than the professor.

Second, there is a great deal of consistency in the top four choices of information with each of those being chosen by between 21 and 29 of the respondents. The indication is that an outcomes assessment program would provide information meaningful to the majority of those responding by focusing on a "Student Satisfaction Study", "Student Need Study", "Student Evaluation of Teaching", and a "Job Placement Study".

Third, only five respondents chose general education testing and only one chose value added testing although these are two of the most often cited foci of an outcomes assessment program. On this campus it would appear that the emphasis, from the view point of these administrative respondents, should be on student needs, student satisfaction, student feedback to instructors, and job placement information.

Question 5 of the survey required the respondents to rank order their preferences for assessment instruments. The results of the ranking are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6

Rank Order of Preference for Assessment Tools

	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Total
Questionnaire	42	26	18	4	90
Interview	37	31	8	13	77
Faculty Developed Tests	9	13	34	24	80
Standardized Tests	4	19	21	30	74
Other	2	1	1	4	8

There are two interesting aspects of these results. First, questionnaires and interviews are by far the most preferred means of collecting assessment information, according to the administrators on this campus.

Second, only 4 individuals chose standardized tests as their first choice in providing feedback which could be used to improve programs or services despite their widespread use.

In question 7 of the survey the respondents were asked to rank order the frequency of use of the types of instruments actually being used to collect assessment information in activities which they listed as having been conducted in question 6. The results are compiled and presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Rank Order of Frequency of Use of Assessment Tools

	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Total
Questionnaire	48	10	4	0	62
Interview	8	20	7	3	38
Faculty Developed Tests	6	7	6	4	23
Standardized Tests	3	4	5	4	16
Other	3	6	2	1	12

The instrument being used most frequently to collect information is the questionnaire. Again, the standardized test was used least frequently as a data collection instrument. It is worth noting that the interview was rated first in terms of preference by 37 of those responding but it was ranked as being used first most frequently by only 8 respondents.

In question 8, one of the more critical questions from a practical view point, respondents were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a pilot outcomes assessment project. The results are listed in Table 8.

Table 8

Interest in Participating in a Pilot Project

Choice	N
Not Now	8
Perhaps Later	30
Interested in Participating	49
Total	87

It was gratifying to find that 56% of the responses were in the affirmative, indicating a willingness to become involved in a pilot project. It is particularly important on our campus since voluntary participation in pilot projects is considered the desired way to move forward with an outcomes assessment program.

The last question asked if the respondent would like additional information about outcomes assessment. This question was included to provide another opportunity to make contact and discuss the positive benefits of an outcomes assessment program. The results are displayed in Table 9.

Table 9

Interest in More Information

Choice	N
Not Now	3
Perhaps Later	11
Would Like More Information	75
Total	89

As one charged with implementing and coordinating an outcomes assessment program, I was gratified to note that 84% of the respondents indicated an interest in obtaining more information about outcomes assessment.

Implications

As a result of the survey 265 assessment activities were identified which were currently being conducted or had been conducted recently. In addition, 49 campus units expressed a

willingness to participate in a pilot project in outcomes assessment. The survey also identified "Student Satisfaction Studies", "Student Needs Studies", and "Student Evaluation of Teaching" as the three types of studies which could most effectively be used to make improvements to the programs or services of the respondants.

The coordinator of outcomes assessment found only one major area of concern which surfaced in the results. As was pointed out earlier, there is a discrepancy between the types of information desired on this campus and the types of information normally considered as part of outcomes assessment. Specifically, the respondents gave their lowest rankings to all of the cognitive measures listed. The same problem holds true for the assessment activities which were identified as being conducted or having been conducted recently; there were almost no cognitive assessment activities listed. The implications of this finding should not be understated. It indicates that while the non-cognitive areas seem to be well covered, some method must be devised to account for the cognitive assessment necessary for a comprehensive assessment program. Those who responded must be encouraged to continue their efforts and to expand those efforts to provide indication of cognitive outcomes as well. Since cognitive outcomes are much more difficult, more expensive, and attempts to measure them meet with more resistance, the task is no minor undertaking.

Although this finding indicates a weakness in the existing assessment efforts, it was not unexpected. Most institutions, particularly the larger, research oriented institutions, operate on the assumption that the cognitive development of students who successfully complete programs is a given. The cognitive aspect of assessment is accounted for by the normal end of course testing and the granting of degrees for successful completion of prescribed courses. It is expected that anyone attempting to begin a comprehensive assessment program under similar conditions would have similar findings.

On a more positive note, the survey and the methods used provided visibility for the outcomes assessment initiatives and increased the awareness of administrators and others across campus about the outcomes assessment movement. As a direct result, numerous invitations have been extended to the coordinator to make presentations about outcomes assessment. Most of these presentations have been followed by invitations to meet more informally to determine the best course of action within a department or administrative office. The most recent invitation came from the College of Arts and Sciences, the largest college on our campus, to make a presentation to all Arts and Science faculty during a recent professional development day. These presentations and informal meetings provide an opportunity to discuss the necessity of adding a cognitive dimension to the assessment activities already being undertaken.

Although the study produced quantitative results which are relevant to this institution, the real value of the approach lies in the educational aspect of the instrument, the construction of an institutional statement regarding outcomes assessment, the high level of visibility given the project, and the involvement of high level administrators in the data collection process. The results also provide a direction for the next step in beginning our assessment program. The spontaneous requests for presentations and additional information provide an open door and a point of continuing contact with these administrators. And, when an approach is made to those individuals who responded to the survey, it is possible to know in advance those who are likely to be receptive to assessment initiatives.

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