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Moving Forward or Holding Back? Creating a Culture of Academic Assessment

Shauna Wilton
University of Alberta, swilton@ualberta.ca
Mélanie Méthot
University of Alberta, mmethot@ualberta.ca

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Abstract
This article analyzes data from a survey on faculty perceptions of a newly instituted assessment process at a small liberal arts campus in Canada. The survey results are compared with an analysis of the reports submitted to the assessment committee over a four-year period in order to determine whether a culture of assessment centred on students' academic skills rather than compliance had been achieved. Although there is evidence of resistance and skepticism from a subset of faculty, we argue that overall a faculty driven process of assessment provided the space for the creation of a culture of assessment based on the explicit evaluation of identified academic skills. Our analysis examines faculty perceptions of assessment and its impact, the materials and methods of assessment used, and the overall impact of assessment on teaching on the campus.

Cet article analyse les données d'une étude sur les perceptions des professeurs d'un processus d'évaluation nouvellement institué dans une petite université canadienne d'arts libéraux. Les résultats du sondage sont comparés à une analyse des rapports soumis au comité des évaluations au cours d'une période de quatre ans afin de déterminer si on en était arrivé à une culture d'évaluation centrée sur les compétences académiques des étudiants plutôt qu'à la conformité. Bien qu'il y ait des preuves de résistance et de scepticisme de la part d'un petit groupe de professeurs, nous sommes d'avis qu'en général, un processus d'évaluation dirigé par les professeurs permet de créer une culture d'évaluation basée sur l'évaluation explicite de compétences académiques identifiées. Notre analyse examine les perceptions des professeurs concernant l'évaluation et ses effets, le matériel et les méthodes d'évaluation utilisés, ainsi que l'impact général de l'évaluation sur l'enseignement au sein de l'université.

Eight years ago, our campus, an undergraduate liberal arts institution in Canada, voluntarily began a campus-wide assessment of student achievement of core academic skills. Together, teaching faculty developed a bottom-up assessment process, instead of one imposed by administration. The process included a new set of core academic skills that would be assessed, planned opportunities for consulting with the academic disciplines, and a formal way for reporting how well students mastered these skills, both within each academic major and on the campus as a whole. The process was developed without any external pressure, such as accreditation criteria or government mandates, and initially unanimously supported by faculty at Faculty Council. From the beginning, faculty were informed that the data collected would not be used to justify the existence of a program or discipline. This paper explores whether the voluntary and faculty grass roots adoption of learning assessment practices led to the creation of a "culture of assessment" (Weiner, 2009), in other words, an environment in which faculty embraces assessment because they see its value. Based on a survey distributed to all teaching faculty regarding the assessment process and outcomes, as well as a longitudinal content analysis of the disciplinary reports submitted annually to the Committee for Academic Skills Assessment (CASA), we argue that a voluntary, faculty driven process of assessment provided the space for the creation of a culture of assessment among the faculty who participated.

Our survey demonstrates that the majority of faculty embrace the assessment process (78% who participated in the survey) and recognize the benefits of assessment on student learning. While the analysis of the annual reports reveals some underdeveloped practices of assessment, the exercise of institution-wide assessment yielded concrete and positive changes in teaching strategies and curriculum. Furthermore, according to the data, only a minority of colleagues belong to the culture of "compliance" and/or "fear" (Skidmore et al., 2018). The presence of a subset of these individuals within both the survey and report data suggests that there is a segment of faculty that are not engaged and do not want to be. However, the disciplines that fully engaged with the process were able to identify learning outcomes and methods of assessing student achievement of the learning outcomes that led to changes in teaching. The project explores the actions of faculty, however, rather than the changes in student learning. As a result of our findings, we recommend forgetting about the less engaged faculty members for now and concentrating on those who are willing to participate. As we gather more empirical data on the positive effects of our new style of assessment has on student learning, we believe that resistance will decrease among the remaining faculty.

Literature Review

Over the past ten years, several common themes appear repeatedly within the scholarly literature on assessment including: faculty resistance and workload concerns (Walvoord, 2010; Weiner, 2009), demonstrable impact (Gilbert, 2018), the use of common standards (Sadler, 2014), and top down implementation and accreditation (Eubanks, 2017). Most actors understand assessment and accreditation go hand in hand, yet as Lane et al. (2014) bluntly ask: "Why is assessment still an issue of contention in most colleges and universities?" (p.2) The literature stresses the difficulty, but importance, of developing a culture of assessment (Ndoye & Parker, 2010). Farkas (2013) concretely defines a culture of assessment as a culture in which "assessment means more than simply doing assessment… Assessment becomes the norm and a valued part of planning and teaching" (p. 15). Similarly, Schlitz et al. (2009) suggest that a culture of assessment has to come from a "shared commitment to becoming better teachers" (p. 145). Analysing 1184

responses to the *Faculty Survey of Assessment Culture*, Skidmore et al. (2018) distinguish between a positive culture of assessment versus a culture of fear or compliance. They warn that "when the sole focus of assessment is on meeting requirements rather than using assessment as a tool of critical self-reflection for the purpose of improved student learning, compliance has fallen short of its full potential" (p. 1243). Banta et al. (2015), reviewing the field of assessment, argue that progress is being made and more institutions are changing their attitude from "Why do we have to do assessment?" to "How can we do assessment more effectively?" (p. 3).

In the Canadian context, a recent survey on assessment practices and learning outcomes amongst administrators at Canadian postsecondary institutions, found that "colleges and universities identified their commitments to improve as either the most or second most important motivation" to engage in assessment (MacFarlane & Brumwell, 2016, p. 32). Their research implies that while the lack of emphasis on accreditation in the Canadian context makes it easier to focus on assessment for learning, assessment practices in Canada that are centered on student learning are largely under-developed in comparison with the United States, and institutions still require a common language and the use of multiple strategies or indicators to assess how and what students learn (MacFarlane & Brumwell, 2016). As more Canadians question the usefulness of university degrees, there is mounting pressure on universities to present concrete data on student skills. As such, it seems inevitable that professors will need to engage with assessment. Research on assessment confirms that the importance of creating a positive culture of assessment is paramount. Our project is timely as it explores how our institution attempted to create such a culture. We present our limited success in doing so, hopefully providing some insight for other institutions engaged in similar processes.

Specifically, our research aims to measure empirically whether the creation of assessment processes, in a context that does not have mandatory assessment of learning for accreditation, prepares the ground for the growth of a positive culture of assessment, centered on student learning rather than fear or compliance (Skidmore et al., 2018).

Context and Methodology

The laboratory for our research is a residential liberal arts campus of around 1000 students located in a small city. The campus is part of a larger research-intensive university and is viewed as a site for innovation and experimentation in teaching. The latest institutional plan for the university identifies as one of the ten top goals to "ensure that [the campus] is strengthened as a leading liberal arts college, and as a living laboratory for teaching and learning innovation, to the benefit of the entire university" (University of Alberta, 2020). Most colleagues accept with pride the leading teaching role conferred on our campus by the university administration. Many professors have vibrant research agendas, but moreover, they see themselves as innovative, passionate and excellent teachers.

In 2012, in response to a previous unit review and under the leadership of a new Dean, faculty identified a set of core academic skills and a process for assessing the student attainment of those skills. The competencies themselves fall under the broad categories of thinking, researching and communicating, and each contain several learning outcomes; for example, finding and assessing sources of information, the ability to structure communication to suit a specific audience, and the ability to assess different points of view. Based on the work of Walvoord (2010), we developed a simple faculty driven process to assessment in which each discipline (major) would submit an annual report describing the skill chosen for assessment that

year, how and where the skills are developed in their program, and the level of student achievement. Faculty were given time during annual spring meetings to meet in disciplinary groups in order to identify a skill to assess and how they would do it. They were able to design their own method of assessment and, at the beginning, members of the committee stressed that conversation and anecdotal evidence were valid starting points for the assessment process. Reports from each discipline were collected in May of each year. The assessment committee met, discussed the reports, and prepared an anonymized summary report to share to the faculty council the following Fall meeting.

After four years of academic skill assessment, a survey was distributed to faculty in order to measure the development of an assessment culture on our campus and explore the impact, if any, that formal assessment was having on teaching practices. The online survey was distributed to all faculty and sessional teaching faculty in 2017. Approximately two-thirds of tenure or tenure track faculty and half of the sessional instructors completed the survey, for an overall total of fifty-five survey participants. The survey tool was based on the "Faculty Survey on Teaching, Learning and Assessment" developed by the National Centre for Postsecondary Improvement at Stanford University (NCP) and modified for our purposes (NCP, 2020). The survey produced both quantifiable results on faculty practices and perceptions, as well as a significant amount of text responses to questions. The textual answers were coded thematically and used to illuminate the quantitative findings.

In order to supplement and test faculty perceptions of the assessment process, four years of disciplinary reports submitted to the committee were evaluated. The use of a mixed methods approach to exploring the development of a culture of assessment has been used elsewhere (Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016). This approach allows for the comparison of the survey data with an additional 58 reports spanning 17 disciplines between 2013/14 and 2016/17. The examination of the reports focused on how the disciplines conducted their assessment of student learning, the concrete actions taken as a result of their assessments, and the overall development of assessment practices and attitudes. The content was coded based on both the information (e.g. What was assessed, how it was assessed, who did the assessment, what the findings were), as well as based on the tone of the report and how the reports of each discipline developed over time.

The two data sets complement each other. The survey concentrates on faculty perceptions of their actions over the previous four years, whereas the reports focus on the concrete and reported actions of faculty on a yearly basis. The use of both data sets was approved by the University Research Ethics Board.

Results

Survey

The analysis of the survey responses reveals three important findings. First, faculty consider the new core skills of thinker, researcher and communicator (See the Appendix for the list of skills) more important and useful than the assessment process itself. Similarly, survey respondents place more value on the discussions with colleagues resulting from the assessment process than the reports these conversations produced. Finally, while there continues to be a high level of engagement with the assessment of the core academic skills, there is resistance from some colleagues around workload, institutionalization, and the level at which data is collected and

collated. In sum, we managed to foster a culture of assessment centered on student learning, although a small group continues to challenge the practice and process of skill-based assessment.

As seen in Figure 1, faculty are largely convinced of the utility of the campus-wide assessment of student competencies. The fact that nearly two-thirds of our colleagues took the time to complete the survey suggests that they are engaged or, in some cases, strongly opposed to the process. Nearly three-quarters of respondents believed that the assessment process improved the quality of education. Approximately 85% either agree or strongly agree that assessment has an effect on what happens in their classroom and that assessment is necessary for monitoring student competencies. Furthermore, around three-quarters of respondents believe that assessment increases teaching effectiveness. These findings provide strong evidence for the creation of a culture of assessment that views assessment as a "valued part of planning and teaching" (Farkas, 2013, p. 15), and suggests that for the majority of the participants, assessment of student achievement of the core skills is productive and benefits students, professors and the campus as a whole.

Figure 1
Survey: Faculty Perceptions of Assessment (%)
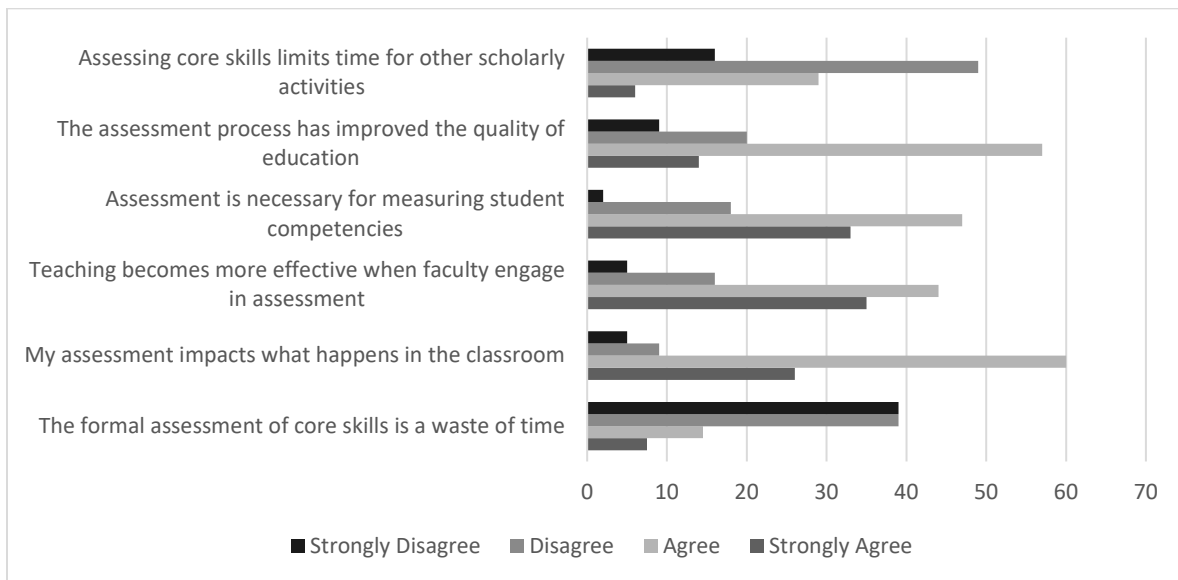
The text responses in the survey support these findings and provide more insight into how faculty view the process. One theme that emerged from the coding of the textual answers was that faculty, in general, found the articulation of a set of core skills that students should achieve more helpful than the process itself. For example, one professor commented that "I have made things more explicit in my classes as to what they are learning and why. Core skills help with this. Not sure the process itself makes a difference." Another faculty member reflected on the impact of the new core skills, stating, "Assignments clearly state the skills that will be developed by the student. It has forced me to think of where the students are, academically, in first year and where I would like them to be when they graduate with their degree." The last comment is interesting because it demonstrates the impact of the core skills, while suggesting, implicitly, the role that assessment could play.

Faculty also made many positive comments about the regular disciplinary meetings scheduled into the academic calendar. The meetings were established to ensure that individuals engaged in teaching had time to do assessment related work. One colleague stated that "the conversations within our discipline have been useful and have inspired a series of minor improvements to certain courses," while another reflected that their discipline had "benefitted from discussing assignments and assessment across courses." Other comments demonstrated the resistance of faculty to the assessment process, rather than assessment in itself; for example, one faculty member commented that there should be "more emphasis on faculty conversations, less expectation of pseudo-quantitative program assessments and standardized reporting."

The survey results reveal that there is a minority of faculty who do not support the assessment process instituted on our campus. Approximately 20% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "the formal assessment of core skills is a waste of time" and disagreed with the statements that "teaching becomes more effective when faculty engage in assessment" or that it is necessary for monitoring student achievement of the core skills. Almost 30% disagreed with the premise that the assessment process had improved the quality of education. Finally, 35% felt that the assessment process limits the time available for other scholarly activities. This sentiment was reflected in comments expressing concerns about workload and the perceived prioritization of research over teaching in faculty evaluations; for example, one faculty member wrote that "There is very little time to engage in assessment, particularly since the focus for merit and promotion is research."

Overall, the survey data demonstrates that the majority of faculty felt that the assessment process was improving teaching on the campus, even if they felt that it was the discussions, regular disciplinary meetings, and focus on what we are teaching and how, that was more valuable than the assessment results per se. The subsequent section analyzes the disciplinary reports submitted by faculty over a four-year period in order to test whether their perceptions match the reality reported by them.

Disciplinary Reports

This section focuses on the annual reports submitted by the academic majors to the assessment committee as a way to empirically evaluate the level of engagement with the assessment process (Jonson et al., 2014). We coded the responses and approaches identified by faculty in their reports. A grounded coding process was used in which both authors read through the reports and created an initial group of categories (e.g., types of activities, method of assessment, attitudes, opinions on the process, changes made in subsequent years). We then coded all the data individually, compared our coding, and resolved any discrepancies in order to ensure reliability. The reports themselves were limited to two pages and asked faculty to (1) identify the skill being assessed; (2) describe the process of assessment; (3) describe the student work assessed; (4) outline the results of the assessment; and (5) present a brief plan for the following year's assessment. The process was quite vague, leaving it to colleagues in the specific programs to determine what to assess and how to do it. The vagueness was deliberate as the committee wanted faculty to drive the process, rather than impose assessment plans on them, in the hope that faculty would, over time, develop more nuanced assessment processes. The analysis of the annual reports shows that some professors never participated or never progressed beyond general conversations and anecdotal evidence, in spite of unanimously voting in favour of developing assessment processes and agreeing to submit annual reports of their activities. If, on one hand,

the freedom to choose assessment methods encourages buy-in, on the other hand, the lack of strict guidelines, procedures or expectations seems to prevent the development of meaningful assessment practices.

The findings emerging from the analysis of the annual reports reinforces the idea that while many of our colleagues have embraced a strong culture of assessment, a significant number were submitting reports in order to comply with the process without fully engaging. In addition, some disciplines chose not to participate; this may be partially a result of the voluntary nature of the assessment process and the lack of accreditation or negative consequences associated with not participating. Over four years, the committee received a total of 58 reports out of a possible 76. Some of the missing reports are explained by sabbaticals and staffing changes, while others were simply not submitted.

One positive finding from the analysis of the annual reports is that 40 of them (69%) actively reflected on their students learning and their own teaching (see Figure 2). Also quite encouraging, 24 (41%) of the reports demonstrated that the program had made changes as a result of their assessment. Additionally, a few programs worked with others or referred the issue to faculty services, such as the library or writing centre. If the goal of assessment is to encourage professors to reflect on teaching and learning and make evidence-based changes to their teaching practices, then these findings show that, overall, the process is successful for the majority of faculty.

Figure 2
Themes Found in the Assessment Reports Submitted Annually by Disciplines (n= 58)
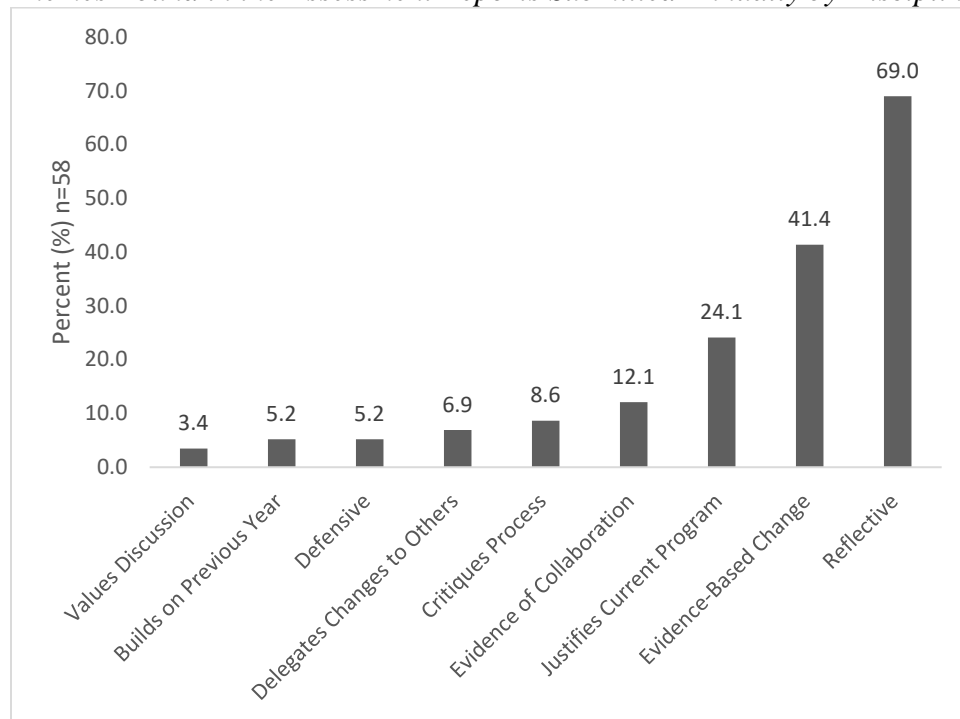
The more problematic findings are that 14 of the reports were used to justify the existing program, three were very defensive of their program, and five explicitly critiqued the assessment process. The first two points indicate a misunderstanding about the assessment process among some faculty. While the assessment process was deliberately separate from all processes of faculty

and program evaluation, the defense of programs, courses and teaching practices implies that some colleagues felt threatened by the process. Also, while they focussed on defending their existing programs, they generally failed to actively assess student learning and make evidence-based change.

Figure 3 outlines the materials faculty reported assessing and Figure 4 outlines the method of assessment used. Twenty-one of the reports (36%) did not assess anything, while the remainder assessed a variety of student materials. The inaction of some programs (several continued to not assess student working throughout the time period studied) is concerning in that they could not determine the level at which those students achieved the core skills nor whether any of their ideas or changes impacted student learning. The ability to convey this gap in our data to faculty, however, makes the importance of concrete assessments of student work more evident. When compared with programs that conducted more thorough assessments, the differences can be used to encourage faculty to engage more with the process.

Figure 3
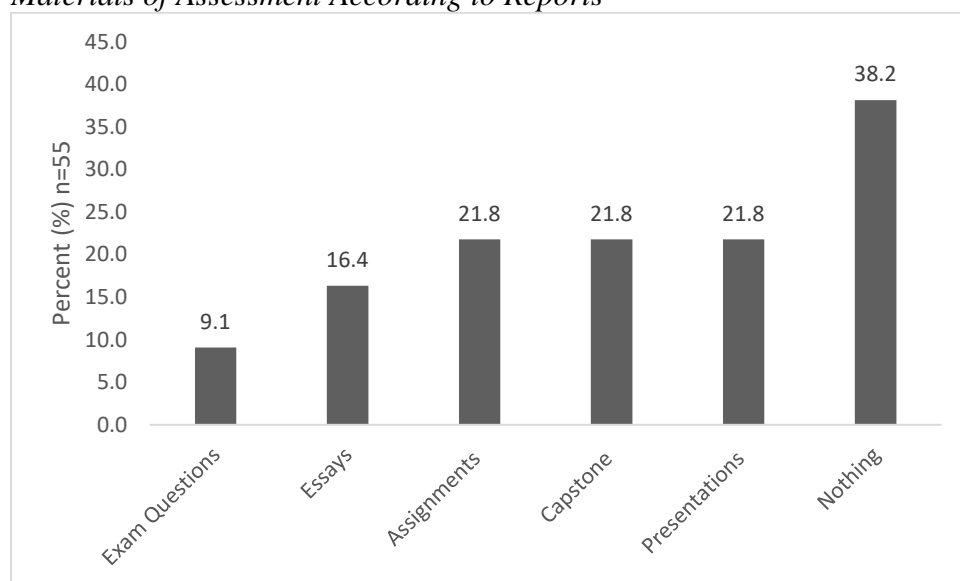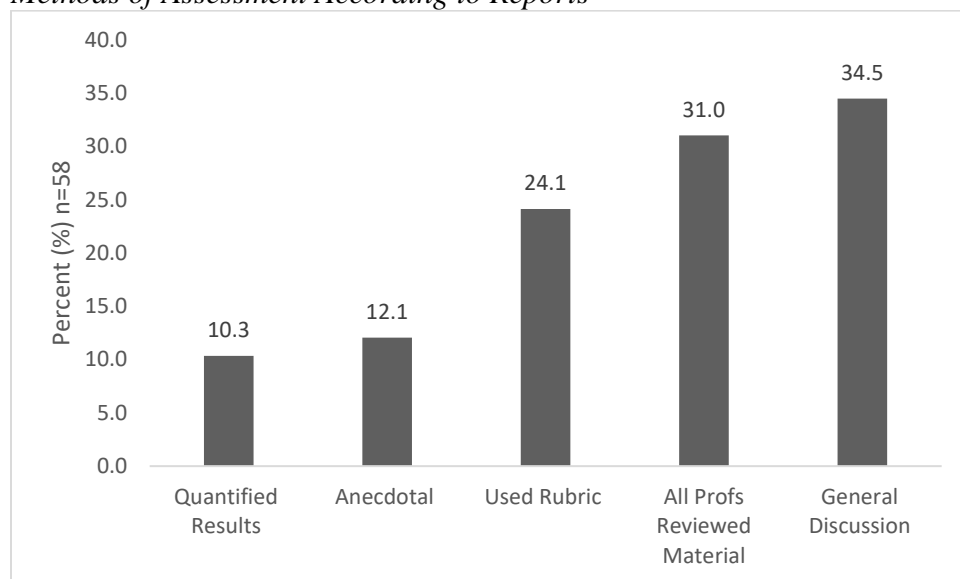*Materials of Assessment According to Reports*

Figure 4
Methods of Assessment According to Reports

Just as the survey responses indicated, colleagues specifically noted in their reports the importance of getting together to discuss courses and programs and to collaborate. In 20 instances, faculty reported simply having a general discussion rather than assessing student materials or analyzing the results of their assessment. All colleagues within their discipline were engaged in the assessment in 31% of the reports (n=18), 24% percent (n=14) used a rubric, and only 10% (*n*=6) provide quantified results. The lack of quantifiable results can be partly explained by the small size of many programs and the resulting small samples of student work to assess.

Generally, the disciplines that took the process seriously and employed a clear method of assessment made changes to their program, courses, or assignments as a result of the assessment process. They were able to build on previous years' results and make concrete changes to the benefit of the program and their students. The successes of these programs and the insights they gained through the assessment process can be used to encourage the active participation of less engaged faculty.

Discussion

The two data sets allow us to compare how faculty perceived the assessment process with what they actually reported doing. In general, some of the responses to the survey had a more negative tone; however, when the data is analyzed more closely, both the survey and the reports demonstrate a positive trajectory and the gradual development of a culture of assessment that values the process of assessment itself.

Figure 5 shows how many colleagues said that assessment led to concrete action such as using rubrics or changing assignments. Figure 6 outlines the planned or executed actions reported to the assessment committee. It is important to note that the survey reflects individual responses and individuals could identify more than one impact of assessment. The annual reports are for each discipline and include up to four years' worth of results from any one discipline.

Figure 5
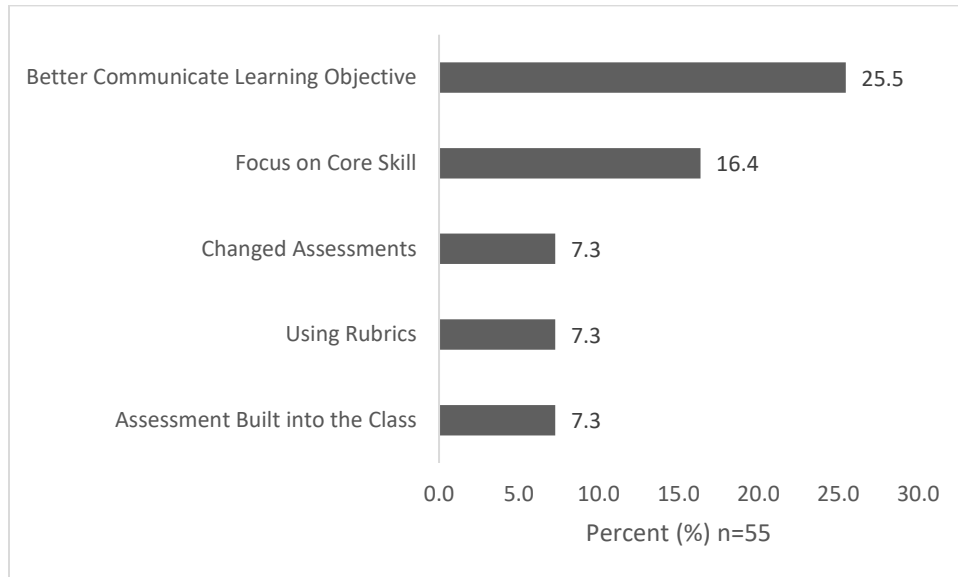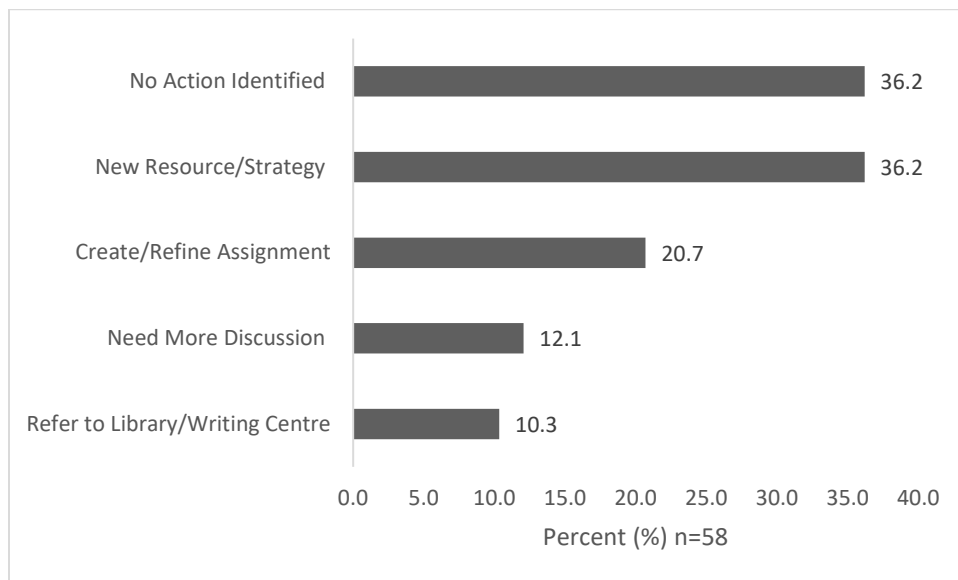*Impact of Assessment According to Survey*

Figure 6
Impact of Assessment According to Reports

In the survey, faculty identified the core skills as the most useful part of the process, particularly for the communication of learning objectives. The annual reports show that in 21 (36%) of the reports submitted, the assessment process was not fruitful since no actions were identified in the report as a result of the process. We speculate that there is a correlation between those who expressed skepticism about assessment processes in the survey and those who did not report any actions; however, the nature of the data collection makes it impossible to test this

theory as faculty in the survey were not asked to state their discipline in order to preserve anonymity.

Some faculty in the survey mentioned building assessment directly into the class, using rubrics, or modified assignments, but these only amount to four responses each, or 7% of the responses. This figure reveals that faculty did not recall the assessment process having a direct impact on what they did in the classroom. In the reports, however, 21 (36%) stated that they developed a new resource or strategy to address a need identified by the assessment process, 12 (21%) created and refined assignments, and an additional six (10%) identified plans to work with the library and writing centre to address student needs. In the reports, 67% demonstrate engagement with the process and concrete results grounded in the classroom experiences of teachers and students. The difference between the survey and the reports may be explained by the time between doing the reports and completing the survey, which was several years in some cases. It is problematic if the time lapse led to a perceived decrease in the perception of the effectiveness of assessment. Another explanation could be that faculty were more honest about their assessment in an anonymous survey than in the program reports, raising potential concerns about the integrity of the reports. Both the survey and the reports suggest that those who engaged less with the process and did not assess student work in a meaningful way made fewer changes and expressed more skepticism about the process itself.

Some faculty members appreciated the process of having discussions about teaching and student learning but did not like the assessment process itself, particularly the filling out and submission of a report. This sentiment reflects a common theme within the assessment literature, recently the subject of much discussion in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* that reporting is a waste of time and contributes to the collection of poor data by universities (Gilbert, 2018). Institutions thus face a dilemma: some segment of faculties resist having to report, yet reporting is necessary to share information to both internal and external audiences, to communicate what students are doing and can do. Interestingly, in the fifth year of the assessment process, due to a variety of curricular changes occurring on our campus, faculty were only encouraged, but not required, to meet or submit a report. Without the mandatory component of the process (which at its best never achieved 100% compliance), the amount of disciplines that were doing concrete and collaborative assessment dropped dramatically to only one. The less popular and required component of assessment – reporting – thus can be viewed as a tool for achieving the aspects of the process that faculty supported and found most useful: discussion and reflection.

Conclusion

The article analyzed data from a survey on faculty perceptions of a newly instituted assessment process and compared the findings to the reports submitted to the assessment committee over a four-year period in order to determine whether a culture of assessment centred on student learning rather than compliance had been achieved. Both the surveys and the reports reveal some reluctance or skepticism towards assessment and indicate that there is a fairly stable, but small, group of individuals who have not adopted a culture of assessment. More encouragingly, the survey respondents and reports confirm we have largely developed a culture of assessment centered on students learning. Providing faculty with formal opportunities to meet and discuss teaching and student learning led to concrete changes in what is taught, how it is taught, and what students learn for the majority of faculty and programs. These findings also reveal that the institutional support and the mandatory nature of the assessment process are

necessary to get faculty to engage with the process, even if some do so reluctantly. Furthermore, the evidence from programs and faculty that did engage in meaningful assessment can be used to demonstrate the effectiveness of the process and encourage more faculty to participate.

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Appendix

List of Core Skills

Augustana students are thinkers, researchers, and communicators.

As **Thinkers** they can

a. read, view, listen, and reflect carefully and extensively;
b. engage in issues from a variety of perspectives, cultures, or traditions; and
c. approach problems using evidence, reasoning, and creativity.

As **Researchers** they can

a. design and execute projects from conception to fruition;
b. analyze and synthesize data, concepts, and ideas;
c. assert their own perspective on a topic through argument, presentation, or interpretation; and
d. employ information literacy skills to assemble and evaluate the most suitable materials.

As **Communicators** they can

a. clearly convey ideas, creative work, and research in an artistic or scholarly manner;
b. present information confidently, showing command of oral, digital, written, visual, or artistic expression;
c. employ effective presentation and rhetorical strategies tailored to specific audiences; and
d. write logically and grammatically.