

Statement of Aims and Objectives

Please consider my application for sabbatical leave for spring 2011; I propose to write a guide to facilitate the effective use of assessment data by administrators, faculty, and others. This *Manual for the Use of On-hand Assessment Data* is important for Stockton and for other institutions whose faculty and administrators are struggling with closing the assessment cycle and moving from gathering data to the really important step of using it to inform institutional, program, and classroom practices. It is increasingly evident that faculty are being held to a standard of evidence-based pedagogical practice in their work, and that programs and schools in colleges and institutions must meet similar standards. From the classroom to the institution, faculty, staff, and administrators are engaging in assessment activities. At many levels and in various ways there is a lot of data gathering going on at Stockton and at most colleges and universities. However, despite much assessment activity, there is relatively little use of the assessment data.

From my participation at conferences and meetings of college and university personnel over the past several years, I am persuaded that there is widespread underuse of assessment data in the higher educational institutions. Undoubtedly, some colleges are doing a good job of closing the assessment loop by using their standardized test data to inform decisions. Kalamazoo College has done much good and helpful interpretive work with their Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) results (Southerland, 2007), and Westminster College has done pioneering work on using their CLA scores and National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results. These models will be helpful to me as I develop the *Manual for the Use of On-hand Assessment Data*. However, many more institutions are receiving assessment reports, puzzling over the findings, rejoicing at, or denying the revelations. In the better cases, faculty and administrators discuss the results. However, in many more cases, the reports are neglected and left unused for several years. In fact, there are appropriate responses to different results. My manual is intended to help in the formulation of effective responses.

The assessment and accountability thrust that is currently part of the landscape in higher education is making it increasingly difficult for institutions to ignore the pressure to engage in assessment activity. Assessment activity, however, is only one step in the assessment process. The main outcome of assessment, for an educational institution, should be a change in the way we do business at the classroom level and as part of institutional culture. Assessment should generate information to inform evidence-based decisions and to improve our effectiveness as we facilitate learning.

Test results as reported to colleges do not provide direction, nor do they provide actionable information; they are often just data such as average scores, percentile ranks, and statistics that compare us with other institutions. This project could operationalize the process of moving the *assessment data* to the level of *useful information*, and through its model and guidelines, provide a starting point for others to take action and adopt or adapt as appropriate. The Manual will help faculty members and deans to move from data to information, to triangulate data by considering assessment results from different sources and methods of collection, and to address reliability and validity concerns in making meaning. The manual is scholarly in the Boyer (1990) revised model of scholarship and is a classic example of the *scholarship of application*. Boyer (1990) defines the scholarship of application as the use of knowledge to solve problems, and he equates this type of scholarly work as being on par with the scholarship of discovery, integration, and teaching. Although the main focus of the manual will be procedural, the procedures will be supported by theory and will be illustrated with examples and cases. The theoretical underpinnings for the methodologies will be firmly grounded in assessment and learning theory.

The Manual will cover the key steps in assessment use, dissemination, discussion, triangulation (both methodological and theoretical and from the interactionist and structuralist perspectives), and the various options for application at all levels of practice. There are advantages and disadvantages to each method of data collection and for each sampling protocol. Triangulation helps to increase reliability of measures and validity in their use by balancing the strengths and weaknesses of different methodologies in sampling and measurement. I will catalogue the types of institutional data that we have on hand and the ways in which these data can provide useful information at the program level or for faculty development. My aim is to provide a research-based practical guide for educators to make informed decisions about student learning by using the assessment data that they have and to give them the steps and a model of what can be accomplished to help overcome the inertia that often follows data collection.

The project will be useful to institutions that are working to address the changing demands of accrediting bodies that have upgraded their expectations of colleges from the earlier requirement of *doing assessment* to the current standard of *using assessment* for continuous improvement.

Background Work already Accomplished

Over the past six years I have been working with Stockton's faculty members and schools (formerly divisions) as they strive to develop assessment plans and strategies. This process has awarded me the best possible preparation for this project. Fresh from the front lines of assessment practice, and with a clear understanding of the issues that are most problematic to faculty members and to programs, I am very familiar with the literature, the current thinking, and the challenges.

In 2007 I was the principal investigator for a Teagle Foundation collaborative assessment planning grant. The three colleges in the planning collaborative investigated ways to use our collective data to answer institutional questions and to plan for assessment use. As a result of that preparation, in 2008 I gave a presentation on the use of standardized assessment test results by institutions to the Teagle Assessment Collaborative. In February, 2009 in collaboration with Claudine Keenan, I made a presentation about assessment use at the Association of American Colleges and Universities' annual General Education and Assessment conference in Baltimore. These presentations are the skeleton from which the manual will be built.

Over the next two years I will co-chair the Assessment Committee for the Middle States Self Study. My proposed sabbatical project will benefit from and support my work in preparing the college for the self study, and in a very real way the project will have immediate practical application. As a result of the symbiotic nature of the two tasks, I am up-to-date on the status of assessment use and will continue to be in the loop about developments and areas of concern. I have already drafted a preliminary outline of the scheme for the major sections of the manual and sketched in the content for some of the sections.

Statement of the Procedures/Methodology

I will begin, in January 2011, by updating my research on assessment use. I plan to review recently published works and contact the colleges that are doing forward-looking work in this area to meet with assessment coordinators to get more detail about their best practices. Part of the work that has to be done at Stockton is to catalogue the on-hand assessment data and to indicate how faculty and administrators can gain access to test results by clarifying who has custody of each

data source and making clear how, and under what conditions the data are available for use. During this period I will also attend the AACU annual assessment meeting to get critical feedback on my draft plan and to discuss it with a group of assessment practitioners. The real work for this project is the writing and re-writing of the chapters and the task of selecting the examples and cases for inclusion.

The procedures will include a) research, b) outlining the sections or chapters, c) collaboration with colleagues, d) formalizing the outline, e) writing, f) editing, and g) disseminating. Steps a and b are planned for January and February, c and d will take place simultaneously in March and the final steps e and f, will begin immediately thereafter and continue through the summer months. I plan to have the document ready for dissemination in the college community when I return to full duty in the fall of 2011.

Importance or Value

Because the project is applied in nature the importance or value has been integrated in the project description. The assessment literature that has proliferated over the past ten years is comprehensive and explicit in its coverage of reasons for assessment, types of assessment, the scholarship of assessment, and the advantages and disadvantages of the various approaches. The published work stops short of being explicit about the step beyond the collection of data. This work would contribute to filling that void.

Further Research or Study

The Manual is the trial run for a book on assessment use. During the latter part of my leave I plan to send the manuscript to a potential publisher such as Jossey-Bass, to get feedback as to its suitability, and then to deepen and extend the manual into a book for use in higher education.

Outcome

As the various sections are completed, I intend to submit presentations based on these sections to conferences on assessment and to write one or two articles for submission to appropriate journals. Specifically I will submit to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Assessment Conference and the annual conference of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education for presentation and to the Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education for publication. At Stockton, the logical path for the document's dissemination and use would be through the Institute for Faculty Development (IFD). The Director of the IFD, who is also the college's assessment coordinator, would be best placed to distribute it locally. The primary outcome will be the integration of the manual into the practice of assessment work at Stockton and hopefully beyond.

References

- Boyer, E. L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
- Southerland, P., Dueweke, A., Cunningham, K., & Grossman, B. (2007). Multiple drafts of a college's narrative. Peer Review, 20 – 23.
- Gonsalves, S. V. & Keenan, C. (2009). Using on-hand assessment data to fine-tune faculty development activities. Presentation at The Association for American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) General Education, Assessment, and the Learning Students Need Conference. Baltimore, MD.