The meeting of the Campus Assessment Network (CAN) was held Wednesday, April 23, 2013 at 3:00 p.m. in Adams Hall B13.

Welcome and Introductions

Members were introduced and thanked for their attendance.

Members present:
Sherrill Morris, Steve Wallace, Victoria Livingston, Tawanda Gipson, Lara Lyles, Beth Towell, Yan Chen, Evelyn Comber, David Gorman, Amy Martin, Kim Rasmussen, J. Schwartz, Megan Ryan, Bri Lauka, and Amanda Thrun

Book discussion “Towards Fairer University Assessment.” (2011). Nerilee Ra Flint and Bruce Johnson

The authors of the book set out to examine university student perceptions on the fairness of assessment. Through multiple focus group and interviews, they developed the grounded theory of demonstrating capability. Although their study took place in Australia where “assessment” is synonymous with grading, the presented concepts are very relevant in NIU’s effort to improve our assessment practices and involve students in assessment discussions. CAN participants discussed the same questions presented by the authors:

1) Why is the assessment of students’ capabilities the core business of universities?

- Beth Towell asked the students in attendance if they thought their grades reflected what they learned or if they reflected good attendance, getting work in on time, etc. Does the grade effect a lot more than learning? Students felt it depended on the exam or case study.
- Sherrill Morris asked if the students knew what their professors were hoping they would learn. Students said yes, as it is on the syllabus. The undergraduates were not aware of expected program outcomes.
- Sherrill Morris stated for her personally, sometimes she was so concerned about the grade that she didn’t learn until she got to the graduate level where she could focus on learning. David Gorman stated that the opposite could also happen – students are so focused on learning that they don’t focus on the targeted information.

2) What are the main sources of student frustration with assessment arrangements?

- Students responded that sometimes clear instructions were not given by their professors, the professor was not available to the students, or the professor made the student feel like they are a burden.
• Tawanda Gipson asked about tutoring services. More are available at the first two years in the undergraduate level. Offerings are reduced for upper level courses. Amanda Thrun commented that students usually rely on their peers.
• J. Schwartz stated some students do not feel comfortable approaching the teacher or they don’t take tests well. He said there are resources available at the university to help students in these areas. When he was teaching, he informed his students early on about available university resources.
• Tawanda Gipson asked how the personality of the professor affects the student/professor relationship. The book indicated if a student feels the professor cares, they will feel they were assessed more fairly. NIU students indicated this was often the case but respect for professor’s knowledge also comes into play.

3) What do students do when they think they have been treated unfairly?

• The general consensus was to “zip your lip and work harder next time.” This was especially true for students who knew they may have this professor again. Once they knew what the professor expected from them, it would be easier for them to perform at that level. Students were reluctant to make an official complaint, because it could make it harder for them to achieve their long term goals.

4) What can be done to promote fair assessment at the university?

• Beth Towell mentioned that the graduate school already uses a fractional (+/-) grading scale and that this system would be put in place for undergraduates in Fall 2013. The general consensus from students was they were against them. However, the students could see some circumstances where it would be useful.
• Steve Wallace indicated that grades have “fuzzy” boundaries. They aren’t necessarily valid measures of student learning. Unfortunately adding precision measures to something that is imprecise doesn’t necessarily improve clarity.

5) Carrie Zack recommended we consider conducting similar research at NIU. Research questions the group discussed were:

• Is fairness a problem at NIU? If so, how do we address it?
• What are students’ objectives for coming to college? What learning will occur through obtaining a degree and will this meet their need? We need to reconcile the student’s perceptions of why they come to college with faculty desires.
• Are there differences between Liberal Arts & Sciences programs and more professional programs in terms of student’s understanding of what programs expect of them? J. Schwartz wondered if there was a disconnect between why a department is giving the credential vs. why the student is obtaining the credential.

Meeting was adjourned at 4:25 pm.