Bridging the Assessment Gap: Collaborating and Communicating to Ensure Student Success

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Outcomes for this afternoon:

- Understand the benefits of using assessment to strengthen two and four year institutional relationships.
- Explore how the results of assessment may be used to improve and enhance overall organizational accountability efforts.
- Discuss the need to establish a shared conceptual framework and highlight ways to enhance trust and increase collaboration in an effort to contribute to overall success.
- Recognize how to incorporate assessment into the transfer and decision-making process.
- Discover the challenges that both permeate higher education as a whole as well as those that are unique to each type of institution.
- Develop ways to use assessment to improve student and organizational learning.
Two Year/Four Year Case

Taylor is a 20 year old student who is getting ready to complete the second year of coursework at the local community college. She is working with school administrators to transfer into a bachelor's degree program at a local four year, state institution. Taylor enjoys learning and has many interests but is still unsure of a specific career path. She recently learned of a General Studies degree option but it seems ambiguous and fairly new. Despite the fact that Taylor is graduating with B+ average and has met all course requirements at her current institution, she has run into some roadblocks that are making the transfer process difficult and frustrating.

These roadblocks include the following:
1. Though an articulation agreement with the four year institution of interest is in place, there does not seem to be any one person responsible for handling students seeking admission without a specific major. As a result, Taylor keeps getting passed from office to office when attempting to get questions answered, submit paperwork, learn about expectations for new students, etc.
2. There seems to be some confusion about how much of Taylor’s associate’s degree will transfer into the new program. Though Taylor was told at the onset of her post-secondary experience that it would be no problem to transfer all classes over and receive credit for two years of coursework, she has recently learned that the credit hours granted for some of the classes at the community college do not parallel those assigned at the four year institution which causes some concern and issues with course transfer.
3. Disjointed communication between the community college and the four year institution regarding level of mastery of particular content areas, assessment metrics, and specific skill sets expected of students entering the program at the sophomore or junior level limit collaboration and contribute to a lack of trust regarding the faculty at the two institutions.

These challenges are discouraging to Taylor who worked very hard under the guise that moving to the next level of post-secondary education would not be so difficult.

Discussion Questions

1. Based on the current scenario, what do you anticipate will happen to Taylor?

2. What other challenges might you expect in a situation such as this?

3. Who is responsible for addressing these challenges and supporting Taylor in her endeavor to transfer to the four year institution?
Whose problem is it?

- Increased emphasis on accountability at all levels of post-secondary education
- Public disenchantment growing due to: tuition and fee increases, financial aid decreases, complex articulation agreements, dissatisfaction with quality of classroom instruction
- A lot of pointing fingers at others

How do we begin to build a bridge?

- Stop projecting blame on others
- Build partnerships and increase collaborative efforts
- Take responsibility
- Increase transparency
- Strengthen communication
- Cut through the “red tape” and make student success a true priority
- Enact instead of espouse
- Make assessment a common thread
Outcomes-based assessment...

- Allows for “quality assurance” and informs external accountability (Bresciani, 2006).

- Yields information about how learning is fostered in both academic and co-curricular environments

- Serves as a means to demonstrate how all facets of the post-secondary learning enterprise contribute to overall student learning and development

What is Assessment?

- A systematic and intentional process in which higher education professionals articulate what the program intends to accomplish in regard to its services, research, student learning, and faculty/staff development programs;

- The faculty and/or professionals then purposefully plan the program so that the intended results (outcomes) can be achieved;

- Implement methods to systematically—over time—identify whether end results have been achieved;

- And finally, use the results to plan improvements or make recommendations for policy consideration, recruitment, retention, resources reallocation, or new resources requests;

- This systematic process of evaluation is then repeated at a later date to determine whether the program improvements contribute to intended outcome (Bresciani, 2006, p. 14).
What is it not?

• Assessment is not haphazard
• Assessment is not “once and done”
• Assessment is not punitive
• Assessment is not an “end in and of itself”

Why is assessment important?

1. Demonstrates contributions to institutional **mission and goals**
2. Contributes to institutional **priorities**
3. Assists in informing **prioritization** of your time as well as other **resources**

(Bresciani, Moore Gardner, and Hickmott, 2009)
Astin (1991):

- “…an institution’s assessment practices are a reflection of its values (p.3)”
- Student learning and development are espoused values at every type of higher education institution and, hypothetically, the center of our work
- Results of assessment demonstrate how mission and values of an institution are or are not manifest in programs and services
- Also contributes to the development of a LEARNING ORGANIZATION (Senge, 1990)

Challenges to assessment and collaboration

- Everyone is already taking care of their jobs and those of others
- Limited funding
- Limited additional time or personnel to handle data collection, communication, etc.
- Limited knowledge, patience, and ability to see “the light at the end of the tunnel”
- Poor or disjointed communication
- Lack of direction
- Varying levels of trust
How do we increase collaboration and strengthen and utilize assessment?

Establishing a learner-centered culture and partnerships
(Informs and enhances evidence-based decision making)
Values necessary for a learning-centered culture

1. Efficacy of Multiple Webs of Interdependence
   - Community and two year colleges are already used to this because they are typical smaller, one or two tiered organizations that require shared resources and cross-functioning
   - A learning centered culture values collaboration and inclusion of multiple units (both academic and co-curricular) in decision making

2. Appreciation of organizational hard work
   - Must be an overarching organizational value of hard work in order to promote and sustain evidence-based decision making------It is not easy!
3. Optimization of functional performance

- A true measure of an organization’s success should be the degree to which functional performance (learning) is fostered and produced.

- Goal of any post-secondary institution is to produce learning and emphasis on that should be readily apparent in daily tasks and expectations should

(Dale, 2014)

Visioning (define and declare organizational direction)

- A vision serves “as an institutional North star” (Hunt, 1998)

- Visioning is the process of determining and sustaining the product of that declared vision

- Critically important in establishing a learning-centered culture (Dale, 2014)

- Visioning tools: strategic plans, mission statements and assessment plans
Key element that is necessary to establish a learning centered culture is not just student learning...also **EMPLOYEE AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING.**

(Dale, 2014)

**In order to start the visioning process**...(and essentially the process of becoming a learning organization)

1. Create a community of learners composed of all stakeholders
2. Begin the conversation
3. Hold a big event
4. Conduct a gap analysis
5. Change the system language
6. Define and personalize a learning-centered model
7. Use national models (Dale, 2014)
Collaboration

• We need to acknowledge and accept that learning transcends our individual institutions and we must, therefore, work together to ensure student success rather than stifle it due to silos and miscommunications.

• We need to ask: “What are the best organizational practices, structures, and processes that encourage, enhance, and support learning?” (Dale, 2014, p. 26)

How do we encourage collaboration?

1. Ensure top-down buy-in
2. Offer professional development that encourages collaboration
3. Make assessment a collective process
4. Create committees that include all stakeholders
5. Consider joint and co-leadership appointments
6. Incentivize collaboration (particularly effective in times of limited resources)
7. Challenge traditional organization structure

(Dale, 2014, p. 29)
Communication

1. Leadership must send, support, and promote the message of collaboration, communication, and trust.

2. Engage in learning-centered messaging

3. “Tell Stories”: assessment is a primary means of telling our story

Garnering and Sustaining Buy-In

Must be focused in two areas:

1) Organizational Structures

2) Continual professional development and education of stakeholders new and seasoned
Sustaining the Organization

1. Develop an annual learner-centered report card (assessment informs this report)

2. Review planning systems and processes

3. Live the Culture

(Dale, 2014)

Sustaining the People in the Organization

1. Cultivate new champions

2. Integrate learning-centeredness into hiring practices

3. Leverage the new employee onboarding process

4. Make everyone accountable

(Dale, 2014)
Start by creating a learning-centered culture, then build on that to establish a culture of communication, collaboration and effective assessment.

Establishing a shared conceptual framework

- Must create a common language among stakeholders
- Provides direction, is mission-driven, provides a sense of commonality and coherence (Senge, 1990)
- Key to developing a strong conceptual framework is removing barriers—particularly trust and management of expectations
Goal definitions—"Three Cs“ (NIU Website, Baccalaureate Learning)

• **Critical thinking**—involves literacy, reflectivity, and understanding how to gather and make sense of various forms of information before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.

• **Creativity**—uses a combination of imagination, intellect, insight, and emotion to solve problems and transform existing ideas, images, or techniques in innovative and original ways.

• **Communication**—includes the mastery of foundational skills, such as language, technology, and collaboration.

Questions for the group:

• Are these goals central to learning at other institutions?

• If so, how do we share assessment, resources, and tools?

• How do we work together to establish a common language, reduce barriers, increase collaboration, etc.?
Establishing trust and collaboration

• Issue of trust includes:
  – Inability to trust professionals, both academic and administrative, as valid contributors
  – Inability to trust moving beyond traditional forms of assessment based on course-specific, criterion-referenced measurement to a broader, more holistic approach
  – Imperative to consider all stakeholders as part of an overall learning community/organization as opposed to an “us/them” method

Blind Men and Elephant Parable
We have to start working together to see the bigger picture

What is your elephant?
Provide specific examples
What are some ways we as stakeholders in student learning can work together to establish a culture of evidence-based decision making and shared accountability for student success?

Stop perpetuating a segmented perspective

- Must create a shared strategic plan
- Focus on systematic and thoughtful assessment
- “Close the loop” and use the information to inform your work
- Educate
- Communicate
- Celebrate
As organizations partnering for student success we must...

- Shared practical conceptual framework
- Establish a culture of trust and collaboration
- Connect to a common mission
- Integrate into all core components of the organization
- Provide internal and external resources
- Encourage discussion at all levels

Revisit Two Year/Four Year Case

Think about the challenges and issues Taylor faced as she tried to transfer from the community college to the four year institution. After learning about additional challenges that might impact the situation as well as how to overcome those challenges to build a strong bridge between two and four year institutions, please answer the following questions:

1. How can you alleviate the challenges highlighted in the case?
2. How might the alleviation of such challenges impact the outcome of the case?
3. In what ways could you use assessment to positively impact the situation and contribute to overall student success?
We cannot get a complete and holistic picture of overall student growth and development during the post-secondary experience without understanding the entire journey.

How will you build that bridge?

• Describe measures you can take starting today to begin to create that holistic picture and build that bridge.
• What resources do you already have to make that happen?
• What resources do you need?
• Who should be involved?
• How will you educate, communicate, and celebrate?
• How can assessment help us in our journey?
Questions?

References


References


Two Year to Four Year Case

Taylor is a 20 year old student who is getting ready to complete the second year of coursework at the local community college. She is working with school administrators to transfer into a bachelor’s degree program at a local four year, state institution. Taylor enjoys learning and has many interests but is still unsure of a specific career path. She recently learned of a General Studies degree option but it seems ambiguous and fairly new. Despite the fact that Taylor is graduating with B+ average and has met all course requirements at her current institution, she has run into some roadblocks that are making the transfer process difficult and frustrating.

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These challenges are discouraging to Taylor who worked very hard under the guise that moving to the next level of post-secondary education would not be so difficult.
Revisit the case scenario from the beginning of the presentation. Think about the challenges and issues Taylor faced as she tried to transfer from the community college to the four year institution. After learning about additional challenges that might impact the situation as well as how to overcome those challenges to build a strong bridge between two and four year institutions, please answer the following questions:

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