Finding the ‘Start Line’ with an Institutional Effectiveness Inventory

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It has been nearly a quarter of a century since assessment began as a way for a university to measure its positive impact on students. Instead of focusing on inputs and resources, assessment looks critically at student learning, articulates program goals, sets standards for accomplishment, and measures the extent to which standards are met. The question, “What should our graduates know, be able to do, and value?” is the focal point for beginning an assessment effort where outcomes matter most.

The mandate for assessment developed as various national commissions studying higher education concluded that a “disturbing and dangerous mismatch exists between what American society needs from higher education and what it is receiving” (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). What began as an experimental response to those concerns on the part of a handful of institutions developed into a national agenda. For the past 15 years, there has been relentless pressure for assessment and the expectations associated with it (Gray, 1997).

National-level efforts, state-level initiatives, accrediting agencies, the private sector, and professional associations have all exerted influence on student assessment (Ewell, 1996; Cole, Nettles & Sharp, 1997). All six regional accrediting agencies now require evidence of student assessment (Peterson and Einarson, 2000). According to a recent survey, all but four states reported some type of student assessment, and the requirement to demonstrate effectiveness via student outcomes has become part of performance funding in a number of states (Burke and Minassians, 2001). Regardless of who guides the effort to strengthen institutional accountability, it appears inevitable that student outcomes assessment will endure as a topic of institutional, regional and national concern into the 21st century.

Conceptual Framework

At Florida Atlantic University, as at many other institutions, our impetus to institute a program of institutional effectiveness was an impending regional accreditation visit. Undertaking assessment in an atmosphere where many faculty are unfamiliar with the concept is a challenge, particularly at a large, distributed university like Florida Atlantic University, where colleges are independent and faculty within a single discipline are scattered across several campuses. To lay the groundwork for an initiative certain to claim a fair amount of time and resources during the next several years, we decided to poll departments on their existing assessment activities. We developed an inventory checklist to identify current campus practices for assessing student performance-related outcomes.

The development of an inventory checklist is not a novel idea for such an undertaking. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) encourages its member institutions to begin their evaluation of institutional effectiveness by conducting an assessment of existing practices within the institution and suggests a format for the inventory (Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, 1996). Nichols (1993; 1995) discusses the importance and added value of conducting an inventory of assessment activities. Many of the institutions in his case studies...
reported the use of an inventory for collecting and reporting information. Palomba and Banta (1999) point out that completing an inventory of current data collection methods may uncover several activities that, although not specifically designed for program assessment, can help accomplish its purpose. Furthermore, institutions using inventories report benefits ranging from the identification of disparities in existing operations and programs to using inventory results as benchmarks to measure future assessment (Nichols, 1995; Hodge, 1997).

**Administering the Inventory Checklist**

The purpose of our inventory checklist was to stimulate conversation and provoke thought among department chairs and their units about ways in which student performance-related outcomes are measured, and to evaluate current methods for overall program effectiveness. The purpose of our inventory checklist was to stimulate conversation and provoke thought among department chairs and their units about ways in which student performance-related outcomes are measured, and to evaluate current methods for overall program effectiveness (Tables 1 and 2 show the academic and administrative versions of the inventory). The inventory checklist identified strengths, weaknesses, and needed resources in individual programs. It highlighted areas in which programs had proven methods of assessment in place, and uncovered potentially useful methods of assessment not yet in place.

The inventory checklist was designed with three areas of interest in mind. The first area focused on departmental mission, intended educational outcomes, and written methods of assessment for evaluating program effectiveness. The second area explored direct and indirect indicators of assessment. Direct indicators, such as capstone courses, portfolio assessments, licensure, certification, or professional exams, and video and audiotape evaluations, assess knowledge and skills demonstrated by the student. Indirect indicators, such as student course evaluations, employer surveys and questionnaires, student exit interviews, and alumni surveys, assess students’ and others’ opinions of their learning. The third area inquired into the use of inventory results for overall program improvement, and identified needed resources (training, personnel, and technology) for improving student outcomes and program effectiveness.

**Table 1**

<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Florida Atlantic University</td>
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<tr>
<td>INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS CHECKLIST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Academic Departments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part I. Does the program listed above have:**

1. A written mission or statement of purpose?  
   **Yes**  **No**

   If yes, please attach a copy or reference a Web site and/or catalog for retrieval of this information.

2. Statements of intended educational outcomes?  
   **Yes**  **No**

   (This term describes what the departmental faculty intend for a student to be able to think, know, or do when they’ve completed a given educational program.)

3. Written methods of assessment for evaluating program effectiveness in terms of measurable student outcomes?  
   **Yes**  **No**

4. A separate accreditation agency or process?  
   **Yes**  **No**

   If yes, please list all accreditation agencies.

**Part II. Assessment of Outcomes:**

- During the past year, has your program used any of the following for assessment of outcomes?  
  Indicate “A” if currently being used; “B” if not currently being used but interested in using; and “C” if not applicable.

**Direct indicators of assessment:**

1. Comprehensive exams
2. Writing proficiency exams
3. National exams assessing subject matter knowledge (e.g., Major Field Achievement Test)
4. Graduate Record Examination (GRE) subject test
5. Certification exams
6. Licensure exams
7. Locally developed pre-test or post-test for mastery of knowledge
8. Performance assessment for graduating seniors (i.e., recitals, art exhibits, science projects, etc.)
9. Video and audio tape evaluations (i.e., music, art, student teaching, etc.)
10. Senior thesis/major project
11. Portfolio evaluation containing representative examples of student’s work (i.e., written, creative, or scientific papers or projects)
12. Capstone courses which are designed to measure student mastery of essential theoretical and methodological issues associated with a discipline (e.g., senior level seminars)

**Indirect indicators of assessment:**

- Comparison of outcomes with peer institutions
2. Job placement of graduating students
3. Employer surveys and questionnaires
4. Graduate school acceptance rates
5. Performance in graduate school
6. Student graduation/retention rates
7. Exit interviews
8. Student satisfaction surveys
9. Student course evaluations
10. Internship evaluation
11. Focus group discussions
12. Alumni surveys reporting satisfaction with degree program and career success
13. Tracking of alumni honors, awards, and achievements at local, state, and national levels
14. Identification and assessment of at-risk students
15. Analysis of student grade distributions
16. Examination of information contained in department’s own database
17. Other evaluations of course instruction (e.g., chair or peer review)
18. Curriculum/ syllabus analysis (e.g., analysis of transfer student preparation)
19. Community perception of program effectiveness
20. Community service/volunteerism participation
21. Other:
Prior to the interview, a Web search was conducted to identify educational outcomes plans from institutions generous enough to share their plans in cyberspace. At least one educational outcomes plan was printed for each discipline, so department chairs could have a tangible example of assessment work done by their colleagues in other institutions. The plan, along with a copy of the inventory checklist, was provided to each department chair a few days prior to the interview.

We also designed the inventory checklist to be administered in an interview setting. The interview consisted of a one-on-one discussion with each department chair. The focus of the interview was to complete the inventory checklist, gather any supporting documentation, and ask as many questions as possible about specific outcomes assessment methods used by each department or program. The inventory checklist proved beneficial in gathering information in several ways. First, it stimulated an exchange of information between the department chair and the interviewer regarding specific outcome assessment methods used by departments and programs. Second, it delineated examples of many different types of outcome assessment methods, thus encouraging departments and programs to consider assessment in broader, less strictly quantitative terms. Third, it became obvious that some departments and programs were well on their way in identifying formal assessment activities. Likewise, the inventory checklist identified departments or programs lagging in formal assessment. Finally, departments and programs were able to identify and prioritize the areas where programs, services, and operations needed improvement.

The inventory checklist, coupled with individual interviews, proved to be an effective method for gathering information about individual departments and programs. The interview format was non-threatening, thereby allowing open and honest dialogue between the interviewer and the department chair. Department chairs candidly voiced their concerns, fears, enthusiasm or ambivalence about the reaffirmation of accreditation. Two-way communication between the interviewer and the department chair was encouraged. Each party had the opportunity to ask questions, not only concerning the department or program, but the accreditation project as well.

Administering the checklist to the administrative and academic support units took a slightly different route. We believed it was impractical and unnecessary to interview each unit director separately. Instead, we attended scheduled staff meetings in each area and explained the institutional effectiveness cycle, walking the participants through the checklist. We asked for the inventories to be completed and returned to our office within a month. The response rate was good, but the self-report aspect of this collection effort made the results a little less credible, particularly where documentation was not attached to the checklist. In retrospect, this effort would have been better served by administering the checklist in an interview format, as was done with the academic department chairs.

Table 1
Institutional Effectiveness Checklist for Academic Departments, page 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part III. Other Information</th>
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</table>
| 1. Has your department used any of the indicators listed above to improve departmental programs, services, and operations?  
   Yes  No  
   If yes, please identify some examples.  |
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| 2. What resources (i.e., training, personnel, technology, etc.) does your department need to develop better methods for assessing student outcomes and improving program effectiveness?  |
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| 3. Please list any additional comments or concerns.  |
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|                             |
|                             |
|                             |

Completed by: __________________________ Date: __________

Using the Checklist Results

Information from the completed checklists was organized onto a spreadsheet to simplify analysis of results. Tallied results indicated that 80% of departments reported having written mission statements, 43% had articulated intended educational outcomes, and 37% had defined methods of assessment for evaluating program effectiveness in terms of measurable student outcomes. Almost all reported that they had used assessment, however informally obtained, to improve programs.

The ordering of direct measures shown in Figure 1 clarified which indicators were most frequently used across departments. Direct measures require students to display their knowledge and skills as they respond to the measurement itself. Senior projects topped the list of
most frequently used direct indicators, followed by GRE subject tests, capstone courses and comprehensive exams. Measures requiring performance rather than testing were slightly more popular. The “white space” between shaded bars was of special interest, because it points to indicators departments would be willing to consider making a part of their program assessments. For the most part, white space was scarce for direct indicators; departments were either using the indicator or were not interested in using it. Direct measures are preferable for assessment, but with fewer than half of the departments either using or planning to use direct measures, we realized that we might have a difficult time promoting their use.

The assessment picture for indirect indicators looked more hopeful (Figure 2). Indirect measures ask students, or those connected with them, to reflect on their learning rather than demonstrate it. Aside from course evaluations, which most departments engage in regularly, there was low participation but high interest in using most of the indirect indicators. These generally fell into two categories: 1) those involving analysis of existing data (analysis of grade distribution, examination of department data, comparison with peer institutions); and 2) those requiring collection of outcome data on graduates. Having an empirical identification of these departmental needs gave our office the mandate we felt was necessary to proceed with centrally directed assessment activities.

Arraying the indicators by college provided a more detailed diagnosis of assessment activities and needs. For example, Figure 3 illustrates that most departments in the College of Arts and Letters expressed little interest in direct measures. Although licensure and certification exams are not used in these disciplines, the rejection of almost any kind of direct display of knowledge and skills was disconcerting. More favorable was the interest

Table 2
Institutional Effectiveness Checklist for Support Units, page 1

Florida Atlantic University
INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS CHECKLIST
For Administrative and Academic Support Units

Unit: ____________________________  Campus: __________________

Part I. Does your unit have
1. A formal statement of purpose which supports FAU’s mission and goals? ______ Yes (please attach a copy) ______ No
2. Explicit goals which support this unit’s purpose? ______ Yes ______ No
3. Procedures to evaluate the extent to which goals are being achieved? ______ Yes ______ No

Part II. Evaluation Measures
During the past year, has your unit used any of the following for assessment of outcomes? Indicate “A” if currently being used; “B” if not currently being used but interested in using; and “C” if not applicable.

1. Measures of volume of activity
   Examples: Number of clients served, circulation data, gross sales.
   Specify: ____________________________

2. Measures of efficiency
   Examples: Average turnaround time for filling requests, timely service/prompt response, budget information.
   Specify: ____________________________

3. Measures of service quality
   Examples: Error rates, accuracy of the information provided.
   Specify: ____________________________

4. Client satisfaction surveys
   Examples: Student satisfaction survey, alumni survey, employer survey, customer survey.
   Specify: ____________________________

Part III. Other information
1. Have you used the results of any of the evaluation measures listed above to improve administrative and academic support services and operations?
   ______ Yes ______ No
   If so, please identify some examples.
   ____________________________

2. What resources (i.e., training, personnel, technology, etc.) does your unit need to develop better methods for assessing service outcomes and improving service quality and effectiveness?
   ____________________________

3. Please list any additional comments or concerns.
   ____________________________

Completed by: ____________________________  Date: ____________________________

Please return your completed form to:
Institutional Effectiveness and Analysis

Table 2
Institutional Effectiveness Checklist for Support Units, page 2

5. Other methods to obtain client feedback
   Examples: Focus groups, comments via email, evaluation forms, suggestion box, hotline.
   Specify: ____________________________

6. Staff discussions/evaluations of services to clients

7. Review of existing data
   Examples: Departmental routine records/reports, institutional data, audits.
   Specify: ____________________________

8. Standards/guidelines provided by professional associations such as SCUP, NACUBO

9. Standards set by federal, state, county, city or FAU regulations

10. External evaluators/auditors

11. Benchmarks/comparisons with peer institutions

12. Other:
   ____________________________
Figure 1
Direct Indicators of Assessment in Academic Departments

- Senior thesis/major project
- GRE subject test
- Capstone courses
- Comprehensive exam
- Portfolio evaluation
- Video/audio tape evaluation
- Performance assessment
- Writing proficiency exam
- Certification exam
- National exam
- Local pretest-posttest
- Licensure exam

Figure 2
Indirect Indicators of Assessment in Academic Departments

- Student course evaluation
- Curriculum/syllabus analysis
- Other evaluation of course instruction
- Identify/assess at-risk students
- Internship evaluation
- Community perception
- Graduation/retentions rates
- Analysis of student grade distribution
- Community service participation
- Focus group discussion
- Examination of department data
- Job placement
- Alumni survey
- Student satisfaction survey
- Comparison with peer institution
- Exit interviews
- Employer survey
- Graduate school acceptance rates
- Tracking alumni honors/rewards
- Performance in graduate school

Currently use  Would use  Not interested

Number of Departments

Number of Departments
displayed in using indirect indicators. The patterns within, as well as across the columns in Figure 3 quickly profiled departments likely to be cooperative in assessment (Communications) versus the probable resistors (Political Science). The contrast of Arts and Letters with the profiled College of Education (Figure 4) is revealing. The College of Education has separate discipline accreditations and is accustomed to demonstrating student outcomes. Their profile identifies them as potential cheerleaders or advocates whose experiences might be used to energize colleagues in other colleges.

A parallel ordering of assessment indicators for administrative and academic support units showed a number of indicators already in use (Figure 5). The indicators generating most interest for future use were measures that could be implemented using a centrally administered client satisfaction survey and comparisons with peer institutions.

The inventory checklist analysis led us to the sobering realization that we had far to go before reaccreditation time. We promptly arranged for outside consultants to conduct a two-day workshop to further acquaint administrators, faculty and staff with the concepts of institutional effectiveness and provide expert guidance for individuals willing to start their plans. An Academic Programs Assessment Committee with representation from all colleges was formed to oversee the development of program assessment plans at all degree levels. Because research has shown that the biggest obstacle to implementing student outcomes assessment is faculty resistance (Maki, 1999), there was a strong effort to extend committee membership to senior faculty with few

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Figure 3
Profile of Indicators - College of Arts and Letters
or no administrative responsibilities. The committee will recommend approval or modification of the plans to the Provost. Also, in the initial interviews, department chairs expressed their need for technical support to assist with instrument identification and data; consequently, a new assessment coordinator position was created and funded. Meanwhile, the SACS Self-Study Committee charged with Institutional Effectiveness reviewed the completed inventories and prepared an initial report for the administration on the compliance status with Section III of the accreditation criteria. As the process of developing assessment plans proceeded, the checklists served as a baseline for measuring progress.

**Conclusion**

The assessment of student performance-related outcomes offers an excellent opportunity for initiating a systematic and continuing process for gathering, interpreting, and using information results in educational improvement. Although mandated by accrediting agencies, a systematic process for assessing student performance-related outcomes can be a catalyst for many positive changes in improving institutional effectiveness.

For us, the inventory checklist was a way to introduce the concept of student outcomes assessment in a nonthreatening, low-risk, collegial context. It allowed us to answer questions, allay fears, and confront resistance.
on an individual basis. By reassuring faculty and
department chairs that many of their existing efforts were
already moving in the right direction, we bought goodwill
for the project. Reluctant faculty were often pleased to
discover that assessment did not necessarily involve only
quantitative measurements and did not require
standardized testing. Finally, the inventory results got the
attention of campus administrators, whose leadership is
critical for ensuring that assessment efforts stay on track.

Two minor limitations of the checklist surfaced during its use. There was some initial confusion over the role this information would play in the self-study process. Some chairs were concerned that the information submitted via the checklist would constitute their department’s “final answer” and they would not have an opportunity to update their status. Secondly, the examples of direct and indirect measures on the checklist, while comprehensive, were not intended to preclude other kinds of measures that might be devised for program assessment. There was some risk that faculty and administrators would not look beyond these indicators for others that might be more appropriate for their programs.

Successful assessment is more than a collection of
techniques, instruments and outcomes; it is a cultural
issue that affects how a community of scholars defines
its responsibilities to its students (Magruder, McManis &
Young, 1997). Now that we have identified the ‘Start Line,’
the goal of transforming the information collected via the
inventories into a successful assessment culture seems
more attainable.

Notes:

1 Xiaomei Feng assisted with data analysis for this paper.
References


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