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Assessing Business Programs

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ASSESSING BUSINESS PROGRAMS

This paper describes the process utilized by one university in assessing its business programs, addresses some of the problems that were encountered, and offers some suggestions on assessment that others may find useful. Assessments provide a mechanism by which continuous improvement can be achieved, which is critical to the success of any school. Tools that were found to be particularly effective include nationally-normed exit exams, alumni surveys, student surveys, employer surveys, and outside evaluators. However, as data are analyzed and areas of deficiency are identified, it is important that departments not make hasty judgments. Trends must be monitored before decisions can be made. When problems are identified, changes in curriculum, pedagogy, faculty development, testing methods, course pre-requisites, and textbooks are just some of the areas that should be considered. Clearly, program assessment is an evolutionary process but, when done correctly, it can provide needed accountability and contribute to program improvement.

Introduction

Assessments provide a mechanism by which continuous improvement can be achieved, which is critical to the success of any school. Moreover, accountability and program improvement are two primary reasons for assessing higher education programs. Most faculty and administrators in higher education are aware of the importance of having an assessment process in place, but few know how to go about implementing an effective assessment plan. This paper describes the process utilized by one university in assessing its business programs, addresses some of the problems that were encountered, and offers some suggestions that others may find useful.

Assessing programs has been an evolutionary process at our university and we are constantly learning. When we began the process of implementing formal assessments at our institution, our faculty were accustomed to assessing students, not programs, which made the task somewhat difficult. Accreditation efforts placed extra pressure on the departments to have a working model in place within a specified time period. From the beginning, we wanted the process to be faculty-driven; we wanted the individual departments to decide what their intended outcomes were and how they wanted to assess those outcomes. At the same time, we wanted a model that was consistent across disciplines in the business school. We also wanted to lower the learning curve for faculty as they began analyzing and articulating the intended outcomes of their programs and selecting appropriate assessors and assessment tools to provide a measure of how successful they were in achieving those outcomes. Although our outcomes have remained primarily the same, both the assessors and the assessment tools utilized in the process have changed over time.

In order to ensure a sound model that provided consistency across disciplines, the assistant dean was assigned the responsibility of coordinating the assessment activities. When she undertook this task, she did not know any more about assessments than anyone else on campus. In order to see what the other schools/colleges were doing in terms of assessment, she joined the University Assessment Committee. Additionally, she studied current literature related to assessments and attended various assessment workshops. She then shared what she learned with the individual departments and assisted faculty as they developed their specific outcomes and assessments. At the same time, she met with the departmental coordinators, as a group, on a regular basis to ensure that there was consistency across the departments.

Desired Outcomes

The first step in the process was to identify the desired outcomes of the business school programs, which proved to be no easy task. This step was very difficult for faculty, because they had a hard time differentiating between outcomes and assessors. In the beginning, outcome statements developed by faculty were often similar to the following: *95% of our students will achieve a score of 75% or above on the exit exam*. It was difficult for them to understand that this is a way to assess an outcome, not an actual outcome. We had to do what we often tell our students to do: *step back and look at the big picture*. Over time, faculty developed a better understanding of the entire concept of outcomes and assessments and we were able to proceed with the process.

Whereas this was to be a faculty-driven process, much discussion occurred before agreement was reached as to the desired outcomes of the various programs. However, by the time the discussions ended, all of the departments agreed that three primary desired outcomes in each of the business areas are: 1) *graduating seniors will demonstrate competence in core business skills*; 2) *graduating seniors will demonstrate competence in their major field of study*; and 3) *graduating seniors will demonstrate skills that will make them competitive in local, regional, and national job markets*. It should be noted that the core business areas provide a broad understanding of accounting, economics, finance, international issues, legal environment of business, management, marketing, management information systems and quantitative business analysis concepts, whereas the major field of study prepares students with a more in-depth understanding of and expertise in a particular area of business. Program-specific outcomes were also articulated for the various disciplines, such as: *graduating seniors in accounting will demonstrate experience in the use of microcomputers for accounting procedures*. In other words, all graduating seniors with a major in accounting will demonstrate: 1) competence in core business skills; 2) competence in accounting concepts; 3) experience in the use of microcomputers for accounting procedures; and 4) skills that will make them competitive in local, regional, and national job markets. Similarly, because the objectives of the international business program are more global in nature than the other business programs, the outcome that references job markets was expanded to include *international* job markets for this particular program.

Assessors/Assessment Tools

After the faculty and departmental coordinators felt comfortable with the outcomes for their respective programs, we began looking for ways to assess the outcomes. We had to choose the appropriate assessors, and identify the best assessment tools, based on existing constraints. Examples of constraints include financial constraints and the number of students graduating (e.g., it is difficult to assess programs that have a small number of

majors). It was decided that the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Major Field Test for Business could be used as one measure of how well we are achieving the outcome: *graduating seniors will demonstrate competence in the core business skills*. Similarly, the Major Field Test sub-scores, by major, were used to assess the second outcome: *graduating seniors will demonstrate competence in their major field of study*. For instance, one Accounting Department assessor stated: *the mean score of the accounting students taking the Major Field Test for Business will be at least one (1) standard deviation higher than the National Institutional Mean for all students on the accounting portion of the Major Field Test*.

In the same way that faculty had difficulty articulating outcomes, they had trouble determining appropriate assessors. We often heard such things as, *"The average GPA of the business students taking business courses will be at or above 3.0."* It is important to understand that an instructor can give all A's in a class, but that is no indication that the students learned anything. As a result, this in and of itself is not a valid form of assessment. It is also important to keep in mind that all outcomes need multiple assessors. Although surveys cannot be the only source of assessment, feedback from alumni who have been working, or who have chosen to continue their education, can be a valuable source of information. We use data from the American College Testing (ACT) Alumni Survey as our second assessment for the first outcome (competence in core business skills). Similarly, the Alumni Survey is used as a second assessment tool for the second outcome (competence in the major field of study).

As is the case in terms of outcomes, many of the assessors are also program specific. For instance, the Accounting Department uses the results of students/graduates taking the CPA exam to assess the accounting program. Similarly, because international business students must be able to communicate at an international level, the ability of students to communicate in a foreign language is used as a form of assessment. Each graduating senior majoring in international business is required to meet with a professor in the foreign language area to have this skill assessed. As part of the process, the following assessment was implemented in the international business program:

100% of the graduates will be able to hold a five-minute conversation with an NSU professor in their selected language at a satisfactory level, as determined by the examining professor. As international business students file for graduation, appointments will be scheduled with a corresponding language professor to assess student ability. Results will be reported to the student and international business advisors and directors.

Some departments chose to use internship evaluations supplied by employers as a measure of student competency. For example, the Management Information Systems Department, in order to assess the outcome management information systems majors will demonstrate competence in applying management information systems (MIS) concepts and skills in the workplace, added, among other forms of assessment, the following:

General performance results as appraised by the employer/on-site supervisor at the student's internship site will be used to assess performance. At least 75% of the MIS majors who complete an internship will receive a grade of B or above from their employer/on-site supervisor on the Internship Evaluation Form.

The thing to keep in mind about an assessment of this nature is that the results may be deceiving. It is possible that better students are more motivated to complete an internship, resulting in scores that are skewed. However, if internship evaluation forms are used as an

additional source of assessment, and not the primary source, they can certainly provide information that is useful to the department in assessing programs.

Student surveys are also utilized in assessing programs. All students who register to take the exit exam are asked to complete a student survey. Included on the survey are questions directly related to job offers. Student responses to these questions were found to be useful in assessing the outcome: *graduating seniors will demonstrate skills that will make them competitive in local, regional, and national job markets*. The number of job offers received prior to graduation provides a measure of how marketable our graduates actually are. In addition, alumni surveys provide supplementary information on how successful our graduates were in finding positions in their chosen field after graduation. Alumni surveys are also helpful in evaluating the percentage of our graduates who chose to continue their education, as well as providing a measure of how well we prepared the students for further education.

In addition to student surveys and alumni surveys, employer surveys can also provide valuable information when assessing programs. Employer responses are especially useful in determining the needs of the business community, thus allowing the departments to re-evaluate what they are teaching to determine if they are addressing those needs. On the other hand, employer surveys are less useful in evaluating the preparedness of our graduates. The difficulty lies in the fact that many employers, especially larger employers, have no idea which of their employees graduated from which university, without looking at their personnel file records, so they have no easy way of determining how our graduates compare to graduates of other institutions.

Multiple exit exams are used in some of the specialty areas to assess outcomes. For instance, as mentioned above, the results of the CPA exam are used to assess the accounting program. (Keep in mind that accounting students are not required to take the CPA exam. However, the 150-hour Professional Accountancy Degree is designed to prepare students for the CPA exam, so few students would take this option unless they intended to sit for the exam.) Similarly, business education students have to take the business exit exam (referenced above) to measure their competencies in the business area, but they are also required to take the Professional National Teachers Exam (NTE) to measure their competencies in the teaching field. Evaluations of student teachers that are provided by cooperating teachers in the public schools furnish additional measures of student competencies in terms of business skills (e.g., software applications, keyboarding) and concepts, as well as in the ability to teach the skills and concepts.

Data Analysis

After the business school had multiple outcomes in place for each program and multiple forms of assessment for each outcome, the next step was to gather and analyze the data that had been collected. The Director of Institutional Research was able to summarize the results of some of the surveys, by major, and provide it in electronic format for easy access by the assessment coordinator. The assessment coordinator gathered the data and the comparative figures from the exit exams and placed the data in a spreadsheet format so that the results could be easily analyzed over a series of years. It should be noted that, as the results are tabulated for each assessor and included in the assessment report, the number of participants is indicated. For instance, a typical set of exit exam data might be reported as follows: *for the 1995-96 school year, the combined average mean for the 20 accounting students taking the Major Field Test was 160.45 compared to the National Institutional Mean of 154.3*.

When we initially began gathering data, most of the data came from reliable sources, but there were some problem areas as a result of confusion on the part of some faculty. One department that was utilizing employer evaluations of its interns as an assessment tool indicated that 100% of the students who completed an internship achieved a grade of A. When asked how many students had completed an internship, the response was that the department did not know because different faculty members supervised different interns, so the files were spread across several offices. When asked how they arrived at the figure of 100%, they indicated they "thought" all of the students had received A's. Faculty soon came to understand that it is extremely important that we have actual data to support anything we put into our reports. Since that time, all internship files have been transferred to and are maintained by an internship coordinator.

Decision-Making Process

The raw data are now stored at a central location (either physically or electronically) by the assessment coordinator. The pertinent data for each major are organized in a report format that is consistent for each program. Each outcome is stated in each report, each assessor and assessment tool (e.g., ACT Alumni Survey) for each outcome is specified, and the resulting data for a series of years follow each assessment indicator. Annually, each department is required to specify the actions to be taken as a result of the current assessments. In addition, the departments are to restate the actions taken that had been specified in the prior year's report, followed by an explanation as to the impact of the actions taken the prior year. These reports are forwarded to the dean of the business school for his response, and the complete set of reports for all departments is then forwarded to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and to the University Assessment Committee. In addition, the department heads and the dean are required to meet with the University Assessment Committee annually to discuss the assessments and the actions that were taken as a result of the assessments. The assessment coordinator for the business school is also in attendance at all meetings.

As had been anticipated, certain areas of deficiency were identified as a result of the assessment process. For instance, a few years ago we noted that the mean score of our graduating seniors was consistently lower on the economics portion of the exit exam than the national institutional mean score in economics. As a result, a third economics course was added to the business core (the core courses that are required of all business students, regardless of their major), and exit exam scores increased accordingly. Similarly, at one point we found that our students were scoring low on the management portion of the exam. One of the people teaching in the management area actually had a degree in marketing. The next time we added a faculty member in the Management and Marketing Department, we chose someone with expertise in both areas in order to provide students with a better background in management.

As possible areas of deficiency are identified, it is important that departments not make hasty judgments. Trends must be monitored before decisions can be made. It is also helpful to look at other data that can impact the results for any particular year. For example, the Director of the Computer Center was able to provide background data, by program, on the graduating seniors, based upon when they entered the program, including the mean ACT Comp score, the mean ACT Math score, the mean high school grade point average (GPA), the mean high school ranking, and the mean HSPerc (High School Rank divided by High School Size). These data proved to be useful when, in one particular year, the results of the assessment data indicated that the mean exit exam score had dropped considerably in one of our programs. Upon further analysis, it turned out that the particular group of students who graduated in that program that year had considerably lower potential coming into the

program, based on the figures provided by the Computer Center, than groups from prior years. In addition, evaluators of programs must be sure to look at more options than simply changing the curriculum or faculty when changes are deemed necessary. Changes in curriculum, pedagogy, faculty development, testing methods, course pre-requisites, and textbooks are just some of the areas that should be taken into consideration as programs are evaluated.

Conclusion

At our university, we found that both accountability and program improvement were achieved as a result of our assessment process. We believe that students are better prepared for the work world because of the program changes that were implemented. In addition, assessments provide a mechanism by which continuous improvement can be achieved, which is critical to the success of any school, as well as to accreditation efforts. It should be pointed out that we are a liberal arts institution and, even though the outcomes and assessments described above are specific to the business programs, this does not mean that the students' general education is not important. We believe that success in life can be enhanced by a good liberal arts education. However, assessment of the general education component of our curriculum is outside the scope of this paper and, as a result, has not been addressed.

For our school we found that assigning an individual the responsibility of coordinating the assessment activities in the business school was beneficial. Faculty and departmental coordinators were less frustrated because they had someone who could provide guidance throughout the process. The assessment coordinator did not have all the answers, but she had built a network of contacts that could help her find answers. In addition, having the assessment coordinator work with the departmental coordinators, as a group, resulted in a great deal of consistency across the programs, which made everyone's job easier. Granted, the assessors and assessment tools have changed over time. However, by coordinating activities, the school has been able to achieve the goal of having a faculty-driven assessment process that is consistent across disciplines.