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Observations and Suggestions on Assessing Student Learning at the University of Toledo Based on a Visit on April 6, 2016

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I visited the University of Toledo (UT) on April 6, 2016, to offer professional development on assessment, including:

- A conversation with graduate students in the Higher Education Administration program
- A workshop on sharing student learning assessment results
- A keynote presentation on using assessment to improve student learning and success
- A meeting with the University Assessment Committee (UAC)
- An end-of-visit debrief with Alana Malik, Chris Roseman and Constance Shriner

This report is intended to summarize the key ideas we discussed during my visit.

In preparation for my visit, I perused the University's website and reviewed the charge and membership of the University Assessment Committee. I also reviewed the results of the latest National Survey of Student Engagement to prepare a workshop exercise. It is important to note that I did not review any assessment reports or other documentation of what is actually happening regarding assessment at UT.

At the end of the workshop, I asked participants to complete brief "minute papers" reflecting on the workshop. Their comments are appended to the end of this report.

My visit made clear that the University of Toledo has a number of strengths:

- Alana Malik, Chris Roseman, and the Assessment Committee are tremendous assets to UT. They are committed to and supportive of one another. They have a good understanding of assessment. They have worked incredibly hard during a challenging period of university leadership transition to help faculty understand how to assess. They are campus assessment champions; they "get" the importance and value of assessing student learning.
- UAC members have used rubrics to review myriad assessment reports.
- There is a strong core of faculty and administrators who are high-energy and enthusiastic about continuing to advance UT.
- Many faculty and administrators understand the importance and value of assessment and are ready to continue to work on assessment.
- A program review process has been designed and is in the early stages of implementation.

Despite these significant strengths, student learning assessment at UT is not yet where it should be, and many faculty and administrators understand this.

1. My guess (and remember that I did not review any assessment reports or other documentation of what's happening) is that perhaps a third of academic programs are doing at least an adequate job assessing student learning. Almost 20 years into HLC's push to assess student learning, this proportion is insufficient. While I cannot predict any accreditation action, this low proportion may place UT's accreditation in jeopardy.
2. Memories are long, and because of past, now-departed institutional leaders, there is a suspicion that assessment results will be used punitively, making some at UT reluctant to share results widely.
3. At this point, UT does not have functional strategic goals that identify UT's top priorities, although it is generally acknowledged that student success is an area of focus.
4. Assessment results do not yet inform planning and budget decisions (and this is an HLC requirement).
5. A brief self-assessment of UAC's effectiveness in completing its stated responsibilities, completed during my meeting with UAC, suggested that UAC may not yet be effectively leading the continued development of assessment policies, making recommendations that inform UT's decision-making, strategic planning, and budgeting processes, or providing leadership on professional development on assessment. While UAC members are reviewing assessment reports, they are not always providing written feedback (copies of their completed rubrics) to departments. UAC recognizes substantial contributions to assessment, but recognition is not based on clear, promulgated criteria.
6. Responsibility for generating and monitoring measures of institutional effectiveness is unclear. At peer institutions, it would typically be the responsibility of the institutional research office to generate a dashboard of metrics tracking institutional effectiveness. At UT, the institutional research office appears too understaffed to take on this responsibility.
7. If my estimate is correct that perhaps only a third of programs are doing assessment adequately, most still need fairly basic professional development on how to assess and are not yet doing assessment well enough to be thinking about how best to share and use the results. This was confirmed by evidence during my visit:
 - Faculty and staff with whom I met were cordial and respectful but unusually quiet; in every session, only a small fraction of participants offered questions or ideas.
 - Almost a third of the "minute papers" completed after the workshop had no questions—a large proportion, in my experience. I've found that participants who don't express questions are typically overwhelmed by all the new ideas I've shared and need a more basic level of professional development.
 - Workshop participants were more likely to say in their minute papers that the most useful things they learned were how to present assessment results, how to teach, and how to assess, not how to share and use assessment results, which were the workshop's primary topics.
 - Workshop participants' most frequent questions on the minute papers were on how to assess.
8. UT's array of 250-300 academic programs in 17 colleges is far too extensive for a university of its size. (During my visit, as an example I compared UT with Towson University, a public university in Maryland of the same size, which offers 114 programs in 7 colleges.) The more programs

offered, the harder it is to ensure that every program is of the best quality, and the greater the likelihood that some programs are too small to offer their students an adequate array of courses, faculty, and fellow students so they may learn a range of perspectives and ideas. The more colleges at university has, the more resources must be devoted to administration rather than student learning and success.

9. UT's unusual practice of encouraging broad participation in institutional governance through very large committees may not be the most effective way to achieve its aims of communication and collaboration. In very large committees, it's not possible for every committee member to speak at meetings. At the UAC meeting I attended, for example, perhaps three-quarters of the members sat silently through the entire meeting. What would have been a better use of that hour: sitting silently (and admittedly absorbing some things) or, for example, redesigning a student learning activity to make it more engaging, or meeting with staff in other units to identify ways to collaborate across units on strategies to improve student success?

Suggested Action Steps

1. Redesign performance evaluation criteria for the UT leadership team, including deans, so that they are evaluated in part on how well they promote a culture of assessment and evidence-based improvement within their areas.
2. Redesign the budget process so that budget requests supported by systematic evidence are given stronger consideration. Publicize to the UT community those budget requests that have been funded because they were supported by disappointing assessment evidence.
3. Consider a program of small grants available only to those faculty and student development staff who have systematically assessed student achievement of a key learning outcome, are disappointed by the results, and want to figure out how to improve student achievement.
4. Develop a clearer statement of UAC's charge and operating procedures.
 - a. "Offload" administrative functions to Alana. These might include providing a clearinghouse (website) for archiving and disseminating information on student learning and assessment and providing resources for self-studies, HLC reports, etc.
 - b. Clarify to whom UAC reports.
 - c. Clarify the responsibilities of the college assessment committees vs. UAC and their relationship.
 - d. Clarify which aspects of institutional effectiveness fall under UAC's purview (and who is responsible for the other aspects of institutional effectiveness).
5. Develop assessment policies that clarify how assessment is conducted and used at UT
6. Share with programs the rubric that UAC uses to evaluate assessment reports, to help them understand what UAC is looking for. Give programs the rubric completed by UAC members, so they can learn what they're doing well and where they might improve. (The completed rubric should come from UAC, not an individual member.)
7. Make clear that any suggestions for improvements in assessment reports **must** clearly flow from systematic assessment results summarized in the report, and any suggestions that do not do so will be disregarded by UAC. As I said to the UAC during my visit, it is the University Assessment Committee, not the University Wish List Committee!

8. Develop and promulgate clear criteria for assessment awards. The criteria might include improvement in rubric scores over time.
9. Continue to focus on providing professional development (including one-on-one guidance) to faculty and student development staff on how to teach and how to assess. Consider focusing your next Assessment Day more on how to teach, how to assess/grade in the classroom, and how good assessment is an essential component of good teaching.
10. Establish terms for UAC members, so they have the opportunity to leave gracefully when they want to move to new challenges, and so new members can come in to learn and bring fresh ideas and perspectives.
11. Develop a written proposal to the UT leadership team on strategies to encourage a culture of collaboration across units and divisions.
12. Consider the pros and cons of moving to a governance structure with smaller committees. What is accomplished under the current model, and what might be accomplished if faculty and staff spent less time in large committee meetings?

Assessment Workshop “Minute Paper” Comments

Note: If a respondent mentioned more than one thing, those things are reported separately.

What was the most useful or meaningful thing you learned in this workshop?

How to present assessment results (18 comments)

- Presenting assessment results visually
- Presentation of data to others
- Emphasizing dashboards
- How to share results – infographics
- Using infographics to help effectively capture my data
- Further organize my data with traffic light colors
- Practical advice for how to share data
- The chart and using that to quickly, visually show where on the continuum we are
- Using the stoplight color ideas is great as well [as the other idea I wrote]
- Use color coded system and graph to present results of assessments.
- Examples related to how we can report, organize large data sets. Select only some items, use graphs etc. Different presentations for difference audiences
- How to present the data
- Color graph for presenting information to a targeted audience
- The traffic light graph would be most useful in sharing data (assessment results) with faculty.
- Presenting research data graphically instead of in written form
- Ways to critically share results for most impact
- How to communicate the data
- Presentation of data with benchmarking/target in traffic light graph

How to teach and help students succeed (6 comments)

- Using peer evaluation
- How effective group work can be

- Calling participation and preparation “professionalism”
- Explore “professionalism” as a learning outcome in first year experience course
- How to work with students to make them succeed? How we can make such environment at UT?
- If it’s important it should be in your SLO’s (Duh! So clear!)

How to assess (6 comments)

- To ask the question: What is the best way to get information?
- Strategies to implement the nebulous idea of “assessment” in my own courses/department
- We are currently assessing our graduating students. It was helpful to learn that we should be assessing our students from beginning to end.
- We are still learning about how to assess in higher education better.
- To get back to the basics of assessment
- The discussion on sampling for systematic evidence gave me an idea of how to collect assessment data on a cycle for an external accreditation.

The value of assessment (4 comments)

- The benefits or usefulness of assessment
- To ask the question: Why collect data?
- The importance of assessment
- I learned the importance of assessment

Interpreting assessment results (5 comments)

- I learn how to read the assessment results
- How to interpret them [assessment results]
- How to interpret [assessment]
- Averages vs. percentages – this is something that seems very logical and will help us see our programs differently
- How to understand results, in terms of good and bad nature of results

Sharing assessment results (good and bad) (9 comments)

- Wider inclusion for communicating results
- Practical advice for when, and to whom [to share data]
- Try to network more across campus to share data
- The importance of sharing both the good and the bad outcomes
- How to report bad data
- To ask the question: Who should hear about the data?
- I liked considering who to share both good & bad news with. It seems common-sense but after just going through an accreditation site visit, this was a good reminder.
- UT’s strengths and weaknesses and how they may be communicated
- The importance of considering what to communicate, how to communicate, with whom to communicate

Using assessment results (5 comments)

- How to apply to real situation in terms of how to improve, who should be involved to make the changes happen
- Focus on what you are doing about the results
- Use of assessment data to get resources
- Translating assessment results in a way to market your university or program

- That bad assessment results can be even more useful for changing resources & approaches to improve student learning when an environment of trust & collegiality exists

Choosing what to focus on (2 comments)

- Clarify how to select meaningful information for reports that are global (such as NSSE) and distill what is needed
- Identifying smaller portions of large data collections to better improve areas of need rather than trying to fix everything

Setting targets (2 comments)

- Setting targets for acceptable results in particular areas
- Don't be too critical in your assessments. Recognize success

Other (4 comments)

- Building trust with assessment process
- Working with colleagues across campus and hearing their views
- I was upset about how poorly UT rated in the attendance regarding "the arts" on campus.
- The list of questions on the NSSE survey

What question remains uppermost in your mind as we end this workshop?

How to assess (10 comments)

- Progress testing at different times in curricula
- Can we "over assess" so that students are perfunctory responders? Or just go straight down a column
- Assessment at the departmental level
- Course assessment
- Assessment design
- How do I create surveys that are broad enough to be useful to other disciplines?
- Asking the right question to get the right info
- How can we standardized college specific assessments and compare ourselves to like programs?
- Collecting, analyzing, reports, share results grad vs undergrad students – does it differ?
- Is there an optimal moment in an academic year to collect, generate, and communicate about assessment results? We do it at beginning of school year, so e.g., if problem with graduating seniors, we can't tell them in time before they graduate. You did answer this in part so I have a follow-up question – should we be generating assessment reports more than once a year and if that is unreasonably demanding on faculty, is there some other way of staying on top of when to collect & what to do with results?

Getting colleagues on board (7 comments)

- How to get faculty, staff, student buy-in
- How to get my team excited about assessment
- Faculty involvement in a culture of assessment
- How can we get others to buy in to assessment matters
- Strategies that can bring faculty along in the process of developing observable & measurable outcomes
- How to encourage discipline-faculty to incorporate needed goals
- How best to knock down "silos" so that integration of curricula can be facilitated

Using assessment results for improvement and creating a culture of evidence (6 comments)

- Use them [assessment results] as evidence to improve teaching & learning
- Whether this really matters to budget process at UT
- How to institute this [using bad assessment results for changing resources & approaches to improve student learning] at UT?
- How can we use assessment to improve a college campus?
- Closing the loop and getting results back – how to do this consistently
- How to solve the “squeaky wheel” problem

Sharing assessment results (4 comments)

- How do we as department deliver the result to our students?
- Best delivery system for bad news
- How do I approach those I need to deliver “bad news”?
- I’d like to learn more about infographics & putting a good one together.

Finding time (3 comments)

- When living in the trenches and understaffed/resourced how do we find time to complete, document/share results and data?
- How much effort should we put into assessment? We have only a limited amount of time to assess and improve
- Where will I get the time to do this?

Interpreting assessment results (2 comments)

- Make meaning of the assessment results
- Would actually like more insight into best way to develop & [illegible] these targets [for acceptable results in particular areas]

Other (2 comments)

- Where do I start? How to prioritize
- Do other colleges and programs think “the arts” would benefit their students? Why/why not