

TRUST: ESSENTIAL TO SUCCESSFUL ASSESSMENT

Eleanor W. Nault¹, J. Joseph Hoey²

Abstract $\frac{3}{4}$ The federal government empowered regional accreditation groups as custodians of quality in higher education. Additional mandates by state governments and, more recently, the Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology Engineering require systematic assessment of student learning in the engineering curricula. Assessment practices, although not new; appear inconsistently practiced. This may be in part because assessment models have often been advanced without developing the requisite basis of organizational trust. This work in progress employed a grounded approach to explore issues of trust in assessment motives, questions, methods, and data. In a Southern research institution, the focus group method was used to explore barriers to assessment; this process was followed by structured group discussions attended by faculty and administrators. From these activities, barriers and corresponding best practices in assessment were identified and a comparative table of characteristics of low-trust and high-trust environments for assessment is developed.

Index Terms $\frac{3}{4}$ Assessment, program evaluation, trust

INTRODUCTION

Over a decade of mandated assessment, state evaluation mandates, and more recently the Accrediting Board for Engineering and Technology Engineering (ABET) Engineering Criteria 2000 have focused attention on the need to systematically assess student learning in engineering curricula; yet, excellence in assessment still appears in pockets and not as the norm for most engineering programs [1]. A crucial problem is that the methods and outlook of assessment have often been advanced without developing the requisite basis of organizational trust upon which assessment relies. Assessment, as a long-term strategy, is intended to enable high-performance student learning systems through the continuous measurement of processes and outcomes, and the usage of results to further refine performance [2]. Systematic assessment of student learning is the first step in an ascending stairway of structured introspection that enables individual faculty members, programs, and institutions to build a learning organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The introduction of assessment into an institution of higher education constitutes a form of planned change intervention, and, as such, is subject to the need for establishing trust in

the process. The most sustained discussion of the interdependence of trust and faculty involvement in assessment is provided by Schilling and Schilling.[3] They offer a comprehensive examination of the barriers to acceptance of assessment by faculty, and prescribe positive strategies for increasing faculty trust and involvement in assessment processes.

Trust or lack of trust in assessment is played out in at least four ways within institutions of higher education: the motives for collecting assessment data may be mistrusted by faculty [4]; the methodological foundation and instrumentation used may be lacking and a source of low trust in assessment [5,6]; the questions raised through assessment may not be relevant to issues of interest to faculty and not regarded as trustworthy [7]; and fear concerning the misuse or inappropriate interpretation of the data generated through assessment may cause deep mistrust of assessment [8,9].

METHOD

The long-term goal of a large research institution in the South is to develop a broadly based, comprehensive, effective program of academic assessment activity as a method of moving forward as a learning organization. In 1999-2000, the University Assessment Committee examined the extent to which the goal has been achieved, investigated the potential barriers to maintaining a program of assessment activity, and engaged in a participative, structured search for ways to facilitate progress in this arena. A two-stage approach to identifying relevant issues and strategies was used, focus group research followed by university-wide participative workshops attended by faculty and administrators.

CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This research stemmed from a desire to further develop a broadly based, comprehensive, effective program of academic assessment activity as a method of moving a major research institution forward as a learning organization. The immediate goal of the research was to investigate the potential barriers to implementing a program of assessment activity, and to engage in a participative, structured search

¹ Eleanor W. Nault, Clemson University Office for Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment, 203 E. Martin Hall, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634 Nault@clemson.edu

² J. Joseph Hoey, Office of Institutional Research and Planning, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA 30332 Joseph.Hoey@irp.gatech.edu

for ways to facilitate progress in this arena. The two-stage approach employed, consisting of initial focus groups followed by participative workshops, functioned as intended. The focus groups allowed initial barriers to the further development of university-wide assessment activity to be identified. From these activities, barriers and corresponding best practices in assessment were identified and a comparative table of characteristics of low-trust and high-trust environments for assessment developed.

Foremost among the barriers that emerged were those concerned with trust. Broad discussion within the context of the workshop activity on aspects of trust drawn from focus group results and identified in the literature produced a number of suggestions for moving towards a more trusting environment with respect to assessment.

REFERENCES

- [1] Engineering Criteria 2000: Criteria for Accrediting Programs in Engineering in the United States, Engineering Accreditation

Commission, Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Inc. Baltimore, MD, January 2001. <http://www.abet.org>.

- [2] Clark, L.A., *Measurement's Highest Purpose: Building Effective Performance Measurement Systems*, The Performance Center, <http://www.performanccenter.org/research/Measurement%20Purpose.html>.
- [3] Schilling, Karl and K. M. Schilling, *Proclaiming and Sustaining Excellence: The Faculty Role in Assessment*, ASHE/ERIC Report, Washington, D.C., 1998.
- [4] Ref. 3, p.18.
- [5] Ref. 3, p.50.
- [6] Ref. 3, p.88.
- [7] Ref. 3, p.60.
- [8] Ref. 3, p.37.
- [9] Levy, R.A., "Development of Performance Funding Criteria", in Banta, Trudy W. (Ed.), *Performance Funding in Higher Education: A Critical Analysis of Tennessee's Experience*, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, Boulder, CO, 1986, p.76.