

"From Systematic" to "Systemic": What Does It Look Like?

Moving from systematic to systemic assessment encompasses four interrelated dimensions of using assessment results to improve student learning (Coburn, 2003).

Depth is the degree to which institutions use assessment data to induce consequential changes in the teaching and learning practices in classrooms and other settings. These noteworthy changes would be manifested not only in such activities as regularly using certain assessment instruments such as the CLA or MAPP or other approaches such as samples of authentic student work recorded in electronic portfolios, but also in changes in how faculty think about how they teach and students best learn among other things.

Spread refers to the number of faculty, staff and others who are using assessment data to inform and guide their work. Spread is more than large numbers of people using different teaching approaches in an effort to improve student learning (though it is certainly important), but also is manifested by lasting changes in how people think about students as learning and the educational conditions under which learning best occurs. Especially important is how changes may have affected reward systems and processes such as promotion and tenure and faculty evaluation of teaching, and the assessment activities themselves. This sensitivity underscores the importance of just not looking at classroom practices (which are critical, of course, to enhancing student learning), but also the attitudes and supporting actions by department chairs, deans, provosts, and so on.

Sustainability is manifested by the extent to which the assessment-improvement cycles and related efforts persist over time. The road to innovation in postsecondary education is littered with failed efforts to improve teaching and learning. Effective methods to institutionalize data-informed changes in teaching and learning activities are few outside of a small number of institutions such as Alverno College and James Madison University. Even more difficult is to determine how to promote and sustain continuous experiments with different approaches that are demonstrably effective in terms of fostering higher levels of student achievement and personal growth.

Reform ownership is shorthand for faculty and staff accepting and working as if the new ideas introduced by internal thought leaders or outside experts are now part and parcel of who they are and what they do. Colloquially known as "buy-in," reform ownership is characterized by a transition from "an externally understood and supported theory to an internally understood and supported theory-based practice (Stokes et al., 1997, p. 21).

Peter Ewell (2002) observed that when colleges use assessment data in academic planning and decision making they likely will exhibit some of the characteristics of a learning organization. Garvin (1999) offers a set of practical, concrete criteria to determine whether a college or university behaves like a learning organization:

- (a) *systematic problem solving* through observing and improving processes such as enrollment management, curriculum development and implementation, and faculty development;
- (b) *learning from experience* by reviewing performance (what works, what does not), often with the advice of external consultants and internal benchmarking activities;
- (c) *learning from others* by examining best practices and benchmarking against other institutions;
- (d) *experimenting with new approaches* in existing programs and through new projects;

- (e) *transferring usable knowledge* from experimenting groups to other institutional units; and
- (f) *measuring whether behavior change* (organizational learning) *is occurring* in ways that result in enhanced performance, which for our purposes means greater student achievement.

In sum, institutions become learning organizations when they continuously explore whether they are as educationally effective as possible and direct professional energy and curiosity into what and how students learn. They put in place systems and incentives to encourage and support faculty and staff to use assessment findings productively and sustain these efforts. They also monitor and evaluate how changes in the curriculum and teaching and learning approaches affect student learning outcomes. Anecdotal evidence as well as the findings from a handful of studies indicate that using assessment data in this way this is a non-trivial challenge, especially in large, complex, and highly decentralized universities.

With this backdrop in mind, this session is organized around two main questions and others that flow from them:

1. What does “good” learning outcome assessment work look like at your institution?
 - What kinds of outcomes data are being collected and reported?
 - What methods and tools are being used to collect the data?
 - How and why did your institution decide to use these approaches? Who was involved?
 - What attempts are being made to use assessment results to improve student learning?
 - What changes in the curriculum, pedagogy and other learning-centered policies and practices have been made, or are planned?
 - What improvements in student outcomes have been realized as a result of these efforts?
2. How do we sustain and institutionalize the assessment, reflection, and improvement process so it becomes imbedded in the culture – not just what we do here but who we are?
 - What are the primary obstacles to using student learning outcomes data productively and how are you overcoming these obstacles?
 - What incentives seem to work in getting faculty and staff to engage in assessment and use the results to change their teaching and learning practices resulting in improved student learning outcomes?
 - What else must happen on campus to move from systematic assessment activity to systemic organizational learning?

Resources

Coburn, E. (2003). Rethinking scale: Moving beyond numbers to deep and lasting change. *Educational Researcher*, 32(6), 3–12

Ewell, P.T. (2002). An emerging scholarship: A brief history of assessment. In T.W. Banta (Ed.), *Building a scholarship of assessment* (pp. 3-25). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Garvin, D.A. (1993). Building a learning organization. *Harvard Business Review* (July-August), 78–91.

Stokes, L.M., Sato, N.E., McLaughlin, M.W., & Talbert, J.E. (1997). *Theory-based reform and problems of change: Contexts that matter for teachers' learning and community* (R97-7). Stanford, CA: Stanford University.

Prepared by George Kuh, Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research for the 2008 Teagle Foundation Conference on Systematic Improvement of Student Learning, Durham NC