From the Desk of the Director - Increasing Institutional Effectiveness through Systematic Self-Regulation

Every organization has a way of doing business. The business of the Office of Institutional Assessment and Evaluation at Howard University is evident in its name. But let's be clear, the assessment and evaluation of the “institution” is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Ultimately, the mission and goals of the University are the “ends” to which we aspire. Achieving those aspirations does not happen by chance. It takes the collective efforts of all units of the University to make sure that each one, in its own right, is systematically and continuously monitoring its efforts and outcomes to determine the extent to which it is helping the University achieve its aspirations.

Assessment is the tool we use to gather information about our efforts and outcomes. Evaluation helps us make value judgments about how well or how effectively we are progressing towards and accomplishing our institutional mission and goals. Rather than solely relying on external regulators, like accrediting agencies, auditors or the federal government to periodically assess and evaluate the extent to which we are achieving our mission and goals or whether we have met a set of standards that we have either voluntarily pledged to meet or are under obligation to meet, the OIAE believes that internal or self-regulation is the best way to increase institutional effectiveness and achieve our aspirations.

Approaching institutional assessment and evaluation within a framework of self-regulation requires all units within the University to take responsibility for implementing their assessment plans and engaging in self-monitoring for the purpose of continuous improvement, quality assurance and internal and external accountability.

- Gerunda B. Hughes

Understanding the Self-Regulation Assessment Loop

The OIAE operates from a framework of continuous improvement through self-regulation - the systematic process in which those involved voluntarily regulate their actions in order to meet desired goals and objectives (Schunk, 2004; Zimmerman, 2000).

Step 1: Self-Determination – “Clear and defined goal setting is essential” to the development of a successful, sustainable improvement plan (Behncke, 2002). By beginning with the end (goals/outcomes) in mind, the departments and units will be able to develop a systematic plan of action that will enable them to achieve their goals.

Step 2: Self-Monitoring and Self-Assessment – After goals and objectives have been determined, and after a plan of action has been established; departments and units must carry out the plan of action and collect information (data) regarding the extent to which the plan is being implemented as well as the apparent strengths and weaknesses of the plan.

Step 3: Self-Reflection – Accumulated data is to be examined in order to determine:
- the extent to which goals and objectives have been met,
- the strengths and weaknesses of the unit, and
- any other information that provides insight that can be used for improvement.

Step 4: Self-Reaction and Self-Improvement – The interpretation of the data allows for evidence-based decision making. Departments and units are able to determine the extent to which policies and practices are working or not working so that necessary adjustments can be made. In addition, resource allocation, staffing, and other decisions can be determined from the evidence.

“Working together to cultivate a culture of evidence-based decision making...”
Creating and Using Student Learning Outcome Data

Colleges and Universities are in the business of producing individuals who are competitive in the job market.

“The most important reason for assessment is to ensure that students are learning. Even when the requirements of those to whom the institution is externally accountable—students, parents, legislators, and accreditors—provide the impetus for assessment, the fundamental expectation is that institutions of higher learning demonstrate that their students are learning.”
(Middle States Commission on Higher Education)

Every institution of higher learning, regardless of its mission should produce graduates who are competent and well educated. The assessment of student learning outcomes is essential to monitoring quality and providing information that can lead to improvement in teaching and learning. From the course level to the institutional level, a systematic plan for identifying, assessing, and analyzing student learning outcomes needs to be in place.

The first step is to clearly state student learning outcomes that explain what a student should know and be able to do at the course, program, department, school and institutional level. These outcomes should be in line with the mission and goals of the institution.

The next step is to select the appropriate metrics at each level that will measure the extent to which learning is taking place. Thoughtful consideration should go into the selection of assessment tools in order to ensure that they are effective at gathering the types of evidence needed to make decisions about student learning.

The third step is to carefully analyze the data and determine how the results will be used. The fourth and most critical step is to actually use the results.

Assigning grades, adjusting the curriculum, and adding or deleting academic programs are only a few of the variety of evidence-based decisions that can be made as a result of analyzing student learning outcome data. “If the results of assessment are not used to improve student learning, assessment becomes at best a descriptive set of data about students and, at worst, a useless exercise” (Middle States Commission on Higher Education).

Finally, the data, analysis, results, and decisions that were made based on the results must be recorded and stored in order to generate trend data and show proof of progress.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT
FOR THE FACULTY

FACULTY SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT COMING SOON CHECK YOUR EMAIL

“Working together to cultivate a culture of evidence-based decision making. . .”
Results from the College Student Needs Assessment Survey (CSNAS)

The College Student Needs Assessment Survey (CSNAS) was administered in the fall of 2008 to the freshman class. The survey was created by ACT and is designed to help identify the perceived personal and educational needs of students enrolled at Howard University. Approximately 737 students completed the survey.

The graph below indicates the five most pressing educational and personal needs of the survey respondents. These results indicate that the freshman class needs more information on financial aid opportunities and on career planning.

It is expected that the appropriate departments will use this information to shape policy and practice in an effort to meet the needs of the freshman class.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

This spring Howard University joins the 644 colleges and universities across the nation participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

The NSSE is a survey that measures the extent to which students are participating in the effective educational practices that are strongly associated with high levels of learning and personal development (Kuh, 2001).

The NSSE measures five “benchmarks” of Effective Educational Practice: (1) Level of Academic Challenge, (2) Active and Collaborative Learning, (3) Student-Faculty Interaction, (4) Supportive Campus environment, and (5) Enriching Educational Experiences.

Although the NSSE doesn’t assess student learning outcomes directly, it does provide “indices of effective educational practice [that] can serve as a valuable proxy for quality in undergraduate education” (Kuh, 2001). In order to focus efforts to improve the undergraduate experience, information from the survey will be used to identify specific aspects of the undergraduate experience inside and outside of the classroom that are in need of improvement.

Starting in February, a randomly selected group of freshmen and seniors will receive an email from Interim Provost Alvin Thornton inviting them to participate in the (NSSE).

Upcoming Activities

The OIAE will engage in a number of activities in the upcoming months including the following:

- Administration of the NSSE: The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) provides information regarding how undergraduate students spend their time and what they gain from attending college. Information from the survey is used by the Institution to identify aspects of the undergraduate experience inside and outside of the classroom. The NSSE will be administered to students beginning in February, 2009.

- Administration of the FSSE: The Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) is a complement to the National Survey of Student Engagement (see above). This survey measures faculty members’ expectations of student engagement in educational practice. It also measures how faculty members spend their time on professional activities including teaching, scholarship and the types of learning experiences emphasized by the University. The FSSE will be administered to faculty beginning in March, 2009.

- Administration of the Graduating Senior Survey.

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McCormick’s Musing - “First, Do No Harm”

The following commentary appeared online in April 2007 as a part of Carnegie Perspectives, a series designed to stimulate discussion on various educational issues.

Accountability is in the air, and the news, these days. In response to various “commonsense” proposals to fix problems in education, a friend of mine used to say, “If you think there’s a simple solution, you don’t understand the problem.” Recent accountability proposals show how true this is. In any accountability regime, it’s not sufficient to simply select a set of performance measures. It’s equally important to consider how the system will affect behavior. A well-designed accountability system motivates substantive change, not merely gaming the system. And the last thing you want is a system that undermines useful diagnostic tools in the name of accountability.

In January 2008, the National Center for Education Statistics proposed some additions to the mass of data that it gathers annually from colleges and universities. Normally an arcane subject, to be sure. But buried in the proposal was a provision—clearly motivated by the Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education—that could seriously hamper current efforts to improve college quality. Russ Whitehurst, director of the Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences (which houses the statistics agency), subsequently offered vague assurance that the most damaging of these proposals would probably not be implemented. Let’s hope he’s right.

The last twenty years have seen calls for greater accountability by higher education, accompanied by growing influence of college rankings by U.S. News and World Report. College officials complain that the rankings, which purport to measure college quality, improperly emphasize inputs and resources rather than what happens on campus. But in response to accountability demands, they argue that the work of their institutions is too complex, too varied, and too ephemeral to be reduced to simple output measures. Although there is merit to both claims, the quest to improve college quality is far from hopeless.

Several relatively new college-quality initiatives show such promise that they were named by the Secretary’s Commission. Colleges and universities participating in these projects have access to sophisticated assessments of effective educational practices (from the National Survey of Student Engagement, or NSSE, and its community college counterpart, CCSSE) and of their students’ critical thinking, analytic and writing skills (from the Collegiate Learning Assessment, or CLA). NSSE and CLA send participating institutions confidential reports showing how they perform relative to their peers; CCSSE posts results on its website. This is valuable information that presidents, deans, department chairs, and faculty members can—and do—use to improve the quality of college education.

But the Commission and the Secretary want more information that students and parents can use to compare institutions. The Secretary often complains that she has access to more comparative information when buying a car than when investing in her children’s college education.

So the statistics agency proposed adding an “accountability” section to its annual compilation of college and university data. In the first phase, colleges would be asked which assessments they participate in, whether they post the results online, and the corresponding Web address. So far, so good—many institutions post this information, and this would make it easier to find. The mischief begins in the second phase, wherein institutions report the assessments they participate in and their “score” on each one. Knowing which assessments a college uses is a good idea, but reporting scores to the government will do far more harm than good.

Why? Let’s set aside the problem of reducing complex assessments to a single institution-wide score. (If you had one score for every auto maker, would that help you choose the best station wagon?) The real danger is transforming a diagnostic exercise into grading and ranking. It’s one thing for college officials to have a confidential report from a sophisticated assessment identifying where improvement is needed. It’s quite another when that information is made public; the emphasis shifts quickly from diagnosis to damage control (although CCSSSE results are public, community colleges do not compete in national and regional markets the way four-year institutions do). And recall that these are voluntary assessments that institutions pay to participate in. If your doctor and financial planner posted your physical and fiscal health on the Web, would you see them more often? Would you see them at all?

It doesn’t take much in the way of critical thinking skills to see where this leads. If the Department doesn’t produce rankings, others will. In NSSE’s case, students’ survey responses will determine their college’s standing, and by extension, the value of their degree. So they will act in their own self-interest to make their college look good, compromising the fundamental requirement for useful information: candor. More likely, though, colleges will simply opt out, as they surely will for performance-based assessments like CLA, because participation would risk too severe a public-relations penalty. Thus would an ill-conceived push for consumer information drive colleges away from the most promising assessment and improvement initiatives in decades.

Higher education institutions must systematically assess and improve their performance. But not all diagnostic information is suitable for accountability and consumer information, and a ham-fisted approach like this could sabotage important efforts to diagnose and improve colleges and universities.

Alexander C. McCormick succeeded George D. Kuh as NSSE director in January 2008. He also holds a faculty appointment in the Indiana University School of Education’s Educational Leadership and Policy Studies department. Through his work with NSSE, McCormick aims to enrich the national discourse about quality and accountability in higher education, while also providing institutions with tools they can use to diagnose and improve undergraduate teaching and learning. Prior to joining Indiana University, McCormick served as Senior Scholar at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching where he directed a major overhaul of the Foundation’s widely-used Classification of Institutions of Higher Education and also served as director of survey research.

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