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Progress, Trends, and Practices in Higher Education

Twelve Tips: Building High-Quality Assessment through Peer Review

Keston H. Fulcher, Chris M. Coleman, and Donna L. Sundre

IS OUR INSTITUTION'S ASSESSMENT SUCCESSFUL? THE QUESTION IS RELATIVELY simple. The answer is not. At first blush, one might respond: *All programs that are mandated to submit assessment reports do so.* After all, full participation is clearly desirable. Reflection, however, reveals this criterion to be superficial. If the submitted reports are of poor quality, then success has not been achieved. The next logical response might be: *all programs practice high-quality assessment.* While a more compelling answer, other questions immediately follow. What does high-quality assessment look like? What type of data would indicate high-quality assessment?

At James Madison University (JMU), this line of questioning led us to a small, dimly lit corner of the assessment literature called *meta-assessment* (Ory 1992). Essentially, it is the process of evaluating the quality of assessment practices. While the term is uncommon, engagement in meta-assessment can add real value to a university.

We began meta-assessment work in the mid-2000s. Since that time, faculty have been incorporated as peer reviewers, and assessment quality has improved dramatically among our academic units. Notably, the proportion of degree programs demonstrating exemplary assessment has risen from 1% to over 50%. More importantly, meta-assessment is helping JMU evolve from being an *assessment* institution to a *learning improvement* institution, a shift that earned JMU a 2015 Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) Award for Outstanding Institutional Practice in Student Learning Outcomes.

In this article, the purpose is not to take readers blow by blow through our process. Instead, it is to highlight twelve tips for organizing assessment practice. The tips should be useful to general assessment practitioners as well as those who wish to implement a meta-assessment process at their institution. The closing tip is the most important, as it puts a capstone on the symbiotic connection between assessment and learning.

Tip 1. *Obtain administrative buy-in.* In the early stages, be clear that evaluating and improving a university's assessment processes is challenging. The purpose is to build an assessment system that can stand the test of time, as opposed to a "just-in-time"

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Assessment Update

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process that squeaks the institution through accreditation but falls apart immediately afterward. The university will need to define what it means by high-quality assessment, employ a system to manage assessment documents, provide constructive feedback to faculty, and offer assessment resources. This process takes years, not months, to implement effectively. Being clear and honest with administrators about strategy and time frame is an excellent start to achieving buy-in.

Being clear and honest with administrators about strategy and time frame is an excellent start to achieving buy-in.



Tip 2. Operationally define high-quality assessment. We started by reviewing what JMU was asking programs to assess and report. Our literature review revealed what most institutions know: learning outcomes assessment entails writing student learning outcomes (SLOs), employing methodology (i.e., testing, data collection), reporting results, and using results (Fulcher, Swain, and Orem 2012). Of course, the devil is in the details. What traits differentiate beginning versus developing versus good versus exemplary practice in those areas?

An emerging trend is to develop or adapt a tool that communicates practices associated with different levels of assessment quality. JMU's meta-assessment tool is an analytic rubric—a “rubric” because it articulates the traits that characterize assessment practice at different developmental levels, and “analytic” because it includes multiple dimensions (rows) that can be rated independently from one another. SLOs, for example, are defined as “developing” if they are “... present, but with imprecise verbs (e.g., know, understand), vague description of content/skill/or attitudinal domain, and non-specificity of who should be assessed” (https://www.jmu.edu/assessment/_files/APT_Rubric_sp2015.pdf).

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Call for Contributions

The editor welcomes short articles and news items for *Assessment Update*. Guidelines follow for those who would like to contribute articles on outcomes assessment in higher education.

- **Content:** Please send an account of your experience with assessment in higher education. Include concrete examples of practice and results.
- **Audience:** *Assessment Update* readers are academic administrators, campus assessment practitioners, institutional researchers, and faculty from a variety of fields. All types of institutions are represented in the readership.
- **Style:** A report, essay, news story, or letter to the editor is welcome. Limited references can be printed; however, extensive tables cannot be included.
- **Format:** In addition to standard manuscripts, news may be contributed via letter, telephone, or fax (317) 274-4651. The standard manuscript format is a 60-space line with 25 lines per page. Articles may be sent to aupdate@iupui.edu as a Microsoft Word attachment. Please include your complete postal mailing address.
- **Length:** Articles should be four to eight typed, double-spaced pages (1,000–2,000 words). Annotations of recent publications for the Recommended Reading feature should be 200–500 words in length. Short news items and content for the Memos section should be about 50–200 words long.
- **Copyright:** Articles shall not have been registered for copyright or published elsewhere prior to publication in *Assessment Update*.
- **Deadlines:** Each issue is typically planned four months before its publication.

Please address mailed contributions and comments to Trudy W. Banta, Editor, *Assessment Update*, Suite 4049 University Hall, 301 University Blvd., Indianapolis, IN 46202. ■

agreement graphs from your own data, a wiki with instructions and sample reports, sample data, and a paper that describes the mathematics in detail. This is all found via the link <http://bit.ly/23QFq5a>. If you are willing to contribute rater data to the project, it will increase the library of comparison references. E-mail the author for details. ■

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How Can We Address Ongoing Accreditation Challenges?

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stellar or troubled student can throw data out of whack.

The best answer to these challenges is to focus your priorities. Focus on just a few key institutional strategic goals instead of a "thousand points of light." Take a hard look at those small programs; if only a handful of students are enrolled, why are you offering them? Are those students getting an optimal experience of learning a variety of perspectives from faculty and fellow students?

Yes, today we are facing increasing accreditation challenges, but with careful consideration of how to tackle them most effectively, our institutions can use

them as opportunities to become even better than they are today. ■

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Twelve Tips: Building High-Quality Assessment through Peer Review

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JMU's rubric (Fulcher and Orem 2010) comprises 14 criteria that were allocated to six categories: objective writing, curriculum mapping, methodology, results, sharing of results, and use of results. We advise institutions to spend a full year developing their rubric. Faculty must have time to consider and vet the meta-assessment instrument. If their

contributions are welcomed, they are more likely to feel ownership and confidence in the assessment process. The rubric can then become the document guiding the university's assessment initiatives, in essence a university-wide backward design process for assessment.

Tip 3. *Once established, freeze the rubric for five years.* When the rubric

is reasonably well developed, it should be "frozen" for at least five years. While tempting, making editorial tweaks based on well-intentioned feedback will be met with resistance. Our experience tells us that faculty hate a moving target. Further, the rubric will need to be consistent to allow for comparisons of assessment quality from year to year. Tweaks obfuscate such comparisons. We were frank with our stakeholders: "This rubric is imperfect, but a group of faculty thought it functional enough to use. Because nobody wants a moving target, we will

freeze the rubric for five years and then review it.” In the meantime, suggestions for improvement should be welcomed and recorded for future review.

Tip 4. Share the rubric broadly. After the rubric has been adopted, share it with all faculty assessment coordinators who write the reports, department heads, and upper administration. Offer sessions where the rubric can be explained and discussed. The strategy we found most helpful is to share a hypothetical assessment report annotated relative to the rubric. Doing so allows faculty to see an exemplary report and how practices described in the rubric could be operationalized. Too often, faculty are asked to write assessment reports but given little guidance as to what is expected.

If faculty receive no feedback, they will assume that administrators do not care. If this occurs, the probability of achieving high-quality assessment is very low.



Tip 5. Choose or develop a web-based system for managing the assessment process. Especially for large institutions and/or those with many degree programs, transmitting assessment-related reports back and forth via e-mail is untenable. Fortunately, several assessment management systems (AMS) are available to higher education through third party vendors. The key is to find one (or develop one in-house) that aligns well with your institution’s assessment needs. See Oakleaf, Belanger, and Graham (2013) for an excellent overview of features to consider when selecting (or developing) an AMS.

Tip 6. Provide feedback on quality. If faculty receive no feedback, they will assume that administrators do not care. If this occurs, the probability of achieving high-quality assessment is very low. Therefore, when programs submit reports, evaluate those reports via the meta-assessment rubric. When feedback is provided, pair it with the rubric

so faculty can connect the two. This tip cannot be overemphasized. Regarding feedback, we combine numerical ratings of quality with comments. Carefully crafted, specific, and constructive suggestions are accepted most readily.

Tip 7. Train faculty to peer review assessment. At some colleges, all assessment reports are evaluated by staff from an office of assessment. At other schools, faculty are brought in as peer reviewers. We strongly encourage the second option. Our faculty reviewers are nominated by their deans and receive a small stipend. We treat this participation like a grant, which provides faculty status and recognition and helps administrators play a facilitating role. Through the experience, faculty become

assessment insiders; they learn how experts would view various practices. Further, they read a dozen or more reports from outside their own program/field, often picking up new assessment strategies along the way. Most importantly, faculty reviewers return to their home programs and become leaders and advisors on assessment.

Tip 8. Share feedback with relevant internal stakeholders. In addition to providing report submitters with feedback, consider sharing quality-of-assessment results up the reporting chain. At JMU we are forthright: Faculty assessment coordinators are informed that their programs’ quality-of-assessment ratings will be shared with their respective department heads, college deans, and provost. This communication ensures accountability and recognition for the programs. Further, it keeps administrators apprised of programs in their purview. In turn, administrators can support pro-

grams. For example, several deans have identified faculty development opportunities for struggling programs identified by low quality-of-assessment ratings.

Tip 9. Provide recognition. Programs conducting robust assessment should be recognized. Five years ago, we initiated an *exemplary* standard for assessment reports. This criterion was established by faculty who had completed the assessment-reviewing experience (Tip 7). Programs meeting the standard are sent kudos letters and are highlighted in communications to the deans and provost. The provost also provides an annual award to an outstanding assessment program: a crystal plaque and a small budget supplement are presented to the department. Finally, the university provides travel incentives for faculty and staff who wish to share their work. Such recognition demonstrates administrative commitment to assessment, which enhances faculty and program engagement.

Tip 10. Be consistent and patient. A pervasive problem among colleges is the desire to fix the “assessment problem” quickly. As noted earlier, quick-fix solutions may help in the short term but rarely yield long-term assessment quality. Carefully think through what high-quality assessment would look like, develop tools and infrastructure accordingly, and stick with that plan over time. The steady, consistent approach will pay dividends in the long run.

Tip 11. One need not submit a traditional assessment report every year. (Frequency-of-reporting expectations differ by regional and disciplinary accreditor. We advise institutions to check all the bases before adopting regular but nonyearly schedules for full assessment reporting.) After several years, many JMU programs plateaued. While the quality of their assessment process was still high, they were essentially plugging new numbers into an old report. We began offering an alternative: if programs consistently turned in exem-

plary reports, they could, every other year, submit an alternative report in lieu of the usual full assessment report. In the alternative year, we encourage programs to focus on a learning improvement project or a particular methodological issue. About half the programs eligible to do so have. And they have viewed the experience very favorably. Deeper explorations have been made, with a few units initiating program-level learning improvement projects.

Tip 12 (the final and most important). *Stop focusing myopically on assessment; start thinking about learning improvement systems.* As a university, we initially struggled to communicate the relationship between assessment and learning improvement. This weakness stemmed from two issues:

- *Distinguishing assessment changes from learning changes.* Producing a better sample or conducting a fancy analysis will not make students learn more. While sound methodology is certainly important to high-quality assessment, “use of results” should evoke curricular and pedagogical modification. We clarified this distinction in the JMU rubric by evaluating changes to assessment processes separately from changes designed to influence program quality (student learning).
- *Distinguishing change from improvement.* The rubric we used from 2009 to 2014 conflated the terms *change* and *improvement*. After the unfreezing of the rubric, we clarified that a change is only an improvement when a reassessment indicates that an intervention yielded better results. In fact, this is how our description of top-level (“National Model for Learning Improvement”) use of results now reads:

Strong evidence, from direct measures, supporting substantive learning improvement due to program modifications. This program responded to previous assessment results, made

curricular and/or pedagogical modifications, RE-assessed, and found that student learning improved. The rationale and explanation of the modifications leading to the improvement are clearly laid out. The methodology is of sufficient strength that most reasonable alternative hypotheses can be ruled out (e.g., sampling concerns, validity issues with instrument or student motivation). In essence the improvement interpretation can withstand reasonable critique from faculty, curriculum experts, assessment experts, and external stakeholders.

As we homed in on learning improvement, it also became clear that JMU needed to do a better job of integrating resources (Fulcher, Good, Coleman, and Smith 2014). Staff primarily trained in assessment methodology are not the best equipped to facilitate conversations about pedagogy and curriculum. This realization has led to partnerships among JMU’s assessment office, faculty development office, and academic programs. In essence, learning improvement necessitates an integration of subject matter expertise, methodological expertise, and curricular/pedagogical expertise. For too long, assessment has been practiced independent of material efforts to improve pedagogy and curriculum.

It is the above point on which we close. High-quality assessment practice will likely keep accreditors at bay. Nevertheless, it is only through incorporating high-quality assessment within a larger learning improvement system that an institution truly advances. If your institution does adopt peer review in its institutional assessment efforts, we advise that the process keep the larger learning improvement context in tight focus. ■

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Useful Links

https://www.jmu.edu/assessment/_files/APT_Rubric_sp2015.pdf

https://www.jmu.edu/assessment/_files/APT_Complete_How_to.pdf

https://www.jmu.edu/assessment/_files/APT_Updates_programs2015.pdf

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Another type of assessment is peer assessment. Boud and Falchikov (2007) define peer assessment as a process of providing feedback on peers' work based on success criteria that the students may previously have established while Topping (2009) describes peer assessment. (2001): firstly, the fact that the students assess their peers through an online system and not face to face ensures anonymity which is a major factor for involving students in this process; secondly, a web-based peer assessment offers flexibility to teachers since they can control students' progress during the assessment process at any time; finally, web-based peer assessment is. The literature suggests that peer assessment enhances students' higher level thinking skills and metacognitive skills. Peer review, also called peer editing, peer feedback, and formative peer assessment, allows students to provide and receive feedback on an assignment before submitting it to the instructor. When students give and get peer feedback on an assignment in progress, they can remind each other of assignment goals and criteria, get a sense of how readers might respond to their writing when those readers aren't marking their work, and then make targeted changes to improve their assignments before submitting or presenting them. In this way, peer review takes some of the teaching and feedback load away from the instructor. Peer review is the evaluation of work by one or more people with similar competencies as the producers of the work (peers). It functions as a form of self-regulation by qualified members of a profession within the relevant field. Peer review methods are used to maintain quality standards, improve performance, and provide credibility. In academia, scholarly peer review is often used to determine an academic paper's suitability for publication. Peer review can be categorized by the type of activity and