Leadership Exchange

A CLOSER LOOK AT HIGHER EDUCATION

STUDENT AFFAIRS PREPARES FOR INCREASED PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCRUTINY

The Internal **Asse**

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A TOOL FOR CREATING CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT IN COCURRICULAR AREAS

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING IS NOT A NEW CONCEPT IN HIGHER EDUCA-TION, but there appears to be an ever-increasing focus on student learning and student success by accreditation bodies in terms of both significance and scope within their evaluation processes. A prime example is the new Open Pathway model of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The Open Pathway model is focused on improvement and assurance.

The aim of the Open Pathway model is to sustain and even enhance the rigor of accreditation evaluations, to maintain the focus on both quality assurance and quality improvement, and to make accreditation more meaningful and less burdensome to institutions. In part, the model achieves this aim by repositioning the traditional self-study process and accompanying report from a focus on data-gathering to a focus on analysis, evaluation, and improvement based on evidence. In current accreditation models, the self-study typically involves extensive resources devoted to documenting past accomplishments of an institution. Open Pathway is one of two new accreditation processes that will replace HLC's Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) over a three-year period, beginning in September 2012. To be eligible for participation in the Open Pathway process, an institution must be relatively mature and stable and must be accredited for a minimum of 10 years with no recent major institutional changes or commission sanctions. The Open Pathway model follows a 10-year cycle of accreditation, with action to reaffirm accreditation occurring in the last year of the cycle. The Open Pathway process consists of both an assurance component, termed the Assurance Argument, and an improvement component, termed the Quality Initiative. The assurance and improvement components have been deliberately separated to allow institutions to take greater risks through their quality initiatives.

The Quality Initiative component is a major, multi-year undertaking to further an identified aspect of institutional mission. An institution may choose to participate in an HLC-facilitated program as its quality initiative, design its own quality initiative, or select from a menu of topics provided by HLC. The institution submits a quality improvement proposal between year five and seven, with the expectation that this endeavor will last approximately two years and will be followed by a quality initiative report between years seven and nine of the accreditation cycle. The assurance component is achieved through a highly structured and focused narrative of 25,000 to 35,000 words known as an Assurance Argument, which addresses how the institution meets the accreditation criteria. The Assurance Argument is presented in electronic format, including evidence to support the narrative. The Assurance Argument can be updated on an ongoing basis, but there is a formal electronic assurance review conducted by HLC peer reviewers in years four and ten, accompanied by a site visit in year ten.

Planning and assessment are central to these processes. In addition to the HLC, accreditation bodies have broadened their definition of assessment to include student learning beyond traditional academic learning in the classroom, particularly in cocurricular areas, such as interaction with student support services. At many institutions, assessment is an integral part of daily operations in cocurricular areas, but the focus is often on tracking services provided—measuring the number of students served rather than actual student learning outcomes.

HLC ACADEMY FOR ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

To improve assessment efforts at Pittsburg State University in Kansas, senior administrators sought external assistance. In 2009, the institution joined the HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning, a four-year structured experience intended to develop institutional culture and increase institutional commitment to assessing and improving student learning. The core of the academy experience involves cohorts of institutional teams participating initially in an on-site roundtable to develop an assessment plan to meet identified goals, with follow-up participation through an electronic network accompanied by ongoing mentor support.

Pittsburg State was one of several institutions invited by the HLC to participate in a Demonstration Project to assist in the design and testing of the new Open Pathway model. To avoid competing institutional priorities and to maximize use of resources, Pittsburg State chose to use participation in the Academy for Assessment of Student Learning as the vehicle to fulfill the quality initiative component of its accreditation. The university's experience was extremely positive as the structure and external resources offered by the academy were invaluable.

Pittsburg State had two goals for the HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning: Assess the core of its general education curriculum, and begin assessment of student learning in cocurricular areas.

To address the general education curriculum core, a task force was formed for each area (writing, math, and oral communication). These task forces were deliberately implemented on a staggered basis to maximize the use of resources and streamline management. The task force model proved highly effective in engaging the campus to define what the institution wants students to know and accomplish in core areas and in developing an ongoing assessment plan. In contrast, a number of offices representing cocurricular areas were selected each year to work with the university's assessment coordinator to develop and implement assessment plans. During the first year, three cocurricular offices with well-established records of success participated in the assessment process.

After year one, the task force model was working well in addressing the selected academic areas. However, the university lacked the infrastructure to support assessment of student learning in the cocurricular arena. Of the three initial units, only two were successful in creating effective assessment plans, and the experience was unnecessarily stressful with few internal or external resources to guide assessment in the respective areas. For Pittsburg State, assessment of cocurricular areas needed to involve a paradigm shift from a customer satisfaction model to a model for improving student learning. Cocurricular units needed formal structure and support to develop the skills necessary to assess student learning. Based on components of the HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning, the university developed an internal assessment academy.

PITTSBURG STATE'S INTERNAL ASSESSMENT ACADEMY

The internal assessment academy is a cohort-based, two-year series of workshops to guide participating cocurricular units through the development of assessment plans focused on student learning. Each participating unit sends a team comprised of the unit head and two or three key staff members. In the first year of the two-year commitment, monthly workshops focus on creating an assessment plan. In the second year, workshops focus on executing the assessment plan and on using results to improve student learning.

Drawing from problem-based learning, workshops are as hands-on as possible: 15-minute mini-lectures are followed by 30 to 40 minutes of guided team activities. Each team works closely with a mentor in these sessions and in separate meetings. Mentors, recruited from the cocurricular units, are individuals who have successfully completed the academy.

INTERNAL ACADEMY CURRICULUM

A deliberate process is followed to develop an assessment plan for cocurricular units. During the first year, the cohort develops its plans. The ongoing process of data collection begins the second year followed by data analysis, evaluation, and program adjustments.

Workshop One is an extended meeting that includes introductions and an academy overview. The workshop focuses on beginning to answer the critical question: What do your students learn? Teams must explicitly align programs with the university mission, then clearly identify the student populations they serve. They must begin to develop goals and objectives for student learning and to consider: What may prevent them from reaching their goals? At the end of this session, each group presents one goal and one objective and receives feedback from other groups in the cohort. Mentors encourage groups to focus on current student populations and programs. For example, the Office of Admission at Pittsburg State serves numerous student populations, including high school seniors, veterans, non-traditional students, and transfer students. Rather than focusing efforts on developing new goals and programs for a relatively smaller population, the Office of Admission first focused on programs related to high school seniors, particularly senior visit days and incoming freshman enrollment.

Workshop Two concentrates on measurement, which often requires an adjustment in thinking for participants, who frequently measure results qualitatively rather than quantitatively. Participants often feel they need to develop a survey for every goal and every objective, and they must assess every goal and objective at one time. During the session, participants apply direct and indirect measurement techniques, explore sources of relevant data, and learn to stagger assessment of goals and objectives to best manage the process. In addition, they work with mentors to develop a timeline for data collection and to identify existing data, whether it is collected by the unit or by another area. For example, Career Services already provides written feedback to individual students on résumé writing and interviewing skills after they participate in relevant programs. This feedback could easily be captured in aggregate form to address student learning outcomes related to those areas.

Workshop Three offers more information on measurement, particularly the development of rubrics, which can help quantify what has been measured qualitatively. Units begin to consider what students learn from participation in a particular program and begin discussions about what constitutes the various levels of student success.

Workshop Four, which falls at the end of spring semester, features presentations on progress to date from participating teams, and team members respond to questions from their peers. This exchange promotes useful discussions leading to the improvement of assessment plans.

During the second semester of participation, teams begin preparing for data collection, a recent modification that will be implemented with the university's second cohort of participants, based on feedback from the first group of teams. **Workshops Five and Six** concentrate on helping participating teams learn to actually gather, manage, and use data. The current cohort will engage in a pilot data collection exercise for a selected objective.

In the last two sessions, participants focus on improving and finalizing the assessment plan—aware that each plan is a living document and will be refined in response to learning experiences during implementation. During **Workshop Seven,** cohorts share drafts of the assessment plan with peers and receive feedback. Units gain insight into how plans might be improved. During **Workshop Eight**, participants present completed assessment plans to the cohort and receive a certificate of completion. The presentations highlight the significant progress that teams have made in building a knowledge of student learning assessment and developing confidence in their ability to execute an assessment. The university provost and incoming cohort will be invited to view future final presentations to broaden their understanding of the end product.

Although mentors are available to teams beyond the first year of participation in the internal academy, this resource has not been well utilized, and more formal follow-up is required. In the future, two additional sessions are planned for year two: one will focus on data analysis and the other will focus on identifying and communicating results to appropriate constituencies.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS
Sustainability
Sustainability—the ability to maintain the program—was a key consideration in its design. For coordinators to manage the process, the number of units in any cohort was limited to five to seven areas, and previous participants served as mentors and session presenters. Initially, mentors were primarily members of the HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning, but are now drawn from previous cohorts of participants who have successfully created their own assessment plans. Emphasis is placed on keeping assessment plans manageable. Participating units are encouraged to use available information or data.

Cherry-picking
To implement the internal assessment academy model, cocurricular units that had already collected data and/or had expressed an appreciation for connections to student learning were selected. A key challenge was shifting participants from a comprehensive focus on student support to a directed focus on student learning. By choosing initial participants whose work explicitly involved student learning, the university could develop expertise in an already-effective core group of individuals, who subsequently could act as mentors and workshop facilitators for other units. The participation of highly driven staff members could help maximize the likelihood of the internal academy succeeding as a viable, ongoing resource for the institution.

Applied Workshops
The use of hands-on workshops allowed participants to work more efficiently, learn from each other's experiences, and collaborate among different areas. For example, the First-Year Programs area and the library share learning goals associated with library basics for freshmen and use the same measurement tool. A shared tool is more efficient and avoids assessment fatigue among students, especially freshmen. It also allows data to be aggregated across cocurricular areas. In selecting cocurricular units for a cohort, consideration is given to units that naturally work together. Some cocurricular units have chosen to create cross-disciplinary teams, which have been highly effective in promoting collaboration across units.

Mentors
Individuals who have successfully completed the internal academy frequently serve as mentors and valuable role models for incoming cohorts—an efficient use of current resources that allows mentors to continue to develop their knowledge and skills. In addition to providing strong evidence that the academy can help units achieve strategic goals, mentors can refocus teams to create measurable student learning-focused goals and objectives and provide support and reassurance to overcome roadblocks and setbacks.

Future Directions
The internal academy is an ever-evolving platform to improve student learning in cocurricular areas. A formal evaluation is conducted and informal feedback is solicited from all mentors and participants. At the end of the first cohort, all surveyed participants rated the academy experience as beneficial, but informal and formal feedback identified improvement areas. For example, the schedule of sessions was faster than participants found useful, and a second year will be added to the internal academy to focus on using data to improve programs and providing guidance through the complete cycle of assessment.

At the end of the inaugural year, Pittsburg State learned: tracking must be improved to chart the progress of unit assessment plan development; challenges faced by individual units must be identified early to provide better mentor instruction or resources during monthly group meetings; and mentors must be held more accountable. Prior to the second cohort, mentors completed basic training that clearly outlined expectations, and a simple form was introduced for mentors to complete and submit electronically to the assessment director after each non-workshop meeting with mentees. The information collected on the form provides valuable insight into the learning taking place among academy participants and ensures effective mentor participation both with the unit and the academy. In addition, the assessment coordinator is able to intervene early to

provide additional support and/or resources to a mentor. The mentorship program will be refined with more explicit training and opportunities for mentors to learn from each other.

The university is also exploring the possibility of creating a parallel academy for academic units since academic areas present different challenges and opportunities to address.

A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL APPROACH

Pittsburg State has found the HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning to be an invaluable resource for improving and expanding its assessment efforts. The internal assessment academy loosely modeled on experiences with the HLC Academy has been highly successful. Most participants complete the internal academy with workable assessment plans in place. Further, they find the process gives them opportunities to discuss the purpose of the unit and its role within the division and the university. The academy allows team members to prioritize and focus on key goals, examine intent behind internal procedures, and refine processes to better meet unit and student needs.

The Pittsburg State experience underscores the need for effective infrastructure to support assessment. The adopted model engages a significant number of individuals across campus in assessment activities with minimal investment of resources beyond initial participation in the formal HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning. As the university expands the internal academy, involving other cocurricular areas as well as traditional academic units, these activities will strengthen its ability to maintain accreditation. However, the value of these assessment activities extends far beyond the role they play in accreditation. Cocurricular units are using data not only to justify continued existence of programs but, more importantly, to improve the learning experience of students. Maintaining accreditation is an essential element of doing business, but improvement of student learning is at the heart of Pittsburg State's mission. LE

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