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Observations and Suggestions on Assessing Student Learning
at Syracuse University
Based on a Visit on November 18, 2016

November 25, 2016

I visited Syracuse University on November 18, 2016, to conduct a three-hour workshop on "Understanding and Using Assessment Results" and to meet for three hours with the university's Middle States self-study work group on assessment (Standard V). This report is intended to summarize the key ideas we discussed during my visit.

I note at the outset that I cannot predict any action by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, and I offer no guarantee that following my advice will result in any particular Commission action.

In preparation for my visit, I reviewed university guidelines for academic assessment along with assessment materials from four academic programs: Communication and Rhetorical Studies, Communication Design, English and Textual Studies, and Public Health.

At the end of the workshop, I asked participants to complete brief "minute paper" reflections on the workshop. Their comments are at the end of this report.

I found that, under the exceptional leadership of Dr. Gerald Edmonds, ~~Associate~~ Provost, and his colleagues, Syracuse University has made important strides meeting Middle States expectations for assessing student learning.

- Members of the assessment work group are tremendous assets to Syracuse University. They are committed to and supportive of one another; they have an excellent understanding of assessment; they have worked incredibly hard to help faculty understand how to assess student learning. They are campus assessment champions; they "get" the importance and value of assessing student learning.
- Dr. Edmonds and his colleagues have developed clear, comprehensive, and appropriate guidelines on how to assess student learning, along with templates for documenting assessment plans and results.
- Dr. Edmonds and his colleagues have met with every department chair, unit head, dean and division head, among others, to educate them on the need for and value of assessment as well as how to do it. This is a remarkable accomplishment considering the hundreds of academic and co-curricular programs that Syracuse offers.
- The Associate Provost's office has sponsored several well-attended workshops on student learning assessment facilitated by nationally-recognized experts.

- The provost is holding deans accountable for assessment in their schools and colleges, and this expectation has been incorporated into their performance evaluation criteria.
- The Faculty Senate has established that all courses must have course objectives, new courses must address relevant program learning outcomes, and proposals for new academic programs must include assessment plans.
- There are pockets of good assessment practice that the university can build upon. The visual and performing arts faculty, for example, have developed an excellent ~~rubric~~ to offer constructive feedback on assessment plans and reports.
- The university has invested in Tk20 and has made the wise decision to implement it initially "behind the scenes." This approach will let the university introduce Tk20 to faculty and administrators gradually, when they are ready to see it as a useful tool rather than yet another mandate.
- The dozens of faculty and administrators who attended and participated actively in my workshop represent a strong core who understand the importance and value of assessment and are ready to continue to work on assessment.

On top of these strengths and accomplishments, Syracuse University is undergraduate-tuition-driven. Why do I consider this a positive? To thrive in the highly competitive higher education market in the northeast United States, Syracuse University must demonstrate convincingly to prospective undergraduates, donors, and other stakeholders that undergraduates have a superior educational experience here. Student learning assessment evidence, along with systematic evidence of student engagement, is vital to ensuring that Syracuse is truly providing an exceptional education and to making this case to its constituents. Syracuse's circumstances thus make student learning assessment particularly important to its future.

Despite these strengths, accomplishments, and positives, however, student learning assessment at Syracuse is not yet where it should be. According to Dr. Edmonds, some programs have not yet submitted plans to assess program learning outcomes, and only about a third of programs with plans submitted a report on their assessment efforts by the September 2016 deadline. Assessments of student learning are not yet systematically implemented in all academic programs and general education/liberal arts requirements. A plan to conduct program reviews of all academic programs is not yet fully developed. Academic programs are sometimes collections of courses rather than the coherent experience promoting synthesis of learning that Middle States requires. And general education/liberal arts requirements, which vary by program, may not yet consistently comply Middle States standards.

While I cannot predict any finding or action by any accreditor, it is entirely possible that, if the Middle States evaluation team visit were held today, the Commission would find Syracuse out of compliance with the following aspects of its standards and requirements of affiliation and formally warn the university that its accreditation is in jeopardy:

- *Requirement of Affiliation 8:* The institution systematically evaluates its educational and other programs and makes public how well and in what ways it is accomplishing its purposes.
- *Requirement of Affiliation 9:* The institution's student learning programs and opportunities are characterized by rigor, coherence, and appropriate assessment of student achievement throughout the educational offerings, regardless of certificate or degree level or delivery and instructional modality.

- *Requirement of Affiliation 10:* Institutional planning integrates goals for academic and institutional effectiveness and improvement, student achievement of educational goals, student learning, and the results of academic and institutional assessments.
- *Standard III:* An institution provides students with learning experiences that are characterized by coherence in all program, certificate, and degree levels…
- *Standard III.1:* certificate, undergraduate, graduate, and/or professional programs leading to a degree or other recognized higher education credential…designed to foster a coherent student learning experience and to promote synthesis of learning
- *Standard III.2:* student learning experiences that are designed, delivered, and assessed by faculty (full-time or part-time) and/or other appropriate professionals who are rigorous and effective in teaching, assessment of student learning
- *Standard III.5:* …a general education program, free standing or integrated into academic disciplines, that (a) offers a sufficient scope to draw students into new areas of intellectual experience, expanding their cultural and global awareness and cultural sensitivity, and preparing them to make well-reasoned judgments outside as well as within their academic field; (b) offer a curriculum designed so that students acquire and demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, technological competency, and information literacy. Consistent with mission, the general education program also includes the study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives.
- *Standard III.8:* periodic assessment of the effectiveness of programs providing student learning opportunities.
- *Standard V:* Assessment of student learning and achievement demonstrates that the institution's students have accomplished educational goals consistent with their program of study… [and] the institution's mission…
- *Standard V.1:* Clearly stated educational goals at the institution and degree/program levels, which are interrelated with one another, with relevant educational experiences, and with the institution's mission
- *Standard V.2.* Organized and systematic assessments, conducted by faculty and/or appropriate professionals, evaluating the extent of student achievement of institutional and degree/program goals. Institutions should (a) define meaningful curricular goals with defensible standards for evaluating whether students are achieving whether students are achieving those goals; (b) …collect and provide data on the extent to which they are meeting those goals [to prepare students in a manner consistent with their mission for successful careers, meaningful lives, and, where appropriate, further education; and (c) support and sustain assessment of student achievement and communicate the results of this assessment to stakeholders
- *Standard V.3:* Consideration and use of assessment results for the improvement of educational effectiveness.

At least some members of Syracuse University community are aware of many of these shortcomings, and in some cases the university has plans to address them. But Middle States requires evidence of ***current*** compliance; plans to come into compliance at some future point do not constitute compliance. A further complication is that in some instances Syracuse's plans to come into compliance are not yet well developed, lacking timelines, specific guidelines, and accountabilities. Additionally, in some instances Syracuse expects to take four, five, or more years to come into compliance. Should Middle States find Syracuse out of compliance with any of its requirements of affiliation or standards, under Federal regulation it can give Syracuse no more than two years to demonstrate compliance—a timeframe that Syracuse should keep in mind as it develops and refines its plans.

Underlying these compliance concerns are cultural issues that make coming into compliance a particular challenge for Syracuse. As with many research universities, Syracuse offers little in the way of incentives for already-busy faculty to engage in meaningful assessment. The minute paper responses at the end of this report also show that many at Syracuse operate in silos and are unsure how to engage in the collaboration necessary for the sustained culture of meaningful assessment and improvement that meets Middle States standards.

Fortunately, Syracuse does have some time, albeit limited, to address these concerns. The self-study will be finalized at the end of 2017 in preparation for a Spring 2018 visit. Faculty and staff can continue to collect assessment evidence through the end of the Spring 2017 semester, analyze it and use it to identify improvements through the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester, and provide reports that can be folded into the self-study by the end of the Fall 2017 semester.

I offer the following suggested action steps, organized into two groups: those that should be addressed in the coming year, before the self-study is completed, and those that might be postponed until after the self-study is completed (and might be presented as recommendations in the self-study).

Suggested Action Steps Over the Coming Year

These are in approximate order of priority.

1. Make clear, through the provost, vice presidents, and deans, that the assessment of student learning is not an option; it is part of teaching responsibilities and an expectation of every academic and co-curricular program, including graduate programs. Further establish that the assessment of all key program learning outcomes is to be completed by no later than the end of this academic year, with results analyzed and consequent action steps identified by no later than the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester, in time to be included in the self-study.

2. Develop and implement a broadly participative process to articulate institutional and general education/liberal arts learning outcomes that comply with Middle States standards.
    a. Once the outcomes are endorsed by the faculty, review curricula to ensure that every Syracuse undergraduate, regardless of major or liberal arts choices, has sufficient opportunity to achieve every outcome.
    b. Then develop and implement a plan to assess student achievement of institutional and general education/liberal arts learning outcomes. Focus initially on high-enrollment liberal arts courses, because improvements to them based on assessment results will have the greatest impact.
    c. Also develop and implement a process to review and ensure appropriate interrelationships between Syracuse's mission, institutional learning outcomes, and program learning outcomes.

3. Develop and implement a systematic, sustainable organization and governance structure to ensure that student learning assessment processes are coordinated and supported and that results are addressed by appropriate individuals and groups.
    a. Because Syracuse offers so many programs, no single committee can coordinate and support everything. Establish or charge appropriate a committee for each college and

school with coordinating, supporting, and reporting on assessment work within that college or school.
   b. Because assessment is a part of teaching and therefore a faculty responsibility, aim for assessment committees that are mostly composed of teaching faculty and chaired by a teaching faculty member.
   c. Charge each committee with reviewing assessment reports in its college or school to (a) provide constructive feedback to programs on their assessment practices, (b) identify and share good assessment practices, and (c) identify pervasive concerns with student learning that might be addressed in institutional, division, or university plans and resource allocations.
   d. Reconsider the names of the assessment committees so they connect assessment to teaching improvement rather than accreditation.
   e. Make the committees small enough that every member can contribute meaningfully to decisions.

4. Revise institutional, division, and university planning and resource allocation processes so that pervasive needs identified through student learning assessment evidence receive strong consideration.

5. Begin to implement a systematic program review process for all academic programs.
   a. Focus program reviews on student learning outcomes and implications of results to date.
   b. Use the program review process to ensure that every academic program has the curricular coherence required by Middle States.
   c. Use the program review process to ensure that every academic program promotes the synthesis required by Middle States.
   d. My book *Five Dimensions of Quality* has a chapter on program review that may give you ideas on the design of the process.

6. Continue to offer a broad, multifaceted program of professional development to faculty on how to assess student learning, including the characteristics of well-stated learning outcomes and the characteristics of effective rubrics.
   a. Encourage faculty to simplify assessment work by collaborating to examine student achievement of multiple program learning outcomes in capstone and other key senior courses, rather than by assessing program learning outcomes piecemeal. They can drill down into earlier courses when warranted by senior assessment results.
   b. Also encourage faculty to simplify assessment work by limiting rubrics to one piece of paper.
   c. Continue to help faculty understand that grades and overall rubric and test scores are usually too global to be meaningful, sufficient evidence of student learning.
   d. Offer professional development on research-based strategies that help students learn and succeed.
   e. Consider a separate workshop on assessment in co-curricular and student affairs programs.
   f. Continue to offer individualize, one-on-one feedback to faculty in programs that are struggling to plan and implementing meaningful assessment.

g. Launch broad discussions across the university of results of the National Survey of Student Engagement and recent retention statistics and studies. Discuss implications of this information for teaching, co-curricular, student support practices.
h. Plan to offer "refresher" workshops on articulating learning outcomes, rubrics, setting standards and targets, and using results at appropriate points.

Suggested Action Steps After the Self-Study is Completed

These are also in approximate order of priority. Many of these are intended to foster the sustained culture of assessment, collaboration, and improvement needed for enduring compliance with Middle States standards. These might be put forth as recommendations in the self-study.

1. Look at other research universities and large institutions for models on how to do assessment in complex environments.

2. Reinstitute a university teaching/learning center charged with helping faculty improve their teaching, including assessments. This kind of support is essential for Syracuse to comply with Standard V.3. It is also vital to offering the consistently outstanding undergraduate learning experience that a tuition-dependent university must provide in order to remain competitive. Create budget line items to support the center's work and the mechanics of assessment (data input and record keeping, data analysis, etc.)

3. Continue to educate the university community on Syracuse's dependence on undergraduate tuition, the consequent need to provide an outstanding undergraduate educational experience, what it means to be a student-centered, learning-centered research university in the 21st century, and the implications of all this for what each faculty member does in and out of the classroom.

4. Launch a university-wide conversation on the characteristics of effective teaching at Syracuse University. Then review faculty evaluation criteria and processes, as well as hiring, promotion and tenure criteria, to ensure that they reflect those characteristics. In this conversation, consider that effective teachers continually use systematic assessment evidence from their courses and programs to understand and improve their students' learning. Effective teachers also recognize that their courses are part of programs and/or liberal arts curricula, and they collaborate with colleagues to ensure that students have a cohesive, integrated learning experience.

5. Launch a university-wide conversation on the pros and cons of requiring all undergraduates to complete a synthesizing program capstone such as a research project, field experience, or other scholarly endeavor. Ask Newhouse students to reflect on their portfolios. Individuals at other research universities have expressed to me that one of the strengths research universities offer undergraduates is the opportunity to engage with faculty in research and other scholarly endeavors. An institutional commitment to this might make Syracuse increasingly attractive to undergraduates.

6. Launch a conversation on additional strategies to get more faculty "on board" with teaching improvement and assessment. Ideas that might be explored include the following:

a. Ask for synthesized assessment reports from program faculty collectively, rather than from individual faculty members.
b. Offer small "curriculum development" grants available only to faculty who are dissatisfied with their program learning assessment results and want to research how best to improve them, preferably collaboratively.
c. Identify additional assessment mentors who can work with colleagues to help them understand how to assess and how to improve their assessment practices.
d. Articulate how Syracuse values the scholarship of teaching in P&T decisions.
e. Hold an annual university-wide "faculty planning day" or "assessment day" that gives faculty time to discuss assessment results. Consider including a poster session or other event that lets faculty share good teaching, assessment, and curriculum design practices with one another.
f. Review program and course offerings with an eye to consolidation. The fewer programs and courses offered, the less time is spent planning, updating, and reviewing program and course offerings, and the more time there is for assessment.
g. Review committees with an eye to putting some on hiatus for one year, until the self-study is completed. Then consider the impact of their hiatus and whether they need to be continued.
h. To help minimize the burden of assessment, continue to encourage programs to identify no more than three to six learning outcomes, where appropriate.
i. Reserve some faculty travel funds for travel that helps faculty improve teaching and assessment practices in their programs.

7. Continue to work with faculty on how to set defensible standards and targets for student achievement of institutional, program, and general education/liberal arts learning outcomes. Consider asking them to justify their standards and targets in your assessment report template.

8. Ensure that all programs and general education/liberal arts requirements have curriculum maps that have been analyzed and used to ensure that every student has sufficient opportunity to achieve key program and liberal arts learning outcomes.
    a. Include only required courses—or required clusters of courses—in curriculum maps.
    b. Consider publishing program learning outcomes in the university catalog.

9. Ask students in appropriate courses and programs to develop data visualization strategies for assessment results and strategies to share assessment results—especially good results—with public audiences. Communication is of course an enormous strength of Syracuse University, and I can see Syracuse becoming a national leader in how to share assessment results clearly, meaningfully, and usefully with internal and external audiences.

10. Plan a periodic (perhaps biennial or triennial) review of assessment guidelines, expectations, organizational structure, templates, and activities to date with an eye to keeping them all as useful and simple as possible.

"Minute Paper" Feedback
Understanding and Using Assessment Results Workshop by Linda Suskie
Syracuse University
November 18, 2016

What was the most useful or meaningful thing you learned in this workshop?

Collaborating with colleagues (12 comments)

- Listen to others. You can look at and view things from a completely new lens.
- That no one at a university *wants* to work collaboratively, but it is critical
- We will need to bring the faculty together to align grading criteria and assignments with learning objectives.
- Talking with colleagues about assessment/outcomes to think beyond our silo
- How to manage and accept an array of feelings simultaneously
- We have to create a shared meaning about assessment and the use of its results in the future with our colleagues.
- Assessment should not be done in isolation.
- The importance of collaboration
- Share plans with others outside my discipline to get feedback and objective insights.
- Importance of faculty coming together to talk about program level assessment
- Collaboration is key to develop a more cohesive learning experience for the students.
- How to align our assessment activities

How to assess (9 comments)

- To always remember when designing assessment to focus on what we want to learn from it
- Gained a better understanding of specific language to use in rubrics so it (the rubric) is understandable to *students.*
- Suggestion for how I can improve my own course assessments in a way that will feed back into our program rubrics
- Writing measurable outcomes that are clear, concise and can be understood
- The importance of making sure that your students understand them [rubrics]
- How I will go back to my current assessment plan & look critically at the outcomes I have put forth
- Revise learning outcomes & assessment & learning activities to ensure alignment & that we are really meeting objectives.
- To think about assessment paired with learning outcomes and not data & research
- We should focus on 3-6 learning outcomes.

How to use assessment results (4 comments)

- Make changes based on results.
- Focus on "close to standard" items first to improve
- How to use assessment results to help improve my work and the work of my department
- How to think about using the results of our assessments

Establishing standards and targets (4 comments)

- The need to clearly define what do we expect in C and C-, to clarify the students.
- To establish more than 1 target
- Formulating standards and targets and differentiating between the two
- The difference between standards and targets

Value of assessment (4 comments)

- Rubrics are important at different levels, sometimes specific and sometimes global, to help student succeed.
- I think this is beneficial to our faculty and proves how essential grading standards and rubrics are at the university.
- I should spend time creating rubrics specific to my program & courses.
- Keeping the focus on teaching and learning – not MSCHE

Celebrating and sharing good results (3 comments)

- Thinking about how we can use assessment results to promote programs
- The reminder about marketing positive assessment results rather than solely critiquing them
- Not be too critical and be more able to celebrate a success as good enough

How to teach (2 comments)

- Importance of pedagogical methods. Thank you!
- The emphasis on "group process learning" for the student

Other (5 comments)

- That assessment can be challenging and fun almost simultaneously
- The importance of setting time aside for reflecting on your assessment methods
- References to other experts
- Faculty have extremely varied views on assessment results, i.e., some want to critique the method instead of using the findings.
- Use of charts instead of straight data

What question remains uppermost in your mind as we end this workshop?

Applying this outside the classroom (11 comments)

- Evaluation *outside* of the classroom
- Need to offer this for student affairs staff
- How can this best be applied in Student Affairs?
- How to apply many of these ideas within the Division of Student Affairs
- Why didn't this speaker know half the audience was Student Affairs pros (outside classroom)
- Translating this information to my work within Student Affairs to make it incredible
- How to actually apply this to my work/area. I'm not faculty and don't teach in a traditional sense.
- How do I translate this to student development outside of the classroom
- How to weave classroom learning together with out of class learning into a comprehensive view of what SU is doing
- How does this apply to departments where main focus is not academics?
- How to intentionally and effectively apply this to the co-curricular experience

Collaborating with colleagues (7 comments)

- What are some ways in which we can practically collaborate with each other? What have you seen that works, what doesn't?
- Why can't we find ways to "network" and build bridges to make assessment easier, more meaningful?
- I need to get my colleagues to sit down around a table and engage in conversation.
- Can my colleagues help with [creating rubrics specific to my program/courses]?
- How to refine outcome wording with faculty. It may not be entirely clear to us but it is to faculty.

- I'd like for a session where we can share & talk about our efforts.
- How best to align efforts among faculty

Getting colleagues on board (6 comments)

- How do we continue to get folks to see the importance of assessment
- This work requires faculty time & effort that is not rewarded/recognized in the academy (i.e., P&T).
- How to continue to foster a culture of assessment at Syracuse University
- How do we get people (faculty) interested in participating in assessment?
- How do we get the faculty buy-in & willingness to do this – especially with aligning assignments and being measurable
- Scaffolded assignments, etc., are time consuming & labor intensive, on top of assessment & other responsibilities – how to encourage buy-in

How to assess (5 comments)

- How do we assess different classes, each of which have different grading rubrics & scales?
- How do we better assess that the achievement of a criteria is a measure of success at the next level (i.e., higher course) and especially at a post course program level
- How much do rubrics differ depending on the discipline
- Specific mechanics of how to write rubrics (but I missed previous workshops)
- How do we include our students in course assessments/evaluations?

Finding time (2 comments)

- Finding time to work with colleagues to review and design good program assessments
- How to integrate it [assessment] into your work so it doesn't feel like work!

How to use assessment results (2 comments)

- How to use and implement the data
- How exactly can I use assessment to improve learning (interpretation, decisions)?

Student responsibility for learning (2 comments)

- How do we account for students who do not turn in work?
- Student "behavior" is still a big unknown variable.

Other (6 comments)

- How much institution is willing to devote resources to areas of academic need
- Formulating meaningful goals
- Hoping to get your PowerPoint. Thank you!
- In the examples used an assumption was made that the PH data was not discussed with faculty. The table only had the author and she indicated that they did do as a dept. Table was SWK, NSD, LAW & PH.
- If the assessment process itself will be assessed – in other words, is it worth all the time and other resources put into it?
- How do we determine what are appropriate and competitive targets?