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Learning Community Assessment 101 - Best Practices

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Abstract

Good assessment is part of all good learning communities, and this article provides a useful set of best practices for learning community assessment planning: (1) articulating agreed-upon learning community program goals; (2) identifying the purpose of assessment (e.g., summative or formative); (3) employing qualitative and quantitative assessment methods for assessing the most critical outcomes for administrative and instructional team-member decision making processes; (4) employing indirect and direct measures of student learning; and (5) ensuring that assessment results are used and that campus decision makers are equipped with the information required to create high-quality learning experiences to meet the diverse needs of all students.

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Offering learning communities has become a prevailing strategy in higher education to ensure that students have enriching academic experiences. Learning communities have been advocated as effective interventions for enhancing student retention (Tinto, 2003), engagement levels (Yancy, Sutton-Haywood, Hermitte, Dawkins, Rainey, & Parker, 2008; Zhao & Kuh, 2004), student learning and academic success (Hegler, 2004; Henscheid, 2004; Huerta, 2009; Kuh, 2008; Stassen, 2003), opportunities for service learning (Oates & Leavitt, 2003), critical thinking (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008), and integrative learning (Lardner & Malnarich, 2008, 2008/2009, 2009).

In this article, we report on the following best practices in the areas of planning for learning community assessment: 1) articulating agreed-upon learning community program goals, 2) identifying the purpose of assessment (e.g., summative or formative) and deciding on data, 3) employing qualitative and quantitative assessment methods for assessing the most critical outcomes for administrative and instructional team member decision-making processes, 4) employing indirect and direct measures of student learning, and 5) ensuring that assessment results are used and that campus decision makers are equipped with the information required to create high-quality learning experiences to meet the diverse needs of all students.

Articulating Agreed-Upon Learning Community Program Goals and Theory

Assessing learning community programs requires careful conceptualization of the processes and intended outcomes before choosing measures and evaluation designs. Assessment scholars have advocated for the development of plans with clear purposes closely aligned with valued

program goals (e.g., Banta, 2002; Posavac & Carey, 2006; Swing, 2001, 2004). Typically, programs designed to improve student learning and success have multiple outcomes, and a narrow focus on retention may obscure an understanding of program processes and effects. Additionally, a myopic focus on specific outcomes such as retention rates and grade point averages may not be sufficient for making substantive improvements based on assessment findings.

As such, an effective assessment planning approach should begin with a clearly articulated learning community program theory and goals to help guide the selection of instruments and to increase understanding among researchers and administrators regarding what internal program operations need to be improved when selected outcome measures suggest that desired program “outputs” are not achieved. In other words, the program theory and goals need to be clear and well understood by all, otherwise there will be disagreements about how and what to assess that will threaten the assessment. Ideally, this approach expands the assessment focus to include investigation into the underlying assumptions, history, and context associated with a particular learning community program. A clear understanding of program goals is a critical first step in assessment planning. With agreed-upon goals clearly defined, assessment planners will be able to select measures and instruments that are sensitive, valid, and reliable.

Identify the Purpose of Assessment

A clear understanding of the purpose of the assessment is essential because it influences the design and data needs of the assessment. For example, classroom teaching techniques or student attitudes might be subjects of evaluation. In this case, student surveys would be appropriate. If the purpose is to measure student learning outcomes, then a different design and data sources are needed. Other purposes may be to assess student satisfaction, student and faculty participation, or the impact on outcomes such as retention or grades.

Employ Quantitative and Qualitative Assessment Methods

Once an understanding of the purpose of the assessment is established, attention can then turn to choosing data for evidence. Data fall into two categories—quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative and qualitative data each have advantages, and, when possible, it is best to use both.

Quantitative areas assessed may include program impact on academic achievement (e.g., grade point averages; numbers of Ds, Fs, Withdrawals,

and Incompletes in courses), retention rates, and graduation rates. An advantage of quantitative data is that it is obtainable and can be analyzed statistically. Employing questionnaires that contain items with Likert-type scales may also be useful to enhance understanding of students' perceptions of course benefits, self-reported learning outcomes, and satisfaction levels.

Qualitative evaluations provide the kinds of in-depth process information that allow faculty, staff, and students to better understand when and how certain learning community interventions are effective. Conducting focus groups and one-on-one interviews can be enormously helpful for understanding students' in-depth perceptions and exploring students' levels of integrative learning. Content analysis of students' open-ended comments on surveys can also provide data that sheds light on students' academic needs that can be addressed in future learning community implementations.

Employ Indirect and Direct Measures of Student Learning

Indirect measures of student learning are most often derived from student surveys by asking students to respond to questions about their learning experiences. Direct measures of student learning require students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. They provide tangible, visible, and self-explanatory evidence of what students have and have not learned as a result of a course, program, or activity (Huerta, 2009; Suskie, 2004; Palomba & Banta, 1999). Examples of direct student learning measures include objective tests, essays, presentations, and classroom assignments. The key is to identify assignments, or parts of assignments, that allow students to demonstrate mastery of the student learning outcome.

Ensuring That Assessment Results Are Used

It is important to make the results of outcomes assessment transparent and readily available to all internal and external stakeholders. We have discovered that fundamental institutional change and continuous improvement is more fully realized by sharing critical outcomes and actively discussing the processes that create the outcomes. This is a critical part of the assessment process. The assessment findings must be analyzed and used for program improvement. Schedule meetings with the stakeholders and participants to share and reflect on the findings. Take notes at these meetings and use the data for making improvements to the program. Successful assessment is a cycle, and using the results for program improvement completes the cycle.

Steps for Ensuring Successful Assessment Planning: Moving the Learning Community Assessment Wheel Forward

Lardner and Malnarich (2008) have emphasized the importance of sharing longitudinal learning community assessment data with key decision makers and actively using learning communities' assessment data in making decisions about the purposes and structures of learning communities, identifying curricular trouble spots, improving academic achievement, and determining students' levels of academic preparedness. A "Learning Community Assessment Planning Checklist" with links to assessment examples is provided in the Appendix. We hope the following are key aspects of all campus assessment plans: involving faculty in assessment planning; defining and measuring integrative learning; assessing students' learning outcomes by using embedded, authentic assessments; employing research designs that identify the program components that have the most positive educational outcomes for diverse groups of students; and communicating results in a timely manner so they are used when decisions are made.

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Appendix

Learning Community Assessment Planning Checklist

- Identify and actively involve stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, advisors, program administrators, students) in all planning stages
- Identify the purpose of the assessment efforts (e.g., summative or formative)
- Clearly articulate the agreed-upon program goals, underlying assumptions, and theories guiding the program
- Consider only instruments and measures that are valid, reliable, and aligned with intended student learning outcomes and proposed curricula (e.g., assessment and curricula are carefully aligned)
- Include direct as well as indirect measures of student learning
- Include measures designed to assess cognitive, affective, and social outcomes
- Consider a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods
- Employ research designs with acceptable internal validity (e.g., research designs such as pre-post with appropriate comparison groups)
- Recruit individuals with the technical expertise required to analyze the data and produce useful, actionable reports (e.g., involve the institutional research office or other campus offices that employ individuals with expertise in quantitative and qualitative data analysis and report production)
- Make concrete plans for ensuring that the assessment results are used and reports are shared with all stakeholders, including key campus decision makers
- Develop a written plan with stakeholders clearly articulating purposes, program goals, definitions, time lines, data collection strategies and methods, and reporting strategies

Please link to the University College Assessment Web site at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis to view examples of assessment reports, presentations, and measures for various first-year programs, including learning communities (<http://uc.iupui.edu/staff/assessment/index.asp>).