Collaboration Is the Only Superpower Needed: Reflecting on Building an Assessment Culture at Messiah University

Kate Oswald Wilkins and Susan R. Donat

IF YOU TOLD US FIVE YEARS AGO THAT our university would become an Excellence in Assessment (EIA) designee, our jaws would have dropped. Institutionwide learning assessment is fairly new at Messiah, formally starting in 2011. We started as a two-person office, with only part-time "casual loading" for assessment. We held no legitimate authority over department chairs and faculty, and *assessment* was an uncomfortable word on our campus for many faculty. However, we were confident that educators across our institution shared our passion for student success, so our efforts focused on making assessment meaningful and manageable for faculty and chairs.

Institutional Context/Description

Messiah University is a private Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences, housing two doctoral programs, 10 additional graduate programs, two adult degree-completion programs, and 87 traditional undergraduate majors. With a mission to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character, and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership, and reconciliation in church and society, we enroll 2,600 full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduates and 833 FTE graduate students.

The university is organized into five schools: a graduate school and four undergraduate schools, with an internal governance based on a Community of Educators (COE) model. Our *COE Handbook* states that our fundamental task is to support students in attaining our institutional learning outcomes. We accomplish this through a collaborative effort of faculty, co-curricular educators, librarians, and curricular administrators in both curricular and co-curricular programming. All groups are active participants in university governance and the assessment of student learning.

Assessment Strategies That Made a Difference

- *Start with strategic planning.* We leveraged strategic planning to evaluate assessment performance in each category of the EIA rubric. For instance, we knew we needed to increase the diversity of groups and individuals involved in assessment efforts. The director and assistant director could not create a culture of learning alone, and assessment was "one more thing" for educators and administrators to do. Therefore, the strategic plan included goals designed to foster engagement at all levels of the university (Kegan and Lahey 2016).

- *Transform paralyzing policies.* What gets done at the end of the day or academic year depends on what appears in policies and job descriptions at Messiah; it can also make certain challenges "immune to change" (Kegan and Lahey 2009). Department heads, we observed, prioritized what deans told them to prioritize. When assessment was not on that list, significant progress often did not occur. Our solution: We distributed assessment oversight to school

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deans. Now, deans ensure program assessment tasks are planned at the beginning of the academic year, plans are evaluated annually, and end-of-year results are approved. The role of the assessment office has since shifted to that of campus educators and curators of assessment evidence. Second, we revised the curriculum approval process to include the assessment committee's review/approval of objectives and assessment plans. This provided opportunities to collaborate with department heads, who needed support in improving their plans so their curricula could move through governance. Finally, Messiah revised its term tenure and promotion teaching evaluation rubric to include the assessment of student learning, which conveyed the centrality of well-aligned, effective assessments to high-quality teaching.

- *Lighten the load with software and sufficient support.* Without an effective assessment management system, we found it very difficult to move beyond the onerous task of data collection. We invested in a software that integrated with our learning management system and student information system. This enabled us to offload the work of collecting and aggregating learning data and instead focus on the interpretation of that data and strategies to improve student learning. Relatedly, we recognized that we could not accomplish

all our assessment goals in isolation. Effective administrative support, including hiring a graduate assistant and work-study student, enabled us to advance important projects, such as our website redesign, periodic assessment newsletters, and the initial programming of our assessment software.

- *Create a communication plan.* Effective assessment is impossible without clear, consistent communication that is compelling to key assessment audiences. Over the last several years, we overhauled our assessment manual, resources, website, and outreach strategies. We continuously direct educators toward those resources, and we create new resources annually, depending on the needs and priorities of our campus.

- *Incorporate ways to share assessment results within existing channels.* Sharing assessment results was one of our most challenging goals, so we identified existing channels to engage with internal and external stakeholders: established meeting times, annual campus reports, department presentations to prospective students, program websites, and employer advisory boards. As we helped educational units envision ways to embed assessment within existing structures and channels of communication, we experienced less resistance and accomplished more assessment engagement (Massa and Kasimatis 2017).

Lessons Learned, Pitfalls to Avoid, and Next Steps

- Sometimes we want to fix everything at once. However, in working with department heads, this can backfire. If we push to change too much too quickly in their assessment plans, department heads can become overwhelmed and leave feeling defeated and unable to make any progress. Our advice: Find the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) for every person you are working with, be flexible and collaborative, and remember to celebrate past progress.

- Our institution places a high value on shared governance, so our ability to embed assessment best practices within institutional, curricular, and faculty evaluation policies ensured these best practices were carried out. Embed policy wherever possible.

- We are consistently reminded that an assessment office cannot accomplish campuswide assessment goals on its own, because effective assessment is dependent upon broad participation (Jankowski and Marshall 2017). Share the load by focusing efforts on educating and empowering others toward meaningful yet manageable engagement with assessment efforts, and remember that support staff includes more than full-time assessment office staff; some of our most critical support has come from graduate assistants and work-study students.

- Our next steps include integrating co-curricular assessment with assessment in the academic division. While we aligned our program learning outcomes (PLOs) in each division to our institutional outcomes, we know that greater collaboration will help students better understand and achieve our institutional learning outcomes. Second, we aim to improve our dissemination and use of assessment results. Since each educational unit processes learning data in unique ways, it can be challenging to translate assessment language into each unit's distinct "disciplinary discourse" (Becher 1994) and coach them toward effective action plans. We need to translate our improvement narratives for broader audiences using compelling storytelling.

Recommendations on the EIA Application Process

- *Look carefully at the EIA rubric.* The rubric helps you understand what information the EIA scorers need to provide the maximum points. As you craft your narrative, clearly provide the information indicated on the rubric to support the reader's understanding of your context.

- *Design your website to support your EIA narrative.* When we looked at our website with fresh eyes, we realized we were not communicating well with our internal or external audiences. It was as if assessment was a secret club, with a secret meeting place and secret handshake. We made information summarized in the EIA narrative easy to find and fully described on our website. This revision included consolidating our resources into a single location, accessible to all members of our community. It also provided the impetus to update information, and it supported consistency in how we communicate our expectations and findings.

- *Do not be afraid of failure.* Regardless of the outcome of your submission, the reviewers provide detailed feedback. We were very impressed by the quantity and quality of their responses and used the feedback to inform revisions to our strategic plan and to revise our submission for the next time around. Use the feedback, learn, and try again. It is easier the second time!

- *Meet with a NILOA coach.* The NILOA coach is an invaluable resource. Our coach met with us and in 15 minutes unpacked the reviewers' comments and provided encouragement to try again. She provided several ideas to strengthen our work and to focus our efforts. We remain grateful for all the NILOA resources, which leads to our final recommendation.

- *Work the synergy between what must happen at your institution and what NILOA needs to award the designation.* Use NILOA best practices to give credence to your campus initiatives and translate the best practices into your institution's culture and values. There was a time when our deans and chairs were uncertain about publishing PLOs. Citing NILOA's work helped demonstrate the value of communicating learning outcomes in a clear and transparent manner.

We have made significant strides in the past five years at Messiah in how we collect and evaluate student learning data. Most importantly, our efforts focus on

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data exploring how student learning activities help to accomplish our institutional mission: to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character, and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership, and reconciliation in church and society. ■

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Kate Oswald Wilkins is the assistant dean of general education and common learning, director of assessment, and professor of communication; and Susan R. Donat is the accreditation liaison officer, director of curriculum, and assistant director of assessment at Messiah University in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

Fostering a GREAT Place for Student Success: An Overview of Five Critical Components for Institutions

engaged alumni. We foster this preparation through the articulation, implementation, and assessment of learning outcomes that we want students to know and be able to do at the time of graduation, including outcomes at both the institution and program levels, along with outcomes from other formal and informal learning contexts. We will discuss this critical component in Volume 33, Issue 2.

Critical Component #2: Retain *our students and promote timely persistence to degree completion*

In order to have graduates of our institution, we must first *retain* our students and encourage their timely persistence to degree completion. This involves offering effective support services; reducing institutional barriers and bottlenecks inhibiting progress; granting access to appropriate people, offices, and institutional resources and functions; providing information and opportunities that enhance the college experience; and developing other interventions and resources that keep students connected to us. We will discuss this critical component in Volume 33, Issue 3.

Critical Component #3: Engage *our students in meaningful, evidence-informed interventions*

Student retention is an outcome of engagement, not the other way around. Thus, we need to *engage* our students through a variety of meaningful, evidence-informed interventions. These take place across the collegiate context: in academic courses and programs; in co-curricular programs and services; and in experiential, community, and international venues. Student engagement also involves fostering meaningful relationships between students and their peers; between students and faculty and staff members on campus; and between students and partners in the community, including alumni. It also happens through multiple, varied, and targeted opportunities to promote student connectedness to our campus. We will discuss this critical component in Volume 33, Issue 4.

Critical Component #4: Admit *new students and position them for success within the institution*

A precursor to fully engaging our students is the need to *admit* new students and position them for success within the institution. This occurs through aligned, structured, and well-coordinated functions such as outreach, recruitment, and admissions processes; new-student orientation programs; and other socialization and integration activities. For newly admitted students, in particular, we need to do everything we can to promote a sense of their belongingness and intentionally connect them to the array of services and resources to address their holistic needs. In doing so, we need to develop, communicate, and invest in student success interventions from the outset of a student's admission to our campus. We will discuss this critical component in Volume 33, Issue 5.

Critical Component #5: Tell *prospective students, their parents, and other influencers about the institution's value proposition*

To admit new students, we must first *tell* prospective students, their parents, and other influencers why they should consider our campus. Higher education institutions operate in an increasingly crowded and technologically accessible marketplace. This means students have an array of choices for how they invest their time, energy, and money in pursuit of a