Launching E-Portfolios: An Organic Process

Maureen Snow Andrade

Faculty in a variety of disciplines in higher education, such as English composition, business, and education, have used paper-based portfolios to assess students’ writing skills and professional competencies. What are the benefits of portfolios? Are they most effective at the course, program, or institutional level, or a combination of these? Why the current interest in electronic portfolios for general education, discipline-based, and institutional assessment purposes? How might creating a campus-wide e-portfolio system meet diverse learning assessment and accreditation needs?

E-portfolios can provide both formative and summative information about learning; thus their appeal for documenting evidence of learning to both internal and external stakeholders. They also have the potential to transform learning from a focus on instruction and course completion for the purpose of degree attainment to a focus on learning through reflection and learner responsibility (Tagg 2003). As students engage in the process of gathering and reflecting on evidence of their learning, they make connections across general education and major coursework and even co-curricular involvements. E-portfolios allow tracking of student learning outcomes across programs and inform institutions about student achievement of college-wide learning goals. As such, e-portfolios are a high-impact educational practice that can be used to document learning in progress as well as its culminating effects (Kuh 2009).

Although extensive examples of successful e-portfolio implementation exist and cover a range of possibilities (Zubizarreta 2004), programs and institutions must carefully consider campus-specific factors and cultures. Many decisions confront those exploring whether e-portfolios are the best choice for their specific purposes and institutions. A few of these include purposes, platform options, technology systems, content and design, and faculty/student training. Recognizing the potential of e-portfolios for enhancing and documenting student learning, Utah Valley University (UVU), a large, public teaching institution, decided to launch an e-portfolio initiative.

The impetus for e-portfolios began with the General Education (GE) Committee, which saw their potential for measuring student achievement of identified essential learning outcomes (ELOs). Outcome assessments had to be aggregated across multiple courses and sections to inform committee members, faculty, and administrators of student progress and to suggest possible curricular changes. E-portfolios could also improve consistency of course content and goals across sections, as courses often were taught by adjunct faculty. The committee was determined to create a system that would be useful
Gathering Information

The first step in the e-portfolio development process involved gathering information, a stage that lasted approximately two years. Committee members attended conferences, reviewed practices from other institutions, debated the pros and cons of e-portfolios, and examined the applicability of common models and best practices. This information-gathering focused on state and national conversations. Fortunately, two institutions within the state were farther along with e-portfolios and provided valuable resources. Individuals from both institutions were willing to share their experiences and expertise, and encouraged the committee’s work. Campus discussions regarding e-portfolios had also occurred previously outside the GE Committee; thus, information was obtained from key stakeholders to ensure that the committee’s direction would support a variety of needs and purposes. Invested groups included academic departments as well as student affairs programs. However, the primary focus, at least initially, was on e-portfolios for GE courses.

Preliminary thinking was that all students at UVU would be required to develop an e-portfolio in which they would include a signature, or representative, assignment from each of their courses. However, the primary focus, at least initially, was on e-portfolios for GE courses. 

6. Evaluating

Like the development of the project, the evaluation process was the result of repeated discussions. Gathering information revealed more than a few bumps in the road and related modifications of initial thinking.

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 upupdate@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 140 Administration Bldg., 355 N. Lansing St., Indianapolis, IN 46202–2896.
On February 27 of this year, I took part in a meeting in Boston of faculty and academic administrators participating in the Lumina Foundation–funded Quality Collaboratives (QC) project. The QC project was conceived by staff at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), and the meeting in Boston was convened and facilitated by QC project director Terry Rhodes, assisted by his AAC&U colleagues Debra Humphreys and Susan Albertine.

The QC project is designed to test the use of Lumina’s Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) in facilitating transfer from two-year to four-year institutions. Developing DQP-related outcomes assessment is to be an important enabler in this process.

As I listened to the conversation during the day in Boston, I took some notes, and by the close of the session, a term—envisioning learning—emerged in my mind as the broad concept within which most of the other ideas I had heard might be integrated. I offer the summary that follows with the hope that it may stimulate your own thinking about outcomes assessment.

• Faculty need to be able to envision how student learning will look if enacted. That is, if “you know it when you see it,” what will students know and be able to do at each level from freshman to senior year?
  • Designing an end-of-sophomore-year milestone assessment of generic and/or disciplinary learning enables faculty to envision intermediate achievement of exit competence and gives faculty and students an opportunity to recognize strengths and weaknesses in this achievement.
  • A “signature assignment” can provide a common stimulus for envisioning assessment across courses, disciplines, and institutions; a common assignment will be essential if acceptable levels of reliability and validity are to be established for authentic assessment methods/artifacts.
  • Collaboration of faculty in thinking about courses and curricula, assignments and student learning outcomes, and methods of assessment almost always improves the final product.
  • Students need to be able to envision the learning that faculty members expect of them. Ask students to describe their own learning and see if it matches what faculty members expect. If it doesn’t, and faculty members are disappointed with what they hear, then the expectations may not have been communicated successfully.
  • Students also should be asked to reflect on their learning of the outcomes faculty members have specified. This will help them integrate—make personal sense of—their learning. An electronic portfolio can be a very effective medium for students to use in envisioning and describing their learning.
  • Employers can help faculty and students envision learning by emphasizing the knowledge and skills their employees need to bring to the job.
  • Curriculum maps and item banks developed by faculty in a discipline—both at campus and disciplinary association levels (state, regional, or national)—can help faculty members envision learning in that discipline.
  • Envisioning common learning requirements in a discipline for faculty members from two- and four-year institutions can be facilitated by scheduling a session at the end of a term during which each faculty member takes a second look at student performance in the aggregate in her or his courses to identify strengths and weaknesses and then shares findings with the assembled colleagues. This sharing session can occur during an “assessment day” when classes are dismissed and faculty members in every discipline in a college or university are encouraged to assemble for the purpose of reflecting on assessment findings and deciding how to respond. Examples of such responses include requiring a new course in the curriculum, specifying a prerequisite for an existing course, adopting a new teaching or delivery method, changing advising instructions, and establishing a new club or other extracurricular activity.
  • Student stories about their learning can be convincing to external stakeholders,

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Introduction

Over 6,500 students, 70 percent of whom are in their first collegiate year, call the campus of the University of South Carolina-Columbia (USC) home. While at home on campus, these residents can participate in a wide range of curricular and co-curricular activities. For the staff of the USC University Housing unit, exploring—and then strengthening—the impact of campus residential involvement on students’ academic and personal development is critical. In this article, we provide an account of our experience in creating and implementing a framework designed to assess and improve data collection efforts to provide a better understanding of the residential student population. We also share recommendations for increasing assessment buy-in across various staffing levels based on our experience.

Background Information

University Housing includes six functional subunits: Administration, Assessment, Business & IT, Construction & Renovation, Facility Operation, and Residence Life. Assessment initiatives focus largely on residential populations to document student learning and engagement. USC has incorporated a learning community model that places every resident in either an associated (academic or theme-based) or general (location-bound through hall floor or wing placement) learning community. In the last two years, the focus on data tracking within these communities has undergone a transformation as assessment is utilized across all staff levels, and through both formative and summative methods. This change can be attributed to the growing emphasis on assessment across the profession of student affairs and the emphasis on supporting the residential student population through timely data collection. This shift has not happened without some negotiation, well-timed luck, and gritty determination by the assessment staff members, residence life leaders, and practitioners using data on a regular basis.

Our assessment strategies are designed to measure the framework of residence life, commonly referred to as the A-Frame, and the 6-Is of community development. The tenets of the A-Frame—academic progress, awareness of self, and awareness of others—encourage staff members to develop individual residents devoted to educationally purposeful activities beyond the classroom. The 6-Is of community development as originally developed by Charles Schroeder and Phyllis Mable (1994)—introduction, interaction, involvement, influence, investment, and identity—are intended to promote the cultivation of a group experience for residents and build a sense of community across the campus. The development of these frameworks originates from a significant review of our institutional and unit missions, including the contribution of our unit to the intended curricular and co-curricular goals for students. The elements of the A-Frame and 6-Is of community development provide basic measurements for our assessment initiatives.

Measurement Strategies

To measure students’ progress toward the A-Frame and 6-Is as outcomes, our staff developed three strategies. First we studied the experiences and interactions between hall residents and their resident mentors (RMs), described as student staff who live and interact daily with residents. We created an online form that allowed RMs to track a variety of interactions and experiences that occurred between them- selves and their hall residents. These interactions occur in many contexts, from large-scale events in the hall to bulletin boards and unplanned lunches between residents and staff. The form is designed to identify how these experiences incorporate the A-Frame and 6-Is. For example, a campus tour would be classified “awareness of others” and “introduction” (to your community and surroundings) in the interaction form submitted. The online forms are gathered and stored in an online database.

Second, we used card-swipe machines to track resident attendance at planned...
events, such as a faculty presentation held in a residence hall or a meeting of student leaders. Residents are asked to swipe their student ID cards when arriving at events. The machine uploads the record of their attendance to a database, allowing our assessment team to monitor resident attendance across various events. Beyond attendance, the swipe of the resident’s ID card unlocks additional data, such as academic classification, age, sex, major, and the hall in which the student resides. This comprehensive dataset is then analyzed to produce a report that gives the hall staff leaders a better understanding of the resident population attending planned events.

Finally, twice per semester, the RMs participate in an intentional conversation, known as an A-Chat, with each of their residents. The questions provided for the A-Chats align directly with the A-Frame and are individualized to each resident’s academic classification. The conversation is intended for RMs and residents to interact in a one-on-one setting in which the RM learns more about each resident and the residents become more comfortable with their peer mentors. For assessment purposes, the A-Chat is designed to track resident-based trends in each building and the development of students throughout the course of the year. Professional staff leaders are provided with responses collected by the RMs and are taught methods to review the data. The three strategies are then shared twice per semester with each hall’s leader in the form of a building report.

**Assessment Cycle**

Over the last two years, the assessment cycle has provided an operational structure to guide and track our staff’s assessment efforts (see Figure 1). Our work has progressively focused on each stage of the cycle, beginning with a review of the departmental outcomes (A-Frame and 6-Is). Next, department staff considered and selected data collection strategies to measure progress toward these outcomes. The cyclical process comes to fruition as our strategies are continually reviewed, and revised as necessary, to ensure that the process provides relevant information regarding our population. For example, as new categories of students or initiatives are created, the databases are adjusted to capture their unique characteristics.

Currently, staff members living in the residence halls are entrenched in the “gathering evidence” phase as it occurs throughout the academic year. The biggest change in the last year concerns how often the “review and interpret results” section occurs. Assessment staff realized that the data analysis was not provided as frequently as could be beneficial to the residential staff. For this reason, each of the three strategies is now shared on a quarterly schedule—a substantial increase over the previous year, when data were shared annually. We anticipate that our tracking efforts will continue on a longitudinal basis and will be incorporated in the decision planning for subsequent years.

**Data Collection Efforts and Outcomes**

- During fall 2011, our data collection strategies were formalized with much support from our information technology staff. Subsequently, the “culture of assessment” within University Housing began to take root. For the semester, more than 900 interaction forms and 15 events were captured via card-swipe machines, including more than 700 individual student entries. This information proved beneficial as we began to “imagine the possibilities” with assessment. The qualitative-focused A-Chats were continuing through their pilot stage.

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A number of years ago, a film about the former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt altered my approach to assessment administration. In the film, Mrs. Roosevelt was portrayed as a social reformer, supporting peace and equality. In her words: “It isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.” From that moment on, I was committed to applying this same tenacity to my role as director of assessment. In a newly created assessment position at a college whose administration wholeheartedly embraced the new position, I knew that I must not only talk about assessment, I had to believe in it. And I had to convince the board, faculty, students, and other constituents to believe in it and in my new position. Thus began my journey—I had to work at building a sustainable assessment infrastructure focused on improving student learning!

As is evident in each issue of *Assessment Update*, tenacity in developing a sustainable culture of assessment is crucial to the work of assessment directors. I can relate to articles in *Assessment Update* that speak to the adoption of assessment procedures (Ennis 2010) and the climate of sustaining responsible student learning assessments (Martins 2010). I have worked for years to strengthen and develop such models. What was missing for me in developing an assessment culture as I became an assessment administrator was a model for the leadership approach to managing and leading assessment effectively. So, I began my research for a leadership framework.

I invited sixteen colleges to participate in a research project, and eleven accepted. Tenured, full-time faculty were in charge of assessment at three of the colleges; two colleges used assessment director positions that were part time in addition to other academic duties; the vice president for academic affairs was the administrator for assessment at two colleges; and four colleges had full-time staff as directors of assessment. Interviews with these assessment colleagues revealed that 100 percent felt a leadership model would be “useful” in their work of leading assessment at their college, with 81.8 percent responding that a leadership model would be “highly useful.” Three leadership frameworks were presented; 45.5 percent felt that adopting Kouzes and Posner’s model (2002) would fulfill “all of the role” of carrying out the responsibilities of assessment leader on their campus; 72.7 percent felt that adopting this model would fulfill all or “most of the role” of assessment leader. Based on these findings, Kouzes and Posner’s *Leadership Challenge* has served as my road map as an assessment administrator for talking about assessment, believing in assessment, and working at assessment for almost ten years.

Whether we, as directors of assessment, inherit an existing assessment model, are working to improve an existing model, or are leading our faculty and departments in designing our own assessment models, the five practices of exemplary leadership from Kouzes and Posner guide any assessment administrator through the steps of talking assessment, believing assessment, and working at assessment. The “Five Exemplary Practices of Leadership” are:

1. Model the way.
2. Inspire a shared vision.
3. Challenge the process.
4. Enable others to act.
5. Encourage the heart.

In this article, I have characterized reflections and perceptions incorporating these approaches from the study as well as my own experiences and applications over the past ten years in leading assessment.

**Model the Way**

How do we begin talking assessment, believing assessment, and working at assessment through a leadership framework? Kouzes and Posner’s “Model the Way” provides two components to leadership that impart a foundational context: “Find Your Voice” and “Set the Example.” The authors tell us that working in a leadership role demands a visionary presence and voice. The capacity to talk assessment and believe in assessment establishes our position and vision as the leaders of assessment on our campuses. I have found no purpose for assessment better articulated than that espoused by Peter Ewell: Assessment has three purposes—demonstrating student academic achievement, improvement of academic programs, and institutional accountability (Ewell 2009, 2010). This has served me well as I have built my values around those three stated purposes of assessment.

Having found confidence in our own voice as assessment leaders, we can engage the institution in a discussion about assessment. Kouzes and Posner tell us that during this time of discussion, we are searching to find common ground on which to build consensus across our college. Of the three purposes of assessment mentioned, achievement of student learning has been a long-accepted goal, and...
Inspire a Shared Vision

Kouzes and Posner’s next concept is “Inspire a Shared Vision.” Leadership commitments in this area focus on envisioning the future and enlisting others. Much like Eleanor Roosevelt and her colleagues shared their vision to educate women on political issues and candidates, we as directors of assessment can inspire a shared vision by enlisting the help of others at our institution. One college administrator gave specific examples of how to inspire a shared campus vision of assessment, stating “If assessment is new to many faculty and staff, attend the Higher Learning Commission conference together, attend the assessment track at the annual meeting of the Association for Institutional Research, read and discuss together the impact of articles in Assessment Update and Change.”

Another effective method is to establish an assessment committee and work together to develop and espouse a common vision across the institution. This builds confidence and provides a mechanism for sharing best practices. As assessment leaders on our campuses, we can explore the assessment aspirations of our campus, build on the good things going on, and find best practices from each program to share. By working with leaders of various programs, directors of assessment can develop and strengthen the institution’s knowledge and practice of assessment.

Enable Others to Act

As assessment leaders, we orchestrate assessment activities through collaboration. Kouzes and Posner’s “Enable Others to Act” includes components that help us lead assessment through listening, fostering collaboration, building trust, and strengthening others. By engaging with each individual on the team in these processes, we are creating relationships and identifying particular strengths of members as well as what gaps, if any, need to be addressed. Through this analytical process we can also identify which members of our team can serve as team leaders for various college-wide initiatives. Some faculty and deans have a greater understanding of assessment, particularly if they are involved in programs requiring accreditation, such as teacher education or nursing. As one director of assessment in the study said, “These faculty can make great leaders for serving on assessment committees.” Training faculty and deans about assessment and giving them ownership in planning and preparing reports for visits and reviews is another way to meet colleagues across the country and experience firsthand how other institutions operationalize their assessment programs. Learning about what works and what does not enables us to improve our own assessment model and calculate the best possible risk to take when planning improvements to that model.

Kouzes and Posner invite us to experiment and take risks by constantly generating small wins and learning from mistakes. (continued on page 13)
Multiple studies show that formative assessment can improve student learning in the classroom. The most in-depth study was conducted in 1998 by scholars Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, who discovered that improvements in student learning through formative assessment “are amongst the largest ever reported for educational interventions” (Black & Wiliam 1998, as cited in Popham 2008, 2). Similarly, academician James Popham (2008) made a compelling case in favor of using formative assessment in the classroom to improve student learning and wondered if formative assessment could help improve student scores on standardized tests. In his work “Beyond Formative and Summative Evaluation,” scholar Michael Scriven (1991) shows how formative assessment logically affects summative assessment as it relates to teaching and learning. However, less attention has been paid to an equally important phenomenon: how assessment through student course evaluations at midsemester influences students’ learning and end-of-semester course evaluation ratings.

In their article “Toward a More Comprehensive Approach to Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness,” Stark-Wroblewski, Ahlering, and Brill (2007) cite how formative assessment through student evaluations resulted in higher summative course ratings. Kealey (2010) recommended using the Small Group Instructional Diagnosis process where a facilitator meets with students at midsemester to get input on the instructor’s teaching effectiveness. The facilitator then meets with the instructor to discuss the students’ comments. The result is greater student appreciation for the opportunity to provide input and instructor appreciation for receiving feedback.

Recently Course Evaluation Task Group (CETG) members at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), conducted a preliminary survey of the effectiveness of using a midcourse evaluation instrument. Survey results indicated that faculty can obtain valuable information through the use of midcourse assessments.

Historically, course evaluations at UNLV have been problematic for both faculty and students. Faculty and administrators have expressed concerns that some of UNLV’s departmental course evaluation surveys do not use valid questions or do not have consistent rating approaches. UNLV’s Faculty Senate Tenure and Promotion Committee has been concerned that inconsistent course evaluation data make it very difficult to compare the teaching components of tenure and promotion applications. Departments using paper surveys for end-of-term evaluations have complained about expending considerable labor and time to input and analyze student data, summarize student comments, and return survey results to faculty in a timely manner. Departments and colleges using electronic surveys have expressed concerns about the high out-of-pocket licensing costs for the electronic solutions and low student participation rates.
The current mix of [course evaluation] approaches across campus satisfies no one, yet the campus has been reluctant to change them because of a desire to retain approaches that, though cumbersome and inconsistent, have somehow worked. There had to be a better solution, but what could that be?

In the spring of 2012, the vice provost for academic affairs appointed a Course Evaluation Task Group (CETG) to review UNLV’s disparate course evaluation approaches and recommend alternatives. CETG members—faculty, administrators, and students (undergraduate and graduate)—immediately began reviewing departmental course surveys. Their findings revealed lack of uniformity in question content, a broad range of survey questions numbering anywhere from 2 and 40, and the inclusion of questions that research literature show to be invalid for student evaluation. CETG also found that the return of survey results to faculty was often too slow to be useful for the next semester because some departments lacked sufficient funds, time, and labor to process them. From a student survey, CETG also found that UNLV students are disengaged from the process, believing it to have little effect on producing positive change in the learning environment. During the process of considering alternative solutions, CETG members began discussing how their use of formative assessments at midsemester could improve student learning and end-of-term summative course evaluation results. Examples of UNLV faculty members’ use of formative assessments are described next.

UNLV Professor of Sociology Barb Brents gave her students an online survey to gauge satisfaction with her classes. In her questionnaire, Brents asked which class components students found to be most and least effective in learning difficult concepts, how fairly exams were graded, and two open-ended questions about what students liked most and least about the course. Twenty of forty-six students responded. Although responses varied, Brents used results from the survey in three ways. First, she implemented some of the suggestions fairly quickly. Second, she put survey results on slides and discussed them in class. Third, at the end of the semester, she went back over suggestions and solicited more discussion on ideas for future classes. One of the interesting results was that many students complained about the difficulty of the textbook and some assignments, yet, in the survey, more people found them to be among the most effective in learning difficult concepts. The overall result for Dr. Brents was a positive experience for students enrolled in her classes because she listened to them and was willing to incorporate some of their ideas.

Gwen Marchand, UNLV assistant professor of educational psychology and higher education, also employed formative assessment techniques to obtain student input about her courses. She used a variety of approaches including asking students to submit index cards after each class. On these cards students were to write one new idea they had learned, one question or need for clarification, and one suggestion. Additionally, Marchand used midcourse paper evaluations, open discussion in classes, and discussion in UNLV’s Web-Campus course management system. She asked what students liked about the course, what they would have changed, and which material they would have liked to study in greater depth. Results were positive, with students noting their appreciation in their summative end-of-term course evaluation comments.

Ann Cammett, UNLV associate professor of law, asked her students to write a memo in response to a set of categorically organized questions based on their experiences as part of a live client clinic. The questions helped students reflect on their experiences and provided them the opportunity to improve their self-evaluation skills. Two questions were “What are my strengths in the client-centered area?” and “What did I do to empower my client?” The midsemester evaluation memo also included questions such as “How effective was I in my oral advocacy in court?” and “What did I learn about professionalism [in the legal industry]?” Cammett points out that the students’ evaluations are about their growing professionalism and understanding of related substantive law (Cammett 2012).

Daniel Bubb, director of academic assessment at UNLV and former instructor of political science and history at Gonzaga University, explained how he used a simple index card system in class to get feedback from his students. He asked stu-

The current mix of [course evaluation] approaches across campus satisfies no one.
When state-based assessment in higher education began in the United States in the mid-1980s, most states first thought of using standardized tests to examine what students were learning. Approaches ranged from the “rising junior” design made prominent by Florida, under which end-of-year sophomores had to achieve a certain level on examinations in reading, writing, and computation as a condition for advancement; “exit” requirements such as those currently in place in South Dakota, under which students have to earn above a particular score in order to graduate; or “value-added” designs such as those used to help drive performance funding in Tennessee. Only a few of these survive today.

Insofar as state-mandated assessment is occurring at all, most states require institutions to develop their own approaches and report the results. Here institutions have for the most part chosen to use more authentic approaches such as those currently in place in South Dakota, under which students have to earn above a particular score in order to graduate; or “value-added” designs such as those used to help drive performance funding in Tennessee. Only a few of these survive today.

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Assessment in Colombia is managed under the direction of a government agency—Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior (ICFES). ICFES is responsible for quality monitoring across the entire range of educational providers and has the authority to shut down schools that do not meet established quality standards. Accordingly, ICFES regularly administers standardized tests to students at all educational levels. Students in both public and private schools are first tested at the end of grades 3, 5, and 9 with tests in language and mathematics (SABER3, 5, and 9). In later grades, natural science and citizenship skills are also included. In 2012, more than 2.5 million students were tested under this program. Students in Columbia are next tested at the end of grade 11 using tests that examine a “common core” of language, mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, philosophy, social science, and English plus an elective component that can include up to six additional fields (SABER11). The SABER11 tests are intended to fulfill multiple purposes including supporting the college admissions process as well as public reporting on school performance for accountability and consumer information purposes.

The higher education component of this testing program (SABER PRO) began in 2003 and was revised and extended in 2010. Like its elementary and secondary counterparts, SABER PRO applies to both public and private universities in Colombia. The assessment includes core examination modules in critical reading, quantitative methods, writing (a one-page essay), citizenship skills, and English administered to students who are nearing the end of their postsecondary studies. In addition, they are examined in one or more disciplines that correspond to their major or program of study. Government policy determines which of these additional assessments are to be given to which students. Testing lasts a full day. Although results are not used to control graduation, students must sit for the assessment in order to graduate.

Like its counterpart examinations in elementary and secondary grades, the test development process for SABER PRO involves extensive consultation with employers and other stakeholders to ensure that content important to them is included. This means that these assessments address application skills as well as pure
knowledge. For example, the quantitative reasoning module is less about mathematical manipulation than it is focused on interpreting charts and graphs or statistical estimation.

Between 2004 and 2009, more than 440,000 students were tested at 317 colleges and universities. By the 2013–2014 academic year, ICFES will produce value-added scores using results of the SABER11 and SABER PRO assessments. In an approach that resembles the General Educational Development (GED) or College-Level Examination Program (CLEP) examinations in the United States, moreover, students can use results of SABER11 and SABER PRO to earn a diploma or college course credit. The Colombian government also supplies financial aid to students drawn from low-income groups who score well on these tests.

ICFES publishes the results of SABER PRO on an annual basis, broken down by institution and discipline. Aggregated reports are provided for each institution, for municipalities and departments (political units corresponding to states), as well as for the nation as a whole. These are provided for public and consumer information. Because of the discipline-specific nature of most of the SABER PRO assessments, comparisons are generally made across “Reference Groups” of students organized by discipline. There are twelve such reference groups ranging from the social sciences to agriculture. ICFES publishes comparisons of students within reference groups, individual academic programs within reference groups, reference groups across institutions, and national results for each reference group. The institute does not rank or otherwise judge institutions using assessment results, but such rankings can be compiled by third parties because all of the information is publicly reported. Individual results can be downloaded by test takers using a Web portal accessed through a password.

In addition to reporting, ICFES also undertakes an extensive program of research using the data it collects. The principal goal of this program is to investigate the connection between various instructional approaches and student learning outcomes in order to improve teaching and learning. Accordingly, the institute also allows researchers to access its databases and provides a comprehensive set of workshops to train them how to download and manipulate the data. ICFES also provides financial resources to researchers wishing to undertake projects using these data and supports graduate students in Colombia who want to use assessment data to prepare master’s theses and doctoral dissertations. In conjunction, it has held three three-day international research seminars on educational quality with guest speakers from around the world.

Colombia’s comprehensive assessment infrastructure also allows it to participate seamlessly in several international assessment programs. For example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests offered under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are administered together with SABER11. Similarly, Colombia achieved nearly a 100 percent response rate (the highest of any participating country) when it used the SABER PRO framework to administer OECD’s Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) assessments as part of a feasibility study last year. ICFES also used the SABER11 and SABER PRO administration opportunities to experiment with using the Australian Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA) on a value-added basis from 2009 to 2012.

By any measure, Colombia’s assessment effort is impressive. The combination of testing points at grades 3, 5, 9, and 11 with an end-of-college test will soon enable researchers to undertake studies of learning gain for a cohort of eight-year-olds all the way through postsecondary completion. With all this testing, however, the jury is still out on institutional use of results. An OECD report three years ago suggested that Colombian colleges and universities were not making as much use of SABER PRO results as initially had been hoped, although they routinely used SABER11 results to guide admissions decisions. The same has generally been true in the United States: the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and ACT enjoy widespread use by American colleges and universities, while institutions frequently are puzzled with what to do with the results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), and the ETS Proficiency Profile. Despite significant differences in national contexts and higher education structures, therefore, there appear to be some behavioral parallels between higher education assessment in Colombia and the United States from which we can continue to learn.

This program is to investigate the connection between various instructional approaches and student learning outcomes in order to improve teaching and learning.

Peter T. Ewell is vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS).
Making the Case for Formative Assessment

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College, used a formative midcourse evaluation tool for student input that resulted in both greater student performance in his courses and higher summative course evaluation scores. Kaalberg asked his students to complete a questionnaire in two parts: a set of general questions on a Likert scale and open-ended questions with written responses. Before he administered the questions, Kaalberg explained his purpose to students: to gauge what they learned and what he could do to improve areas where they had difficulty. Kaalberg categorized the survey responses according to the types of responses and their frequencies. Then he determined what pedagogical adjustments he should make so that his students could meet the course learning objectives. One such pedagogical change included designating time when he could provide additional instruction to give students greater depth of knowledge in specific areas where he perceived, and they suggested, they were weak. In their summative course evaluations, Kaalberg’s students expressed appreciation for his willingness to listen and implement some of their suggestions so that they could learn more course content.

Few, if any, scholars in higher education will deny that formative assessment improves student learning. Evidence available in the literature supports this conclusion. However, the literature does not adequately explain how effective formative assessment can be when used in midcourse evaluation, and how it affects end-of-course student evaluations. We believe this is an area that merits additional scholarly attention. Instructors at Carnegie Mellon, Harvard University, and Carleton College have also adopted this method. (For Carnegie Mellon, see http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/design-teach/teach/early-course-evaluations.html. For Harvard University, see http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=10024. For Carleton College, see http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/ltc_old/resources/evals/)

Results obtained by UNLV instructors clearly showed that both student learning and classroom performance improve when instructors listen to their students’ suggestions and consider implementing them to improve teaching effectiveness. The evidence also shows how instructors receive higher end-of-course ratings.

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Envisioning Learning

(continued from page 3)

but following a story with research findings can greatly strengthen the impact of individual anecdotes.

• The current press in some state legislatures to limit the number of student credit hours that institutions may require for associate and baccalaureate degrees may reduce educational expenditures in the short run but will shortchange the preparation our students actually receive. Students will have far more limited opportunities to explore areas of interest that could actually strengthen their preparation for one or more careers as well as for future advancement.

• Faculty development is an essential component in the process of honing the skills necessary to envision learning. Faculty members at two- and four-year institutions must have time and encouragement to participate in developmental experiences. Contracts for faculty members, particularly at two-year institutions, should be modified to include specific language about the expectation that professional development opportunities will be provided and that the individual named in the contract will participate. In addition, promotion and tenure standards for faculty members at four-year colleges and universities should provide credit for participation in faculty development experiences.
Working at Assessment  
(continued from page 7)

develop people within the institution. If there are knowledge gaps, a consultant or colleague from another institution often can provide guidance that will enable a particular department or program to head in the right direction.

Encourage the Heart

The two major components of Kouzes and Posner’s “Encourage the Heart” component include recognizing contributions by showing appreciation and celebrating values and victories by creating a spirit of community. As work on assessment progresses through departments and programs at our institutions, leaders will emerge. Recognize their efforts! And when work on assessment reaches a particular milestone, celebrate that too! I have found that recognition can be a simple thank-you note to faculty, a box of chocolates for the department, or lunch for a committee’s accomplishments. Last, celebrate the victories as a community. Focusing on the work of the team keeps collaboration as the core value. Hearing that “we did this together” builds confidence for all team members and leads to higher levels of performance. I have found that celebrations do not always have to be internal. As one participant in the study commented, “Generally, a community is eager to share in an institution’s success as well.” Additionally, encouraging the team to present or publish their accomplishments can benefit all of us in assessment.

The application of Kouzes and Posner’s components to our role as assessment leaders provides new insights for leading assessment across our institutions. Key elements of the “Five Exemplary Practices of Leadership” provide an effective road map for transforming how we approach and lead our next assessment project. In our role as assessment leaders, we have the much-needed resources to begin with confidence our leadership role in talking assessment, believing in assessment, and working at assessment. May Eleanor Roosevelt’s leadership example of talking peace, believing in peace, and working at peace be a reminder to all of us that our tenacity and approach as leaders can make a significant difference. Her accomplishments culminated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This important work affirmed life, liberty, and equality internationally for all people regardless of race, creed, or color. ■

References


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Promoting Student Affairs Buy-in for Assessment: Lessons Learned  
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• During the 2012 spring semester, increases emerged across interaction forms and events captured through card-swipe machines. Furthermore, the first major “push” for our A-Chats was incorporated, ending with 87 percent of our residents completing at least one such chat.
• A thorough residence life summer training with focused attention on our assessment initiatives resulted in a 30 percent increase in interaction forms, 267 percent increase in card-swipe machine usage, and an overall increase of 7 percent with the A-Chats through just one conversation.

As demonstrated, our residence life staff has subscribed to the assessment process. Therefore, the department has experienced large increases in participation and perceived value of what we do.

Buy-in Methods

Although your department may utilize very different assessment strategies, the success of our strategies is attributable more to the buy-in of our residence life staff than to the strategies themselves. These buy-in methods can be implemented in all types of departments and institutions and attached to various assessment strategies. Next we list the six techniques our team has used to foster buy-in and commitment to assessment among our residence life staff:

1. Flexible Strategies and Assessment Team. For assessment strategies to be successful, it is vital that they meet the needs of the user—the hall staff in our case. If, for example, the database does not address user needs, the system becomes ineffective. Thus, our assessment team continuously considers staff requests to improve the database, weighs the benefits and costs of these changes, and determines appropriate changes without compromising database integrity.

2. Practitioner-based Strategies. Our assessment team makes it a priority to share with building staff the value
our data have to inform everyday practices. Instead of focusing on the big picture and strategic planning with building staff, we bring the data to a manageable level applicable for use in their individual communities.

3. “Quantoids versus Qualitative Nuts.”
   It is essential to recognize the individual learning styles of those with whom our data are shared. While some value the hard numbers, others see more use in qualitative information. Thus we implement a variety of methods to create data that are valued by all groups. For example, our quarterly building reports are numbers driven while our learning sessions involving A-Chat data are mainly qualitatively based. We consistently value meeting the needs of our residents while also remembering to meet the needs of our staff so that they may serve our students more effectively.

4. Internal Competition.
   The competitive nature of the hall staff was an unexpected gift to the assessment process. No explicit standard for participation exists within the department. However, the hall staff members competitively strive to submit a significant number of completed interaction forms, card-swiped events, and A-Chats conversations. The competitive nature of our professional staff members also encourages our RMs. We find that with the encouragement of a supervisor, RMs are more likely to complete A-Chats and interaction forms and to seek out card-swipe machines for their events.

5. Involving Outside Stakeholders.
   Increasing the involvement of multiple parties in the review of data is extremely valuable. Sharing data with stakeholders outside your direct community ignites support for data-driven decisions across many facets and increases the overall value placed on assessment practices. Those invested in the community who do not have daily interaction with the specific student population use assessment results to understand the needs of the community. For example, the community planning of our residential communities involves campus partners outside our residence life staff, and decisions are driven largely by assessment data.

   Completing the assessment loop and providing staff with the results of analyses of their data in a timely manner is the final key to developing staff buy-in to assessment strategies. Data must be provided to staff while they are still valuable. Our team utilizes a bisemester building report to share data. We have chosen this method so that staff will have the opportunity to review data and immediately make changes or additions in accordance with the trends and information revealed in the data.

Reference

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Launching E-Portfolios: An Organic Process
(continued from page 2)

their GE courses. These assignments would demonstrate how they had achieved one or more of the institution’s ELOs. Students would also write a reflection paper in which they examined their learning experience related to the signature assignment. Faculty teaching the courses would score the assignments for the course grade, and a team of trained faculty would later review and evaluate the e-portfolios based on a yet-to-be-developed set of criteria, possibly AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics (AAC&U 2009, 2011/2012) as these were aligned with the institutional ELOs.

Building Foundations
It soon became apparent that moving this initiative forward required focused attention and resources. Consequently, two faculty members were selected and given half reassigned time. One of them had expertise in the creation and design of e-portfolios, and the other had technological expertise. As a team, these faculty coordinators were tasked with piloting e-portfolios in their courses, exploring technology options in depth, and developing faculty recruitment and training models as well as systems for student support. A subcommittee of the GE Committee was formed to meet regularly and oversee the development and launch of e-portfolios. A few interested people from outside the committee expressed interest and were invited to attend. The faculty coordinators were also included in GE Committee meetings.

Concurrent with this, the GE Committee organized a learning circle focused on a seminal text, The Learning Portfolio (Zubizarreta 2004). The learning circle met for an hour before the regularly scheduled bimonthly GE Committee meeting to discuss selections from the book and obtain ideas. One lesson learned was that e-portfolios could serve a variety of purposes and needs and that most institutions began their adoption by involving willing departments and faculty. The case studies in the book also provided helpful guidelines and indicated six key questions to address:

1. Why do we want an e-portfolio system?
2. At what levels will e-portfolios be used—institutional, general education, program?
3. What are the most important elements required in a platform (e.g., accessibility, ease of use, portability,
Instituting Learning Outcomes

As previously mentioned, ELOs had already been established for GE courses. They were well known internally but not externally. Although vetting of the ELOs had occurred at the time they were adopted, and all GE courses had recertified by indicating alignment to one or more ELO, time had passed, department chairs and faculty had come and gone, and knowledge of the ELOs across campus was somewhat limited. Furthermore, attempts to gather assessment data from GE courses had been ineffective. Critical to the success of assessment at large, as well as to the e-portfolio initiative, was agreement on the ELOs as institutional student learning outcomes. This occurred as the result of extensive discussion and support on the part of academic leaders.

Addressing Technical Issues

Technological issues are a major consideration for e-portfolios. Commercial platforms are available, as are open access blogs (e.g., Word Press, Yola, Weebly, Wix). Many learning management systems have the capability to include e-portfolios. Decisions about platforms are dependent on the answers to the questions posed previously. Our committee initially decided to use e-portfolios that were available in the institution’s learning management system but discovered that data could not be easily retrieved across courses without additional programming. After extensive consideration of the options, faculty in the initial pilot were introduced to a few viable options from which they could choose with the caveat that they would collect the data from their signature assignments and submit it to the committee.

Discussions continue about the means for providing students technological help for e-portfolios. Ideally, faculty responsibility should be limited to creating the assignment and asking students to design an e-portfolio in which they include artifacts from the course.

The group included video clips from the GE Committee chair and the president of a nearby university who had created his own e-portfolio as an example. The outcome of the project was even more impressive considering that the initial meeting with the students revealed that they were quite skeptical regarding the value of e-portfolios. Their initial reaction was that it would simply be “more work” with little benefit.

Instituting Learning Outcomes

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Training and Piloting

Faculty members who might be interested in and good candidates for an e-portfolio pilot (i.e., due to personal skills or teaching required or large sections of GE courses) were identified by GE Committee members. A general call for participation was also extended, and phone calls and follow-up visits were made to gather an initial group of 14 faculty and 1 staff member to be trained to pilot-test student e-portfolios. Participants represented these areas: English, communications, biology, dance, philosophy, math, digital media, psychology, college success studies, and the Institute for Professional Engagement.

These innovators attended a week of training and received a $500 stipend for the training, implementation of e-portfolios, and collection of assessment data. As part of the training, participants were introduced to the ELOs, assessment purposes and processes, e-portfolio design formats and platforms for e-portfolios as well as national conversations about assessment, learning, liberal education outcomes, and e-portfolios. They were asked to create a signature assignment to measure critical thinking (one of the institution’s ELOs), use or adapt the VALUE rubric for critical thinking to assess the assignment, design a related student reflection piece, and post the assignment and accompanying documents in the university’s learning management system. They were also asked to create and submit an assessment plan, provide end-of-semester data to the GE Committee, get feedback from students, and share the outcomes of their experience with their departments.

Evaluating

Review of this initial pilot was critical in determining its success. Training outcomes in terms of signature assignments and assessment plans were achieved, and participant feedback was extremely positive. Participants were able to work within
the loose structure created by the GE Committee and add their own creativity and design to accommodate their course goals. The e-portfolio coordinator responsible for the training continued to follow up and support the first trained cohort during the implementation stage. She also created a blog for purposes of sharing and discussion. The pilot has concluded, and assessment data and feedback are being analyzed. Plans are in place to continue the training with another group of faculty.

Next Steps

As mentioned, the e-portfolio initiative began with the GE Committee. Although GE Committee members envisioned e-portfolios being widely adopted and required for general education assessment, they now recognize that implementation will be organic due to limitations in institutional information and learning management systems and recognition of the time needed for e-portfolios to take hold in the culture. Faculty members from all disciplines are being invited to participate in the next training sessions. Presentations of pilot outcomes have been scheduled for campus committees and decision-making groups. Broadening the opportunity for adoption and fully vetting the implementation and expansion of e-portfolios with institutional decision makers will support cultural change. Ongoing dissemination of approaches and successes will encourage individual faculty and departments to incorporate e-portfolios where doing so makes sense. Much effort has gone into integrating the ELOs with program outcomes and reflecting this approach on curriculum maps. This change is being vetted with plans to implement it more fully in the coming semester. Doing this will potentially affect the purpose, use, and ownership of e-portfolios and increase accountability for the ELOs at the department level.

The e-portfolio initiative at UVU is under way due to a group of motivated, creative innovators who want to make learning meaningful to students. “People only support what they create” (Wheatley 2005, 89). As the momentum builds, the value of creativity, bottom-up initiation, and a focus on student learning must continue to be emphasized.

References


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