Exploring how Assessment Professionals Describe “The Battle” with Faculty Compliance

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Why Study Assessment Professionals?

- Emerging group of higher education professionals
- Understudied group of employees
- Assessment professionals are diverse in their professional histories and the ways in which they enter the field
- Assessment professionals carry the burden of compliance
- Need to give voice to assessment professionals
- Because assessment professionals are responsible for documenting compliance, they must work collaboratively with faculty
Purpose of the Study

- To explore how higher education assessment professionals described their efforts to work collaboratively with faculty in order to gain compliance on academic tasks.
Research Questions

Question 1.
• How do higher education assessment professionals describe their experiences collaborating with faculty on academic assessment?

Question 2.
• How do assessment professionals describe faculty commitment to assessment in relationship to their other traditional professional obligations (teaching, research, and service)?
Research Questions

Question 3.

- How do assessment professionals describe faculty roles and contributions to program, course, and institutional academic assessment processes?

Question 4.

- What are best practices for effectively collaborating with faculty on academic assessment?
Conceptual Framework

- **Resistance to Assessment**: Campbell Wilkins, 2007; Hutchings, 2010; Kuh, 2008
- **Uncertain Role Expectations**: Finkelstein, Seal, & Schuster, 1998; Trullen & Rodriguez, 2014
- **Lack of Training**: Alpert, 1985; Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Caughie, 2003; Engvall, 2003; Hutchings, 2010
- **Academic Assessment is a New Practice within Higher Education**: Green, 2011
- **Assessment Practice is Idiosyncratic**: Hutchings, 2010; Jankowski, 2012
Summary of the Research Design

• This qualitative research study was conducted through the lens of interpretivist inquiry.
• A collective case study research design was used to study how assessment professionals work collaboratively with faculty members.
• Formal approval was received from the Texas Tech University Human Subjects Review Board.
How do higher education assessment professionals describe their experiences collaborating with faculty on academic assessment?

- Tension is present among assessment professionals and faculty.
- Power imbalances between faculty and assessment professionals affects compliance.
- Communicating reciprocity to faculty is a helpful compliance strategy.
Findings – Research Question 2.

• How do assessment professionals describe faculty commitment to assessment in relationship to their other traditional professional obligations (teaching, research, and service)?

• Academic assessment is a new job-related expectation for faculty.

• Faculty are more responsive when their direct supervisor is aware of the assessment task.

• It is important to communicate flexibility and supportiveness to build greater commitment to academic assessment.
All participants seemed to communicate, with fairly high intensity, that academic assessment places a burden on faculty members in which they receive very little benefit.

- Only one participant, **Bob**, indicated that academic assessment is part of the faculty job description at his home institution.
- **Tom** acknowledged that academic assessment is probably “at the bottom of the list of responsibilities for our faculty.”
- Because assessment isn’t “spelled out in the job description,” **Shari** said that the faculty at her institution act “begrudgingly.”
- **Norm** stated that “it’s [assessment] is one more thing that doesn’t get counted toward their status, so it stands to reason that it isn’t a top priority.”

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**Theme 1.**
Academic assessment is a new job-related expectation for faculty.
Findings – Research Question 3.

- How do assessment professionals describe faculty roles and contributions to program, course, and institutional academic assessment processes?
  - Faculty participate in all levels of assessment.
  - Faculty are engaged in academic assessment tasks when a discipline-based connection is present.

What are best practices for effectively collaborating with faculty on academic assessment?

- A best practices approach emphasizes how the assessment data benefits faculty.
- A best practices approach is dependent upon the extent to which the faculty member(s) and the assessment professional can propose a solution to the assessment problem.
- A best practices approach focuses on the creation of disciplinary connections to the assessment project.
Theme 1. A best practices approach emphasizes how the assessment data benefits faculty.

- Analysis of assessment data, Rose said, “could help the faculty set new learning goals for students.” Rose said that she emphasized “over and over how changing their assessment plan could help them... more realistically reflect student learning rather than...reporting results that are probably too good to be true.”

- Bob said that when he worked with faculty he would try to “map the institution’s learning outcomes to the discipline.” Or, Bob said he would try to “put together...information that would help the department with their self study...Bureau of Labor Statistics, for example.”
Discussion of the Findings – Research Question 1.
How do higher education assessment professionals describe their experiences collaborating with faculty on academic assessment?

- Exchange-oriented approach to working with faculty might offer a feasible short-term solution, but it is not a practical long-term solution (Kim, 2007).
- Higher education reform is necessary in order to shift faculty attitudes about assessment from a compliance mindset to an improvement mindset (Champagne, 2011; Linkon, 2005; Martinez-Aleman, 2012; Powell, 2011; Zemsky, 2013).
- Findings from research question 1 confirmed the conceptual framework for this study. Participants reiterated that the role of faculty in higher education assessment is complicated (Bassis, 2015).
Discussion of the Findings – Research Question 2.
How do assessment professionals describe faculty commitment to assessment in relationship to their other traditional professional obligations (teaching, research, and service)?

- Participants generally described that working with faculty was frustrating; however, these descriptions were tempered by empathy. Participants acknowledged that faculty members did not prioritize academic assessment tasks as compared to their other job-related expectations.

- Participants recommended that assessment professionals should communicate flexibility and supportiveness to their faculty colleagues to build greater commitment to academic assessment.

- Findings from research question 2 confirmed the conceptual framework for this study. Participants confirmed that academic assessment is a new job-related expectation for faculty.
The researcher acknowledges that the absence of academic assessment responsibilities within faculty job descriptions is harmful to the present and future of institutional assessment initiatives (Trullen & Rodriguez, 2013).

Explicitly listing assessment within faculty job descriptions gives assessment professionals greater authority to hold faculty accountable for conducting and documenting academic assessment activities.
Discussion of the Findings – Research Question 3.
How do assessment professionals describe faculty roles and contributions to program, course, and institutional academic assessment processes?

- As a method of gaining compliance on all levels of assessment, participants recommended that faculty are more engaged in assessment when a discipline-based connection is present (Burton Clark, 1997).
- The findings confirm that faculty disciplinary identity is critical to assessment practices. Therefore, assessment professionals should create collaborative opportunities to work with faculty, based on the preferred assessment strategies of their discipline (Bennett & Brady, 2012).
- Working side-by-side with faculty members to solve assessment problems is a valuable collaborative strategy.
Discussion of the Findings – Research Question 4. What are best practices for effectively collaborating with faculty on academic assessment?

- Advocate for collaboration as an overall compliance strategy.
- Assessment professionals can help faculty create discipline-based connections to their assessment data (Bennett & Brady, 2012).
- Interprofessional collaborations should inspire trust.
- Assessment professionals must assert that assessment leads both to improvement and to compliance (Kuh et al., 2015).
- Assessment professionals need to frame their collaborations with faculty around improvement (Kuh et al., 2015).
Implications of the Study

- This study gives voice to the role of assessment professionals in higher education.

- The current accountability climate is not overwhelmingly empowering either to assessment professionals or faculty members (Deffenbacher, 2011; Ferren, 1993; Hutchings, 2010).

- Failure for assessment professionals to adopt an open, flexible, and supportive communication style with faculty may result in a disempowering organizational culture (Jankowski, Hutchings, Ewell, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2013).

- When assessment professionals intentionally work together with faculty to solve assessment problems, this helps create faculty buy-in (Kuh et al., 2015).
Implications of the Study

- *Cultivating the faculty voice* encourages administrators to carefully consider past assessment-related experiences and perceptions that faculty hold (Kuh et al., 2015).

- Interprofessional collaboration is a legitimate compliance strategy.
Recommendations for Higher Education Practice

- Institutional leaders must explicitly state that academic assessment is a required part of the faculty contract.
- Assessment professionals must create meaningful professional development opportunities for faculty (Huber & Hutchings, 2005; Kuh et al., 2015).
- Institutions must develop their own assessment policies that privilege continuous improvement of student learning. These policies should offer reward systems for faculty who report their assessment activities and penalize faculty who fail to report their assessment activities (Maki, 2015).
Recommendations for Higher Education Practice

- Assessment professionals should have more direct involvement with the academic decisions of their respective institutions.
- Formal partnerships should be developed between assessment professionals and faculty.


Chafee, E. (2014). Learning metrics: How can we know that students know what they are supposed to know? Trusteeship, 1(22), 15-21.


