

Building a Comprehensive Assessment Framework

Gesele E. Durham, Sheena G. Serslev, and Matthew DeSantis

In the mid 2010's, the George Mason University (Mason) offices responsible for institutional reporting and assessment were merged to strengthen and solidify their functions and expertise. What had been a cooperative relationship framed around distinct responsibilities became one of shared responsibility and purpose. The organizational structure creating the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning (OIEP) was intended to engineer a new paradigm where assessment would inform the production of quantitative metrics, and quantitative metrics would inform the process of assessment. An understandably difficult transition, the

teams warily danced around each other seeking to maintain their individual identity, despite the inherent value.

New leadership, a global pandemic, and multiple staffing transitions provided additional energy to broaden the purview of assessment conducted by OIEP. Traditionally focused on academic program review and survey administration, OIEP did not participate in co-curricular unit/program assessment or assessment of the core curriculum. These processes were managed external from OIEP, the byproduct of which was a lack of university vision and cohesion for assessment. With those functions brought under the leadership of OIEP, Mason began creating a new understanding of a comprehensive assessment framework.

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Phase 1: Infrastructure Development and Implementing a Feedback Process

The Mason Academic Assessment Council (MAAC) was formed under the Office of Assessment pre-merger. It served as a clearinghouse to engage, share, and discuss good practice and innovation. However, post-merger, it was a bit rudderless with minimal engagement and participation, often focused on the burden, rather than value, of assessment.

Reimagined, MAAC was charged with a new responsibility: to assess assessment. To that end, the council focused on determining how best to provide peer feedback within the assessment of academic program student learning outcomes. Whereas assessment activity was previously tracked by accounting the number of programs who had entered any information into the assessment tool, MAAC was charged with examining the quality of that work. With the support from the Provost and in discussion with the academic deans, membership was confirmed to ensure representation by all schools/colleges with the understanding that this council was moving toward more active participation within a broader framework of assessment.

In Fall of 2020, OIEP council leaders developed a pilot annual assessment feedback rubric. Existing assessment plans served as a starting point for framing the rubric. The rubric fields reflected the components of a complete assessment submission: mission,

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curriculum map, student learning outcomes, findings, and improvements. As a council, MAAC members worked together to refine that instrument from their perspectives, ensuring all school/college concerns were addressed. Initially designed around a four-point scale with 4—exemplary, 3—proficient, 2—developing, 1—incomplete, the rubric was revised in the second cycle to include a field for 0—missing. Ongoing minor edits to the rubric, based on council feedback, were welcomed and encouraged. Instruction for those who needed support using the rubric was provided by a user-guide and practice sessions at monthly MAAC meetings.

Cognizant of the range of disciplinary expertise reflected on MAAC, members were keen to communicate to program faculty that the intent of the feedback was not judgement or to be used in a punitive manner. Rather, like all good assessment, the intent was to provide opportunities for improvement with feedback focused on the quality and completeness of an assessment plan.

To ensure MAAC representatives were not assigned to their own disciplines, at their request pilot review groups were paired with randomly selected programs. Comprised of three MAAC representatives, each group was assigned to review 20 programs. Using the rubric, each group member reviewed all 20 programs on their own. When complete, the group convened to calibrate and agree upon one score with uniform commentary. MAAC members were initially concerned with the amount of time required. OIEP addressed these concerns by taking the bulk of the reviews, sharing strategies for increasing efficiency, using MAAC meetings as a space for continued refinement, and offering consultations to support the groups.

While there have been ongoing minor edits to the rubric, the process itself has evolved to reflect each year's worth of learning. For example, a substantive change made in the second and third cycle was to keep one representative from a given school/college on the review committee. While initially concerned this would be problematic for a variety of reasons, in practice it was found that having additional context from someone within the school/college allowed reviewers to provide more informed feedback by detailing program development, intent, external accreditation considerations and/or transition issues.

As all anticipated, there was hesitation about how faculty would receive feedback. A frequent topic of discussion at MAAC meetings, OIEP worked closely with members from each school/college to create tailored dissemination plans to address known and anticipated concerns. Further, OIEP hosted workshops prior to circulating feedback to provide deeper insight into the annual assessment process, share themes from annual assessment feedback, and illustrate opportunities to apply annual assessment feedback in future submissions. After these open forums, completed rubrics were shared with program directors and assessment contacts from each program, and an overview of feedback and scores was subsequently sent to school/college leadership.

The quality of academic annual assessment submissions at Mason, as reviewed by their peers, has steadily improved after implementing systematic feedback.

Happily, and contrary to initial concerns, faculty and college leadership responses to the first cycle of feedback were appreciative, citing the value vis-à-vis external accreditation, academic program review, and future annual assessment submissions. Several programs even went as far as to say that they were redesigning assessment processes for which the feedback proved invaluable. This positive overall reception provided MAAC the motivation to continue feedback after each cycle with continued appreciation and constructive criticism that has helped hone the process each year.

Assessing the Assessment of the Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Process

OIEP evaluates both quantitative data and qualitative themes that arise from the reviews and processes on a continuous basis. Shared with the campus community, these analyses have informed the development of support resources and programming. Qualitative analysis has prompted the development of “how-to” materials and workshops on, for example, scaffolding curriculum mapping, and designing measurable student learning outcomes paired with aligned direct and indirect measures. This is in addition to the nuanced and meaningful qualitative feedback provided by the

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Principles for Building a Learning-Centric Culture Reliant on Excellence, Equity, and Evidence: An Overview

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Principle #4: Making Improvements

This principle discusses how to use assessment findings to guide ongoing improvements, including sustaining what is working well and scaling or adapting promising practices from one instructional context to elsewhere across campus. The importance of reporting to internal constituents, demonstrating accountability to external stakeholders, proposing improvement initiatives based on assessment findings, adjusting instructional approaches and contexts, and strengthening assessment methods will all be discussed. Finally, using results of improvements to inform subsequent planning, goal setting, and resourcing—thus closing the loop and engaging in a systematic, recursive cycle—will be highlighted. Principle #4 will appear in the Editor's Notes of Volume 36, Number 5.

Principle #5: Strengthening a Learning-Centric Culture through Distributed Leadership

This principle discusses how distributed leadership encourages vesting approaches to and decisions about student learning and institutional effectiveness in individuals and groups using collaborative, inclusive, and democratic processes, including sharing responsibility and authority for this work with stakeholders throughout the collegiate learning enterprise. Doing so requires leaders—at all levels and contexts—to make a learning-centric culture a priority; attract and retain talent to support a learning-centric culture; develop capacity for a learning-centric culture to thrive; reward, recognize, and promote a learning-centric culture; and sustain a learning-centric culture. The need for building a learning-centric culture reliant on excellence, equity, and evidence will also be summarized. Principle #5 will appear in the Editor's Notes of Volume 36, Number 6.

Assessment Update Editorial Changes

As we turn the calendar to 2024, I wish to acknowledge and thank my colleagues Caleb J. Keith and Shirley Yorger for their service to *Assessment Update*. Both have assumed new roles at IUPUI—which is becoming Indiana University Indianapolis in fall 2024—and, as a result, are cycling off the editorial board of this publication. Let me welcome to the *Assessment Update* family Jerry Daday, Tom Hahn, and Angela Bergman from IUPUI, along with Erica Eckert from Kent State University. These colleagues join Katie Busby from the University of Mississippi and me in serving on the editorial board, and, excitedly, we will all be part of a larger team that will launch the “Assessment Scholars Academy” during the 2024 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis. Please visit assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu to learn more about the oldest and largest U.S. event focused on assessing and improving higher education; we would welcome the opportunity to see you in Indianapolis in late-October 2024. Thank you, as always, for reading *Assessment Update*. ■

Building a Comprehensive Assessment Framework

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reviewers to the unit—feedback that simply cannot be provided by a score on a rubric.

Further evidence of the success of this approach is found in the quantitative data. The quality of academic annual assessment submissions at Mason, as reviewed by their peers, has steadily improved after implementing systematic feedback. The chart below illustrates the average score across all academic programs for each assessment area. The improvement of “Student Learning Outcomes” in the most recent assessment cycle may partially be attributed to the additional resources and feedback, but also may reflect a modification in the annual assessment feedback rubric that encouraged alignment with any existing external accreditation standards.

Available by school/college, both program directors and academic deans can compare their annual assessment scores to others and the university mean.

Assessment Area	Mean Score		
	2019–20	2020–21	2021–22
Mission	3.1	3.2	3.3
Curriculum Map	2.8	2.9	3.1
Student Learning Outcomes	2.8	3.0	3.2
Measures	2.8	2.9	3.2
Findings	2.9	3.2	3.3
Improvements	2.6	2.9	3.2

Phase 2: MAAC Proliferation

Given the success in launching MAAC and the positive feedback to the process, OIEP launched a new phase in developing a comprehensive assessment framework. With the formerly scattered assessment functions now located within OIEP, three additional assessment councils were created: Mason Core Assessment Council (MCAC), Co-Curricular Assessment Council (CCAC), and the Administrative Assessment Council (AdAC). Established with the knowledge gained, and mirroring the MAAC structure and mission as appropriate, these councils are comprised mostly of director-level personnel with ownership of assessment within their units.

The three new councils are at different stages of maturation in the assessment process. While all serve as assessment learning communities, CCAC has begun the meta-assessment process. AdAC is working to build the capacity of its council members in the assessment space and MCAC is developing a new assessment process for the general education curriculum.

The final stage of development is the creation of the Mason Executive Assessment Council (MEAC) to serve as a coordinating council where representatives can provide each other with

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insight and where OIEP will have the opportunity to identify collaboration and professional development opportunities. While the MEAC was included in the initial blueprint, the other councils' development was required to start. As demonstrated by MAAC, a ground-up approach, regardless of context, was central to the successful launch of each council and their unique assessment process. The graphic below illustrates the framework Mason has created.

Final Thoughts

The transformation of assessment at Mason over the last three years has been profound. The development of the assessment councils beyond the academic space has increased awareness of the needs and benefits of this improvement-focused engagement. Feedback from the recently completed decennial reaffirmation for Southern Association of Colleges and Schools—Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) included commendation for the mission and work of MAAC and applauded the idea of proliferation and growth.

Faculty, staff, and administrators are notably more engaged and Mason's completion rate for assessment plans and reporting is +95% for academic programs. The assessment council structure has also created opportunities for improvement in other engagements such as Academic Program Review (APR). For example, in the past, academic programs occasionally delayed assessing outcomes until required by APR every seven years. This approach resulted in assessing all outcomes at once, creating confusion, burnout, and resentment about the process. The structure provided by MAAC provides academic programs a manageable assessment calendar with time for reflection. The result has been stronger continuous improvement plans that support the aspirational goals of APR.

The evolution of assessment at Mason is not complete. However, the process OIEP implemented—a process from which OIEP benefited with collaborative learning and understanding—can

serve as a moldable example for others looking to refresh, reengage, and reassess their campus assessment culture. Support of university leadership, engagement with stakeholders, piloting processes, and devotion to skill and professional development are central to the process. As Mason continues in this work, we anticipate more learning and engagement as we refine both within councils and across the university. ■

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Assessment Institute in Indianapolis: 2023 Highlights and 2024 Preview

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2024 Preview

As we look ahead to this year's Assessment Institute, which will be held Sunday, October 27, 2024, through Tuesday, October 29, 2024, the "Call for Proposals" is open with a priority deadline of Friday, March 1, 2024, for proposal submission. Previews for 2024 include:

- **Thematic Keynotes.** In addition to a wide array of specific topical areas related to assessment and improvement, the 2024 program will offer keynote addresses reflective of the following broad themes:
 - Engaged Learning: facilitating active participation and immersive educational experiences that promote student involvement.
 - Inclusive Environments: fostering diverse and welcoming spaces and contexts for all individuals.
 - Innovative Instruction: implementing leading-edge teaching methods to enhance learning experiences.
 - Strategic Directions: executing purposeful planning and forward-thinking approaches related to quality in higher education.
 - Student Success: supporting and empowering students to achieve their personal, academic, and professional goals.
- **Assessment Scholars Academy.** Launching as a Pre-Institute Workshop in 2024, the *Assessment Scholars Academy* will provide participants with an opportunity to recognize the importance of a scholarly approach to assessment and improvement; identify and discuss appropriate perspectives and methods to engage in scholarly inquiry; develop a plan to conduct assessment and improvement research in a given context; offer mentorship and support throughout the scholarly journey; and encourage dissemination of scholarship in venues such as the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis and other research- and practice-informed outlets. More information about this unique *Academy* is available at the Assessment Institute's website. ■

