Chapter XXI
Developing a Receptive and Faculty-Focused Environment for Assessment

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ABSTRACT

There is much in the assessment literature about the necessity of developing a culture of assessment and mandates from accrediting bodies include language related to a culture of continuous improvement. However, much of this literature discusses administration and cultural hierarchies. Because faculty must be fully engaged in the assessment process for it to be successful and improve teaching and learning, development of an environment for assessment must be faculty-focused. This chapter suggests five elements to consider: structure of assessment, qualifications of those in assessment, focus of assessment conversations, faculty development, and linkages with other areas within the institution.

INTRODUCTION

As Banta, Lund, Black, and Oblander (1996) have noted, the nine principles of good practice for the assessment of student outcomes provide a guide for what works in assessment. They further note that there should also be a tenth principle, “a composite encompassing several distinct, straightforward characteristics of good practice” (p. 62). This principle, as they put it, asserts “assessment is most effective when undertaken in an environment that is receptive, supportive, and enabling” (p. 62). Developing such an environment requires the development
of a new culture, one that includes core beliefs, values, behavior norms, and infrastructure. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a guide to the effective development of such a culture, illustrated through the experiences of the authors working at two institutions and serving as consultants to several others.

Assessment of student outcomes has become part of what many universities do, not because they are inherently interested in improving teaching and learning, but because they have been prompted by external forces, such as the federal government, state government, and regional and professional accrediting bodies. When faced with improvement or accountability (see Aper, Culver, & Hinkle, 1990), institutions have typically focused on accountability given the perceived importance of accreditation (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). Faculty recognize this schism and are skeptical of what new tasks they will have to take on for their institution – new tasks that must be completed in a time when higher education faces increasing numbers of students, larger classes, and flat funding. Further, as Miller (1988) pointed out twenty years ago, there are concerns that assessment brings others into the classroom to look over the shoulder and the autonomy of individual faculty. Professors indicate concern about academic freedom and believe that “experts” outside the academy are questioning their faculty judgment. It is no wonder that, as Lee Shulman (2007) put it, “academics, in the face of the growing volume of calls for accountability, have developed a sense of higher education as victim, swept away by a powerful current over which we can exercise little influence” (p. 25).

Of course, the problem with this approach is that, as many have already pointed out (e.g., Austin, 1993), student assessment can only be successful if faculty own the process. The assessment literature is replete with articles on the importance and value of faculty in successful assessment efforts (Banta, 1999; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Schilling & Schilling, 1998). Developing a new