

# Strategies to Overcome the Barriers in Assessment of Student Learning and Development

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# Presentation Overview

- Summary of challenges that assessment presents
- Examples of common assessment challenges
- Suggested methods to address those challenges
- Resources
- Discussion and questions



# Examples from the field

- What are the greatest barriers you have faced in implementing assessment?
- What are some examples of concerns about assessment you have heard from colleagues?



# Common Challenges

Are there any similarities between our groups?



# This Presentation...

- will not focus on the challenges “external” to the systematic structure and delivery of higher education.
- will address the challenges within our “locus of control”.



# Common Challenges Assessment Presents

- Understanding what it is
- Not knowing how to do it
- Finding Time to engage
- Not prioritizing values/ goals
- Finding time to document
- Getting support from top leadership
- Not using results to inform decision-making
- People who prefer anecdotal decision-making
- Academic Freedom
- Academic Autonomy

Bresciani, M.J.  
Source: Ewell, P. (2005); Bresciani, Zelna, and Anderson (2004); Bresciani, 2006



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# Common Challenges Assessment Presents, Cont.

- Lack of organizational incentives
- Lack of communication about what has been learned
- Difficulty with requesting data
- Difficulty with finding data
- Difficulty in identifying how to use data
- Difficulty interpreting data
- Fear of change, of unknown
- Concern over faculty contracts – a.k.a. – unions
- Confusion

Bresciani, M.J.

Source: Ewell, P. (2005); Bresciani, Zelna, and Anderson (2004); Bresciani, 2006



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# Common Challenges Assessment Presents, Cont.

- Avoiding being labeled as “one of them”
- Avoiding burnout
- Lack of truly authentic instruments and evidence-gathering techniques
- Challenge of benchmarking against external standards
- Concern over student motivation and involvement
- Challenge of managing the assessment process

Source: Ewell, P. (2005), Bresciani, M.J. (2006)

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**In addition, see Table 1**

# Tips to Identifying Resistors

From Bresciani, 2006

- Treat every “excuse” to not engaging in assessment as if you heard it for the first time.
- Remember that what is being said is not always the reason for the resistance.
- Probe with empathetic questions and genuine offers of assistance to identify what the real barrier is
- Work with the “resistor” to identify the solution.



# Suggestions

from Bresciani, 2006

- Get your leadership on board
  - Explain why assessment is not a fad
  - Explain that doing it well does require resources
  - Fine balance between “top-down” expectations and “bottom-up” engagement
  - Fine balance between structure and flexibility



# Suggestions, Cont.

- Know your university's culture
- Define assessment
- Articulate a shared conceptual framework and common language for assessment
- Articulate and implement expectations
- Identify short and long range goals for the process
- Disseminate information on the process – keep the process transparent



# Suggestions, Cont.

- Genuinely interact with faculty/ staff and utilize feedback to improve the process
- Design and implement a professional development plan
  - Tie to theory, delivery, evaluation methods, identifying data, interpreting data, use of data, report writing, etc.
  - Include how to reflect and how to collaborate
- Provide incentives for initial engagement
- Consider engagement in process – not generation of results – as a performance criteria and position description expectation

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## Suggestions, Cont.

- Re-allocate time from doing to reflection of doing
- Involve students, where appropriate and accepted by your institutional culture
- Protect junior faculty, if appropriate
- Identify assessment successes
- Celebrate good practices in quality assessment

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# Suggestions, Cont.

- Start small and grow
- Start with early adopters and then ask them to be the spokespersons
- Start with pilot projects and grow them if successful
- Remind people why they are engaging in assessment – not a process for process' sake
- Embrace the ambiguity
- Remain flexible, but systematic

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# Suggestions, Cont.

- Remember that Faculty / Administrators must have ownership of the process
- Respect varying disciplines' academic freedom
- Recruit influential faculty / administrators to lead the process
  - Stagger or turn over appointments to avoid burnout
- Offer one-to-one or group consultations/sessions as needed and requested
- Take time to get to know and cater to specific needs



## Suggestions, Cont.

- Share examples with each other
- Advertise your assessment learnings and decisions made
- Nudge and Retreat (Maki, 2001)
- Incorporate students in all facets of assessment planning and implementation, if your program is ready
- Answer the question, “What happens if I don’t engage in assessment?”

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# Suggestions, Cont.

- Discuss challenges, derive solutions, and document
  - Establishing acceptable levels of performance and why
  - Prioritizing
  - Concerns about trust and use of data



# Resources

- Each Other
- University Planning and Analysis (UPA) Assessment website
  - <http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/>



# Questions and Discussion

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# One Minute Evaluation

- What is the most valuable lesson that you learned from this session?
- What is one question that you still have?
- What is one thing you will implement on your campus as a result of this presentation?



# References

- Bresciani, M.J. (2006). *Good Practices in Outcomes-based Assessment Program Review*. VA: Stylus.
- Bresciani, M.J., Zelna, C.L., and Anderson, J.A. (2004). *Techniques for Assessing Student Learning and Development in Academic and Student Support Services*. Washington D.C.:NASPA.
- Bresciani, M. J. (Under Review). Understanding barriers to student affairs/services professionals' engagement in outcomes-based assessment of student learning and development. *College Student Affairs Journal*.

