Lessons Learned
from the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment

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OUR UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

Connecticut is the only state that established an “MSC SWAT Team” that went to each campus to provide technical assistance with the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Learning Outcomes Assessment. In this way, the team became familiar with the experiences of both two-year community colleges and four-year universities as they engaged in the initiative. The team was comprised of Southern Connecticut State University’s director of assessment, a math student, a computer science student, and a political science student.

This report presents our lessons learned. In the report, we identify the most effective strategies observed as well as the most common errors. The intent of the report is to provide useful information that may help guide the next phase of the multi-state collaborative.

THE MSC SWAT TEAM

In Connecticut, a team that provided technical assistance to the campuses was established by the director of assessment at Southern Connecticut State University (Michael Ben-Avie). There were several notable advantages to this strategy.

The institutional leads from the campuses did not need to navigate the project-specific version of Taskstream. This was particularly important at the community colleges, which did not have an office of assessment and planning. The faculty members who served as institutional leads were grateful that they were not alone when uploading the artifacts and supplementary documents. One institutional lead wrote the team, “Thank you for coming all the way over here to complete the upload process! It saved me a LOT of stress.”

The MSC SWAT Team gained knowledge and experience through working with all the campuses. Team members quickly identified common errors and thus the speed of the upload process at the institutions steadily increased over time.

The team shared knowledge of the initiative and effective strategies while at the institutions. Through this cross-fertilization of information and techniques, a common understanding of the initiative emerged across the state as well as plans for the future.

The student members of the MSC SWAT team also gained; they learned more about assessment, and were able to include a description of this work in their resumes.

THE MOST EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR COLLECTING STUDENT ARTIFACTS

In almost all cases, the institutional leads received hardcopies of the student artifacts from faculty. Receiving only hardcopies required the institutional leads to use “white-out” or sharpies
to de-identify the artifacts. The institutional leads talked with the team about the de-identification process, and the process took much more work than was anticipated.

At one university, electronic copies of the papers were collected. Students uploaded their de-identified artifacts to their Blackboard accounts. The following is the process used by the director of assessment and director of teaching & learning technologies (Karen Musmanno).

**Posting the Assignment**
- Posting the assignment in the students’ Blackboard accounts will be done by the director of teaching & learning technologies, and no instructor would incur additional work.
- A separate folder will be added to each course under the course menu with an appropriate name for easy identification. This folder, when added, will in no way impact other content that currently resides in the course or will be added in the future.
- Each instructor understands that director of teaching & learning technologies will enter their course to add the assignment.

**Submitting the Assignment**
- Each student will be asked to submit the assignment to two locations within the same course. The first submission will be to the course assignment which is created by the individual faculty member. The second submission will be to the assignment created by director of teaching & learning technologies.
- Specific instructions will be provided to the students on how to submit to the second assignment.

**Downloading the Assignment Submissions**
- After the assignment availability period, the director of teaching & learning technologies will go into each respective section and download the assignment submissions.
- The director of teaching & learning technologies will enter their course to download the assignment submissions.
- The director of teaching & learning technologies will send these submissions to the director of assessment.

The faculty members were also told that the director of teaching & learning technologies would enter their courses on only two occasions. They were also told that no one else would enter their courses. The director will not edit, delete, nor move any other content within the course.

To simplify the process, all the students were directed to upload their papers, and not only the seniors nearing graduation. Since Blackboard captures the students’ ID numbers, the director of assessment removed from the file all the student artifacts that were not eligible based on earned credit. In this way, it was unnecessary for the faculty members to identify which students met the criteria or to request that only some students follow this procedure.
Communicating with the Faculty

The initial communication with faculty described their responsibilities:

We are looking for volunteer professors who are willing to join a national movement designed to take control of our university curriculum and ward off standardized testing of university students. When you join this project, you will contribute to a system-level assessment program that does not rely on standardized testing. It builds instead on assessment linked to faculty instruction, actual curricula, and real student work, some of which is already in place at in courses at the university.

To participate, (1) you will need to ask your students to submit two copies of their senior course assignment through Blackboard; (2) ensure that your final assignment may be scored on the AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics for critical thinking, quantitative literacy, or written communication; (3) complete a brief “coversheet” about your assignment; and (4) send in your description of the assignment. That’s it.

The most important communication to the faculty members was that it was not necessary for them to use Blackboard for their course. Even if they did not know how to use Blackboard, the students knew how to use it. All that the faculty needed to do was distribute the student letter described in the next section.

Communicating with the Students

The students received the following letter from their professors when they described their final assignments and again, when it was time for them to submit their artifacts.

Since you were in elementary school, you have taken standardized tests of achievement. At our university, we do not believe that administering a standardized test is the only or best way to measure university students’ learning. When we heard that a multi-state consortium is piloting a different approach, we asked to participate. Instead of administering a standardized test, we are collecting the final assignments of students and randomly selecting some to assess and use for faculty development. The three learning outcomes that we be used for assessment in the study are critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, or written communication.

Your assignment is required by your professor in the course (and he/she will grade it), whether you decide to participate in the study or not. Since the assignments will be randomly selected, your assignment may or may not be selected for assessment.

*Do not submit your assignment as a .pdf file.*

When you submit your final assignment in Blackboard, we ask that you submit two copies:
- One copy will go directly to your professor (he/she will provide you with instructions).

- When you prepare the second copy of your assignment, do NOT write your name on it, your professor’s name, the course name and/or number, name of the department, or the name of the university. Please upload the second copy of your assignment in Blackboard. When you go to Blackboard and click on this course, you will see the following (or something similar):

![Final Assignment for Assessment](image)

Please upload a copy of your final assignment here.
Before submitting, please be sure there is no identifying information on your paper.
Remove any references to your name, your professor's name, and any references to the university.

Your assignment will remain completely anonymous. Even your professor will not know whether your assignment is selected for the assessment.

If you choose not to participate, please use the form below to inform the Office of Assessment and Planning. Your professor will not know about your decision. Thus, your decision will not impact your grade in the course or your relationship with your professor in any way.

In general, the students chose anonymity for their assignments before submitting them.

**Why this strategy is effective**

This strategy is effective because it collected de-identified, electronic copies of the students’ artifacts. Thus, the institutional lead did not need to “white-out” students’ names, professors’ names, course numbers, and so forth. In addition, the strategy was effective because Blackboard captured the students’ ID numbers. In this way, it was easy to match the artifacts with the demographic information. The strategy required the students to submit their artifacts, and not the faculty members thereby reducing the load of the faculty.

At one institution, about half the student artifacts were hardcopies. In reflecting on the difference between hardcopies and electronic copies, the institutional lead immediately said, “No scanning.” With the hardcopies, the institutional lead de-identified the artifacts and then scanned them. At times, the scanning process was time consuming, particularly because some students wrote on both sides of the paper and other students wrote on only one side of the paper (thus the papers could not be scanned in bulk). For quantitative literacy artifacts, some students wrote equations by hand in pencil; the scanner did not always clearly pick up the students’ handwriting. On the other hand, many students submitted their electronic artifacts as .pdf files, which complicated the de-identification process.
INELIGIBLE PAPERS

Not all student artifacts collected were eligible. The most salient reason why artifacts were not uploaded was the dearth of sufficiently earned credits by the students. For example, a sophomore at our institution enrolled in a senior-level course. While the student’s quality of writing may have been on par with that of the seniors, this student’s artifact could not be uploaded.

Student artifacts that were too long or too short were also not uploaded. For example, a student submitted an 80-page paper. In one course, some students wrote two-page papers. These artifacts were also not uploaded.

The requirements for the de-identification process also resulted in student artifacts that were ineligible. For example, a history professor required the students to write autobiographies using the skills taught in the course. The autobiographies were deeply personal, and many students did not want them to be uploaded for assessment. Also, the artifacts that students did submit were nearly impossible to de-identify and, therefore, were not uploaded.

NOTES

The most common refrain by the institutional leads dealt with the delay in receiving the revised “cover sheet,” quick guide, and other critical information. The leads felt that they would have structured their work differently if they were to have had this information at the start of the initiative. They tended to considerably underestimate the time it would take to de-identify the student artifacts. This left them with a sense that the initiative was too overwhelming or required too much work. As a result, institutional leads are withholding judgment about the merit of MSC until they see the reports.

Some of the jargon caused confusion. For example, the file that contained the demographic information of the students was called “LearningArtifact.” It would have been helpful if this file had been called the “demographic file.” Also, the word “artifact” was considered clunky. In general, faculty members who do not work directly with online assessment systems are not familiar with the word “artifact.” It would have been helpful if the word “paper” had been used instead.

Another word that caused confusion was “assignment.” In the minds of the institutional leads, student papers were to be collected by course or faculty member. “Assignment” did not fit into how they thought about the collection process.

Institutional leads felt that the focus of the materials provided by MSC tended to be geared toward the faculty. Yet, these materials did not provide the institutional leads with the guidance that would have been helpful. The critical question that the institutional leads wrestled with was how many courses or faculty members to recruit. This is not a question about sampling. The issue is that after the add-drop period, the number of students approaching graduation may considerably decrease in courses that had been selected to participate. They also faced faculty members who promised that they would submit student papers, but in the end did not do so. They would have wanted to know how to take this into account. Institutional leads also had to
deal with faculty members who switched the designated learning outcome during the course of the semester; this negatively impacted the planning of the institutional leads (i.e., how many papers to expect for each learning outcome).

There were many questions that the institutional leads had about the scoring process. For example, an institutional lead collected student papers from engineering courses. She wondered whether scorers without a background in engineering would be able to adequately score papers from this discipline.

**HOW MSC FITS INTO INSTITUTIONS’ ACCREDITATION EFFORTS**

Accrediting agencies expect that universities conduct outcome evaluations of students’ progress. For example, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges’ standard 4.19, which deals with the academic program, states, “Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English; the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continuing learning, including the skills of information literacy.” Standard 4.49 states, “The institution’s approach to understanding student learning focuses on the course, program, and institutional level.” Thus, participating in MSC provides the institutions with outcome data that fulfill expectations of accrediting agencies.

Another evaluation strategy is the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA+), a performance-based assessment used to test students’ development of the competencies considered by employers as important in new hires. Students are tested in terms of their competence in analysis and problem solving; scientific and quantitative reasoning; critical reading and evaluation; and writing mechanics and effectiveness. There is an overlap in the competencies measured by MSC and CLA. The advantage of CLA is that it projects how well the seniors should score based on freshmen CLA scores and entering academic ability. Thus, an institution is able to exceed expectations and, therefore, take credit for the value-added.

CLA is expensive. For the MSC pilot, the only cost to the institutions was the time that the institutional leads devoted to the initiative. This may not always be the case. If MSC continues to be more cost-effective than CLA, then MSC has an advantage.

CLA is a timed exam, which rewards quick thinking. As MSC collects student papers, reflective thought and insight are rewarded. On the other hand, the quality of the papers collected for MSC depend, in part, upon the quality of the faculty members’ instructional prompts. This is not the case with CLA.

From the perspective of the assessment directors, CLA is handled as a university-wide assessment and, therefore, faculty members are not involved. Typically, assessment directors arrange for students to take CLA in computer labs outside of class time. By way of contrast, MSC requires the assessment directors to actively engage faculty members in the data collection process. As a result, knowledge and understanding of assessment increased among the faculty. In
some cases, their commitment to assessment increased as well because the assessment was directly linked to their teaching and to their students’ learning. In this regard, MSC has a definite advantage.