Creating A Faculty-Centric Approach as a Catalyst for Improvement in Teaching and Learning

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Abstract

We created a faculty-centric model to serve as a catalyst for faculty engagement that resulted in improved teaching and learning. We aligned the goals and objectives to improve teaching with faculty-centric guiding principles, creating policies and practices that are in the best interest of the faculty. Simple but effective philosophical guiding principles were defined and implemented to openly support and defend faculty. We facilitated dialog among faculty, leveraged technology, and opened new opportunities for faculty scholarship, resulting in documented improvement in student learning. We witnessed innovation in pedagogy become pervasive across the university. This strategy sparked meaningful improvements in teaching and learning. The model is so effective that accreditors noted that a culture of assessment was created "at mach speed."

Keywords

Faculty-centric, curricular mapping, strategic planning, goals, assessment, culture, improved student learning

"We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking that created them"
— Albert Einstein

Background

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, higher education is tasked with making agile pivots in scope and scale in order to prepare our graduates to meet unprecedented challenges. However, the very mechanisms, processes, and policies that protected academic institutions for centuries from the whims of monarchs, despots, and dictators also hinder their ability to change quickly. Accrediting bodies struggle to adapt and adopt policies to validate the educational effectiveness of an institution to make sure they conform with modern notions of student success. The intent of assessing educational effectiveness is to ensure that institutions develop a culture of continuous improvement in teaching and learning. Unfortunately, many assessment efforts did not produce the intended effects (Eubanks et al 2018, Jankowski et al 2018). Faculty across the country complain that the bureaucratic nature of mandatory and compliance-based assessment is not resulting in improved student learning.

In response to the mandate from the accrediting body to institute assessment of student learning, the Office of Assessment at Samuel Merritt University (SMU) developed a framework to guide assessment. The framework went well beyond the narrow definition of assessment and created a structure that nurtured a culture of continuous improvement in teaching and learning. This framework was embraced by the faculty. The accreditors' site visit summary reported that the University created a culture of assessment "at mach speed." A faculty-centric approach was key to success.

Faculty-Centric Approaches

The goal of assessment is to improve student learning. The role of the Office of Assessment is to provide a philosophical framework and set of guidelines and structures that drive improvement in curriculum, pedagogy, services, and assessment of student learning (Banta et al 2016, Rami 2012). Key to achieving this goal is to facilitate practices that support faculty in becoming the best version of themselves.

The faculty-centric framework supports and promotes the student-centered mission of the university by supporting faculty to continually improve teaching. Improvement in learning begins with support for improving teaching (Banta et al 2016). So, while faculty and student services staff maintain a student-centered focus, academic administrators must maintain focus on supporting faculty and facilitating practices and policies that promote and incentivize their development, as well as work to eliminate barriers to innovation.

In a plenary address at the 2018 Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education conference, Erik Gilbert (Gilbert 2018) stated that too much effort is spent on assessment activities rather than on the desired result—improvement in teaching and learning. Faculty-centric assessment plans focus on the results of teaching and learning, rather than on dictating and monitoring assessment activities.

Strategic Planning as a Call to Action

A strategic plan can become an integral part of a narrative. John Hagel describes the difference between story and narrative.A

> "In short, stories for me have two characteristics: they're self-contained (they have a beginning, a middle and an ending)... In contrast, narratives for me are open-ended, there is no resolution yet, but there is some significant opportunity or threat on the horizon that is yet to be achieved and it's not clear whether it will be achieved. The resolution of the narrative hinges on you: it is a call to action to those you are addressing, telling them that their choices and actions will play a material role in helping to resolve the narrative." (Hagel 2017)

A strategic plan can be a call to action, a compelling narrative, that provides faculty greater opportunity for significant shifts in culture and innovation. The narrative as a call to action for assessment is embodied by the motto *Non Satis Scire*, "To know is not enough". Assessment data should inspire tangible and documentable change and improvement. The assessment narrative can be designed to spark an innate desire for faculty to improve their craft. The narrative of the strategic plan for assessment can help faculty fulfill their potential. The data collected and the assessment framework should help faculty become who they want to be. This idea was articulated by Giorogia Lipi in her TED talk (Lipi 2017)

> "...to make data faithfully representative of our human nature and to make sure they will not mislead us anymore, we need to start designing ways to include empathy, imperfection and human qualities in how we collect, process, analyze and display them. I do see a place where, ultimately, instead of using data only to become more efficient, we will all use data to become more humane."

Strategic plans can either help organizations achieve their goals, or be considered a time consuming bureaucratic process. At SMU, the strategic planning process for assessment was influenced by the work of technology visionary Douglas Engelbart. Engelbart focused on augmenting human capabilities by leveraging collective intelligence through technology, creating integrated repositories that connect silos and promote communication and transparency, enabling people to assess the current state in order to imagine and pioneer the future state (Landau, Clegg, Engelbart 2010). The methodology was the foundation that led to a visual and non-linear approach to assessment, based on a holistic rather than siloed approach. It engaged faculty by providing them a different viewpoint for engaging with their courses, their pedagogy, and their role in the educational structure at the program and university levels. The framework for assessment is about self-improvement and collective improvement, not a race for compliance.

Philosophical Framework

The Office of Assessment created a strategic plan to implement the faculty-centric framework. First, they defined a goal and objectives designed to create a faculty-centric model of assessment of educational effectiveness:

> **Faculty-centric goal**
> Create a continuous cycle of improvement to promote excellence in teaching and learning.

Objectives

1. Inspire and support scholarship and innovation.
2. Nurture the recognition and rewarding of teaching excellence.
3. Foster learning communities.
4. Provide faculty development opportunities.

Second, they defined a set of guiding principles outlining the philosophical tenets:

Philosophical Guiding Principles

1. Support and defend faculty.
2. Assume every teacher wants to be a great teacher; therefore, improving teaching and learning is in their interest.
3. Ensure all policies and initiatives are in the interest of the faculty and directly benefit them.
4. Make assessment meaningful and flexible.
5. Create institution-wide goals, and honor individual approaches.
6. Remove barriers, annoyances, and bureaucracy.
7. Leverage technology to add value and eliminate tedium.

The third step was to define the actions that would achieve the desired objectives. An analysis of the organizational infrastructure led to the definition of four types of implementation actions:

Implementation Actions

1. Policy/Process
2. Services
3. Technology
4. Incentives

The final step was to define a set of actions to achieve the desired goals. Each action was aligned with both the objectives and the philosophical guiding principles. That became the map for our actions. (See Appendix: Assessment Department Strategic Plan).

A faculty-centric model focuses on supporting and defending faculty by following guiding principles. In this model, all policies, tools, and services directly benefit faculty. No assessment policies are put in place that require faculty to engage in work unless it is in their best interest. Each step of assessment (gather, display, analyze, share, improve) purposely serves as a catalyst for continuous improvement and directly benefits faculty. The result includes documented improvements and a rich narrative demonstrating continual improvement in teaching and learning. This foundation was operationalized in a unique strategic planning process.

Faculty-Centric Strategic Plan

At SMU, the strategic planning for assessment of student learning aligned to a simple goal and associated objectives that are paired with guiding principles and actions. The articulation of a faculty-centric approach led to widespread adoption of authentic assessment practices.

The faculty-centric assessment strategic plan was created by first defining a simple goal and objectives that focus on cultural change. Objective and guiding principles were assigned a color or symbol as shown in the Assessment Department Strategic Plan in the Appendix.

Technology has served as a catalyst for change. History shows us that with the advent of an effective tool, culture changes rapidly. SMU designed and developed several tools and initiatives that sent a clear message to faculty that aligning and assessing learning outcomes was focused on improving teaching and learning.

Tools and Initiatives

I. Curriculum Mapping Initiative

The Curriculum Mapping Initiative app (CMI), developed at SMU, provided a key element in our change strategy. It allows faculty to view dense data in a context that has meaning and allows them to critically view where their courses are situated in the landscape of the curriculum. It sparks the faculty interest to examine, discuss, and assess the effectiveness of their curriculum.

CMI creates a portfolio for each academic program. It displays the entire curriculum as a whole, with easy access to each part. The broad and detailed maps engaged faculty to think deeply about their own teaching practice within the context of the program and the institution. It is easy to use and provides engaging ways to assess, document, and share how students are demonstrating the learning outcomes.

Faculty can upload and view exemplar assignments, rubrics, and authentic evidence of student learning. They can reflect on the quality of the student work and gain perspective on how they might improve their own teaching practice. The learning outcomes are also integrated into each course in the learning management system (LMS).

Curricular maps are enhanced with data visualization, graphics, and music. These maps provide a shared vision and motivation to analyze program strengths and weaknesses. This serves as a catalyst for faculty dialog on:

- Alignment of learning outcomes to professional standards
- Quality of evidence of student learning
- Curricular gaps and overlaps

CMI illuminates curricular strengths and weaknesses with powerful displays. The software provides a program portfolio for assessing each course learning outcome, as well as creating curricular maps displaying the alignment of learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels. The gathering, display, analysis, and sharing of assessment data occurs all in one place (Landau 2018).

Example 1: Adding sound and color to the alignment of institutional and program learning outcomes

To spark conversations about curriculum, CMI displays the alignment of program learning outcomes (PLOs) to institutional learning outcomes (ILOs) in the Sonification of ILO-PLO Alignment display. Each ILO is represented in a row and is assigned a color and a musical note. The tool plays the PLO-ILO matrix as a musical score, a process referred to as "sonification." Each academic program has its own song. By hearing and seeing the high-level assessment information, faculty begin to think openly and critically about their curriculum. The music and visuals help faculty engage with the data using different parts of the brain, often leading to new insights.

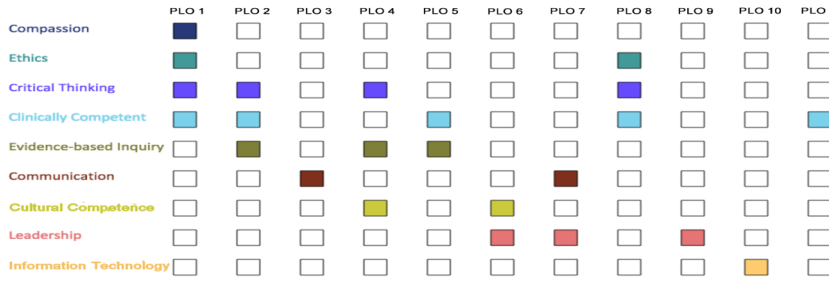

Figure 1: PLO-ILO alignment matrix with sonification of curricular maps

Faculty testimony reflects that the music and colorful animation made a lasting meaningful impression, provoking a serious reflection on the role of learning outcomes as evidenced by student learning. In a faculty meeting in February 2020, two faculty members commented on the positive impact of using CMI nine years earlier for assessing their curriculum.

Example 2: Mosaic View

The Mosaic View provides a dense but rich way to very quickly conduct assessment at the program level. Each ILO is represented by a color and is displayed in a legend at the top of the screen. The first PLO is displayed in a rectangle. At the top the color of ILO that align with that PLO are filled in. The black dots represent all the CLOs aligned with that PLO. The user can click on any CLO dot to see the full text of the CLO, the full text of the PLO, and any evidence of student learning demonstrating full

Comment [1]: I don't understand, let's discuss

or partial fulfillment of the CLO. In addition, users can download any supporting documents such as the assignment instructions, rubrics, or learning resources.

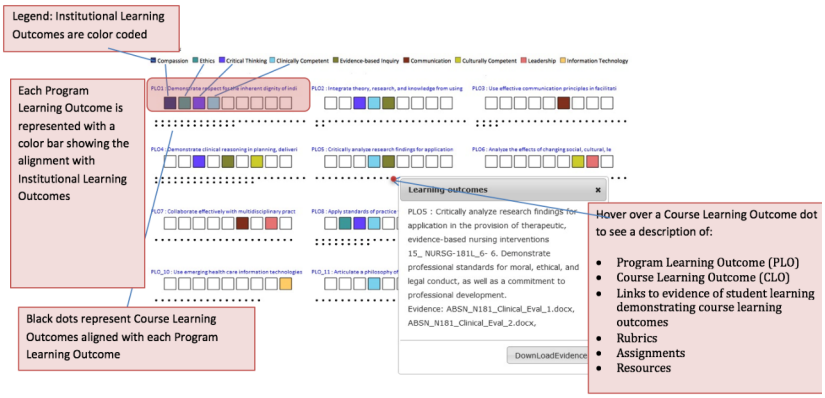

Figure 2: Mosaic View showing institutional/program/course learning outcomes with evidence of student learning, rubrics, and assignments

Linking learning outcomes with evidence of student learning honors individual approaches by allowing faculty to decide which evidence demonstrates student learning in their course. Each faculty member can explain or upload and showcase how student work demonstrates competency for each CLO. It provides a transparent assessment tool that enables faculty to evaluate how well student work demonstrates mastery of the CLOs. It also shows how all the CLOs combined fulfill the PLOs. Specialty accreditation displays are also generated to show how each standard is met.

The central purpose of the CMI app is to generate discussion and analysis rather than generate reports that do not require critical thinking and dialog. Assessment data displays can support faculty in analyzing and strategizing, and then in developing rich narratives that inspire action to achieve excellence in teaching and learning. The data visualizations and sonification of alignment have facilitated faculty in thinking creatively. By creating views that literally represent a shared vision, this technology has augmented the collective intelligence of academic programs.

Results

- All academic programs improved learning outcomes (except the undergraduate nursing program)
- Increase in assessment of authentic evidence of student learning
- Increase in program-level coordination around assignment content and timing
- Alignment of learning outcomes with specialty accreditation standards

II. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning as Assessment

Action research is a powerful tool to drive improvement in practice. In-depth assignment-level assessment is a form of scholarship designed to improve the researcher's own practice. According to Jean McNiff (2002), action research begins with the question, "How do I improve my work?" She identifies steps for action research as:

- Identify an area of practice to be investigated.
- Imagine a solution.
- Implement the solution.
- Evaluate the solution.
- Change practice in light of the evaluation.

The Office of Assessment launched an assessment initiative to incentivize faculty to conduct action research as part of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Faculty receive a small grant for experimenting with and assessing new pedagogies or technologies in their class, displaying their work at the annual Faculty Research Symposium and in an online archive. This provided multiple incentives for faculty. SMU is not a tier one research university, so while research is a part of rank and promotion, it comprises a small portion of faculty workload. The grant incentive provides a stipend (roughly equivalent to 10 hours of pay) and counts towards their scholarship, both as receiving a grant and as presenting a poster at a conference.

This initiative sparked collaborations and sharing of best practices and recognition of excellence in teaching practice. The majority of full-time faculty have completed action research projects (currently 150 completed reports). This initiative has also led to pervasive and effective use of technology-enhanced pedagogy and improved student success.

One of the keys to success of the program was making the process easy and rewarding for faculty. Faculty were provided a poster template with clear criteria for each section, as well as a checklist of the established faculty competencies that were required for promotion. The rich discussions at the symposiums led to the sharing of ideas and inspired multiple related projects across diverse disciplines.

The majority of the action research projects centered on the use of video. This included adding videos, the use of video for online office hours, and video feedback in online courses. Other topics included the effect of simulations on student learning, test preparation methods, student collaboration, student peer review, cultural competence, and mindfulness practices, as well as a host of other topics. Faculty unanimously found that using some form of student response system (clickers, mobile device, and paper-based systems) all yielded both quantitative and qualitative improvement in student satisfaction and test scores.

Results

- Documentation of improved teaching practice
- Recognition of poster presentation as a form of scholarship
- Recognition for receiving a grant as part of scholarship (includes a stipend that is added to paychecks)
- Grant award demonstrates fulfillment of one or more of the faculty pedagogy competencies
- Action research projects occasionally served as a springboard for peer-reviewed publications
- Inspired multiple related projects across diverse disciplines
- Created a culture of assessment of student learning to improve student learning

III. SyllaBot

The SyllaBot app is another technology tool developed at SMU to support faculty and improve student learning. It collects the latest information from official university sources and uses it to automatically generate an editable draft syllabus as a Microsoft Word document. The app imports the course number, title, term, section, description, and pre- and co-requisites, course credits, and current university policies from the university's student information system. It imports from the LMS the name of each course's modules, assignments, assignment groups, assignment weights, and grading scales, as well as the alignment of assignments with learning outcomes. It then imports the course and program learning outcomes from the Curriculum Mapping Initiative (CMI) app.

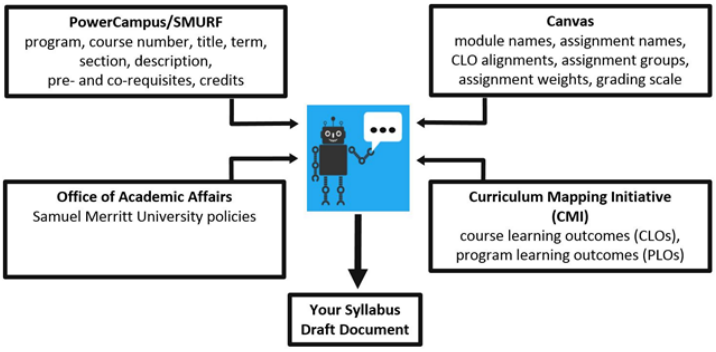

Figure 3: How SyllaBot gathers information from a variety of sources

SyllaBot is intended to save faculty time in gathering and formatting clerical information, enabling faculty to devote more attention to the creative work of course and assignment design. In addition, SyllaBot has dramatically reduced the number of

errors in syllabus content and helps faculty see ways to improve their course design in the LMS.

The SyllaBot project was initiated after conducting a preliminary review of 15 randomly selected syllabi across all academic departments. One or more of these issues was found in each of the 15 syllabi:

- Department grading scale was inconsistent
- Course descriptions didn't match the catalog
- SMU policies weren't current
- Course learning outcomes were missing or not the approved CLOs
- Other required elements were missing

Several semesters after the implementation of SyllaBot, a faculty survey found that the majority of faculty using it found it useful, particularly in ensuring that policies were up-to-date.Frequent comments included:

> "Helps provide a standard format for all department courses."
> "While most of my syllabus matched the format and style, it was a relief to know that all the university policies were current and I could just leave those sections as-is."
> "It gave me direction and order."
> "Consistent template between courses."

Results

- The majority of faculty surveyed reported saving time and found the SyllaBot format helpful
- Reduction in errors in syllabi
- Standardization of syllabi in some academic programs
- Improvements in course organization in the LMS
- Help identify issues such as poorly written university policies, errors in program-level grading scale in the LMS, and inconsistencies between course descriptions in syllabi versus in the catalog
- Reduction in inconsistencies between information on the syllabus and the LMS

IV. Assignment Designer Toolkit

Faculty use the Assignment Designer Toolkit to align each course assignment with the relevant course learning outcomes and examine evidence of student learning to see if they are achieving the desired results. Then, using a rubric, faculty critically assess their assignments and capture improvement plans. In a workshop evaluation, a faculty member described the Assignment Designer Toolkit in this way: "It's objective and systematic, and it includes important aspects that we should be looking at when assessing an assignment."

Results:

- Improved teaching and learning at the course and program levels

V. Faculty Development

Faculty development was in some ways the most challenging task. Faculty workshops, mentoring, and events became more and more difficult to schedule as the institution grew with unique academic calendars and increased faculty workload. Despite this, we created a series of workshops and mentorships that were highly effective for the small number of attendees. We also launched a campaign to educate faculty on how to more effectively design the LMS.

Faculty participated in interactive workshops where they outlined plans for improving their teaching strategies. Topics include:

- Creating impactful presentations (Landau, Broz 2019)
- Techniques to improve student engagement and long-term memory (Landau, Broz 2017-2019)
- Developing effective rubrics (2017)
- Universal design for learning (Landau, Broz 2019)

Results

- One academic program reduced the number of assignments and improved assignment design by coordinating assignments across courses
- Documentable improvement in design of the courses in the LMS in at least 25% of courses
- Faculty presentation quality improved
- Faculty and staff created and implemented universal design into their teaching practice, with over 40 documentable practices

VI. Participation in the Faculty Organization

The Office of Assessment collaborated with SMU's Faculty Organization Curriculum Committee and the Faculty Development Committee to support their work and champion the goal of creating a continuous cycle of improvement to promote excellence in teaching and learning. This often took the form of supporting moves to improve processes and remove barriers to make their work more efficient and effective.

Results

- The process for submitting new and revised courses for approval was streamlined and improved by adding clear guidelines and rubrics
- Support staff are now included in faculty development events
- Faculty and staff embraced universal design for learning
- Improved quality of faculty research symposium events, including development of rubrics for peer review

- Improved quality of faculty scholarship presentations
- Redesigned and improved the Faculty Organization website

Conclusion

Using philosophical guiding principles that are staunchly pro-faculty informs our practice and motivates faculty to engage in improving student learning. The result is a robust change in curriculum and pedagogy in almost every academic program. The majority of faculty now incorporate active student learning in their courses and have a demonstrated willingness to experiment with new forms of pedagogy. They regularly conduct meaningful assessment of teaching and learning.

One key factor in this shift is incentivizing faculty for their scholarship of teaching and learning through action research. Faculty received a small grant to experiment with new forms of pedagogy, gather evidence of student learning, and reflect on the results. The success of this strategy is evidenced by the numerous faculty action research reports presented at faculty research symposiums over the past seven years. The scholarship of teaching and learning is now pervasive at SMU.

Another key factor is providing tools and policies that facilitate faculty work. Actively working to eliminate compliance-based bureaucracy provides credibility and gratitude from faculty that helps create buy-in for a robust assessment framework .

It is now part of the fabric of each academic degree program for faculty to regularly meet to improve curriculum and pedagogy, and best practices for improving teaching and learning are shared openly.

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Appendix

Assessment Department Strategic Plan

Goal: Create a continuous cycle of improvement to promote excellence in teaching and learning to ensure student success		
Objectives		
Faculty regularly engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning.	Teaching excellence is regularly rewarded and supported.	Experimentation and transformation to enhance student learning is the norm.

Guiding Principles				
Support and defend faculty • Assume every teacher wants to be a great teacher, therefore improving teaching and learning is in their interest. • Ensure all policies and initiatives are in the interest of the faculty and directly benefit them.	Make assessment meaningful and flexible.	Create institution-wide goals and honor individual approaches.	Remove barriers, annoyances, and bureaucracy.	Leverage technology to add value and eliminate tedium.

Actions Infrastructure categories help organize actions and tactical implementation.			
Policy/Process	**Services**	**Technology**	**Incentives**

Encourage each academic program to assess and improve student learning in a way that is meaningful to them.	Facilitate academic program meetings to assess and improve curricular maps at the course and program level. Help faculty align assignments to CLOs.	Use an innovative curricular mapping tool that facilitates insight and aligns learning outcomes with evidence of student learning, assignments, and rubrics and is engaging by incorporating sound, color, and animation.	Faculty showcase excellence in teaching and learning.
	 Provide training and instructional design support for aligning assignments to learning outcomes and creating more engaged classrooms.		
	 Provide assistance for specialty accreditation.	 Integrate assessment software with LMS (Canvas).	
 Improve process for curricular change in the Curriculum Committee.		 Create the SyllaBot tool that automatically builds a draft syllabus from info from the LMS, the learning outcomes, and policies. Saves faculty time and reduces syllabi errors.	
 Work with Curriculum Committee and Registrar to streamline small curricular changes		 Use SyllaBot as a catalyst for improving course communication.	

to save Curriculum Committee time.			
 Research Committee changed policies to include "The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning" as research.(Boyer's model).		 Create online repository for reports/posters of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning program.	 Robust Scholarship of Teaching and Learning action research program "Improving Teaching with Technology Grant" to encourage the majority of our faculty to experiment with new pedagogy and tools, and conduct ongoing meaningful assessment of student learning.
 Faculty Development Committee includes Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Faculty Research Symposium.	 Collect, archive, and print the STL posters for the Faculty Research Symposium.	 Create a PowerPoint poster presentation template as the grant report.	 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning counts toward scholarship for the poster presentation and as receiving a grant.
	 Faculty attend workshops to improve teaching and learning.		