

The Evolution of an “Award-Winning” Assessment Plan

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Abstract

Assessing student learning outcomes has become important to business schools. As stated in AACSB guidelines, assessment plays an important role in evaluating a program's effectiveness, in making continuous improvement to the curricula, and in preparing students for employment. AACSB guidelines allow considerable flexibility in how program goals and student learning outcomes may be derived or how they may relate to the missions and visions of business schools and their respective departments. AACSB does not consider student grades, surveys related to student satisfaction with courses, and so on as sufficient measures of student learning outcomes. The lack of specifics in how various disciplines may assess student learning outcomes has led to the development of multiple instruments. The challenge has also resulted in more creative assessment strategies and design approaches that are seen as more responsive to departmental needs. Depending on resource availability and other practical considerations, marketing departments have typically used external field tests (e.g., the ETS Major Field Test) or have developed in-house instruments.

In the interest of joining hands with others in finding effective strategies in increasing the validity and reliability of in-house instruments, this case study discusses the journey pursued by a large western university in developing in-house instruments which ultimately won the university's Assessment Plan Award in 2010. In particular, the paper discusses the challenges faced in (1) developing a curriculum roadmap for the program, (2) establishing a relationship between the program goals and the mission and vision of the college, the school of business, etc., (3) mapping the relationship between student learning outcomes to the desired objectives of the master syllabi, and (4) developing multiple sets of instruments that, in turn, measure the components of knowledge, critical thinking, and written and oral communication skills. Further, the challenges the department faced in evaluating the validity and reliability of in-house instruments are outlined.

Many business programs in colleges and universities around the world use AACSB guidelines when pursuing assessment. In addition to these guidelines, business programs themselves recognize the importance of assessment and are usually very eager to prove the benefits of their programs and to improve them (Chonko 2004). AACSB suggests that assessment is the way business programs can assure student learning in relationship to a business program's student learning outcomes. AACSB's Assessment Resource Center makes it clear that assessment is to provide continuous improvement through clearly defined student learning goals, effectively assessing

these goals, and utilizing what is learned in this assessment to continually update and improve business programs (AACSB Website 2011). These guidelines leave much flexibility as separate departments are expected to arrive at student learning objectives that are related to the business school's and department's missions. Then finding ways to effectively measure these objectives and implementing continuous improvements based on what is learned from this process round out the assessment efforts suggested by AACSB. Further, leading marketing scholars have identified proper and effective assessment as one of the ongoing key issues in marketing education (Tanner 2001, 2005).

This all sounds simple enough; however, the flexibility AACSB provides may in fact serve as a stumbling block and may result in difficulty deciding what and how to assess. It might be simpler if AACSB would give very specific instructions, such as using the Major Field Tests from Educational Testing Service (ETS) or provide a standardized rubric to be used in judging student presentations. The only specific guidance AACSB provides informs us what measures are not sufficient for assessment (e.g., student grades, surveys only, etc.). Marketing educators know that AACSB does not provide these specifics, so it is up to departments and schools of business to creatively and effectively design and implement assessment programs. Engaging in such uncharted tasks is quite a challenge.

Assessment was defined in earlier research as “any regular and systematic process by which a program faculty designs, implements, and uses valid data gathering techniques for determining program effectiveness and making decisions about program conduct and improvement” (Metzler and Tjeerdsma 1998, p. 2). Evaluated in the context of AACSB's current guidelines, this definition remains still valid. (and Willenborg 1998). The guidelines now adopted by AACSB are similar to these suggestions. See Figure I for a simple model depicting how assessment programs are developed.

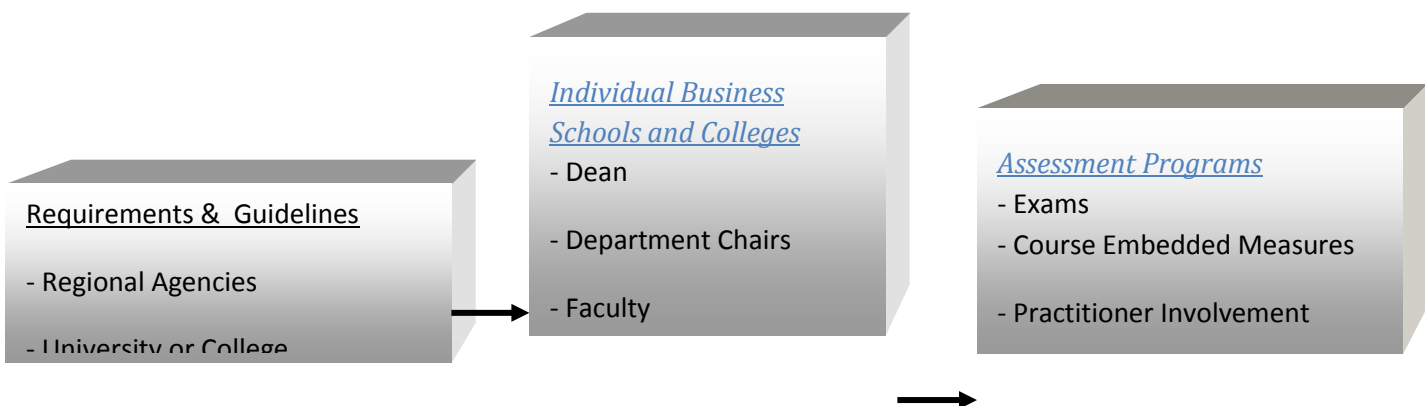


Figure I. Model of assessment program development

In 2010, the Marketing Department at a large western university won an award from the University for its Assessment Plan. Winning this award was an outcome of continuous improvement efforts. The development began years ago with a simple review of the expectations of North Central Association of Colleges and Schools' Higher Learning Commission. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools was founded in 1895, for the purpose of establishing close relations between the colleges and secondary schools of the region. Today, the Association is a membership organization of colleges and schools in 19 states, including Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. It also accredits the Department of Defense schools and Navajo Nation schools. Two independent, for-profit schools (University of Phoenix and Argosy University) are also accredited by the organization (North Central Association Website 2011).

By necessity, assessment guidelines of such a regional accrediting agency are general to be able to account for all sorts of colleges and universities and the wide variety of programs within those colleges and universities. Thus, though a good place to begin the assessment program design, assessment for a business school, and the departments within, must go much further and be more specific. This is especially true if the business school wants to be accredited by AACSB, or even the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP).

Taking all accreditation issues into consideration, this Marketing Department created an assessment plan that included the following.

- Advisory Board (abandoned)
- ETS Major Field Test (abandoned)
- Skill set of Advisory Board retained and updated every five years
- Internally-developed test, based on well-established textbooks' text banks
- Common rubrics for assessing presentations and written work
- Assess all business majors and marketing minors – goes beyond AACSB

There are 50 departments at this university and every year, four of the departments are given awards for their assessment plans. The criteria for the awards are based mostly on continuous

review of the assessment process and how the department uses the information to constantly improve the academic program.

So, what was so special about the efforts of this Marketing Department that resulted in this award? To be truthful, it was not that special or different from what business schools and Marketing Departments are going through everywhere. Many colleges and schools of business, as well as Marketing Departments, have gone through similar steps, making similar conclusions and adjustments along the way. Because of the strong emphasis by AACSB on assessment and assurance of learning, business schools are excellent at assessment. If universities have award programs for assessment, it is likely that any department in the business school would have an outstanding chance at winning.

The key to winning the award, in this case, was having multiple measures and engaging in continuous improvement. This is also the key to assessment. The things that are learned from assessment must be used to not only improve the assessment process itself, but also to improve the academic programs we are offering our students. We should not ignore any of our students who are taking our marketing classes, whether they are marketing majors, minors, business majors enrolled in a required marketing course, or students from other majors and minors who just want to take a Principles of Marketing course.

References are available upon request.