Assessment Task Force 6-Month Report with General Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

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INTRODUCTION

This report reviews the progress and findings to date of the Assessment Task Force (ATF) in its first six months (January-June 2008). Section I highlights the project context, goals, and the key activities of the task force. Section II highlights the key findings, impediments and enablers of assessment, the key conclusions we have derived from this initial effort, and some preliminary recommendations for the future.

SECTION I

(a) PROJECT CONTEXT:
The ATF was formed to address three key questions on the campus:

1. What is the current state of assessment of learning outcomes across the entire campus, at the department/school level?
2. What facilitates or hampers engaging in assessment activities at the department/school level?
3. What is the future of assessment practice on campus?

(b) PROJECT GOALS: January-June 2008
The Assessment Task Force had three key goals during its first six months. These goals were:
- To establish the identity of the ATF as an entity created to learn more about existing assessment efforts and facilitate future assessment efforts throughout the university through both outreach and dissemination efforts;
- To extend the inventory of assessment practice across the university that began during the Middle-States self-study, primarily through interviews with key representatives of departments and other academic units across the campus; and
- To better understand existing cultures and understandings on campus with regard to assessment, as preparation to developing a larger conversation about assessment on campus.

<u>(c) KEY PROJECT ACTIVITIES: January-June 2008</u>
To meet the goals of the Task Force, we have initially focused our efforts on three major activities: Organization & Management, Data collection and Dissemination, and Communication & Education.

1. Organization and Management
   - Hired a temporary (3 years) fulltime Project Manager to facilitate management and data collection for the ATF.
   - Convened three formal meetings of the University-wide Assessment Task Force.

2. Communication and Education
   - Presented our charge and work-to-date at a formal department heads meeting.
   - Invited 51 department heads, and other faculty to participate in our data collection.
   - Conducted individual, in-depth interviews on assessment activities and attitudes across the campus with 33 department heads and other faculty members representing six colleges, and 17 departments.
   - Began to establish relationships with faculty and department heads in order to get them involved in ongoing conversations around assessment.
   - Responded to initial requests for more information, interaction, and/or consulting regarding assessment in individual departments. (We have offered this support through the Eberly Center but to-date no department had taken us up on the offer).

3. Data Collection and Dissemination
   - Collected 29 assessment artifacts and examples of assessment practices at various stages of development across the campus.
   - Created and evaluated a reporting template that can be used to document a wide variety of assessment examples.
   - Conducting initial development of an assessment website to facilitate the dissemination of assessment practices and examples across campus.

<u>SECTION II: KEY FINDINGS</u>

<u>(a) ASESSMENT CULTURE AND PRACTICE</u>

Our preliminary findings address two major areas, assessment culture, (which includes attitudes and knowledge regarding assessment) and assessment practice.

Assessment Culture

Through the interviews we were able to identify three distinct groups on campus that differed according to their attitudes and knowledge of assessment and, as a result, how they engaged in assessment practices.

1. Established and Knowledgeable. The first group, which comprised about 10% of our contacts, consists of a small number of department heads and other faculty who view assessment as a valuable pedagogical and research activity. Most are already incorporating assessment into their pedagogical and research efforts and are actively seeking best practices in assessment in order to be part of the national conversation on assessment. This group would like access to experts to help them develop, and/or rework their assessment plans, methods and/or tools.

2. Emerging Novices. The second group, which consists of the large majority of department heads and other faculty we spoke to on campus, is just beginning to see the value of rich assessment practices, beyond summative mid-term and final exams, or indeed beyond the classroom entirely. This group is admittedly "lost" in terms of how they might best go about directing their efforts. This group is not resistant to altering their approaches to incorporate clearly articulated outcomes and assessment of outcomes into their curricula or program. Some have developed rudimentary assessment tools but are unsure about how to increase their effectiveness, put them into practice, and/or use the data they collect. Others are unsure of how to start the assessment process or how to convince their colleagues in their departments of the value of such a process

   As a whole, this group is looking for resources to help them. This group was most likely to mention the need for a centralized repository, such as a website, that could be accessed on an ongoing basis and provide examples of assessment practices going on across the campus.

3. Resistors. The third group consists of department heads and other faculty who are resistant to the idea of assessment. Much of the resistance derives from the language of assessment, its association with external accreditation, and the belief that assessment is far too time-consuming. However, some in this group also indicated that centralized resources, dedicated to helping both individual faculty members as well as program-planning committees, would reduce the resistance tremendously.

Assessment Practice

1. Some learning outcome assessment activities—beyond traditional within-course tests and quizzes—are being conducted across the campus. Most of these practices have emerged out of very practical needs to address particular problems both at the course and at the program level. Some of the most common motivations for developing assessment tools are:

   - To clearly articulate grading criteria;
   - To develop clarity around assessment of process-oriented and project oriented assignments;
   - To shorten the time and effort spent on grading of writing assignments in large courses where students differ widely in their writing skills;
   - To respond to employer feedback on students' presentation skills in the workplace;
   - To direct students to apply basic concepts to problem-solving;
   - To direct students to learn how to self-assess their own learning; and
   - To determine students' prior knowledge and assumptions.

These findings further confirm the initial finding of the Middle States self-study. Furthermore, assessment tools developed to address these common problems run the gamut from sophisticated direct measures of learning, such as controlled studies or design experiments, to more simple, indirect measures, such as focus groups, surveys, etc.

2. While many assessment efforts exist, very few departments/programs use the data collected to make curricular revisions, largely because there is a lack of knowledge about how to do so.

(b) IMPEDIMENTS & ENABLERS

As expected, we found both impediments and enablers in the establishment of richer assessment practices on campus that might provide better feedback to students, better data on which to base curriculum evaluation, and internal program review etc.

Impediments

1. Lack of Resources and Supporting Infrastructure: The most significant impediment to assessment is the lack of resources and knowledge available to help design assessment plans, methods and/or tools.

2. Alienation and Lack of a Shared Process: Most faculty and department heads that we talked to feel that they have to figure things out on their own when it comes to assessment. This is a process that is perceived as overly daunting and time-consuming. As a result, programs often assign one [reluctant] faculty member to assume the task of directing assessment practices, leading to rather 'alienated' efforts. In many of these cases, the assigned individual has little input

from colleagues, and minimal support & knowledge. As a result the assessment tools produced are of minimal value and never utilized. These failures only serve to further reinforce negative attitudes toward assessment and disengage faculty even more.

3. <u>Lack of Sharing of Assessment Practice or Assessment Knowledge:</u> Most faculty members reported very little sharing of assessment efforts even within the same department.

Enablers
1. <u>Leadership from Department Head</u>. Department heads who support and encourage assessment practices seem to be key in setting the context for assessment. Departments in which heads routinely talk about assessment of learning also seem to be departments where the largest number of faculty members have assessment tools in place.

2. <u>Access to resources</u>. Assessment practices are more likely when faculty or departments have easy access to examples that can be used as is or can be easily adapted, or have collaborative efforts to develop assessment tools within the department. In departments that have developed Web sharing of assessment practices, faculty are more likely to incorporate assessment practices into their teaching.

3. <u>Support from Experts</u>. Individual faculty members or departments who have sought help from the Eberly Center are more likely to have assessment plans and practices in place. These faculty members have partnered with the Eberly Center staff to collaboratively develop assessment tools and engage in ongoing consultations to support their emerging practices.

<u>(c) KEY CONCLUSIONS</u>
Our findings at this stage of the process are sufficient to suggest some preliminary conclusions on the three questions put forth by the Task Force. These are:

- Assessment of student learning does occur at Carnegie Mellon. The practice is varied, with departments at different stages of development and with varying attitudes towards assessment. However, the view of assessment is more positive than prior to the Middle States self-study. The discussions that emerged as a function of that process did much to dispel negative myths surrounding assessment and made faculty more aware of and open to the potential value of assessment to their teaching practices and programs.

- The need for resources and support to enhance assessment practice was a recurring theme throughout the interviews and data collection process and in discussions with the members of the Assessment Task Force. Those

departments with access to resources and support were more positive regarding assessment and more likely to integrate assessment into their practice, at both the course and departmental levels. This suggests that the success of future assessment efforts that would have the widest impact would need to target this need for resources and support for assessment. In particular, there is a widespread need and emerging demand for a centralized information bank---particularly a website on successful assessment practices and examples.

- Finally, some—perhaps many—departments do not appear to be aware of some resources already available. For example, some department heads mentioned to us that the existing new faculty orientation sessions on assessment would be useful to share with more senior faculty as well. On the other hand, previous offerings of such workshops by the Eberly Center have not been well subscribed. A web resource for successful assessment practices and examples—similar to Eberly's web resources for course design — may help in providing a low-commitment entry point to information on assessment, with the option of more in-depth consulting later if that seems useful. This approach has established significant and sustained consulting traffic in course design, and the same could be predicted for assessment.

(d) THINKING AHEAD
The ATF has engendered much good will in its first six months and encountered many positive attitudes toward assessment. We have been pleasantly surprised by the willingness of our colleagues across campus to work more systematically toward a more comprehensive approach to assessment. To take advantage of the good start of the ATF and the good will it has encountered, we want to take the following steps:

1. Develop a permanent and dynamic web presence for information on, and examples of, learning outcomes assessment. This will function, for assessment, much like the Eberly Center's site for helping faculty with course design and classroom pedagogy and problem-solving challenges.

2. Hire a permanent assessment person [to work with Anne Fay] to continue the great start of outgoing Tarini Bedi and to focus our efforts in the 2nd year on consulting and design-experiment activities.