

ASSESSMENT CLIMATE SURVEY REPORT
April 2016

Executive Summary

What was done

- The Assessment Climate Survey was designed and conducted by John Stevenson, with substantial input and support from Elaine Finan and Michele Martel in the Office of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment and Accreditation (SLOAA).
- The survey was administered as an on-line survey to all URI department chairs (and the directors of department-equivalent academic programs) in Fall 2009 and again in Fall 2012. In 2009, 29 of 51 responded (56.9%). In Fall 2012, 36 of 61 responded (59.0%).
- The survey consisted of 37 Likert-scale items (with response choices ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) in 2009; seven items were added for the 2012 version for a total of 44 structured items. An open-ended space for qualitative comments was provided in both years.
- Content was organized into six major domains, all dealing with the university's program-level student learning outcomes assessment: (1) personal attitudes toward assessment; (2) perceived campus norms; (3) perceived leadership commitment; (4) structured support for assessment; (5) level of achievement within departments; (6) level of achievement university-wide.
- As an organization developing the capacity to conduct and learn from program level assessment of student learning outcomes, URI is investing resources and establishing policies for assessment. The survey gives us something with which to benchmark our progress over time and identify strengths and weaknesses in our overall progress. The findings can inform policy and resource allocation decisions as we go forward.

What was found

- **Table 1** presents the item-by-item results for both years, providing the percents of respondents who agreed and strongly agreed to each item, with the items grouped into six domains. The domains are intended to summarize major indicators of progress on program assessment. Qualitative comments are also included.
- **Figure 1** presents results for six summary indices that combine relevant items available for both time points (averaging agreement with positively worded items and disagreement with negatively worded items) for each of the *á priori* domains. The **Appendix** provides some statistical information about the domain scales.

Conclusions and recommendations

- There is good news and bad news in these findings. Although the response rates do not allow total confidence that these results would generalize, the rates are higher than is often the case for this type of survey, and do give us modest confidence in the interpretability of the findings.

- First for some **good news**:
 - Looking at the overall levels for the domains covered by the survey, chairs/directors expressed relatively positive personal views of the value of assessment, and reported relatively high levels of implementation and use in their own departments. More than half of the responding chairs/directors were positive about these aspects of assessment at both time points.
 - Several specific items were highly endorsed: the value of continuous assessment to improve students' knowledge and skills; the support of college deans for departmental assessment; the building of faculty capacity through attendance at workshops; and the completion of assessment reports on undergraduate programs.
 - Perceptions of broad campus norms supportive of assessment, although much lower than personal views, went up from 2009 to 2012, suggesting that chairs/directors did see the campus moving toward more acceptance of the necessity of engaging in these activities. The perception that the institution is committed to the goal of having every student graduate with abilities and values consistent with the mission and strategic plan went up ten points between 2009 and 2012, ending with more than half of the chairs/directors agreeing that the commitment is real.
 - Chairs/directors also reported that there was more structured support for program-level assessment at the University, with more awareness of available training for faculty, the SLOAA office, its website, and the policy-setting role of the Learning Outcomes Oversight Committee (LOOC). In addition, chairs/directors are more aware of University-wide tracking of compliance with assessment requirements.
 - These findings suggest that our University is making real progress in establishing the value of assessment within programs and providing the sorts of structural support that can make these activities meaningful and sustainable.

- Now for some **bad news**:
 - The domains with the least positive results in 2012 were (1) perceived campus norms; (2) perceived positive administration leadership; and (3) perceived full integration of university-wide program assessment into the functioning of the campus.

- There were declines between 2009 and 2012 in the domains of personal attitudes, leadership commitment, and departmental implementation.
 - Individual items provide more details of these negative changes. The view that college deans are supportive, while still positive, declined by 20 points between 2009 and 2012. Agreement with the view that there are no incentives for faculty or chairs/directors to engage in assessment, and that there are no negative consequences for failing to comply with assessment requirements, was already high and increased substantially between 2009 and 2012.
 - Although department chairs/directors were likely to express positive personal views of the value of assessment in their departments, there were notable declines from 2009 to 2012 in the use of assessment results for either strategic planning or curriculum revision, fewer chairs/directors believed that their majors were aware of their departmental learning outcomes, and fewer chairs/directors believed they had colleagues who had received training.
 - This pattern suggests that although there have been gains over time in the areas under the control of the chairs/directors themselves, and their awareness of the practical help offered by SLOAA, there is not a comparable sense that the administration genuinely values this work and will provide the recognition, resources, and incentives to demonstrate that valuing. Qualitative comments in Table 1 reinforce this conclusion. Thus, although the mandate is increasingly clear, the point of the work is not.
- **Recommendations:**
 - Chairs/directors deserve congratulations for bringing their colleagues along to engage in and learn from assessment in their own departments, and for recognizing the value of doing this work.
 - The bodies that provide necessary policy clarity and help for making the work manageable and meaningful deserve recognition as well as encouragement to continue to develop these supports.
 - Policies from LOOC can clarify both the positive uses of the data across the institution and the consequences for failure to engage in program level assessment.
 - Accessible resources for training and other forms of capacity-building, at both the individual faculty-development level and the program support level, can be made even more salient and accessible.

- Feedback on assessment reports can continue to demonstrate the value of peer review for setting reasonable standards and providing guidance for improvement over time in the assessment process.

- The need for continuing emphasis on the importance and internal utility of assessment from the Provost's level, and clear recognition of the usefulness of the process by college deans, backed up by essential resources, is evident. Even with growing recognition by faculty of the intrinsic value of the assessment process the administration's commitment is essential if a culture of assessment is to be nurtured and sustained. The perception that administration support has declined over the past three years is a matter for serious attention.
 - Individual faculty who make substantial contributions to departmental and/or university-wide assessment deserve to have this recognized in meaningful ways, including annual review (with support for those who wish to make assessment activity part of their scholarly pursuits), summer recontracting, as well as explicit recognition of the value of the service in public forums.
 - Departments that engage in meaningful assessment deserve recognition and celebration of their work as well as their findings. This might include public awards, "showcase" events, and also resources when the need for them is demonstrated by assessment results.
 - Alignment of program assessment with college and university-wide priorities calls for a new institution-wide effort with leadership from the top. Learning outcomes and assessment priorities should be explicitly linked to the strategic planning and resource allocation processes in colleges and at the Provost's level. Integration into the Academic Program Review process will facilitate this effort. Mini-grants and other means of support can help departments to move in the direction of greater alignment, but administration leadership is crucial.

**Assessment Climate Survey
URI 2015**

ITEM 2009 N = 30, 2012 N = 35, 2015 N = 28	% Agree + Strongly Agree			Re-verse key
	Fall 2009	Fall 2012	Fall 2015	
I. Personal attitude toward assessment (2015 Alpha, 6 items = .694) <i>5 items</i>	.656	.751	.550	
1. Assessment of learning outcomes for our majors is very important.	75.8	66.7	60.7	
2. Assessment of learning outcomes does not yield useful results.			25.0	X
3. General education outcome objectives are complementary to our objectives for the major.	44.8	61.1	60.7	
4. Assessment should be the job of the administration, not the faculty.	17.2	25.7	21.4	X
5. Assessment of student learning outcomes is here to stay.	65.5	51.4	71.4	
6. We faculty need to keep checking ourselves to improve the chances that our students graduate with the skills and attitudes we believe they need.	93.1	80.5	96.4	
II. Perceived campus norms (2015 Alpha, 6 items = .677) <i>6 items</i>	.658	.507	.677	
7. Most departments here are now taking assessment seriously.	34.5	38.9	28.6	
8. Most faculty on this campus believe assessment is unrelated to genuine concern for student learning.	53.6	61.1	46.4	X
9. Many faculty resist assessment because they fear negative assessment findings that could damage individuals or programs.	65.5	63.9	21.4	X
10. At this institution, faculty highly value transparency, including open disclosure of our students' learning outcomes.	20.6	22.2	32.1	
11. The faculty at this institution are committed to the goal of having every student at the university graduate with abilities and values consistent with our university's mission and strategic plan.	41.3	51.5	57.1	
12. At this institution, assessment of student learning outcomes has become a highly valued, consistently practiced, aspect of our culture.	3.4	5.7	14.3	

III. Perceived leadership commitment (2015 Alpha, 10 items = .747)	<i>8 items</i>	.683	.693	.733	
13. The administration supports assessment, from the Provost on down.		44.8	38.9	42.9	
14. Our college dean/associate recognizes and supports the value of assessment.		83.3	63.8	50.0	
15. Our college dean/associate dean discusses our departmental assessment reports with us.				21.4	
16. There are no rewards or incentives for chairs or program directors participating in assessment.		75.8	81.7	85.7	X
17. There are no incentives for faculty to participate in assessment (e.g. annual review recognition).		79.3	91.7	75.0	X
18. There are few administration-provided resources for assessment.		72.4	83.3	64.3	X
19. The administration keeps track of programs' assessment activities and results.		24.1	42.9	21.4	
20. Adequate time is provided for those who are asked to do the work of assessment.		10.3	11.1	14.3	
21. Programs that excel at assessment are formally recognized at the institution-wide level.				3.6	
22. Departments that choose not to assess their programs will experience negative consequences.		64.3	50.0	35.7	
IV. Structured support for assessment (2015 Alpha, 10 items = .814)	<i>7 items</i>	.886	.869	.785	
23. Faculty and chairs have easily accessible opportunities to learn about how to conduct useful assessment.		37.9	33.3	35.7	
24. Expectations for what is to be done and reported for program assessment are clear.		20.7	27.8	21.4	
25. A clear policy for a 2-year cycle of assessment reporting is now in place.			47.3	57.1	
26. There is adequate training provided for those who are asked to do the work of assessment.		10.3	25.0	25.0	
27. There are models for what is expected in an assessment report.		34.5	31.5	42.9	
28. The two-year reporting cycle works well for my department.			25.0	7.1	
29. Departments receive useful feedback on our assessment reports.			33.4	21.4	
30. There is an office on campus that provides assistance of many kinds for assessment.		55.2	75.0	78.6	
31. There is a helpful website on campus addressing assessment progress and expectations.		27.5	41.7	46.4	
32. There is a policy-setting committee to guide assessment on this campus.		31.0	47.2	35.7	

V. Level of achievement within department (2015 Alpha, 9 items = .785)	6 items	.788	.775	.698	
33. My department has workable assessment plan(s) for our undergraduate program(s).		77.7	55.5	67.9	
34. My department has workable assessment plan(s) for our graduate degree program(s). (Please skip if not applicable for your department.)			11.4	71.4	
35. Our majors are aware of our department's learning objectives.		48.2	37.1	17.9	
36. My department has conducted and reported one or more rounds of assessing learning outcomes for our undergraduate major(s).		72.4	88.6	89.3	
37. My department has conducted and reported one or more rounds of assessing learning outcomes for our graduate major(s). (Please skip if not applicable for your department.)				61.9	
38. My department uses assessment results in strategic planning.		51.7	38.9	39.3	
39. Faculty in my department have discussions about our students and our hopes for them in the context of assessment.		48.3	47.2	57.1	
40. My department has changed our curriculum design (requirements, courses, course content, etc.) in response to assessment results.		58.6	41.7	28.6	
41. My department has made changes in how courses are taught (pedagogy) and what is covered in them on the basis of assessment results.				39.3	
VI. Level of achievement university-wide (2015 Alpha, 9 items = .609)	4 items	.783	.276	.256	

42. A majority of <u>undergraduate</u> majors across the campus have now gone through at least one cycle of assessment – reporting - program revision (sometimes termed “closing the loop”).	31.0	50.0	37.0	
43. A majority of <u>graduate</u> majors across the campus have now gone through at least one cycle of assessment – reporting - program revision.			32.0	
44. Departments share ideas with other departments/programs for meaningful, manageable assessment.			10.7	
45. Strategic planning at the university level uses assessment results.	3.7	11.5	3.6	
46. Learning outcomes for degree programs are aligned with the broader missions of colleges and the institution.			28.6	
47. University-wide objectives for students’ learning outcomes are specified, measured, and reported on a regular basis.	3.3	0.0	10.7	
48. Our general education program has clear, measurable outcome objectives.	14.3	11.5	14.3	
49. General education addresses important learning goals at this institution.		64.7	46.4	

50. My department is willing to contribute to the assessment of general education.		31.4	39.3	
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51. In which stage in the development of learning outcomes assessment would you judge that URI is?

Denial: 3.6%

External Demand: 50%

Tentative Commitment: 39.3%

Full-scale Effort: 7.1%

Maintenance and Refinement: 0.0%

52. This survey was previously administered to department chairs/directors in October 2009 and October 2012. Do you believe you took the survey at that time?

	Yes	Not Sure	No
2012	25.7	17.1	57.1
2015	17.9	35.7	46.4

Open-ended responses (9 total responses):

Assessment of a program takes time and effort. Workload plans need to reflect this or you will continue to get resistance and limited assessments. Everyone is asked to more with less. This is another of those activities that takes time to conceptualize, implement and use, incentives are sorely lacking.

Graduate programs that already report learning outcomes for purposes of being professionally accredited should be able to substitute these reports for grad student learning outcomes assessment process at URI

The university must recognize programs that already have rigorous external accreditation, and not duplicate requirements internal for these programs.

We have gone from "why should we? ... the administration never uses the results", to understanding that the feedback could be informative for us.

The primary obstacle for those of us who would embrace assessment is time. We are all strapped and over committed without adequate workload release flowing to us to learn how to do this and then carry it out.

Administrations across the country have grown, in part, to address increased workloads due to increased responsibilities and complexity of their work. But some of this work flows down to the chairs and to the professors, who are increasingly asked to strengthen everything that they do with the accompanying extra workload (more research, more external funding, improved teaching, more outreach - all more evidence - based). New offices are created and administrators are hired to assist. The professors and chairs however are denied workload time or additional staff within the colleges and departments to do all of this

effectively.

At a time that we are asked to improve teaching and strengthen research, would you expect professors to now give up research and instructional time to also attend to robust and meaningful assessment? In the daily and yearly triage process, I am guessing that assessment might get short shrift unless we get more help.

So yes, we agree that assessment is important. And yes we would value the feedback - it would be very helpful in assisting us to improve teaching and learning outcome and informative to curricular changes. Until these workload challenges are addressed, it remains a struggle to adequately attend to assessment.

While I think assessment has the potential to be useful, at URI it falls on chairs or program coordinators, with no additional resources at the department level to gather data, track students, analyze data, etc. Thus, we try to put as little into it as possible, and our data reflect that.

We do assessment because we are told we must do it. Most faculty believe our time and resources are better spent actually teaching, advising, learning. But since URI is now a corporate institution run by bean counters, we will do the minimal amount required to satisfy their politically motivated requirements of us.

In most answers with "Neither Agree nor Disagree" the response should be interpreted as "I don't know".

I think the current assessment process is more suited to secondary education and unduly complex. You could use the SLO in IDEA and have each dept specify them a bit and map those to particular courses. The IDEAs can then be used to measure student perceptions and specific exercises used to measure "actual" accomplishment.

