

Making It Better

Research, Assessment, and Recursive Learning Cycles

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Abstract

This article provides case study examples of how assessment efforts led to and have been enhanced by the creation of integrated curriculum delivery models in parks, recreation, and tourism programs at Clemson University and the University of Utah.

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Whether we like it or not, assessment is a hot topic. Typing the term “assessment” into *The Chronicle of Higher Education’s* search engine alone returns 7,794 results including commentary on the need for better methods, descriptions of a variety of programs’ methods, the legitimacy of such efforts, the ills of such efforts, and even a few people admitting they like the process. In addition, there are many other scholarly journals and other publications that focus on assessment and issues relevant to assessment. In spite of all the attention (good and bad) this topic gets, most faculty would not describe the assessment process as fun or enjoyable and it is not something that department chairs and other administrators include on their “things I look forward to telling faculty they have to do” lists.

Probably the most revealing, controversial, and talked about study on student learning recently is *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa (University of Chicago Press, 2011). The researchers found that 36% of students made no significant gains from freshman to senior year. Even before this study was published, pressure was building from students, parents, politicians, and the general public for colleges and universities to produce evidence of student success. While there are serious problems and issues with the ability of the study to pinpoint problems and issues at individual institutions, its impact on the discussion of assessment has been profound. It is also important to acknowledge that assessment is a two-way street that not only includes outcomes but should also include the process of teaching and instructing students.

Ironically, faculty often tell practitioners in our field that they need to do a better job of assessing their programs and provide advice as to how to do so. Yet we remain steadfastly shocked that anyone would have the gall to ask and expect such a thing of us as educators and researchers. To be fair, there are outstanding agencies and faculty who do an excellent job with program evaluation and assessment but they tend to be the exception rather than the rule. Like many practitioners in our field, assessment is something that takes a back seat to the other responsibilities faculty have like research, public service, advising undergraduate and graduate students, and serving on departmental and university committees. Plus, it can be difficult, even for us, who have training in research methods and probably have an education program with assessment experts across or right next to us on campus. Most campuses even have an office, most likely in a dark corner of a basement in some forgotten building, full of eager assessment nerds dying to be asked to come up to the surface and into the sunlight to help us.

The purpose of this paper is to provide case study examples of how the assessment process led to, has been integrated into, and improved core immersion programs in parks, recreation, and tourism at Clemson University and the University of Utah.

Clemson University

Unfortunately, the layers and levels of assessments we have become expected to undertake in higher education have expanded and are often disjointed. Clemson’s Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management (PRTM) program is accredited by NRPA (the 29 Professional Competencies included in Section 8.0 from the 2004 *Standards and Evaluative Criteria for Baccalaureate Programs in Recreation, Park Resources, and Leisure Services*), we have Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and general

education responsibilities (communication, ethical judgment, and critical thinking), and our college has learner dispositions (6 values all students in the College will develop in addition to content knowledge and skills including working collaboratively, leading creatively, demonstrating resilience and an entrepreneurial spirit, possessing ethical conduct, possessing global perspective, becoming lifelong learners, appreciating diversity, and understanding the complex global economy) that must be assessed. Each of these assessment requirements includes several overlapping, interrelated, and/or very similar learning outcomes across various topics. Before the development of the EDGE (Engaging in Diverse Guided Experiences; see paper entitled “The EDGE of Learning” in this issue for a detailed description of the program) semester, these assessments took place in multiple courses that students were taking out of sequence, some were redundant, none were particularly well done (and that is probably being a bit generous), some were not done at all, and many of the learning outcomes were jammed into courses in what could have been and most likely appeared to be a haphazard, random fashion. Most of the time assessment was done a lot like most of our students complete their work, at the last minute and under duress. In other words, assessment tended to happen at the beginning and end of each semester. At the first faculty meeting of the semester, the undergraduate coordinator reminded faculty who taught courses with assessment responsibility to track results on assignments and tests (insert collective groan here) and would ask for those results when final exams were complete (with a few exceptions this process would take multiple requests and office visits).

It was these pressures and less than ideal circumstances that led to the faculty in our department deciding that there had to be a better way to deal with this very necessary and essential “evil” and turn it in to something meaningful and useful. Several issues were identified:

- Because we are the beneficiaries of many change of major and transfer students, a lot of students took courses out of sequence.
- We have five concentration areas (Community Recreation, Sport, and Camp Management; Travel and Tourism; Therapeutic Recreation; Parks and Conservation Area Management; and Professional Golf Management) and where we assessed our core requirements varied. Therefore, assessment of a single learning outcome was sometimes assigned to very different courses.
- Courses that had assessment responsibilities almost always had multiple sections, taught by multiple instructors who did not discuss what they were doing and how they were assessing learning outcomes in their sections. Therefore, under the pretense of not impinging upon anyone’s academic freedom, there was little quality control of the type and intensity of how learning outcomes were being measured.

One of our goals was to make the assessment process clean, painless, and robust. As described in “The EDGE of Learning,” Clemson’s EDGE semester currently includes 12 credits and is where the majority of our assessment efforts occur. A team of 5 faculty and approximately 10 graduate students team-teach this learning experience.

Ideally, students have completed or nearly completed their 30 hours of general education coursework before entering the EDGE semester. Transfer and change of

major students enter the EDGE semester with students who matriculated as freshman. EDGE was designed around the NRPA's learning outcomes, our college's learner dispositions, and our general education responsibilities. Clemson is an NRPA core-accredited program and the EDGE semester gave us the opportunity to design a very nontraditional yet cohesive and standard learning experience that insures all of our students, regardless of concentration area, have a broad understanding of our field that is delivered in a consistent manner. We wanted to be sure that our tourism people, our parks people, our community recreation and sport people, our therapeutic recreation people, and yes, even our golf people were receiving the same message and speaking the same language.

The main factor that leads to an efficient system of assessment is that the EDGE semester is designed around the idea of our students being a "captive" audience. During the EDGE semester, our students "own" us and we "own" them as one of our team members, Dr. Fran McGuire, likes to say. Students only participate in the EDGE experience (I hesitate to use the term *courses* because that would be an extremely inaccurate description of what we do) and take the introduction to their chosen concentration area during the fall semester of their sophomore year. Using this format we almost have complete control over their academic schedules and make it very clear that EDGE comes first. Having a cohort group of students moving through their core curriculum removes the vast majority of the issues we experienced in the past with coordinating assessment efforts. More importantly, it has allowed us to focus on assessing learning outcomes using a multiple measures approach (see below), where in the past we were not doing a very good job of using simple single measures.

In 1996, the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) published *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning*. One of these principles is "assessment works best when it is ongoing not episodic" (Astin et al., 1996, p. 2). An example of a previous measure of a learning outcome might have been stated as "80% of students will pass a quiz/group of questions on an exam/complete an assignment related to outcome x with a grade of 70 or better" and we still do that type of assessment. However, we have added new measures like learning portfolio entries, major project assignments, reflections on volunteer experiences and field trips, oral exams, and performance evaluations to the mix that happen throughout the semester and across all 12 credit hours. While none of these things qualify as new, ground-breaking assessment tools, it is the delivery system and team-teaching model that has put us in a position to accomplish a more purposeful and focused assessment of learning outcomes with less work and pain. Previously there were nine core courses that occurred across the curriculum map and included one, two, or more NRPA objectives, general education responsibilities, and college learner dispositions thrown in with the other course objectives. The EDGE semester was built to include a majority of those outcomes in a neatly packaged product delivered as distributed competencies across all learning activities. Our department chair often encourages us to "work smarter, not harder." This has been one of the few times we have actually paid attention to his advice.

The big question or criticism of this approach might be that these things should be done throughout the curriculum, and they are. In our case, because our concentration areas have such diverse requirements it was and remains a bit more difficult for us

to do so with the core learning outcomes required by NRPA. However, we do see the EDGE semester as our initial step in re-engineering how we deliver our upper-level concentration area requirements to be more immersive in nature. Because students now move through the curriculum in cohort groups we plan to redesign other assessment points we currently conduct (we also conduct assessments upon students completing practicum experiences, the completion of the internship, and our department chair conducts exit interviews). In the near future, we will integrate measures of selected NRPA learner outcomes, general education responsibilities, college learner disposition into these additional layers of assessment.

Another AAHE principle is “assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes” (Astin, 1996, p. 1). In addition to our assessment activities, there are a few things we do on a regular basis to assess how we are doing as a team, to evaluate the learning activities we are putting students through, and to receive feedback from students in our attempt to, again as Dr. McGuire likes to say, “insure that we are delivering content and experiences to students in the best format by the best people we have available.” While this may seem like a nightmare to some, our team meets once per week. The first year, these meetings often lasted a long time and often included heated arguments (or more diplomatically - spirited and collegial debates), frustration, confusion, and tons of hysterical laughter. It was great, really great. Looking back on it, it was because we all learned a lot about a lot of stuff like collaboration and teaching and learning and students’ expectations of us and our expectations of them. As we have learned lots about what works and hopefully gotten better at operating under our new model the meetings have gotten shorter but no less entertaining and enriching. We use this time to discuss learning activities, grading, assessment, and to share stories, frustrations, and successes we and our students have experienced. The best part is that despite all the wounds and battle scars we remain relatively fearless about trying new things.

Even though we maintain a significant amount of contact with our students as individuals, we have a student advisory board. The purpose of this group of students is to provide us with feedback on a regular basis and as needed. They are charged with discussing issues and getting feedback from their peers and now that we have three classes of student advisory board members we are beginning to use upper level advisory board members as mentors for new EDGE students. We have found their input to be invaluable.

We use student learning portfolio entries and an oral exam question as a layer of our feedback loop. Two learning portfolio entries have included reflections on the field trip experience all EDGE students participate in and an overall reflection on the EDGE semester experience. The oral exam questions are administered in a focus group setting and give students the chance to discuss the “aha” moments they experienced throughout the semester. These questions are designed to measure specific learning outcomes. For the first time, assuming students give us permission to do so, we are planning on videotaping the oral exam in order to mine student responses and have a record in addition to the notes team members take during the exam. Again, with permission, we will begin to use this data and the responses collected from learning portfolio entries to answer research questions we are currently developing.

Finally, “assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time” (Astin et al., 1996, p. 1). In the EDGE semester we have done away with the silos of traditional courses and topics. All outcomes are considered distributed competencies and most learning activities and assessments are designed to integrate multiple outcomes. Students are afforded opportunities to improve their work throughout the semester through re-writes of learning portfolio entries and feedback provided throughout the semester as the major program development project is completed.

The University of Utah

At the University of Utah, otherwise referred to as the “U,” our research began by visiting the University of Georgia and Clemson to better understand their Integrated Core Programs. We wished to learn about their successes and trials mainly to ensure we did not make the same mistakes (said with a big cheesy grin). Without understanding their challenges and approaches, we could not have had such a great experience. However that success did not happen overnight. We needed to fully understand whether or not we could succeed at the University of Utah first. As a reminder, in “The University of Utah’s Integrated Core: A Case Study from a “Commuter Campus,” in this volume, a thorough explanation and breakdown of the Integrated Core is explained by Dr. Karen Paisley, et al.

One of our greatest strengths at the “U” is our students. We are considered a commuter school, which generally translates to a nontraditional student body. According to the most recent National Student Survey on Engagement in 2011 (NSSE), total enrolled students at the U was 31, 673. Students worked off-campus an average of 15-20 hours per week; spent on average up to 10 hours per week commuting to school, and less than 10% lived on campus. This meant we had to be aware and considerate of our student’s schedules outside of school. We knew we could not build a program that met five days a week. We had to be sensitive to what our students could realistically manage with their full-time jobs, families, military responsibilities, etc. In order to understand what our students could and would be interested in, we asked them. Through this we learned that there was a willingness to participate in this type of structure because it would allow them to better juggle all their other responsibilities while succeeding in their experience at the U.

What we quickly learned was that our students wanted an educational experience that made an impact. They wanted to be learning while working in the field. They were open and wanted to be a part of a different kind of college experience. The registration numbers proved their desire to be a part of a Core program with 92 students registered for the first year IC and 100 for the second year of the IC.

What We Learned From Our Students

An integral aspect of any Integrated Core program is evaluation, evaluation, evaluation. In order to provide high-level learning opportunities, faculty must be aware of changing environments, trends, and political advancements. It is not always easy asking your students to constantly evaluate teaching styles, topics and structure because you just might not hear what you want. However, key to making this successful is to be open to student, faculty, and TA feedback.

Our team, consisting of three faculty and six graduate assistants, elected to assess the Core two times during the semester—Week eight and Week 16 (assessments are included in folder). Through this we could ensure we were meeting their needs as well as developing the Core to be the best it could be. What we realized was we were actually meeting our goals and theirs through the Core. Specific goals included flexible schedule, engagement in the community gaining real life experience, and tangible products at the end of the semester such as a portfolio to build upon for the remainder of their collegiate career. The merging of five courses into one semester experience brought it all together for them. Our students understood the importance of social justice, active living and sustainability within the field. They began asking higher level learning questions through journal entries, and weekly discussion groups, because the out-of-class experiences opened their eyes to gaps within the profession. They were not afraid to walk out into the public sector and build partnerships. Ultimately we met our goals of building a socially aware student body due to constant evaluation from the students.

Our evaluations did not stop with the students. As a teaching team, we met weekly for up to two hours, in order to evaluate the week. We found that we had to create a meeting space that encouraged professional feedback (both positive and constructive). In our meetings we followed a tight agenda that always began with Kudos (recognizing others work or creative ideas). Working together as a team is not easy and recognizing the hard work at the beginning of each meeting by welcoming compliments and encouraging the act of thankfulness brought our team closer. It kept our meetings from focusing solely on issues and problems but also made each team member aware of what we were doing or seeing others do.

Making it Better

Our commitment to “making it better” for the student, the teacher, the department, and the community has been a guiding factor in how we have continued to build the Core into the second year. Intention has been our guiding principle and has given us a strong foundation from which to grow.

For the students, we took a hard look at how information is presented, when it is presented, and how the information can be presented in a manner that encompasses other course topics, real-world events, and current community issues. We kept asking ourselves, “If this is meant to be seamless, why doesn’t it feel that way yet? How can we make this feel seamless and continue to cover all the important information out there?” In order to answer that question, we reviewed all of our previous course documents, determined goals that addressed the seamless concern and designed a course of action for the second year to provide a seamless experience. Ultimately we did not want to say to the students, “This content meets the standards/objectives for course ###.” Our goal was that as the semester went on, each week would build off of the previous ones, and then the culminating experience (i.e., Program Plan/Special Event) would combine all course content into one tangible experience and portfolio. In addition, we eliminated the breakdown on course syllabi and outlines that indicated what courses were being taught for each session achieving the seamless feel of the semester. Evaluations will be completed to assess whether or not we have succeeded with this and results will be freely shared.

An additional way we are looking to make the IC better is to “flip” the class, a popular trend in higher education. Flipping basically looks at creating online lectures that students watch prior to coming to class so that class time can be dedicated to critical thinking and community involvement. In order to do this, the teaching faculty are applying for grants to hybridize the course in order to accomplish this goal.

For our faculty and teaching assistants, we wanted to make sure all were teaching to their strengths/core professional areas. It is imperative that effort is put into building a strong teaching team before ever meeting with students. Taking the time to understand everyone’s strengths and weaknesses really opens doors to creative learning opportunities for the students. Moreover, taking the time in the beginning to work, plan and make decisions together will greatly impact how decisions are made during the semester.

During the fall of 2012, the IC was recognized as a Community Engaged Learning (CEL) course by the University of Utah. This recognition is beneficial for both the department and the community as it recognizes the faculty and students commitment to the community and engaged learning. Our students also benefit from the CEL designation as it appears on their transcript and enables them to apply for scholarships, internship and awards.

In conclusion, when deciding to switch to a core/block model, evaluation must be an integral part of any plan. Evaluation must go above and beyond the standard, “once a semester” course evaluation. It must be consistent, ongoing, and constructive. As a team, results from the assessments/evaluations should be taken seriously and acted on. When students are engaged at a higher level of learning, their feedback and comments are extremely beneficial and can strengthen your program. Basically, adopting the mantra “Making it Better” guides decisions and provides direction for growth rather than that is in the present or future. Adopting a “core: model is well worth the work!

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