Benefits of the NADE Certification Process: Self-Knowledge, Informed Choices & Programmatic Strength

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Editors' note: The NADE Certification Council thanks Professor Greci for this article in support of the certification process.

Research shows that systematic, ongoing program evaluation is needed to adequately assess the effectiveness of developmental programs (NADE, 2010). Ongoing evaluation provides both (1) validation of programs to educational institutions and legislators and (2) impetus for program improvement. I work in the Developmental Education Department at University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), where I recently coordinated our department's National Association of Developmental Education (NADE) certification program evaluation. Becoming NADE certified was an incredible learning process that produced fruits beyond what we ever would have imagined when we were starting out. Both in terms of professional development for faculty and the development of a stronger program for our students, going through the NADE certification process was indispensable.

Applying for certification was a long-term project, and thus daunting at times, but with NADE's untiring assistance, supportive administrators at our university, and a good-sized table in my office, I was able to coordinate this effort. Our study team broke down the certification process into the following steps, according to the NADE application instructions. First, we researched our program's historical background. Second, we described our program's organizational structure and its location within the university. Third, we examined the mission statements of the university, the college in which we were located, and our program. Fourth, we elaborated our program's theoretical foundation. We documented program content, collected and analyzed baseline data, completed a department self-study, and determined the strengths of our program. We identified areas needing improvement, proposed feasible improvements, and chose and implemented the action plan that we would study. Last, we collected and analyzed comparative data after the action plan had had time to take effect.

The key was breaking down the work into these pieces. As the coordinator of our program's program evaluation, I didn't try to do everything at once but approached the work in the order that we needed to present it to NADE in the final document we turned in to them. NADE was so supportive that we felt comfortable checking in with them at any stage of the process, whenever we had questions about what we were supposed to do or the quality of our work.

I. Accumulation of Knowledge
The evaluation process encouraged a prodigious accumulation of self-knowledge. The first project was to write up our program's history for NADE. For us, this involved interviewing a lot of faculty and staff, to pull together a complete picture of what had happened in developmental education at UAF during the previous thirty years.

Our program had its roots in the community colleges and rural education centers located around Interior Alaska during the 1970s. In the 1980s the Cross-Cultural Communications Program was started in response to the needs of those same students. In the 1990s a Developmental Studies Committee was formed to establish more DEV classes and to review DEV curriculum. In 2003 the Department of Developmental Education was founded, and with it, the DEV program accumulated more power within the university hierarchy. All these pieces when looked at together showed clearly why our department was here, and what had

been done to serve our unique and developing student body, which stretched from urban Fairbanks to rural (off the road system) communities.

NADE asked us to provide organizational charts showing the place of our program in the university. Acquiring and presenting the organizational charts helped us gain clarity of the location of our department within our college and of who oversees each part of the system. But with NADE's assistance, this task also helped us to see where information and action were getting stuck in our system, and to see how administrators, teachers, and students shared parallel goals. We were able to put these findings to use as we made future programmatic changes.

We looked closely at our institution's mission statement, which included UAF's priorities as an international research center. We compared the institutional mission statement to the mission of our department to make educational opportunity and success possible for all students. We felt, and still do feel strongly that access without support is not opportunity. Our mission statement and the university's conflicted in these areas. Obviously, it is important for a department's mission statement not to be superseded by its institution's; it became clear that this was an important area of focus for our programmatic work.

Developing the theoretical foundations section of the evaluation is challenging for many programs, but very empowering. Like so many developmental programs, ours was founded most directly on best practices as outlined by NADE. NADE asked us to look more deeply at the specific theories that underlie the way we teach our classes. (When doing reviews of other programs as a Certification Council reviewer, I have found that many programs do not have a clear, well-developed theoretical framework.)

Once again, this became an opportunity to gain greater understanding of our program. During this process, we learned more about the theories that were central to the foundation of our program: in our case, these were Student Personnel Point of View, Democratic Theory, and Constructivism. We now have a well-written elaboration of the theoretical foundation for our program, and this work of other educators and researchers serves as strong support for what we believe and why we do the things we do.

Because we were working on a NADE certification project, we had access to institutional data we had not had access to in the past. In fact, it had been especially frustrating to us that administrators had access to data about our program and misinterpreted it regularly, while we had no opportunity to collect and analyze data about our own program. Assisted by NADE and our Office of Planning, Analysis & Institutional Research, we were able to define for ourselves what data we wanted to see and accumulate a solid body of quantitative data on our program. This data covered a six-year period (Fall 2005–Summer 2011) and helped us study our NADE action plan, the implementation of mandatory placement (which occurred in Fall 2007–Spring 2008). We compared baseline and comparative data on our program and compared our data to similar national data.

The best way to analyze the comparative data was through a team process, assisted by Planning, Analysis and Institutional Research staff. My personal background for coordinating this study included a master's degree in Community Psychology, but it had been years since I had done quantitative research. By working with faculty in each of the areas we were studying, with the help of the research staff who had helped us to gather the data, we were able to look very closely at our findings.

Some data confirmed what we already knew, for example that more students took developmental courses when mandatory placement was in place. Other data

prodded us to ask why surprises were showing up, and that was a very fruitful area for discussion indeed. For example, we still didn't know why many students still were not enrolling in the appropriate courses in spite of mandatory placement. Writing a results section that analyzed baseline and comparative data and their relationship was also a team project, which helped us to identify the important findings and present them in ways that are clear to an audience reading our work. NADE Certification Council review teams often work closely with faculty and staff on this section of the evaluation.

II. Informed Choices

This accumulation of knowledge fostered what might have been the most important benefit of the NADE certification process: it helped us to make more informed choices than we'd been able to make before.

For example, as we studied the mission statements, it became clear that our mission was often buried in the missions of our university and our college, hindering us at times from working more successfully with other departments with whom we needed to collaborate and leaving us unable to receive funding for any but our rural students.

The NADE self-study helped us identify our strengths and our primary goals. Hunter Boylan, David Caverly and Irene Doo came to UAF to do an external study for us early on in our process. The action plan we chose for our NADE study was recommended by them and confirmed by our faculty self-evaluation. This evaluation included looking as a group at baseline data. Boylan's expertise speaks well to this process: he says that most programs fall into the average category, and the point is not to compare ourselves to some "mythical standard," but to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Working as a study team to identify the areas most needing improvement, proposing solutions, and choosing to work on improvements expanded our clarity about where we wanted to focus our energies. It required coming to an understanding of where we had control and where we didn't, and of where we wanted to push on the system given what was possible. One by one we filtered out proposals that didn't make sense at the time, resulting in an action plan grounded in self-study and baseline data that showed the need for this action.

By analyzing data, we acquired quantitative support for goals we'd had for a long time, and we were able to add to the growing understanding at the university that these goals were worthy of immediate action. We found that our action plan, implementing mandatory placement, was a positive step, but wasn't working as fully as it could. Many recommendations were made for improving mandatory placement, most having to do with increasing the amount of specialized advising for students in general. This was an essential finding that influenced subsequent decision-making at the department, college and university levels.

III. Increased Confidence

The list of areas needing improvement always seems long where developmental education services are concerned; this can be trying to developmental educators as the years go on. Many aspects of the certification process helped us build confidence in the face of such concerns. The self-study, for instance, identified our program's strengths: we saw that we had well-trained faculty with common goals and objectives, who provided varied instructional methods based on learning theory, assessed students regularly and gave them prompt feedback, provided support services to rural and urban-based students, and used formative evaluation strategies to refine and improve courses and services. The self-study made it easier to see these strengths. We became more confident about what we had to offer, and presented these strengths forward to administrators. We also were able to see

that our centralized program with its clearly defined mission, goals and objectives was a great strength, and we even found that we had institutional support higher than that which is found at most research universities. Having data to support our strengths gave us confidence and a positive focus.

With strong data came an increased opportunity to speak to and acquire funding and other support from our administrators. The quantitative data, especially, was required for speaking to our University of Alaska President. We were able to enter into that sort of conversation with our deans and use numbers to explain why we supported mandatory placement, intensive developmental advising, and other programmatic supports for students. Putting mandatory placement at the center of our study helped make it more likely that effective placement for our students would remain in place for our students.

IV. Assistance from NADE

If you are considering engaging in the certification process, always remember that the NADE Certification Council is there to support you as you go through key points in the process. For example, the choice of action plan is important to the certification process because the analysis centers on seeing how the action plan does and doesn't work. This is an area where NADE's involvement can be useful since the action plan needs to be well-focused, specific and precise.

The NADE certification guides helped us identify the best variables for our study. They gave us guidance as to which variables to measure but also gave us enough freedom to design our study specifically, so as to make it effective for our particular institution. For instance, though grade distributions for developmental courses were required (that's just one example of a required NADE variable), we were also able to study "retention through 24 credits," a variable that made sense for us at UAF.

Wording the goal of one's study is one of the most challenging parts of the certification process. But doing this well helped us become more precise in defining exactly what action we were trying to put into effect. Choosing the correct variables to study was also essential. These were places where coordinating with the NADE Certification Council helped ensure completion of a precise, well-focused quantitative study. Linda Thompson, Val Hampson and Karen Patty-Graham, along with our specific review team members, were always available to help us.

V. Empowerment

NADE provided the support and structure to help us develop our ability to do continuous and systematic data collection, evaluation and assessment. It's not that we hadn't been doing these before. But NADE provided a system of evaluating and assessing our program that was very structured. That structure enabled us to learn about ourselves, develop confidence, and become more powerful in our ability to support our students. We continue to use that structure of study even now that we are certified: it helps us do a stronger job on institutional program review requirements, as well as student learning outcomes assessments. We are empowered now, not just by our certification but also by what it means we know how to do for our students. We are proud of our accomplishment and recommend this process to everyone.

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