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ABSTRACT

Assessment in the discipline of speech communication is far from a "passing trend." Between 1988 and 1991, assessment activity on college and university campuses moved from a 55% level of involvement to 81%. Following certain steps allows for an approach that needs to be taken to make the transition to departmental assessment a manageable one. The plan not only focuses on developing departmental acceptance of the process, but it also recognizes the value of strategic positioning of the department in the total university environment. First, it is important to have at least one individual in the department with a working knowledge of communication assessment. This person must become familiar with key resources in communication assessment, particularly SCA actions on assessment, published resources, other campus initiatives, and various assessment tools. Second, the concerns and suspicions among departmental faculty must be replaced by an attitude that encourages empowerment and ownership. Faculty must feel that they own the process and not that it is being dictated to them. Third, faculty must stay in touch with university assessment initiatives and make sure their views are represented in university discussions and mandates. Fourth, assessment must be brought directly into the department's structure. Fifth, faculty should look at communication departments on other campuses. Sixth, faculty must investigate creative means of funding assessment. In general, the department chair is the key person when it comes to assessment efforts. (TB)

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COMMUNICATION ASSESSMENT: INSTITUTIONAL AND DEPARTMENTAL
DECISIONS AND ACTIONS

by

Judith K. Litterst

St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN

Presented at the 1994 SCA Annual Conference, New Orleans

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Assessment. The word brings forth all sorts of reactions from those who hear it uttered, and not all of those reactions are positive. It is not uncommon to find that colleagues are at very different stages of awareness of what communication assessment entails, how it can be implemented, why it is important, and how it can be a valuable element in long-range planning for departments. The department chair who believes that assessment is a passing trend may find herself or himself fighting for the very existence of a program or trying to convince powers-that-be at the institutional or system level that speech communication is an essential part of the undergraduate curriculum. Sometimes the toughest battles are those that are fought on home turf, and it is with that thought in mind that we must carefully consider communication assessment in terms of institutional and departmental decisions and actions.

Communication assessment is far from a "passing trend." In the three year period between 1988 and 1991, assessment activity on college and university campuses moved from a 55% level of involvement to 81% (Higgerson, 1993). In a national survey of assessment trends in communication departments, Hay (1992) found that 53% of the respondents indicated that assessment was a priority on their campuses. In most cases, focus was placed on articulating goals for general education, but in two-thirds of the cases, oral communication abilities were included. Assessment is viewed not only as "a technical endeavor," but it is also seen as "an intensely human enterprise with social, educational, and highly political components" (Thomas, 1991, p. 431).

As a department chair of a large speech communication department at a moderate-sized midwestern state university, I have realized the importance of attention to the topic of communication assessment. Ours is a strong program boasting a full-time faculty of twenty-two, graduating 700 majors and 400 minors over a five-year period, and sitting at a position of being the largest department in the nine-department College of Fine Arts and Humanities. Yet, we don't take lightly stories of equally strong departments across the country who have taken a hit by chancellors and governing boards who failed to understand the value of the discipline.

My first interest in communication assessment came with a chance attendance at various Speech Communication Association and Central States Communication Association convention sessions on communication assessment. I learned about the SCA Committee on Assessment and Testing, and, curious to know more, attended their business meeting. What I discovered was a group of bright and committed individuals who believed in the importance of their work. It wasn't long before I was regularly reading articles on communication assessment, and then I applied to attend the 1990 SCA Assessment Conference in Denver. There, with a group of about 30-35 dedicated individuals, we struggled with important issues of communication assessment that today have seen fruition in such

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guiding documents as SCA's Criteria for the Assessment of Oral Communication and the principles guiding departments involved with communication assessment (Hay et. al, 1990).

When I became department chair, I brought with me this interest in and knowledge of communication assessment. I have come to learn that not all department chairs come to their position with this resource at hand. As I met with other colleagues in other departments across campus, I discovered tremendous differences in focus on assessment. With assessment a major priority on our campus, there were many departments who had not yet begun to consider ways to assess their programs beyond traditional classroom assessment. I will admit, with other departmental work demanding of my time, it was not until our university became immersed in the issue of assessment that I encouraged our department to turn its immediate attention to this issue. That, I discovered, was not an automatic or easy task.

The steps that follow itemize the approach that needs to be taken to make this transition to departmental assessment an easier one. The plan not only focuses on developing departmental acceptance of the process, but it also recognizes the value of strategic positioning of the department in the total university environment. For each institution, the game plan will be different, but each element of this process needs to be considered for eventual success of assessment efforts.

1. Knowledge of Assessment. It is important to have at least one individual in the department with a working knowledge of communication assessment. This person may be the chair of the department, a member of the curriculum committee, or a person interested in matters of speech communication pedagogy. It is important that this person become familiar with key resources in communication assessment, particularly SCA actions on assessment, published resources, other campus initiatives, and various assessment tools. If people are not informed as to the purposes, procedures, values, and cautions of assessment, conjecture and apprehension reign supreme. Decisions must be based on information, choice, and sufficient planning.

There are several ways to develop this base of knowledge. One way is for the informed individual to begin the tedious job of routing pertinent articles on communication assessment through the department. Yet, it must be realized that it is far easier to pass articles on to our peers than it is to ensure that they have read and understood the information. It is certainly possible to hold a department meeting to discuss the "A" word, yet the chair needs to realize that such a discussion may call forth a Pandora's box of issues, none of which is easily addressed in a one-to-two-hour meeting. One can also thrust the job of communication assessment on an existing committee or individual in charge of curricular decisions such as the curriculum committee or the basic course director. Yet, with other tasks expected of these individuals, communication assessment may be another one of those department initiatives that takes a back seat position.

To encourage department attention to communication assessment, it becomes important to widen the circle of knowledge within the department. As chair, I enlisted the assistance of

faculty who were interested in survey methodology to help with the gathering of demographic data, encouraged the basic course director to accept an appointment to a university ad hoc committee on general education assessment, recruited faculty to assist with alumni assessment, and secured funding for two members of the faculty to attend the 1994 SCA Summer Conference on Assessment. This was an important move to help the entire department see the value of focusing our limited time, energy, and resources on the time-consuming yet crucial activity of communication assessment.

2. Consideration of Department Attitudes. The job of educating others in the department about communication assessment is not one that occurs easily. People come to this topic with differing levels of awareness, concern, comfort, resistance, and interest. This can be particularly frustrating to the chair who sees that the department cannot afford to ignore institutional interest in assessment. Thomas (1991) recognizes that faculty resistance can contribute to the demise of assessment efforts. Higgerson (1993) compares faculty attitudes on the implementation of assessment to the grieving process of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. As with the bereaved, the department chair must listen to colleagues' concerns. We must also realize that this takes time and patience.

The concerns and suspicions over assessment must be replaced by an attitude which encourages empowerment and ownership. For assessment efforts to work, you must have broad-based departmental support. Faculty must feel that they "own" the process and not that it is being dictated to them. They must see value in the activity of assessment itself. They must realize the creative potential for assessment. There is not one single "correct" way to assess.

One of the key attitudes that needs to be addressed is the concern--and, sometimes, anger--that assessment activity is externally mandated. Faculty must see internal value in the activity. As Higgerson (1993, p. 9) notes, departmental assessment programs must be "owned and managed by the faculty and, therefore, integrated closely with the academic program." Morreale and Hulbert-Johnson (1994) stress that students, faculty, and institutions benefit from the assessment process. Too often, faculty focus more on the benefits to only the latter. Skeptical faculty need to be shown how assessment activity can benefit the student by enhancing student advising, correcting student deficiencies, assuring competency, providing learning goals, and strengthening degree credibility. Faculty benefits of reshaping curriculum and pedagogy must also be articulated. At the same time, faculty must also see that there is an essential public relations function of assessment. As Aitken and Neer (1992a, p. 55) emphasize, "the more done to enhance a department's image externally, the better the chance that assessment will be used to form, publicize, and promote the department's desired changes."

Additionally, not everyone realizes that there is a great deal of latitude possible in the design of a specific assessment program; few recognize the variety of tools, models, and creative approaches to assessment. Once faculty see assessment in this light, they gradually become more receptive to experimentation in the design

of a departmental assessment program. Prus and Johnson (1992) indicate that the biggest error made is in not choosing the most important method for assessment. They offer a useful compendium of assessment approaches with advantages and disadvantages of each. They suggest that once the appropriate measures are in place, we must "close the loop" by bringing findings back to program improvement, identification of weaknesses, continuence of strengths, and implementation of change. It is only with a good base of knowledge of communication assessment possibilities and potential and with departmental opinion leaders favoring communication assessment that a department chair can counter pervading negative attitudes.

Faculty may be more involved if assessment is tied not just to departmental and institutional commitment to excellence but also to personal needs for professional development and research. Our university operates under a collective bargaining agreement that evaluates faculty on five criteria: teaching effectiveness, scholarship and creative activity, professional development, community and university service, and contribution to students. Higgerson (1993), in delineating the components of an effective assessment program, notes that assessment activity must be seen as an opportunity. Extending and broadening her thinking on this, it is important for a department chair to help faculty see how assessment activity--more than being time-consuming and personally unrewarding--can, in effect, mesh nicely with career development. On our campus, for instance, assessment activity could be an immediate bonus to demonstrating teaching effectiveness and contribution to student development. The faculty member who either involved himself or herself in assessment training or who shared expertise in assessment with others in the campus community could claim contributions to professional development and university service. Finally, innovative programs of assessment, development of assessment methodologies, and other projects culminating in convention presentations or publications can provide evidence of scholarly or creative activity.

3. Development of University Connections. It is essential that you stay in touch with university assessment initiatives and that you make sure that your department's views are represented. This is especially important when assessment becomes a campus priority as it did for us. In 1987, the North Central Association accreditation team expressed concerns about our general education program, and we were suddenly thrust--like it or not--into the world of assessment. Peter Ewell (1991) recognizes that the motivating forces behind the current assessment movement include concern over the content and structure of undergraduate education and the pressure for accountability in the expenditure of higher education funds. In our case, we found ourselves locked into a timeline to get an assessment system in place before a follow-up review. Within a five-year period of time we needed to implement a general education assessment plan and develop and implement an institution-wide assessment plan prior to a 1996-97 report to North Central and a follow-up accreditation visit.

It was fortunate for us that, on our campus, the assessment efforts were chaired by a colleague in our College of Fine Arts and Humanities. Consequently, there was not the need to have to argue for multiple kinds of assessment and against reliance on paper and pencil testing. Nevertheless, with my prior interest in

communication assessment, and my desire to be well-informed on institutional plans, I attended the various faculty development workshops and meetings held by the Assessment Task Force. This early involvement in university initiatives proved to be important for our department. While other departments were reeling from the sheer numbers of memos being sent to us by the Assessment Task Force, our department--while still novices at communication assessment--was seen as taking the right steps at this time.

It wasn't long before our department was represented in such activities as the Employer Communication Assessment Project conducted in collaboration with the English Department, Career Services, and University Public Relations. We brought in the top employers of our graduates and conducted focus groups to determine oral and written communication skills needed for job success, entry-level positions, and long-range employment and advancement. We gathered information on primary communication strengths and weaknesses, checked to see what could be done to better prepare our students for the workforce, discovered changes in the organizations necessitating changes in communication skill, and discovered both university and industry expectations for training. We were also invited to participate in a pilot project grant proposal in Communication Skills Assessment Across the Curriculum. The purpose of this proposal was to develop a communication skills assessment project focusing on three levels: general education, major/minor/graduate programs, and career placement. Also, in collaboration with the English Department, we held senior student focus groups to assess the communication component of general education. Finally, we also involved ourselves in the grouping of faculty who provided campus leadership in educating other university colleagues on assessment projects and methodologies.

It is noteworthy to underscore the importance of publicizing within your own institution the backing provided our discipline by the Speech Communication Association. The first assessment newsletter published by the Office of the Assessment Coordinator at our university recognized the importance of our department working with the national organization's guidelines for assessment. At our university, each program has the responsibility for developing and implementing its own plan in conjunction with the assessment director. Having a clear statement on our discipline's view of assessment as presented in the SCA Criteria for the Assessment of Oral Communication (1990) provides support for our plans and initiatives.

4. Structural Integration of Assessment. Once a department has recognized the importance of devoting time and energy to assessment, they must consider ways to bring assessment directly into the department's structure. Hay (1992) reports that only 21% of departments formed a committee within their department to address assessment concerns. We were one of those departments who had formed such a committee, but we first found it important to discuss thoroughly the role of assessment for our department and its connection to the institutional commitment to assessment. The committee composition and charge, developed after much discussion and reflection, meant that decisions would be made on logic rather than expediency and with an eye to the importance of prior planning, an approach deemed sensible by Aitken and Neer (1992a).

The composition of the assessment committee includes our basic course director (essential because the introductory speech communication course is a general education requirement on our campus), a representative from our departmental Curriculum and Academic Policies Committee, and three volunteer members of the department who serve two-year overlapping terms. Because of the size of our department, we saw the difficulty of asking our curriculum committee to take on the job of communication assessment, so this committee functions as a specialized committee reporting directly to the curriculum committee who then brings proposals and findings to the department as a whole for discussion and action.

Our assessment committee has defined its charge as including the following endeavors: (1) recommending potential assessment projects for the department; (2) seeking funding for assessment projects through department grants or in conjunction with other university assessment projects; (3) assisting the curriculum committee in departmental planning and development; and, (4) assisting the department in meeting university, community, state, and disciplinary directives. We have further defined our job of assisting the curriculum committee in departmental planning and development to include: (a) monitoring student experience with department programs by defining core concepts and competencies, evaluating student communication competencies through various and appropriate measurement techniques, surveying alumni to discover long-term impact of speech communication course work, and participating in employer communication assessment projects; (b) aiding in long-term planning such as recertification; (c) collecting materials to contribute to our five-year review; (d) developing curricular coherence; and, (e) identifying need for curricular development and modification.

It is also important to connect the departmental assessment initiatives to both program and university missions (Backlund et al., 1989). In fact, the North Central Association, in suggesting characteristics of an assessment program, suggests that a program to assess student academic achievement should flow from the institution's mission and should have a conceptual framework. We found that our program objectives and assessment plan related to several points in the university mission plan. Our program provides fundamental knowledge of the social, intellectual, and artistic foundations of culture and history (through coursework in rhetoric and performance studies). Our curriculum prepares students for responsible careers in society (through coursework in public address, interpersonal, small group, organizational communication, and internships). We also encourage and assist students to develop greater critical thinking and self-understanding; respect and concern for individual worth and human rights; skills appropriate for professional careers; international awareness (through intercultural communication); and, understanding of responsibilities to others and to society. In fact, all of the courses in our curriculum fit neatly into one or more of these outcomes.

It is also helpful to consider objectives of general education at the university. Our general education assessment calls for departmental reporting on an cyclical basis as to how our general education requirement and elective courses meet the objectives of

general education at the university. The various sets of objectives can help in formulating matrices in which cells match outcomes with methods of assessment. The matrix approach, embracing more of a package philosophy of assessing, "helps to create maximum effectiveness and efficiency for instructional and assessment purposes (Johnson, et al., 1993)."

5. Discovery of Workable Models of Assessment. As departments become involved in shaping their own goals for assessment, they should start by examining models on other campuses. Ultimately, they will need to find an assessment package that suits the needs of their program. Prus and Johnson (1992) recommend a two-step process whereby departments use higher education assessment literature, conferences, models, and methods from other institutions to tentatively identify useful methods. Then, they should pilot-test the best candidates in their own programs. A department, for example, might find it useful to study various models such as the the standards-based performance assessment at the University of Northern Colorado (Karre, 1994) or the competency-based assessment at the University of Missouri-Kansas City (Aitken and Neer, 1992b). Then, with a critical eye as to local effectiveness, the department may consider gradual implementation of such a model.

Oftentimes, it is not the specific model itself, but the creative approach or a suggestion for implementation that provides a valuable resource for a department. For instance, our department was interested in an alumni outcomes assessment project conducted by Boise State University (Parker, B.L. & Drummond-Reeves, S. J., 1992a, 1992b, 1992c). We incorporated their ideas for assessment into a combined phone and mail follow-up survey of our alumni. We have incorporated advice offered by other departments involved in program assessment and are currently embarking upon the tedious task of formulating departmental objectives for our general education required speech communication course, general education elective courses, major/minor requirements, and capstone courses. Our assessment package will not look exactly like a package elsewhere, but it will be one that works for us.

6. Expediting Implementation of Assessment Efforts. It is not enough to consider the structure and the design of the departmental assessment package. A department chair may find it necessary to investigate ways to creatively fund assessment efforts. In considering resources needed in an assessment program, Thomas (1991) says that visible commitment to assessment by administration is essential. Moral and financial support for the program are certain to be items on a department chair's assessment wish list. Unfortunately, in tight budgetary times, sufficient resources for assessment initiatives--despite university mandates for such activity--may just not be there.

Our department found that it needed to be creative and aggressive in seeking out funding for assessment activity. One such grant opportunity was available through our Bush Faculty Development Project which provided funding for projects within the scope of general education, critical thinking, or cultural diversity, and which promised to have a significant impact on teaching and learning. Our department was able to secure funding to cover costs associated with developing the alumni outcomes assessment project modeled after

the Boise State University model. Included in this funding was a stipend for a colleague who directed a senior-level communication research seminar in conducting the phone portion of the assessment and departmental costs of an extensive mail survey. It should be noted that special consideration was given to those proposals calling for active and meaningful involvement of students. We felt that it was very valuable to involve our own majors in such an important project as alumni assessment.

In addition, Title III money from the U.S. Office of Education was made available to our university for a variety of activities designed to strengthen the institution. Faculty initiatives in mentoring, experiential learning, and interactive television have been funded by Title III dollars. This last year, Title III money was focused upon developing departmental models of assessment strategies. Our department applied for and received a grant which included a multi-phase general education and major/minor program assessment. This grant included money for release time for the department chair, a part-time graduate student to assist with assessment work, and other supplies. A part of this grant fully funded two department members to attend the SCA Summer Conference on Assessment.

These opportunities to fund departmental initiatives greatly enhanced our department's ability to address comprehensively our institution's request for program assessment proposals. Because of the importance that our institution has placed on assessment, it became necessary to divert attention to quality assessment efforts. Despite continual growth of faculty and majors, our department has not seen an increase in operating budget in the last five years, and department chair release time has been reduced from .65 to .55 over the same time period. Grant funding has given us the cushion of financial support, and it has also given our department the university recognition which has put us in a favorable position on campus.

CONCLUSION

Thomas (1991) suggests that careful consideration of resources can establish the credibility of an assessment effort. When viewed as more than an academic exercise, assessment gains cooperation and acceptance. Higgerson (1993) reminds us to invest the extra effort to develop an assessment program which is owned, managed, and integrated into the academic program by the faculty.

The department chair is in a pivotal position when it comes to assessment efforts. He or she can prepare the department for seamless transition into the institution's plan for assessment, or can ignore the institutional messages and then later scramble to save the department from embarrassment and lack of preparation. As Backlund et al. (1989, p. 7) remind us, "a positive and productive attitude is necessary."

This article has delineated an assertive approach that a department chair can take in meeting the demands for communication assessment. Starting with the development of a sufficient knowledge base, addressing prevalent faculty attitudes, developing strong institutional connections, solidifying department assessment infrastructure, studying and selecting appropriate assessment models, and discovering sources of funding which also further credibility of

assessment efforts, decisions can be made and actions taken to strength the departmental position in terms of assessment.

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