Assessing our “Assessment Briefs” as a Faculty Development Tool
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ABSTRACT

Several university offices collaboratively publish monthly “Assessment Briefs”. These briefs provide instruction in assessment, highlight assessment projects, and suggest how to use the information to improve teaching. We surveyed our audience about the usefulness and impact of these briefs. We found mostly enthusiastic users and a minority of negative responses. We hope to engage others in a discussion of outreach methods and ways to measure the effectiveness of these methods.

INTRODUCTION

The university Assessment Team is a collaborative effort across a number of different offices: Institutional Research, Liberal Education, Student Affairs, the Registrar’s Office, and the Center for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and University Assessment. Although several offices at Miami University share the responsibility for leading the university’s assessment efforts, successfully integrating assessment into the university culture requires the support of all faculty and staff. The Assessment Team identified several questions that must be addressed to foster effective communication about assessment at the university. How do we “close the loop” of getting assessment results back into the hands of faculty and staff who can make use of this information? How can we improve attitudes about assessment by demonstrating its usefulness? How can we inform the university about assessment efforts both here and nationally?

The Assessment Briefs

The Assessment Briefs were identified as one potential method for addressing these needs. Beginning in 2004-05, the Assessment Team has published “Assessment Briefs” approximately once every 3 – 4 weeks. These briefs were conceptualized as one-page news briefs to raise the profile of assessment on campus. Most briefs also provide useful suggestions for ways to utilize the information (e.g., changes that one can make to a class).

The Assessment Briefs cover a variety of topics, ranging from providing basic steps and suggestions for implementing classroom assessment to sharing the results of large institutional and national surveys. Sample Assessment Briefs include:

“Faculty and Student Learning Experiences: Similarities and Differences” (comparison of similar questions on NSSE and FSSE)
“Perceptions of the Climate for Learning at Miami” (a report on several local climate studies)
“Highlights from Two Assessing Critical Thinking Projects” (results of a faculty development effort)
“Miami Plan Assessment: Planning for Success” (how-to for general education assessment)

METHOD

Last spring we administered a survey to determine our university’s faculty and staff perceptions of the Assessment Briefs. We wanted to know how useful they find them, which topics are most useful to them, and how the briefs have affected their attitudes about assessment and their awareness of assessment activities on campus. We also inquired about format, length and frequency issues. Finally, we sought information about the impact of the briefs on teaching and student learning.

RESULTS

Although we routinely send briefs to a list of 800+ members, we received 36 responses to the survey. 91% of the respondents were faculty while 9% were staff; 76% were located on the main campus while the remaining 24% were located on the regional campuses.

Responses to the Briefs

Readability and format: We publish approximately eight briefs per year. On average, our respondents report they read 4.4 briefs per year. In addition:
- 34% read 7-8 briefs per year
- 57% reported that the frequency of publishing (i.e., 8 per year) is “just right”
- 85% prefer an electronic format over paper
- 82% believe the length should be limited to one page

Usefulness and preferred topics: 48% of the respondents said that 4 or more of the 8 briefs contained something useful to them. An additional 26% indicated that 1 – 3 briefs per year contained something useful to them. 55% said the briefs had been somewhat or very effective in informing them about the range of assessment activities at the university. We asked respondents to rate the usefulness of topics from 1 to 5 (1= not at all useful and 5=very useful). The most popular topics are identified in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student demographics</td>
<td>4.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student experiences and perceptions about their education</td>
<td>3.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student attitudes and values</td>
<td>3.82</td>
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Attitudes about assessment: Only 24% of our respondents reported being more positively disposed toward assessment as a result of the Briefs. 57% reported a no change in their attitude, whereas 18% reported more negative attitudes. Respondents’ open-ended comments included helpful suggestions, such as providing more attention to graduate education or the regional campuses. However, many of the open-ended responses could be characterized as hostile, characterizing the briefs themselves or the activity of assessment as a waste of time (or worse).

DISCUSSION

Our initial reaction to reading the open-ended comments was to suspect that the Assessment Briefs were having the opposite of the intended effect – that they were, in effect, damaging the desire of faculty and staff to engage in assessment activities that are vital to excellence of our programs. However, a further review revealed that the negative responses were from a vocal minority.

REFERENCES