

## **Building Campus Support one Brick at a Time**

### **BACKGROUND**

The Joliet Junior College (JJC) Assessment Committee was created about ten years ago in the spring 1992 semester. The fundamental purpose of the Assessment Committee was to implement systematic program evaluation to help the College continue to offer quality programming. It was asserted that the Assessment Committee would lead the evaluation efforts at the college by providing guidance to each academic department in terms of planning and implementing program assessment. In spring 1995, the Assessment Committee redefined its role to reflect the recommendations from a North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (NCA) accreditation visit. In fall 2000, the college again examined its campus assessment activities and how they were integrated in other campus initiatives including Baldrige quality initiatives, budget and planning, and facilities master plan.

Importantly, the Assessment Committee shifted the focus of academic program assessment to that of student learning and outcomes. Key questions that arose from conversations with faculty and staff included:

- ✓ What should students know and be able to do (competencies) as a result of having completed an academic program at JJC?
- ✓ Did the students achieve what they were expected to achieve?
- ✓ How do the faculty and staff know that students have gained those competencies?
- ✓ How are assessment results used to improve curriculum, teaching, and learning?
- ✓ How are the adjustments made because of the assessment results actually improving student learning?

In turn, these questions became the premise of the fall 2000 reincarnation of the Assessment Committee. With a core group of dedicated faculty from the various academic departments, the blue print to secure better academic program assessment was constructed. The following are some of those building blocks that comprise the formal assessment structure at JJC.

## GOALS

First and foremost, the Assessment Committee Chairpersons developed the most critical priorities facing the college's academic departments. Soon after dialogue with various faculty ensued. With this input, six goals regarding academic programming assessment were created.

- ✓ Implement rigorous program evaluation that identifies what knowledge, competencies, and skills are essential for all **degree program offerings**.
- ✓ Assess the **developmental education program** as it relates to the college's mission and goals.
- ✓ Create an organizational climate that will be conducive to the assessment of the **general education competencies** deemed appropriate by each degree conferred.
- ✓ Encourage the construction of assessment activities by providing opportunities and financial support to faculty and faculty support staff via the administration of the **Assessment Grants** and procurement of resources.
- ✓ Identify **other additional areas** where assessment of the rigor of academic programming is critical such as distance education, the Academic Skills Center, retention initiatives, and career planning.

## GRANTS:

Although JJC had an Assessment Grant program in place, few faculty were taking advantage of the monies available to do academic program assessment. Worse, those who were

applying for the grants were doing assessment at the classroom level. Although a laudable objective, these type of assessment proposals defeated the very essence of academic program assessment that targets a larger picture. As a consequence, the assessment grant process was redesigned to encourage members of the college community to explore new and creative ways to directly or indirectly assess learning or services at the academic program level. A formal application process replete with a submission deadline and mandatory presentation was instituted. The Assessment Committee, in effect a peer-review panel, appraised the grant applications based on merit and alignment to genuinely evaluating student outcomes. In addition, the Assessment Committee had exclusive charge to award and disburse the grant resources to the best assessment proposals.

### TRAINING

To kickoff the new design of assessment, the college has hosted a three-day seminar on faculty driven academic program assessment in fall 2001. All full-time faculty were enabled to attend because the college funded the use of substitutes for the faculty attendees. Adjunct faculty were also encouraged to participate. Over 40 faculty, about 25% of all full-time faculty at JJC, partook in the seminar. As part of the seminar, faculty were encouraged to begin to plan assessment in their academic areas.

The seminar and subsequent activities have been infectious. The Assessment Committee members often present at department meetings and academic chairperson meetings. Since the initial training, several faculty have presented their assessment methodologies at state and regional conferences. In addition, each Assessment Committee representative is the liaison to an academic department and is responsible for training faculty in that department.

## HANDBOOK

The existing Assessment Handbook was updated in fall 2002 to reflect the new fortitude and efforts on academic program assessment. The Handbook contains information on how to do academic program assessment, a glossary of evaluation terms, information on the Assessment Grant process, the Assessment Goals, directions on how to submit Assessment Plans to the Committee, and other resources. Sample assessment plans are also provided. The Handbook was distributed during the first day of the fall 2002 semester to all full-time faculty. It was also introduced and distributed at the adjunct faculty and community advisors' dinner. Congruent to the spirit of assessment, the Handbook also contains a survey evaluating the effectiveness of the Handbook as well as the other activities supported and hosted by the Assessment Committee.

## WEB PAGE

As with the Assessment Handbook, the Assessment Committee Web Page was updated to reflect all the current activities and new programs being offered on campus with respect to academic program evaluation. The web page is actually a collection of pages that have downloadable Assessment Grant Applications, Assessment Grids, and miscellaneous forms. The Assessment Handbook is also available online. The minutes of the monthly Assessment Committee meetings are posted within 24 hours. The meeting schedule, open to all college constituents, is also available on the web.

As indicated by the faculty, the most popular addition to the Assessment Web pages has been the Electronic Assessment Grid Submission Form. At JJC, each academic program is required to submit an assessment plan and an update after the plan has been implemented. Each academic program is to be evaluated at least once every three years. This plan was submitted on the dreaded form dubbed the "Assessment Grid". The "Grids" were submitted to the Assessment

Committee representative in the respective department. Then, it was copied for every member of the Assessment Committee, 16 members in all. This process was cumbersome at best. The electronic form makes the assessment plans available to each member of the Committee soon after it is submitted. Time spent at the copier is minimal.

### THE FUTURE

It is hoped that a Center for Teaching of Learning Excellence will be developed within the next year. The Center will afford regular training opportunities for assessment techniques, evaluation pedagogies, and networking between seasoned assessment faculty and new faculty. At the very least, the Center will expand the prospects for full and part-time faculty to hone their classroom and academic program evaluation skills.

On the other side of the house, the Student Services Division is in the early stages of building their formal assessment plan. In the works are the formation of an assessment committee for academic support areas, documentation of assessment activities, and some divisional training seminars.

### SUMMARY

Each of these bricks or initiatives, have served to make the formal assessment structure at JJC sound and solid. Each brick serves to bring a holistic and strengthened effort to campus assessment. Complicity, each new product and initiative has induced a further understanding of the importance of academic program assessment. It also increases the visibility of the good work being implemented by the faculty. As a disclaimer, these may be existing bricks on other campuses. However, the mortar, or faculty's sustained commitment, is what collectively forms a great foundation for campus wide assessment of academic programs.

About the Author: Dr. Mary Lou D'Allegro is the Dean of Institutional Effectiveness and the administrative member of the faculty Assessment Committee at Joliet Junior College.