Qualitative Approaches to Evidence-Based Evaluation in the Self-Study Process

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Quantitative vs. Qualitative Data

• Quantitative Data:
  – Necessary for context, but:

  • How do community leaders view your commitment to engagement?
  • How do students perceive efforts to measure and improve student learning?
  • How are planning and budgeting efforts coordinated at different levels in the institution?

• Please introduce yourself to 2 people next to you, and identify at least one area where quantitative data may not exist or be hard to get at your institution.
So, why not just Survey Everyone???

• Problem
  – A university community (faculty, staff, and students) over-surveyed and 40,000 strong
  – A metropolitan area of 1 million people

• Need
  – Collect systemic evaluative information

• Solution: Qualitative Data!
  – A purposive case study survey
  – Focus groups
  – Semi-structured interviews
A Purposive Case Study Survey

• Goals (focused on Criterion 3):
  – learn how students (undergraduate and graduate) and faculty perceive how learning assessment occurs in the unit
  – learn how these constituencies use and evaluate learning and teaching infrastructure

• Selection of 11 departments/units
  – Purposive: select units to get a range in
    • Numbers of majors (undergraduate, graduate)
    • Professional accreditation
    • On/Off campus
    • Many/few transfer students
    • Range of Colleges (arts & sciences, health sciences, etc.)
Case Study Survey: Sample Topics

• Triangulated approach
  – Feedback
    • How does each faculty member report assessment results to department and students?
    • How do students themselves indicate they receive assessment results?
  – Instructional Support
    • Do faculty members use any of the instructional support services available on campus?
    • How useful do faculty and students feel they have been?
Survey Findings
Assessment of Student Learning

• Departments
  – Program level: exit surveys, comprehensive exams & capstone projects (graduates); exit surveys & meetings with advisors (undergraduate)
  – Course level: embedded questions & pre-test/post-test (graduates & undergraduates)
  – Some departments identify and keep track of performance in key course sequences

• Students
  – Except for embedded questions and online assignments, over 2/3 of all students report a wide variety of assessment tools including exams (89%), graded projects or presentations (74%), in-class assignments or discussions (67%)
  – Critical skills promoted & assessed primarily through team work, presentations & essays.
Survey Findings
Learning Infrastructure

• **Departments report:**
  – laboratory equipment and rooms: sufficient, but below standards
  – library resources and support: ‘sufficient’ and ‘up to standards’
  – positive impact on students referred to most support services
  – recommend most teaching support services, but use is low

• **Faculty report:**
  – need to equip classrooms with technology
  – positive impact on students referred to most support services
  – low use, and questioned usefulness, of teaching support services

• **Students report:**
  – major departments genuinely interested in their learning & advancement.
  – most students do not use or use only occasionally most student support services
Activity

• Please talk with 2-3 people near you (mix up from last time, if possible)

  – If you were to use a **Case Study** at your institution, what would you use it for?

  – What might be some of the challenges to using a **Case Study** at your institution?
Student Focus Groups on Experience

• Concern for over-surveying & need for in-depth evaluative information for all criterions
  – 9 Focus groups, each with facilitator and note taker
  – 3 Groups each for lower division, upper division, and graduate students
  – Recruited through student organizations

• Each Focus group focused on one of following:
  – Institutional Issues
  – Making Connections
  – Academic Experience
Take Home from Student Focus Groups

• Lower Division Undergraduates
  – **Institutional Issues** – *research university matters*
    • Came for the opportunity to participate in research
    • The campus community is like a family
    • Concern that transformation (and budget woes) may cut things that drew students to the university
    • Confused about the UA as a land-grant university
  – **Connections** – *engagement matters*
    • Extreme satisfaction with clubs and residence life
    • UA experiment with 1100 student classes greatly disliked: rampant cheating; disruptive loud classmates
  – **Academic Experience** – *generally good*
    • Most accurate academic information from: advisors; “rate my professor” sites; older students; professor
    • In general faculty and staff are committed to helping; mixed feelings about TAs
Take Home from Student Focus Groups

• Upper Division Undergraduates
  – Institutional Issues – research university matters
    • World-class instructors and opportunities for first-hand research
  – Connecting – less successful than lower-division
    • The university could do a better job of promoting opportunities
  – Academic Experience – generally good
    • Preserve UA reputation, but do not want tuition raised

• Graduate Students
  – Institutional Issues – generally satisfactory
    • Value working with and being mentored by leaders in their field
  – Connecting - successful
    • Many opportunities, but some lack family friendliness
  – Academic Experience - mixed
    • Uncertainty about professional development (RA or TA work?; faculty only care about tenure; loosely structured programs)
Activity

• Please talk with 2-3 people near you (mix up from last time, if possible)

  – If you were to use **Focus Groups** at your institution, what would you use them for?

  – What might be some of the challenges to using **Focus Groups** at your institution?
Semi-structured Interviews: Criterion 2

• Planning and Budgeting
  – A need for better alignment and inclusion at and across all levels

• Academic Program Reviews (7 year UA cycle)
  – Tremendous effort with few benefits perceived; need to streamline procedures and focus on current key issues

• Personnel Reviews
  – Reviews not serving purpose of enhancing performance; need to rethink criteria and aims
Semi-structured Interviews: Criterion 5

- Need evaluative information for engagement
- Desire to include new voices
- Challenge – team had not used methodology
  - Collaboratively developed questions and analytical techniques
- Questions:
  - “Identify three examples of activities, projects and/or programs that demonstrate ‘best practices’ of community engagement and the factors that are key to the success of these endeavors.”
  - Also asked about failures and recommendations
Key Findings from Engagement Interviews

• Successful Projects
  – Most come to the UA from the community
  – Follow from consultation among the partners
  – Depend on mutual respect, collaboration and common goals
  – Depend on expertise and commitment of UA students and faculty

• UA partners should remain cognizant of its primary role as an academic institution and not act as a competitor to private enterprises
Activity

• Please talk with 2-3 people near you (mix up from last time, if possible)

  – If you were to use Semi-structured Interviews at your institution, what would you use them for?

  – What might be some of the challenges to using Semi-structured Interviews at your institution?
University of Arizona Lessons Learned

• Qualitative methods result in new information
• Start early (it takes time to put together and analyze qualitative data)
• Be prepared for use of methods & analysis
  – Software; staffing; expertise; time; money
• Plan on how you will share results with those who have participated
• Engage team members (you can’t do it all yourself!)
Questions & Answers

• The one-page handout contains links to this presentation as well as to a document with more details about the results of our use of qualitative approaches as part of our self study.

• Please visit the University of Arizona NCA 2010 Accreditation web site: http://nca2010.arizona.edu/