

HLC Assessment Academy Project: Changing the Culture of Assessment at UNC through a Focus on Program-Level Student Learning

Project Summary

In recent years, the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) has made organizational changes and invested in resources to lay the groundwork for establishing a solid assessment infrastructure. Despite these efforts, an environment focused more on accountability than improvement presents a central challenge to meaningful and effective use of assessment in support of teaching and learning. Through participation in the HLC Assessment Academy, the university seeks to transform the culture of assessment at UNC through a focus on academic program-level student learning.

Led by a team of six Faculty Assessment Fellows and the Assessment Director, UNC's Academy project encompasses the following areas: (1) refining and implementing consistent standards for program-level assessment across the university; (2) building a professional development portfolio that includes a cohort-based Assessment Leadership Institute for faculty, a workshop series, and a virtual assessment toolbox; (3) encouraging faculty to engage in assessment as a scholarly activity through mini grants and sponsorship of an annual Assessment Fair; and (4) rewarding effective assessment practices by revising evaluation, tenure, and promotion to include recognition for assessment and publicizing faculty accomplishments. Ultimately, by changing the culture of assessment, we hope to improve program quality and student learning.

Need for the Project

In 2011-2012, the Faculty Assessment Fellows conducted a listening tour across five colleges and the library to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and barriers experienced and reported by faculty. The findings from the listening tour provided illumination into how faculty view and participate in assessment. The main themes that emerged informed the development of the HLC Assessment Academy Project and respond to the specific needs identified through the listening tour. Some of the key findings are summarized below.

- Changing attitudes/beliefs about assessment is essential. When faculty don't see the value of assessment, they find few reasons to participate. *One critical roadblock is the perception that assessment is for external audiences and regulators rather than for faculty and their programs (accountability focus).* To address this issue, UNC will need to show tangible, positive outcomes associated with participation in assessment that demonstrate its value to faculty.
- Classifying assessment as a service activity diminishes its value to faculty. UNC needs to disrupt this association by reframing assessment as a component of teaching and learning and devising reward and recognition processes that reinforce the value of assessment.
- Limited opportunities for meaningful conversations about student learning and assessment inhibit progress. Faculty care deeply about student learning but often work in isolation from colleagues within and across departments. Providing structured and unstructured opportunities for departmental and collegial dialogs will be important in establishing cultural norms around assessment.
- A lack of meaningful feedback on assessment outcomes leads to confusion about the purpose and value of assessment. In addition to providing support for faculty, improving the ways that campus leaders, faculty, and assessment committees respond to and use program-level assessment is warranted.

- Inconsistency across colleges regarding assessment expectations and processes creates confusion. In securing the infrastructure for assessment, it will be critical to engage college leadership in reinforcing clear and consistent expectations and common practices and standards that are uniformly applied across the university. A central tenet regarding UNC's use of assessment is respect for the epistemological approaches valued by different disciplines. Finding a balance between respecting and valuing these different approaches while establishing baseline standards for assessment will be important.

Project Goals

The primary purpose of the project is to change the culture of assessment at UNC from accountability to improvement. Towards this end, UNC seeks to accomplish the following goals:

By the end of the project (spring 2016) . . .

1. Faculty will express more positive attitudes towards assessment.
2. Programs will effectively use assessment results to improve student learning.
3. UNC will demonstrate its commitment to the assessment of learning through its policies, structures, and procedures.

Improving faculty knowledge about assessment and removing some of the existing barriers is intended to change faculty perceptions, leading to greater levels of engagement with assessment. Ultimately, this should lead to improvements in program quality and student learning. By focusing on program-level learning, UNC expects that faculty will identify avenues for curricular and pedagogical improvements and innovations. For at least some faculty, assessment activities may lead to research and publication on teaching and learning.

To evaluate this project, the Academy Team will conduct longitudinal research on the factors that enhance or inhibit the institutional change model. The evaluation design will consider fidelity of the project's implementation (formative evaluation) as well as the extent to which the intended goals are achieved (summative evaluation). Qualitative data in the form of interviews, observations, documents and artifacts will be collected throughout the project. In addition, quantitative data from surveys, participation rates, and program evaluations will also be used.

Project Activities

The project is centered on two key activities: revision and clarification of institutional assessment policies and procedures and faculty professional development (primarily through participation in the Assessment Leadership Institute). The HLC project team will work with academic leaders and existing campus committees such as the University Assessment Council and the Provost's Leadership Team to address inconsistencies in policies and practices. Specific areas we intend to evaluate and revise include the following: program review, annual assessment plans and reports, use of TracDat, college assessment committee structures and feedback mechanisms, and promotion, evaluation, and tenure guidelines.

Concurrently, the project team will develop and implement the Assessment Leadership Institute, a cohort-based program for faculty teams intended to improve knowledge and use of assessment at the program level. Small teams of faculty from up to ten programs will be recruited each year for three consecutive years to participate in the Institute. Faculty will attend monthly workshops taught by the Assessment Fellows and the Assessment Director on topics including (1) the purpose of assessment, (2) writing a mission statement, (3) writing program-level student learning outcomes, (4) developing a

curriculum map, (5) selecting methods, measures, and performance criteria, (6) assessment data management, and (7) analyzing and using assessment results for improvement. Participants in the Assessment Leadership Institute will develop or revise program assessment plans, create or update curriculum maps, pilot an assessment method for at least one student learning outcome, and present their work at the Assessment Fair. To encourage participation, programs will receive a \$2,500 grant.

Professional development and support will be provided to non-participants in the Assessment Leadership Institute through several activities. The Assessment Fellows will sponsor a New Faculty Assessment Welcome Luncheon each fall to provide an orientation to assessment at UNC. In the spring, the University Assessment Council will sponsor an Assessment Fair to showcase best practices in assessment. Individual workshops on topics covered during the Assessment Leadership Institute will be offered to non-participants, and advanced topic workshops will be developed for years two and three of the project. Funds have also been allocated to bring guest speakers to campus, support continuing professional development for the Assessment Fellows, and provide mini-grants to faculty and staff for assessment-related research and projects. Finally, a virtual toolbox will be created that includes an assessment handbook, a TracDat manual (data management software tool), and model assessment plans appropriate for different disciplines.

Faculty development is at the heart of the project, and in addition to the Assessment Leadership Institute, the project is expected to yield additional resources that will benefit faculty and the larger institution well beyond its conclusion. Specifically, in developing and implementing the Institute, the project team will create manuals, handbooks, and web-based resources that will fill a current gap and be of use to faculty and staff in the future. By the end of the project, the team aims to have up to 30 examples of effective assessment plans from a wide range of disciplines that can be used to support ongoing development with the remaining programs on campus.

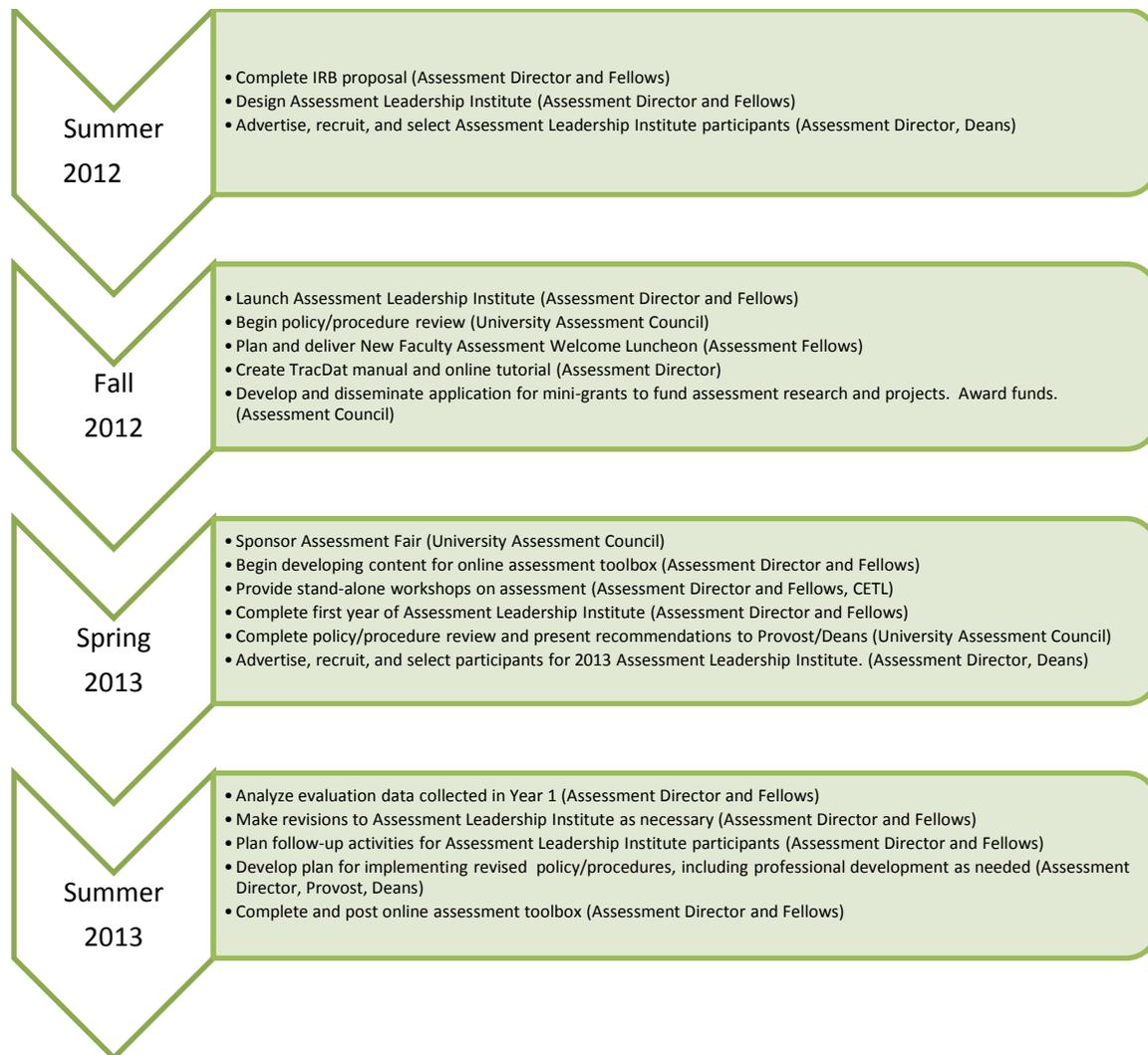
Challenges

In designing our project, we drew from the literature on institutional change models, particularly from the work of Bolman and Deal (2003). Our primary challenge lies in the scope of the project, which seeks to effect a change in the culture of assessment at UNC. As such, the challenges we will face are overlapping and multidimensional. We have summarized these in figure 1, which shows the relationship between Bolman and Deal’s four frames of institutional change and the specific challenges related to each.



While our project has been designed to address each of these challenges, several other factors will contribute to its success. First, our participation in the Assessment Academy is the result of a “ground-up” recommendation to the Provost and President. The initial push to participate came from the University Assessment Council, which viewed the Academy as an opportunity to enhance assessment at UNC. The Council’s recommendation was taken up by the Faculty Assessment Fellows, who authored our application and crafted the project design. **Faculty are leading the project**, and this fact is a powerful response to the political and symbolic challenges we have identified.

Year One Timeline



Necessary Resources

In order for the project to be successful, support from several key individuals and groups is essential. Our plan relies on the involvement of four groups working together to support the project goals. The **Academy Team**, comprised of six Faculty Assessment Fellows and the Assessment Director, is responsible for designing, implementing, and evaluating the project. **Faculty** from programs across the campus will contribute through their participation in professional development opportunities and the application of what they learn to their programs’ assessment activities. The **University Assessment**

Council will sponsor assessment activities and mini-grants and also conduct an institutional policy/procedure review. **Campus leaders**, such as Deans and the Provost, share responsibility for consistently administering policies and procedures that clarify institutional expectations for the assessment of student learning. They are also responsible for working collaboratively with faculty to ensure that assessment results are used in meaningful ways to improve student learning and support planning and resource allocation.

In addition to support from these individuals and groups, fiscal resources are also necessary. The project’s budget is presented below.

Item	Description	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Total
ALI Program Grants*	10 grants @ \$2500 per program per year (\$1500 year one, \$1000 year two)	\$15,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$10,000	\$75,000
Professional Development	Supplies, training/evaluation materials, meals, Assessment Fair, etc.	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$20,000
TracDat Training Materials	Creation of TracDat resource guide and online tutorials	\$5,000				\$5,000
Mini-Grants	15 \$1,000 grants per year		\$15,000	\$15,000	\$15,000	\$45,000
Speakers	1-2 speakers per year	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$5,000	\$20,000
Total		\$30,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$35,000	\$165,000

*Assessment Leadership Institute – Programs will receive a \$1,500 award the first year and \$1,000 the second year after they complete all ALI requirements.