

LAC Minutes – Final

Friday, 05/12/2017, CLIMB 303, 1:00 to 3:00

Attendance:

Voting Members		Voting Members, cont.		Non-Voting Members	
Chris Brooks, Chair		Davina Ramirez		Kendra Cawley	
Elizabeth Cole		Laura Sanders		Sally Earll	X
Marc Goodman	X	Julianne Sandlin	X	Anne Haberkern	
Allison Gross		Jenny Sasser		Susan Wilson, Recorder	X
Dana Harker		Torie Scott	X		
Wayne Hooke, Vice-Chair	X	Thomas Songer	X	Today's Guests	
Jessica Johnson		Nora Stevens	X	Jamee Kristen	X
Matt Levy	X	Ann Su	X	Jean Mittelstaedt	X
Hannah Love		Catherine Thomas			
Linda Paulson	X	Ralf Youtz	X		

Note: Minutes are sent to all of the individuals listed above, plus the VP of Academic Affairs, the Director of Institutional Effectiveness, and all past LAC chairs.

Chris Brooks was representing PCC at the statewide LO&A meeting today, so vice-chair Wayne Hooke stepped up to lead this afternoon's LAC meeting.

BUSINESS UPDATES

Subcommittee Reports

- Templates (Ralf): Nothing to report. As it moves forward in its efforts to streamline the reporting templates, Wayne entreated the subcommittee to retain the *Assess* → *Evaluate* → *Reassess* concept. As PCC slowly works to redefine its General Education system and its Core Outcomes, it is important to continue documenting institutional progress where it is taking place. Recording changes and improvements prompted by assessment remains a key element in the accreditation process, and the reporting templates should convey this all-important cycle.
- By-Laws (Susan and Linda): The revised LAC by-laws are currently in the hands of a copy editor who will insert them into the LAC Guidelines & By-Laws Handbook and update the relevant appendices. It is Chris's plan to have the updated handbook ready for distribution in June.

LAC DISCUSSION

LAC FAQs

Earlier this year, Davina suggested the LAC address some of the concerns and queries colleagues have posed about assessment, and develop an answer sheet of sorts for frequently-asked questions (FAQs). The rest of the meeting was spent in this pursuit, working off a list of questions and goals that Chris had inserted into the agenda. In some cases, the questions themselves prompted tangential conversations and concerns. Those have been summarized at the very end.

Question 1: “The ongoing fear that assessment will somehow be ‘used against’ a given faculty member in terms of their employment status.”

Discussion: We need to clearly delineate how LAC assessment is different from other forms of evaluation, especially those that could be used for punitive reasons. The thrust of LAC assessment is *program* assessment and nothing else. The annual reports are to be anonymized so as not to reflect directly on any individual student or instructor. Wayne acknowledged the difficulty in achieving 100% anonymity when SACs assess a specialty course that is offered only once a year, perhaps, and taught by only one person. It may be appropriate to contact the union to get language in the contract that communicates the freedom from retribution that faculty enjoy when it comes to program assessment. Jamee shared something that worked well for Sociology: Each SOC instructor who contributed student artifacts to the Multi-State Collaborative (through PCC’s Academic Affairs Office) received a thank you letter expressing appreciation for their participation. The letters were signed by each member’s division dean and copies were forwarded to HR for their employee file.

Formal Response: “The LAC’s emphasis is on program, not individual faculty or course, assessment. We want to support SACs’ assessment efforts and we encourage anonymity in the reporting process so there is no direct connection to an individual. This is a good reminder that assessment reporting shall not tie back to the individual instructors who contribute to program assessment. Further, the LAC endorses positive acknowledgement of faculty assessment efforts. To bridge accountability, the LAC recommends that such faculty receive a letter from the Dean of Academic Affairs, signed also by the faculty’s division dean (not administrative liaison), and that a copy be forwarded to their personnel file.”

2. “A lack of understanding as to why course grades are not sufficient for, or equivalent to, our assessment needs.”

Discussion: This question begs a ‘mea culpa,’ Wayne suggested, because the LAC did encourage SACs to go after ‘low hanging fruit’ when assessment was in its infancy at PCC. This practice diluted the overall objective, which was to evaluate student performance on a larger scale and attain meaningful data that informed program improvements. Course grades give only a one-dimensional view of student performance, when the LAC aims to get a macro view. Course grades often represent the percentage of points students earn out total points possible, but do not pinpoint specific areas of achievement or failure.

Formal response: This question begs a ‘mea culpa,’ offers 2016-17 LAC vice chair Wayne Hooke, because the LAC did encourage SACs to go after ‘low hanging fruit’ when assessment was in its infancy at PCC. This practice diluted the overall objective, which was to evaluate student performance on a larger scale and attain meaningful data that informed program improvements. Course grades indicate whether a student or group of students pass an exam, an assignment, or an entire course. Course-level grades are one-dimensional in that they reflect only how students meet an instructor’s unique and subjective array of requirements. They do not provide detail as to the *specific areas* where students may exceed, minimally meet, or fail expectations. Program assessment, on the other hand, applies standardized measurements to a target population that might extend across sections or across campuses, and pinpoints levels of achievement on a specific outcome or set of outcomes.

3. “The perception that assessment is too difficult and/or requires esoteric knowledge (e.g., social science skills like sampling and norming).”

Discussion: It is important to acknowledge the complexity of assessment. Yes, it is difficult, and even more so when it involves a core outcome that the SAC isn't totally into.

Formal response: Designing a meaningful assessment in one's discipline *is* difficult. Successful assessment requires an action plan that includes follow through (post-assessment analysis, tweaks, reassessment, more analysis; and, ultimately, improvements to instruction). The LAC recommends taking baby steps and setting realistic expectations. Do not expect your first attempt to be perfect and realize you might need to ask for help. Decide as a group what you would like to know about your students, and seek help executing the technical side of assessment. The LAC offers a variety of web-based resources and free assessment coaching.

4. The perception (and/or desire) that assessment is just a phase in higher education that will atrophy by itself over time.

Discussion: Diffuse resentment by acknowledging that assessment is a royal pain and an ever-moving target. Susan volunteered to ask Kendra how she might answer this one.

Formal response: As fellow faculty, the LAC members agree that assessment is time-consuming and tedious. However, faculty who are on board with assessment have something in common: interest in knowing that their students are truly learning what the faculty want them to learn.

Additional input from Kendra: “(Assessment going away)... Probably not. It has become a key part of accreditation, and is arguably a good thing to do in the context of increased concern about the costs and benefits of a college education. We are in a much better place, overall, if we can provide evidence that we do the things we say we do – that is, to help students develop mastery of our stated outcomes.”

5. The question of why assessment is such a major priority of administration and/or accreditation.

Discussion: We all want to know that students are getting what we hope they are getting. Accreditation ensures that colleges are giving their paying students and taxpaying constituents their money's worth. It has to do with accountability. As a public institution, we have additional stakeholders.

Formal response: Our mission is to deliver a product that provides value to the students we serve.

Additional input from Kendra: “It stems from a 2006 report by the federal Spelling Commission, which called for uniform assessment of students via standardized tests. Concerned about that approach, higher ed argued that the accrediting agencies should weave assessment into the accreditation standards, and issue recommendations, warnings or more dire consequences if we fail to meet the stated standards. All regional agencies do this a little differently, and NWCCU's approach is not as draconian as some, but we need to attend to it, since losing accreditation would basically put us out of business.”

Other Comments

(Related to Q3): When SACs lose points in peer review for issues beyond their control (e.g., not having full SAC participation), it sets SACs up for failure and is counter-productive. SACs should be encouraged to assess and those who do participate should be rewarded for doing so. Changing the template so as to remove the punitive loss of points is recommended.

(Related to Q4): We should ask for a formal statement as to how the expectations for assessment fit in with the faculty contract.

(Related to Q5): We can have a perfect course and a perfect assessment method, but some students will still fail because there are factors affecting their success and persistence that go well beyond the SACs' control.

(Related to several questions, especially Q5): PCC's lack of assessment funding for faculty work – particularly for PT faculty – undermines the ability of faculty to devote sufficient time and effort in many assessment projects.

General: None of the questions or responses address the cynicism that PCC's faculty-driven assessment system really *isn't* (driven by faculty, that is). The LAC has always operated top-down, with the Council leading the charge using an invisible playbook largely influenced by the accreditation agency's decrees and standards.

Inherent problems exist when assessments do not lead to anything useful. A SAC may execute a great assessment project every year and summarize it in a stunning report each June, but if there is no action plan, no faculty commitment, and no mechanism in place to do anything meaningful with the results, then the SAC and PCC have failed.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 3:00.