Good assessment practices call for logic and simplicity

An interview with Ryan Murnane

During a workshop on curriculum development at the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers conference hosted by ATS, Ryan Murnane, director of assessment for Regent University, provided some interesting insights regarding assessment. Through an email interview following the event, he shares with us some of those insights along with practical advice regarding assessment.

Why do you think assessment is important for ATS member schools?

Assessment is the best source for clear diagnostics of an institution's effectiveness. When a weakness is identified, assessment can guide the decision-making process for improvement. The more detailed and specific the assessment, the clearer the findings. When findings lack clarity, many times leaders spend time and money trying to fix a problem of which they do not know the source. Bottom line, good assessments can save an institution money while maintaining and improving the quality of its programs and the efficiency of its processes.

Why do you think so many ATS member schools struggle with assessment?

My assumption is that many ATS schools struggle with assessments because those in leadership have experience and expertise in areas other than assessment and higher education administration. This is common in higher education. Faculty members who possess credentials in a particular discipline get promoted into leadership although they may not have any experience in curriculum design or administration. The same practice happens in the area of assessment. Assessment is a skill that needs to be learned in much the same way that Greek, homiletics, and hermeneutics need to be developed and practiced.

The assessment challenge is daunting. How do you make it manageable?

Assessment, in general, is made up of three parts: evaluation, implementation of a change based on the evaluation, and reevaluation to measure the effectiveness of the change. I have been at Regent for slightly more than two years. When I first

More than 140 participants from 67 schools convened in Pittsburgh for two days as part of an event hosted by The Association of Theological Schools to share ideas and learnings regarding the economic challenges facing future ministers. The initiative, funded by Lilly Endowment, will address the need for schools to do research into financial issues facing students, develop new strategies to decrease financial burdens on students who attend theological schools, create and strengthen educational programs in financial literacy to prepare future pastoral leaders, and help schools use partnerships to address these issues.

arrived, there were a lot of assessments taking place. So many, in fact, that most people could only handle the first part of the three-step process. One faculty member told me when I first arrived that the school had an entire room full of assessment findings. When I asked what improvements had been made from all that assessment, the answer wasn't as clear. Over the last eighteen months, I have pulled back on the number of assessments and have required those involved to focus on the quality of the assessments that they conduct with the assurance that they can complete all three steps.

During my time at Regent, we have established a regular program review cycle for each academic program. We have also strengthened both the practice of assessing learning and the assessment process for cocurricular areas. By strengthening the quality of the assessments, we have been able to reduce the number of assessments.

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An example of this reduction is with our Regent University Graduation Exit Survey, which is sent out to each student once his or her graduation application is completed. The intent of this survey was to allow the various departments to ask graduating students questions regarding their experience in their domain. When I first arrived, the survey had more than seventy questions. During a three-month review period, I inquired about the rationale for each question. Now the survey is roughly one third of its original size, and each question is utilized by a variety of areas. The response rate has increased from around 30 percent to more than 60 percent on this voluntary survey.

What are the key components of assessment at your school?

There are three main components that make up assessment at Regent: program reviews, cocurricular assessment reports, and surveys.

The program reviews, as previously mentioned, constitute the centralized process by which all academic programs assess each component of their programs (student learning, faculty, curriculum, and support). The review process is conducted every six years with a three-year interim report. This process is designed to link to any regional accreditation standard that an academic program may need to address in an accreditation report (assessment of student learning, faculty credentials, curriculum length, student achievement, etc.). By doing this, any time I need to pull something for Regent's regional accreditor (SACSCOC), I can use the program review as the primary and centralized document.

The cocurricular assessment reports are annual reports that each nonacademic area completes. This consists of the assessment of the department's objectives for that year and a plan for improvement for the following year. Each entity needs to articulate how that area supports at least one of the university objectives, thereby providing us with evidence that university objectives are being met as well. If there's a SACSCOC standard that relates to a cocurricular area (e.g., student affairs), then that is linked in there as well. As a result, one assessment in this process could potentially be used to satisfy multiple standards.

Like many institutions, Regent departments value surveys as a means to collect feedback and insight on the perception of a stakeholder's experience. When I arrived at Regent, there was no centralized clearing house tracking when and by whom a survey was being conducted. Last summer I established a survey calendar web page that allows us to coordinate and manage when surveys are distributed to avoid requesting the same set of students to complete multiple surveys at the same time. A number of areas have told me that since we have implemented this practice, participation rates have increased.

What assessment practices should be implemented to get good assessment data from the curriculum?

Understanding two concepts. The first is the difference between a student learning outcome and a curriculum objective. The second is the difference between a course learning outcome and a program learning outcome.

The first concept (a student learning outcome versus a curriculum objective) is important because one focuses on the end product while the other focuses on the process by which the end product is encouraged and accomplished. A student learning outcome is a measureable skill that a student can demonstrate with the content of the curriculum. A curriculum objective describes a characteristic or task within the curriculum (e.g., qualified faculty, completion rates, quality internships, etc.).

The second concept (course learning outcome versus program learning outcome) describes how a student learning outcome is implemented within the program; understanding this difference can be difficult at times. Occasionally faculty members are trained to teach a particular set of courses. As a result, they tend to simply think about those courses and forget that their courses are only a portion of a larger component. Asking faculty to complete (or participate in the completion of) a curriculum map usually helps to illustrate this concept.

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Once these two concepts are defined and understood by stakeholders, assessment instruments can be developed with a narrowed focus. This should also lead to better assessment data of the curriculum (primarily because the data will be defined, which can lead to quick diagnosis and change). Strong understanding and clearly defined concepts are always the smartest and efficient practices in assessment.

Workshop participants described diverse formats of financial literacy training such as dinner sessions, community-relational-based models, and workshops. How should assessment practices differ for such formats?

Besides Regent, I have not been a part of an institution that offers financial literacy training platforms nor have I have researched it extensively. My initial response is that assessment practices should differ based on platform and expected outcomes. A dinner session would be assessed differently when compared to a community-relational-based model. Additionally, the instrument should reflect the outcome; self-efficacy is measured differently than cognitive competency which is measured differently than perception. As a result, assessment practices should differ because they ought to be designed to accommodate the platform while effectively measuring the outcome or objective.

In addition to assessment, the demand for online education is increasing, and schools are developing ways to accommodate the demand. At the workshop, however, you suggested approaching it with caution. Please explain.

The illustration I told at the conference was based on a story from a colleague of mine, Todd Marshall, who was a missionary in the Ukraine during the mid-1990s and early 2000s. He explained to me that theological education was extremely limited during the time of the Soviet Union. When Ukraine became free from Russia, so did theological education. As a result, there was an influx of students who had a desire to become educated in theology but had not had a chance to pursue this education until that time. Enrollment in the few seminaries that did exist exploded with students under this new freedom. A number of these institutions built new buildings to accommodate not only the growth at the time but the future growth. What many didn't realize was that there was a type of backlog of students from the 1970s and 1980s that accounted for this rapid growth. In other words, the trend during the mid-1990s wasn't reflective of the normal trend of that environment (i.e., ratio of that type of student within that country). As a result, enrollment numbers dropped at the turn of the century to the normal and expected trend for that culture once the backlog flattened out.

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The rationale for my illustration was to highlight the potential danger of many institutions that rely heavily on the recent growth of online students. Many of these students are individuals who were unable to attend college (or seminary) until the online platform developed into what it is today. My concern is if we are experiencing a type of backlog of students who are now able to complete a degree online who were unable to do so 10 to 20 years ago. Is the trend of online enrollment numbers across higher education inflated and will they flatten out in the next few years as they did in Ukraine, or is our current trend sustainable? I don't know the answer to this. There was just a lot of conversation regarding online growth at the conference, and I wanted to provide my illustration to highlight a potential warning by placing too much dependence in the online platform.

What advice would you give other assessment directors at ATS member schools?

When I first started in assessment, I had lunch with a gentleman who had four decades of experience in higher education administration. When I asked him the key to success in the area of planning and assessment, he gave me two answers. The first was to keep everything simple. Design everything as though I was leaving tomorrow and my replacement would not only understand everything I did but also continue it. The second was to make everything logical. Many leaders, he told me, try to implement large and unrealistic goals that waste time and money. By keeping things simple and logical, things can be accomplished effectively and efficiently.

My other advice would be to get training. I learned assessment through mentoring by assessment experts. Find someone who understands assessment and sit under him or her and learn. Much of this learning is through dialoguing and bouncing ideas off of each other. Without collaboration, the quality of assessments will struggle.

Do you have any further advice?

Remember the mission of your institution. Don't forget the big picture and the ultimate reason for everything we do as educators. Don't get so caught up with trying to remove the weeds that you forget to appreciate the beauty of the garden.

__Ryan Murnane__ is director of assessment at Regent University. He attributes his knowledge of effective assessment practices to being mentored in the area of higher education administration and assessment by gifted leaders, such as C. Wayne Freeberg (Secretary of Education for the State of Florida for 30 years) and Barbara Boothe (Director of Assessment at Liberty University for 13 years and pioneer in assessment for Christian higher education). He is currently enrolled in Regent's PhD program in higher education administration under the guidance of Michael Ponton.

The ATS Board of Commissioners will release this summer a new assessment guide that will replace Section Eight of the *Handbook of Accreditation*. The guide is entitled "A Reflective Guide to Effective Assessment of Student Learning." It will be introduced at the ATS Biennial Meeting in Pittsburgh in June and should be available on the ATS website (under Accrediting > Handbook of Accreditation) by early August.