Adapting Assessment Audits in a Changing World

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Winston-Salem State University's Institutional Assessment & Research (IAR) office conducts an annual assessment audit for academic, administrative, and educational/student support services units. This article will discuss the academic audit process and detail the changes we made to this process to account for the COVID-19 pandemic that moved all interaction to a virtual format.

Background

Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) has conducted an annual assessment audit since 2009. The purpose of the audit is to ensure that assessment activities are systematically shared and regularly reviewed to allow for continuous improvement. More specifically, the audit process is a two-tiered review process whereby a variety of stakeholders across campus review assessment plans and reports that have been entered into our centralized assessment management platform. By involving a variety of constituents across different levels of the university, assessment activities have become more broadly shared and embraced by our campus community. Individual audit results are shared with units to promote continuous improvement. Aggregate results of the audit review are shared with upper administration and external agencies such as our accrediting body (SACSCOC).

WSSU has an assessment committee that includes individuals from all academic, administrative, and educational/student support service units. These individuals are appointed by their unit's leadership and are expected to attend meetings, input data into the assessment management system, and serve as a liaison between Institutional Assessment & Research (IAR) and their team. The assessment committee meets at minimum two times a semester, once at the beginning and end of the semester, with meeting frequency depending in large part on institutional priorities.

Assessment Audit

Original Audit Process

Traditionally, department chairs were asked to complete an institutionally created assessment audit form for majors under their purview. This form asked chairs to review, rate, and provide comments on four key areas: outcome statements, assessment methods, results, and use of results. Chairs were also asked to provide an overall assessment and at least two recommendations for improvement before signing the audit form. After the chair completed the audit form, the form was elevated to the associate dean for a second-level review.

For academic areas, the percentage of audit forms completed declined rapidly from 83% in 2015 to a low of 24% in 2017. Additionally, IAR had concerns that reviewers were not providing actionable feedback as a high percentage of auditors, ranging from 82% to 93% between 2015 and 2017, consistently indicated the reports were "sufficient as is" or "needs minor revision."

IAR surmised that a changing institutional structure, our accreditation cycle, and consistently asking chairs to provide feedback on their own majors was contributing to the lack of participation and useful feedback.

Academic Assessment Audit Day

Beginning in 2017-2018, IAR began hosting an Academic Assessment Audit Day. Department chairs were expected to attend this day-long session at the end of the spring semester and complete assessment audit forms, with a pre-assigned teammate, for units *not* under their purview. Teams, expectations, dates, and the agenda were shared during assessment committee meetings and via email.

The initial audit review process allowed faculty and staff to create their own structure to how the audits were completed.   By imposing a more formalized meeting structure, the audits were completed in real time during a one-day session that allowed for results to be discussed among teams and the broader group. Worth noting is the fact that the audit day was widely advertised and supported by our upper administration. Any individual unable to attend was expected to alert the Dean and provide a representative. The Provost's expectation was that all chairs would attend.

The audit form design and length were retained, as well as the two reviewer/signature requirement. Pairing department chairs and expecting them to come to a session with on-site IAR staff support led to 100% of academic majors receiving review and more thoughtful, useful feedback, as highlighted by the lower percentage of reviewers indicating the reports to be sufficient or in need of minor revision (i.e., 69% in 2018 compared to 82%-93% in 2015-2017). In a follow-up survey, all (100%) department chair respondents reported that completing audits for other units was helpful and that the process showed ways they could improve their own plan/report.

The Academic Assessment Audit Day was held again in 2019 with a few revisions. The audit form was placed into our online survey platform to facilitate data collection and reporting. The overall assessment item was changed to allow for feedback by the following assessment elements: outcomes, assessment methods, results, use of results (actions/follow-ups), and supporting documentation/related documents. All academic majors were reviewed during the 2019 Academic Assessment Audit Day.

Academic Assessment Audit During COVID-19

Given our success with Academic Assessment Audit Day, IAR had planned to hold a similar event in spring 2020. When WSSU moved to emergency online teaching/learning, we began to make adjustments.

IAR created a COVID-19 Assessment Questionnaire as part of the assessment audit. Department Chairs were asked to submit this questionnaire for their majors. The questionnaire asked chairs to indicate the extent to which they had to change their assessment process due to COVID-19 and how COVID-19 affected faculty members' ability to engage in assessment. The questionnaire also contained open-ended questions surrounding the following themes:
- Description of how assessment practices changed due to COVID-19
- Data collected to show if/how student learning outcome attainment was affected by COVID-19
- Assessment successes and challenges
- Resources needed to move forward
- General comments

In addition, IAR abbreviated the approximately 25-question assessment audit form such that it only asked about the following:
- If assessment methods and targets made sense for the student learning outcomes
- If data had been entered for 2019-20
- Overall judgement by assessment element

Comment boxes and overall recommendations were retained in the audit forms. Where possible, IAR kept department chair teams consistent with 2018-19 pairings so that chairs could more efficiently review the information with a familiar teammate.

IAR held virtual meetings with department chairs in late April to propose the modified assessment audit process. In these meetings, department chairs provided guidance on the revised process, expectations, and submission deadline. Department chairs were encouraged to work with their teammate through a format (e.g., virtual meetings, email exchanges) and during a time period that made sense for their schedule.

On the day originally designated as Academic Assessment Audit Day, IAR held virtual sessions for department chairs. The virtual sessions covered a variety of topics with 30 minutes devoted to audit progress. As response rates were low and chairs were dealing with other challenges posed by COVID-19 (e.g., altered grading policy, connecting to necessary systems remotely), IAR extended the assessment audit due date.

Assessment Audit Data during COVID-19

COVID-19 Assessment Questionnaire Results

Almost half of respondents (46%) indicated they did not have to alter their assessment process due to COVID-19. Over half of respondents (64%) said the move to online learning did not affect their faculty's ability to engage in assessment.

Assessment challenges centered on technology issues, running out of time, and necessary assessment method changes due to COVID-19. Assessment successes included assessment method modification for an online environment (e.g., virtual recitals) and better engagement in courses.

Abbreviated Assessment Audit Results

Audit forms were received for 100% of units. Reviewers indicated substantial improvement in overall assessment report quality when compared to 2019:

Percentage of Responses Indicating "Sufficient As Is" or "Needs Minor Revision"			
	2019	2020	% Change
Outcomes	82%	98%	+16%
Assessment Methods	85%	98%	+13%
Results	70%	78%	+8%
Use of Results (Actions/Follow-Ups)	63%	76%	+13%
Supporting Documentation/Related Documents	62%	77%	+15%

Further research is needed to discern what may have contributed to the improved ratings (e.g., preparations for reaffirmation visit, reviewers working with same reports from last year, etc.).

Conclusion

COVID-19 presented IAR with an opportunity to reimagine our assessment audit process. IAR was able to retain elements that worked well, like assigning teams to provide feedback for units not under their purview. Certain adaptations made for COVID-19, like abbreviating the assessment audit form and providing unit leadership with an avenue to explain their assessments more fully in a questionnaire, proved to be valuable changes that will be considered in future audit cycles.

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