

Assurance of learning: moving from a compliance to an improvement culture

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe an organizational change effort that the College of Business Administration at a Midwestern university undertook to transform assurance of learning (AoL) from an inefficient process focused on responding to accreditors to the one that embraced continuous improvement focused on student learning.

Design/methodology/approach – A case study approach was employed along with the analysis of historical documents, interviews with stakeholders in the college, and a review from an external expert to reveal root problematic causes behind the current state of AoL in the college. Lewin's model of planned change was applied at the beginning of the process to identify the ways to unfreeze the current state of assessment, implement changes, and refreeze by identifying rewards and incentives for faculty to institutionalize the new assessment culture of student learning.

Findings – Four root problematic areas were revealed behind the current state of AoL in the college: faculty resistance and lack of engagement, structural and communication challenges, inconsistency across degree programs, and misalignment of the college vision and mission with program learning goals. Improved communication and coordination between assessment groups and increasing faculty ownership were identified as the key factors for a successful AoL process.

Practical implications – Colleges looking to improve coordination of AoL activities and increase faculty engagement in the AoL process can implement many of the initiatives described in this study.

Originality/value – This case study takes into account new trends in the area of assessment and AoL and addresses common problems that colleges face regarding accreditation in an area where empirical studies do not exist.

Keywords Assessment, Accreditation, Assurance of learning, Assessment and evaluation, Lewin's model of planned change

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Over the past few decades, increased attention has been directed toward the effectiveness of education with a shift in focus from teaching to student learning. Consequently, many policymakers, administrators, and educators have pushed toward outcome-based models of education with clear assessments and assurances that students have met specified objectives (Bryant and Scherer, 2009; Earl, 2013; Haggis, 2009; Honawar, 2005; Olayiwola, 2012). In some instances, funding has even been tied to measures related to assessment (Banta and Palomba, 2015). Yet despite the necessity and demonstrated value of assessment efforts, many schools and programs still struggle in making changes necessary to implement effective assurance of learning (AoL) initiatives. Faculty resistance resulting from such factors as inconvenience, extra work, or even fear of assessment (Pringle and Michel, 2007), along with lack of ownership of the assessment process (Rexisen and Garrison, 2013), challenge those looking to



introduce sustainable continuous improvement changes in AoL. Additionally, changing (and increasing) demands by (sometimes multiple) accreditors makes AoL a difficult process to manage successfully.

This paper describes the journey taken by one College of Business Administration (CBA) at a public university in the Midwestern USA (hereafter referred by the pseudonym MWU) in transforming and revitalizing the AoL process in the college. The specific question being addressed is:

RQ1. How does a university transition from a culture of compliance driven by external accreditation standards in AoL to one of continuous improvement that focuses on student learning?

To answer this question, a root cause analysis was performed to identify the causes behind the existing culture of accreditation- and compliance-driven AoL. Analysis of historical documents related to assessment, analysis of reports from a 2015 re-accreditation visit from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), and interviews with faculty and administrators involved in assessment in the college, revealed four root causes of the problematic existing state of AoL at MWU: faculty resistance and lack of engagement in AoL, structural issues that inhibited communication and made coordination of closing the loop difficult, misalignment of college mission and vision with degree program learning goals, and inconsistency across degree programs with regard to assessment practices.

Lewin's change model was adopted at the beginning of the change effort to specifically address each of these four problematic areas to implement changes in three steps: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Studies that address AoL have often focused on assessment of specific student learning outcomes (SLOs) in an institution, such as teamwork skills (Loughry *et al.*, 2014) and short-term study abroad programs (Black and Duhon, 2006; Douglas and Jones-Ridders, 2001). Some scholars have focused on AoL in specific courses offered in a program (Carnovale *et al.*, 2016). This study, however, addresses AoL from a holistic perspective. We review the college vision and mission, alignment of all college SLOs to the vision and mission, and the entire AoL process, structures, and measures. The paper concludes by highlighting key insights that provide a potential roadmap for schools looking to improve their AoL process.

Identifying root causes of our current state of assessment at MWU

MWU's CBA has five accredited programs: a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (BSBA), an accounting major (ACC) (which is a major in the BSBA but is separately accredited by AACSB), a Bachelor of Applied Arts (BAA) for the college's entrepreneurship program, a Master of Business Administration (MBA), and a Master of Science in Information Systems (MSIS). It may be useful to note that the BAA may be unusual in many schools, where an entrepreneurship major or concentration is part of the traditional bachelor's degree. As a relatively new degree in the college compared to the BSBA, the BAA in entrepreneurship was created with specific content courses related to the various functional areas. The school's BSBA has a tight integration and sequence of required courses, and it was felt that having marketing, information systems, finance, and other content courses that could be focused on entrepreneurship gave students an education more focused to their ultimate goals.

As an accredited school of business by the AACSB, MWU's CBA has had to meet AACSB AoL standards, which were revised in 2013 with an increased emphasis on "closing the loop," or linking assessment results to curricular and instructional improvements (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), 2013b). AACSB states that they expect "accredited institutions to formulate specific learning goals and conduct appropriate direct assessments of learning for purposes of improving curricula

when deficiencies or opportunities for improvement are found” (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), 2013a, p. 3). Although business schools seeking accreditation must respond to this demand, this still allows considerable flexibility in the approach to assessment and assurance of student learning.

In 2015, the CBA sufficiently met assessment standards to meet reaffirmation requirements, but the visiting team identified several issues that needed to be addressed prior to the next AACSB visit in 2020. Most notably, the team observed problems regarding the ability of the CBA to close the loop on its learning objectives. The visiting AACSB team made several specific observations and recommendations (Figure 1).

This feedback was instrumental in identifying discrepancies between the actual and desired state of AoL in the college and helped us begin a root cause analysis to identify the biggest limitations to a successful AoL culture at MWU.

The accreditation visit in February 2015 and subsequent report became a catalyst for bringing about some necessary process and structural changes within the college. A timeline showing the chain of events is represented in Figure 2. CBA senior administration acted quickly following the report to respond to the need for additional support to address the issues identified by the visiting AACSB team by creating a new position: assistant dean for AoL. Just prior to the creation of this new position, the administration also appointed a new

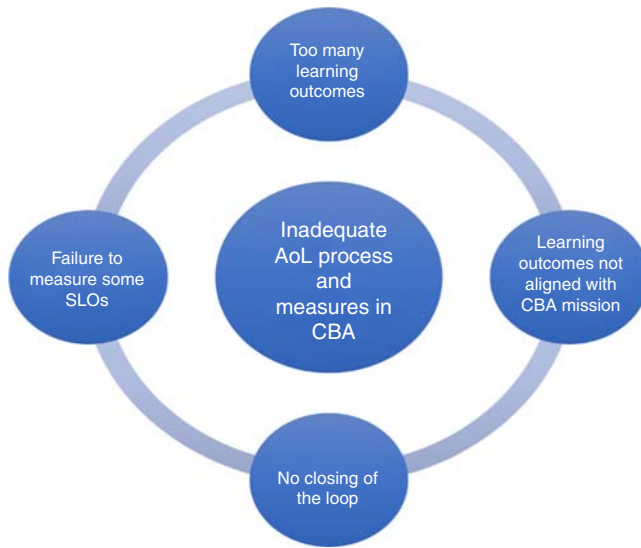


Figure 1.
AACSB feedback on
AoL process and
measures

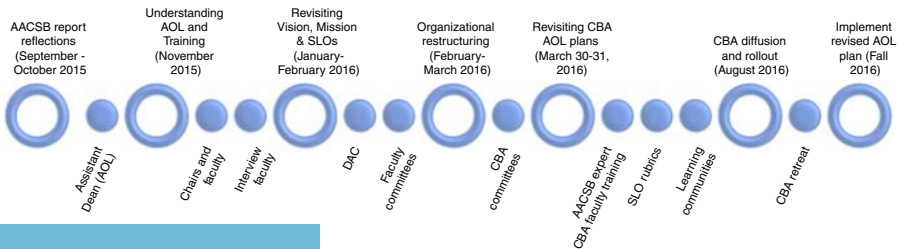


Figure 2.
AoL timeline: key
decisions and actions

director over assessment for the BSBA, the college's largest program. Additionally, they appointed an interim chair for the newly created Department of Entrepreneurship (BAA). These new appointments met with the associate dean and formulated goals for the coming year. They were charged with making necessary changes and brought a fresh perspective and energy to assessment efforts. Although a change in leadership does not guarantee fresh ideas or increased energy or commitment toward assessment, in this instance, the new appointments brought individuals to the front not steeped in previous procedures or structures who were willing to look at things differently. In part, this may be due to their training in communications and organizational behavior. The differences, infused with passion about student learning, became a catalyst for change.

Conceptual framework for change

The new leaders in AoL knew that successful change efforts start as planned organizational efforts, so they selected an organizational change framework with a long history of success in practice: Lewin's model of planned change. Lewin's (1947a, b, 1951) model provides a simple yet powerful framework that presents three phases of change: unfreeze, change, and refreeze. Although some (e.g. Burnes, 2004) have criticized Lewin's model as overly simplistic, particularly in regards to attempting to refreeze in a complex and dynamic world, Cummings *et al.* (2016) describe Lewin's model as the foundational framework in the field of change management and postulate that newer models (e.g. Mantere *et al.*, 2012) have Lewin's concepts in the background of their work. We found Lewin's model consisting of three general elements – preparing for change, initiating change, and formalizing change – to be efficient and effective, helping us to focus on the crucial elements to consider in a change process while not getting caught up in elaborate procedures, phases, or stages.

According to Lewin (1951), any change initiative requires preliminary work helping others examine the status quo and see the need for change – what Lewin calls unfreeze. In a university setting, particularly one existing in a union environment like MWU, unfreezing often proves to be the most difficult step. Union environments encourage transparency, procedural justice, and shared governance. Individuals must see a need for change (which can be difficult as humans are creatures of habit), and existing barriers to change must be removed. Schein (1987) suggests that individuals can be motivated to change when they perceive discrepancies between a current state and a desired state, thereby creating “psychological disconfirmation.” Changes that are perceived to come from administration may be more likely to be resisted by faculty, who may have a different idea about what the “desired state” of the organization (Schein, 1987) may be. Indeed, assessment as an accreditation-driven process reinforces the perception of external pressure, demands being placed from administration, and a lack of shared governance.

At MWU, responding to the report received from the AACSB re-accreditation visit helped create an initial picture of a “desired” state in regards to student learning. In the spirit of transparency, procedural justice, and shared governance, this initial picture was shared with faculty who had been involved with assessment efforts. The moving or change phase of Lewin's model focuses on implementing change interventions after adequate preparation from the unfreeze phase. The AoL group at MWU knew they must focus on making attitudinal, behavioral, and structural changes critical to support new processes and ensure successful change. Along with change efforts, some refreezing efforts were initiated to help reinforce desired behaviors and increase the probability of long-term success. The refreeze step is where new practices are reinforced and codified to become the common way of doing things. Although these refreezing efforts will help ensure the new “desired” state remains, it should be noted that in a continuous improvement culture, AoL will have to be constantly evaluated and reassessed, so that “refreezing” becomes a more dynamic process, reinforcing new changes as they occur. Developing a shared vision of student learning and creating

short-term and long-term “wins” or rewards are some of the efforts MWU began to help shift the organizational culture from compliance to improving student learning.

After adopting a change model, the AoL leaders at MWU next examined the root causes behind the current state of AoL by conducting interviews with faculty in the college who were involved in assessment: program directors, department chairs, chairs of committees involved in curriculum and assessment, and individual faculty who conduct assessment work for the college. The goals of these informal interviews were to identify the level of engagement in and awareness of current assessment activities in the college and develop an understanding of the entire workflow of AoL duties. A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative data in a quantitative fashion (Christensen *et al.*, 2016) was used performing a content analysis (classical content analysis, inductive approach; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2007) to identify themes that emerged from the data. A saturation point was reached quickly, whereby it was clear to see that there was not a common understanding of AoL, no clear connection between assessment activities and the overall vision of the college, duplication of assessment efforts in the college, a lack of communication and coordination of activities between groups responsible for curriculum and assessment, and a lack of faculty engagement with faculty seeing assessment as an extra burden to their workload.

It was clear that building a common understanding of AoL was a needed first step to engage faculty in the change process and establish a common lexicon. Faculty would be ultimately responsible for the success of any AoL change initiative, so this problem was tackled first. The duplication of assessment efforts was seen as a result of the lack of communication and coordination between groups involved with assessment and curriculum efforts, so the structural and communication challenges were tackled next, followed by streamlining assessment plans within programs to reduce duplication of efforts. In the process, student learning outcomes (SLOs) were also realigned with the college vision and mission so that all programs could be in a place to help the college better achieve its strategic plans.

Faculty resistance and lack of engagement in assessment

The first root problem that needed to be addressed was engaging faculty in the change process and in AoL activities, an effort that had previously only involved a select few individuals in the college. Change resistance has a long-documented history (e.g. Deneen and Boud, 2014; Lawrence, 1969) and was certainly evident in the CBA at MWU. In the CBA, faculty had usually viewed assessment as an external compliance requirement (not only from the AACSB but also from the higher learning commission for each major for the entire university), which resulted in reluctant participation at best in assessment activities. Faculty, who are ultimately responsible for the success of the assessment process, often resist change because they value processes they use, even if imperfect, over procedures they are unfamiliar with (Halpern and Hakel, 2003). Tagg (2012) also describes the phenomenon of “loss aversion” in change resistance efforts with faculty; that is, faculty may perceive the potential loss of a familiar process as a greater harm than the perceived gain from adopting a new process.

To aid in the unfreezing process by examining the current state of assessment and possible resistors to change, informal interviews with faculty either formerly or currently involved with assessment were conducted. Faculty were asked for their opinions on our current assessment plan for the college, the relationship between the groups responsible for assessment, and their own participation in assessment activities. Data revealed that for nearly all faculties, the term “assessment” had become loaded with negative connotations. As one faculty member stated, “Assessment is just not part of my workload. It does not contribute to my research or teaching expectations, and service will not get you tenure. It is not a valued activity.” Generally, faculty viewed assessment as a required activity that took time from other more valued activities. They did not see personal value in assessment

but saw assessment as service work required to maintain accreditation or appease administrators who were requiring it. Other faculty pointed out a lack of support for assessment in department bylaws, suggesting that it would have more perceived value if it were incorporated into department bylaws as criteria for reappointment, promotion, and tenure decisions. Moreover, a point was made by one faculty that feedback from administrators following assessment is often scarce and not related to resources: “I do these (assessment) reports because it is a check-in-the-box, but then I never see any meaningful results come from it.”

When asked about “valued” activities, many faculties passionately discussed active-learning or student-centric learning. As one faculty member observed, “Assessment is something we have to do, but I typically only worry about it when a report is due. What concerns me week to week is whether students are learning, mastering concepts and developing skills essential to their success.” To encourage a paradigm shift from an accreditor-focused culture to a student-focused culture, assessment leaders began to use new terms such as “AoL” and “student learning communities” to reflect the focus on student learning. This paradigm shift was critical to get faculty past the point of viewing assessment as a top-down approach, driven by external standards, to a faculty-driven approach that embraces the notion of valuing student learning.

Educating the faculty who had been most directly involved in assessment activities was a first step to getting faculty buy-in, as well as a needed step to addressing a root problem identified in early interviews. The assistant dean of AoL, four program directors, a department chair, and two regular faculty members attended AACSB assessment training to more fully understand AoL concepts and expectations. As the attendees of the training returned, one noted, “Now I understand what ‘closing the loop’ really means and why we haven’t been doing it right.” The training served to help create a shared understanding of principles and concepts central to our learning assurance efforts. Those who had been to the training then reached out to others upon their return to educate and inspire them to join the shift in focus to student learning. Overall, faculty responded positively, and both virtual and live discussion forums (such as “brown bag” meetings) were used to educate faculty and share the new vision. These activities also provided feedback in the early phases of the change.

When the administration began to see the effects of the unfreeze process through faculty interest and involvement, they began to commit more financial incentives, as well as time, to the effort. In addition to devoting an entire college retreat to AoL, they sponsored a consultant (an AACSB assessment trainer) to come to campus for two days. The consultant spent time with each program to address specific AoL issues for that program and facilitated workshops for faculty to develop rubrics for each of our college student learning goals. Over 50 percent of faculty in the college attended one or more of the working rubric sessions with the AoL consultant, which was a significant improvement from approximately 15 percent participation at best in prior assessment activities. Volunteers from each of the four rubric sessions later formed new student learning communities around each of the student learning goals. These volunteers (four to six per group) finalized the college-wide rubrics and took responsibility for following through with efforts in the closing of the loop process around each learning outcome. This increase in faculty involvement was substantial and led the way to address the remaining assessment challenges.

While these were successful first steps to change initiatives aimed at increasing faculty engagement and involvement in assessment activities, additional activities were planned to reinforce the desired behaviors. A variety of follow-up activities were planned to reinforce changes: creating faculty training videos, highlighting faculty AoL accomplishments in a regular newsletter, and designing signage for large-screen

monitors in the building to promote shared college learning goals and assessment results. These efforts were done as ways to continue to reach out to faculty and educate those who may not be directly involved in assessment work in the college. Several faculty members engaged in the change effort showed interest in getting involved in assessment-related research, and a research network was started for faculty to connect their assessment work to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Efforts to help refreeze changes were also in place, including an analysis of department bylaws to determine if or how assessment activities were rewarded. Departments were encouraged to consider making bylaw changes that would give credit for assessment activities. Additionally, financial support from administration was sought to reward or give credit to faculty engaged in significant assessment work.

Structural and communication challenges

Another discovery from the faculty interviews uncovered an underlying problem of lack of coordination and communication of groups responsible for assessment activities in the college. One faculty member said: “When the AACSB team asked us to come to the whiteboard and draw the relationship between the UBSC (Undergraduate Business Studies Committee) and Assessment Committee, there was an awkward pause [...] one member of both committees finally came up and attempted it but there was never a clear relationship.” Faculty reports from those involved in assessment stated that others in the college were not aware of their own assessment work and findings and that there was a lack of accountability and ownership of following-up with assessment results. When asked about their own (curriculum and/or assessment) committees, many faculty members struggled to define their own committee’s charge or explain the reporting relationship between curriculum and assessment committees (ACs) in the college. This evidence led us to analyze historical documents including formal charges, mission/vision statements, workflow processes, and meeting minutes to uncover the original purpose of these committees. It became readily evident that communication issues created the greatest difficulty in closing the loop.

Historically, there had been no coordination of efforts in the CBA between any of the accredited programs (see Figure 3 for a chart of the prior AoL structure). Committee

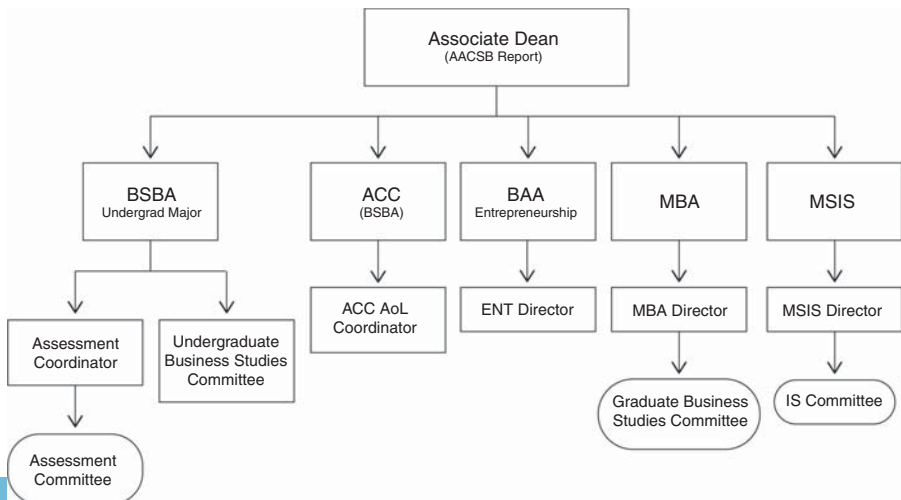


Figure 3.
Prior assurance of
learning structure

charges, even within the same program, were unclear and at times overlapped. For example, the AoL efforts of the BSBA degree program were handled by two major committees: an AC, charged with designing and administering assessment measures and analyzing results, and an Undergraduate Business Studies Committee (UBSC), charged with oversight of the BSBA degree (including AoL activities). This organizational structure had challenges from the beginning. The UBSC formalized nine “global business competencies” (in assessment terms, SLOs), while the AC decided on assessment measures and the timing and administration of those measures. The AC collected and analyzed tremendous amounts of data and reported results each semester to the UBSC for deciding how to implement improvements. The UBSC did not report back to the AC, however, about changes actually made, and little communication between the groups occurred.

“Closing of the loop” activities where improvements to courses or curriculum to be made based on assessment results was typically a “check-the-box” activity relegated to an annual faculty retreat where faculty work groups would digest results and suggest improvements. Little follow-up from any group resulted, and student learning was rarely a focus of discussion in college meetings. Moreover, it was discovered that there was a fundamental misunderstanding about what it meant to close the loop, as the discussions themselves, rather than the measurement of the improvements from those discussions, were thought to “close the loop.”

In the spirit of transparency and shared governance, the assistant dean met with both the AC and the UBSC several times to openly discuss the communication and coordination challenges. The merging of these two committees became a top priority, which caused some tension. While some faculty advocated for shared governance, others expressed concern about all the “talk” about change, with little action taken. One frustrated member of the AC complained: “Since this isn’t an Academic Senate Committee [meaning shared governance was not required], why doesn’t the Dean’s office just tell us what to do, and we can do it.” He went on to express concern over the time wasted when he felt the administration had their own agenda. The opposite extreme was expressed in a joint meeting of the two committees, where one member of the UBSC very passionately stated, “Whatever we end up deciding to do, it MUST be faculty driven,” reflecting the strong feelings for shared governance. In the spirit of shared governance, every attempt was made to be inclusive, particularly since student learning really was a function of faculty work and efforts.

The assistant dean also met individually with faculty who had concerns or doubts about the new direction. These meetings helped assure faculty their input was important, but it also gave the assistant dean the opportunity to communicate the need for change to aid in the unfreezing process. For example, one member of the AC liked the division of duties between the AC and the UBSC: “The committees serve an audit function of each other, ensuring appropriate checks and balances. If there is one committee and the data show a weakness in students, what would keep the committee from merely changing a target goal or objective?”

In some instances, the resistance was less about the proposed direction of AoL but more about difficulties individuals had with prior decisions made by the college administration. In one instance a member of the AC spoke passionately about keeping the two committees intact. In a conversation with the assistant dean, it came out that the chair was not really against merging the committees; rather, he was upset at the administration about a remodeling project for the business building where he was losing one of his prime classrooms he depended on for scheduling classes. Through individual interactions with faculty, the AoL leadership began to see consensus building for the changes suggested. As Lewin’s model suggests, forced change from the top seldom succeeds. Instead, preparing

for change or unfreezing requires shifting mental models and attitudes. In the spirit of shared governance, every attempt was made to be inclusive in discussions. When faculty saw the proposed changes as a faculty-driven effort, with a commitment of leadership to open, candid discussions, resistance diminished – even when initial reactions toward change had been negative.

The interviews and discussions helped reveal that faculty were united in one thing: their commitment to student learning. When discussion centered around student learning, the conversations about assessment and AoL became much less combative. To reflect the new focus on student learning, a new Student Learning Committee (SLC) was proposed as a group to focus on closing the loop in the AoL process. Some discussion arose as to whom should serve on this committee, and with input from several faculty members, it was proposed that the chairs of each of the departments along with the directors of each of the programs should comprise the SLC. This group would have an overall view of the programs and be able to work together to promote better continuity and shared efficiencies across all the programs, as well as to follow through on curricular improvements based on assessment results.

It was acknowledged that assessment work was also needed at the program level. Each program had a group that would meet, even if sporadically. These groups became AoL groups – a BSBA AoL, a BAA AoL, an MBA AoL, and an MSIS AoL. These groups were responsible for deciding on appropriate measures and seeing that data were gathered and analyzed. Program-level groups connected with degrees still remained, but with a focus on AoL instead of assessment. The SLC was charged with examining results from all programs to look for common strengths or gaps in student performance that need to be addressed.

The next organizational structure aimed at increasing faculty involvement and maintaining a focus on student learning formed learning communities around each of the college's four student learning goals: written communication, oral communication, problem solving, and technology skills, outlined in Figure 3. These groups encompass faculty across the college and are responsible for developing rubrics and looking at data collected around each learning goal. These groups report to the SLC on results and suggestions for improvement around each learning goal, who then are ultimately responsible for implementing and monitoring the change(s). The discussions with faculty concerning structural and communication challenges revealed another root cause to the existing state of assessment: a lack of alignment with the college mission and vision.

Alignment of the college mission and vision with program learning goals

As the various groups engaged in conversations about AoL, we saw the effects of the unfreezing phase. Faculty began to be open to changes in structure and processes. One of the most significant changes to occur came as the UBSC and the ACs met jointly for the task of revising the existing nine “global business competencies” in the BSBA program into four “SLOs,” a term more consistent with assessment practices (the term “global business competency” even caused some internal confusion when some faculty did not understand that they were outcomes or objectives). This reduction in number of SLOs was driven initially by a recommendation received during our re-accreditation visit in 2015 by the AACSB review team, however, it was also seen as a strategic move to streamline our processes and focus on the essentials related to student learning.

Initially, several faculty members expressed concerns about “losing” some of the global business competencies in the revision. Two things were done prior to the meeting to get people to engage in constructive dialogue and diffuse some of the potential resistance. First, both committees ($n = 13$) were given a survey with all nine global competencies and

were asked to rate each as either: “definitely keep,” “uncertain to keep or get rid of,” or “definitely drop.” Ultimately, four key areas were rated as important by faculty as “definitely keep”: basic business knowledge (76.92 percent), effective business communication (92.00 percent), problem solving (46.15 percent), and use of technology (72.73 percent). Second, a Blackboard shell was created to share the results of the survey with faculty members from each committee, who were then encouraged to post opinions and ideas or other documents related to AoL. These steps provided a starting point to the discussion, which helped to promote dialogue, transparency, and improved communication.

With much of the unfreezing preparation complete, the combined meeting was held as a working lunch. Although a relatively small thing, providing lunch was a signal that the work of the faculty was valued and is considered a short-term win to help refreeze change efforts. Surprising to many, in just an hour and a half, the group reached consensus on four student learning objectives deemed most critical to the college and its programs at this point in time, removing five (or in some cases, subsuming them under “basic business knowledge”) in a single hour-and-a-half meeting. At the end of the meeting, one faculty member exclaimed, “Wow. We agree on more things than I realized.” The preparation or unfreezing work that was done served to help the change come across quite naturally and painlessly.

The discussions during the revision of the BSBA SLOs led some faculty to question whether the learning outcomes were aligned with the college mission and vision, and general learning goals of the College. The mission and vision should drive the development of goals, which then can become learning objectives (AACSB, 2013a). At MWU, the CBA’s mission and vision had been revised during a faculty retreat with the new Dean’s arrival a few years prior (after SLOs for the program had been determined). The larger question was then raised as to whether the CBA mission and vision were reflective of our college. The area of biggest disconnect was the mention of global diversity in the mission, with few SLOs in any of the programs assessing that dimension. A discussion ensued as to measuring it in the programs as well as altering it if needed in the mission. Since the combined committees had no authority to alter the college mission/vision, the issue was brought to the dean’s advisory council for discussion. The faculty had to push to get administration to be open to change in a timely manner, as the dean noted the first revision took nearly two years. Discussion turned to ways the college could connect what they do well with what was being measured. In 2015, the AACSB visiting team’s maintenance of accreditation report had noted that the college was particularly strong in what they termed “transformational experiences,” a combination of internships, professional certifications, and other experiences such as study abroad. As a college, there was a general sense of pride in being “business-connected,” and it was felt that this could be part of the mission as well. The dean’s advisory council was charged with making small changes to the college mission by the end of the semester, even if an official acceptance of the revision from the entire faculty came later. The group also agreed that each program, in its own way, should address the broad goals of the college in business knowledge, communication, problem solving, and use of technology.

Through these discussions and meetings, it became evident that that the college was moving from the unfreezing to the change stage. Faculty, in general, were engaged and it was not just those leading the AoL efforts who were making suggestions. Faculty involved with the process began to look at and talk about improving student learning. The new joint BSBA committees met again to finalize the new SLOs, ensure their alignment with our college mission/vision, and update the curriculum map.

The administration showed continued support by hiring a consultant who was an AACSB assessment trainer to come in for two days to facilitate changes. The consultant reviewed each program’s mission, SLOs, and assessment plan and made suggestions to help

align assessment activities better and create efficiencies. She also helped refine the structure of the committees responsible for AoL and helped facilitate the creation of learning communities around the student learning goals.

Faculty began to see the benefits of the changes being implemented. As changes were codified, the refreeze began. Faculty who participated in a session with the consultant were given \$50 per session (up to \$100) into their professional development funds. Modest financial incentives have been shown to reinforce desired behavior, when used in moderation and when not the sole element of a change strategy (Kullgren, *et al.*, 2016; Scott and Connelly, 2011; Taylor, 2008). We added the incentive to increase the valence of the reward (Vroom, 1964) and to increase initial participation, understanding that eventually we would move toward more intrinsic motivators. The incentive should be directed to the desired behavior not just the result (Grenny *et al.*, 2013). In this instance, the actual meeting was not the focus but getting previously unengaged faculty to participate in AoL-related activities was important. Faculty who had participated in one of the student learning community sessions were invited for a sponsored lunch to further the development of a rubric and provide a start to the student learning community.

The creation of the rubrics became a unifying activity in the college. As faculty across the college met, they developed a shared understanding of concepts and common expectations. Faculty became excited, for instance, when a basic writing framework was introduced. They saw that it could be introduced in the 100-level courses, then emphasized and reinforced in upper-level courses. As one faculty observed, "If I know [students] have been introduced to a concept and rubric in their first year classes, they can't claim ignorance." Not only did expectations of students become more consistent, the consistency of expectations for faculty emerged as well.

Now that faculty across the college had some consistent expectations around student learning (which now aligned with the college mission and vision), degree program directors set to work with faculty making improvements to existing assessment plans based on the consultant's recommendations and the 2015 maintenance of accreditation report to address inconsistencies across degree programs with regard to assessment practices.

Inconsistency across degree programs regarding assessment practices

Aligning college-wide SLOs with the college's vision and mission brought people working on separate programs together in new ways. Through joint meetings with degree program directors and the assistant dean of AoL, processes and assessment measures currently being used across different programs were examined. It was clear that assessment practices, as well as the development of SLOs, had been conducted in a silo fashion, with each degree program engaging in its own process and measures. This process is depicted in Figure 3, which shows the prior state of AoL at MWU. For instance, in the MBA program, faculty teaching core courses were asked to provide a suggested SLOs for their class (instead of program-level outcomes) along with questions to build a knowledge-based assessment of student learning. The exam was given in the MBA capstone, and passing was not a requirement for graduation. In the MSIS program, faculty created a comprehensive exam whereby failure to pass required additional coursework prior to graduation. Similar to the MBA exam in construction, the MSIS exam covered only half of the SLOs of the program and focused more on specific course concepts rather than overall program outcomes.

In the BAA program in entrepreneurship, an assessment was integrated into the capstone course as part of the course grade, developed by one faculty member. An oral presentation rubric was used sporadically. An internship supervisor evaluation was also

used as part of assessment, which is considered an indirect measure and would not meet AACSB standards for direct measures.

The School of Accounting received separate accreditation, and their assessment was coordinated by a single faculty member who gets paid a summer stipend for managing the work. The BSBA degree program was the most robust with a committee responsible for the assessment plan, which included nine SLOs, assessed with multiple measures at multiple times. This was an inefficient process with not enough use of the data used to drive improvements.

Looking at all of the programs, it was clear that there existed numerous inconsistencies in the processes as well as the measures used to create, manage, and respond to assessment. No program worked with nor discussed assessment or learning outcomes with any other program, and none of the programs consciously worked to align program outcomes with the mission and vision of the college. All these things led to inefficiencies, which were identified both by the consultant (AACSB trainer) and the AACSB review team at the 2015 maintenance of accreditation visit.

Many of the structural changes implemented to address communication challenges also facilitated change in increasing coordination of efforts across degree programs. A key improvement was the creation of the SLC, which had representation from each degree program to share assessment results and activities. The creation of overarching student learning communities created around each of the four key student learning goals of the college facilitated a discussion of results across programs necessary for recommending and implementing changes needed to initiate closing the loop. The assistant dean and BSBA assessment director worked to create a process flow for these groups to improve communication and make sure the focus of all groups remained where it should be: on student learning. Wherein Figure 4 shows the new structure of these committees, Figure 5 illustrates the process flow in the restructuring, an improvement over how things had been handled previously.

Change initiative results and implications

Significant improvements in AoL occurred in a relatively short period of time at MWU, starting with a review of the recommendations of the 2015 maintenance of accreditation report and the subsequent Fall 2015 appointment of a new assistant dean of AoL and director of assessment. The preceding narrative documents challenges faced and improvements made in implementing changes and moving to a more mature continuous improvement process.

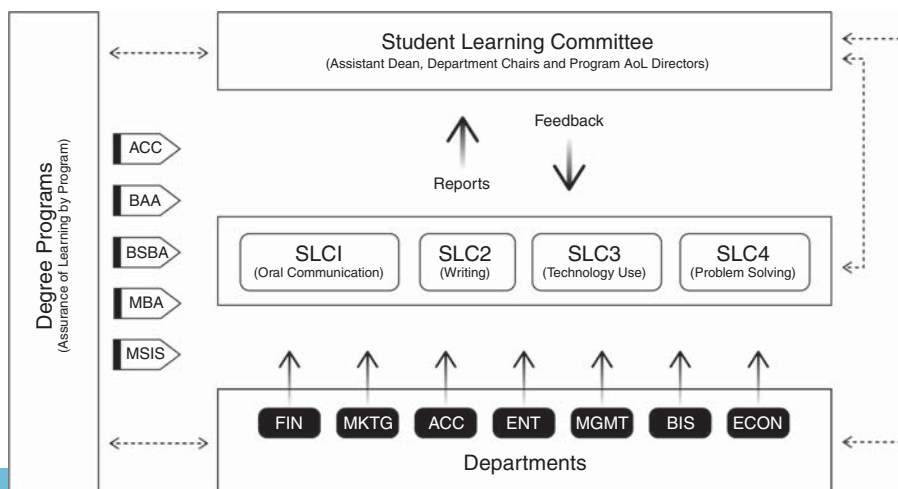


Figure 4.
Structural changes to
address assurance
of learning

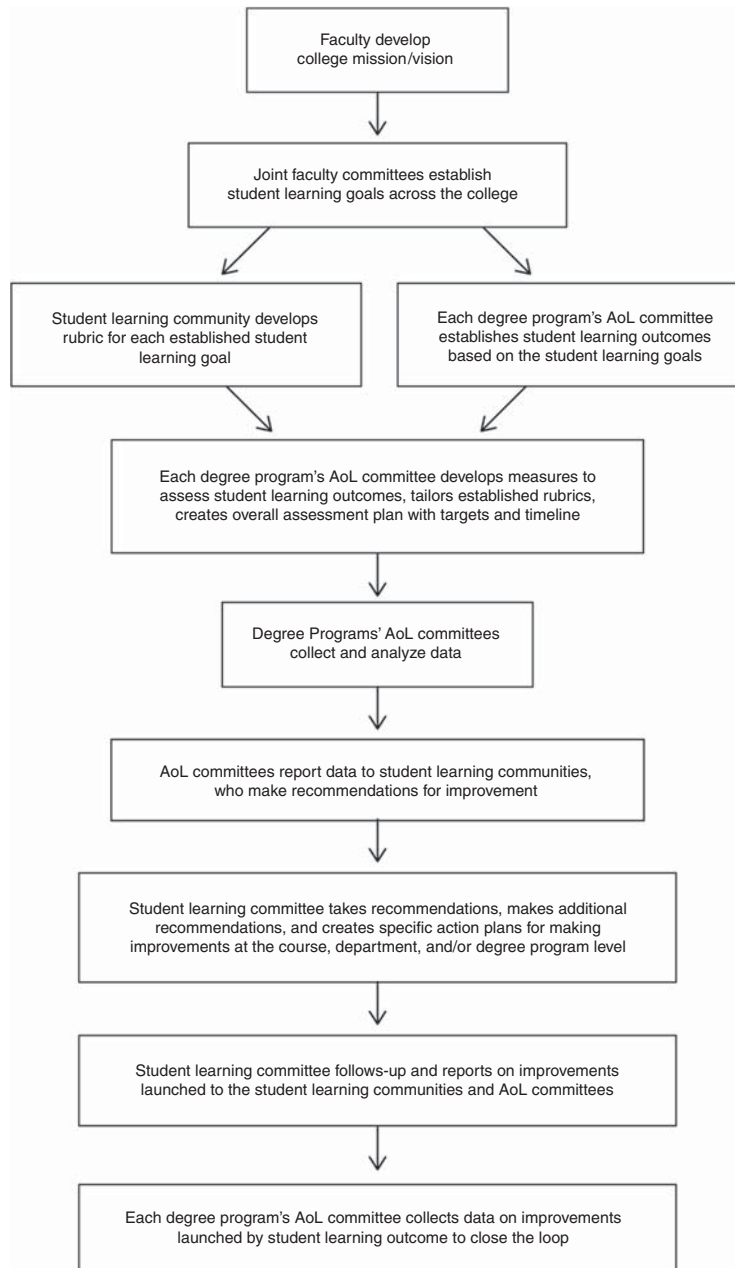


Figure 5.
Assurance of learning
process flow

Like many schools, MWU has been involved in assessment activities for quite some time. However, the vision and implementation of AoL remained lacking in significant ways.

Although external AACSB accreditation had served as a catalyst for engaging in assessment, the focus on this external pressure had created many problems for assessment in

the college, including making faculty resist assessment because it was seen as extra work that was disconnected from our central focus on students. Historically, few significant changes had been made at MWU to improve programs or really assess student learning. From the challenges presented, several lessons were learned, which can provide guidance and encouragement to programs looking to make changes to improve their assessment efforts.

Results of change initiative

Several significant results came because of the AoL changes initiated at MWU. The following highlights some of the major accomplishments of the MWU change efforts:

- A refocus on learning and improving student learning. As one faculty member stated after going through the rubric development process: “I can’t remember when I’ve had such a meaningful conversation about how our students solve problems.”
- Increased faculty involvement and participation in AoL activities. Prior faculty participation was less than 15 percent and increased to over 50 percent in development of assessment measures.
- More consistent faculty expectations of student learning as a result of discussions across the college about AoL and AoL processes. Rubrics are now being shared with faculty across the college, and are introduced to students in their very first business course.
- Programs and program objectives aligned with the college mission and vision, which have been updated as a faculty-driven process.
- Greater consistency among the programs, with less wasted or duplicated effort (as can be seen comparing Figures 3 and 4).
- A clearer AoL process (see Figure 5) established to collect data and initiate program and curricular changes based on evidence (which also resulted in better data for use in accreditation reporting).

The accomplishments of the past two years have brought more progress in AoL than had been seen in the college through the previous decade. Examining the factors that enabled change at MWU, through the unfreezing phase, can provide other schools encouragement and ideas about improving their own AoL systems and processes.

Enablers to change

In reviewing the changes made and the results achieved, it is sometimes difficult to determine which initiatives effected which changes, particularly since the change is an evolving process. Some actions clearly had more impact in the overall change effort than others, however. The following details our assessment of the causes of change and their relative importance to one another, which may provide guidance to others desiring to implant change in their own AoL efforts.

Establishing an appropriate structure

Perhaps the most impactful element of our AoL efforts came with the appointment of an assistant dean and the selection of a new AoL director for the BSBA. Creation of a position dedicated to AoL showed a commitment by the college and signaled the importance of AoL to the college. The new AoL leaders were able to address structural challenges in the college that made communication and coordination difficult. Schools looking at improving AoL efforts should make sure that committees and assignments are not at odds – for example, committee charges do not overlap nor conflict – and that the work and reporting structure

naturally flow from those involved with student learning. Consolidating committees, creating learning communities focused on key skill areas, and getting individuals and groups to discuss challenges are structural changes that all contributed to the successful change effort at MWU. New structures and meaningful communication resulted in shared learning goals across programs, with clearer delineation of duties and an elimination of redundancies and inefficiencies. The number of meetings of most committees has actually reduced, and committee work has centered more around meaningful discussions of student learning. New leadership to oversee the assessment efforts, particularly with a dean-level advocate facilitated many of these changes.

Empowering AoL leaders and providing instrumental support

One of the most significant elements that allowed the new leadership to move forward was they were empowered to make decisions and were provided adequate support (including financial support) to make changes. Eight faculty members were sent to AACSB training in Tampa, Florida, and four faculty members were supported to attend AACSB's annual Assessment and Impact conference. A leading book on learning assurance was purchased and distributed to nearly two dozen faculty members involved in some aspects of AoL. Another book on best practices of student learning was provided during the fall faculty retreat and faculty held discussions in small groups. Nominal financial support was provided to the faculty in the college for attending training provided by a consultant. In significant ways, the administration signaled the importance of AoL, which positively motivated the faculty to engage (at least initially) in AoL. Future research on this case will need to establish continued engagement from the faculty members.

Aligning to a common focus and building shared vision

Part of the reorganization and discussion among the groups resulted in another critical component to changes in AoL at MWU: an alignment of program learning goals with the college mission and vision – something colleges wanting an effective AoL process must do. A college's mission, vision, and program student learning goals should reflect the reality of what students can and will do as part of successfully completing a program rather than some lofty, unattainable goal. This alignment proved challenging because the college's mission and vision needed revision, and the AoL changes prompted this revision. Schools making changes should realize not all changes come in order and adjustments will be needed as things progress.

It is interesting to note that throughout our change process, we found that terminology can impact how things are perceived, thereby impacting change initiatives. Replacing the term assessment with AoL when possible and when appropriate, subtly shifted focus from compliance and accreditation to students – ensuring that they were learning the intended outcomes. Creating learning “communities” around key college student learning goals gave a sense of shared faculty ownership in the process and reinforced the commitment to student learning. Words, names, and titles do matter (Lakoff, 2010), thus careful word choice and following through with consistency regarding the use of terminology can help facilitate a successful change.

Engage faculty and acknowledge effort and progress

A truly successful AoL effort requires widespread participation across a college. Involving members across the college in a variety of activities from training to rubric creation to committee reorganization to revising program objectives went a long way toward faculty buy-in and commitment. Listening internally to potential change agents, champions of assessment and student learning, addressing their concerns regarding change efforts, and

soliciting their help in presenting new structures and procedures helped faculty see this as a bottom-up initiative rather than another duty forced upon them from the administration.

Although some short-term rewards (such as faculty development money for attending assessment workshops, or providing lunch for AoL meetings) have already been implemented, MWU is continuing to look at long-term rewards, such as release time or stipends for assessment activities, as well as rewarding participation in assessment in departmental bylaws. Colleges looking at improvements in AoL need to address engagement issues and must value, support, and enable faculty to move in the desired direction. In some instances, this means a financial commitment by administration.

Create and focus on key deliverables

Identifying the root causes (faculty resistance, organizational structure and communication, aligning program outcomes with the college vision and mission, and creating consistency in processes across programs) behind the existing culture regarding assessment was key to understanding and addressing the need for change.

The structural changes along with the alignment naturally led to eliminating inconsistencies and redundancies in AoL efforts across programs. Colleges must be willing to look carefully at current structures and processes and be willing to make changes as needed. If assessment efforts are duplicated or not tied to changes that improve student learning, faculty begin to view tasks as burdens. Successful AoL efforts should not create additional work for faculty, and in fact the work should be seen as more meaningful to faculty as well. Having shared learning goals across a college also communicates shared expectations to students.

Additional factors that enabled change

Approaching the change effort with a frame of reference in mind was useful. While some may see Lewin's change model as dated, the unfreeze, change, and refreeze concepts identified some distinct areas of focus that facilitated the change efforts made at MWU. The idea of unfreeze suggests that change efforts need thoughtful preparation and planning. Change involves obvious alterations to processes and procedures, often involving doing things a different way and doing it with different people. Refreezing is reinforcing or codifying the alterations made to incorporate them into the values and culture of the organization. This helps ensure that the new "desired" state remains, and in a continuous improvement culture, AoL will have to be constantly evaluated and reassessed, so that "refreezing" becomes a more dynamic process.

Just as a gardener must work the soil in preparation to plant his garden, colleges looking to adopt any change initiative must prepare to put much effort in preparation for change. People are the seeds, the heart of change, and every effort was made at MWU to involve faculty in each step of the change process. We hope that other colleges might find use out of adopting some of the strategies and initiatives we described above.

Next steps and conclusion

The drive for assessment has brought about meaningful improvement in programs, practice, and student learning (Banta and Palomba, 2015; Golding and Adam, 2016; Trapnell, 2007). It is clear that there is both a need for assessment and meaningful impact that we can have on student learning through our AoL efforts. What is less clear is the direct impact that each change implemented at MWU has had, and efforts to measure success of AoL changes at MWU will continue.

In many ways, although MWU has made great progress in revising existing AoL structures and processes, the change effort with AoL at MWU has really just begun.

For instance, the involvement of students in the reorganization and review of processes established has been minimal. With the rubrics created, for instance, there is now an opportunity to get feedback on what works and does not work. Students will be included as part of the learning communities focusing on areas where improvement is needed. Student focus groups on areas of poor performance on the basic business knowledge test will help answer questions about specific content areas students are struggling with, and how faculty can help in their courses. A college-wide AoL day is being planned, where students across the college will participate in AoL activities and where accomplishments will be recognized and celebrated.

One moral to MWU's story is that change is possible when viewed through the lens of improvement rather than compliance, with a bottom-up approach that is driven by faculty. Through AoL change initiatives already begun at MWU, faculty now have renewed energy and excitement to what brought many to the occupation in the first place – seeing students learn, grow, and develop skills critical to their success in the workplace and in life. Our work now seems more about improvement than compliance, more about students than accreditation, and more about changing lives than managing reports.

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