
PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH!

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Faculty participate in a variety of professional development opportunities, but what is the gain? Colleges support faculty learning centers and attendance at local, state, and national conferences, but is it effective? Continuing education offerings usually report attendance and satisfaction survey results, but is participant learning ever measured? Ironically, for educators, the answers to these questions are not always clear.

Sinclair Community College had an opportunity to create professional development to assist faculty with limited or no formal training in curriculum and assessment. While faculty took classes or attended conferences addressing curriculum and assessment, on-site professional development sessions were limited to single topics or general presentations offered sporadically during the academic year. Therefore, a deeper faculty development experience required a change from the traditional single-session offerings.

In response to this need, the Curriculum & Assessment (C&A) Track was created. This six-session track began in fall 2011 as a collaborative effort between the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and the Divisional Assessment Coordinators (DAC) led by the Assistant Provost for Accreditation and Assessment. The DACs, who are faculty representing each college division, provide cross-discipline expertise in best practices in curriculum and assessment. The result was a professional development offering created for faculty, by faculty assessment experts in the college.

The C&A Track experience assists faculty in understanding their rights and responsibilities relative to the official Sinclair curriculum while developing practical assessment tools to incorporate into the courses they teach. Incorporating the unique aspects of Sinclair's practices, including the connection to Sinclair's software and learning management system, this approach integrates new knowledge in hands-on applications that promote a relevant learning experience. Sessions focus on concrete examples to improve faculty performance with assessments at the course level. Additionally, individual contributions to department initiatives, annual department updates, program reviews, and accreditation requirements are explored.

The high rates of attendance and satisfaction in the initial track assessments were exciting, but a question surfaced: was knowledge of curriculum and assessment enhanced? This question prompted the development of a core curriculum with course and track objectives. Deliverables were added as evidence of the synthesis and application of learning. These deliverables demonstrate understanding of curriculum as well as course-, program-, and college-level assessment. The track experience raises the standard for professional development offerings at Sinclair by integrating a model of curriculum and assessment best practices; we practice what we preach!

The “practice what you preach” approach brings benefits and new challenges. Like student development, benefits include an efficient and effective professional development process, the ability to grow our own experts, and ultimately improve assessment practices. However, like development and maintenance for any educational course, allocating the time required for this type of professional development program is a challenge.

The track improves the efficiency of assessment education practices at Sinclair. Sinclair supports DAC attendance at local, state, and national assessment conferences to maintain currency in the knowledge disseminated to faculty participating in the track. This provides wide distribution of best practices to the faculty contributing to assessment at the college.

The track is effective at stimulating interest and competency of quality assessment practices at the course, program, and college levels. As colleges nationwide are experiencing increasing scrutiny to assess and report outcome data, it is critical that faculty and leaders have a strong understanding and commitment to assessment work. Furthermore, the changing funding environment in higher education is likely to require authentic and transparent assessment data for sustainability. In preparation, community colleges in particular must explore and support options for faculty who are technical experts aspiring to improve their knowledge of educational principles. Quality educational opportunities such as this track provide faculty with convenient access to develop these essential skills.

The track outcomes are relevant for all levels of teaching experience and allow Sinclair to “grow our own” experts throughout the college, forming a sustainable plan for quality assessment practices in the future. Participants are encouraged to use what they have learned as part of their annual faculty evaluation process. Track ‘graduates’ are recommended as potential appointees to the college-wide Assessment Committee. By recruiting track participants, the input and efforts of the Assessment Committee have improved. Furthermore, awareness of the importance of course level contributions to the general education curriculum and assessment has increased.

The efficiency and effectiveness of the track was celebrated, but there were challenges. Faculty were not accustomed to participating in development opportunities that included assessments and evaluations.

In addition to the challenge of skewed pre-assessment data, some faculty were frustrated with the deliverables. Though many appreciated the time and opportunity to work on course deliverables, others made it clear the “homework” was inconvenient or even unnecessary, contending that attendance and participation should be sufficient for credit in a professional development offering.

In addition to the challenges to assessment and evaluation with faculty, there are challenges to constructing this type of track offering. As faculty know, planning for any course, and developing outcomes, assessments and evaluations takes time. Furthermore, time is needed for the manual process of grading deliverables and analysis of open-ended qualitative pre- to post-assessments. Though time consuming, the evidence of faculty learning and consequent validation to the value of a development offering is worth it.

Sinclair provides an efficient, in-depth, and effective professional development track that is a model of best practices and provides a sustainable plan for curriculum and assessment. The successful completion of outcome deliverables and data from assessments offers confirmation to the effectiveness of faculty development. Though faculty learning continues to be a challenge to measure, the time and effort required to demonstrate this learning might be exactly the type of evidence faculty and institutions should expect for professional development offerings.

Colleges seeking to improve curriculum and assessment practices, or other professional development topics, may want to consider replicating this “Practice What You Preach” model. With limited resources, institutions and faculty may be questioning the value of development offerings and the cost of centers for learning. The ability to demonstrate how these resources have made a difference confirms it is a worthy investment.