Putting Students at the Center of Our Learning: Connecting Assessment and Professional Development

Charles Jordan

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Summary

Assessment Days reflect Guttman’s commitment to use professional development to guide our ongoing assessment work, improve institutional practice and maintain student learning as the driver for all decisions made throughout the institution. The Days have three main purposes: 1) assessing student achievement of learning outcomes in their work on integrated assignments; 2) reflecting on the alignment of assignment, course, program, and institutional outcomes; and 3) identifying successes and areas of improvement for the different components of our academic model.

Author

Laura M. Gambino, Ed.D.

For a printable, PDF version of Guttman’s Professional Development Practice, Click Here.

Description

Part I: Overview and Setting

At Guttman Community College we have a non-traditional academic calendar. Each semester (fall and spring) is broken up into two sessions, a 12-week session (Fall I,Spring I) followed by a 6-week session (Fall II, Spring II). From an academic standpoint, this gives students the opportunity to either stay on track by re-taking courses during their 6-week sessions or students can accelerate their pace to graduation by taking additional courses. While traditional professional development seminars are difficult to offer at Guttman, this calendar has between ten and twelve Assessment Days built into it each academic year. As discussed in the Catalyst essays, there is a connection between professional development and outcomes assessment. As the Faculty Scholar for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, I oversee and guide the structure and activities that take place during Assessment Days – I do consider our Assessment Days to be an ongoing form of professional development and learning.
There are many benefits to having these days built into our calendar: one benefit from a professional development standpoint is that all full-time faculty are expected to attend. Student Success Advocates and Career Strategists – our first and second year advisors – attend all relevant parts of the days. In addition, adjunct faculty are strongly encouraged to join their colleagues as are our graduate coordinators. These days provide an opportunity for all faculty and staff to put student work and student learning at the center of our institutional learning.

Part II: Practice Step-by-Step

Because these days are a systematic, ongoing part of our learning, and since we are only in the second year as a college, it is difficult to provide a step-by-step description of our Assessment Days. These days evolve and change as we are growing and learning. In this section, I will first describe some of the structures which are common across our Assessment Days. Then, I will describe three professional development activities related to student learning.

At the core of our first year experience is the Instructional Team. An instructional team is comprised of the faculty and graduate coordinators who teach first year courses for a particular cohort of students, along with a Student Success Advocate, or advisor. Instructional team time is a main component of our Assessment Days activities. Teams sit together and review individual student progress, often examining student work and student learning via ePortfolios and discussing student progress. At the mid-point of our Fall 1 and Spring I sessions we also identify students who may need additional academic support or other interventions to help keep them on track to success. Instructional team time conversations are grounded in student learning and help faculty think about a student’s holistic first year experience and not only the experience they are having in his/her particular course. At the end of each session, instructional teams review each student’s overall progress over the course of the session, making sure students are either on track or receiving the help they need to be success. These end-of-semester conversations are a time to both look back at student progress over the previous session and to look ahead, thinking about assignments and activities for the upcoming session. The key to instructional team time is to have everyone – faculty, Student Success Advocates, and Graduate Coordinators - in the room at the same time, focused on student learning and success.

In addition to instructional team time, we also use our Assessment Days to engage faculty and staff in assessment work – looking at actual artifacts of student learning from ePortfolios – related to different components of our academic model. The activities are examples of assessment for learning – using student work to identify ways we can improve our practices. During the 2013 Fall I semester, we held two such activities, one related to our Summer Bridge program and the second to our Community Days.

All of our students are required to complete a Summer Bridge Program (SBP) prior to beginning their First Year Experience at Guttman. The Summer Bridge program has six learning outcomes. Using those outcomes, we assess the overall impact of the SBP via a mixed methods approach. As one component of that assessment, at the end of the Fall I semester, we asked students to think back and respond to a set of common reflective prompts about their Summer Bridge experience. During our Assessment Days, we had faculty and staff review a random sample of those student reflections, looking for common themes related to our SBP outcomes. Here are the steps for that guided activity:
Highlights from the conversation that resulted from this activity were shared in a Summer Bridge ePortfolio that we maintain and is accessible to everyone at the college. In addition, we held a whole group conversation where participants shared their findings and we discussed ways those findings helped identify areas of both success and potential improvement. The Summer Bridge Committee will now use those findings and the ideas generated from the activity and follow-up conversation to help plan next year’s Summer Bridge Program.

We followed a similar process to help assess the impact of our Community Days on student learning. At the mid-point of each twelve week session, students are expected to complete a service learning or experiential activity in New York City. Students were asked to complete an assignments or reflection from that activity in their ePortfolio. Participating in service learning or experiential activities relates to one of the criteria of our Civic Learning, Engagement and Social Responsibility Guttman Learning Outcome. During the Assessment Day activity, faculty and staff assessed student work in relation to this outcome and discussed what they saw as they reviewed that work. The steps for this activity are below. As with the SBP Activity, there was a follow-up whole group conversation where the findings were shared and discussed. These findings will be used by the Community Days committee in thinking about ways to improve future student experiences. This was also a valuable conversation for the instructional teams in thinking about ways to better integrate the Community Days activities into their curriculum.

During our Assessment Days we also regularly offer ePortfolio workshops that focus on both ePortfolio as a technology and a pedagogy. Each year we offer “ePortfolio 101” sessions for our newer faculty and staff along with “ePortfolio Pedagogy and Best Practices” workshops for our more experienced faculty to help strengthen and deepen their practices.

Part II: The Role of Inquiry, Reflection, and Integration

The design principles of Inquiry, Reflection, and Integration (I-R-I) are central to the construction of activities during our Assessment Days. By connecting professional development to the assessment of student work, we are seeking to create a learning culture that focuses on assessment for learning and improvement.
Faculty and staff engage in an inquiry process, examining artifacts of student learning, thinking about our practices and curriculum in relation to that assessment. Faculty engage in both individual, team, and larger reflections based on that inquiry process. And, through the implementation of changes based on the findings from the inquiry and reflection process, integration takes place across multiple layers – course, program, and institution.

Connections to Other Sectors of the Catalyst

Pedagogy

Much of the work that takes place during our Assessment Days relates to the pedagogy. Our ePortfolio sessions focus on reflective, integrative and social pedagogies. Instructional team time provides faculty an opportunity to assess student learning in relation to their pedagogy and teaching practices and to develop and adjust integrative learning activities that take place across the first year curriculum as a result of that assessment.

Scaling Up

For us, since ePortfolio and on-going assessment are already “at scale”, we use the term scaling up to refer to the deepening of our learning and understanding related to ePortfolio. Our professional development activities that take place during Assessment Days and the sharing of assignments and examination of student work all contribute to the scaling up, or deepened use of ePortfolio across our institution.

Outcomes Assessment

Much of the work that takes place during our Assessment Days is directly related to assessing student work in relation to course, program, and institutional student learning outcomes. At Guttman, we believe there is a strong interplay between professional development and outcomes assessment and these Days are the lived experience of that connection.

Technology

ePortfolio technology supports our Assessment Days in two main ways. First and foremost, we examine student work and reflections via ePortfolios. Second, we have an Assessment Days ePortfolio which we use to share materials for the days with faculty and staff and to serve as a visible history of these days as the days themselves and our learning evolve. The technology makes student and faculty/staff learning visible across the institution.

Evidence of Impact
It is challenging to evaluate the impact these days have on students, faculty, and staff. In October 2013 we surveyed faculty about these days. In that survey which had a response rate of close to fifty percent, using a four-point Likert Scale (not helpful, limited helpfulness, fairly helpful, very helpful) almost 87% of respondents (n=14) indicated that the Instructional Team Time was Very Helpful. And, during a whole group reflection at our most recent Assessment Days (December 2013), faculty reported that looking at student work was a valuable activity.

As we move forward, we will continue to measure the impact of these professional development activities – identifying ways we improve curriculum and student experiences based on findings from our review of authentic work in student ePortfolios.

**Conclusion**

At Guttman Community College we are in the midst of our second year of our institution’s history – we are still evolving and growing; learning is central to that growth. Assessment Days provide a regular, structured way to provide professional development opportunities to our faculty and staff. We use these days to engage faculty in an inquiry and reflection process related to student learning and then connect, or integrate, the results of that process into our individual or collective practice. The use of ePortfolio during these activities allows us to keep the focus of our work connected to and centered on students and student learning.