Faculty Attitudes toward Assessment

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Within the field of undergraduate program assessment, anecdotal evidence abounds about negative faculty attitudes. Regardless of the common wisdom, there is little research that corroborates these reports. If reports are correct that faculty resistance is widespread, it is still not clear if that resistance is toward accreditation, professional development, institutional requirements, other calls for accountability, or assessment. In fact, faculty members can be seen as spending much of their careers assessing: Faculty members routinely assess their students, a textbook they are using, whether the curriculum has adequately prepared students for the next class or their careers, and more. Faculty attitudes toward program assessment remain unclear and largely uninvestigated.

The focus of this study is based on 18 interviews of faculty members in three programs of study at a large, research-intensive, land grant institution. The approach is socially constructivist in nature; the theoretical lens is that faculty members have constructed concepts of assessment and that their constructions inform their participation. The study provides information about faculty attitudes toward assessment with a nuanced understanding toward the factors that influence their attitudes. The study reveals that faculty members view student learning outcome assessment as a call for accountability, a reaction that supports their fear that the information they provide will be used to cut positions and programs of study. When assessment is initiated within the program, however, faculty willingly participate to gain the information that assessment provides to improve their curriculum and their teaching. Additionally, how faculty construct their understanding of assessment is related to the epistemological foundations of their disciplines.

The study adds to the body of literature on faculty attitudes toward assessment. Next steps include incorporating faculty perspective and participation into the assessment process. Additional research will reveal the support needed for faculty to engage in assessment and for institutions to support that engagement.