Specific Steps to Support Assessment in the Improvement of Graduate Programs

* Share information with faculty, department chairs, and deans about the national context for accreditation and assessment. Most faculty understand their role in contributing to the general welfare of the institution and are willing to engage in assessment if they can see the value of the process. While some departments may begin the process by viewing assessment as an "unfunded mandate," engaging in thoughtful discussion about student learning outcomes, gathering evidence, making changes, and then seeing how effective those changes might be, can serve as motivation to continue the process. In other words, faculty might begin conducting assessment because they have to, but they will likely continue it because they want to.

* Remind faculty members that assessment tools are already in place in most graduate programs in the form of, for example, comprehensive examinations, research proposals, internships, and dissertations. For many programs, assessment is not a new idea. While requirements for disciplinary accreditation might differ from those required by regional accreditation, similarities do exist. Those existing practices should be used and evaluated before new ones are developed.

* Incorporate assessment of student learning into the program review process by asking programs to articulate their goals and learning outcomes statements, identify methods to assess those outcomes, establish criteria and standards of judgment to assess student work, and report on results and proposed changes in the structure or design of a doctoral program to improve student learning. For example, what do students learn and what skills do they possess upon graduation? Do those who employ your graduates agree with your assessment?

* Gather and present concrete evidence of what the department is doing now and might be able to do regarding assessment-how it is succeeding with its goals-in a time of tight budgets. These activities can demonstrate to a departmental faculty that assessment of goals and outcomes data may allow them to make a more compelling case to the graduate dean for receiving continued, or perhaps additional, funding for graduate fellowships. In this way, assessment can lead to increased rewards for the program and that, in turn, can encourage participation in assessment activities. Making public the assessment process and data, along with the rewards, will demonstrate institutional valuing of the activity.

* Build assessment into the administrative processes already in place within the institution. Michigan State University (2004) added a section on assessment to the official University Curriculum Committee Program Change form (http://www.reg.msu.edu/Read/UCC/assessinfo.pdf). Currently, those who request either a new graduate program or any changes in a current graduate program must provide a description of the programmatic learning outcomes and the intended assessment methodology. Any program going through a curriculum change process must have developed a means of program assessment that includes a focus on evidence of learning before approval is granted. Assistance by the MSU director of assessment is provided to the departments as they engaged in learning about assessment tools.

* Through workshops or during program meetings, introduce faculty to the assessment process with particular focus on effective uses and tools of assessment in relation to graduate program reviews. These workshops or meetings provide valuable information for members of a program and enable faculty to put in place the procedures they will need to engage in before an institutional accreditation review. Given regional accrediting agencies' focus on program-level assessment of student learning, many institutions now have either an individual or an office dedicated to assessment willing to assist faculty in the process.

* Provide evidence about how assessment can strengthen aspects of a doctoral program, such as in recruiting high quality graduate students, increasing completion rates, or shortening time to degree. Posting (positive) placement data on a graduate program's web site can entice interested, prospective graduate students to further explore opportunities with that program.
* Provide assessment of student learning in order to demonstrate to potential internship sites and/or employers the outcomes of student academic experiences. This information may increase opportunities for internships and encourage a variety of employers across multiple economic sectors to explore hiring doctoral students.

* Make use of other national initiatives, such as the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/CID/), to encourage faculty to engage in serious conversations about the structure, content, and requirements of doctoral education and the efficacy of educational practices, such as comprehensive examinations, in assessing student learning outcomes (Golde & Walker, 2005).

* Develop ways to provide feedback and comments to departments on their assessment efforts. Too often we ask or require faculty to participate in initiatives only to have them provide the data and do the work without ever giving recognition, assistance, or even acknowledgment of their efforts. If we are not asking departments about their assessment plans, commenting on what seems to be working well and what might be best looked at from another angle, then their plans will be developed but not implemented, or implemented but the results not used. We need to help faculty understand that if we ask them to engage in this process, it’s because we believe it offers value to them as individual faculty members, to their departments, to their colleges, to the institution as a whole, and overall to doctoral students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Graduate deans and the Council of Graduate Schools should be leaders in advancing assessment of student learning as part of graduate program review and in demonstrating how evidence of student learning can be integrated with data that programs currently collect or draw upon as part of external reporting demands. The upcoming NRC assessment of doctoral programs is a visible and prestigious focal point to begin with. The requirement by regional accrediting bodies of the assessment of student learning also provides a process to engage faculty. What we can and should do is move beyond simply collecting data for program reviews to using those data as a part of a thoughtful assessment plan.

Encouraging departments to discuss goals and learning outcome statements, methods of assessment, analysis and interpretation of direct and indirect assessment methods, and use of analysis and interpretation to improve teaching and learning through active feedback loops should become a regular part of program review. As the professional and disciplinary societies move toward a common expectation of engaging in assessment, and as graduate deans continue to demonstrate the effective use of assessment for improvement, we will begin to make assessment a part of the culture of graduate programs.

References
