

**Establishing an Assessment Culture At Two
Very Different Institutions:
*Spalding University and Sierra Nevada College***



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Introducing Ourselves

□ **Dr. Lynn Gillette**

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- Former Vice President for Business, Administration and Compliance at Spalding University
- Service on over ten SACS accreditation site-visit teams
- PhD in Economics from Texas A&M University

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- Assistant Provost/Assistant Vice President of Academic Affairs at Sierra Nevada College and Co-Chair of the Institutional Effectiveness Committee
- Member of the Executive Team in charge of the SNC's recent self-study and full-scale evaluation visit from the NWCCU
- Former Director of Academic Records Technology at University of La Verne
- M.A. and A.B.D in Women's Studies in Religion at Claremont Graduate University

Learning Objectives

- ❑ LEARNING OBJECTIVE ONE: How meaningful assessment was established at two very different institutions

- ❑ LEARNING OBJECTIVE TWO: How the change management approach must be altered to address different institutional circumstances



The Case Studies: Spalding University and Sierra Nevada College

- ▣ This presentation will begin by exploring the commonalities between Sierra Nevada College and Spalding University as they relate to the process of establishing an effective academic assessment system.
- ▣ Then, the presentation will identify relevant points of difference between the two institutions and discuss the different approaches that had to be employed at each in order to successfully navigate the need for institutional change.

Spalding University Facts

- Carnegie Classification:
Doctoral/Research University
- Founded in 1814
- Spalding offers two degree programs at the associate level, twelve degree programs at the baccalaureate level, eight degree programs at the masters level, and two degree programs at the doctoral level.

Spalding Enrollment Data (Fall 2006)

- Headcount 1706
 - Undergraduate 990 (58%)
 - Graduate 716 (42%)

- Female 1271 (75%)
- Male 435 (25%)

- African American (22%)
- White, Non-Hispanic (78%)

Spalding Programs

❑ Traditional Undergraduate Day Program

- Six-week session calendar
- Students meet four days per week, 100 minutes per day, for a total of 2400 minutes of class contact for a 3-hour course (exceeds 2250 minutes for a typical 15-week semester course).

❑ Adult Accelerated Program (AAP)

- Students meet four hours per week for five weeks with a final two-hour class for the sixth week.

Sierra Nevada College Facts

- ❑ Carnegie Classification: Baccalaureate Colleges--Arts & Sciences
- ❑ Founded in 1969
- ❑ SNC offers fourteen degree programs at the baccalaureate level, one degree programs at the masters level, and no degree programs at the doctoral level.

Sierra Nevada College Enrollment Data (12-Month Unduplicated Headcount, 06-07)

- Headcount 1070
 - Undergraduate 285 (27%)
 - Graduate 785 (73%)

- Female 675 (63%)
- Male 395 (37%)
 - *Undergraduate Only:* 45.7% women; 54.3% men

- African American (1%)
- Hispanic (4%)
- Asian/Pacific Islander (3%)
- Nonresident Alien (3%)
- White, Non-Hispanic (69%)
- Unknown (20%)

Sierra Nevada College Programs

□ Traditional Undergraduate Program

- 15-week semester calendar
- Students meet 50 minutes per unit per week for 15 weeks, for a total of 2250 minutes for a typical 3-unit, 15-week semester course
- Combination of Arts & Sciences and Professional Preparedness

□ Graduate Master of Arts in Teaching Program

- Students take a combined program of study that allows them to complete all requirements for the initial teaching license and earn a Master of Arts in Teaching with just one more semester of coursework.

Commonalities: Accreditation Driven

□ Spalding University

- During the 1996 SACS visit, Spalding had 4 recommendations related to Institutional Effectiveness. A new president was hired in 2002 and she was committed to successful reaffirmation of accreditation at Spalding in 2006 without any recommendations related to Institutional Effectiveness or Assessment.

□ Sierra Nevada College

- In their 2007 Full-Scale Evaluation Report by the NWCCU, a recommendation was included to continue improvement in an area where there was substantial compliance by developing a campus-wide assessment plan with particular attention to use of results.

Commonalities: Tuition Driven

- **Spalding University and Sierra Nevada College are both tuition-driven institutions where accreditation problems could have serious negative financial implications**
 - At both institutions, there is an impetus to treat potential accreditation issues as economic issues and to take them seriously as such.
 - Assessment therefore becomes a critical issue at both institutions when it is tied to accreditation
 - Although this seems like a shared benefit rather than a shared barrier, the tuition driven nature of both institutions also means that there is not necessarily substantial available funding to be invested in creating an assessment plan regardless of the tie to accreditation.

Commonality: Faculty Fear

- ❑ Spalding University: In February 2003, 20 programs were eliminated along with 22 faculty positions. This meant that faculty were feeling vulnerable coming into accreditation-linked, assessment development process.
- ❑ Sierra Nevada College: The decision to pursue a strategic partner in order to lessen financial pressures during the same year as the NWCCU Full-Scale Evaluation created an atmosphere of faculty vulnerability at Sierra Nevada College.
- ❑ At both institutions, this faculty fear had mixed results. On the one hand, faculty convinced of the need for change were willing to become involved and help facilitate the process of developing an assessment system. On the other hand, faculty concerned about their future jobs and programs were very open with their fears about the potential negative uses of real assessment data.

Commonalities:

Lack of Assessment History

- Although some work on assessment had been done at both institutions in preparation for their previous accreditation visits and some assessment activity, both institutions lacked a consistent, well-documented, institutionalized assessment process where data was connected to decision making.
 - Assessment documentation was limited or nonexistent
 - There was a lack of continuity between past efforts and the present state of assessment at both places
 - Much work had to be done from scratch to create the governance structures that would conduct and monitor assessment.

Commonalities:

Data Transparency Problems

- At both institutions, there was a problem with the consistent, reliable exchange of assessment data
 - There was no culture of data-driven decision making at either institution, so data was often not sought out when changes needed to be made.
 - There was no consistent format for assessment data, which made comparing and cross-analysis of existing data difficult.
 - Departments did not exchange assessment data with one another and no governance structures existed to facilitate that exchange.
 - Data that was collected often remained at the executive level.

Commonalities: Leadership Support

- At both institutions, executive leadership in Academic Affairs recognized the importance of assessment and supported the development of an assessment system.
- At Spalding, the continued support of the President and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs was instrumental in the process of creating an assessment system.
- At Sierra Nevada College, the support of the Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs has played a key role in driving assessment activities. Presidential support also exists for accreditation-related activities.

Commonalities: Student Engagement Issues

- Both institutions struggled with how to get students to take participation on nationally-normed tests seriously. Both institutions had to confront the “You can make them take the test, but you can’t make them try” problem.
- This was particularly acute at Sierra Nevada College where the small numbers of students taking the ETS Major Field Tests meant a single disengaged student could significantly alter the statistical patterns reflected in the results.

Common Solutions: Leveraging Accreditation

- **Both institutions were able to leverage the accreditation process to create a sense of urgency about the establishment of an effective assessment system.**
 - At Spalding, time was taken to educate every member of the faculty and staff, through the SACS 101 workshops, about the potential consequences of a negative accreditation experience and to equip them with tools that would empower them to take steps to avoid that outcome.
 - At Sierra Nevada College, the recommendation for improvement by the NWCCU gave the Provost the leverage to create certain institutional structures – like the Institutional Effectiveness Committee – for the purpose of pursuing assessment goals.
 - The executive leadership at both institutions remained visibly and vocally committed to assessment systems because of the connection between successful assessment and successful accreditation.
 - At both locations, the connection between assessment and accreditation has provided the necessary motivation for maintaining an aggressive timeline for achievement.

Common Solutions: Creating History

- At both institutions, some investment in infrastructure and common documentation of assessment results was necessary to ensure that the assessment practices that were established would remain consistent moving forward.
 - At Spalding, a special subcommittee of the Curriculum Committee was established to guide the process of creating assessment for the general education curriculum.
 - At Sierra Nevada College, where governance infrastructure was somewhat sparse, an Institutional Effectiveness Committee had to be created by the Provost to guide the assessment process.
 - At both institutions, documentation of assessment results was facilitated by making academic departments create annual Unit Assessment Reports that were submitted to Institutional Effectiveness. Consistent exchange of data was encouraged through the use of the Nichol's Five Column Model as the common format for these annual reports.

Common Solutions: Generating Faculty Support

- At both institutions, a lot of energy was invested in creating faculty buy-in for the new systems of assessment.
 - At Spalding, most of the initial work in establishing the general education assessment system was done through a subcommittee of the Curriculum Committee, a faculty committee, that was created by the Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs
 - At Spalding, four-hour “SACS 101” workshops were held to educate faculty on assessment, accreditation standards, potential problem areas and negative future consequences of failing to establish an effective assessment system.
 - At Sierra Nevada College, workshops were held on how to produce assessment plans and individual meetings with every department chair were scheduled to guide faculty through the process.
 - An important aspect in generating faculty support at both institutions, especially because of the climate of fear, was to maintain a commitment to multiple means of assessment as a way of ensuring accurate, fair results. This is especially important for maintaining faculty confidence when resources are going to be allocated based on assessment data.

Common Solutions: Sharing Data

- **At both institutions, creating assessment systems also meant creating communication systems.**
 - **At Spalding, distributing the first set of nationally-normed test scores to all faculty members resulted in a recognition that Math Skills were critically low and the subsequent development of an innovative, skills-based math course within the general education module.**
 - **At Spalding, sharing assessment results became an important part of the academic culture. Entire cabinet meetings – 3 to 4 hours – were dedicated to discussing results and Board of Trustee meetings were even held on the subject. Even post-accreditation, bi-annual presentations of assessment results are made to all faculty and staff.**
 - **At Sierra Nevada College, an Assessment Day has been organized in conjunction with annual Faculty Professional Development activities to encourage departments to share assessment results and discuss refinements to the assessment process.**
 - **At both institutions, each department/school must submit annual assessment reports to the Institutional Effectiveness group, the results of which are summarized and passed on to executive leadership in Academic Affairs where those results are used to inform decisions about resource allocation.**

Common Solutions: Producing Student Engagement

- At both institutions, steps were taken to improve student efforts on nationally-normed tests.
 - Spalding responded by instituting pep talks for students about the importance of tests, offering certificates of achievement for performing well on tests and attempting to control for the problem through the use of multiple means of assessment.
 - Sierra Nevada College enlisted academic advisors and faculty members to talk to students about the importance of the tests, offered graduation honors for students who performed well and relied upon multiple means of assessment to control for any remaining issues.

Relevant Differences: Assessment Knowledge

- At Sierra Nevada College, there was a steeper learning curve in terms of assessment practices because the faculty experience with assessment was rather limited due to the nature of the degree programs.
- At Spalding, by contrast, a number of the professional schools had specialized accreditations, which made them more familiar with both accreditation practices and assessment principles.
- This difference in background knowledge, changed the education process that had to go on at Sierra Nevada College before work on assessment could begin.

Relevant Differences: Stage in the Process

- ❑ At Spalding, no competencies existed for the general education curriculum at the beginning of the process of establishing an assessment system. This meant that much of the work that had to be done in order to establish effective assessment revolved around determining what would be measured.
- ❑ At Sierra Nevada College, the faculty had just finished designing a new CORE Curriculum and had done the work of establishing detailed CORE competencies. This meant that the place where SNC faculty had to focus was on making those competencies into measurable outcomes and “closing the loop” by using assessment data to drive campus-wide decision making.
- ❑ The difference discussed above meant that education on assessment needed to start in different places at each campus and that the resources necessary to facilitate the process (assessment experts, internal resources, etc.) were different for each school.

Relevant Differences: Stages of Accreditation

- Where Spalding was proactively preparing for a positive accreditation review with SACS, Sierra Nevada College is responding to a recommendation from the NWCCU for improvement in the area of assessment after their Full-Scale Evaluation.
 - The psychology of motivating people is different when you are trying to inspire them to a successful initial performance versus when you are attempting to convince them to respond to perceived “criticism”.
 - There was more of a need to control negativity and pessimism at Sierra Nevada College than at Spalding as a result of this difference.

Relevant Differences: Means of Assessment

- ❑ Where the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) test was an incredibly well-matched choice for assessing Spalding's general education curriculum, faculty at Sierra Nevada College have been less successful finding a good fit in the form of a nationally-normed test that can be used to assess their CORE curriculum.
- ❑ This difficulty is related to the nature of the curriculum at SNC. The faculty designed and adopted a team taught, interdisciplinary CORE curriculum that focuses specifically on social, environmental, economic and educational sustainability – Not something easily measured on a nationally-normed test. As a result, Sierra Nevada College has tended to focus more on course imbedded assessment, student surveys and other similar instruments than was true at Spalding.
- ❑ This is a key difference to note because it highlights the need to respect cutting-edge pedagogies and mission specific learning goals when you are attempting to establish good assessment practices. If you ignore differences like these, you run the risk of undermining the confidence of faculty members who are invested²⁶ in the uniqueness of the learning experience at their institution.

Relevant Differences: Psychology of Change

- ❑ Faculty at Spalding had been experiencing a significant amount of change leading up to the process of creating an assessment system, but they were feeling positive about those changes as they related to the future of the institution. This meant that the desire for change could be used as a positive motivation for directing assessment efforts at Spalding.
- ❑ To the contrary, Sierra Nevada College faculty had just emerged from a very difficult year where there was constant discussion of the need to obtain a strategic partner in order to secure the financial future of the institution. Change was affiliated with uncertainty and risk in the minds of faculty and staff and had therefore taken on a threatening character at Sierra Nevada College prior to beginning the process of establishing a campus-wide assessment system.
- ❑ Although the faculty are now positive about the strategic partnership and confidently optimistic about the future of the institution, addressing this negative attitude towards change was a necessary part of establishing a campus-wide assessment system at Sierra Nevada College. To proceed with the Spalding-appropriate “Change is Good!” rallying cry at Sierra Nevada College would have undermined assessment efforts from the beginning.

Relevant Differences: Governance Structures

- ❑ At Spalding, it was very important to respect the governance structures that were already in place and to orchestrate all assessment policies through the appropriate channels. The emphasis was on respecting the powers that were already in place to make academic decisions.
- ❑ At Sierra Nevada College however, a much more informal governance structure required a certain amount of innovation/creation of the committees and positions that would end up being responsible for assessment.
- ❑ Given this difference, the key leadership in Academic Affairs played a difference role at Spalding than at Sierra Nevada College. At Spalding the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs was the guardian of the academic process, while at Sierra Nevada College, the Provost/Vice President of Academic Affairs became the architect of the process.

Creating Assessment Cultures

- The path to assessment success at Spalding and at Sierra Nevada College has been paved by a recognition of the relevant similarities and differences between the two institutions.
- Although many of the processes used at Spalding have been effective at Sierra Nevada College as well – Nichol’s Five-Column model, the role of the Institutional Effectiveness Committee, improving data transparency, leveraging accreditation – the recognition of key differences has been important in producing a relevant, effective, cooperative assessment process.
- Recognizing the unique qualities of your particular institution will be important in establishing a culture of assessment. There is no “off-the-rack” assessment system – To some extent it is all couture.

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Questions?