Assessing the Effectiveness of Instructional Design/Online Course Development Teams

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Introduction

U.S. Higher education has faced an unprecedented decade, with overall enrollment declines coupled with calls for greater accountability and evidence of effectiveness and return on investment. Accrediting agencies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) have been shifting from an emphasis on inputs—e.g., number of books in the library—to outputs including assessment of student learning and graduation rates. One of the critical institutional measures for accreditation is “institutional effectiveness.” In language reminiscent of an instructional design model, SACSCOC defines institutional effectiveness in its Standard 8.2c: “The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results” (SACSCOC, 2018, p. 73). Interestingly, institutional effectiveness is one of the most often-cited areas of weakness identified during accreditation visits (SACSCOC, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has been another unexpected and unprecedented event that continues to have a profound effect upon higher education. The threat of closure caused colleges and universities—many of which had largely downplayed or rejected online/distance learning in the past—to take it more seriously and began to institutionalize it (Garrett, et al., 2020). A recent study by NC-SARA indicated that during the past two years, the percentage of students learning online rose from 30% to 93% (NC-SARA, 2021). As a result, the job market for instructional/learning designers has risen significantly. Just one month after the COVID-19 crisis started shutting down campuses, Inside Higher Ed ran an article titled “The Hottest Job in Higher Education: Instructional Designer” (Decherney & Levander, 2020).

As colleges and universities instigate campus-wide digital learning initiatives, the model of a single instructional designer for an entire institution is increasingly being replaced by a team, (group, unit, center or department) of instructional design, learning design or online development (Intentional Futures, 2016). How will calls for accountability and institutional effectiveness
affect these teams? When “COVID panic” dies down and colleges and universities return to a “new normal” of on-campus and online instruction, will decreasing funding mean that instructional design teams will need to justify their existence or effectiveness to stay intact? Which metrics will or can be used to measure the effectiveness of instructional design teams? How can systematic instructional design, which includes identifying outcomes, assessing the outcomes and making improvements based on outcomes assessment, be applied to instructional design/course development teams?

Metrics for Assessing Course Development Teams

Multiple standards and rubrics exist for assessment of instructional design and instructional designers. These, include the Association for Educational Communications and Technology’s (AECT) Instructional Design Standards for Online Courses (Piña, 2017), Blackboard’s Exemplary Course (Blackboard, 2022), California State University-Chico’s ROI (California State University-Chico, 2022), Quality Matters (Quality Matters, 2022), and OLC/Open SUNY’s Course Quality Review (OSCQR) (Online Learning Consortium, 2022). These standards and rubrics provide useful metrics for assessing the quality of individual courses but are not designed to assess the teams that develop the courses. The OLC Quality Scorecard for the Administration of Online Programs (Shelton, 2010) is a helpful tool for formative evaluation of institution-wide resources and processes; however, its guidelines and metrics also focus upon courses, not course development teams. The International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (ibstpi®) has identified 22 competencies for instructional designers (Kozalka, et al., 2013). These competencies provide beneficial guidance for training and assessing individual instructional designers, yet they also were not formulated to assess a team of instructional designers.

Although Slaughter & Murtaugh (2018) recommend administering surveys to faculty subject matter experts to identify strengths and weaknesses in the course development process, a comprehensive search of literature failed to find comprehensive guidance on how to evaluate instructional design/online course development teams. A search was then conducted to identify assessment reports and assessments guides for academic support units at higher education institutions, some of which included course development. The reports and guides from the 15 institutions listed below were consulted:

- Arkansas Tech University
- Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute
- California University of Pennsylvania
- Eastern Kentucky University
- Florida State University
- Jackson State University
- LaGuardia Community College
- Miami University of Ohio
- New Mexico State University
- Northern Illinois University
- Savannah State University
- Sullivan University
Analysis of the assessment reports and guides identified four primary assessment categories for academic support units: 1) key constituent satisfaction; 2) activities undertaken by the unit; 3) scholarship undertaken and recognition received by the unit and 4) operations. Table 1 below identifies the most common data type for each category (survey data, numerical data, text description) and possible metrics for assessing online course development teams.

Table 1: Possible metrics for assessing online course development teams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Data type</th>
<th>Assessment Metric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key Constituent Satisfaction</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Faculty satisfaction with courses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student satisfaction with courses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Academic leadership satisfaction with courses</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Advisory council satisfaction with courses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty/SME satisfaction with course development process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty satisfaction with consultancy/support/training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Numerical</td>
<td>Courses developed/modified by the team</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Courses evaluated by the team</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Training events provided by the team</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consultancy sessions provided by the team</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty support sessions provided by the team</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scholarship and Recognition</td>
<td>Text description</td>
<td>Awards received</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conference presentations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations</td>
<td>Text description</td>
<td>Improvement actions taken</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The metrics listed above provide various options for assessment of instructional design/course development teams, units, centers or departments. The institutional effectiveness process requires that a team identifies outcomes, determines how to assess the outcomes, collects and analyzes assessment data, and determines improvement actions or strategies based on the data analysis (SACSCOC, 2018). In order to successfully implement an improvement strategy, the team in question must be “in control” of the assessment metric. In other words, if the data from a metric is primarily controlled or influenced by an entity outside of the unit being assessed, then improvement strategies or action may have no effect. For example, the metric “number of courses developed/modified by the team” would not be very useful if the number is completely dependent upon development requests received from academic units and there is little that the team could do to influence the demand for more courses. In order to successfully implement improvements, the team must be able to implement actions that could affect the data. In the same manner that instructional design models are designed to promote continuously improving
instruction, the similarly-structured institutional effectiveness model is designed to promote continuously improving teams.

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References


