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Impacts of Neoliberal Managerial Practices on Faculty Engagement in Student Learning Assessment

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Abstract

Faculty perceptions of student learning assessment were examined in the context of neoliberal trends in higher education in this exploratory survey study. For this preliminary study, a small department consisting of sixteen faculty members was surveyed. Responding faculty rated themselves as highly engaged in assessment, and rated course uses of assessment as more important than institutional uses of assessment. Faculty perceived administrators as placing more importance on institutional uses over course uses, though the gap between administrators and faculty was less in course uses than in institutional uses. Faculty ratings of neoliberal manifestations at their institution varied considerably, with a perceived institutional focus on job training over liberal arts education the most substantial item. Together, these findings set the stage for future research into whether neoliberal trends impact faculty engagement student learning assessment.

Keywords

assessment, neoliberalism, corporatism, survey

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Introduction

Over its three decades of formal existence, student learning assessment has reflected the tensions facing higher education at large. From its beginnings in the 1980s up to its various manifestations in the present, assessment practice has been negotiated between outside groups demanding accountability and internal groups looking to improve the educational quality of their programs (Ewell, 2002). Work by Huba & Freed (2000) and Hutchings (2010) indicates that assessment is more successful—that is, it is broadly utilized by faculty to improve learning—when it is viewed by faculty as an internally-driven practice focused on teaching and scholarship rather than an externally-driven practice focused on accountability and compliance.

The same three decades have also been identified as a period when higher education has been shaped by neoliberal trends. Neoliberalism as a term is considered a “loose and shifting signifier” (Brown, 2015, p. 20). However, in broad strokes it can be understood as a “rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and...formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation” (Brown, 2015, p. 176). The rationality of neoliberalism manifests itself in higher education in many ways, including:

- an increased use of economic metrics to define productivity and value disciplines
- viewing students as customers or clients;
- a focus on job preparation over a liberal arts education;
- a valuing of knowledge primarily in terms of its economic exchange value;
- the use of corporate practices in governance; and
- increasing external accountability (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2002; Giroux, 2009; Giroux, 2014).

This list is not exhaustive, but illustrates the various ways in which economic market values have permeated higher education.

More specific survey studies have looked at various aspects of student learning assessment and neoliberalism. Some have shown that faculty are more likely to engage in assessment if it is viewed as a scholarly activity (Wang and Hurley, 2012). Other survey studies have investigated faculty job satisfaction in relation to neoliberal developments (Fredman & Doughney, 2012). Still others have discussed the difference between faculty and administrator perceptions of assessment use (Kinzie, 2010; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Non-survey studies have also conceptualized ways to reconceive assessment in ways that counteract neoliberal trends (Hursh and Wall, 2011).

One item missing from this research on neoliberalism and assessment is an investigation into whether manifestations of neoliberalism in higher education impact faculty engagement in student learning assessment. Engagement in this context is determined by how often faculty use assessment in their courses, how much work faculty perceive they put into assessment, and how much faculty think they know about assessment. The aim of this exploratory study is to provide initial direction toward answering the following questions:

1. Do perceived conflicts between faculty uses (for teaching and learning) and administrator uses (for accountability/compliance, connected to neoliberalism) of assessment impact faculty engagement in student learning assessment?
2. Do non-assessment neoliberal manifestations in higher education impact faculty engagement in student learning assessment?

As assessment in higher education continues to evolve, it is important to understand the relationship between assessment and neoliberalism. Such an understanding would help guide assessment professionals in building a successful assessment culture at their institutions, and illuminate ways to manage assessment in ways that counteract neoliberal trends.

Methods

Survey Development

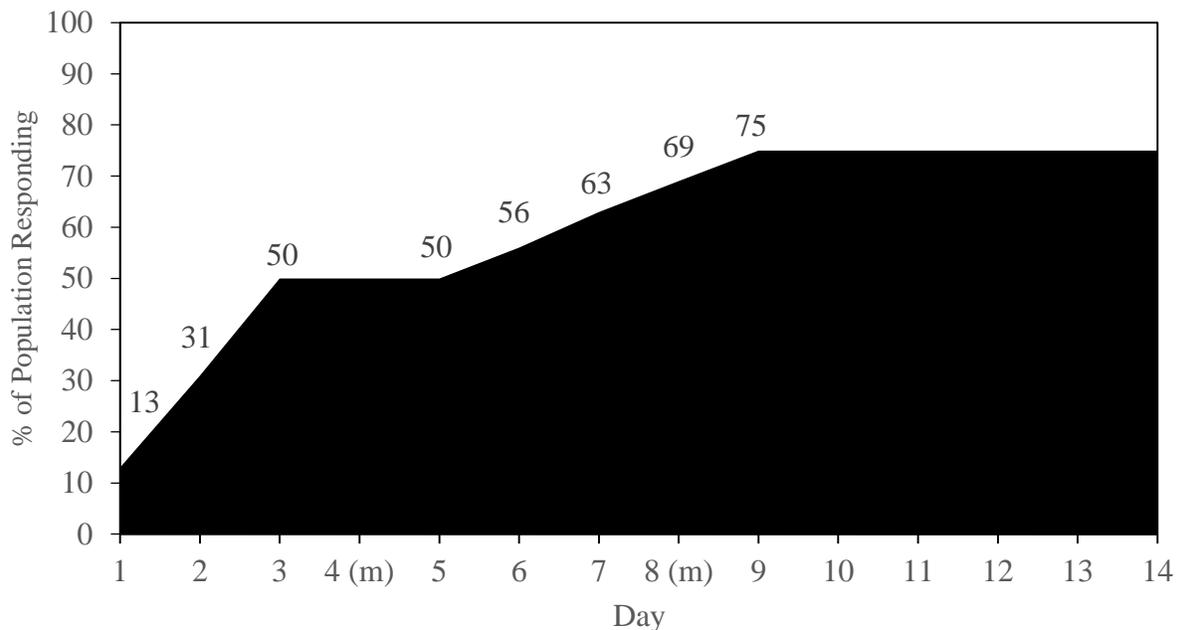
The survey was developed and implemented according to the “Tailored Design Method” guidelines found in Dillman, Smyth, and Christian (2014). The main contextual factors affecting the survey were that it was completed in a relatively short time frame for a class project and, because of that, was considered an exploratory study. The questionnaire was developed by adapting questions from Wang & Hurley’s (2012) items relating to faculty perceptions of assessment as a scholarly activity. Items on the uses of assessment from the faculty and administrative point of view were adapted from National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) surveys (Kinzie, 2010; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Items on manifestations of neoliberalism at an institution were adapted from Fredman & Doughney’s (2011) work relating neoliberalism to work satisfaction of faculty. Adapted items were combined into a questionnaire, which was presented to a subject matter expert for review. This resulted in the elimination of several redundant and irrelevant items, the reordering of questions to be more conceptually consistent, and the rewording of items to be less abstract and more grounded in the work faculty members actually do. One cognitive interview with someone unfamiliar with the topic was also done, which resulted in minor revisions to question wording and scales. Demographic items thought to affect results were added relating to number of years worked at the institution and whether the respondent had served as an assessment coordinator for their program, college, or institution. Number of years worked and a history of service as an assessment coordinator may change how faculty perceive assessment uses, importance place on assessment by administrators, and neoliberal trends.

Respondents & Response Rate

Respondents included all faculty and staff in a leadership studies department at a large, Midwest research university whose online listing indicated they taught a course. These faculty were selected for this exploratory study because there were enough faculty to achieve meaningful exploratory results. The list of faculty was taken from the department's website. There were sixteen total respondents in the frame, of which twelve responded and completed the survey, for an overall response rate of 75%.

Figure 1.

Cumulative response rates and reminder messages over time



Reminders represented by (m). Day 1 was Tuesday, April 14. Day 14 was Tuesday, April 28.

Implementation

The survey was implemented using Qualtrics, an online survey tool. Participants were sent an initial invitation email and two reminders, each with unique subject lines and messages. The invitations and reminders were framed as a graduate student seeking help to complete a research project on management and assessment, which was thought to be the message that best induced complete and truthful responses. Figure 1 shows the cumulative percent response trend over the entire two weeks the survey was open.

Limitations

As an exploratory study, several limitations are apparent. With only twelve responses, in-depth data analysis and statistical tests on the surveys items are not feasible. Thus only percentages of respondents selecting given responses are presented. Respondents included only faculty in one department, which may result in error because the department's assessment and managerial culture may not represent the institution as a whole. The study also revealed that the

structure and design of the research was overly complex, which made the results difficult to interpret.

Results

Overall, results show that faculty in this limited study are highly engaged in assessment. While faculty perceive some conflicts in the use of assessment, especially at the institutional level, these do not appear to impact faculty engagement. Items related to neoliberal manifestations showed varied perceptions of neoliberal trends. Like the perceived conflict in institutional uses of assessment, these neoliberal manifestations do not appear to impact faculty engagement in assessment.

Results, as shown in Table 1, indicate that faculty are highly engaged in assessment, with 100% responding that they commonly use assessment and that they put substantial work into completing assessment. However, respondents did rate themselves lower in knowledge about assessment, indicating a potential area for improvement. Surprisingly, faculty rated themselves lower overall than administrators in assessment knowledge, while they rated themselves higher in how often they used assessment and how much work/resources they put into assessment. It was not clear, however, if perceived conflicts in assessment use or neoliberal manifestations impacted these results, as there were too few respondents to expect any meaningful results from statistical tests. The descriptive results, however, indicate that assessment professionals may assist faculty by helping to increase their knowledge, and by encouraging administrator use of assessment data. Interventions such as these would help bridge gaps identified by faculty and contribute to a culture of assessment.

Table 1

Faculty-perceived self and administrator engagement in assessment

Item	% in top two categories of scale		
	Self	Administrators ^a	Difference
Frequency of use ^b	100	70	30
Amount of work/resources ^c	91.7	60	31.7
Knowledge ^d	75	80	-5

^aRatings of "Unsure" excluded. ^bResponse set = Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often. ^cResponse set for self = None, A little work, Some work, A lot of work; for administrators = No resources, a few resources, some resources, a lot of resources. ^dResponse set = Know nothing, Know a little, Know some, Know a lot.

Results comparing faculty perceptions of the uses of assessment are detailed in Table 2. In general, faculty place importance on course-based uses for assessment above institutional uses, while they perceive administrators as placing more importance on institutional uses. The gap between faculty and administrators in course uses is consistently much smaller than the gap in institutional uses, indicating that faculty perceive administrators as finding importance in teaching and learning uses of assessment in spite of the need for administrators to satisfy institutional requirements. In addition, faculty rate institutional uses with the lowest importance of any group-use combination, indicating that conflicts may be present.

As shown in Table 3, faculty perceptions of neoliberal manifestations at their institution vary considerably across items. Very few indicated a lack of control over their own work and a perception that the institution is focused more on the bottom line than on learning. However, many faculty (over 50%) indicated that they work extra hours without additional pay and also perceive the institution to be focused more on job training than on liberal arts education. From these preliminary results, assessment professionals would be well-served in discussing assessment in terms of student learning and instruction, and focusing on making assessment processes as efficient as possible as faculty.

Table 2

Faculty-perceived self and administrator importance on assessment uses

Item	% in top two categories of scale		
	Self	Administrators ^a	Difference
Course uses ^b			
Improves student learning	91.7	75	16.7
Improves instruction	83.3	66.7	16.6
Institutional uses ^c			
Budget requests	50	83.3	-33.3
Institutional improvements	58.3	83.3	-25
Institutional accreditation	50	91.7	-41.7
Governmental accountability	58.3	83.3	-25
Demonstrate public value	50	83.3	-33.3

^aRatings of "Unsure" excluded. ^bResponse set = Not at all important, A little important, Somewhat important, Very important. ^cResponse set = Not at all important, Somewhat important, Important, Very important.

Table 3

Faculty-perceived neoliberal manifestations

Item	% agree / strongly agree
Work factors	
Not consulted before decisions are made	33.3
Lack control over work	16.7
Work extra hours without pay	58.4
Insufficient employees to get the job done	45.4
Institutional focus	
Bottom line over learning	16.6
Job training over liberal arts	72.7

Note. Scale = Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree. Some items recoded to create comparable response set for this table.

Summary

While data are limited because of the exploratory nature of the study, there are some indications that faculty may perceive conflicts in assessment use between themselves and administrators, especially in terms of institutional uses of assessment. Whether these conflicts affect faculty engagement in assessment is unclear, as the limited number of faculty in this study generally rate themselves as very highly engaged in assessment. Neoliberal manifestations varied significantly across items, indicating some areas to explore further in terms of how they impact faculty engagement in assessment.

Future Plans

Results from this study and the process by which it was developed will be used to inform future research. The research and questionnaire design will both be revised to more simply and effectively answer the research questions, rather than relying on overly complex connections between several sets of survey items. This revision will also allow for the application of an appropriate statistical model to identify particular use and neoliberal factors that may impact faculty engagement in assessment. Once these revisions are complete, a full institutional pilot study will be undertaken.

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