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The Assessment Dance

Most members within the university community will acknowledge that, at least to some to some extent, assessment has become a permanent part of the educational system. Faculty members and administrators alike can be heard across the country mumbling about “tracking the student data” and asking questions about its use and validity in collection. For some, the accreditation and reaffirmation process is something imposed upon educational institutions by external entities like the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) simply to make the job of educators more difficult. Faculty members, in particular, enter the educational profession because of a desire to TEACH, not assess, and assessment is sometimes viewed as a hindrance or something **in addition** to teaching (the proverbial “one more thing to do”). But, what we have to realize is that to be an effective teacher, teaching and assessment actually have to be intertwined, much like music and dance steps. Assessment should be used for more than just monitoring learning; it should be used to both diagnose and promote learning.

This dance between assessment and teaching should have particular importance to those of us affiliated with SFA. When the Board of Regents approved **Strategic Plan 2013: Preparing for the Future**, July 15, 2008, we committed to developing several initiatives. Initiative #1 is listed as “*Enhance excellence in teaching and learning, research, scholarship, creative work, and service*”.

I assert that in order to enhance excellence in these areas, we must have a clear understanding of our current state of performance. In order for this process to be a significant part of our campus culture, both students and university personnel must be viewed as learners. It is imperative that we realize the responsibility we hold to assess and critically reflect upon our practice. Otherwise, we run the risk of doing a genuine disservice to our students and ourselves by perpetuating stagnated (ineffective, antiquated...) information or practices. By engaging in relevant and meaningful assessment activities, we expand the possibilities for ourselves as professionals, for our students as emerging professionals, and for our university as a learning institution.

Dancing and the QEP

Over the next year, there will be much discussion about developing a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as a part of the reaffirmation process for SACS. While the procedure for developing a QEP is identified by SACS, the plan that we develop will be unique to SFA. Ideas will be solicited from all who have an investment in our university (students, faculty/staff, and community) about how to improve the quality of student learning, and the plan will be generated based on that information. Even though it is a critical part of the reaffirmation process – we cannot be reaffirmed without a successful QEP submission– the QEP is NOT for SACS. The QEP is for SFA. This is an opportunity that we will have to collaboratively make a significant impact on student learning. As we continue on this learning journey together, it is my hope that we will seek excellence in education with the same fervor exhibited by a great dancer. The outcome of such enthusiasm is best described by the late Martha Graham, one of the foremost pioneers in the modern dance movement, who said, “Great dancers are not great because of their technique; they’re great because of their passion.”

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