

Assessment *in* Practice

Implementing a Student Assessment Scholars Program: Students Engaging in Continuous Improvement

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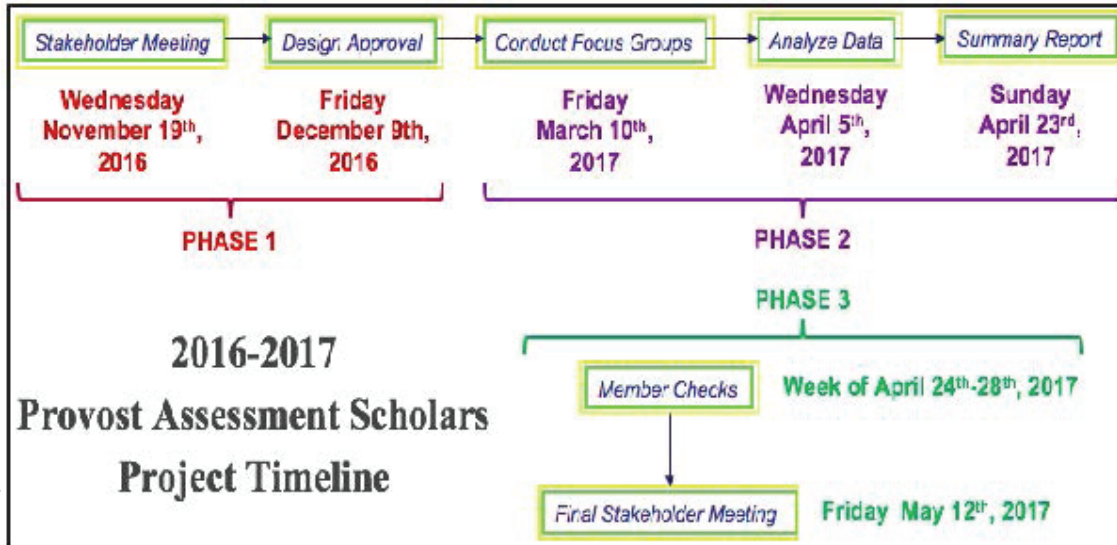
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In March of 2016, The University of Scranton's Office of Educational Assessment sent a team of four (one faculty member, one staff member, and two students) to a Teagle Assessment Scholar Workshop at the [Center of Inquiry](#) at Wabash College. The workshop was titled "*Students Engaging Students to Improve Learning: Using Student-Led Focus Groups to Gather and Make Sense of Assessment Evidence*," with a view to help assessment leaders, faculty, staff, and institutional researchers create and implement student-led focus groups to address institutional assessment questions. Following the workshop, we returned to Scranton and began work on implementing a special program called the "Provost Assessment Scholars" that would involve students in the collection of qualitative institutional data. Student scholars in the program aid The University of Scranton in continuous improvement by examining viewpoints and ideas of other students and rendering suggestions to campus stakeholders in the university community. Each student who shares their unique perspectives with the student scholars receives the individual attention indicative of a Jesuit education so that those student impressions are communicated to stakeholders who may take action. Stakeholders on campus can be academic and non-academic program directors, department chairs, student government, division heads, or administrators.

During our time at Wabash, the team developed a strong framework for what would become the Provost Assessment Scholars. Upon our return, we set to work creating a mission statement, process and methodology paradigms, and goals for the program. During our first year, six projects (three with the Office of Study Abroad, one for Campus Safety and Student Government, and two for the Office of Educational Assessment) were completed through cooperation with campus stakeholders. To attract students to join the program, a general call for applicants was emailed to all University sophomore and

junior students. There were no explicit requirements for scholars, no minimum GPA or particular major. Twenty-seven students applied¹, and from this pool, thirteen were chosen to become scholars in the program, in addition to the two original students. The original two students now serve as Assistant Directors in the program. All student scholars have a GPA above 3.0 and no history of academic or conduct issues. These students received an intensive two-day training on methodology, data collection and the mechanics of focus groups, at the end of October 2016 where much of the project planning and design was accomplished.

PROJECT ACADEMIC YEAR TIMELINE



There are several compelling reasons to engage students in assessment. Students are more likely to feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics with peers as opposed to faculty or staff. Student leaders are also more in tune with campus culture as well as better able to judge the authenticity of responses (Werder, Thibou, Simkin, Hornsby, Kali & Tawanna, 2016). In addition, stakeholders may be unintentionally biased about their programs or initiatives (Werder, Thibou, Simkin, Hornsby, Kali & Tawanna, 2016).

Overall, the University benefits when students are involved in assessment. The program provides indirect evidence and qualitative assessment data to stakeholders. Data gathered by scholars may lead to university-wide improvements. The data can allow stakeholders to undergo reflection and discernment, both of which are integral to the Jesuit educational paradigm, to make informed decisions and changes. This program also contributes to building a culture of evidence-driven improvement at the University of Scranton. In addition, students are able to see their perspectives being incorporated, for example, a suggestion about forming a Study Abroad club was put forward in a focus group, which was implemented. The student scholars themselves reap rewards. They earn non-credit, official transcript recognition, and take part in a yearlong qualitative research experience (High Impact Practice!). Finally, the scholars credit the program with improvements in their report writing, project and time management, critical thinking, teamwork, leadership skills, and adding something unique to their skill sets. At the end of the first program year, the

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¹ Online Application to the program and other programmatic materials including training presentations and the agenda can be found here: <http://www.scranton.edu/provostscholars>

scholars received a survey about their experiences with the program and cited all these benefits.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

We employ the methods of descriptive qualitative research in all of our projects to answer the general question: What is the experience of a particular sample? Of the total possible population of students who could attend the focus groups, our goal is to hold focus groups with a purposive sample of students. We do not generate or test theories; our process seeks to yield reasonably accurate and truthful information about what students have learned so stakeholders can use assessment results to make informed decisions and implement changes (Suskie & Banta, *Assessing student learning: a common sense guide* 2009). Every project undertaken begins with quantitative data to guide the scholars in the design of their qualitative project. For example, one of our inaugural projects involved collecting data on student perceptions of their oral communication skills after completing a First Year Oral Communication (FYOC) course. A quantitative assessment project conducted by faculty across all three of our colleges and schools showed our first-year students improved their oral communication skills or already came to Scranton with higher oral competence. The student scholars sought to find if student perceptions matched faculty project results. The method of analyzing quantitative data and then delving into certain findings qualitatively, is our way of using evidence triangulation (Polit & Beck, 2017).

Our student scholars document decisions made during the process and record the details of the setting and characteristics of participants so the reader can examine findings and processes. We are careful not to record identifying characteristics of the participants. Scholar findings, in the form of a theme analysis, are a product of the focus group discussion only and do not reflect stakeholder bias as the stakeholder is not involved in the process at all once they approve the project design. The summary report delivered to the stakeholder contain “extracts” so the reader can see adequate support for the scholar’s interpretations of the focus group data (Doody, Slevin, & Taggart, 2013). The scholars invite focus group participants to read the summary report, a process called member checking, to increase the trustworthiness of their findings (Rubin and Babbie, 2008).

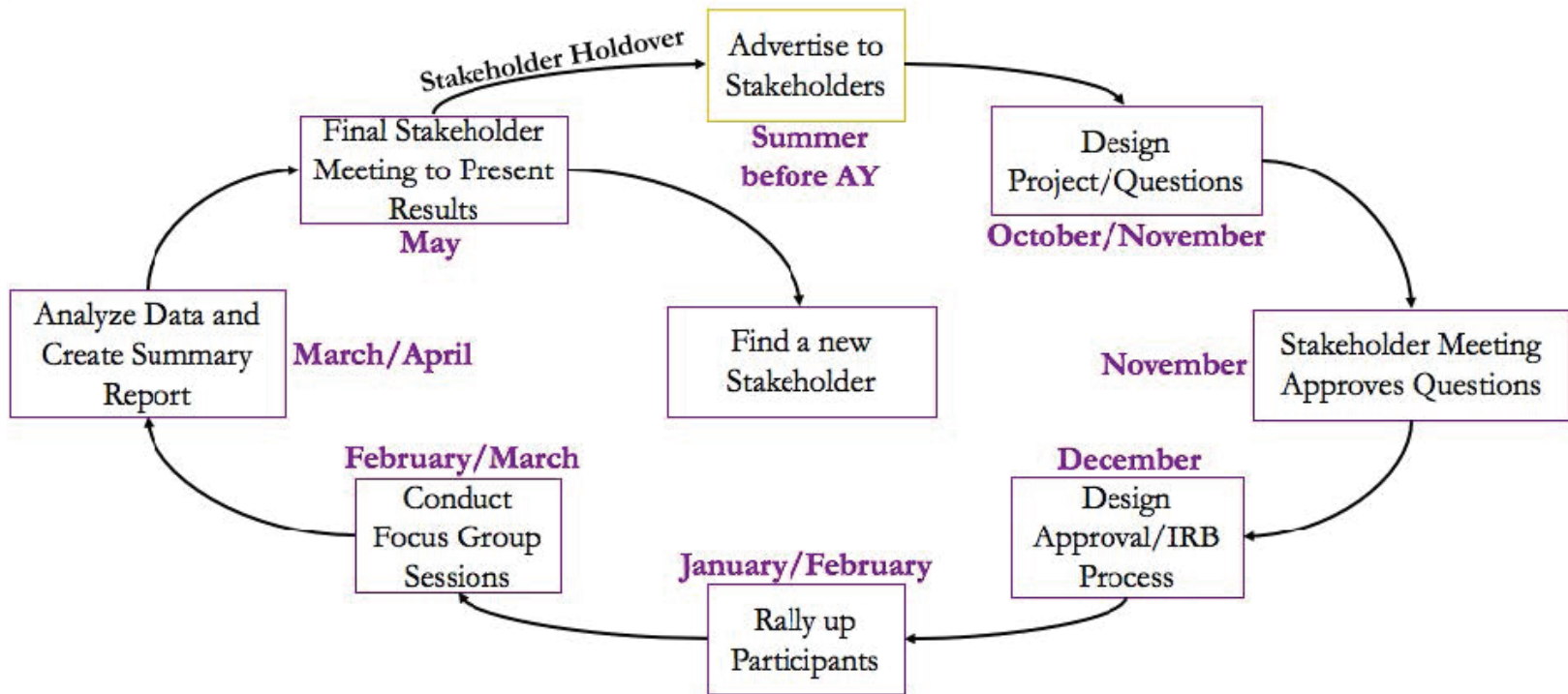
STUDENT SCHOLAR TRAINING

We conduct a **two-day training** both on our campus while also utilizing a retreat center owned by our university. Training sessions are based on our Center of Inquiry workshop experience. We also include presentations by a focus group expert and a speaker on research methodology from our university. Along with formal training sessions, we provide multiple teamwork sessions so the scholars can begin designing their actual project. Each scholar’s project team is provided with initial quantitative data as well as background information so that by the end of training their focus group project is nearly fully designed. Scholars engage in mock focus groups first in a large presentation and then later in smaller subgroups allowing the new scholars to practice as moderators and note takers before they are in the high stakes setting of a real focus group. At the end of training, scholars present their preliminary design to everyone in the program

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and receive feedback. In addition to this two-day training, scholars also become CITI (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative) certified to work with human subjects in research as some of our projects receive Internal Review Board (IRB) approval so our stakeholders can present the data and summary findings outside of the university. For example, we presented at the Annual Drexel Annual Conference and on Teaching and Learning Assessment Conference and were able to use the results of one of the IRB approved projects as the basis for the workshop portion of the presentation.

THE PROVOST ASSESSMENT SCHOLAR LIFECYCLE



Our project lifecycle begins by advertising the program to potential stakeholders during the summer months before the beginning of the academic year. Once stakeholders are identified, they are informed of the project timeline and have initial discussions with someone from the program. Once project student leaders are identified, they meet with the stakeholders and collect any quantitative data and background information relevant to their project in preparation for training. Training takes place, which results in a preliminary project design. During what remains of the fall semester, students complete CITI training, their focus group questions gain approval from their stakeholder, and their final project design is approved by the Provost Assessment Scholars Director. Before the spring semester, any remaining parts of the IRB process are completed, and any logistical goals are met (reserving rooms, focus group population sorting, etc.) so that the scholars can begin running their focus groups at the beginning of the spring semester. Once the focus groups are complete, the student scholars perform a theme analysis, prepare a summary report with uniformity across all projects, perform member checks, and then finally deliver their results to the stakeholder. So far, stakeholders on campus have been the Student Government Executive Committee, the Chief of University Police, the Director of the Office of Educational Assessment, the Director of Research and Sponsored Programs, the Director of Study Abroad, and the Director of International Admissions.

The stakeholders all had positive experiences and appreciated the work of the students.

INITIAL HIGHLIGHTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE PROGRAM



Our primary challenge was convincing the campus community at large we could achieve the goal of having a successful program involving students and assessment. However, the highlights of our first year far outweigh the challenges.

Even though the first year of our program was a success, based on the reactions to the final reports of the stakeholders, we still had many challenges. Our primary challenge was convincing the campus community at large we could achieve the goal of having a successful program involving students and assessment. We also had issues with student focus group attendance and logistics. We have a wonderful campus, but sometimes reserving the most sought-after rooms is difficult. Students would also sign up to attend a focus group, but then would not show up to the group. One point of emphasis in this second year of the program is to increase focus group attendance by using more concentrated efforts like table-sits and more email reminders. Initially, we did not know how to proceed with data collection by students, due to the sensitive nature of the data being collected. For example, in the FYOC project, students could have received information about particular faculty members and that information had the potential to be negative. To mitigate this issue, advice from our IRB included having our student moderator inform the participants not to mention any specific faculty member by name or course name and the review of the summary report entailed looking for anything that could identify specific individuals.

The highlights of our first year far outweigh the challenges. Our scholars had so many unexpected outcomes. For example, one of our scholars was offered a full-time position in the fraud department at a financial institution based on her work in the program. Most of the scholars from the first year chose to stay on for the 2017-2018 academic year. We are adding additional scholars this year to increase the size of the program as well. And it turns out, our greatest challenge of convincing campus constituents we could create a program with students collecting assessment data, was our greatest triumph. This second year, stakeholders sought us out to complete projects. We attribute this to our very successful first year. Our second year lineup of projects is full and includes project topics such as examining student learning related to the conduct process on our campus, improving learning living community offerings, assessing our

institutional learning outcomes, and looking at the effectiveness of our university's current strategic plan.

We would like to thank Charles Blaich and Kathy Wise of the Center of Inquiry for offering the workshop that was the basis for this program. We would also like to thank Dr. Mary Jane K. DiMattio, the University of Scranton's Director of the Office of Educational Assessment, for her leadership, support, and for her guidance throughout all aspects of developing the Provost Assessment Scholars program. For more information about the Provost Assessment Scholars at The University of Scranton, including training materials and resources, project information, and sample documents please find our website link here: <http://www.scranton.edu/provostscholars> or feel free to email the Director of the Provost Assessment Scholars, Nicholas P. Truncale, at ProvostScholars@scranton.edu.

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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