

Decoding the complexities of assessment strategies in criminal justice education

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Introduction

Each program must embark on serious self-examination. Such self-examination should be followed by an objective external review. Our advertising must reflect the reality of our programs. Some of us will have to face the hard fact that our programs are not what we profess them to be. We owe it to our students to ensure that they are receiving a broad-based liberal arts education at whatever level we teach (Southerland, 2002, p. 597).

Within the last 30 years, the role of academic program evaluation has emerged as one of the most striking subjects in American higher education. Burrowed within an arena of accountability, program evaluations have become an important and contestable issue. The production of empirical evidence of accountability is being driven by needs to establish that institutional goals and objectives are being met. Whether this is a practice for accreditation requirements, to assist in program development or improvement, or to discover unintended consequences of programs or policies, it is one that must be confronted and addressed. Although Weiss, Cosbey, Habel, Manson and Larson (2002) indicated that 70% of faculty regard assessment activities as not dramatically important, the terms ‘accountability’ and ‘assessment’ have increasingly drawn the attention of accreditation bodies.

Decoding Assessment

Evaluations yield current assessments of strengths and weaknesses of academic programs and determine needs, potentials and opportunities for each

program. Academic program reviews (evaluations) are inclusive reviews of academic programs typically conducted every five to ten years and are important devices for improving, maintaining, enhancing, restructuring, or terminating programs. Evaluations encompass a program's vision, curriculum, educational experience, student enrollment and program outcomes, cost effectiveness, and faculty contributions. The overall goal of effective evaluations in higher education is to improve academic programs.

Assessment is no longer exclusively in the hands of program administrators, as faculty members are increasingly now responsible for and accountable in taking part in evaluation efforts (Palomba and Banta, 1999). Legislative mandates for accountability and financial crises have directed administrators to attempt to include faculty in institutional decision-making (Miller, McCormack, Maddox, and Seagren, 1996). Regarding assessment, faculty participation is essential.

In order for evaluations to be effective, they first must be supported by a commitment by top administrators and faculty leaders. This will help establish critical organizational support. "Institutional policy and procedures should integrate evaluation activity and results into decision-making processes for academic program planning and resource allocation" (Jedamus, Peterson, and Associates, 1980, p. 454). As faculty become more acquainted with the assessment process, they soon realize that former methods used to assess quality of academic programs, including peer evaluations, program reputation, and measures of faculty productivity are not adequate measures or indicators of

student learning. Furthermore, course grades are insufficient measures of learning in themselves. Accordingly, the new era of accountability calls for much more (Bufkin, 2004).

Carmen, Butler and Odo (2006) stated that resources regarding the practice of assessment are plentiful. However, many programs across the country are unprepared or under-prepared to enter this new era of measuring student learning and better evaluation. Criminal justice programs are not exceptions to this trend. Moriarty (2006) reviewed data from 146 criminal justice programs and argued,

Criminal justice programs will be expected to assess student learning, too. We accept this challenge, but really do not know all that much about assessment of student learning in criminal justice programs (p. 412).

For those educators currently in the process of building or revising assessment plans, it is well known that the days of using grades for evaluation purposes are gone, for grades do not necessarily demonstrate or measure learning just as summative instructor evaluations of teaching are not the best indicators of quality teaching. At the outset, assessment activities are no longer simplistic matters where student grades, grade point averages, library holdings, ACT/SAT scores and retention rates can be collected to determine student success. Reviews of letter grades do not necessarily represent the knowledge of specific skills, just as simply passing or completing coursework does not necessarily indicate learning or that the student achieved the intended course objectives. Specific to criminal justice programs, measures of learning must be reviewed in light of Moriarty's (2006) findings revealing that student grades from core courses in the major are the most frequently used assessment measure in

criminal justice education. Indeed, much more careful contemplation in the area is crucial.

Educators need to examine programmatic and operational goals to determine if alterations are considered necessary in their quests to ensure that programs are deemed intellectually challenging and promote critical thinking. In addition, there is a need to expand a multi-cultural understanding of their environment and assist students in becoming informed, responsible citizens, so they can adequately prepare to excel in future careers. Furthermore, terms such as the appropriateness of curriculum, inputs, outcomes, outputs, direct and indirect measures are becoming commonplace in higher educational environments.

Assessing Criminal Justice Programs

The scholarly literature pertaining to assessments of criminal justice education is sparse (Tontodonato, 2006). Kleck, Wang and Tark (2007) addressed key barriers regarding assessment, which pertain to the quality of criminal justice programs and noted an absence of uniformity and agreement on standards in the criminal justice discipline. Without uniformity and agreement upon such standards, difficulty lies in assessing what appropriate outcomes of criminal justice education should entail. As not all criminal justice programs are created equally, assessment practices need to be unique to each campus; one assessment plan does not fit all programs. However, one of the first questions needing exploration is what should criminal justice students be learning and how can their learning be improved?

The assessment process begins by reviewing the evolution of departments or programs and by re-evaluating mission statements and revising, planning, altering, and clarifying goals and outcomes. Palomba and Banta (1999) identified six components needed in every assessment plan:

- developing learning objectives and goals, and
- being careful and thoughtful in designing and implementing the plan, and
- involving faculty, administrators, students, alumni, as well as others off-campus, such as employers in the community, and
- selecting and designing data collection approaches, and
- utilize findings of the assessment by acting upon them, and
- reviewing and re-examining the process.

When the following questions can be swiftly answered, key content areas of assessment plans should begin to take shape and the phase of data collection and analysis can begin:

1. Can evidence be provided that mission statements are being accomplished?
2. What are the broad-based goals for departments? How can such goals be measured?
3. Can evidence demonstrate that such broad-based goals are being accomplished?
4. Are sources of student learning measures identified in ways that are measurable?
5. What are direct measures of student learning outcomes?
6. What are indirect measures of student learning outcomes?
7. What changes and improvements can be made to improve student learning?

Other vital questions must be answered as well in this process:

1. Can evidence demonstrate that students are being challenged by course content and assignments?
2. What strategies are being devised and implemented to measure knowledge?
3. What objectives do course syllabi reflect?
4. Are students' levels of satisfaction with course content and programmatic functions tracked?
5. Is there evidence of a link between student satisfaction and students' perceptions of the learning challenges presented in particular courses?

Jedamus et al., (1980) further identified additional questions that program assessments in higher education should seek to answer. Answers to the following questions depend on the effectiveness of academic program evaluations:

1. How can the quality of instructional programs be maintained?
2. How can programs be sensitive to the needs of students, society and scholarship?
3. What fixed resources must be available if a program is to be offered and its quality maintained?
4. How can access for a variety of heterogeneous students be maintained despite the pressures to increase tuition?

Broad-based Goals and Outcomes Regarding CJS Programs

Generally, broad-based goals of criminal justice programs in part, should be somewhat similar, in that evidence must be provided that the mission is being accomplished. Additionally, certain broad-based goals must be addressed in each plan, as Berg and Bing (1990) brought attention to promoting heterogeneity among students and faculty in efforts to embrace tolerance and diversity as they pertain to working in the criminal justice field. Mijures and Blackburn (1990) also point out that attempts should be sought in increasing heterogeneity of programs, and in promoting multiculturalism.

Promoting ethical behavior and embracing tolerance for diversity among faculty and students is a good place to initiate the shaping of assessment plans. An outcome of that goal could be that 50% or more of all core and elective programmatic syllabi include coverage of ethical/legal challenges, dilemmas and behaviors as they pertain to working in the criminal justice field. Such syllabi may also include coverage of multicultural issues. Annually, all syllabi would need to be reviewed to ensure that such topics are promoted, thoroughly discussed, and comprehended. Furthermore, ethical challenges can be addressed in capstone courses through essays and graded by faculty who are skilled in areas of ethics and/or multicultural issues.

Criminal justice students should demonstrate an ability to effectively communicate their ideas in written and oral form. Objectives (outcomes) of this primary goal could be that students successfully pass an essay section of a capstone exam. Another outcome could call for students to successfully write essays in specific upper-division courses that reflect critical thinking. Critical thinking and writing skills can further be assessed through the utilization of rubrics. Presentation rubrics showing what is expected of students can be utilized as assessment measures in courses requiring students conduct oral presentations.

Students should be exposed to challenging curriculums that will prepare them for internships or employment in the field of criminal justice. That goal may be measured indirectly with an outcome (objective) that senior post-internship surveys reflect satisfaction with course curriculum as well as levels of

preparedness for internships. The same goal could have another outcome/objective, for example, 90% of internship field supervisors will be satisfied with the student intern's ability to function in their respective organization. Levels of functioning can include quality of work, quantity of work, initiative, dependability, and effectiveness in organizational relationships, ability to follow agency rules and regulations, and a demonstration of effectiveness in oral and written expression. Field supervisor assessment surveys may be distributed during and after the internship has been completed—yielding and identifying information regarding student preparation for the criminal justice field.

A different goal may reflect that programs offer a responsive, challenging, and flexible curriculum with a broad range of courses on various aspects of criminal justice, thereby fostering critical thinking, inquiry and life-long learning skills. A direct outcome of that goal could be that 90% of students will complete a capstone course or senior seminar with a 'C' or higher. However, a letter grade alone is an inadequate measure, therefore adding an extra outcome regarding that goal could be insuring that 100% of upper division courses must include a writing and/or project component, which would incorporate elements of applying theory to real world examples. Additionally, alumni or senior satisfaction surveys can address and explore realities regarding whether the program was challenging and responsive to employment needs after graduation.

Myers and Myers (2002) recognized that many criminal justice programs were not directing adequate attention to or exposing students to coursework pertaining to the investigation of high technology crimes. Offering a responsive

curriculum might include additional courses in computer technology, white-collar crimes, and financial accounting in order that financial crimes can be better understood. The effects of having such courses can increase a student's marketability upon graduation. Furthermore, in a world where white-collar crime is encompassing and threatening, students who are trained in the areas of financial accounting can better understand the ever-changing financial aspects of crime. Students that are familiar with the examination of income statements, balance sheets and statements of cash flows will have the skills to better understand how to identify and combat those crimes such as embezzlement, fraud and securities violations.

Jones (2006) indicated that general programmatic goals should reflect changes in technology and added that,

One consequence of this technological change is the opportunity for the professorate to dramatically rethink the goals of its classes, especially the large introductory ones, and to reflect not only on how students access information, but also how they best make meaning from it (p. 88).

Programs need to evaluate whether students will demonstrate mastery of program material and a comprehensive knowledge of the criminal justice field. In a criminological theory class, an objective/outcome could be that students will comprehend the predominant theories related to the causation of crime. That objective can then be assessed directly in several different ways: one being that 75% of students in that particular course will write successful essays pertaining to criminological theory and the second that they pass the course with a "C" or higher. Yet again, a course grade to assess student mastery is not enough to determine student learning. Therefore, this can be assessed additionally via

capstone exams including thorough successful essay coverage of criminological theory.

In a criminal law class, projects for specific courses can also appraise whether students grasp the fundamental concepts and nature of criminal law. Furthermore, a senior capstone exam including coverage of criminal law can be developed and utilized. Each core course, policing, corrections, or courts can be assessed in such ways. Student surveys may also reflect whether students believe the specific courses met their intended outcomes. Internship or alumni surveys can further bring relevant information to faculty and administration as to whether students can apply specific core coursework to real-life internships or career experiences and situations.

Goals and objectives should be identified further depending upon the locality and needs of the communities in which programs are located. For example, in Oklahoma with the large Native American populations, programs should be designed to train, guide and prepare students for leadership positions in the administration of agencies at the local, tribal, state and federal levels, as well as in the private sector. Out-of-class involvement in the community through internships and cooperative education will expose undergraduates to the experience of research and work in such fields pertaining to American Indian Nations. Special courses should be developed, including tribal law courses, for example, to prepare students to apply skills in research, technology, management and intervention to the unique needs of various Native American communities.

Research methodology and statistical reasoning courses are increasingly emphasized and offered in criminal justice programs, as approximately 40% of criminal programs require a methods-type course (Southerland, 2002). Benefits of research methods and statistic courses include students' preparation to conduct quality research on crime measurement and causation as well as policy implications of local, tribal, state and federal crime efforts and initiatives. Specifically, students should be able to practice and utilize acquired research skills at internship sites. Moreover, students and faculty can facilitate collaborative research endeavors between the program and local criminal justice organizations, which can indeed be beneficial to all involved. We cannot overlook our missions to provide a service to the communities in which we live. Myers (1994) called for joint efforts with criminal justice programs and local agencies, where students can learn about such agencies and agencies can benefit from the program via knowledge gained from the academics and through internship/career placements.

Faculty can provide a service to the community, and in turn students will be introduced to hands-on research experience. Payne and Monk-Turner (2005) suggested the inclusion of active learning approaches for students by engaging them in faculty research projects. This will help students understand the opportunity to carry out scientific research.

Putting it all Together

Essentially, all goals must stem from and reflect back to the mission statement. After goals have been formulated, an assessment/evaluation

measure must be devised. This simply reflects how the assessment will be done through the utilization of specific techniques, instruments, or methods. The most frequent and currently utilized measures to assess student learning in CJS programs include grades in courses, observation of faculty members, internship experiences, employer/internship supervisor surveys, and senior seminars or capstone courses (Moriarty, 2006). Tontodonato (2006) contended that additional measures are incorporated to include student satisfaction constructs into assessment plans, thereby yielding critical programmatic information regarding student attitudes and/or expectations concerning respective programs.

Supplementary assessment measures/techniques may be appropriate and can include:

- course feedback/course evaluation surveys, and
- capstone courses enabling students with opportunities to apply, in an integrative fashion, criminal justice knowledge and skills acquired in previous core courses, and
- instructor evaluations, and
- job placement data, and
- graduation/retention rates, and
- senior satisfaction surveys, which can demonstrate why students selected their respective programs, perceived programmatic strengths and weaknesses, and perceived levels of preparedness for career or internship placement, and
- collections of essays written on given themes in specific courses;

- grade point averages, and
- student grades, and
- internship supervisor evaluations, and
- retention rates.

With that step completed and assessment strategies and techniques formulated, an assessment schedule, which will detail when the outcome will be assessed, must follow. Respectively, assessment measures can be implemented and applied each semester, quarter, annually or whenever deemed appropriate. Following the schedule, results must be recorded and analyzed to determine whether or not the indicators of success were achieved. Lastly and importantly, an improvement plan must accompany the schedule, indicating what and how programmatic changes will be implemented regarding assessment results. An example of this process can be illustrated by using an important programmatic operational goal, such as, are there adequate professional development opportunities for departmental faculty? An outcome could be that 100% of full-time faculty will submit completed professional development plans by required dates, and can be measured via annual reviews and evaluations of professional development plans. Did the faculty members meet their annual goals, whether being research, educational endeavors, or securing grants? Results can then be appraised and analyzed. Was the outcome attained? Finally, what improvements should be made? The ultimate product will be an improvement plan, identifying and specifying how the analyzed data will be used in concert with decision-making processes.

Another attempt to examine this process can be explored through additional programmatic goal such as showing that students can demonstrate the ability to effectively communicate ideas in writing and in oral form. One outcome of this goal could be that 75% of students will pass the essay section of a capstone exam. This can be measured via direct measures of carefully reviewing essay sections of capstone exams, whereby student scores on the essay section would be identified. To illustrate how changes would be made, analysis of essays could lead to curricular changes that may include additional writing requirements and assignments. Furthermore, there can be another outcome for this same goal, such as 75% of students will successfully write essays in senior-level courses that reflect critical thinking skills and adequate writing abilities for careers in criminal justice or advanced study. Qualified faculty in criminal justice programs/departments can analyze this annually.

Writing rubrics can be utilized as direct measures, as annual student essays will be written and examined by criminal justice faculty. When appropriate, other selected faculty in the department, college or university can be asked to review writing samples. Improvement plans could then include pertinent information regarding how programmatic changes will be made accordingly, as faculty will be continuously encouraged to make modifications to their course requirements to include additional and useful writing assignments.

This endeavor can further be examined by reflecting upon the goal that students will be exposed to an intellectually challenging curriculum that adequately prepares them for internships and employment in the criminal justice

field. An outcome of this goal could be that 90% of senior surveys (an indirect measure) will reflect satisfaction with course curriculum and content. An indirect measure, annual senior surveys, should identify information regarding curricular quality. Data collected would be analyzed to determine if programmatic goals and student learning outcomes are being achieved. Information yielded will possibly lead to review of content and instructional strategies when relevant.

An additional outcome of the same goal, regarding internship preparation, could be that 90% of internship/field supervisors will be satisfied with students' abilities to function adequately in their respective agencies. This can be assessed via another indirect measure, a field supervision assessment survey, which could be completed and reviewed each semester when a student concludes an internship. Specifically, this instrument should seek to identify relevant information regarding student preparedness for the criminal justice field. Improvement plans should be evaluated to determine if programmatic goals and student learning outcomes are being achieved. Information yielded will possibly lead to review of content and instructional strategies in relevant coursework or through the restructuring of curriculum through adding classes or other programmatic changes in response to determining whether students are actually prepared for internship experiences. In any event, all faculty must be willing to assist in and contribute to assessment activities and determine amongst themselves who has the skills to best assess particular measures of student learning.

Conclusion

There is no single approach to program assessment. Many different approaches have been evolving in higher education over the past several decades. This is driven externally by demands for accountability and internally by pressures for resource allocation and the need to maintain program quality. Further exploration is also vitally needed to determine what a 'quality' program actually entails.

The process of assessment and devising learning outcomes that are truly meaningful is now permanently ingrained in the realm of higher education. Assessing learning outcomes and programmatic goals is not voluntary, but is becoming mandated as a standard and an on-going practice. Gathering appropriate assessment data is challenging, on-going and time consuming. Furthermore, a thorough and careful comprehension of assessment is vital to its success, as assessment results should detail where and how program improvement can be made. Academic rigor should be addressed.

First and foremost, those involved in assessment practices must become comfortable with common assessment language and terminology and be willing to begin the process. While there currently is no single focus, agreement or theory on how to conduct a program evaluation, faculty must embrace the process and find measures that will best fit their respective program in determining whether students are meeting learning objectives.

Administrators and faculty need to raise the bar and set sights on revising and implementing solid assessment plans that detail whether student learning is

being achieved. Accrediting bodies are demanding higher educational institutions prove themselves accountable for student learning and success. Demonstrating that measurable outcomes are indeed showing that programmatic or institutional goals are being met is paramount. Utilizing student grades, as established earlier, will not suffice. The utilization of direct measures is important and incorporating creative and usable indirect measures will add greater value to all stakeholders. Those measurements must be defined and implemented to provide solid results to provide evidence that programmatic goals are being attained.

Assessment need not be a dreaded faculty activity, but one in which we deliver results demonstrating that our students are learning that which we intend for them to learn, thereby allowing them to market themselves to attain and achieve their desired career goals. That in turn, will reflect back to the academic program and will lead to higher retention rates and overall interest in the program or institution.

Showing accountability in times of economic turbulence, indicates that academic programs are delivering qualified, knowledgeable, skillful, competent and capable graduates is precisely a vital key to programmatic success (Bruns and Bruns, 2007). Criminal justice education must follow in efforts to upgrade its reputation in the academic world and to add to the professional outcomes of criminal justice policy and practice (Finckennauer, 2005).

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