

Measuring Assessment Climate: A Developmental Perspective¹

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Introduction

Higher education institutions have been responding for some time to externally imposed accountability requirements that call for evaluation of all degree programs' "student learning outcomes" with documented attention to using the results for program improvement, a process generally termed "assessment" (Banta & Blaich, 2010; Fontenot, 2012; Kezar, 2013; Kuh & Ewell, 2010; Peterson & Augustine, 2000). Drawing on the broader literatures on evaluation capacity building (ECB) and evaluation utilization, this paper describes one local effort to measure and promote organizational readiness for the kind of evidence-driven learning organization that features an institution-wide, ongoing, highly valued system for using the study of student learning outcomes to improve educational results.

Developmental Framework

To guide our work we apply a five-stage developmental model for institutional assessment capacity (see Table 1) developed by the first author with several associates (Stevenson, 2011; Stevenson & Monteiro, 2013; Stevenson, Trembl, & Paradis, 2009). The original conceptualization of the stages (Stevenson et al, 2009) was based on the literature dealing with characteristics of colleges and universities associated with good assessment practices (e.g. Angelo, 1999; Axelson & Flick, 2009; Banta, Lund, Black & Oblander, 1996) and more specific designations of possible stages in the development of these practices (Allen, 2004; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Wehlburg, 1999).

Although this model is specific to the assessment context, we believe it has relevance for the broader evaluation capacity building endeavor. The literature on learning organizations (e.g. Argyris & Schon, 1978; Cousins, Goh, Clark, & Lee, 2004; Preskill & Torres, 1999) implicates the value of having a model for how improved internal processes evolve. Demonstrating the utility of this kind of approach, Rogers (2003) proposes a five-stage developmental scheme in his well-known work on diffusion of innovations in organizations. The three latter stages during implementation are most relevant for ECB: Redefining/Restructuring, during which the necessary infrastructure is developed and the innovation is adapted to fit the organization's context; Clarification, in which the internal diffusion process builds understanding of how integration can work and leads to gradual embedding across the organization; and Routinization, in which the innovation becomes an accepted, sustainable aspect of functioning. Preskill & Boyle (2008) note the general utility of stage models, including Rogers's, for understanding organizational change as an aspect of ECB.

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Two particular advantages of the developmental approach are that (1) success can be defined by movement from one stage to the next, rather than only by achieving a final outcome, and (2) the strategies useful for making each step may be examined separately, so that the most effective means for forward movement can be determined stage-by-stage. Classic work on individual processes of change (Norcross, Krebs, & Prochaska, 2010) has long shown the value of these two contributions. Kreiner and Herr-Zaya (2005) demonstrate the value for understanding organizational change in the ECB context, suggesting that each step may require different internal capacities and may respond to capacity building influences differently.

Understanding Evaluation Capacity Building for Assessment

Research on ECB provides valuable insights into the issues faced by evaluators in higher education settings, for whom assessment represents a specialized form of outcome evaluation. Placing our examination of assessment capacity in the context of ECB adds a great deal of conceptual and empirical support for understanding the issues and means for addressing them, and at the same time offers some perspective on the particular advantages of the university assessment environment as a place to learn about ECB. As Preskill (2014) points out, there is still hard work to be done to clarify means for solidifying ECB in practice: (1) moving line staff (i.e., faculty) toward using data in decision-making in a “culture of inquiry”; (2) building the capacity of senior leaders (i.e., top administrators) to shape and sustain a learning culture; (3) transferring newly acquired skills to long-term, sustainable practice; and (4) evaluating the success of ECB interventions themselves (i.e. enhanced faculty competencies, effective reports, curricular improvements in response to data, and sustained assessment practice). These challenges seem wholly pertinent for the assessment context.

Also very relevant for that context is Patton’s (2008) focus on the special role of “process use” – how programs are improved by the process of doing evaluation, long before any outcome data are used to guide alterations in the program, consistent with the view that “evaluative thinking” is beneficial as it challenges stakeholders in the program to ask critical questions about what the intended effects of the program really are, how they could be measured, and what logical connection they have to elements of the program. Evaluation as a field has put a great deal of emphasis on the importance of stakeholder involvement in evaluation – with accumulating evidence of the benefits of doing so, particularly for those most directly involved in delivering the program being evaluated. This participatory and empowering aspect of ECB has been the focus for work by Clinton (2014), who shows the importance of stakeholder engagement empirically by demonstrating its mediating effect on the impact of evaluation. Brandon & Fukunaga (2014) provide more details on the empirical support for stakeholder engagement in a systematic review of the literature, noting some problems (e.g. the importance of adequate resources for building the evaluation capacity of stakeholders) along with clear indications of the pattern of positive effects on evaluation use and influence. Botcheva, White & Huffman (2002) incorporate the notion of “learning cultures” as an aspect of ECB. Taylor-Ritzler, Suarez-Balcazar, Garcia-Iriarte, Henry, & Balcazar (2013) have done the most sophisticated job of testing an empirical model for personal and organizational factors affecting evaluation capacity outcomes (use of evaluation findings and incorporation of evaluation into established work processes). Their structural equation model results suggest that favorable organizational learning capacity conditions (leadership, learning climate, resources) directly influence capacity

outcomes and mediate the role of individual factors (knowledge, skills, and attitudes). In fact, in their findings there is no direct influence of individual factors (most likely to be affected by training and technical assistance) on manifest capacity.

The higher education setting evinces the same crucial role for faculty engagement in the assessment process as is so frequently noted in broader discussions of the importance of stakeholder engagement, participatory models, and empowerment. Moving to a “learning community” is not easy, even in institutions devoted to learning (Angelo, 1999; Axelson & Flick, 2009; Driscoll & Wood, 2007; Kezar, 2013; Kuh & Ewell, 2010; Ndoye, 2013). However, before we turn to some of the special difficulties for ECB in the higher education assessment context, we note some of the particular advantages of that realm for learning more about ECB. First, the accreditation mandate for higher education institutions in the U.S. makes clear that faculty must be centrally involved in the assessment process from defining outcomes to using results. Second, faculty development is already a routine part of most higher education institutions, and can be adapted to address the necessary competencies for assessment in ways that tie directly to improving the educational outcomes about which faculty care deeply. Third, structures to facilitate collegial processes focused on improving the curriculum are already at least latent in most academic departments. And finally, the outcomes from ECB are readily available and can be tracked over time. The accreditation mandate for assessment calls for regular reports on degree-level learning outcomes along with follow-up reports on the effectiveness of curricular and pedagogical changes in those programs responding to the results of initial assessment (“completing the loop”). Thus every year in most higher education institutions there will be many department-level assessment reports, and these will have been evaluated for compliance and quality by some internal review process. If faculty capacity for doing learning outcomes assessment and learning from the results is being enhanced, the “proof of the pudding is in the tasting” as the reports provide a window on strengths and limitations in assessment practice and use of results.

Promoting Meaningful Assessment with a Climate Survey

In plenty of places, though, the “pudding” is still a bit lumpy. As in many other ECB contexts (e.g. Botcheva, White, & Huffman, 2002; Owczarzak, Broaddus, & Pinkerton, 2016; Preskill & Boyle, 2008), evaluators in higher education have struggled to move from the initial external **accountability** impetus for learning outcomes assessment to an internal, intrinsically motivated **learning** role for assessment. Leviton (2014, p. 92) makes this one of her challenges to ECB researchers, noting that accountability associated with external funding can distort what programs think evaluation is for, affecting the way it is viewed, valued, and conducted. Faculty are just as skeptical as staff in many other kinds of organizations about the real intent of this data collection activity as well as outraged by its effects on their already overburdened workloads (Axelson & Flick, 2009; Banta & Blaich, 2010; Blaich & Wise, 2011; Buller, 2013; Cain & Hutchings, 2015; Jonson, Guetterman, & Thompson, 2014; Kezar, 2013). Efforts to measure aspects of the institutional and departmental environment for assessment, often linked to conceptions of “culture,” address these issues at length (Fontenot, 2012; Fuller & Skidmore, 2014; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Kezar, 2013; Peterson & Augustine, 2000). Fuller & Skidmore (2014, p. 10) refer to a “culture of assessment” vs. a “culture of compliance.” Jonson et al (2014) use the labels “improvement paradigm” vs. “accountability paradigm.” Walser (2015)

advocates “meeting in the middle” between the competing purposes for assessment, but in the broader evaluation context the genuine possibility of compromise has been challenged (Patton, 2008).

Attempts to define and measure “assessment culture” have burgeoned as evaluators try to understand factors beyond the design of training and technical assistance (over which they usually have some control) to broader contextual forces that may facilitate or impede the desired end goal of a sustained, routinized process for improving higher education results. Fuller & Skidmore (2014) provide a useful introduction to the concepts usually embedded in such measures, noting that in the U.S. the phrase “culture of assessment” typically refers to “the deeply embedded values and beliefs collectively held by members of an institution influencing assessment practices at their institution (p. 10).” Walser’s (2015) definition aims at an end state “...when assessment work and use is an integrated part of the college or university routine” and calls for “...faculty, staff, students, and administrators to work together.” (p. 59) Sometimes the term “culture” has a broader meaning, referring to institutional precursors that are hospitable to assessment (or not) such as campus leaders’ demonstrated valuing of learning from evidence; campus-wide valuing of quality of teaching, setting improvement of educational performance as a primary goal; an institutional norm embracing transparency in the service of improvement on shared goals; and valuing community, collaboration, and participation (Banta et al, 1996; Cain & Hutchings, 2015). While bemoaning the frequent vagueness of definitions of “culture” in research on assessment, Kezar (2013) generally gravitates to the broader norms-beliefs-values perspective. Her review is very helpful for demonstrating the variety of hypotheses and varied roles attributed to culture in research on assessment. She reports that organizational culture (whatever that may mean) is generally found to be more important than practical, policy, and technical support for assessment in determining successful adoption.

The content of a measure of assessment culture may provide more clarity regarding the concepts involved. Fuller & Skidmore (2014) developed a 34-item scale (agreement on 5-point Likert scales) based on the work of Maki (2010) on principles of inclusive commitment to assessment. Exploratory factor analysis (PCA) yielded three factors, labeled Clear Commitment, Connection to Change, and Vital to Institution. High-loading items for Clear Commitment include “adequately staffed assessment office” and “clear definition of assessment.” For Connection to Change, the strongest items are “administrators want to know about student learning” and “assessment results are used in campus publications/speeches.” The high-loading items for Vital to the Institution include “assessment is vital to the institution’s future” and “assessment and teaching (*sic*).” For a comparison drawn from the broader evaluation field, Botcheva et al (2002) report on a 10-item measure of “learning culture” with high-loading items including “evaluation activity is seen as threatening to the status quo”, “a general fear of change permeates the organization”, “staff are eager to learn from their experience”, and “agency management is supportive of evaluation work.”

The factors within institutions that promote meaningful assessment have been discussed at length. Kezar (2013) points to “culture, leadership, and organizational policies and structures” (p. 191). Banta et al (1996) assert that successful assessment requires effective leadership from both administration and faculty; administrative commitment represented by administrative structure and reward structure; adequate resources including clerical support, summer faculty

support, mini-grants, and technical support; and faculty and staff development opportunities. Angelo (1999) presents four pillars of transformative assessment: shared trust; shared motivation (based on shared goals for learning); shared language for the transformation process; and shared research-based guidelines for using assessment to promote learning. Cain and Hutchings (2015, p. 101) list “culture, climate, context, and language.” Relevant for the present study, they define culture as “the long-standing way a group understands itself and its shared values”, characterized as “deeply embedded and resistant to change”, consistent with Kezar (2013). On the other hand, Cain & Hutchings (2015, p. 101) describe climate as “more immediate and changeable”, involving “feelings and understandings about organizational life.”

A separate, closely related line of research has focused on faculty involvement and satisfaction with assessment as dependent variables, with a number of posited predictors. Fontenot (2012) examined attitudes, concerns, and involvement of community college faculty with assessment. Her factor analysis of Attitudes yielded two factors: Benefits (e.g. “improved the quality of education at this institution”) and Faculty Reluctance (e.g. “limits time”; “a distraction”; “fear of results”). Only the Benefits scale was significantly related (positively) to Involvement at the institutional level. Grunwald and Peterson (2003) also examined institutional factors, with a faculty survey across seven institutions. They posit a complex causal model linking external influences (e.g. accreditation pressures), faculty characteristics (e.g. gender, rank), institutional context (type of school), and a host of intra-institutional factors to four dependent variables based on satisfaction and involvement. The institutional factors are relevant as potential predictors of successful assessment, with subscales measuring institutional approach (how student performance is defined and measured), institutional support (e.g. mission priorities, purposes for assessment, influence of faculty, departments, administrators and a formal plan on assessment, steering committee, annual forums); and assessment management practices and policies (e.g. data system, support for professional development, incentives to use assessment results, relevance for faculty promotion and tenure review, relevance for department planning and budget). Ironically, uses and impacts of student assessment are treated as another predictor of involvement and satisfaction. The problems of shared method variance (self-report), many subscales in the analyses, and a way of framing the causal model that prioritizes involvement over results, all reduce the potency of the conclusions, but the scope and sophistication of the conceptual approach remain landmarks.

The first author originally conceived our Assessment Climate Scale as a means to probe and prompt institutional movement from one developmental stage to the next (Stevenson et al, 2009). Hence the more long-term connotations of “assessment culture” seemed less appropriate than the malleable conception of “climate.” Central to both the developmental stage construction and the climate scale construction was the conviction that formative use of assessment to improve educational outcomes calls for a shift from the initial external-accountability impetus on most campuses, with its threat of summative use and potential for superficial measures, to internal recognition of pedagogical relevance by faculty – a “culture of evidence” in Kuh and Ewell’s (2010) terms. The scale drew on the pool of knowledge regarding faculty attitudes and beliefs that might inhibit or promote change toward the kind of idealized assessment culture described recently by Walser (2015), and anticipated Kezar’s (2013) conclusion that norms, beliefs, and values would prove more important than structural

progress in moving toward that goal. Our scale is not intended to measure broad cultural precursors of successful assessment, nor institutional evaluation capacity, nor is it a needs assessment. Its premise is more like that of action research (Fals Borda, 2001), aiming to speak faculty's perceived truths to the academic community of both faculty and administrators – and particularly to those with the power to communicate the value of that ideal assessment culture and support forward movement with policies, recognition, and resources.

It is important to have a map for how utilization of assessment findings can evolve, and how faculty can become prime movers in the process despite the initial mandate from above. Investigation of what stage a higher education institution may be in, and identification of factors that are relevant for further progress, call for organizational-level assessment to accompany and complement program-level assessment. Here we will describe survey content, psychometric properties, and our approach to using the results to promote change, with special attention to the challenges of stage transition and strategies for addressing them.

Method

Sample

Department chairpersons were chosen as respondents. At the University of Rhode Island (URI), chairs function as a kind of “bridge” between faculty and administrators. The administration (college deans and provost) holds them directly accountable for producing assessment reports from their departments. The new pressure on faculty workload for assessment-related activities has rapidly grown, including a number of time and competency demands: convening with colleagues to define learning outcomes for their degree programs; developing a curriculum map linking their courses and other degree requirements to those outcomes; developing ways to quantify student learning (e.g., grading rubrics); administering, scoring and reporting on department-generated means for evaluating student work in their courses; meeting to discuss the results with colleagues and determine recommendations for future action; following up with implementation of pedagogical and curricular changes; and re-assessment. As these expectations were promulgated from the provost's level via a newly created assessment office and a joint faculty-administration committee, chairs were expected to convey the demands and their rationale to their colleagues. Thus we see the chairs' perspective as a particularly informative one to track the development of a mature assessment system over time, and to prompt consideration of needed changes in policies and practices for assessment.

All URI department chairs (and the directors of department-equivalent academic programs) were invited to participate in Fall 2009, Fall 2012, and again in Fall 2015. In 2009, 30 of 51 responded (58.8%) participated; in Fall 2012, it was 36 of 61 (59.0%); and in 2015 it was 28 of 49 (57.1%). In order to preserve anonymity, no descriptors (e.g., college, gender, rank) were included in the survey. In 2015 18% of the chairs indicated that they remembered taking one or both of the prior surveys, suggesting a high degree of turnover.

Survey Design

Content of the survey is organized into six major domains: (1) chairs' personal attitudes toward assessment; (2) institution-wide faculty norms regarding the value of assessment; (3) leadership commitment; (4) infrastructure support for assessment; (5) department-level implementation;

and (6) university-wide implementation. Response choices range from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. A final structured item addresses chairs' perception of how far URI has come in the development of a useful, sustainable assessment system, using the 5-stage model described in Table 1: (1) denial ("It's a passing fad"); (2) external demand ("The administration says we must; give us the time and resources or do it yourselves"); (3) tentative commitment ("Leaders are committed and some of us are too"); (4) full-scale effort ("Most of us accept the necessity and there are policies and resources available to help"); and (5) maintenance and refinement ("We see the value and regularly use the results at all organizational levels"). The original 2009 survey consisted of 37 items; seven items were added for the 2012 version for a total of 44 items; and in 2015 still further revisions were made, leading to a total of 51 items. An open-ended space for qualitative comments was provided in all three years. See Table 2 for the current version of the instrument.

Procedure

After IRB review the survey was administered online via Survey Monkey, with an invitation to participate and IRB assurances accompanied by an e-mailed link, followed by a brief introduction at the beginning of the survey explaining its purpose and defining key terms. Mid-October was chosen as a promising time in the annual calendar of chairs' duties, and the survey was thus administered during that time-frame for each of the three iterations. Chairs were given three weeks to respond, with two reminders sent during that period to those who had not participated or explicitly indicated that they declined to participate.

Survey Results

Item-level Responses

Table 2 presents the mean response to each item for each of the three administrations. One-way ANOVAs were used to check for significant changes over time, with superscript letters used to denote items for which there were differences across years. The items are grouped into the six a priori domains on which the design was based; those headings were not included in the survey as administered, but the order of the items was the same.

Significance tests at the item level provide evidence that the chairs perceive forward progress on some important issues. Chairs responding in 2015 were less likely to agree that faculty fear possible negative consequences of assessment (item #9), and more likely to agree that faculty value transparency (item #10), that the university tracks assessment evidence and results (item #19), and that the university is defining, measuring, and reporting university-wide learning outcome objectives on a regular basis (item #47).

Some item-level results indicated perceived movement in a negative direction. In 2015 there was significantly lower agreement that college deans recognize and support assessment (item #14) and that programs that do not comply with assessment reporting requirements will receive negative consequences (item #22).

Figure 1 graphically displays what the chairs thought about the University's current stage in the establishment of program-level assessment (item #51). The modal response is Stage 2, "External Demand," with administrative leaders requiring faculty compliance to meet that

demand without added support for faculty (selected by 50.0% of the respondents). The second highest choice was for Stage 3, “Tentative commitment,” indicating a sense that faculty are starting to join with campus leadership in institutionalizing assessment, selected by 39.3% of the respondents. No one endorsed Stage 5, “Maintenance and refinement.”

Domain Scale Patterns

Figure 2 presents results for the six domain scales, with means calculated on the basis of relevant items available for all three time points (averaging agreement with positively worded items and disagreement with negatively worded items, which are denoted “R” in Table 1). Table 3 provides some statistical information about the domain scales based on the 2015 responses, including Cronbach’s Alpha reliabilities and inter-scale correlations. The scales have Alphas ranging from .61 to .81 – suggesting some degree of internal consistency although for University-wide Implementation, Personal Attitude, and Faculty Norms the Alphas are lower than we would like. Personal Attitudes correlate positively with all other scales except Leadership Commitment. Leadership Commitment is strongly correlated with Infrastructure Support and University-wide Implementation ($p < .01$). Infrastructure Support is positively correlated with all of the other scales except Department-level Implementation. Intriguingly, Department-level Implementation is not significantly correlated with University-wide Implementation.

Table 4 reports analyses of domain-level patterns of change over time. Two of the scales achieve statistical significance in one-way analyses of variance. Chairs’ perceptions of faculty norms supportive of assessment have gone up significantly in 2015. Chairs’ perceptions of University-wide implementation went up significantly between 2009 and 2012 and remained at that level in 2015. Looking at patterns over time it is clear that chairs consistently view the value of assessment for their own departments as relatively high and believe infrastructure support for assessment is going steadily up. Significant item-level changes reported above are consistent with those trends, and several item-level analyses in the Infrastructure Support domain also approach significance in the positive direction.

On the contrary, there are some more concerning aspects of the domain-level findings. Leadership Commitment remains the lowest domain score and has continued a downward trend from past administrations. The significant item-level changes within that domain epitomize the negative trend.

We also examined the relationship between the six domain-based scales and the chairs’ perceived stage of institution-wide assessment (item #51) for the 2015 responses. Data for the four stages with responses were used. A stepwise discriminant function analysis (DFA) indicated that Leadership Commitment was clearly playing the dominant role in determining judgment of stage. A single function solution with an Eigenvalue of .736 located Stage 1 and Stage 2 very close together and spread Stage 3 and Stage 4 further along the single dimension (Wilks’ Lambda = .576; $X^2 = 13.52$; $p < .004$; 50.0% of the cases classified correctly). With a more liberal F-to-enter, the first function (Eigenvalue 1.152; canonical correlation of .732, explaining 83.3% of the variance) again featured Leadership Commitment with a loading of .855, followed by Faculty Norms (loading .627). Once more the first two stages were literally on top of each other

with stages 3 and 4 spread out along the first dimension (Wilks' Lambda = .375, $X^2 = 23.05$; $p < .006$; 60.7% of the cases correctly classified).

Qualitative Responses

Qualitative responses to the final open-ended item of the survey are summarized by theme and year of administration in Table 5. There are some shifts over time in the comments, with a bit more recognition of value in 2015, and less concern about technical support after 2009. One theme seems very persistent: the workload burden is a severe impediment, even for those who see value in the work. The sense that the burden is compounded by a sense of its futility does seem to diminish over time. It also appears that there is some positive anticipation of the potential value of assessment: in 2009, it is recognized as an expectation for new programs (an accountability motivation), but by 2015 there is more grasp of the potential for internal use (consistency with faculty values), although that is quickly countered by the frustration with lack of workload offset, recognition, or reward.

Discussion and Action Steps Taken

Using the Results to Prompt Action

The action research purpose for the survey is important to keep in mind as the results are contemplated. The survey design was improved by an early and ongoing relationship with the campus assessment office, which also actively promoted attention to the findings. After each administration, the findings were presented to various decision-making groups in a “good news – bad news” frame. The rationale for the survey was clearly stated: “As an organization developing the capacity to conduct and learn from program-level assessment of student learning outcomes, URI is investing resources and implementing policies for assessment. The survey gives us something with which to benchmark our progress over time and identify strengths and weaknesses in our overall progress. The findings can inform policy and resource allocation decisions as we go forward.”

Limitations

The limitations were acknowledged at the outset, anticipating possible resistance to the findings by some decision-makers. These limitations include: (1) the sample size is small, reflecting our choice of chairs as the population of interest, making statistical significance more difficult to achieve; (2) the response rate is not as high as we would like, though it is not out of line with other similar survey contexts; and (3) the overlap between samples over time presents a statistical issue, and the effort to preserve anonymity in order to increase trustworthiness of responses, as well as the high turnover rate, made it impossible to consider a “repeated measures” approach to analyses of change over time. Thus it is best to consider each year’s quantitative results as a cross-sectional snapshot of what a majority of chairs thought at that time, with the qualitative comments as a “triangulating” set of evidence.

Good News – Bad News

The “good news” we presented included the high level of chairs’ own reported valuing of assessment, which remained the highest domain scale score across all three time points, with department-level implementation remaining second highest. Infrastructure support, including

things like faculty training, models for what is expected in reports, clear policies for reporting, an office providing many forms of assistance, and a helpful website, is the third highest domain and shows a steady positive trend over time. We conclude that we appear to be on track for providing what is needed to make assessment both feasible and useful.

Chairs' view that faculty norms are supportive of assessment made a significant upward jump in the 2015 results. More chairs agree that faculty value transparency, including open discussion of learning outcomes; fewer agree that their colleagues believe that assessment is unrelated to a concern for student learning or that faculty resist assessment due to fear of negative findings. Agreement that the institution's faculty is committed to the goal of having every student graduate with abilities and values consistent with the mission and strategic plan went up fifteen points between 2009 and 2015. This suggests that chairs see their own colleagues moving toward more acceptance of the necessity of engaging in these activities, and more recognition of the value of doing so.

Our presentation of those positive conclusions treated them as worthy of celebration, but they were followed by some "bad news." Leadership Commitment remains the lowest domain score and has continued a downward trend from past administrations. Significant item-level changes (in deans' support and lack of negative consequences for non-compliance) provide more concrete substantiation of that concern. More administrative tracking (#19) may not be seen as a positive thing if it's just about "bean-counting."

Most dramatic from our standpoint is where Chairs believe the university is in terms of developmental stage of growth in assessment capacity. Stage 2, "External Demand", with administrative leaders requiring faculty compliance to meet that demand, is not what we expected as the modal response. In prior administrations we had not included that final item, believing that we could derive conclusions about stage from the domain scales – but clearly we were wrong, as we had previously placed the university between Stage 3 (tentative commitment) and Stage 4 (full-scale effort), based on the chairs' own positive attitudes, their perceived level of implementation within their own programs, and their perceptions of the improving infrastructure. The DFA helps with understanding what's going on: leadership commitment is the most powerful indicator for chairs of whether the institution is really moving toward an assessment system that is internally valued at all levels. The qualitative responses, although from a small subset of the respondents, amplify the level of frustration with administrative leadership. Infrastructure enables but does not motivate. The demand is increasingly clear, but the commitment is not.

All of those findings were presented in a series of decision-making contexts: first within the university's assessment office, where some thoughts about possible recommendations were generated; then to the university-wide assessment committee with representation from both administration and faculty; later as one part of an agenda for a series of meetings arranged by assessment office staff with each college dean; and finally to the "Deans' Council," which is chaired by the Provost. Formats for presentation varied. The assessment office collaborated in data analysis from the outset. The authors engaged the university assessment committee in an active discussion, with graphic presentation of major quantitative results, the qualitative comments, and skeletal recommendations used to stimulate ideas for new policies and

practices. The deans and provost got the “elevator talk” bullets, also with few recommendations and an attempt to generate ideas for next steps. After all of those presentations, a final complete report with more detailed recommendations went back to the chairs themselves.

Actions Taken

First, we believe that the survey itself was an intervention into the understandings of chairs regarding assessment – making available resources salient and portraying potential for internal value. However, most of the tangible changes we can point to were generated by the university assessment committee, whose deliberations led to (1) an annual recognition event honoring assessment reports that meet specified peer-review criteria; (2) agreement on the need to offer peer models showing how assessment can be both meaningful (internally useful) and manageable (feasible with limited resources); and (3) greater emphasis on assessment reporting and use in the cyclic academic program review process, which provides an opportunity for departments to negotiate for resources and demonstrate their accomplishments. In one large college the dean’s recognition of the survey’s implications led to internal restructuring to enhance administrative focus on supporting and tracking departmental assessment activities. Two complements to the survey release process have bolstered its impact. One is a change in assessment policy to reduce the reporting burden for degree programs with their own accreditation reporting requirements. The other is the developing plan for assessing a new general education program (the one campus-wide requirement where learning outcomes are important). The assessment needs for that new program are driving a new set of resources and training activities, new technical advances in data management for assessment, and rapidly expanding faculty awareness of how assessment “works.” It remains to be seen, however, whether the leadership for this transformation is able to emphasize “learning culture” over “accountability culture.”

Conceptual Implications of the Findings: Stage Progression

Having put an intensive amount of effort into developing assessment policies, necessary governance structure, a variety of training opportunities and on-line resources, and various kinds of incentives (e.g., mini-grants, off-campus conference attendance), it is not surprising that the leaders of campus assessment (both faculty and administrative) would expect “infrastructure support” to give chairs a sense of the remarkable progress the University is making. However, our results confirm what others have found before us: leadership and campus culture provide the impetus for integrating assessment into a meaningful process of program improvement. Taylor-Ritzler et al (2013) contrast individual capacity building with institutional leadership and organizational culture, showing that in their data individual factors only have influence via the mediating role of those organizational factors. In the higher education context, Kezar’s (2013) review finds “organizational culture” and “leadership” to be consistently recognized as primary sources of constraint and facilitation, followed by “organizational policies, practices, and structures.” Her discussion of campus culture acknowledges but also reflects the confusion in the literature about what these terms mean, making “clarity and commitment of leadership” a force for transforming culture. Thus leaders seem to have the pervasive means to influence the assessment process.

As previously noted, one of the helpful aspects of a stage perspective is that it allows for identifying differing capacity-building strategies as most effective in different stages. As the university studied in this case example seems to be “stuck” despite notable progress on faculty attitudes and infrastructure to support assessment, it may help to consider if differing emphases might help it to move at this point. We have local evidence from several years of peer-reviewed assessment reports showing that most degree programs are now compliant with requirements and doing a reasonable job of meeting them (Finan, Stevenson, Monteiro, & Martel, 2015). However, the Climate Survey adds some key stakeholder perspective on how the process is perceived, the extent of true integration into decision-making, and the perceived barriers. The qualitative comments are especially telling for the frustration with a mandate without a real value. And yet the value seems obvious to evaluators: programs are routinely learning from their students about what is working well (and can be celebrated) and what isn’t (and calls for some experimenting with altered pedagogy and/or curriculum). Evaluative thinking in the form of “curriculum maps” that link program requirements to intended learning outcomes drive the assessment process. Perhaps the early emphasis on infrastructure development, policies, and training have moved the accountability mandate forward (to Stage 2/3) at the expense of a recognition that the purpose is truly aligned with what faculty themselves value. As we know from other evaluation contexts, evaluators may see “empowerment” where those who are doing the work see “exploitation” (Stevenson, Mitchell, & Florin, 1996).

What can get things past that developmental impasse, to Stages 4 and 5? Cain & Hutchings (2015, p. 96) advocate paying close attention to “how assessment is talked about” and linked to faculty values and expertise. Fuller & Skidmore’s (2014) “Connection to Change” factor seems especially relevant for our predicament, and the earlier framing by Angelo (1999) makes shared motivation and shared language essential pillars for the transformation process. Owczarzak et al (2016) and Jonson et al (2014) warn of the dangers of leadership focus on accountability, and Leviton (2014) questions whether leaders always share evaluators’ rosy view of the value of “evaluative thinking.” Owczarzak et al (2016) also offer some helpful suggestions for progress that can have relevance for the higher education context, including the use of peer-nominated experts to provide ongoing consulting, and accessible qualitative narratives documenting how assessment can work for departments. An important point made by several authors including Kezar (2013) is that faculty leaders are as important as administrative leaders. Respected peers can influence the perception of norms, and provide models for positive use. Our survey could have done more to explore that aspect of leadership. The challenges of workload burden reduction and staff turnover (especially in key roles like chair) remain more difficult to address.

Conclusions

From the chairs’ perspective, it is not faculty acceptance nor even the enabling infrastructure that is most important for determining how close we are to a fully realized assessment culture – it is the communicated support from administrative leaders and their commitment to motivate assessment as an internally useful process that are the key to a sustained quality-improvement system. Interventions targeting competencies are needed on a continuing basis but they will not lead to the desired goal without clear messages and incentives from leaders. Heed Leviton (2014): understand what top managers believe about the value of assessment, and watch out

for the distorting effects of an accountability culture. Getting from grudging compliance to enlightened conversation takes leadership that believes in transparency, learning from evidence, and collaboration.

We view our measure as a means to the end of moving the developmental process along, and have attempted to leverage the results via the policy-making channels of the institution. Campus assessment policies are now moving from efforts to clarify expectations, provide training and consultation, and establish peer review feedback, toward greater recognition for success, models for good practice, and now academic program review policy, which has resource implications for departments and aligns departmental objectives with the college and university mission. Promotion of collegial conversations informed by data as well as values, leading to creative insights regarding pedagogy and curriculum remains our aspiration, and may best be served by the recruitment of more highly respected faculty leaders. Genuine enthusiasm for the effort involved will also take a broader initiative to enhance transparency, trust, and confidence that contributions to assessment will be recognized, rewarded, and respected as time-consuming professional achievements.

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Table 1. Building a Culture of Assessment: Developmental Stages

Stage 1: Denial	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “No one really cares about this and we all have more important things to do; it’s a passing fad.”
Stage 2: External Demand	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration: “We have to!”
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty: “<u>You</u> have to!” (denial still rampant for faculty)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear/defensiveness
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top-down pressure reduces sense of intrinsic value, “buy-in”
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few resources of any kind devoted to assessment (workload recognition, faculty time, direct funding, staff time, technology (portfolio, web, IR, etc.), training in skills, supportive administrative structures)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty concern about trivialization of learning (reductionist, privileges surface learning, factory model, consumer model) – both genuine and defensive
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrators starting to send faculty to conferences, consider needs, build capacity
Stage 3: Tentative Commitment	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early adopters on board (administrators and faculty)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong leadership at the administrative level (key person)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial internal structures (faculty advisory committee, staff resource)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First round public statement of learning objectives by programs is initiated
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few faculty accepting responsibility, working with administrators
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accredited programs ready to go
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity-building (e.g., conferences, workshops) starting to pay off; more awareness of non-trivializing approaches to assessment
Stage 4: Full-scale Effort	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear expectations and incentives at the program level – uniform, visible, insistent
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular monitoring of assessment progress by program, department, college, university
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive rewards for “completing the loop,” recognizing needed improvements and acting on that recognition
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical mass of faculty and chairs accept necessity
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing recognition of potential pedagogical value of the process (intrinsic motivation)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formalization of support structures and decision-making structures with necessary resources
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Models available, peer support and mentoring built in
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention to ways of incorporating into strategic planning, aligning with overall mission and vision of the institution, connecting to college deans’ concerns
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web visibility at department, college, and university levels
Stage 5: Maintenance and Refinement	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Late adopters and resisters targeted
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mature resources and structures allow longitudinal tracking of outcomes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pioneers ready for more sophisticated efforts at alignment, taking risks in questioning the premises in their learning outcomes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership at every level sees the genuine value and is committed to providing the resources on a stable basis

Table 2. Assessment Climate Survey Items and Results

Instructions: Please answer each question by clicking on the appropriate response. Where you are unsure of an answer, please provide your own impression. In this survey, the term “assessment” is used to refer to the series of steps in defining and measuring students’ learning outcomes in order to draw useful conclusions about the effectiveness of educational programs (e.g. majors) in achieving their intended outcomes and to act on those conclusions. In this context these “learning outcomes” would be defined at the program level, and be measured in ways that reflect the program faculty’s intentions.

Items in Domains	Mean Agreement ³		
	2009	2012	2015
Sample size (N=)	30	35	28
I. Personal attitude toward assessment			
1. Assessment of learning outcomes for our majors is very important.	3.90	3.69	3.46
2. Assessment of learning outcomes does not yield useful results. (R) ⁴			2.64
3. General education outcome objectives are complementary to our objectives for the major.	3.20	3.58	3.43
4. Assessment should be the job of the administration, not the faculty. (R)	2.77	2.60	2.32
5. Assessment of student learning outcomes is here to stay.	3.80	3.40	3.75
6. We faculty need to keep checking ourselves to improve the chances that our students graduate with the skills and attitudes we believe they need.	4.17	3.89	4.36

³ Ratings are from 1 (=strongly disagree) to 5 (=strongly agree). Superscript letters (a, b, c) are used to indicate significant differences ($p < .05$ 2-tailed) between means across years.

⁴ Reverse-keyed items for scoring the domain scales.

II. Institution-wide faculty norms			
7. Most departments here are now taking assessment seriously.	2.93	3.19	3.04
8. Most faculty on this campus believe assessment is unrelated to genuine concern for student learning. (R)	3.52	3.69	3.29
9. Many faculty resist assessment because they fear negative assessment findings that could damage individuals or programs. (R)	3.67 ^a	3.53 ^a	2.64 ^b
10. At this institution, faculty highly value transparency, including open disclosure of our students' learning outcomes.	2.70 ^a	2.69 ^a	3.29 ^b
11. The faculty at this institution are committed to the goal of having every student at the university graduate with abilities and values consistent with our university's mission and strategic plan.	3.40	3.37	3.61
12. At this institution, assessment of student learning outcomes has become a highly valued, consistently practiced, aspect of our culture.	2.33	2.17	2.29
III. Leadership commitment			
13. The administration supports assessment, from the Provost on down.	3.17	3.03	2.96
14. Our college dean/associate dean recognizes and supports the value of assessment.	4.07 ^a	3.72	3.36 ^b
15. Our college dean/associate dean discusses our departmental assessment reports with us.			2.46
16. There are no rewards or incentives for chairs or program directors participating in assessment. (R)	4.07	4.42	4.32
17. There are no incentives for faculty to participate in assessment (e.g. annual review recognition). (R)	4.00	4.50	4.07
18. There are few administration-provided resources for assessment. (R)	4.00	4.17	3.75
19. The administration keeps track of programs' assessment activities and results.	2.07 ^a	1.92 ^a	2.79 ^b

20. Adequate time is provided for those who are asked to do the work of assessment.	2.97	3.43	2.43
21. Programs that excel at assessment are formally recognized at the institution-wide level.			3.14
22. Departments that choose not to assess their programs will experience negative consequences.	3.62 ^a	3.44 ^a	2.07 ^b
IV. Infrastructure support			
23. Faculty and chairs have easily accessible opportunities to learn about how to conduct useful assessment.	2.73	2.89	3.00
24. Expectations for what is to be done and reported for program assessment are clear.	2.33	2.47	2.61
25. A clear policy for a 2-year cycle of assessment reporting is now in place.		3.17	3.36
26. There is adequate training provided for those who are asked to do the work of assessment.	2.17	2.53	2.79
27. There are models for what is expected in an assessment report.	2.79	2.86	3.29
28. The two-year reporting cycle works well for my department.		2.75	2.32
29. Departments receive useful feedback on our assessment reports.		2.94	2.61
30. There is an office on campus that provides assistance of many kinds for assessment.	3.40	3.92	3.86
31. There is a helpful website on campus addressing assessment progress and expectations.	2.93	3.25	3.50
32. There is a policy-setting committee to guide assessment on this campus.	3.10	3.58	3.36
V. Department-level implementation			
33. My department has workable assessment plan(s) for our undergraduate program(s).	4.04 ^a	3.08 ^a	3.71 ^b

34. My department has workable assessment plan(s) for our graduate degree program(s). (Please skip if not applicable for your department.)		2.54 ^a	3.57 ^b
35. Our majors are aware of our department's learning objectives.	3.33	3.09	2.71
36. My department has conducted and reported one or more rounds of assessing learning outcomes for our undergraduate major(s).	4.00	4.37	4.11
37. My department has conducted and reported one or more rounds of assessing learning outcomes for our graduate major(s). (Please skip if not applicable for your department.)			3.43
38. My department uses assessment results in strategic planning.	3.40	3.06	2.86
39. Faculty in my department have discussions about our students and our hopes for them in the context of assessment.	3.27	3.17	3.29
40. My department has changed our curriculum design (requirements, courses, course content, etc.) in response to assessment results.	3.57	3.00	2.96
41. My department has made changes in how courses are taught (pedagogy) and what is covered in them on the basis of assessment results.			3.04
VI. University-wide implementation			
42. A majority of <u>undergraduate</u> majors across the campus have now gone through at least one cycle of assessment to reporting to program revision (sometimes termed "closing the loop").	3.03 ^a	3.56 ^b	3.44
43. A majority of <u>graduate</u> majors across the campus have now gone through at least one cycle of assessment – reporting - program revision.			3.28
44. Departments share ideas with other departments/programs for meaningful, manageable assessment.			2.18
45. Strategic planning at the university level uses assessment results.	2.36	2.77	2.50
46. Learning outcomes for degree programs are aligned with the broader missions of colleges and the institution.			3.07

47. University-wide objectives for students' learning outcomes are specified, measured, and reported on a regular basis.	2.10 ^a	2.51	2.71 ^b
48. Our general education program has clear, measurable outcome objectives.	2.41	2.51	2.50
49. General education addresses important learning goals at this institution.		3.59	3.11
50. My department is willing to contribute to the assessment of general education.		2.97	3.18

51. In which stage in the development of learning outcomes assessment would you judge that URI is?

Denial ("It's a passing fad"): 3.6%

External Demand ("Administration says we must; we say give us time and resources or do it yourselves!"): 50.0%

Tentative Commitment ("Leaders are committed; some of us are ready to follow"): 39.3%

Full-scale Effort (A critical mass accept the necessity; policies and resources are in place to help): 7.1%

Maintenance and Refinement ("We see the value and regularly use the results at all organizational levels"): 0.0%

52. This survey was previously administered to department chairs/directors in October 2009 and October 2012.

Do you believe you took the survey at that time [either of those times]?

	Yes	Not Sure	No
2012	25.7%	17.1%	57.1%
2015	17.9%	35.7%	46.4%

Table 3. Assessment Climate Domain Scale Properties and Correlations for 2015 Sample (N=28)

2015 Scale		No. of Items	Mean	S.D.	Alpha	Inter-scale Correlations				
						FN	LC	IS	DI	UI
PA	Personal Attitude toward Assessment	6	3.34	.674	.694	.590**	.353	.523**	.538**	.555**
FN	Faculty Norms	6	2.71	.561	.677	-	.231	.432*	.354	.277
LC	Leadership Commitment	10	2.21	.555	.747		-	.532**	.097	.529**
IS	Infrastructure Support for Assessment	10	3.07	.554	.814			-	.204	.505**
DI	Department-level Implementation	9	3.29	.726	.785				-	.144
UI	University-wide Implementation	8	2.84	.442	.613					-

* p<.05

** p<.01

Table 4. Significance of Domain Scale Change over Time

Scale	Mean Agreement*			F	df	p<
	2009	2012	2015			
Personal Attitude toward Assessment	3.57	3.40	3.54	.501	91	n.s.
Faculty Norms	2.37	2.36	2.71	3.94	91	.023
Leadership Commitment	2.35	2.17	2.06	1.98	91	n.s.
Infrastructure Support for Assessment	2.78	3.08	3.20	2.22	91	n.s.
Department-level Implementation	3.51	3.29	3.27	.891	91	n.s.
University-wide Implementation	2.49	2.87	2.78	3.98	91	.022

*Calculated for items included at all 3 time points.

Table 5. Themes from Open-ended Responses

Theme	Illustrative Quotations
Year 5: 2015	
1) Workload burden	<p><i>"The primary obstacle for those of us who would embrace assessment is time. We are all strapped and over committed without adequate workload release allowing to us to learn how to do this and then carry it out."</i></p> <p><i>"We are denied workload time or additional staff."</i></p>
2) Consistent with values	<p><i>"We have gone from 'why should we? ... the administration never uses the results', to understanding that the feedback could be informative for us"</i></p> <p><i>"... we would value the feedback [which] would be very helpful in assisting us to improve teaching"</i></p>
3) Antagonistic to values	<p><i>"We do assessment because we are told we must do it. Most faculty believe our time and resources are better spent actually teaching, advising, learning."</i></p> <p><i>[This is a] "corporate institution run by bean counters"</i></p>
4) Accredited programs should get a break	<p><i>"The university must recognize programs that already have rigorous external accreditation, and not duplicate requirements internal for these programs."</i></p>

Year 3: 2012	
1) Workload burden without benefit	<p><i>"... most faculty I have contact with consider assessment as being promulgated and practiced at URI to be an incomprehensible and onerous activity that wastes our time and energy without having a genuine impact on what and how we teach."</i></p> <p><i>"The primary problem is that faculty do not have the time to design, conduct, track, and interpret these assessments."</i></p>
1) Antagonistic to values	<p><i>"... we are overstretched already, and spending time on this administrative activity, which feels largely driven by motive and jargon that we do not choose, understand or feel relates to our field gets in the way of us doing our real job: teaching and research."</i></p> <p><i>"... I consider it a joke and a fraud perpetuated by politicians and administrators with little actual value. It impinges upon faculty governance, demeans faculty and treats us like children. We do it to keep the suits happy- but we minimize its impact on us. No one wants to do it and we do the minimum necessary to get a stamp of approval from whatever useless agency is currently overseeing the process."</i></p> <p><i>"... costly and unnecessary process"</i></p> <p><i>"I think that outcomes assessment as practiced at URI, with top down mandates and no funding to support the actual assessment process at the department level besides small mini-grants, will not result in useful data that guides improvements in student learning."</i></p> <p><i>[lacks] "genuine impact"</i></p>
3) Inadequate help	<p><i>"... university does not provide the resources – invalidates the reason for doing them"</i></p> <p><i>"... poorly planned, instituted, and managed"</i></p>

Year 1: 2009	
1) Workload burden without benefit	<p><i>"...Those of us who do it, get NOTHING from the administration for our efforts -- no reward, no recognition. We do it for the students, and most of the time we do it for free on top of our already back-breaking loads. We do it because we believe it does matter, despite the signals sent to us by the administration."</i></p> <p><i>"[Top administration leaders have] not once mentioned student learning outcomes, nor [have they] indicated that assessment matters at all to [them]."</i></p> <p><i>"... faculty have not been socialized into recognizing its importance..."</i></p> <p><i>"I am not really convinced that a good assessment tool (better than the grades that we assign or the success our students achieve by the jobs they attain) has been produced."</i></p> <p><i>"... faculty have had neither time nor energy nor will nor incentive..."</i></p> <p><i>"... the lack of perceived consequences for not doing assessment is a key factor..."</i></p>
2) Inadequate help	<p><i>"... we should be given a specific timetable [and] should be able to invite someone from the assessment office to give a workshop..."</i></p> <p><i>[We are] not shown a straightforward way to conduct it, either by example or training ..."</i></p>
3) Positive value	<p><i>"I have noticed that every proposal that has to go through channels here at URI needs to include assessment in the justifications for request. So, I know it is important."</i></p> <p><i>"...Developing and distributing an expectation and outcomes set of statements is valuable for all departments ..."</i></p>

Figure 1. Assessment Climate Survey: Responses to Question 51

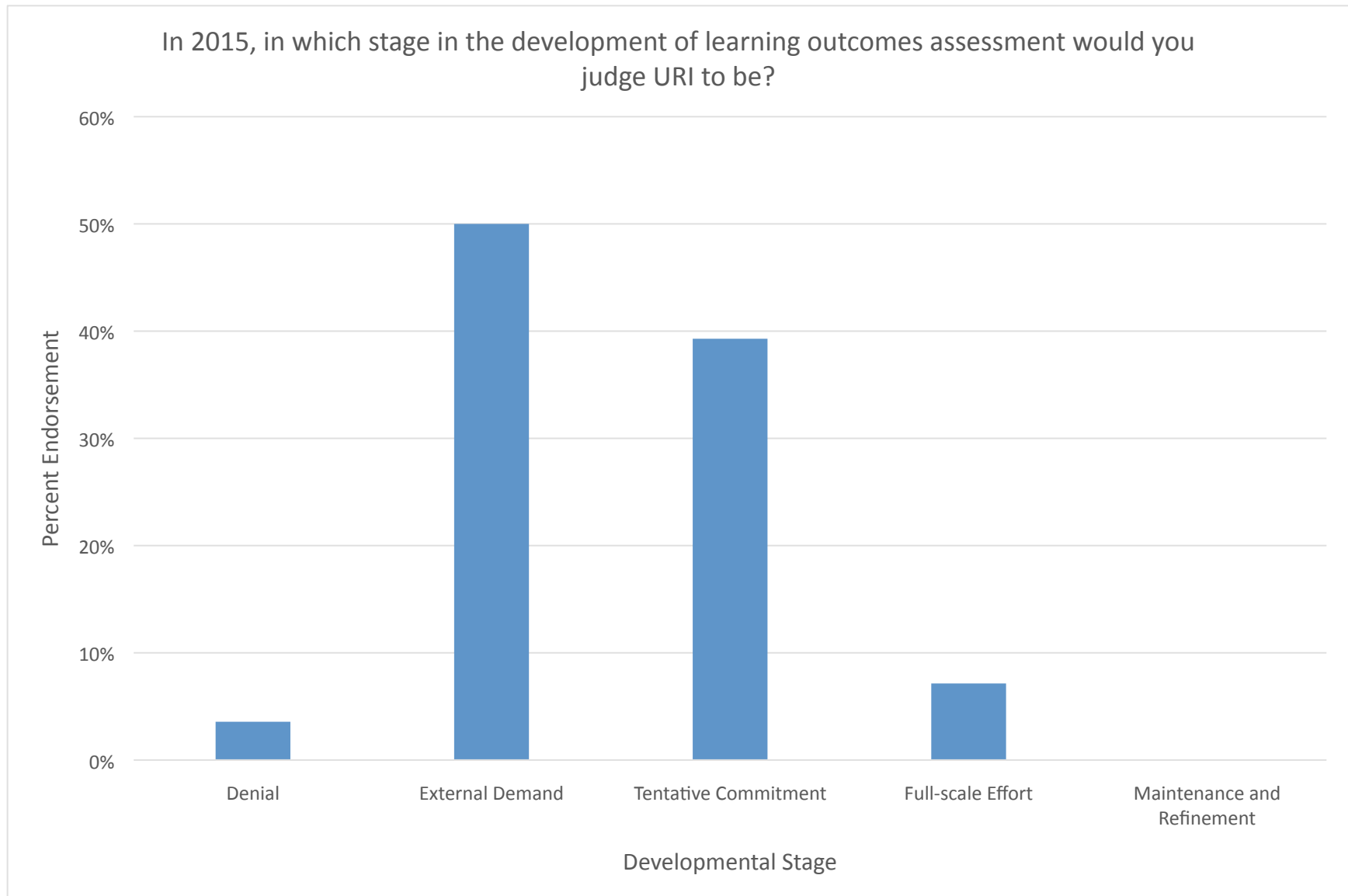


Figure 2. Assessment Climate Survey Domain Scale Averages: 2009, 2012, 2015

