Featured School:

James Madison University
College of Business
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The Center for Assessment and Research Studies

James Madison University (JMU)'s College of Business has benefitted from the scientific measurement of student learning and performance through a series of assessment designs and instruments developed through collaboration of College of Business (COB) faculty with faculty in the Center for Assessment and Research Studies (CARS). Since the center's formation in 1986, CARS has been a critical player in the school's assessment activities. CARS has played an integral role by providing consultation, assistance with development of tools, analyses, and reports to elevate the school's overall assessment presence, accuracy, and utility.

According to CARS, assessment of student learning follows a six-step cyclical process, as detailed in Figure 1.¹ These steps are development of student learning objectives, assessment design, data collection, data analysis, reporting of results, and use of results. Using this process in close collaboration with COB faculty, a rich and informative assessment design has been developed.

Despite being a distinct entity and not housed within the COB, the COB works closely with CARS to improve assurance of learning practices within the college. Dr. Matthew Rutherford, JMU Associate Professor and COB Core Curriculum and Assurance of Learning Coordinator, remarks that, "while CARS provides valuable feedback and support to the COB, COB faculty are responsible for conducting all assurance of learning activities." He continues, "COB faculty members are tasked with developing our learning objectives, collecting and analyzing the assessment data, and developing strategies aimed at future improvement of student learning outcomes."

"Based on annual assessment reports prepared by the BBA core as well by as each major, CARS provides the COB with formal written feedback and a numerical rating of our assessment practices each year," notes Dr. Matthew Rutherford. As such, CARS assists with the assessment of the effectiveness of the COB's AoL practices. CARS and the COB are thus collaborative partners in assessment.

Origins of the Center

Prior to the center's launch, JMU received state funding to explore assessment and accountability. Four different assessment models employed at other universities were examined by a JMU Task Force. After

¹ The figure details the six-step cyclical process as follows:
- **Program Objectives**: Establishing the goals and expectations.
- **Assessment Design**: Planning and structuring the assessment methods.
- **Collect Data**: Gathering the necessary data.
- **Analyze Data**: Interpreting the collected data.
- **Report Results**: Communicating the findings and conclusions.
- **Use Results**: Implementing changes based on the assessment outcomes.

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testing these models, the group recommended an assessment office be founded and a full-time assessment director should be hired. This group served as the search committee for JMU’s first assessment director.

In 1986, JMU hired Dr. T. Dary Erwin, Director of the office known then as the Office of Student Assessment. Thus, assessment at JMU began with just two personnel – a director and a secretary. In 1997, this office was renamed to the Center for Assessment and Research Studies. Now, the center boasts 10 faculty members, 2 full-time administrative assistants, and over 20 graduate student assistants. The center’s primary function is to act as JMU’s full-time assessment consultant, serving all academic majors, certificate programs, general education and student affairs programs that have stated and explicit student learning outcomes.

CARS has had several reporting structures since its inception. In the past, CARS has reported directly to the Provost and the Vice-Provost for Research and Public Service. Today, CARS reports directly to the Dean of University Studies.

Assessment Innovation

It is important for all assessment methods to align with student learning outcomes. To this end, over ninety percent of the assessment instruments used at James Madison have been developed by faculty within JMU, tailored to target those specific outcomes. With a combination of instrument development expertise and collaboration with subject matter experts (largely the faculty), CARS has been able to effectively build out a series of tools which can efficiently assess student learning in a variety of ways.

Mr. David Yang, a CARS Administrative and Professional faculty member, working with Dr. Keston Fulcher, an instructional faculty member and Associate Director of CARS, designed and coded the software application used at JMU, in conjunction with the school’s Assessment Progress Template (APT), to create an innovative new means of measurement. This software is digital, and allows for the school to analyze the quality of assessment practice with a level of precision that had previously been challenging, if not impossible, to achieve.

For the past four years, JMU has been utilizing this software to enhance the school’s assessment process. The software application allows all academic majors’ assessment coordinators to submit their assessment reports online. These reports are submitted in a standardized format that parallels the assessment process displayed earlier in Figure 1. After report submission, faculty raters from across the university are nominated by their Deans. These raters are trained to evaluate the APT reports using JMU’s APT rubric, which provides a stable and meaningful metric. All ratings are entered into the software program, and the software populates the database. This data can be aggregated and disaggregated to
provide useful information about the quality of assessment practice at four distinct levels: university, college, department, and individual academic major.

Since implementing this software, current CARS Director Dr. Donna Sundre has noted a marked improvement in assessment scores across the University. JMU faculty have now established an average APT program rating they consider exemplary. After the first year, one program earned the rating of exemplary. The following year, 11 programs were rated exemplary, and in the third year, 30 programs achieved this standard. During the 2011-2012 year, 46 of JMU's 110 participating programs achieved exemplary status.

To make this data more accessible to campus leaders, CARS developed a dashboard window into the assessment scores, called the "dean's view." This view was piloted by Robert Reid, then dean of JMU's College of Business and now AACSB's Chief Accreditation Officer. Through this view, JMU's deans can review all academic programs for their particular college at a glance. "Now with these new tools, the deans can finally put their arms around the practice," Dr. Sundre remarks. Having quick access to assessment scores at the college, department and program level creates a more transparent environment for each college's assessment goals. The university and colleges recognize those programs with exemplary status. For those programs that receive lower scores because they are new or lack assessment expertise, JMU offers development opportunities. For example, representatives from such programs are paid to engage in assessment fellowships. In these fellowships, faculty members work with CARS, for four weeks, to accomplish particular assessment projects. While proud of the progress, Dr. Sundre notes that there is still more to do to improve program assessment quality.

The COB is in a unique position in that the core curriculum is submitted through a separate report, apart from the majors, and is subject to its own ratings. Essentially, CARS treats the core in the COB as its own major, and as a separate entity. This is done at the specific request of JMU's College of Business. Dr. Sundre notes that "because there are explicit student learning outcomes that are shared across the disciplines during the initial core course work, having it separated in this way made sense."

One of the comparative strengths of JMU's assessment program, according to Dr. Rutherford, is that assessment is done in nearly all of the 14 BBA core courses. Dr. Rutherford comments that, "I believe that many schools have one person who collects and analyzes the data and that data is often collected in
only one or two courses. I think that having so many of our faculty involved in assessment has benefited us tremendously."

**Funding CARS**

CARS is primarily funded by JMU itself, with the University paying for all of the faculty and administrators, along with their operating costs. CARS does have an indirect source of cost recovery, however, through sales of their instruments and tests via Madison Assessment, LLC. Madison Assessment, LLC, a separate entity, markets and sells the assessment instruments released to them by JMU and CARS. Located in Boulder, Colorado, Madison Assessment, LLC was spun out of James Madison Innovations, a non-profit corporation established in 2009 to bring intellectual property produced at JMU into the commercial sector. The tools sold have been used by schools and individuals in Japan, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and across the United States.³

**Additional Services**

The Program Assessment Support Service (PASS) is a companion service offered through the center. PASS is an office that is largely supported by doctoral and graduate students with supervision provided by CARS Associate Director, Dr. Keston Fulcher. PASS supports all of the academic degree granting aspects at JMU by providing assessment support services. This dedicated component of CARS acts much like a statistical consultancy center, where departments concerned about improving their assessment outcomes can come for assistance and guidance. PASS uses the cycle depicted in Figure 2 when working with their clients.⁴ Much like the more general assessment process model in Figure 1, PASS’s continuous cycle for assessment review is an ongoing process with no defining end point. This reinforces CARS’s standpoint on assessment as a continuous process.⁵

In addition to PASS, CARS also coordinates a doctoral program in Assessment and Measurement. Only three of the courses are taught by faculty not affiliated with the center. CARS forms the core of this program which launched in 1998 with its first graduate in 2001. There are now 35 graduates from this doctoral program. The doctoral program admits three to five full-time students each year. The program emphasizes quantitative psychology and real-world application in higher education. The program is consequently also very hands-on, with practical material forming a key component of the curriculum. Additionally, CARS offers an online certificate program, the Higher Education Assessment Specialist
Graduate Certificate, which admits a dozen students each year. This online program is designed to provide cutting-edge information regarding the latest assessment practices in higher education, so that students may apply these practices to their own institution.6

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End Notes


