The Semester Student/Faculty Meeting: A Simple Indirect Assessment Instrument that Works

Richard R. Schultz
Associate Professor & Chair, Electrical Engineering

Starting at Noon on Wednesday, November 1st, the Department of Electrical Engineering held a one-hour Student/Faculty Meeting in Harrington Hall Room 324 to discuss student issues and concerns. This meeting takes place once each semester, generally near the midterm, so that the students can speak frankly about their education and the faculty can share new initiatives. Although the concept is incredibly simple, this indirect assessment instrument probably has the highest impact on our overall program at the undergraduate and graduate levels with respect to continuous quality improvement and closing the loop on our assessment plans.

The meeting is always run by the IEEE Student Chapter President, who is electrical engineering senior Brian Berseth this school year. The Institute of Electrical & Electronics Engineers is the main professional society for practicing electrical engineers and students, as well as a very active student chapter within the School of Engineering & Mines here at UND. Typically, juniors, seniors, and graduate students attend this meeting every semester, although all students are invited. We try our best to include freshmen and sophomores, but unfortunately they do not feel as connected to the program as our upper-division students. Attendance is always very good, since the department alumni funds buy pizza or submarine sandwiches for everyone in the room. The meeting opens with comments by the IEEE Student Chapter President, and then an open forum is facilitated by the department chair. From these relatively informal discussions with students over the past decade, the electrical engineering faculty members have learned a great deal about where we have problems with the curriculum and academic advising. Additionally, we have learned that our students care very deeply about the quality of their program, that they truly enjoy being challenged, and that they respect us for listening to and acting on their concerns.

This meeting provides us with a chance to communicate all sorts of items to the students face-to-face, without the impersonal tone of electronic mail. For example, we briefly discussed our mission statement, program educational objectives, and program learning outcomes with the students on November 1st, and then asked for undergraduate student volunteers to form a small focus group to study our assessment plan in-depth in preparation for our next B.S.E.E. accreditation site visit by the Engineering Accreditation Commission of ABET in the fall of 2009. The students are not shy – they let us know that we don’t always directly communicate important issues to them. For example, we encourage our students to take the Fundamentals of Engineering Exam, in order to prepare for professional licensure in the future. During this last meeting, some of our students mentioned that they believed they were required to take this exam to graduate, but we ensured them that this simply was not true.

“Closing the loop” is always a challenge in educational program assessment, but we have a number of documented cases of positive changes that have taken place due to these meetings from our archived meeting notes. We have made changes to our required and elective course offerings through the years, based on student feedback. For example, we have modified our basic
science requirements for the B.S.E.E. degree to reflect modern electrical engineering practice that our cooperative education students have experienced in industry. We have updated test equipment in our laboratories, and even converted lab space to an EE Student Study Lounge based on their requests. On November 1st, we heard that the students were interested in changing the time on one of the required courses in the 2007 spring semester because of a conflict with another department’s course offerings. This change was made before the first day of online registration (thankfully!) – most likely, we would have never known that the original time would not have worked without this meeting. The students mentioned that they would like to have wireless access to the Internet throughout the engineering complex of Upson I, Upson II, and Harrington Halls, and we have started working on this in the college. Through the years, we have updated computer-aided design software on our server based on their recommendations, and even fixed a bathroom in Harrington Hall!

Our suggestion: try this indirect assessment instrument for yourself. Invite all of your students, order enough pizza and pop, and let them talk. Be open to their ideas and their complaints – after all, their perception of your program is their reality. Take notes, and after the meeting, talk over the issues with your faculty. Take actions that are both appropriate and beneficial. What our electrical engineering faculty members have found is that our students trust us, because we do what we say we are going to do. They look at us as partners in their education, and we use their feedback to make positive changes in our curriculum, facilities, and overall program offerings.