SACSCOC (STILL) MATTERS:
An ongoing column addressing compliance issues

IE: PEConomics and PIgonomics

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For the October 15th, 2016, Faculty Retreat presentation, Dr. Wiljanen, Director of Institutional Research, and I presented on the topic of PEConomics. “PEConomics:” it is a term of my own invention that lexicographers might describe as having an idiosyncratic or Pickwickian, non-literate semantic value. Like Humpty Dumpty to Alice in Behind the Looking Glass, “When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” “PEConomics” is similar to other recently coined terms using the – “nomics” lexeme, such as, Reaganomics (1981), Wikinomics (2007) and Cinderellanomics. Accordingly, I use PEConomics to refer to management of the PECC’s IE processes and its associated body of knowledge. PEConomics describes the PECC’s systematic and integrative assessment oversight processes which also models both microPEConomics (that is: smaller or more circumscribed microassessment criteria that do not change from one annual assessment cycle to another, such as: departmental missions) and macroPEConomics (that is: larger or more global macroassessment criteria that change from one annual assessment cycle to another, such as: a department’s current analyses of outcomes). Perhaps, better terms to describe the changeability of these criteria would, respectively, be: stably (no change) and labile (changing), but then I could not indulge in the pleasure of the extended conceit modeled upon the original term.

Now for a little history related to the evolution of PEConomics as an SU IE strategy: after Sullivan’s 2005 reaffirmation review, the SACSCOC onsite committee indicated that Sullivan University assessed virtually all aspects of its operations, but that overall institutional effectiveness efforts were backward-rather-than-forward-looking and lacked planning and coordination. In response to this critique, I worked with Dr. Coppock to develop the PECC in 2006. Regarding the backward-rather-than-forward-looking critique, in his September 2011 NILOA white paper, Gaining Ground: The Role of Institutional Research in Assessing Student Out-
comes and Demonstrating Institutional Effectiveness, Dr. JF Volkwein, policy analyst and organizational effectiveness expert, articulated what he refers to as the “Janusian challenge” of looking two directions: internally and externally. Janus was the Roman god that had two faces. Obviously, to “close the loop” on one assessment cycle’s data-driven improvements, department must look backwards while also looking forward. SACSCOC requires that evaluation processes must be “ongoing.” For compliance, moreover, SACSCOC typically requires 3 years of evidentiary longitudinal data. In juxtaposition to Dr. Volkwein’s “Janusian challenge,” I perceive IE as an ever-changing and infinitely organic Heraclitean river: around 500 B.C, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously asserted that, “no one can step in the same river twice.” Again, that is why the IE HOW, and its processflow and architectonic systemization of knowledge, are so very important. To this point: in 2011, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa published a bombshell book, Academically Adrift, that indicted the quality of higher education. Interestingly, in his introduction to Richard Arum’s more recent 2016 book, Improving Quality in American Higher Education: Learning Outcomes and Assessments for the 21st Century, Ira Katznelson indicates that “We live in an age of metrics. With measurement everywhere, critical questions concern not whether, but how to gauge and evaluate.” That simple three-letter word, "HOW," which presumes a method or process, is all important as I have suggested. In just a moment, I will parse the implicit distinctions between the HOW and the WHAT of SACSCOC’s assessment processes. After our 2005 SACSCOC decennial reaffirmation review, we were confronted with Katznelson’s situation, “how to gauge and evaluate,” particularly regarding better compliance to the key institutional effectiveness CR 2.5 and CS 3.3.1 standards.

So, down to brass tacks: what is institutional effectiveness? As noted a moment ago, SACSCOC defines institutional effectiveness as “the systematic, explicit, and documented process of measuring performance against mission in all aspects of an institution” (2012b, 115). The measurement of performance against mission is the basis for the PECC emphasizing department-to-institution mission alignment of paramount important to accreditation. Also, outcomes - by which performance is measured (remember the SACSCOC definition of IE) - derive directly from one's mission. It is no accident that core requirement 2.4 relates to mission, and
the very next core requirement relates to IE. So, perhaps, the propinquity of these two standards exhibits SACSCOC’s not-too-obvious intentional construction. There are several standards that SACSCOC associates either specifically [CR 2.5., CS 3.3.1.1-5], or tangentially with IE [CR 2.9 (Library); CR 2.10 (Student Services); CS 3.5.1 (General Education); and FR 4.1 (Student Achievement)]. Ordinarily, core requirement 2.5 starts it all and – in contradistinction to the other standards, focuses on institution-wide IE by stipulating the requirements enumerated on this slide. You will notice momentarily that I incorporated the language of this standard - and that of 3.3.1, shown next - into the PECC’s charter, mission, and Continuous Improvement Circle.

The other primarily IE standard is Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1 which has 5 parts. NOTE that I do not show 3.3.1.4 that deals with research; nor, 3.3.1.5 that deals with community/public service. Earlier, remember that I quoted SACSCOC as stating that it expected all services to be assessed - and, the SACSCOC IE definition as you will recall stipulates assessment of "all aspect of the institution." To comply with IE CS 3.3.1, an institution’s educational programs, as well as its administrative, and academic or student support institutional areas “identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results.” Posited that all standards are essentially bright-line prescriptions for compliance, nonetheless, only the IE standards are so incontrovertibly differentiated by mandated adherence to an algorithmic, path-based assessment calculus specifically predicating the establishment of goals, analysis of achievement of those goals, and use of the resultant empirical data to drive departmental improvements. These assessment elements are what the doyenne of U.S. higher education assessment, Trudy W. Banta, calls “assessment essentials,” which she defines as the “systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (2014, 1-2). BTW: Dr. Banta has a new NILOA occasional paper Tracing Assessment Practice as Reflected in Assessment Update Trudy W. Banta, Peter T. Ewell, and Cynthia A. Cogswell that came out yesterday. Its link is in the LibGuide.

In a 3.3.1 NOTE appearing in the Resource Manual, SACSCOC states rather emphatically that: “While institutions may organize functions differently, it is expected that all services, whether administrative or academic student support services, engage in effectiveness processes.” At
the base level, this performative assessment algorithm would seem pretty straightforward. Yet, as later SACSCOC-generated research data will attest, a precisely interpreted and then executed application of the standard is sometimes difficult to achieve. Consequently, SU relies upon its PECC process for IE quality control and assurance oversight. Generally, poorly executed assessment processes do not adhere precisely and completely to the prescribed IE algorithm or process flow; nor are they sufficiently detailed; and, finally, they do not “close the loop,” a point that many SACSCOC on-site reviewers scrutinize closely and routinely use to cite noncompliance.

Here is a synopsis of two SACSCOC guiding statements designed to assist institutions in documenting 3.3.1 compliance:

1. Methods for assessing the extent to which students achieve these outcomes are appropriate to the nature of the discipline, and consistent over time to enable the institution to evaluate cohorts of students who complete courses or a program. Shared widely within and across programs, the results of this assessment can affirm the institution’s success at achieving its mission and can be used to inform decisions about curricular and programmatic revisions. At appropriate intervals, program and learning outcomes and assessment methods are evaluated and revised.

2. Institutional effectiveness can be achieved in a variety of ways and the mentality that “one size fits all” is inappropriate and diminishes the individual missions of institutions. The institution should develop and/or use methods and instruments that are uniquely suited to the goal statements and that are supported by faculty. (Resource Manual, pp. 49-50)
Now for a PEConomics (PIGonomics) IE heuristic: In his NILOA occasional paper, Keston H. Fulcher of the James Madison University's Center for Assessment and Research Studies, even more reductionistically and - perhaps, irreverently - distils the SACSCOC algorithmic learning improvement model into its most basic formula, viz.: “weigh pig, feed pig, weigh pig.” Fulcher predicates that “assessing learning does not by itself result in increased student accomplishment, much like a pig never fattened up because it was weighed. Indeed, recent research shows that while institutions are more regularly engaging in assessment, they have little to show in the way of stronger student performance. This paper clarifies how assessment results are related to improved learning – assess, effectively intervene, re-assess – and contrasts this process with mere changes in assessment methodology and changes to pedagogy and curriculum.” It is listed on the LibGuide.

In such a porcine assessment model, please consider what do you think is the pig farmer's expected outcome? Backwards from that outcome, please consider what would be the farmer's mission predicated upon that outcome. Then, please consider why does the farmer weigh the pig the first time and why does he feed it and why does the farmer weigh the pig the second time?

I hope these insights have been helpful. If you have questions, kindly let me know.