

# **Collaborations, Referrals, and Invitations: A Reflection on Examples of Better Together from One Institution**

**Gloria Shenoy**

University of Texas at Dallas

**Karen Huxtable-Jester**

University of Texas at Dallas

## **Abstract**

In this article, Drs. Shenoy and Huxtable-Jester share perspectives from the classroom, research, and central support administrative offices to give concrete examples as well as pose recommendations about how to create partnerships and strategic collaborations for an integrated approach to teaching and learning. Karen Huxtable-Jester is an award-winning professor who works with students in the classroom, and as Director of the CTLat UT Dallas, supporting faculty as they work on improving their teaching. Gloria Shenoy is the Director of Academic Assessment at the same institution, an expert in measuring learning who was involved in a national project looking at student learning outcomes. In this article, they describe past and current collaborations, including co-presenting at conferences, leading book clubs, guiding a faculty learning community on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and facilitating seminars for graduate students and faculty on teaching. Referrals include helping one office find a student worker, assisting faculty to create assessments for grant proposals, and giving feedback on syllabi. Invitations to committees and team meetings round out ways the relationship between assessment and educational development plays out on our campus so that we are "Better Together."

## **Keywords**

collaboration, assessment, educational development, shared vision, referral, invitation, practical example

## **Introduction**

It is no secret that faculty may view assessment as a potential threat (Weimer, 2011). They may fear being judged negatively, losing academic freedom, or having to comply with time-consuming demands for data that have little connection to their teaching or teaching-related decisions. To

assuage these fears, assessment and educational development professionals can present a united front to assure faculty that their shared goal is improving student learning, not evaluating faculty performance. In this article, we will demonstrate how this is possible.

As an award-winning professor and as Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), Dr. Karen Huxtable-Jester works with students in the classroom and with faculty as they work on improving their teaching. As Director of Academic Assessment, Dr. Gloria Shenoy has expertise in measuring learning and was involved in a national project looking at student learning outcomes. She continues to read, research, and share ideas with faculty about student learning and how to operationalize this construct. The Director of Assessment's partnership with the Director of the CTL allows Gloria access to the state of student learning at the university. This partnership gives her a platform to share ideas about what might work and what evidence will document teaching effectiveness. The Director of the CTL's partnership with the Director of Academic Assessment allows Karen to rethink how assessment is happening in her own and others' classrooms, how to engage instructors in assessment, and how to support the development of research projects involving learning and teaching effectiveness. In this article, we outline practical ways assessment and educational development can work "Better Together" through collaborations, referrals, and invitations by sharing examples and giving recommendations. Working together not only makes our work more effective but also makes the work more legitimate as we demonstrate the impact and value of using assessment to improve teaching and learning (Huber & Hutchings, 2006; Kinzie et al., 2019; Ikenberry et al., 2015).

The impact of this partnership has been a fluid conversation around teaching, learning, and assessment on our campus. We are committed to student learning and faculty benefitting from assessment. Campus stakeholders see us bring one another into conversations through email chains, presentations, and in-person task forces and collaborations, and they now often invite both groups to meetings. This reflective article shares one experience at one institution to encourage and inspire the reader to add to current practices, start new initiatives, and reflect on positive impacts on their campus.

## **Common Vision**

The two Directors of the CTL and Academic Assessment understand that student learning is at the core of our institutional mission. Without our students, there would be no university. Having students who are not learning or gaining the skills programs desire would be a failure of our university mission. This mutual place of understanding informs our work.

When the design and delivery of instruction are fully integrated with assessment practices as the path to continuous improvement, teaching is not only evidence-informed but evidence-generating. "Best practices" are, at best, only a starting point because what "works" in one setting may be wholly inappropriate in another. The fallacy of seeing teaching as the employment of best practices is that excellent teaching cannot be modeled simply by examining what excellent teachers do. Teaching cannot be separated from its context (Chew et al., 2010; Chew, 2023). While we encourage high-impact practices in the classroom by informing instructors about strategies to use active learning and inclusive practices through programming, lectures, and book discussions at the CTL(CTL), we balance that with an acknowledgment that what happens in the classroom also gives us important information. Assessing student learning allows us to begin asking, "Are these

practices making the impact we thought they would? Are students leaving with the intended learning outcomes?"

The supervisor of the assessment team and the leadership at the institution are strong supporters of using assessment data to improve campus efforts and fulfill its mission of informing collaboration between faculty and staff. Early in Gloria's career, she read Peter Ewell's work describing the tension in assessment between improvement and accountability (Ewell, 2009). She became an advocate for using assessment as a tool to have conversations about student learning and improving the learning process instead of doing assessment as only compliance to the accreditor. Starting her journey in assessment at the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) gave her numerous examples of how other institutions were using assessment data in meaningful ways to make impactful changes for students. It is from this perspective that she arrived at this institution, and with the support of her supervisor and the provost, this was nurtured.

Because both directors begin with the goal of improving student learning, we respect one another's work and see the interrelated components of what we do. Whenever speaking in a public forum, Karen promotes assessment, and Gloria speaks about the importance of learning, the frameworks of learning, and teaching pedagogies. We are united in understanding that neither of our work is about evaluating instructors. We have supervisors who understand this and encourage it. It is about students and their learning.

With this common vision and commitment to student learning, we have found that we are Better Together through collaborations, referrals, and initiations, as seen in Figure 1. This shared vision allows us to improve programming as we recognize that faculty supported to do more than simply "deliver" instruction (Lieberman & Guskin, 2003), and we effect cultural change throughout our institution (Wright, 2023). The rest of the article describes practical ways of how we work together.

## Figure 1

*Concept Map of Different Ways that Educational Development and Assessment Partner*



## **Collaboration**

The relational dynamic between the Director of Academic Assessment and the Director of the CTL on our campus has resulted in several fruitful collaborations. Past and current collaborations include co-presenting at conferences, leading book clubs, leading a faculty learning community on the scholarship of teaching and learning, and facilitating seminars for graduate students and faculty on teaching.

Gloria and Karen presented a concurrent session on student motivation (and the limitations of attributing motivation alone to students' successes or lack thereof) at the annual SACSCOC conference. This collaboration resulted in (1) a practice workshop on campus three months prior to the conference presentation about student factors associated with student success and (2) expanding the original presentation into a half-day pre-conference workshop the following year. Working together to prepare these presentations allowed for deep reading of the literature on student engagement, robust conversations about mindset and belonging, and crafting active learning strategies for the presentation. These presentations resulted in being invited to speak at other campuses and encouraging feedback about changes people were making at their campuses. The external motivator to complete the conference presentation helped keep us on task and allowed us to have a prolonged conversation. Assessment and educational development professionals in similar roles might look for topics related to student learning and engagement to develop similar projects. Readers might consider similar presentations to encourage dialogue between stakeholders in educational development and assessment.

Book clubs or reading groups at UT Dallas are popular, especially when free books are part of the incentive. The CTL will sponsor 4 to 6 book clubs with 20-30 participants reading each book each year. One way that collaboration happens through book groups is by having the Director of Academic Assessment facilitate a book discussion. In this way, Gloria brings a lens of assessment into the readings while getting to know faculty interested in educational development, and the CTL gains another facilitator for the book clubs. To avoid "read it and forget it," a key component of these conversations is developing plans for implementing changes inspired by the reading, assessing the impact of these changes, and reporting back to the group.

Our most successful book clubs have an action component, such as our faculty learning community on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2011). With a small group of faculty, we read a book on SoTL (the book club component) and then continued to meet as people developed their projects. Three instructors applied for and were awarded the CTL's Instructional Improvement Awards, which provide funding for developing sustainable and widely impactful teaching innovations. To improve the assessment of the impact of these materials and procedures, the Director of Academic Assessment has met with instructors one-on-one to develop their ideas further. The resulting SoTL projects were stronger in design because of the collaboration of assessment and educational development.

Among other offerings, the CTL regularly facilitates a Reflective Teaching Seminar, Senior Reflective Teaching Seminar, and a Graduate Reflective Teaching Seminar. Cohorts meet weekly for one or two semesters to talk about the science of teaching and learning. The Reflective Teaching Seminar is targeted to early career faculty, the Senior level seminar recruits mid-level, experienced faculty who are either already or may be about to begin administrative roles. The

Graduate level seminar is targeted to graduate teaching assistants and graduate teaching associates who are new to teaching. Participants are recruited using both broad calls for interest and personal invitations based on individual roles and responsibilities. These programs are directed to all faculty interested in pedagogical issues and in improving their own teaching. The Director of Academic Assessment performs the essential role of speaking about assessment to these groups during one or more of their sessions. By collaborating, CTL personnel take responsibility for hosting and creating the agenda, and the Director of Academic Assessment meets those who wish to improve their teaching and begin planning and elaborating on assessment and its relationship with educational development. One graduate student secured a teaching position during his last semester and reported back, crediting his experience with the graduate teaching seminar and certificate program as the reason he stood out from the other candidates. We have had deans from a hiring institution reach out to us about candidates who have completed the certificate, and other graduate students have told us similar stories. An instructor who has thought intentionally about learning and assessment clearly is an asset to any academic program.

These formal collaborations, from presenting at conferences to leading book clubs and teaching seminars, have successfully changed the culture of teaching on our campus. In these spaces, we remind our campus of our responsibility for student learning and the benefits of engaging in teaching, learning, and assessment. We recommended that others consider similar endeavors that could be turned into collaborations between educational development and assessment.

### **Referrals**

While doing our work in service to the university, we keep one another's roles in mind, leading to the second way that educational development and assessment are Better Together: we give each other referrals. When Karen reads a submission for the CTL's Instructional Improvement Award, an award with monetary funds to help instructors continuously improve classes, implement teaching innovations, develop assessment alternatives, and increase the visibility of teaching excellence, she reviews them using an assessment lens. The Director of Academic Assessment often reviews these Instructional Improvement Award proposals and provides consultation about methodologies for the projects. Sometimes, this begins a conversation between Gloria and the instructor, resulting in a change to the class and academic program.

When the assessment team was looking for a student worker to help review research studies for an academic literature review and clean some data with software, Gloria asked Karen for help. Karen teaches a 3000-level course in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, giving her contact with students with the skill sets the assessment team needs.

During the start of each semester, the Director of Academic Assessment is invited to speak at new faculty orientation. One of the things she talks about is what must be on the syllabus to be compliant with state laws. This presentation becomes a launching point to talk about student learning outcomes in general and about student learning outcomes and metacognition. Gloria ends her presentation with an invitation for new faculty to send her their syllabi for feedback. A handful of instructors take her up on this. For questions about classroom activities and policies, Gloria always invites Karen into the conversation. When working with instructors, the feedback from both an educational development expert and an assessment expert truly makes things better for the

instructor and especially for the students. We recommend that others also consider how to provide these combined and complementary perspectives in supporting faculty improvement.

When hosting events or speakers, we advertise one another's events using our listserv as a place for announcements and reminders. The CTL posts reminders and events in their eLearning portal for faculty and instructors to access. We do this because we know the work to improve student learning can be approached from many perspectives, and we want to support all who are doing this work. While some doctoral programs have training in pedagogy, there are faculty who arrive as novice teachers without knowing the science of learning (Gooblar, 2019). Thus, any and all information we can get to faculty, who care about these students, the better the experience of students.

### **Invitations**

The final way we are Better Together is through invitations to committees, team meetings, and other training opportunities. This way of working together strengthens the relationship between our offices and keeps the lines of communication open.

The CTL has monthly staff planning meetings to which the Director of Academic Assessment has a standing invitation. Gloria finds these meetings to be helpful in knowing the initiatives that the CTL is taking and conversations that are happening around campus. This knowledge allows her to align her messaging in person, in meetings, and in presentations to address issues such as how to navigate assessment in the era of generative artificial intelligence.

Gloria is an ex-officio member of the University Assessment Committee, and at the same time, Karen serves as Chair of the Committee on Effective Teaching (CET). There is much overlap in the work of these committees to improve teaching for the benefit of our students. Again, these built-in invitations to committees show not only the commitment of our institution to quality teaching but also how teaching and learning benefit from the positive dynamic of educational development and assessment. The current chair of CET has informal and formal meetings with both the Directors of Assessment and of the CTL, continuing our ability to be Better Together.

Between the offices, we keep our lines of communication open. Whenever one of us reads something, attends a webinar, or hears something that we think the other ought to know about, we shoot each other a quick email. Just this month, an invitation was forwarded about a conference on the SoTL; a compiled list of resources about how instructors use GenAI from a webinar was forwarded, and some innovative assessment examples from a listserv were shared. There will always be more conversations, webinars, and articles than either of us can attend on our own. Invitations to committees and team meetings and sharing resources are additional ways the relationship between assessment and faculty development plays out on our campus so that we are Better Together. We recommend that assessment leaders and educational developers create their own ways to share what they learn through reading and webinars with stakeholders and colleagues. With shared knowledge, we all will be better prepared to make decisions and have ideas of how to implement new practices. Figuring out who is and should be at the table for meetings is another way to further enrich relationships on campus and improve student learning (Cruz et al., 2023).

## Conclusion

These are just some examples of the many practical ways we have worked Better Together through collaborations, referrals, and invitations. Working with and for one another, we start with a common vision about student learning and teaching. Collaborations include formal conference presentations, leading book clubs, faculty learning communities, and teaching seminars. Referrals include helping one office find a student worker, assisting faculty in creating assessments for their grant proposals and giving feedback to instructors on syllabi. Invitations as a way of working Better Together is holding a seat at the table during team meetings, university-wide committee meetings, and other training opportunities. As presented in Figure 1, there are multiple strands, but all hold together as we make a commitment to student learning. It is keeping that line of dialogue open. The impact of working together has established a culture of teaching, learning, and assessment as a continued dialogue on our campus, which is particularly impactful at a young institution like ours. Proposals for improvement in the classroom, our functional offices, and instructor training experiences are all stronger because of our partnership. We see continued growth by reaching instructors who do not typically come to our programming, supporting our teaching faculty, and keeping a pulse on the state of student learning.

When thinking about being Better Together, Gloria's colleague, who oversees assessment for general education, encouraged our campus community to read and discuss a book together. The collaboration spanned from the Office of Human Resources, to the CTL, to the Office of Undergraduate Education, and the Office of Institutional Success and Decision Support, and yielded a three-session university-wide conversation about improving our institution. The book's first page referred to Edwards Deming's assertion that every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets. We maintain that the more we can recognize and coordinate the elements of that system, the more we can produce the outcomes we want to see. This reading group was just one example of how our partnership does not need to be only between assessment and educational development. We hope this reflection gives the reader concrete examples as well as poses recommendations about how to create partnerships and strategic collaborations between educational development and assessment, and beyond.

## References

- Bishop-Clark, C., & Dietz-Uhler, B. (2012). *Engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning: A guide to the process, and how to develop a project from start to finish*. Stylus.
- Chew, S. L., Bartlett, R. M., Dobbins, J. E., Hammer, E. Y., Kite, M. E., Loop, R. F., McIntyre, J. G., & Rose, K. C. (2010). A contextual approach to teaching: Bridging methods, goals, and outcomes. In D. F. Halpern (Ed.), *Undergraduate Education in Psychology: A blueprint for the future of the discipline*. Jossey-Bass.
- Chew, S. L. (2023). We can do better than "best practices." *The Teaching Professor*, August 28 <https://www.teachingprofessor.com/topics/teaching-strategies/we-can-do-better-than-best-practices/>
- Cruz, L., Parker, M. A., Smentkowski, B., & Smitherman, M. (2023). *Taking flight: Making your center for teaching and learning soar*. Taylor & Francis.
- Ewell, P. T. (2009, November). *Assessment, accountability, and improvement: Revisiting the tension*. (Occasional Paper No. 1). University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- Gooblar, D. (2019). *The missing course: Everything they never taught you about college teaching*. Harvard University Press.
- Huber, M. T., & Hutchings, P. (2006). Building the teaching commons. *Change*, 38(3), 24–31.
- Ikenberry, S. O., Jankowski, N. A., Cain, T. R., Ewell, P. T., Hutchings, P., & Kinzie, J. (2015). *Using evidence of student learning to improve higher education*. Jossey-Bass.
- Kinzie, J., Landy, K., Sorcinelli, M. D., & Hutchings, P. (2019). Better together: How faculty development and assessment can join forces to improve student learning. *Change*, 51(5), 46–54.
- Lieberman, D. A., & Guskin, A. E. (2003). The essential role of faculty development in new higher education models. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, 21(1), 257-272.
- Weimer, M. (2011). The assessment movement: Revisiting faculty resistance. *The Teaching Professor*, 25(7), 5.
- Wright, M. C. (2023). *Centers for teaching and learning: The new landscape in higher education*. Johns Hopkins.