CCAU
Confronting Challenges in Academic Units

Academic Unit Diagnostic Tool (AUDiT) Manual

The Academic Unit Diagnostic Tool (AUDiT) provides a way to create a snapshot of the vibrancy and challenges of an academic unit. The tool is a one-sheet dashboard that lays out key factors and warning signs that may be present in vibrant or challenged units. The items in the dashboard were developed through extensive consultation with deans, provosts, and department heads, and through iterative development, use, and feedback at colleges and universities. There are specialized versions of the AUDiT tailored to departments in research universities, teaching-oriented colleges, and primarily professional units, and for use within research groups.

The tool is not a validated instrument. The primary purpose of the AUDiT is diagnostic, supporting and catalyzing effective change. The dashboard contains a distillation of issues that are present in both vibrant and challenged academic units. The tool can help leaders identify particular areas of focus, stimulate discussions within a unit, and point to possible paths to reinforce vibrancy within a unit. The numbers that result from use of the AUDiT are not meaningful as absolutes or as a "total" indication of how well a unit is doing; they can be an effective starting point to stimulate thinking and discussion about issues that affect daily life and interaction in the unit.

Where the AUDiT surfaces significant issues, it can help leaders and unit members focus efforts on a plan to restore vibrancy. The Confronting Challenges in Academic Units (CCAU) Consortium provides resources and tools for that process.

Many of the topics raised by individual cells in the diagnostic tool are addressed in NCPRE's Leadership Collection, a multi-media library of management and leadership materials curated for academic leaders. The Leadership Collection is updated regularly with new resources.

First Things First

Who will be using the tool? What is our goal? Are we prepared to stick with it?

It's useful to consider these questions before using the AUDiT. The tool can be used by a leader of a unit, by leaders up the chain to whom a unit reports, by a team assessing a unit, or with all the members of a unit when seeking to catalyze changes in group interactions and rules of engagement.

Individual leaders or teams seeking to understand a unit's strengths and challenges may use the tool first as part of a process to identify and develop a strategy for unit reinvigoration or intervention. This use most frequently occurs early in a process, when indications of unit challenges attract attention as needing a response. In conjunction with other tools and advice available through the CCAU Consortium, the AUDiT can be a starting point for identifying areas in need of attention and helping to formulate the most constructive next steps, whether that is working within the unit with existing members or more serious steps, such as considering unit receivership or other external interventions.

CCAU Consortium members should refer to member resources and case studies if using the AUDiT for such purposes.

How to use the tool

Each user of the tool assigns a number to each cell. The higher the number, the more the statement applies to the unit as the individual experiences it. Thus, each person places 30 numbers on the sheet, one in each cell, on the indicated scale: 0-5 (green), 0-3 (yellow), 0-5 (red).

Each column is then totaled, and then the overall score is totaled as follows: Start with the sum in the green column, then subtract the sum totals in the red and yellow columns.

<div align="center">Total Score = Green - Yellow - Red.</div>

In group use, to stimulate effective conversations, we recommend calculating the minimum, maximum, and average for each column and the total, and sharing them with all participating in the discussion.

Facilitator Guide

When the path chosen is to engage all faculty in a unit, or all professional members of a unit, the AUDiT can be used to stimulate constructive discussion. Use with a group's faculty as a whole is most effective when 1) at least a significant portion of the group is open to discussions about how to strengthen their internal climate and culture; and 2) where there is a unit leader or team of leaders (department chair/dean or associate dean; department head/executive committee, etc) who are prepared to see a change management process through. It can be detrimental to start a process, engage unit members, and then drop the initiative or change leaders in mid-stream to ones unfamiliar with or uncommitted to follow-through. Experience suggests this can leave a unit in a worse situation than where it started.

First: Use in-person, in real time

In every case, we recommend for the AUDiT to be used in "real time," with unit members present, and not via distribution in advance or implementation online. Experience has demonstrated that an in-person approach can short-circuit discussions that deflect off to other topics, including the validity of individual items. In-person, real-time use can help focus a discussion about unit culture and how unit members interact with each other, which is the goal in trying to shift or establish new norms for a department.

Create a safe environment for engagement with tough issues

Successful use of the tool hinges on doing all that is possible for unit members to talk together constructively about things that the unit is doing well and the challenges that the unit is facing. The purpose of identifying these points is to facilitate a discussion and engagement around expectations of how to interact with each other and about the professional environment the group as a whole wishes to create and maintain. Having an effective facilitator lead the discussion is important. It is also helpful for the facilitator to identify a few likely hot spots in the tool dashboard beforehand, and to prepare some questions to stimulate conversation.

Implementation

1. Anonymous, personal assessment

(1) Distribute paper copies of the AUDiT, providing 5-10 minutes to fill it out. We recommend keeping responses anonymous. Providing index cards to each participant can reinforce anonymity and speed the tallying process after the tables have been filled out (see 2(d) below).

(2) Provide instructions:

(a) "Assign a number to each cell on the indicated scale: 0-5, 0-3, 0-5, with numbers getting larger the more the statement applies to the unit." Each member fills out the table as *that person* experiences the unit culture. Thus, each places 30 numbers on the sheet, one in each cell.

(b) Put positive numbers in each column. (Yes, even though green reflects positive aspects and yellow and red reflect negative aspects of unit culture.)

(c) Total each column, and then sum the three resulting numbers to create an overall total. The green sum is a positive one, and the yellow and red sums are subtracted from the green for the total score, thus: Total Score = Green - Yellow - Red.

(d) Record the four numbers on each index card, labeling each: Green #, Yellow #, Red #, Total #.

(3) Collect the individual results and tally them.

(a) For each of the four aggregated numbers (Green, Yellow, Red, Total Score), compute the minimum, maximum, and average score across all unit members and post them on a board or flip chart so all can see them.

(b) It may be helpful to have a spreadsheet prepared to input, compute, and summarize the data collected. Templates for such a spreadsheet are available from NCPRE.

2. Group assessment and discussion

Depending on the presenting symptoms and the degree of trust among unit members, there are various approaches to analyzing and discussing the results.

Whatever approach is used, it is most constructive for a unit to focus on identifying its strengths, as well as areas that need improvement. The first goal of a unit self-assessment is to help unit members define what they aspire to, collectively, as a place to work and learn. After that, the general process is to assist in developing rules of engagement to change interaction patterns to help arrive at the desired culture and climate.

Some suggestions:

- Analyze the similarities and differences in perceptions by collecting the individual anonymously scored sheets by specific group (for example, by role, by subject area, by disciplinary methodology, or by gender) and putting the four minimum, maximum, and average scores for each group on a board to start the discussion. (This can be easier to do if you ask people to sit in designated groups while filling out the AUDiT, and keep the index cards or sheets separate for each group.)

- If you have collected the sheets from the individuals, scan them to note outliers or specific cells in which many individuals placed high scores, in the green column (vibrancy) and in the yellow and red columns, then share the observations with the group to start the discussion. Do not use this method if trust is already low, as it may exacerbate anxiety and tension in the group.

- Questions to start a discussion may include: "What do you see here?" "How do we go about interpreting these scores?" or "Are there any particular cells that you'd like to discuss?". If the atmosphere will support it, ask if anyone is willing to describe which ones he or she perceives as "hot" cells.

- Focus discussion on positive ways to approach changing the unit environment.

Suggestions for further exercises are available to CCAU Consortium members.

Next Steps…

What happens next depends on the areas identified, the nature of the unit, and the choices made by the participants. There will be people involved who have an interest in resolving problems; it is key to keep these people involved, and informed. If the unit has a capable leader, that leader can help provide reinforcement and accountability for a change process.

Some resources that might be of assistance include:

1. The Confronting Challenges in Academic Units (CCAU) Consortium
The CCAU Consortium offers support for institutions in dealing with units that are troubled or challenged in their ability to function effectively. Building on our experience in academic administration and leadership, NCPRE supports the Consortium in developing concepts, labels, tools, and approaches that are principled, pragmatic, and effective. CCAU Consortium member resources include case studies, guidance from experts, exercises, and more.
https://ccau.csl.illinois.edu

2. The NCPRE Leadership Collection
NCPRE's Leadership Collection has a number of relevant resources. A multi-media library of management and leadership materials curated for academic leaders, it is updated regularly with new resources. It can be used on a "just in time" basis ("I need to know now!") or as a platform for personal study and reflection.
http://ethicscenter.csl.illinois.edu/leadership-collection-dashboard/

3. Inside Higher Education Columns
Our Inside Higher Ed columns focus on academic leadership challenges and tools for strengthening shared governance. These articles give you an insider look on how our lessons can be applicable in your day to day work environment. http://ethicscenter.csl.illinois.edu/leadership-collection-dashboard/