

STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT AT THE PROGRAM LEVEL

I. What is assessment?

Assessment is a systematic process of looking at student achievement within and across courses by gathering, interpreting and using information about student learning for educational improvement (American Association of Higher Education). The process requires that departments think about what it is they are trying to teach, how they are teaching it, how the students learn it, what evidence shows that students are learning it, what actions can be taken to improve student learning? The point of assessment is not to get good news, but to improve teaching and learning. Assessment reveals and helps to close the gap between curricular goals and student outcomes.

II. Why do assessment?

A. Improvement

1. Curricular – Outcomes Assessment can help identify problems within a particular curriculum. It can establish a need for increasing the emphasis of particular skills areas within the curriculum. It can tell you whether or not your students are learning what you want them to learn.
2. Instructional methodology and practice - Outcomes assessment can help faculty evaluate teaching practices to address issues like the increasing numbers and diversity of students; stakeholder emphasis on value-added education; legislative desire for a productive, competitive workforce; increasing time to degree and so on.
3. Student Services – Assessment results can be used to improve retention and recruitment as well as service and support areas on campus.
4. Teaching and learning – Most importantly, assessment can help to focus institutional attention on the most critical activities, teaching and learning.

B. Accountability

1. SBOE/BOR – The Idaho State Board of Education mandates that all institutions of higher education perform outcomes assessment. According to SBOE Policies and Guidelines “The primary purpose of assessment is to enhance the quality and excellence of programs, learning, and teaching. “
2. Public accountability – The American public is demanding accountability in higher education and requiring that colleges and universities show that they are providing the promised results efficiently and effectively. Taxpayers are looking for ways to educate the public at the lowest possible cost.
3. Competition for limited resources – As resources become more limited, legislators and others responsible for higher education resources have begun to require evidence of the return on their investment.

- C. Accreditation – Nationwide both regional and specialized accrediting bodies are requiring assessment. In Standard II Educational Program and Its Effectiveness, the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges (our institutional accrediting agency) requires that the expected learning outcomes for each degree program be identified and published, that evidence of student achievement of these goals be presented, and that this evidence is applied to program improvement. NASC requires that we

“demonstrate through regular and systematic assessment that students who complete [our] programs, no matter where or how they are offered, have achieved a specified set of learner goals established for each program.”

III. What are the characteristics of good assessment?

- Comprehensive, ongoing and evolutionary
- Broad involvement from faculty
- Clear, assessable educational goals and objectives
- Uses a variety of assessment and evaluation methodologies
- Collects meaningful and accurate data
- Primary emphasis is on improvement of teaching and learning

(Adapted from Seybert, 1998)

The assessment process helps faculty to define quality, determine whether or not they have attained it in their program, and, if not, determine what changes need to be made in order to attain it.

IV. Why aren't grades enough?

- A. Grading practices are not standard - An A in one section of a course may not mean the same as an A in another section of the same course. How many students can't read, write, or do math at a college level when they enter? But all of these students graduated from high school with a passing grade.
- B. Different ways of structuring program assessment are needed – Grades are not systematic. A student, who is a good writer or a good test taker, good at memorizing or good at analysis, will fare differently in different courses, and the grade distributions in classes that allow relearning will be different from those in classes that do not allow relearning.
- C. Grades reflect many things other than student learning – For example, grades reflect participation variables like discussion, cooperation, attendance, verbal ability, which do not reflect course content and mastery.
- D. Objectives differ – How is an individual student's grade used to improve the department overall? The point is not to evaluate the student but to evaluate the program. Departments need to look carefully at groups of students to see what they tell us about how to enrich teaching and improve the curriculum.
- E. Good assessment requires multiple ways of measuring goal achievement – Grades are only a limited piece of a complete assessment process. Grades won't necessarily tell you anything about what students aren't learning but need to know. Nor will they tell you how and when you can best improve the program. Assessment should use multiple measures, both qualitative as well as quantitative, rather than relying on one instrument or activity.

V. How is assessment done?

- A. Identify each degree and certificate program to be assessed.
- B. Identify student learning goals.
 1. Establish 3 to 6 broad goals
 2. Each goal should outline what is to be learned, the level of learning, and its application.
 - a. What should a student know and be able to do after completing the program?
 - b. What is the level of learning the student should achieve? Does the student need to 'understand' the knowledge or should the student be able to 'analyze and apply' it?
 - c. What is the learning to be applied to?
- C. Identify the educational criteria and experiences for each goal. For example, when during the program is the student exposed to the knowledge or skills being taught? What outside experiences enable a student to achieve the goal? Is the knowledge or skill being taught at the level the goal establishes?
- D. Select one or two goals to assess. Identify the appropriate assessment methods and strategies to measure student outcomes (knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, behavioral outcomes). How does a student demonstrate having met the goal? What is the best way to measure the student achievement? Determining what to assess from each goal and how to assess it will depend on clearly identifying departmental priorities.
- E. Collect, analyze and interpret the data.
- F. Specify program improvements. Where is the goal not being met? What will you do to improve student learning? Which program elements should be reinforced? Which should be maintained, strengthened, modified?
- G. Review your assessment plan. What changes need to be made to do a better job of assessment? Should the student learning goals be modified? Do new assessment strategies need to be incorporated? Which goals will you assess during the next cycle?