Topic: Action Planning & Closing the Loop

Introduction

The assessment cycle does not end once findings are collected for a program's outcomes. It is important for programs to determine what changes they should implement to advance in areas with the potential for improvement as well as to later assess the effectiveness of any improvements implemented. Action planning and closing the loop, the two final components of the assessment cycle, address these important steps of the process.

Action Plan Development

Once a program has collected findings for an outcome, it is time to identify any deficiencies or areas for improvement. Action plans describe the changes that a program intends to make based on its assessment findings. Common action plans might entail changing curriculum, assessment methods, pedagogical practices, the implementation of new technologies or assignments, or changes in program policies and procedures. Once implemented, any effects of the changes would be evaluated in future assessment cycle findings.

Closing the Loop

The assessment cycle does not end with the creation of action plans. It is important for programs to follow up on previously implemented action plans and the effectiveness of these changes. This follow-up process is referred to as "closing the loop." This step is an integral part of the assessment process and highlights the focus on continuous improvement. By providing information regarding previous action plans and their effects, departments and faculty gain a better perspective on how much progress has been made, and how they might continue making improvements in the future. Closing the loop can be accomplished in many ways – depending on whether or not the outcome is being met. If the assessment findings demonstrate that the outcome has been achieved, then the program can continue measuring the outcome in future assessment cycles, or make additional changes to try and improve performance. If, on the other hand, the outcome has not been achieved, the program has two options: (a) take further action to improve performance on that outcome, or (b) decide that the outcome and/or measure should be changed in some way and re-measured in a future assessment cycle.

Examples from Outcomes to Action Planning and Closing the Loop

Programs should develop an action plan for each outcome not meeting the program's established achievement target. Action plans should be specific, and directly relate to the stated outcome. Below are a couple of examples:

- **Student learning outcome for a master's degree program:** Students will be able to effectively communicate in written and oral formats.
  - Measures:
    - Written communication: Thesis committee uses a 5-point rubric to evaluate student performance on the master's thesis in regards to written communication.
    - Oral communication: Final oral exam is evaluated by the thesis committee using a 5-point rubric designed to evaluate student performance in oral communication. (Rubric scale: 1 = significantly below expectations, 2 = slightly below expectations, 3 = meets expectations, 4 = slightly above expectations, and 5 = significantly above expectations.)
  - Targets:
    - Written communication: 75% of the students will receive an average committee rating of 3 or higher indicating that the student is meeting the performance standard and 35% of the students will receive an average rating of 4 or higher.
    - Oral communication: 65% of the students will receive an average committee rating of 3 or higher and 20% of the students will receive an average rating of 4 or higher.

- o Findings:
  - Written communication: 71% of the students received an average committee rating of 3 or higher and only 26% of the students received an average rating of 4 or higher. Targets not met for this year.
  - Oral communication: 68% of the students received an average committee rating of 3 or higher and 22% of the students received an average rating of 4 or higher. Targets met.
  - o Action Plan: Faculty will collaborate this summer to create a new seminar course focused on research skills. This course will help students synthesize literature, develop a written project proposal, and ultimately become more comfortable with scientific writing early in their program. The effectiveness of this action plan will be measured in the following academic year.
  - o Closing The Loop: One year after implementing the action plan above, the program reviewed assessment findings and determined that the outcome is still not being met. Consequently, the program will implement a writing workshop for thesis students in their last year of the program. The effectiveness of this change will be measured in the upcoming academic year.

- **Program outcome for an undergraduate program:** Students enrolled in the Criminology BS program will be accepted into an advanced degree program in a related field or have obtained employment within one year of graduation.
  - o Measure: Alumni will be contacted by the department one year after completing the program.
  - o Target: 50% of students completing the undergraduate program will report obtaining employment and 35% of students will report being accepted to an advanced degree program in a related field.
  - o Findings: 55% of the students reported obtaining employment within one year of graduation but only 25% of students were accepted to or started an advanced degree program. Target for employment was met but target for advanced degree was not.
  - o Action Plan: We have created a committee tasked with compiling resources so that additional advising services can be provided to students interested in pursuing advanced degrees. This committee is also working with faculty to determine how this information can be better distributed to our students. The effectiveness of this action plan will be measured in the following academic year.
  - o Closing The Loop: One year after implementing the action plan above, the program reviewed assessment findings and determined that the outcome is being met, so no additional changes need to be made at this time. The program will continue to measure this outcome in future assessment cycles.

Contact: **If you need assistance or have questions regarding assessment, please visit the Institutional Effectiveness website at https://aie.vt.edu/institutional-effectiveness.html.**