

Topic: What Is Assessment, Why Should Programs Do Assessment, and What Are the Institutional Requirements for Assessment?

Introduction and Background

As noted by Huba & Freed (2000), prior to the 1970s, college environments operated very much in isolation and did not report information on their degrees, programs, or operations to external audiences. Then, because of financial reasons, the increasing diversity of the student population, and concerns raised over the extent to which students were attaining the necessary workforce skills and abilities, the value of higher education came under attack. In response, several reports were issued stating that higher education needed to become more focused on student learning and improvement and regional accrediting agencies began requiring institutions to participate in outcomes assessment with discipline-specific accrediting bodies following suit. This practice of assessing student learning and program outcomes is now part of most accreditation practices and is used to demonstrate institutional effectiveness.

What Is Assessment?

Assessment is the systematic, continuous process of gathering, reviewing, and using data on student learning and program outcomes in an academic program for the purpose of making improvements. Assessment is an ongoing four-step process of “establishing clear, measurable, expected outcomes of student learning; ensuring that students have sufficient opportunities to achieve those outcomes; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well student learning matches our expectations; and, using the resulting information to understand and improve student learning” (Suskie, 2009, p. 4).

What Is Assessment NOT?

Assessment is not simply the process of assigning grades to students. Rather, it is defining, as a program, the central areas of student learning, looking at each of these areas independently to see if students are achieving them, and then examining ways to adjust teaching/learning practices to increase student achievement. Grades, whether course or exam, often reflect multiple student learning outcomes and therefore do not accurately reflect learning in one area.

Assessment is also not an evaluation of faculty. Assessment is designed to look at learning through the student experience within a program. Although the measurement of a specific learning outcome might take place in one course, student learning typically takes place over the course of a curriculum and any deficiencies in student achievement should be considered programmatic in nature, not course-based.

Assessment also is not just an exercise for accreditation purposes. For assessment to be effective, it must be on going and systematic. It is not just the implementation of improvements in programs, but following up on these actions to determine if additional steps are needed.

Why Should Programs Do Assessment?

Assessment is the cornerstone of a continuous improvement process. The primary reason for doing assessment is to improve teaching and learning. However, assessment can also:

- Help a program identify its strengths and areas for improvement
- Highlight program contributions and student learning evidence to stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, discipline-specific and regional accreditors)
- Encourage collaboration among program faculty
- Help create a program vision and ideal
- Encourage curriculum review
- Provide data to support resource requests

What Are the Institutional Requirements for Assessment?

Though improvements in student learning are the focus of our assessment efforts, we are guided by standards from our accrediting agencies. Multiple standards from our regional accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), outline institutional requirements for assessment. Three of these standards are presented below.

Institutional Effectiveness: Standard 8.2 states that “The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results in the areas below:

- a. Student learning outcomes for each of its educational programs. (*Student outcomes: educational programs*)
- b. Student learning outcomes for collegiate-level general education competencies of its undergraduate degree programs. (*Student outcomes: general education*)
- c. Academic and student services that support student success. (*Student outcomes: academic and student services*)” (p. 68).

Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP): Standard 7.2 states that “The institution has a QEP that (a) has a topic identified through its ongoing, comprehensive planning and evaluation processes; (b) has broad-based support of institutional constituencies; (c) focuses on improving specific student learning outcomes and/or student success; (d) commits resources to initiate, implement, and complete the QEP; and (e) includes a plan to assess achievement. (*Quality Enhancement Plan*)” (p. 59).

Institutional Planning and Effectiveness: Standard 7.3 states that “The institution identifies expected outcomes of its administrative support services and demonstrates the extent to which the outcomes are achieved. (*Administrative effectiveness*)” (p. 62).

Who Is Required to Do Assessment and What Is Everyone’s Role in the Assessment Process? Requirements for assessment on a university campus cut across many divisions and functions. Specifically, the following areas are required to participate in the assessment process:

- All academic programs by degree level (i.e., bachelor’s, master’s, PhD, etc.)
- Certificate programs
- Administrative support services (including research and community/public service units)
- Academic and student support services
- Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)

The entire campus community plays an active role in assessment practices. On the academic side, for programs and certificates, all faculty members involved take an active role in assessment by identifying appropriate outcomes for the program, working to gather and analyze data, and discussing how to make improvements. For administrative units on campus, essential office personnel help their units define assessment plans and processes. The Institutional Effectiveness unit in the Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness provides resources and support to units and personnel charged with facilitating assessment; maintains assessment documents; reviews assessment plans and offers suggestions to programs and units on how to improve their processes; and documents and oversees the process for the campus community.

References

Huba, M. E., & Freed, J. E. (2000). Learner centered assessment on college campuses: Shifting the focus from teaching to learning. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(9), 759-766.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. (2024). *The principles of accreditation: Foundations for quality enhancement*. The 2024 Edition.

<https://sacscoc.org/app/uploads/2024/01/2024PrinciplesOfAccreditation.pdf>

Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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