ASSESSING SMALL GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

Institutional Effectiveness
Office of Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness
Presentation Outline

- Goals of assessment
- What the institution needs to demonstrate
- Assessment basics for all programs
- Overcoming challenges related to small numbers
- Advantages of doing assessment in programs with small numbers
- Questions to answer, overall objectives, responsibilities, and utilizing the information
Goals of Assessment

- To provide an honest appraisal of the extent to which students are achieving student learning outcomes as defined by the program
- To make informed, evidence-based decisions based on these findings
- To advance the unique experiences students have as a result of being in the program

The focus of assessment should be on improving student learning and the student experience
What the Institution Needs to Demonstrate

- Each program has defined student learning outcomes (i.e., knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies)
- These outcomes are directly assessed
- The program seeks to make improvements based on its findings

Overall:
Is there a documented, systematic, and ongoing process of planning and seeking improvement?
Assessment Basics for All Programs

- Requirements for VT degree and certificate programs
  - Programs should have a mix of student learning and program outcomes
    - 5 to 8 student learning outcomes (2 to 4 for certificates)
    - 2 to 3 program outcomes (1 to 2 for certificates)
  - Programs with discipline-specific accreditation requirements (e.g., ABET, AACSB, etc.) might have more outcomes
  - Each program should measure at least 2-3 student learning outcomes (1 for certificates) and 1-2 program outcomes (1 for certificates) every year
  - All outcomes should be measured at least twice in five years
Assessment Basics for All Programs

Each program needs to document the following as part of its assessment plan:

- Outcomes
- Direct measures and targets
- Findings and comments pertaining to the findings
- Action plans and comments regarding previous action plans

In general, make the assessment process:

- Relevant to the program, faculty, and students
- Simple and focused
Challenges Related to Small Numbers

- **Challenges:**
  - With small numbers, it is hard to determine if a true problem exists or if it is based on a particular cohort.
  - Numbers can be dramatically affected by the performance of one person.

- **Solutions:**
  - If the findings contradict what faculty experience, look at several cohorts of students or aggregate data over a few years (i.e., two or three-year running average).
  - Present data not just as percentages but also give the number of students assessed and provide some narrative regarding the findings.

- **Advantages:**
  - Faculty can have more in-depth discussions regarding specific students or cohorts.
  - Entire populations can be examined; this is hard to do in programs with lots of students especially if examining complex assignments.
Challenges Related to Small Numbers

- **Challenge:**
  - Most faculty will need to play an active role in the assessment process

- **Solution:**
  - Offer support/stipends to faculty to offset time commitments outside the classroom

- **Advantages:**
  - Faculty can benefit from working on the assessment/improvement process
  - Not just a few faculty members making the decisions
Challenges Related to Small Numbers

Challenge:
- “Service courses” that contain numerous non-majors

Solutions:
- Use assessment points later in the curriculum
- Examine data for majors only (comparing majors to non-majors)

Advantage:
- Can examine learning across two groups of students
Advantages of Doing Assessment in Programs with Small Numbers

- Programs can utilize and assess more complex assignments or culminating experiences (i.e., capstone projects)
- Programs can look at collections of student work (i.e., portfolios)
- Easier for programs to have multiple data collection points and to examine student growth
- Programs can develop measures that examine outcomes at higher cognitive levels
- Formative assessment is the key but this can be taken further with fewer students and more detailed projects
Advantages of Doing Assessment in Programs with Small Numbers

- **More faculty involvement:**
  - In the process - Can have several faculty rate the same capstone projects
  - With the students - Know more about how most students experience the curriculum
  - In discussions of the findings - Can talk about the nuances of the findings and have more detailed, holistic conversations

- **Programs:**
  - Can make changes more quickly
  - Can make more significant changes
  - Are more aware of what needs to be accomplished
  - It may be easier for these programs and their faculty to come to consensus on an improvement plan
Questions to Answer

- What knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies should characterize a graduate of the program?
- What data points are available that could capture more than just quantitative information?
- What information can be collected that would answer your questions?
- Are there transition points in the curriculum that can be used to capture data (mostly for graduate programs)?
- Programs with licensure: Does the exam cover the specific student learning outcomes of your program?
Overall Objectives

- Examine data in a way that looks at:
  - Trends across several years
  - Areas that are substantially lower in a given year
  - Areas that are consistently lower longitudinally
  - Aggregated data from several years
- Determine if numbers are lower than faculty would expect or want to see
- Make the process transparent for faculty and students
- Keep focus on improvement and student learning
Responsibilities

- Faculty are responsible for:
  - Determining what students should be learning as part of their program
  - Making improvements to their program based on the findings
- Institutional Effectiveness is here to:
  - Assist in the development of programmatic assessment plans
  - Offer tips for utilizing the results
  - Respond to and document information for our regional accrediting body

Assessment is not the responsibility of one faculty member or one administrator; it is a collaborative effort
Utilizing the Information: Remember

- The reason we do assessment is to improve student learning and the student experience
- This is not scientific research
- Not meeting targets should not be considered failures but opportunities for improvement
- It is not just about the number of data points but the meaning we extract from the data
- Discussions around assessment should be open and based on moving the program forward
- Measurement does not imply judgment
- Make the best decisions you can with the information you gathered