

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 off set 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