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**A Quick Guide**

**to Academic Assessment**

Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment

**2009**

**Contents**

*A Quick Guide to Academic Assessment*provides academic programs the essential knowledge needed to develop a system for review of the program’s mission, goals, and learning outcomes for continuing improvement in program quality. The document addresses the primary justifications for learning outcomes assessment, the basic steps for developing a useful assessment program, a template with guiding questions for writing an assessment report, and a rubric to assess if the program-level assessment meets necessary criteria. For a more complete guide, including the principles of assessment, as well as detailed suggestions and examples for assessment plan sections, see the *Guide to Academic Assessment.*

Beginning with the 2008-2009 school year, program-level assessment reporting moved to an online format with the use of WEAVEonline. For instructions for online reporting see *WEAVEonline: Quick Start Guide.*

**Why Assessment?**

Learning outcomes assessment is a process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. The process involves (adapted from Astin, 1996):

* Making expectations explicit
* Setting appropriate criteria and high standards for quality
* Systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well student performance matches those expectations and standards
* Using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve

The assessment process should answer three main questions:

1. What are we trying to do?
2. How well are we doing it?
3. How are we using the findings to improve future practices?

At the heart of the SACS philosophy of accreditation, assessment is viewed as quality enhancement. SACS expects the College to document quality and effectiveness to demonstrate an ongoing program of improvement. The following SACS standard, states this expectation:

*The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas: educational programs, to include student learning outcomes…*

Assessment should not be an exercise in reporting data; instead, quality assessment ***uses*** results to improve teaching and learning and inform planning and budgeting decisions. Suskie (2009, p. 37) specifies four characteristics of useful assessments [formatting added].

*Useful assessments:*

1. *Yield reasonably accurate and truthful information on what students have learned, so that we can use the assessment results with confidence to make plans and decisions.*
2. *Have a clear purpose, so that the assessment results are valued and don’t end up sitting on a shelf.*
3. *Engage faculty and staff, so the assessment becomes a useful part of the fabric of campus life.*
4. *Flow from and focus on clear and important student learning goals, so the results provide information on matters the college or university cares about.*

**Steps to Building a Useful Assessment Process**

1. **Accept that perfect assessment does not exist.**

Instead, “strive to make assessments sufficiently truthful that we will have reasonable confidence in our findings and can use them with enough assurance to make decisions about goals, curricula, and teaching strategies” (Suskie, 2009, p. 38).

1. **Start with clear and important learning outcomes.**

Begin with clear statements of the *most* important things you want students to learn from your program. Do not state all possible goals; articulate the most important ones, 6 to 8 are recommended (Hatfield, 2009). Focus on the skills, knowledge, and/or traits a student should acquire and demonstrate through the course of instruction in the major, not the actions (or inputs) from the department (Walvoord, 2004).

Examples (from Suskie, 2009):

* Biology students will make appropriate references and deductions from biological information.
* English students will present original interpretations of literary works in the context of existing research on these works.
* Theatre students will use voice, movement, and understanding of dramatic character and situation to affect an audience.
* Students will write with clarity, unity, coherence, and correctness.
1. **Plan your assessments carefully.**
* Assessment mechanisms must *clearly correspond* with the learning outcome. When planning an assessment, learning outcomes should map onto specific questions or scoring criteria.

NOTE: It is *insufficient* to state: “Students achieved the learning outcome of writing with clarity, unity, coherence, and correctness because 75% of students scored a B- or better on their capstone project.” Was this grade based ONLY on clarity, unity, coherence, and correctness? Were other factors included when grading? Did students receive points for a title page, presenting references correctly, or submitting on time? The connection between outcome and assessment must be clear.

* Use a *variety of assessments* over time for each learning outcome.
* With multiple sources of evidence, aggregated findings are more reliable and you can be more confident to infer that students have indeed learned what you wanted them to learn.
* By assessing over time, students have ample opportunities to demonstrate their learning, and the department is able to monitor learning development as students progress through the course sequence. Knowing students cannot demonstrate a learning outcome in the capstone course gives too little information, too late; and, programs do not have enough information to know where in the course sequence adjustments should be made.

NOTE: Triangulation is key. Evaluation of learning outcomes should include combinations of assessments with most being direct evidence of student learning (at least 2-3 direct measures with possibly 1 indirect measure).

* **Direct measures** include immediate evaluation of a student performance, such as a test, paper, project, laboratory procedure, musical performance, etc. They can be classroom-based activities, department-level exams or projects, or standardized tests relevant to the field. Student performance must be measured *using explicit criteria* connected to the learning outcomes.
* **Indirect measures** include student reports about what they learned (from student evaluations, exit surveys, or alumni surveys), record of job placement, graduate school admissions, or fellowships and prizes won by graduates. (From Walvoord, 2004)
1. **Use the findings for departmental decision making in areas such as curriculum, pedagogy, and other aspects that affect learning.**

To use program-level findings when making plans in a department or program, time must be allotted for information sharing and reflection. Examine the annual meeting schedule. When would be the most effective times to share data and discuss the findings? Is it a predictable annual event? For assessment to be most useful, findings should be discussed prior to planning for the following year.

As a department, discuss possible changes to address areas of student weakness. Some possible changes are listed below.

* The assessment is not providing useful information; the department develops a different mechanism for assessing an aspect of student learning.
* Students’ topic knowledge demonstrated in their capstone project lacks multiple perspectives; the book and subsequent readings assigned in lower level classes are changed to better address the topic.
* Student prerequisite knowledge is satisfactorily demonstrated at the end of the introductory course, but much of knowledge is not retained by the junior year; the department develops review assignments of requisite knowledge to be given as homework throughout the 200 and 300 level courses.
1. **Tie the assessment process to planning and budgeting.**

Often, program-level assessment results suggest fairly simple, low-cost actions similar to the ones described above. However, sometimes assessment results point to a problem that takes time, planning, and resources to address (Suskie, 2009). Using assessment results to request resources is a powerful strategy to promote a culture of assessment.

**References**

Astin, A. W. (1996). 9 Principles of good practice for assessing student learning. *AAHE Assessment Forum.* Retrieved from http://www.academicprograms.calpoly.edu/pdfs/

assess/nine\_principles\_good\_practice.pdf

Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. (2008). *The principles of accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement* (3rd ed.). Decatur, GA: Author.

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

Walvoord, B. E. (2004). *Assessment clear and simple: A practical guide for institutions, departments, and general education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

**Assessment Planning Template**

The ultimate goal of the assessment process is to improve student learning through careful planning. To gather indicators useful for decision making, our assessment efforts are cyclical, designed for continuous improvement, and describe the specific processes of mission and goal formulation, outcome specification, effective measurement of those outcomes, and thoughtful decision making.

**Mission:** Provides a clear and concise description of the ultimate principles that guide the work of the Program.

***Ask:*** “What is the purpose of the program in the overall College context?”

**Goals** (optional): Broad, generalized statements referring to a longer time frame than outcomes, goals are not directly assessed.

***Ask:*** “What does the program aim to achieve?”

**Outcomes:** *Learning Outcomes* are benefits for students: changes in knowledge, values, skills, or behavior.

***Ask:*** “What do you hope students can demonstrate once they complete your program?”

**Measures:** Tools based on the data you are trying to collect.

***Ask:*** “By what mechanisms will students demonstrate achievement of the outcome?”

**Achievement Targets:** Define success with anticipated results meeting specified criteria.

***Ask:*** “How will we know the students were successful?”

**Findings:** Your assessment results, and the interpretation of those results.

***Ask:*** “What does the data tell us? Did we meet our targets?”

**Action Plans:** Based on our assessment evidence, the actions needed to reach the targets.

***Ask:*** “What is the next step? Are changes needed? If so, what are they?”

**Assessment Plan Rubric for Academic Programs**

Department/Program Name \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date Reviewed

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Criteria* | **A Model for Others** | **Acceptable** | **Needs Some Modification** | **Not acceptable** | **Comments** |
| **Mission** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mission Statement is clear and specific to the program |  |  |  |  |  |
| Mission statement connects program to the RC mission |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Outcomes** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Learning Outcomes are identified (at least 3) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Learning Outcomes are appropriate and student-focused |  |  |  |  |  |
| All elements of the mission statement are identified in the outcomes |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Measures** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Each outcome is measured |  |  |  |  |  |
| Most of the measures are direct measures |  |  |  |  |  |
| Multiple (3 or more) and varied methods of assessment are identified |  |  |  |  |  |
| Assessment measures clearly correspond with the learning outcomes |  |  |  |  |  |
| Assessment measures allow student performance to be gauged over time |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Findings** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Findings are entered for each measure |  |  |  |  |  |
| Each outcome shows evidence of measurement |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Action Plan** |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Action plan is specific and aligned with the findings |  |  |  |  |  |

Adapted from *Assessment Plan Rubric*, Texas Christian University—www.assessment.tcu.edu