

Guidelines for Good Assessment of Student Learning at the Department or Program Level

by Barbara D. Wright

1. Begin with the mission, values, traditions and aspirations of your program.

Assessment is not an end in itself; it's merely a tool for getting us, our programs and our students where we want to go. So it's essential to know what we are going to use it *for*. We have to think about our mission, about the educational values our program represents, what our aspirations are, and what kinds of learning goals for students flow from that vision. These considerations in turn influence both *what* we assess and *how*.

2. Remember, assessment is about quality improvement first, quality assurance second.

The primary purpose of assessment is to improve the educational experience so that students leave us better prepared for their professional, civic, and personal lives. This is no criticism of the *status quo*, but it is a recognition that as students, society, and the workplace change, education must also change. Every program, even the most successful, can benefit from a process of continuous inquiry, reflection, and improvement.

If improvement is the point, then the most important comparison for each program is what it accomplishes *in relation to its own past record*. Comparisons to other programs on the same campus, or to similar programs on other campuses, can be illuminating but they are of secondary interest.

3. Define your key learning goals for students.

Defining key learning goals for the major is the essential first step in the assessment process. Goals should focus on what is truly important, not just what can be readily measured, and include skills and attitudes as well as knowledge. Goals should be expressed in three dimensions: 1) *what* we want students to learn; 2) *how well* we want them to perform; and 3) their development *over time*. Goals should represent the highest ambitions of the program, not just minimum standards.

Traditionally, academics have been very good at defining *inputs*, i.e., what goes *into* the education we offer. We have been less adept at defining *outcomes*, i.e., what knowledge, skills, and dispositions we want students to acquire and demonstrate as they leave us. The assumption has been that if the right inputs are present, the outcomes will follow – and if they don't, then it's the student that has failed.

Assessment challenges us to abandon those assumptions, define education in terms of *student learning* rather than faculty teaching, and then ask the hard questions that follow, e.g., “*Can our graduates write in the genres of their major?*” “*Are they information-literate?*” “*Can they apply quantitative skills to solve problems?*” “*At what level of skill?*” And “*Is this good enough?*”

4. Align methods for gathering evidence of learning with your goals for learning.

Aligning assessment methods with learning goals means two things: 1) using direct methods, and 2) choosing direct methods that are adequate to the task of documenting complex educational outcomes.

The best evidence of learning is *direct* evidence, that is, actual student work and performances that can be examined directly to determine what students know and can do. Traditional approaches to assessment often rely on *indirect* evidence (e.g., responses to questionnaires or surveys, results of focus groups or interviews) and *descriptive data* (e.g., retention rates, time to degree, percentage of graduates working in the field they studied).

These approaches do provide useful information. They tell us what students *think* they learned, and they can help identify problem areas. But they cannot answer fundamental questions about learning such as “Just how well *do* our students write?” or “Just how information-literate *are* our majors?”

Testing provides direct evidence of what students know, and it is a widely accepted assessment method. But standardized true/false and multiple-choice testing generally measures student knowledge at a superficial, fact- and formula-based level. It also sends the message to students that “education” means swift recall and regurgitation.

Students can best demonstrate higher-order intellectual skills when they respond to assignments or engage in activities that demand higher-order skills. Such assignments are authentic, open-ended and complex, involve meaning-making, and may have no “right” answer. They require judgment in the face of conflicting evidence or multiple solutions, and students must actively construct their own responses verbally, graphically, mathematically, or using other representations.

Without alignment, assessment is unlikely to yield useful results.

5. Look for evidence of learning, not just scores.

As faculty, we have high hopes for students. We want them to acquire a wide range of knowledge, hone their intellectual skills, and develop the habits of mind and heart that characterize a liberally educated person as well as a competent professional.

This kind of deep, complex, and transformative learning cannot be fully reflected in normed scores or responses to survey questions. But it can be identified in essays and research projects, in portfolios and capstones, in online discussions and observations of behavior. A combination of qualitative *and* quantitative documentation of student learning gives the fullest, most robust picture of student learning and development.

6. Make interpretation and use explicit steps in the assessment process.

Too often, assessment is viewed as a process of administering a test or questionnaire and reporting the results. Underlying this view is the assumption that assessment is done to satisfy external accountability demands, not for purposes of internal improvement. Understandably, faculty resent this, because they see it taking time and energy away from their students and their scholarship.

But good assessment practice calls for going around the *entire* assessment loop. Only when there is thoughtful *interpretation* and *use* of the findings can assessment benefit both faculty and students by improving learning and strengthening programs. An effective assessment effort convenes an inclusive “community of interpretation” to make meaning of the data or evidence, then follows up with specific actions designed to improve specific outcomes.

7. Think of assessment as ongoing, not episodic.

The real benefits from assessment come when the process is iterative and the effects – on curriculum, pedagogy, students, and faculty – are cumulative. Yet assessment is often regarded as an matter of collecting data and writing a report, then forgetting about it until the next report is due years later.

“Ongoing” may mean tracking the progress of individual students or cohorts, or it may mean collecting the same samples or administering the same instrument semester after semester. It may mean cycling repeatedly through the same list of goals. The point is to monitor progress toward intended goals in a spirit of continuous improvement.

A continuous process develops habits of reflection and inquiry about learning. It gradually breaks down campus “silos” and provides occasions for students, other faculty, professional staff, and administrators to join the conversation. It promotes sharing of information, expertise, collegiality, and a sense of common purpose. Ultimately, ongoing assessment can change campus culture, tempering the individuality we treasure with the collaboration we need.

8. Remember, assessment is not something entirely new.

Assessment may seem strange and intrusive. But it’s not really new or alien. Faculty have always met to talk about changes in their discipline, the needs of the profession, and the ways their curriculum and pedagogy could be updated. Testing and grading have traditionally been used to uphold standards and provide feedback to both students and their instructors. These practices have worked well.

Assessment builds on that academic tradition, but in a sense raises it to the next power. For example, assessment uses the tradition of faculty meetings, but asks us to make our decisions based on evidence of students’ strengths and weaknesses as well as impressions. Assessment is collective rather than private, systematic rather than *ad hoc*. It asks questions not only about one course or one student but also about what *the program as a whole* adds up to. Assessment is intentional, encouraged by campus-wide expectations for improvement, and publicly supported by resources and rewards.

9. Build on what you’re already doing and what you care about.

In every program on campus, students produce documents and performances that can be analyzed to answer assessment questions. Instead of seeing assessment as something extra, be efficient and take advantage of what you’re already doing.

Take advantage of local talent, too. Many faculty on campus have relevant expertise: they know how to write learning goals, evaluate portfolios or capstones, design performances, create authentic assignments, apply rubrics, and do other things that can contribute to assessment. Save time, save hassle, and draw on their skills.

To maintain energy and purpose over the long term – and make assessment maximally rewarding – focus on the questions that *matter* to you, your colleagues and your students. Remember, you’re not doing this to satisfy anyone else; assessment is *your* tool for strengthening your program.

10. Keep in mind the bigger picture and public calls for accountability.

US society has a strong and legitimate interest in the quality of higher education. As educators, we have a responsibility to the society that supports us as well as to our students, one another, and our institutions. It is essential to set the terms of debate in ways that respect the complexity of the educational process and communicate the challenges that our students and programs face. Assessment is our most powerful tool for doing so.

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