

## **Topic: What Is Assessment, Why Should Programs/Units 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 institutional accrediting agencies began requiring institutions to participate in outcomes assessment with discipline-specific accrediting bodies following suit. This practice of assessing student learning and other 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 other outcomes for the purpose of making improvements. Student learning outcomes 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?**

Student learning outcomes 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.

Student learning outcomes 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.

Overall, the assessment process at an institution is not just an exercise for accreditation purposes. For assessment to be effective, it must be ongoing and systematic. It is not just the implementation of improvements in programs or units, but following up on these actions to determine if additional steps are needed.

### **Why Should Programs/Units Do Assessment?**

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

- Help a program/unit identify its strengths
- Provide evidence of institution, program, or unit effectiveness and student learning
- Encourage collaboration among individuals within units or program faculty
- Create a unit or program vision
- Provide data to support resource requests

### **What Are the Institutional Accrediting Body's Requirements for Assessment?**

Several sections and core requirements from our institutional accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), outline institutional requirements for assessment.

**Institutional Planning:** Section 7.1 states that, “The institution engages in ongoing, comprehensive, and integrated research-based planning and evaluation processes that (a) focus on institutional quality and effectiveness and (b) incorporate a systematic review of institutional goals and outcomes consistent with its mission. (*Institutional Planning*) [CR]” (p. 19).

**Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP):** Section 7.2 states that, “The institution has a QEP that (a) has a topic identified through its ongoing, comprehensive planning and evaluation process; (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. 19).

**Administrative Effectiveness:** Section 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. 19).

**Student Achievement:** Section 8.1 states that, “The institution identifies, evaluates, and publishes goals and outcomes for student achievement appropriate to the institution’s mission, the nature of the students it serves, and the kinds of programs offered. The institution uses multiple measures to document student success. (*Student achievement*) [CR]” (p. 20).

**Student Outcomes:** Section 8.2 states that, “The institution identifies expected outcomes, assess 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. 20).

### **Who Is Required to Do Assessment and What Is Everyone’s Role in the Assessment Process?**

Institutionally, the college or university needs to engage in an ongoing evaluation process, examine appropriate student achievement goals and outcomes, and assess achievement of its Quality Enhancement Plan. Additional requirements for assessment on a university or college 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, certificates, etc.)
- Academic and student service units that support student success
- Administrative units

The entire campus community should play an active role in assessment practices. On the academic side, all faculty members should take an active role in assessment by identifying appropriate outcomes for the program, working to gather and analyze data, and/or discussing how to make improvements. For administrative units on campus, essential office personnel should help their units define assessment plans and processes and implement appropriate improvement plans when necessary.

### **References**

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