

Topic: Action Planning & Closing the Loop

Introduction

The assessment cycle does not end once findings are collected for a program or unit's outcomes. It is important for programs and units to determine what changes they should implement to advance in areas in need of improvement as well as to assess the effectiveness of any improvements already implemented. Action planning and closing the loop, the two final components of the assessment cycle, address these important steps.

Action Plan Development

Once a program or unit has collected findings for an outcome, it is time to identify any deficiencies or areas for improvement. Action plans describe the changes that a program intends to make based on its assessment findings. Common action plans for academic programs might entail changing curricula, assessment methods, pedagogical practices, the implementation of new technologies or assignments, or changes in program policies and procedures. Common action plans for administrative and academic and student support units might entail changing processes, implementing new procedures, increasing outreach efforts, or providing additional training or development opportunities. Once implemented, any effects of the changes would be evaluated in future assessment cycles. Action planning and closing the loop demonstrate that the program or unit is seeking improvement.

Closing the Loop

The assessment cycle does not end with the creation of action plans. It is important for programs or units to follow up on previously implemented action plans and the effectiveness of these changes. This follow-up process is referred to as "closing the loop." This step is an integral part of the assessment process and highlights the focus on continuous improvement. By providing information regarding previous action plans and their effects, departments, faculty, unit heads, or administrative professionals gain a better perspective on how much progress has been made, and how they might continue making improvements in the future. Closing the loop can be accomplished in many ways depending on whether or not the outcome is being met. If the assessment findings demonstrate that the outcome has been achieved, then the program can continue measuring the outcome in future assessment cycles, or make additional changes to try and improve performance. If, on the other hand, the outcome has not been achieved, the program has two options: (a) take further action to improve performance on that outcome, or (b) decide that the outcome and/or measure should be changed in some way and re-measured in a future assessment cycle.

Examples from Outcomes to Action Planning and Closing the Loop

Programs should develop an action plan for each outcome not meeting the program's established achievement target. Action plans should be specific, and directly relate to the stated outcome. Below are a couple of examples:

- **Student learning outcome for a doctoral program: Students will be able to effectively communicate in oral form.**
 - Measure: Preliminary oral research exam is evaluated by the preliminary exam committee using a 5-point rubric designed to evaluate student performance in oral communication. (Rubric scale: 1 = significantly below expectations, 2 = slightly below expectations, 3 = meets expectations, 4 = slightly above expectations, and 5 = significantly above expectations.)
 - Target: 90% of the students will receive an average committee rating of 3 or higher and 40% of the students will receive an average rating of 4 or higher.
 - Findings: 75% of the students received an average committee rating of 3 or higher. Only 25% of the students received an average rating of 4 or higher. Targets not met for this year.
 - Action Plan: Faculty will collaborate to create a new seminar course focused on research and presentation skills. This course will train students in appropriate research methodologies and how to effectively present research findings in a cohesive, coherent manner. This course will be required during

the students' first year in the program. The effectiveness of this action plan will be measured during the next cycle.

- Closing the Loop: One year after implementing the above action plan, the program reviewed assessment findings and determined that the outcome is still not being met. Consequently, the program will implement an oral communication workshop for students in the semester prior to their preliminary examination. The effectiveness of this change will be measured in the upcoming academic year.
- **Student learning outcome for an academic and student support unit: Students will be able to identify services provided by the Student Success Center to help students on academic probation.**
 - Measure: Students completing training at the center will be able to identify at least three services the center provides to support students on academic probation.
 - Target: 75% of students will accurately name three services.
 - Findings: 60% of students who completed training could name three services.
 - Action Plan: The center will implement short quizzes during the training process related to several areas to assist students in remembering information presented.
 - Closing the Loop: In the following assessment cycle, 80% of students were able to name three services provided. This demonstrates that the action plan was effective. The center will continue to use the developed action plan in the future.
- **Student outcome for an undergraduate program (Note: To demonstrate compliance for standards, 8.2a or 8.2b institutions only need student learning outcomes. This example and the one for the graduate program is presented merely to illustrate what a student outcome would look like for an academic program.): Students enrolled in the Criminology BS program will be accepted into an advanced degree program in a related field or have obtained employment within one year of graduation.**
 - Measure: Alumni will be contacted by the department one year after completing the program.
 - Target: 50% of students completing the undergraduate program will report obtaining employment and 35% of students will report being accepted to an advanced degree program in a related field.
 - Findings: 55% of the students reported obtaining employment within one year of graduation but only 25% of students were accepted to or started an advanced degree program. Target for employment was met but target for advanced degree was not.
 - Action Plan: We have created a committee tasked with compiling resources so that additional advising services can be provided to students interested in pursuing advanced degrees. This committee is also working with faculty to determine how this information can be better distributed to our students. The effectiveness of this action plan will be measured in the following academic year.
 - Closing the Loop: Two years after implementing the action plan above, the program reviewed assessment findings and determined that the outcome is being met, so no additional changes need to be made at this time. The program will continue to measure this outcome in future assessment cycles.
- **Administrative outcome: Promote diversity, equity, and inclusion through programming within the administrative unit.**
 - Measure: Track the number of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs offered by the administrative unit during the academic year.
 - Target: The unit will offer at least two diversity, equity, and inclusion programs each semester and at least three during the summer.
 - Findings: During the academic year, the unit only provided one program in diversity, equity, and inclusion each semester. Four trainings were offered during the summer months. Target partially met.
 - Action Plan: The unit is working with the Office of Diversity to develop shorter training sessions to offer during the academic year that would more easily fit into the schedules of unit professionals.
 - Closing the Loop: One year after working with the Office of Diversity, the unit was able to offer two sessions during the fall term but only one session in the spring. The unit considers this a success and will add an additional measure to track the number of participants at each of the sessions to make sure as many unit professionals are participating as possible.