Program Assessment Toolkit for Academic and Non-Academic Programs

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Debunking myths and the 8 steps to assessment success

Debunking Assessment Myths

Before you get started, here are some myths to consider.

Myth #1: Assessment should be time-consuming and involve a detailed and complicated process.

> This myth comes from two sources. First is the design issue. Assessment can be as complicated as you want it to be, but as complexity increases, usefulness decreases. A sustainable process can start with tests, activities, projects, or assignments you already have students complete. It should be something all sections of the course and faculty are using. Faculty own the assessment process for academic units and staff own assessment for non-academic units like student affairs. Design a process that makes sense to you, and that gives you something you can use and report.
>
> The second issue is how assessment can be perceived as a waste of time if the results are not used. Program reviews and external accreditation reports require program-level assessment. There are guidelines and requirements for accredited programs. When units (departments, degrees, programs, non-academic programs) use assessment to make changes, the next step is to see if they worked. If they didn't, your assessment is still a success because you learned something about student learning.

Myth #2: If we are externally accredited, the University does not want to hear about our assessment activities.

> External accreditors have standards for assessment that accredited programs have to follow. Those activities are essential to students and the institution and will be part of your brief, one-page annual assessment report. You don't have to do anything in addition to what your accreditor wants. The annual report to the institution gives you a roadmap to indicate your process. If there is not an external accreditation, then there are regular programs reviews for both academic and non-academic units. Those are typically on a 7-year cycle. These programs also provide an annual assessment report.

Myth #3: We have to have an objective for everything we do because if we do not assess it, it isn't important.

> If you have external accreditation, they may require you to assess objectives and outcomes that are part of their standards. If you are not externally accredited, your program review process that occurs every seven years asks you to report your program's objectives. A rule of thumb in assessment is that there should be no more than five objectives for the program. Faculty and staff in non-academic units decide program objectives based on the most important things they want students to achieve in their program. In addition to the program, course design means that there are

course-level objectives. These may be in addition to program-level objectives or cover additional items faculty think are important.

Myth #4: We have to assess every objective every academic year or term.

No, you don't! If you have five objectives and you assess all five every year, you will then find yourself mired in Myth #1 – too time-consuming. After you decide on your objectives, pick one or two to assess each year. When you collect the data, you will reflect on the changes you want to make. If you collect data in the fall and discuss it the following spring, you will first be able to "close the loop" and make changes the next fall. Collect, talk, and make the change. To document this, make up a schedule on a spreadsheet and note what you are assessing, how you are closing the loop (using your assessment data), and what you found when you closed the loop.

Myth #5: We have to assess every student.

It is ok to select a sample of students if you have multiple sections and many students. Smaller classes should assess each student. If you want to match demographic data with your students and look at the effect of those, you can assess each student.

Myth #6: If we find a problem or an issue, it can be used against our program or faculty.

Administrators are required to take the assessment safety pledge each term. If you feel your assessment results were used against you or your program, you should discuss your concerns with your supervisor. If there are unresolved issues, please contact the assessment office.

Myth #7: We assign final grades to our students, so that should tell us everything we need to know about how they are doing.

Grades can include items that are important, including attendance, on-time submissions, or following a required format that can affect the final grade in the course. Assessment focuses on a specific segment of learning you decided to include in your objectives. Think about it this way. A student who just reports their GPA on their resume doesn't help an employer know what they can do or what they learned. The class objectives communicate this information. For example, a student in a program that had an objective indicating that students will learn to "evaluate all the options and make a business decision" has something to talk about. They can show how they learned to look at all sides of a problem, the steps they took to find solutions, what they included in their analysis and how they made a decision. This is much more informative than "I got an A in a case study class."

Myth #8: There is no place to go for help when we have questions about assessment.

> The Idaho State University Office of Assessment is available to help. Also, many faculty serve as assessment coordinators or on committees related to assessment. Idaho State University has an assessment web site with information and links on assessment topics. The University Assessment Review Committee consists of Associate Deans and, for units that have them, full-time assessment professionals. Student Affairs has an Assessment Committee and individuals responsible for the assessment.

Myth #9: If we do program assessment, we don't have to assess other courses, skills, or concepts.

> Departments and units meet and discuss what they want students to know and learn. What takes place in classrooms is the foundation of programs. The building blocks of classroom activities involve introducing, reinforcing, and mastering skills and knowledge. Class objectives are collaborative with the department and those who currently or might teach the course. Come up with no more than five objectives for classes and follow the same strategy to assess them as you do for program objectives.

Myth #10: Doing assessment is not valued.

> We value what we report, and assessment is no different. The Office of Assessment will work with the Faculty Senate to develop ways for faculty to report and be credited for their assessment activities. The time spent should be recognized.

Getting Started

Most programs, degrees, certificates, and co-curricular programs have national organizations that provide insight into discipline-specific assessment ideas. If your program has external accreditation, the accreditor will have standards you follow as part of the accreditation process. For programs without external accreditation, an excellent place to begin is with a recognized national professional organization. Their web sites, conferences, and workshops will have information on how to apply assessment concepts to your discipline. Student affairs and other non-academic units also have national organizations and standards that include ideas about assessment.

This document takes you through eight steps that will help you with your assessment, no matter where you are. If you are just starting, begin with Step 1. If you have results and want to use them, skip to Step eight. Even if you have a robust assessment process, you should skim through all the steps. Assess your assessment process to make it inclusive and designed to get results you can use. Also, be mindful of the time spent on assessment and make choices that fulfill your needs in the easiest, most meaningful way possible.

Mission Statements

Assessment begins with a mission statement. Program mission statements align to the institutions and provide a simple framework for developing your assessment plan. Many programs developed mission statements in recent years as part of the planning process. If you don't have a program mission statement you can always use the institutional mission or contact us at assessment@isu.edu for help developing one.

Step 1: Assessment Plans

What is a link to information that will help us create an assessment plan?

> Walvoord, B. E. (2007-2008) The Useful, Sensible, No-Frills Departmental Assessment Plan. Essays on Teaching Excellance: Toward the Best in the Academy. Published by The Professional & Organizational Development Network in Higher Education (www.podnetwork.org). 19,7. https://podnetwork.org/content/uploads/V19-N7-Walvoord.pdf

What is an assessment plan? It is an outline of what you want students to learn, when and where during the class or program you plan to assess them, the data you will collect and how you will use the results, and finally, what you changed based on what you learned. The plan is created by following the 8 steps listed here. Begin by talking to each other and deciding what you need to do. Departments are urged to consider how best to use faculty and staff time. If there are meetings you can drop for a semester while you get started or regular meetings, you can incorporate assessment into, consider those options.

How should we communicate about the plan? Find someone or a group willing to sum up what you discussed and then share it using google drive or Box. You can even create a Moodle site for your assessment. That allows you to post documents, have discussion forums, and create a calendar.

What and who is included? You should assess across all teaching modes; online, hybrid, face-to-face, distance learning, clinical settings, hyperflex, zoom and any other way you meet and interact with students, including dual enrollment. If you collect data separately for each modality and look at it separately, it will help you see if there are things to change relating to where and how the course is taught. The process should be inclusive, meaning adjuncts and dual enrollment faculty should be included when student learning outcomes are assessed. They should also be included in the conversations you have as you make decisions about the plan. The extent to which adjuncts or contingent faculty participate depends on your program and their workload requirements. Note that the University can have online meetings with distant faculty using access to the directly connected rooms or zoom.

Step 2: Program Objectives (Goals)

What are the objectives (goals) of our program? It is important to work together to create the objectives (goals) for your program. The terms objectives and goals are used interchangeably and mean the same thing, but at ISU we typically use the term objectives. Objectives are related to your mission statement. An objective could have one or more student learning outcomes in which faculty evaluate student evidence. Objectives are higher-level and describe where we want our students to be when they complete our program. Once you decide on the objectives, you will create student learning outcomes for each one. This is called a direct assessment because it looks at an individual student's performance on activities, projects, exams or other work. Learning objectives can also include indirect assessment, which could include focus groups, placement in internships, or participation in community-based experiential learning.   Programs should have three to five objectives. Some accredited programs have more because of their accreditation, unaccredited programs can begin with three to five and then, over time, consider changes.

What documents do you already have about assessment? Collect any documents or plans you already created, share them with everyone who will participate in assessment, and set up a meeting to talk about assessment. What you talk about at your meeting will depend on where you are. Units with a well-developed assessment plan would start by revisiting the process they devised to see what is working or what they want to change.

If you don't have a formal plan, how do you talk about students' learning? If you don't have a formal assessment plan, you might have an informal one. If you talk about how students are doing on assignments and activities, but you haven't written how and when you assess, you are still off to a good start. Assessment just documents what you are already doing.

Who should join the conversation? Meeting and talking with everyone you think is interested in student success, and learning is a starting point. Those who need to be included are faculty who teach in the program. Inclusiveness means finding ways to involve adjunct faculty, graduate teaching assistants, dual enrollment faculty, or anyone who teaches.   In non-academic units, the people to include are program directors and staff.

How do I achieve equity and inclusion in my assessment efforts? There are several sources of information for this topic listed below. Discussions about activities and rubrics should include the concepts of equity and inclusion. The idea is to create assessments for all cultures. After conducting an assessment, programs can evaluate any statistical difference among groups. The institution is implementing a pilot program that will provide faculty feedback about best practices and help develop methods to find information with a minimum of time. The references help explain the why and how about these efforts.

Erick Montenegro and Natasha A. Jankowski (2017) Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment. National Institute for Learning Outcome Assessment. https://learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/OccasionalPaper29.pdf

Higher Ed Connects. (2019, June 15). Diversity in Higher Education: Creating Culturally Responsive Classroomshttps://higheredconnects.com/diversity-in-higher-education-creating-culturally-responsive-classrooms/

Step 3: Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

Who do we share our outcomes with? Idaho State University is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), and its new standards on Student Learning 1.C.3 are as follows:

> *The institution identifies and publishes expected program and degree learning outcomes for all degrees, certificates, and credentials. Information on expected student learning outcomes for all courses is provided to enrolled students.*

What is a link to information about student learning objectives/outcomes?

> Student Learning Outcomes: Good Practices Source: Washington State University Center for Teaching and Learning https://atl.wsu.edu/documents/2015/02/student-learning-outcomes-good-practices.pdf/

How do we set standards for our outcomes? You can decide what percentage you want to achieve acceptable or excellent. You should choose that first and agree to a percentage. For example, "we expect 75% of our students should achieve acceptable or excellent ratings." When you use a rubric for assessment, as discussed in the next step, you will rate students, count how many you have at each rating, and then calculate what percentage met or exceeded the standard.

What is a student learning outcome? A student learning outcome indicates what the student will be able to do. It can include soft skills like teamwork or working in a culturally diverse environment. Hard skills relate to things we usually associate with the specific content and skills related to a degree or major. It is something that can be observed or measured. What will students be able to apply and do after they finish your course or program?

How often should we assess our outcomes? Until you have your outcomes, it will be hard to create an assessment schedule. External accreditors may visit the campus every five years or, if you don't have external accreditation, it may be every seven years. General Education classes report to the GERC committee each year. Each Goal is formally reviewed by GERC every five years and they prepare a report similar to a program or accreditation assessment review. Your timetable should indicate that you assessed each objective, used the results, and looked at how well your changes worked at least twice during the period in the cycle for program review, GERC, or accreditation.

How many learning outcomes should our program include? It depends on the standards you need to meet for external accreditors. It also depends on your program's mission. For each objective, you should have from three to five student learning outcomes.

How do I know which classes should be assessing learning outcomes for my program? All classes taught on campus need to share course-level learning objectives with enrolled students. Program assessment should occur only in courses required by all majors in your program or degree.

What is curriculum map and how do I create one? If you want students to learn something, you need to map out where it is introduced, reinforced, and finally, where students should master the skill or concept. For example, a required senior design project in Computer Sciences could require teamwork, writing, and presentation skills, problem-solving and programming design and implementation. Some accrediting entities require programs to assess individual students and that can be difficult with a group project.

A curriculum map can help identify where the skill or concept is introduced, reinforced, and mastered. Faculty can bring their syllabi to share and meet to map out where learning occurs at all levels. The link below provides insight into how to create a curriculum map.

> Natasha Jankowski Associate Director National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment September 12, 2014. Mapping Learning Outcomes: What you map is what you see. https://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/Presentations/Mapping.pdf

What are the requirements for General Education classes? The State Board of Education provides objectives and rubrics for state-wide general education courses which are 1 - 6. The objectives unique to Idaho State, Objectives 7 – 9, have outcomes available on the GERC internet site. Those links are listed on the next page.

State Board of Education General Education Outcomes and Rubrics Link.

> Idaho State Board of Education, General Education. Goals and rubrics are accessed under the links on the left titled "Related." https://boardofed.idaho.gov/board-facts/board-committees/general-education-committee/

General Education Requirements Committee Link, Student Learning Outcomes for Objectives 1- 9.

> https://www.isu.edu/gerc/gen-ed-objectives-and-courses/

The Idaho State University Instructional Technology Resource Center. The ITRC sponsors support for online faculty with the Quality Matters program. Many faculty who completed the program indicate its value in developing assessment and student learning outcomes in addition to its information on course design. An overview and the ITRC contact information is available via the link below.

> https://www.isu.edu/itrc/quality-matters-at-isu/

Step 4: Creating Signature Assignments & Activities

What is a link that will explain how to create assignments, projects, and activities?

> Eberly Center. Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation, Carnegie Mellon University. Creating Assignments. https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingassignments.html

If your faculty met and shared their syllabi in Step 3, you already have a good idea about the assignments, exams, projects, or activities occurring in your program. The questions and issues in the link will provide a broader perspective.

How should we collaborate? If you created a Moodle site to share your assessment insights, you can collaborate with discussion forums and share ideas, assignments, and information. You might want to set up periods during which your discussion occurs and then meet face-to-face or with a zoom meeting for all participants. Once we return fully to campus, you may also want to schedule a zoom meeting or use one of the connected rooms on campus that have links to rooms in Idaho Falls and Meridian. If you have questions about arranging remote meetings, please contact the assessment office for help.

Step 5: Writing and Using Rubrics

What is a link that will explain how to create rubrics or show examples of them?

> Writing Effective Rubrics by Brophy, T. University of Florida Office of the Provost, Institutional Assessment. http://web.cse.ohio-state.edu/~soundarajan.1/abet/writing_effective_rubrics_guide_v2.pdf

How do we use rubrics when we assess student work? Faculty should collaborate to use rubrics and evaluate student work when there are multiple sections and faculty teaching the course. Programs and departments can decide if they want faculty to assess their own students or if they want to have two or more faculty grade the same student paper. Rubrics set the standard for the work and are usually on a scale. It can be as simple as 0 for did not do the work, 1 unacceptable, 2 acceptable, and 3 exceptional. Faculty should collaborate to develop standards on the ratings and be descriptive enough on each level so everyone understands the criteria. If a multiple-choice test is used and there are three questions on the concept, you may want one to be introductory, one more challenging, and another difficult to help determine where students are in terms of their learning.

How do we do the actual assessment? How you do this is your choice. You can sit down together in a room, share work using methods that meet FERPA standards like Box or pass work and papers back and forth. If you are assessing projects or assignments that students submitted in Moodle, you can add other faculty to your class to access and read the papers or student work. Find a way that works best for you. To track students, download and create a roll sheet from Moodle, for example, and then put the assessment score next to the students' names. If you link assessment with students, make sure you follow what you learned in the FERPA training just as you learned to do for grades. If you connect the assessment score to your students individually, there is the possibility to study outcomes and incorporate demographic data. This can be helpful if your program is working to determine how best to help and support various demographic groups.

Who do we share the rubrics with? Both students and faculty should have access to the rubrics used to assess student work. Rubrics help students understand your expectations. Faculty engaged in evaluating student work for assessment should use the rubrics, but everyone in the program should have access to them. General Education classes have rubrics to use that are posted on the State Board of Education site, but other programs have the flexibility to develop their own.

Step 6: Collecting Assessment Data

What is a link to a site that can help me understand direct and indirect assessments?

The terminology of assessment isn't supposed to be confusing, but it can be. Think of direct assessment as something tired directly back to an individual student's performance on a project, activity, assignment, performance or other work. Indirect assessment does not come from direct student work, but looks at things that would help your program determine the extent of student success and engagement. These might include enrollment, retention, participation in service learning or internships, alumni surveys or focus groups. The source below helps show you what might appear in these categories.

> Skidmore College. Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment at Skidmore College. Direct vs. Indirect Assessment Methods. https://www.skidmore.edu/assessment/archived/direct-v-indirect-assessment.php

Why should our program use both direct and indirect assessments? If you collect data on student learning by reviewing their work and use information from surveys, placement, retention, you will have a broader picture of your program.

How do we find data that already exists? Data that may already exist in surveys and questionaries' of students that collect information on activities like participation in internships or have access to retention and program data. Idaho State has program viability data that tracks retention and other metrics. Access is available to program directors and chairs via Institutional Research.

Step 7: Organizing and Analyzing the Data

What is a link that will explain how to organize the data?

> Organizing Assessment Data for Analysis Source: Washington State University Office of Assessment, Teaching, and Learning https://atl.wsu.edu/documents/2016/10/organizing-assessment-data-for-analysis.pdf/

What is a good way to analyze the data? Here are two links:

> Analyzing Quantitative (Numeric) Assessment Data Source: Washington State University Office of Assessment, Teaching, and Learning

https://atl.wsu.edu/documents/2016/10/summarizing-quantitative-assessment-data.pdf/

Analyzing Qualitative (Textual) Assessment Data Source: Washington State University Office of Assessment, Teaching, and Learning
https://atl.wsu.edu/documents/2015/03/qualitative-data-analysis.pdf/

How complicated does our analysis need to be? It does not need to be complicated. The goal is to get results that help you understand what happened. Then you need to talk about your perceptions of why it happened. Faculty own the process, and the results should not be used to place value judgments on programs, courses, or individual faculty. The goal is to look at the data, think about what it means, and how you could use it to make changes.

Step 8: Sharing and Using Results

What are some ideas about how to share our results? As of the academic year 2019-2020, ISU requires that all our programs share their results in a brief annual report. Results are a natural part of program reviews and accreditation reports. Non-academic units often prepare annual reports, and they also have periodic program reviews. Below are some additional ideas about who might be interested in your results:

- ✓ Alumni or college newsletters
- ✓ Donors and the community
- ✓ Legislators
- ✓ Parents and potential students
- ✓ The university community
- ✓ Administrators
- ✓ Those developing budgets

What are some ways to use the results to make curricular or program changes? The terminology often used in assessment for this step is "closing the loop." All that means is making changes based on assessment data and then continuous reviewing those changes. It is important to remember that if you change multiple things all at once, it will be harder to determine what worked to help student learning.

In the classroom setting, some of the following ideas were used:

- ✓ Had students take graded quizzes or a practice exam with feedback on test-taking skills, classroom discussion about problem and questions
- ✓ Did a curriculum map of the concepts/skills students most struggled with and realized it was introduced, but not reinforced. This also occurred at the program level. Had additional work to reinforce the concept/skill

- ✓ Used clickers during class to more readily get feedback on students' understanding and adapted lectures as they occurred
- ✓ Changed to a textbook with better and clearer information or better support materials
- ✓ Changed when in the semester a project or test occurred because too much was due too close together
- ✓ Made sure homework and assignments with feedback were returned in a timely way so students could incorporate the feedback and improve
- ✓ Asked students to share the "muddiest point" each class, determined trends and addressed the issues the next class
- ✓ Asked students to engage in active learning, see, share, and do, for example. Involved problem-solving with students going to the board to share step-by-step answers or verbally reporting answers

In programs at Idaho State, based on a survey in 2017, the following occurred:

- ✓ Changed the curriculum – a sequence of classes, the content of classes, dropped one and added another
- ✓ Updated equipment and materials
- ✓ Changes to pedagogy – incorporated active learning, changed projects and activities, developed a capstone class or project
- ✓ Program reorganization – involved courses under the control of the program or department and other classes outside the department or program
- ✓ Revised the assessment process
- ✓ Revised advising procedures
- ✓ Revised learning outcomes
- ✓ Revised the strategic plan