



SYMPOSIUM INTRODUCTION: A Is for Assessment

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As educators, we're always in evaluation mode, whether we're preparing that first syllabus for the new academic term, grading papers, or gently steering a classroom discussion that has gone off track due to students' inattention or limited comprehension. Assessment guru Barbara Walvoord calls assessment a "natural, inescapable, human, and scholarly act," in which all good teachers can't help but engage (2010, p.2). We're always asking whether students are learning what we're trying to teach. Increasingly, though, faculty across all disciplines are learning that their natural remedies must be turned into official measurements and documents to satisfy accreditors, administrators, and others. The additional work on top of teaching and other demands has made assessment the dreaded "A-word" many faculty resist. As a respondent to a TJMC survey put it, "I'm all for taking a look at your program and deciding what you'd like to do and how'd you like to get there. But the way assessment works, you are really just jumping hoops and not truly assessing."

The frustration seems to be exacerbated by the fact that assessment takes time and resources to get right; universities, departments, and programs often go through several failed iterations before they get something that fits their situation. Even with a good plan, assessment may not produce immediate rewards: It takes time to take the findings from assessment and create interventions in the curriculum—and then, ideally, assess the interventions, too.

Nevertheless, as the articles featured in the sym-

posium indicate, some of our colleagues in small programs have made assessment a way of life in their departments. Tracy Lauder shares what she and colleagues at Emory & Henry have learned as they have attempted to implement a comprehensive senior exam for assessment, while Lola Burnham discusses initiatives she and colleagues at Eastern Illinois University have undertaken as part of an assessment program that is "constantly in progress." Her article is accompanied by a sidebar sharing how her program assessment led to an initiative to counter weak math skills. Eastern's intervention is an example of how the assessment cycle is supposed to work: the kind of interplay between assessment and curriculum the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications advocates in its guide.

Programs with developed assessment plans are a little intimidating to those of us who have yet to get all faculty sitting around the table in agreement on what needs to be done (another often-cited barrier), which is why the editors thought it might be helpful for readers to share some of their experiences of what has worked or hasn't worked. We invited subscribers to the SPIG listserv to respond to a short survey on assessment efforts. With 177 members, the SPIG listserv has many subscribers who are not SPIG members; as a result the 37 responses we received have to be read with some caution. Nevertheless, it was clear we were hearing from an experienced group of SPIG members—78.8% of respondents have taught for 11 or more years and nearly 82% are at the associate and

professor level, while nearly 73% reported having tenure—that reflects SPIG membership identified in a previous survey. Journalism pros make up 62.1% of the respondents, with public relations at 10.2% and mass communication generalists at 27.6%.

A few notes on what the respondents thought: 90.0% of respondents report their programs have tried assessment, and all of those programs (100%) continue to do so. Overall, 75.6% strongly agree or agree that assessment is working; nearly 30% were neutral, and 3% strongly disagree that assessment is working. This is where it starts to get interesting. We have reproduced the open-ended responses to questions on why assessment may or may not be working. The frustration is apparent, but amid some of the battle fatigue are colleagues who state, “We have put assessment of learning outcomes at the heart of our program.” Read the comments and add share your experiences and observations.

Reference

Walvoord, B.E. (2010). *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. (2nd ed). Foreword by Trudy W. Banta. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Please see these related supporting essays:

- A is for Assessment: The Assessment Plan: A Work Constantly in Progress by Lola Burnham
- A is for Assessment: Teaching to the Test? Administration of a Senior Comprehensive Exam by Tracy Lauder

Survey Responses

We have reproduced all responses to the three open-ended questions on views about assessment. Responses have been edited only when glaring typos or misspellings might hamper reading.

Why do you think your assessment plan is working?

1. We have fine-tuned our teaching/objectives/assignments, etc., when it is clear our students are not learning or remembering what we thought we had taught.
2. We have a fairly streamlined assessment instrument (3 major areas), and we work on only

one area a year. The conversations about student work have helped us norm our grading and identified areas for improvement. They also have led us back to curriculum to see where we need to emphasize certain skills. The word “norming” and “curriculum map” still make me shiver in dismay—but assessment has helped us make a difference for our majors and has helped us keep our focus.

3. Multiple points of entry. We do lots of different things: outside advisory group, capstone projects, and narratives at the end of each course.
4. We are more conscious of what we need to measure. The enforced discipline of assessment requires that we, at the very least, take a cursory look at what we’re doing, and, at best, consider how to improve. It varies from person to person and course to course, but it does make a difference.
5. Long-delayed effort to systematically measure whether students are learning anything
6. Feedback from assessment review committee. Changes made to the program.
7. We have been doing assessment for 24 years and have used the results to change courses, delete courses, add courses, change the curriculum, and add new information/units to courses.
8. We review the material, the feedback, and have a chance to consider changes.
9. Assessing the first two classes of our journalism sequence allows us to focus our syllabi, refine our goals, and avoid repetition. It also gives instructors a rough guide for grading students and figuring out whether they are making progress.
10. We are an accredited program (ACEJMC), so we must show that we are doing this, and it does give us ways to evaluate our program and what we do, so it is a good thing.
11. We have the assessment for outcomes mapped to our departmental objectives. The data have been helpful to evaluate learning.
12. I skipped that question [Is assessment working?] because I don’t feel able to say whether our efforts that might fit the survey’s unstated definition of assessment are working or not. If they are working, we are not seeing high-profile direct results. The most formal assessment efforts were a flurry of activity a few years ago: institution-wide, appallingly bureaucratic and tedious, and so far as I could tell, utterly useless

to our program. Likewise, the automated end-of-term student assessments of every course eventually produce stats of some value to administration and a tiny bit of help to faculty. Our simple paper-form departmental midterm student assessments of the courses so far are a bit amateurish by comparison, but sometimes quite helpful, especially if several students correctly perceive a real problem but have not otherwise brought it to the attention of anyone, or anyone but each other and the instructor. Our capstone course is one that uses portfolio review as one way to assess seniors' competencies; I cannot judge it because I'm out of that loop.

13. They help us make meaningful change in improving the learning of our students.
14. The strategies we've employed force students to produce materials in a way that benefits them professionally.
15. Because they are identifying weaknesses and strengths of the program; because the process is helping us develop as a faculty learning community; because the process is generating data useful in requesting greater resources; because the process is providing data demonstrating that we are achieving learning goals—we can demonstrate students are learning.
16. There should have been a "maybe" option. Our assessment methods are college-wide, not just in our department.
17. Outcomes support all of the courses in the undergraduate school.
18. We've been able to see that our learning outcomes for our classes are met. Senior exit interviews with our students seem to indicate we are doing the right things, and our university assessment committee has given us glowing feedback.
19. We find that assessment raises the level of expectation of academic rigor and professional preparation for media careers. That expectation, first caught by faculty in a common vision behind assessment, is transferred to students (usually only the best, at first, but later more of those in the middle of the pack.)
20. The assessment methods provide us with feedback that we can use to strengthen teaching or make curriculum changes.
21. We have put assessment of learning outcomes at the heart of our program.

Why don't you think assessment is working?

1. We are still new to this.
2. Early stages of implementing assessment & student learning outcomes in a unified approach that's quantifiable.
3. As a university, we have an assessment director who is pushing SLOs and other assessment devices with mixed results. Lots of faculty resistance. Changing verbs in a document doesn't necessarily improve teaching/learning. At a department level, we've talked about assessment but haven't done it other than at the course level with exams, papers, projects.
4. If the point of assessment is to improve your program, it's not working. If the question means, "Are you assessing?" it's working.
5. I think we are complying with our regional accreditation body, and that may be our only "success." In terms of making progress against our less-than-spectacular learning outcomes, we've pretty much hit the wall on those.
6. The assessment being done is to meet the University's minimum requirement.
7. We just started a formal assessment, which is tied into accreditation. Therefore, some profs scorn it as bureaucratic.
8. There is no incentive to use the results to change things. It's all a matter of shuffling papers so we can look like we're doing assessment.

What is the biggest obstacle to assessment?

1. The time it takes to administer the assessments and time it takes to evaluate the results.
2. We've kept things simple (but important) and measurable. We meet once a year at the end of the semester, so that's completely doable. The only obstacle would be time—and we've kept that under control so far. Our university brought in assessment guru Barbara Walvoord, who takes a completely sane approach to assessment. She helped us get to a good place.
3. REALLY "closing the loop." The assessments tell us what we already know: Students are poor writers; they are ambivalent about the media and media careers; they are poorly prepared for the job market. We really don't do a damn thing about it.
4. Very time-consuming. At first we tried to do too much. We adjusted and made our plan more realistic and designated one faculty member to

- be our assessment guru and negotiated a one-course reduction once a year for that and some other duties.
5. Getting faculty to initially buy in; once they do, they see the value and realize it is not as onerous as it seems.
 6. University bureaucracy.
 7. Time and money. With the regional accrediting group (SACS) and our professional accrediting group (ACEJMC) specifying assessment that MUST be done, we're expending three to four courses of faculty load time just on assessment.
 8. Time! I think we would assess more classes in a useful way, but workloads are substantial and the burden tends to fall on junior faculty (moi). I also think that certain types of classes—what we call “context classes” (discussion-based with readings on history and ethics)—are not as assessment-friendly. I'd like to believe that certain kinds of learning are beyond categorization and rubrics.
 9. We have had trouble “closing the feedback loop” and showing how we are using the data we collect for assessment purposes. We now have a much clearer and cleaner way of doing this and closing this loop.
 10. The time it takes!
 11. The entire process of getting valid info and turning it to action in a timely way. The paper forms at midterm, for example, have to be sifted and reviewed by program heads before being shared with instructors. If they contain negative, or obviously brown-nosing, comments, those have to be typed by office staff so instructors do not see recognizable handwriting while there's still time for recognition to potentially affect grading decisions.
 12. It takes cooperation among the department.
 13. Getting students to reach their full potential in the things we assess.
 14. Fear, anxiety, lack of understanding, resistance to change, intellectual mummification.
 15. Bureaucracy.
 16. Our communication faculty doesn't talk about assessment unless a problem occurs.
 17. Time. Our faculty are so pressed for time that it is hard to take the time to do it.
 18. Time, scheduling, personalities of individual faculty and students, and the tendency for assessment to mushroom into something bigger than its intended purpose. (Bureaucracy grows like Georgia kudzu.)
 19. Lack of time and resources to adequately assess.
 20. Implementing the changes we discover through assessment because assessment called for major curricular changes.
 21. Time and faculty buy-in.
 22. Faculty who have been here for a very long time.
 23. Faculty haven't bought into the idea. Many see it as another No Child Left Behind gimmick that wastes a lot of time developing criteria, filling out paperwork, etc. Time that could be spent on preps, working with students. At the department level, we're simply dysfunctional.
 24. I'm all for taking a look at your program and deciding what you'd like to do and how'd you like to get there. But the way assessment works, you are really just jumping hoops and not truly assessing.
 25. Student learning/motivation.
 26. No changes are implemented by individual teachers, though some changes in curriculum are implemented.
 27. Attitude of professors—including myself. Accepting assessment means you must accept a public accounting of your work, which can be painful. But also, success is harder to measure than failure.
 28. Administration doesn't care if students actually improve—just that we can tell our accrediting bodies that we are doing assessment.