



14 Key Tips for Conducting Assessment

Assessment has been defined in the literature as a process that involves making judgment about student learning in a systematic manner. An effective assessment process consists of collecting information, analyzing it and then using any information gathered from the analysis to improve the teaching and educational process, (Shaftel and Shaftel, 2007).

It is an institution's ethical duty to make sure that their academic programs are as effective as they can make them and to continually collect assessment data in an attempt to constantly improve their students' learning environment. No program is ever perfect, and assessment helps us pinpoint where we are lacking and guides us as we strive to make our learning community better. I recognize that many faculty members have not engaged in assessment planning before. As a result these tips are intended to assist them in the process.

- 1. Keep it as manageable as possible.** Assessment is not, and should not, be your full-time job. Keep goals focused, and keep assessment efforts reasonable. If faculties are analyzing every paper written by every student in order to assess writing skills, you're making the process too complex. Take a random sample instead.
- 2. Set ambitious goals.** According to their 2012 report, the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability suggest that learning goals should include both broad as well as specific ones. Not only should students develop professional, practical and technical skills but also evolve into socially responsible individuals. These goals should be made publicly aware to all stakeholders including faculty, students, and the public at large. The individual departments should strive to keep their academic goals in alliance with the institutional framework so that individual courses can be directed towards fulfilling the overarching educational ambition of the institution, (New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, 2012).
- 3. Make sure your expectations are reasonable:** While it is crucial to set ambitious goals, at the same time these goals should be realistic. It would be hardly appropriate to expect students to be able to do data analysis after only a single week of introductory statistics teaching. Consult other faculty members and develop appropriately spaced out and timed learning milestones that students should be assessed against.
- 4. Assessment is everyone's responsibility – treat it as such.** Spread the workload around to faculty in your area, or even to multiple related areas. For example, General Education courses might be best served by coordinating assessment efforts with multiple departments that teach Gen Ed courses; online courses with the Director of Online education.



14 Key Tips for Conducting Assessment

5. **Let many people review the assessment tools before implementing them.** This is particularly important to make sure your tools are valid and reliable (Suskie, 2009). In other words, multiple perspectives would help you determine whether the tools are clear, and are truly measuring or assessing what you want them to assess.

6. **Assessment is necessary to make a case for budgetary issues.** Assessment data can provide evidence to make the case that you need a certain piece of equipment or an extra budget line to effectively do your job. According to the report Ewell et. al (2011), assessment initiatives are often undercapitalized, with little or no budget. In order to include faculty in the process of assessment and create an embedded assessment structure within their courses and programs, institutions should provide a modest stipend to staff and faculty engaged in creating important assessment rubrics and other benchmarks that can then be shared across different programs/departments.

7. **Communicate effectively.** Everyone needs to know when you're doing assessment and why you're doing it. Communicate this to students as well. Research has shown that students learn much better when the goals and objectives of the program or course material are made clear. Students should have a lucid understanding of what it is that they are expected to learn and know at the end of the course. It is also crucial to provide them with quick feed back as they may lose interest and not benefit if they do not receive constructive and timely feedback on their assessments (Suskie, 2009).

8. **Develop a systematic process for gathering data:** Institutions should ensure that there are policies and procedures in place that define how frequently information about student learning is going to be gathered, such as half way through the semester, right before the finals and so on. This evidence should also include information on student demographic and other characteristics, so that contextual factors are not ignored (Ewell et al., 2011).

9. **Do not over react to data.** Data naturally fluctuates, so wait for patterns of evidence to emerge before implementing an action plan to fix a perceived problem. Suppose 95 percent of your students pass a state-mandated test this year, and the next year only 91 percent pass. Should you panic? No. Performances vary based on many factors and fluctuations in data should be expected. On the other hand, a drop from 95 percent to 42 percent should raise serious concerns and be acted upon quickly.

10. **Work within the constraints of the current system.** One of the most common comments as to why something is not being done in the area of assessment is that the current system is faulty. The budget is inadequate, the faculty overworked, or the support staff stretched too thin. These might be legitimate complaints from time-to-time



14 Key Tips for Conducting Assessment

but unfortunately are not going to get you out of doing assessment. Your job is to do quality assessment given the constraints currently in place, so if you can't afford some national standardized test, then use something else. However, do communicate your concerns to the decision makers in your department or at your college so they can be addressed.

11. Involve the right people: Faculty are at the core of any effective assessment program. So in order to make assessment processes successful it is important to have people on board who have demonstrated success in promoting learning centered environments, and promoted assessment to improve and inform teaching and pedagogical practices (Suskie, 2009).

12. Respect and empower people: Assessment is a collaborative effort and can only be successful if all stakeholders involved are willing to work with each other in a collaborative manner. Without getting faculty on board, it would be extremely difficult to make any serious assessment efforts or to let the results inform the teaching practices. Similarly other academic actors might contribute by making reports, writing up commentary, data analysis, recommendations and budgetary concerns. Hence it's important to be respectful to people and include everyone's ideas and opinions in the process. Assessment needs to be a bottom up approach to be truly successful.

13. Set priorities: Assessment is a complex task and it does not have to be perfect from the beginning. Faculty can start on a smaller scale by assessing one class and then moving on to other classes in subsequent years. Focus on the most major of goals instead of assessing all the program goals. Start by assessing more easily measurable goals rather than the complex ones and build on that.

14. Ask the Assessment Committee if your campus has one. If you have a problem or question, ask. The committee is there to provide guidance to you.

This article, along with all references used can be found in the book: The College Assessment Handbook by Dr. Charles A. Taylor. [You can get your copy here.](#)

Dr. Taylor is the author of over a dozen books and publications. He is a consultant to college campuses throughout the U.S. in the areas of diversity and inclusion. Please check out his website at: www.drcharlestaylor.com
