

The posting below looks at some key elements of assessment planning. It is from Chapter 2 – The Essentials of Assessment, in the book, *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*, second edition, by Trudy W. Banta, Catherine A. Palomba. Published by Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Brand, One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594.

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## Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

----- 2,039 words -----

### **Planning Effective Assessment**

- \* Engaging stakeholders
- \* Establishing purpose
- \* Designing a thoughtful approach to assessment planning
- \* Creating a written plan
- \* Timing assessment

#### **Engaging Stakeholders**

An initial step in planning is to identify and involve relevant stakeholders. Faculty, academic administrators, and student affairs professionals need to play leading roles in charting the course for assessment. Students can contribute ideas, as can their parents, employers, advisory board members, and other community representatives. Trustees of an institution may play important roles. Both regional accreditors and the Association of Governing Boards have set expectations that trustees will be cognizant of assessment information and processes and will participate in the conversation about institutional effectiveness (Hinton and MacDowell, 2012).

Faculty must establish broad learning outcomes for general education and more specific objectives for academic majors. Trustees, alumni, employers, and other community representatives can review draft statements of these outcomes and suggest revisions based on their perspectives on community needs. Student affairs professionals can contribute to the development of academic outcomes and devise their own complementary outcomes based on their plans to extend learning into campus environments beyond the classroom. For instance, West Virginia University's (2014) office of student affairs has developed student learning goals organized around five Cs: commitment to excellence, competence, compassion, citizenship, and communication.

Students can translate the language of the academy into terms their peers will comprehend. Students may also assist in designing data-gathering strategies and instruments. At the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, assessment workshop participants have included several student scholars, as well as faculty, academic affairs staff, and student development staff (Kramer, Knuesel, and Jones, 2012).

Regional accrediting associations and national disciplinary and professional organizations provide resources for the planning phase of assessment. They may set standards and

expectations for assessing student learning, furnish written materials, and offer workshops at their periodic meetings. Although the six regional accreditors have similar expectations for assessment, they are experimenting with different assessment strategies, including innovative approaches to providing assessment resources such as the Leadership Academy offered by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (Provezis, 2010; Wright, 2013).

### **Establishing Purpose**

Reaching agreement about goals and objectives for educational programs and having an understanding of where and how they are addressed are essential to effective planning. This foundation guides the selection of assessment instruments and facilitates the use of assessment results. It also provides explicit information to students and the public about the aims of higher education.

As a starting point for assessment, faculty must consider the institution's values, goals, and vision. Some campuses are strongly committed to experiential education, some value knowledge and understanding of arts and humanities, and others focus on service-learning. In 2008, Hartwick College (2014b) faculty adopted their organizing principles and strategic framework with the goal of being the best at "melding a liberal arts education with experiential learning." St. Olaf College leaders seek to develop the whole person in mind, body, and spirit and to enhance the global perspective of their students (Jankowski, 2012). Inspired by their institution's namesake, Justice Louis Brandeis, faculty at Brandeis University (n.d.b) expect their graduates to endeavor to advance justice in the world. Regional accreditors require their members to make their educational goals clear, public, and appropriate to higher education. Thus, mission statements should capture the special qualities that graduates are expected to possess. Assessment itself can be a strong factor in pushing institutions to become more focused and specific in their mission statements and in the ways they convey their missions to the public.

Developing goals and objectives for general education necessarily involves a group of campus representatives who describe the knowledge, skills, and values graduates should possess regardless of their discipline. Agreement about the role of general education on campus will guide this discussion. The Provost's Advisory Committee on Assessment of Student Learning at Brandeis (n.d.b) worked for more than a year to create a draft of learning goals for its graduates. Committee members, consisting of faculty, academic staff, and student life staff, researched goals at other universities as part of the development process. Before finalizing their statement, they submitted the draft for review to many campus groups, including a subcommittee of the board of trustees.

Faculty who are developing goals and objectives for a major field will be most concerned with the standards of the field, but will likely consider learning outcomes traditionally associated with general education programs such as valuing lifelong learning or working cooperatively. At Bismarck State College (2014), for example, program outcomes align with the overall goals and mission of the College.

### **Designing a Thoughtful Approach to Assessment Planning**

At either the institution or department level, members of the committee or task force charged with developing an approach to assessment need to begin with a discussion about its purposes. Several authors distinguish between activities aimed at improvements and those aimed at demonstrating accountability. Ewell (2009) refers to a "simmering tension" between

these competing forces. The two categories often are referred to as formative and summative evaluations. The first is meant to “form” the program or performance, the second to make judgments about it. Formative assessment is conducted during the life of a program (or performance) with the purpose of providing feedback that can be used to modify, shape, and improve the program (or performance). Summative assessment is conducted after a program has been in operation for a while, or at its conclusion, to make judgments about its quality or worth compared to previously defined standards for performance. If activities are to continue or be repeated, the results of summative assessment can be used to help form the program (or performance) for the future.

Although the overall focus of the assessment movement has centered on improvement of educational programs, elements of summative assessment are in practice on college campuses, not only in responding to external accreditors and state governments but also in reviewing internal processes. For example, general education assessment programs that are course based may include an evaluation of whether courses should remain in the program. These reviews usually contain strong elements of formative as well as summative assessment.

The terms formative and summative assessment are applied to activities focused on individual students as well as those focused on overall programs. Summative assessment activities aimed at students include such things as junior-level writing competence exams and comprehensive exams in the major that must be passed for advancement or certification. Since 1984, Ball State University (2014c) graduates have completed a writing competence requirement. Students must register for and pass a proctored and timed writing examination that carries no credit hours. A writing proficiency course is available for those who do not pass the exam after two attempts or who have test anxiety. Formative assessment measures include performance reviews accompanied by feedback, perhaps provided by a panel of experts (who may also certify the work). The strongly held view that students should learn from assessment has increased the use of formative assessment approaches focused on individual students. In their argument for integrated learning, Hersh and Keeling (2013) write that assessment must be systematic, cumulative, formative, and summative in order to signal and reinforce learning expectations and standards. They believe standards should be in place so that students can demonstrate mastery of a subject before they move on to the next level of learning.

### **Creating a Written Plan**

One of the major tasks facing assessment planners is the development of a planning document. An assessment plan captures agreement about what matters, gives direction for actions, and provides a means to determine if progress is being made. Many institutions adopt a model for assessment that becomes the basis of their plan. At Marquette University (2014), the assessment cycle is viewed as a continuum with four steps: define, measure, reflect, and improve. Edmonds Community College (n.d.) faculty have named their planning document the SIMPLE (Strategic, Informed, Measurable Process Leading to Improvement) plan. The plan provides for ongoing assessment of processes to make sure each area of the college is meeting students’ needs.

Creating a plan helps the institution or program see the big picture of assessment, including the who, what, when, and why. The plan need not be elaborate. It may be a simple time line or a matrix of activities, but there needs to be agreement at the institution and within departments about the overall objectives of an assessment program and how it will be carried

out. Faculty at Del Mar College (n.d.), a two-year institution in Texas, use an annual assessment time line. The cycle begins each August when department chairs review assessment plans from the previous year. In September student learning outcomes are reviewed and measures to be implemented during the current year are selected. Action plans based on findings are completed by mid-July.

Although regional accrediting bodies now ask their members to have written assessment plans at the institution level, emphasis in the plans should be on the process and discussion that produce and implement the plan rather than on the document itself. Individuals involved in assessment planning can adopt strategic planning methods such as brainstorming, seeking input, and revising. These strategies work for department planners as well. At a panel discussion for new assessment coordinators at California State University Fresno (2007), veteran assessment coordinators urged their colleagues to view their assessment plans as “something you’re constantly rewriting and changing ... Revise it all the time.” No plan is unchangeable.

Institutions may have assessment plans or designs at several levels, including campus, program, course, and classroom. Assessment at each level can provide information for the others and may reflect a variety of purposes. For example, a department assessment plan aimed at improvement may reflect institutional reporting requirements and those of one or more disciplinary accrediting bodies. Lancaster Bible College and Graduate School has a plan in place requiring assessment at five levels (Mort, 2012): course, program, division, core knowledge and skills, and institution. All academic and support units must create comprehensive plans that include purposes, intended outcomes, means of assessment, data summary, and use of results. Based on assessment findings, units indicate whether an action plan or strategic initiative is needed. Action plans are follow-up activities that can be undertaken with the unit’s own resources. Strategic initiatives require additional resources from outside the unit.

An important consideration when planning an assessment program is to link the results of assessment to other educational processes such as curriculum review, planning, and budgeting. Some campus leaders require that proposals for curriculum change be accompanied by relevant assessment information. Insisting that assessment information be provided in support of budgeting requests is another approach for linking assessment to decision making. In the Division of Continuing Education at Brigham Young University, an existing planning and budgeting template was modified to include assessment reporting (Hoyt, 2009). Directors are required to report on and consider assessment results in establishing annual budgeting priorities, making assessment part of a meaningful established process.

### **Timing Assessment**

Ideally assessment is a component of strategic planning for an institution or department and is part of any new program from the outset. Adding assessment to an ongoing program or event will require time to convince the developers of the value of assessment for improving and sustaining their efforts. Since assessment requires multiple methods, it is not usually necessary to implement every method immediately or even every year. A comprehensive assessment plan should have a schedule for implementing each data-gathering method at least once over a period of three to five years. Assessment leaders at St. Olaf (n.d.) maintain a detailed time schedule of planned activities at the institution, program, and general education levels through 2018. National surveys will be conducted intermittently, and assessment of individual general education courses is planned for 2015-2016.

Institutional requirements generally set the time table for program-level assessment, often with some flexibility. Emory University (2014a) leaders expect faculty to collect evidence over time and analyze data longitudinally. Assessment reports are completed annually, and program faculty are to evaluate all outcomes within three- to five-year cycles. Administrators at Long Island University (2013) recently announced a revised assessment cycle for their Post campus. In the new three-year cycle, program faculty are required to report assessment results for two learning objectives each year rather than four.

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