

# IDEA PAPER #45



Insight.Improvement.Impact.®

## Assessing Your Program-Level Assessment Plan

*Susan Hatfield, Assessment Director • Winona State University*

By now, most academic programs have an assessment plan. Some of these plans were developed after hours of discussion and debate, while others were plucked from the results of a Google search. Some were inherited from previous program leadership. Still others were borrowed from friends at other universities, or adapted (with more or less success) from other disciplines.

Regardless of the origin of a program's assessment plan, all assessment plans can benefit from a periodic reevaluation — ideally before the site team arrives on campus for a comprehensive or focus visit on assessment.

This IDEA paper poses fourteen key questions to guide the process of reviewing an assessment plan.

### Why Are We Doing Assessment?

Be honest — is the purpose of having a program assessment plan simply to satisfy the administration and your external accreditation organization? Or is there genuine interest in the ongoing process of identifying the strengths and weaknesses in the program as reflected through student performance? A plan created to appease the accrediting agency or administration is very different from an assessment plan that was created with the intent to implement and learn from it.

The best way to determine the reason for doing the assessment is by examining the focus of the plan. Is the focus simply on collecting data? Or is the focus on *using* data to improve student learning? Assessment plans designed to appease others generally involve a lot of data collection, but are rarely put to meaningful use. Plans that focus on student learning connect collected data to potential courses of action.

### What Kind of Plan Are We Writing?

Essentially, there are two types of assessment plans — program effectiveness and student learning outcomes. A program effectiveness plan examines issues pertaining to, for example, enrollment, retention, curriculum, graduation, placement, and satisfaction. It focuses on what the

faculty and program curriculum will provide. A program effectiveness plan will contain goals that look like these:

- The program will admit 75 students annually
- The program will graduate 90 percent of students enrolled in the program
- 70 percent of students will pursue graduate degrees within five years of completing their undergraduate program
- Faculty will be active in research and scholarship
- Students will be satisfied with academic advising

While these are all important goals, they are not about student learning. No one will argue against the importance of maintaining enrollments, high placement rates, faculty scholarship, and student satisfaction. Student satisfaction is important to most programs, and justifiably so, since satisfied graduates are more likely to donate money to the program after graduation, set up internships, notify the program of employment opportunities, and even offer to sit on advisory boards and committees. Satisfaction with the educational experience is one thing, but student learning is another issue entirely.

A student learning outcomes assessment plan emphasizes what students are able to do as a result of study in the program, such as:

- Students will be able to execute a qualitative research study
- Students will be able to analyze statistical control data
- Students will be able to adjust techniques in non-routine situations
- Students will be able to diagnose system failures
- Students will be able to design solutions based upon customer requirements

Colleges and universities with traditional program review processes tend to emphasize program effectiveness (though that is starting to change), while professional and regional accreditation organizations tend to require a combination of both program effectiveness and student

learning outcomes, with a growing emphasis on efforts made to assess student learning.

### **Who Is Responsible for Assessment in Our Program?**

For an assessment program to be effective, it must be a collective effort on the part of tenured and non-tenured faculty alike. That being said, it is equally as clear that there needs to be a “point person” or small group directing the program’s assessment efforts. Ideally, efforts should be led by someone who has a genuine interest and enthusiasm for the research. This person or group would be responsible for presenting ideas and generating documents that can serve as starting points for larger discussion.

### **Is Administration Supportive of Assessment?**

There are many reasons administration may not support an assessment program:

- Implementing an assessment program requires administration to expend a fair amount of political capital, which is hard to earn and budgeted carefully. Some administrators don’t have the political capital to spend, and others choose to spend it on issues they see as more important.
- Some administrators fail to see the value of assessment and still believe (perhaps remembering **Management By Objective**, **Total Quality Management**, and **Continuous Quality Improvement**) that assessment will “blow over” one of these days. Given that assumption, they feel it is not worth their energy to implement an assessment initiative.
- Other administrators contend that assessment must be a faculty-driven initiative.
- The reality for some institutions is that the current administration will not be in place when the next accreditation visit occurs. Due to that fact, accreditation — and therefore assessment — is simply not high on their list of priorities, and there are far more popular initiatives to pursue.

Over the past few years, all of the regional accreditation agencies and a large percentage of the professional program accrediting bodies have rewritten their accreditation standards with an emphasis on assessment of student learning. Because standards are moving so clearly in this direction, choosing not to pursue assessment can be a great detriment to an institution.

Assessment needs to be actively supported at the top levels of administration. Otherwise, it is going to be difficult (if not impossible) to get an assessment initiative off the ground. Faculty listen carefully to what administrators say — and don’t say. Even with some staff support, assessment is unlikely to be taken seriously until administrators get on board.

Administrators can show their support in two major areas: staffing decisions and resource allocation. Administration

need to value leadership in assessment activities — at both the program and college level — when it comes time for renewal, promotion, and tenure decisions. Additionally, administrators must explicitly and intentionally allocate resources toward assessment to be clear that it is a commitment and a priority of the institution.

### **Is There a Common Language for Talking About Assessment?**

One of the first and most important steps an institution can take when it comes to starting an assessment initiative is clarifying the terminology. To date, there is no universal language of assessment. Terms used to describe assessment processes and ideas vary across accrediting organizations, colleges and universities, disciplines, and programs. Terms such as *objectives*, *outcomes*, *competencies*, *dispositions*, *goals*, *indicators*, *measures*, *tools*, and *methods* all appear in assessment literature, often referring to concepts that are defined differently in another source. It will continue to be difficult to talk about assessment until there is some agreement among program faculty (and, ideally, across an entire institution), as to what terms are going to be used.

### **Have We Identified Program-Level Student Learning Outcomes?**

#### **What Is a Reasonable Number of Outcomes?**

An assessment plan is only useful to the degree that it can be implemented. A plan might be elegant in its construction, but it will be useless if it is too complex. One common mistake is when programs combine all of the course-level learning outcomes into a laundry list of student learning outcomes for their program. While some faculty may see this as an assurance that the course will continue to be required in the curriculum, the resulting 100-plus item list is paralyzing in its complexity.

A short list (perhaps six or eight) of program-level student learning outcomes is much more likely to be useful — indeed, to be implemented — than a more ungainly plan. A shorter list is also more likely to be embraced and understood by faculty and students. The list always can be expanded, but starting small is a good idea.

#### **Are the Outcomes Tied to the College Mission/Goals?**

The student learning outcomes at the program level should be tied to the mission and goals of the college or university. The mission and goals of an institution are often embedded in the general education curriculum, though this is not always the case since mission statements tend to be revisited more frequently than general education programs, which often can have a shelf life of 20 years or more.

The outcomes of a general education program may serve as the basis for program-level student learning outcomes. For instance, technological literacy and critical thinking may be two of the outcomes for the general education program.

At the academic program level, these outcomes may be adapted to the specific technology of the particular field of study, using the knowledge of the field to analyze context-specific situations. However, it is not usually practical or helpful to adapt all general education outcomes to the program level.

### **Are the Outcomes Written in an Appropriate Format?**

At the core of any program-level assessment plan are the student learning outcomes. If well written, the outcomes can provide the foundation for a solid assessment plan. Unfortunately, many program-level student learning outcomes contain issues that not only make them difficult to understand, but nearly impossible to assess. For instance:

- Students will be able to identify, define, and analyze the major causes, effects, and implications of \$150-a-barrel oil prices on the transportation, food, and housing industries.

While efficiently stated, these Rubik's Cube-like outcomes are, for all practical purposes, not measurable. Student learning outcomes, both on the program and course levels, can be stated as simply as: "*Students will be able to <<action verb>> <<something>>.*"

For example:

- Students will be able to design customer-focused solutions.
- Student will be able to examine rhetorical phenomena from multiple theoretical perspectives.
- Students will be able to analyze the causes of system failure.
- Students will be able to produce diagnostic quality radiographic images.
- Students will be able to participate effectively as a member of a task-oriented team.

Additionally, program-level student learning outcomes should be appropriate for students *graduating* from the program. It is not uncommon to see program-level student learning outcomes stating that students will have a "basic understanding" of something. For example:

- Students will be able to demonstrate a basic knowledge of human anatomy.
- Students will have a basic knowledge of abnormal psychology.

Generally, basic understandings are developed early in the curriculum. These are usually lower-division, course-level outcomes. Graduates, on the other hand, should be able to demonstrate more advanced knowledge and skills, using the "basic understanding" developed early in the curriculum to design, diagnose, evaluate, or create something concrete.

### **Do Faculty Agree on the Definition of the Outcome?**

While writing outcomes is one thing, actually understanding

them is another. It is not enough to simply list a number of "our graduates can..." statements. Discussion among faculty as to what those statements actually mean is a critical task to undertake before the collection of data begins. For instance, it is common to assert that graduates from a specific program are able to think critically — but what does that mean? Do faculty have a shared understanding of what it means to be good critical thinkers? How will faculty be able to tell if students have or have not mastered critical thinking skills?

A number of universities have attempted to make assessment more palatable to faculty by allowing each faculty member to "own" the program-level learning outcomes. For instance, there might be a program-level writing outcome, but instead of having a shared understanding among faculty of what constitutes competent college-level writing, each faculty member is allowed to define — and measure — the outcome in their own way. Grammar and mechanics might be the prevailing criteria for some faculty, while style and voice might be the most important elements for other faculty. Still other faculty might look at a paper's organization and use of sources. The end result is a significant amount of collected data that does not help faculty understand whether students can write at the level appropriate for graduates entering their field. Students, meanwhile, are confused by the constantly shifting array of writing criteria in different courses.

While allowing individual faculty to define program outcomes however they like might indeed increase acceptance of the assessment process, the data that is collected cannot be aggregated across the faculty. As a result, faculty will not be able to achieve a meaningful understanding of student success in achieving the desired outcomes.

### **Are the Outcomes Supported by Core Courses?**

Program faculty must carefully examine their core curriculum to make sure students are given the opportunity to develop competence in program-level student learning outcomes *regardless of what semester they took the course and who was teaching it.*

A curriculum map (see Figure 1, next page) will help program faculty examine their curriculum as related to the program-level learning outcomes. The map lists the outcomes in the first column and the required courses in subsequent columns. The resulting grid allows faculty to indicate which courses in the curriculum support the achievement of specific outcomes.

Curriculum mapping is a valuable process. In many cases, it is the first time a curriculum has been systematically examined to see how the individual courses function in the curriculum. In theory, program curricula would be developed after the identification of the program-level student learning outcomes, and courses and the curriculum would be designed to foster the achievement of those outcomes. But since most program-level learning outcomes are created



**Figure 1 • Curriculum Map.**

	Required Course 1	Required Course 2	Required Course 3	Required Course 4	Required Course 5	Required Course 6
<b>Outcome 1</b>	X		X	X		X
<b>Outcome 2</b>		X	X		X	
<b>Outcome 3</b>	X			X		X
<b>Outcome 4</b>		X			X	X
<b>Outcome 5</b>			X		X	

at the request of the regional accrediting agency, most outcomes are retrofitted to an existing curriculum rather than driving it.

Curriculum mapping is an opportunity to check for the alignment in the curriculum. It can identify, for example, outcomes that may not be supported adequately by the curriculum, areas of overlap, and outcomes that have been overlooked. It provides a conceptual framework for both faculty and students to translate the list of required courses into a curriculum designed to support achievement of specific outcomes.

Creating a curriculum map may reveal that certain outcomes are not supported by the program's core curriculum. A common "orphan outcome" is presenting in front of a group. Many programs list public speaking as an outcome, but rarely require students to deliver oral presentations in their classes, since it would take several weeks to accommodate 25 or more individual presentations.

**Does the Plan Rely on Direct Measures of Student Learning?**

The assessment of program-level student learning outcomes should be based upon a direct examination of student work. Virtually any assignment can potentially be used to assess student achievement of the program outcomes, either formatively (in process) or summatively (at the end of the program). Assessment of learning outcomes can also be based upon student work created for the sole purpose of demonstrating achievement of the program outcomes (a portfolio, for instance). The only stipulation is that the work itself must be reasonably tied to one or more program-level outcomes. And, obviously, it makes more sense to assess program-level learning outcomes toward the end of a student's program.

Many programs still depend on indirect measures for assessing student learning outcomes, asking students how

much they have learned in a focus group or on a survey, or extrapolating from student satisfaction data. While it is interesting to find out how students feel about their level of achievement (especially if those perceptions can be matched with objective measures of learning), perceptions alone are not reliable indicators of learning. Satisfaction also has a tenuous relationship with learning; just because a student has reported being satisfied with their experience in the program doesn't necessarily correlate with how much that student learned. Asking students how much they have learned or grown as a result of their studies may yield some potentially useful information, but it is not until students can *demonstrate* that learning or growth that program faculty can honestly say an outcome has been achieved.

This is not to say that satisfaction data is not important. Satisfied students donate money back to their programs, direct their siblings and eventually their children to the programs, set up internships, alert the programs of new entry-level positions in their organizations, and return to campus to talk to students about careers. Graduate satisfaction is important. But it is not the same thing as student learning — or developing the ability to meaningfully reflect on your own learning.

**Are the Assessment Methods Appropriate to the Outcomes?**

The link between the assessment method and learning outcome must be logical. For instance, assessing public speaking ability through the use of a multiple-choice test would be problematic.

Too often, an assessment method is chosen without giving serious consideration as to whether or not the method is appropriate. For instance, a nationally normed standardized test might be a relatively easy way to obtain data, but if the test doesn't assess the outcomes of the program, it isn't going to offer much insight into whether or not specific program outcomes have been achieved. Occasionally, line-item student data is available from the testing organization

(usually at an additional fee), allowing for additional analyses focused on the outcomes specific to the program. In this case, the relevant question set would need to be selected in advance so as not to have the results impact the decision about whether a particular question should be included in the analysis.

Randomly pulling questions out of a textbook's test bank creates essentially the same problem — students are being tested on issues that may not relate to the identified course or program outcomes. The questions in the test bank might be legitimate questions, but to be useful for assessment purposes, the questions need to be matched to the program-level student learning outcomes.

A number of schools are using portfolios to document and assess student learning. A portfolio can be an effective assessment tool, if the portfolio is organized around the program's student learning outcomes. Specific artifacts evidencing each of the learning outcomes must be included in an organized manner.

There also needs to be a structure or process, and tools, for actually assessing the portfolios. While many schools have their students create portfolios, a high percentage of portfolios are never actually assessed due to timing and resource constraints. Typically, students turn in their portfolios upon graduation, leaving faculty with a stack of documentation and no compensated time over the summer to actually review them.

Another common problem with using portfolios is that assessment often is focused on the *portfolio itself*, in terms of its layout, navigation, and design. It is the individual artifacts *in* the portfolio that need to be assessed in relation to the learning outcomes of the program. Generally a set of rubrics are used for this purpose (see Georgia State and Winona State examples in the Resources section).

Capstone courses also may provide evidence of student learning if created with the program-level outcomes in mind. These courses are less effective as evidence of student learning if any of the following apply: (1) the course was established before the program identified outcomes, (2) no student learning outcomes at the program level have been developed yet, or (3) the course is really not a "capstone," but simply the course that the majority of students wind up taking during their last semester on campus. Capstone courses and projects can be very effective in assessing student achievement of program-level learning outcomes, but *only* if the course — and the assignments — have been carefully constructed to do just that.

### **Is There a Systematic Approach to Implementing the Plan?**

Effective assessment plans are implemented in an ongoing, systematic manner. While assessment activities tend to pick up in frequency and intensity in the year or

two prior to an accreditation visit, effective assessment plans rely on patterns of data collected over time. In those programs, there is a collective understanding among faculty as to which outcomes are being examined and over which period of time, who is collecting the data, and who will be discussing it. Analysis is based upon data collected over several semesters or classes or contexts, allowing for the examination of patterns in the data, as opposed to a set of data collected one time by a single faculty member. A sure tip-off to a site team that a program might not be doing a legitimate job of assessing their program is when all of the data presented was collected in the six months prior to the accreditation or re-accreditation visit.

### **What is the Method for Collecting and Organizing Data?**

Assessment is as much an organizational exercise as an intellectual one. Analysis of data is more efficient and effective if the data is collected systematically and is well organized.

For instance, consider the complexities of assessing an "across-the-curriculum" initiative like critical thinking or writing. Not only do you need to engage faculty from multiple departments, but you also have to systematize the data collection so that faculty are assessing the same concepts in the same format within a specified timeframe. This task will be both time-consuming and potentially overwhelming unless you develop a system for the collection of data.

Many schools have created or purchased commercial technological infrastructures for collecting, organizing, and assisting in the data analysis. These tools can be effective in aggregating data across a campus, assuming that a common rubric or scoring method has been devised. On campuses that have not invested in a technological solution for data collection, individual programs will need to develop their own data collection techniques and databases.

### **How Are Faculty Trained to Use Assessment Tools?**

In a perfect world, groups of faculty would be given extended contracts over the summer to participate in extensive training in assessing student performance. All of the assessment tools would have been carefully studied and determined to be both valid and reliable. Multiple faculty would review each student learning artifact and inter-rater reliability would be high — and documented.

It seldom works that way. Most assessment tools have, at best, face validity, and in most instances individual faculty are responsible for assessing program-level outcomes using assignments embedded in their classes.

While not ideal, this methodology can work well if faculty are given the opportunity to calibrate their evaluations against a set of model papers. These are examples of student work that program faculty have identified and

agreed upon as representing excellent, acceptable, and unacceptable work. Meetings should be scheduled regularly for faculty to share and discuss student work. Faculty can even exchange student work to enhance objectivity in assessing student achievement.

### **Do the Assessment Tools Distinguish Among Levels of Achievement?**

An assessment tool is only as strong as its ability to distinguish among levels of achievement. Rubrics are a common method for assessing student learning outcomes at the program level. In fact, a search on the web will yield literally hundreds of rubrics for assessing a wide array of learning outcomes. While rubrics can be excellent assessment tools, it is important to make sure that the rubric being used actually distinguishes among levels of student performance. If scores on a rubric indicate that virtually all of the students are falling into the same performance level column, something is likely wrong, either with the rubric itself or with how it is being used.

On the structural level, the rubric's performance descriptions must be clear and incremental. The level of complexity must be appropriate for the concept being evaluated. Rubrics that identify too few performance categories (e.g., yes/no) are as problematic as ones that contain too many categories. If it is difficult to use the rubric consistently and reliably, then structurally it is not effective. If faculty misinterpret the operational definition of the performance categories, then faculty may require training. Rubrics, like every assessment tool, should always be pilot-tested before you utilize them for outcome assessment.

Exams are another common assessment tool, and if carefully constructed, they can be effective in assessing student learning. Ideally, questions of increasing complexity or difficulty allow you to identify a specific point at which a student began to struggle.

### **What Happens to the Data After It Has Been Collected?**

Many of the benefits of engaging in assessment are the results of focused discussion about student achievement of the program's learning outcomes. Yet it is not uncommon for data to be collected only to be ignored thereafter. It is not until the data has been analyzed, discussed, and used as a basis for further program improvement that *assessment* has taken place.

The goal of analyzing assessment data is to identify what the accreditation bodies refer to as *patterns of evidence*. Common patterns involve patterns of consistency, patterns of consensus, and patterns of distinctiveness.

*Patterns of consistency* develop by studying data from the same outcome over a period of time — for instance, tracking aggregate data on student performance from semester to semester (or year to year). Organizations

accrediting professional programs often require data representing pass rates on national exams over a five-year period. Programs will often report student scores on NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) or CCSSE (Community College Survey of Student Engagement) over a period of several years, allowing for the identification of trends in the data.

*Patterns of consensus* involve disaggregating the data to see if all of the college's or university's communities of interest achieve (or in the case of a survey, rate an item) at the same level. For instance, you may break down data by gender, first-generation students, nontraditional students, ESL students, or other significant populations in your college community. This provides an opportunity to examine whether simple aggregate data masks performance data or feedback from a significant population in your community. Reporting an average score on a program-outcome measure may hide the fact that transfer students are not performing as well as homegrown students. NSSE item averages in and of themselves may be masking the fact that male and female students reported a qualitatively different experience on your campus.

*Patterns of distinctiveness* emerge from examining the data across outcomes or categories. For instance, a program may examine performance on their six program-level outcomes and notice that some outcomes reflect significantly higher or lower performance than others. These discrepancies indicate what areas may need attention, and from what areas exemplary practice may be modeled.

For each of the three patterns, the same questions are relevant:

1. Does the data represent an identifiable trend?
2. Does the data represent an acceptable level of achievement?
3. Does the data surprise you?

The first issue is whether or not there is an identifiable trend in the data. Stable? Equal? Consistent? Increasing? Decreasing? Not interpretable? Each of these situations invites a potentially useful discussion.

The second question is whether or not the level of achievement indicated by the data is acceptable. For instance, if 83 percent of graduating students in the program meet stated standards for writing, is that good enough? What would need to happen to improve the percentage? What do we know about the 17 percent of students who do not meet the standards? Clearly, the "acceptable" percentage of students achieving the outcomes will vary by the field of study and the nature of the specific outcome, with some fields and outcomes requiring 100 percent of the students to meet an acceptable standard.

The final question is whether or not the data surprises those in the program. This intuitive validity check is very

important. Many faculty, especially those in smaller programs, know their students' skills and abilities well. Faculty often know intuitively how well their students individually and collectively meet the stated program-level learning outcomes. The question for these faculty members is whether or not the actual documented assessment data (test scores, research papers, internship evaluations, portfolios) match their intuitive assessment of the qualities of the graduating class. If there is a mismatch, then you may need to examine the assessment tools used in the program, as well as the basis of your impressions of the graduating class's abilities.

### **Have We Used the Data to Improve Learning and Teaching?**

The need to "close the loop" has become an assessment cliché. It is also the biggest challenge facing any assessment program. While many programs have collected sizeable amounts of assessment data, only a few have been able to document that their assessment data has been used as a catalyst for change.

Part of the reason for this is because in many cases, the program already takes into account student performance and adjusts the curriculum and teaching methods accordingly — it just isn't documented. But not all programmatic, policy, and curricular changes can be directly linked to systematic assessment of student learning outcomes. Some changes are the result of personnel decisions, college-wide initiatives, changes in enrollment, leadership agendas, and simply intuition. These changes, however, are not substitutes for the systematic analysis of program-level student learning outcomes.

In some ways, the pressure from accreditation site teams to produce evidence of having closed the loop may even be promoting questionable practice in assessment. Some programs are rushing to take action simply to prove to the site team that there has been some follow-up as the result of assessment. Far better practice would be to collect data over a period of time, then triangulate it with other information before considering any plan of action — regardless of how soon a re-accreditation visit is scheduled.

Closing the loop can take many forms, as described below.

### **Faculty, Staff, and Student Development Activities**

Sometimes what is needed in order to close the loop is information. For a program's assessment plan to be fully functional, everyone involved needs to understand:

- What outcomes are being assessed
- Why the outcomes were selected
- How the outcomes are being assessed
- What the data means

Each of these issues offers opportunities for focused faculty, staff, and student development, including workshops, presentations, and discussions.

### **Policies, Practices, and Procedures**

Faculty may choose to close the loop by revisiting program policies, practices, or procedures. For example, you may consider revising the criteria for admission to the program (for example, GPA, or prerequisite courses or experience). You might also develop learning supports for students who are recognized to be struggling in the program. Implementing annual sophomore, junior, and senior reviews is another step some programs have taken to formalize formative assessment in their programs. Other options include reviewing the role of student advising, and creating a system for tracking student progress, if the college doesn't already have such a database.

### **Curricular Reform**

Revising the curriculum might be necessary if gaps are found between desired and actual student performance. Additional coursework in a specific area might be required to remedy consistent deficiencies in student performance. New technologies, theories, or techniques in the field might also require changing the course structure of the program, as well as changing the program mission, emphasis, or outcomes. A specific course (e.g., ethics, diversity, critical thinking) might be replaced with an across-the-program initiative, or vice versa.

### **Learning Opportunities**

If assessment results indicate that students are not demonstrating learning at a desired level, it might be worth rethinking strategies — both inside and outside the classroom — to facilitate student learning. Gamson and Chickering's (1987) *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* provides a practical and portable list, detailed below, of opportunities to facilitate learning.

*Student-Faculty Contact:* Contact with faculty serves to engage students in the learning process. Maximizing opportunities for this contact — both inside and outside of the classroom, in face-to-face settings or electronically — can facilitate student learning.

*Active Learning:* For students to truly learn, they must process information and concepts, and integrate it into their own experience. This seldom happens by just taking notes in a lecture hall. Activities in class, as well as direction for how to investigate topics outside of class, can help students understand and integrate new information with their existing frames of reference.

*Cooperative Learning:* Professors aren't the only people in the classroom who can teach. Students can learn from each other in both structured and unstructured settings. But instructors need to help students learn how to work this way. You should be especially careful when asking students to critique each other's work. Students need to develop the requisite knowledge base themselves before they can be responsible for critiquing the work of others.



*Prompt Feedback:* Feedback is an important part of the learning process: guiding, directing, and suggesting — in addition to evaluating. Feedback aimed at helping students improve their learning is more useful to the student than feedback that merely justifies the assignment of the grade. While providing feedback promptly should be a goal, it needs to be balanced with the desire to offer support, direction, and suggestion.

*Time on Task:* Many students come to college lacking the time-management skills necessary to succeed in college. Faculty who can guide students in using their time outside of class effectively can positively impact student learning. This is especially true in large assignments, where students may lack the knowledge of how to break down the task into smaller activities to achieve the goal.

*High Expectations:* Often students do not achieve learning goals because they are unsure about what those goals are. Being clear and explicit about expectations — and setting challenging but realistic expectations — can motivate students to succeed. Even an act as simple as providing

the evaluation rubric along with the assignment can help students focus their effort and energies, often producing higher quality learning.

*Respect for Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning:* Students learn — and demonstrate their learning — in different ways. Try structuring curricula, assignments, and learning opportunities so that students can learn, and demonstrate that learning, in ways that are most natural for them. This will engage students and foster learning.

### **Summary**

Assessment theory and practice has evolved significantly over the past two decades. As such, assessment plans that were developed even a few years ago may need to be reconsidered. While it may be easy to forge ahead using the same methods and methodologies that a program has used in the past (and who doesn't love a good trend line?!), updated assessment plans will promote a better understanding of how well our students are achieving the program-level learning goals that have been identified.

---

*Susan Hatfield is coordinator of assessment at Winona State University. She is also a professor and served for nine years as chairperson in the Department of Communication Studies at WSU. She authored as well as served as the project director for her university's Title III grant, which developed a software program to collect and analyze assessment data. In addition to her university responsibilities, she serves as a peer reviewer for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central*

*Association and has been appointed by the United States Secretary of the Navy to the Marine Corps University Board of Visitors. During the past 12 years, she has presented numerous workshops on assessment at state, regional, and national conferences, as well as consulted with individual departments and universities on issues related to assessment.*

---



## References

Chickering, A. & Gamson, Z.F. (1987). *The Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*. The University of Hawaii received permission to reprint this article from the American Association for Higher Education Bulletin. <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/7princip.htm>.

## Resources

### Online

North Carolina State University's Internet Resources for Higher Education Outcomes Assessment: A great collection of online resources for program and course assessment. <http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/resource.htm>.

Georgia State University's Rubric for Assessment Plans might provide a starting point for creating your own assessment plan rubric. <http://education.gsu.edu/ctl/outcomes/rubric-plans.htm>.

Central Michigan University's Assessment Toolkit: Practical ideas and strategies for developing and implementing assessment plans. <http://academicaffairs.cmich.edu/caa/assessment/resources/toolkit.shtml>.

Winona State University's Sample Rubrics page contains hundreds of rubrics for a variety of courses and topics. [www.winona.edu/air/rubrics.htm](http://www.winona.edu/air/rubrics.htm).

### Books

Allen, M.J. (2004). *Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education*. Anker.

Angelo, T. (Ed.) (1998). *Classroom Assessment and Research: An Update on Uses, Approaches, and Research Findings*. Jossey-Bass, New Directions for Teaching and Learning.

Angelo, T.A. & Cross, P. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*. 2nd Edition. Jossey-Bass.

Astin, A.W. (1991). *Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. American Council on Education: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Banta, T., Lund, J.P., Black, K.E., & Oblander, F. (1996). *Assessment in Practice: Putting Principles to Work on College Campuses*. Jossey-Bass.

Cross, P.K. & Steadman, M.H. (1996). *Classroom Research: Implementing the Scholarship of Teaching*. Jossey-Bass.

Huba, M.E. & Freed, J.E. (1999). *Leamer-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning*. Pearson Education.

Maki, P.L. (2004). *Assessing for Learning*. Stylus Publishing.

Palomba, C. & Banta, T. (1999). *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*. Jossey-Bass.

Suskie, L. (2004). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. Anker Publishing.

Walvoord, B.E. (2004). *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. Jossey-Bass.

Walvoord, B.E. & Anderson, V.J. (1998). *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*. Jossey-Bass.

Wiggins, G. (1998). *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Student Performance*. Jossey-Bass.

---

T: 800.255.2757

T: 785.320.2400

F: 785.320.2424

---

E: [info@theideacenter.org](mailto:info@theideacenter.org)

[www.theideacenter.org](http://www.theideacenter.org)

©2009 The IDEA Center

Manhattan, Kansas