Academic Program Assessment

Assessment and Evaluation: What It Is and Why It's Important

Assessment is a systematic approach to collecting, analyzing, and reviewing data to improve learning. It is important because it tells us what and how much students are learning and where they’re learning it, and it gives us insight into how we might refine our programs to help them learn more. The best assessment activities supply us with meaningful information that can be used as the basis for improving educational programs (Astin, 1991). Assessment is not evaluation of individual faculty, staff, or students; rather, it tells us how well the entire academic program is meeting its purpose. Nor is assessment considered a simple record of course grades—assessment occurs at the outcome or program level and is more longitudinal in nature.

The best assessment plans satisfy the needs of multiple stakeholders. In the past several years, many colleges and universities have developed authentic assessment processes that give them useful, and sometimes unexpected, insights into their academic and service programs. Accrediting agencies such as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) are also interested in assessment because it is one measure of post-secondary institutions’ ability to achieve their goals. In a recent statement on learning, the HLC (2003) commends assessment as “critical not only to promoting and improving effective curricular and co-curricular learning experiences and to providing evidence of the quality of educational experiences and programs, but also to enhancing the public’s perception of the value of higher education” (pp. 1-2).

Program assessment plans should be designed to meet the unique needs of the faculty and programs that design them, but the following tenets outline some common characteristics of the best plans:
1. The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.

2. Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.

3. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.

4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.

5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic.

6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.

7. Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.

8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.


Assessment is important because it helps us determine if our purpose as an academic institution—educating IPFW students—is being achieved. It helps us understand the causal relationships between our actions (teaching) and outcomes (learning) (Astin, 1991), it explicitly establishes what is of importance (i.e., program goals and objectives), and it sets standards for student achievement. Well executed plans and results that are widely disseminated catalyze pedagogical discussion among faculty within and across programs. Ultimately, assessment is a manifestation of the intellectual curiosity of faculty about their programs and is a part of scholarship.
and applied research. As such, it can be approached in the spirit of experimentation and innovation.