

Conceptualizing Program Assessment of Student Learning

An Assessment Committee document prepared for the faculty of Dominican University

Introduction

Assessment seems to be one of those words that generates considerable angst. This isn't surprising given that before we address program assessment, we need to define it specifically.

Before we address program assessment, we need to define it specifically, it will be beneficial to offer a generic definition of assessment.

Assessment

Confusion so often associated with assessment in large part has to do with the fact that it can be used a number of different ways and the fact that it is often used synonymously with evaluation.

For the following definitions:

"Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education (Thomas Angelo, AAHE Bulletin, November 1995, p. 7).

"I shall consider assessment to include the gathering of information concerning the functioning of students, staff, and institutions of higher education. The information may or may not be in numerical form, but the basic motive for gathering it is to improve the functioning of the institution and its people. I used functioning to refer to the broad purposes of a college or university: to facilitate student learning and development, to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and to contribute to the community, and the society" (Alexander Astin, Assessment for Excellence, Corax Press, 1993, p. 2).

"Rather than defining assessment as testing what students know now, my colleagues define it as a process of evaluating and improving current programs, encouraging innovations, and then evaluating each innovation's effectiveness. The key step is systematic gathering of information for sustained improvement. And always with an eye toward helping faculty or students work

more effectively” (Richard J. Light, Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2001, 223-224).

Collectively, these definitions shed some light on assessment: it's about collecting information so as to make an improvement. However, the broad scope of these definitions does not allow us to conceptualize program assessment in a straightforward workable form. In order for program assessment to be manageable and for us to be able to talk about it at a program level, we need a succinct working definition.

Operationally Defining Program Assessment of Student Learning

Program assessment of student learning is the formal process of collecting information from a representative sample of students so as to make generalizations about the impact the program is having on specific student learning outcomes that correspond to articulated program goals.

In addition to the above definition, it is important that the following be agreed upon attributes of program assessment:

- x Program assessment is about student learning, not about the program.
- x A program assessment is conducted in order to ascertain if the program is achieving its goals with respect to student learning.
- x The information collected during a program assessment is an indicator of student learning. In other words, not everything that can be measured during a program assessment should be measured.
- x A focus on program-level assessment requires faculty members to discuss and agree upon what students will be able to do when they finish the program, discuss where in the curriculum the agreed upon skills and knowledge are to be attained, which courses in the program will these skills and knowledge be assessed.

Program assessment is a student-centered endeavor. The focus and aim is towards improving student learning. Thus the context of the conversation regarding program assessment must be about improving student learning. For example, many programs strive to increase job placement for students who have graduated from their program. This is laudable, but what does it have to do with student learning? Student job placement is NOT the type of information that one would want to collect when wishing to make a decision with respect to student learning. It is important information for program review, but not program assessment. Program review is a specific duty of a program conducted every five years which includes a self-study and an external review. Assessment of student learning is just one part of this multi-faceted endeavor which includes, but is not limited to, addressing teaching excellence, curriculum development, and adaptations to or expansion of the program. A more detailed description of Program Review can be found in the Faculty Handbook.

Program assessment is goal oriented. Every program has a set of goals (whether they are articulated or not is another story) that its faculty wants their students to achieve by the time they have completed the program. These goals pertain directly to student learning and serve as the foundation of program assessment. The idea being that if your students are achieving the goals

Scenario 3: The English department collects