

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 many conversations about assessment leave people either more confused than they were before or with the perception that they are about to be burdened with a less than worthwhile task.

The purpose here is to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of program assessment, as it relates to student learning, in the hopes that this will lead to not busy-work, but rather fruitful endeavors that will improve student learning. Before we address program assessment of student learning specifically, it will be beneficial to offer a generic definition of assessment.

Defining Assessment

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

Consider 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 social 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*, Oryx 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, pp. 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 talk about it at an inter-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:

- Program assessment is about student learning; it is not about the program.
- A program assessment is conducted in order to ascertain if the program is achieving its goals with respect to student learning.
- 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.
- 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, and in 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 maximize 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 that you have set for them, then you should be confident that the desired learning is taking place.

Program assessment is an indicator of student learning. Even with such a narrow definition of program assessment that is offered above, we cannot possibly assess everything associated with student learning while conducting a program assessment. It would simply be unmanageable and if we were able to conduct it, the data analysis would be too imposing to conduct. Just as a small set of corporations are used by the Dow as an indicator of economic strength (only about 30), program assessment requires only a small set of outcomes to serve as indicators of student learning. Program assessment needs to be strategic. Specific outcomes that we consider to be good indicators of student learning are what should be measured.

In order to conduct an effective program assessment, you need a plan. There is much more to conducting a formal program assessment than just collecting data. In order, for the assessment to be worthwhile, it is important to decide ahead of time the following:

1. What will be measured during the assessment?
2. When the data will be collected?
3. Where will the data be collected?
4. How will the data be collected?

Finally, program assessments needs inspired minds. At the 2010 Fall Faculty Workshop, our Associate Provost, David Krause, reminded us of a critical component of inspired minds – YOU NEED TO TELL ABOUT IT! Whether it is the submission of an assessment report, an agenda item in a department meeting, or a topic of conversation during lunch, we must be willing to engage in discussions about program assessment. It is through these conversations that new ideas for improving student learning will emerge.

Ok, so am I saying that program assessment is the only type of assessment that we need to think about? Of course not. There are many types of assessments and these can be done at a number of different levels (e.g., classroom, course, program, and institution). In fact, what can make assessment so confusing is that there are so many definitions for assessment and it can be conducted at so many levels.

Examples of Different Types of Assessments

Consider the following three scenarios. All of them describe assessments that one would expect to take place in a college or university, but only one would be considered a program assessment.

Scenario 1: A mathematics professor collects data in her course to determine if a newly implemented teaching technique improved student learning.

Scenario 2: The chair of the Art department tracks enrollment data for all courses in the Art program over a 5-year period.

Scenario 3: The English department collects data to determine if the students who have taken courses in the English program are improving their critical thinking skills.

All three of these are worthwhile assessment tasks that are appropriate for the college or university setting and should be highly encouraged and supported on campus. However, only one of these is a program assessment of student learning. Remember, from our definition above, a program assessment must possess two essential qualities: 1.) the results must be generalizable to the program as a whole and 2.) the assessment must be a measure of a specific student-learning outcome. Based on these two criteria, only Scenario 3 is a program assessment.

In Scenario 3, the English department is looking at improvements in critical thinking skills for their students – certainly a commendable student-learning outcome. They are collecting data from more than one course which implies that the information derived from the assessment can be generalized to the program as a whole (Please bear in mind that this is an oversimplification – much more would have to go into the preparation to make certain that the results can be generalized).

What about Scenario 1? Why is this not a program assessment? Although Scenario 1 corresponds directly to student learning, it is not considered a program assessment because the findings cannot be generalized to the program as a whole and the implementation of a new teaching technique is not a student-learning outcome.

So, if Scenario 1 is not a program assessment, then what type of assessment is it? Scenario 1 falls into the category of “Scholarship of Teaching and Learning” (SoTL). SoTL is a type of assessment that can also be considered a form of research. A SoTL assessment often generates information that people from other colleges and universities find useful and, thus, SoTL assessments have the potential to be published in peer-reviewed journals. In fact, Dominican University values its faculty performing SoTL assessments to such a high degree that SoTL projects published in peer reviewed journals are favorably considered during tenure/promotion review.

This leaves us with Scenario 2 – why is it not a program assessment? Although this assessment provides information at the program level, it does not measure a particular student-learning outcome and by our definition cannot be considered a program assessment of student learning. This type of assessment is best considered a part of a program review.

So, there you have it; program assessment is just one of a number of worthwhile types of assessments that can be performed. Its value lies in the fact that the information obtained from a program assessment is a good indicator of how well the program is achieving its intended goals pertaining to student learning. If your program assessment of student learning tells you that you are doing a good job of achieving your goals, great! Tell us about it, so that we can celebrate with you. If, on the other hand, student learning in your program leaves something to be desired, let us know about that too. Remember, being engaged in the conversation about student learning is an important aspect of improving student learning.