Advancing Student Learning

Highlights and Summary of
*Student Learning Assessment:
Options and Resources*

Middle States Commission on Higher Education

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Why define and assess learning?

Colleges and universities need a better way to assure students and the public of their quality than relying on rankings by commercial magazines. Quality assurance should be based on what colleges actually do, which is to educate students. By adopting revised accreditation standards in 2002, member institutions in the Middle States region affirmed that the best way to explain clearly to students and the public what they do, while maintaining the diverse types of higher education institutions in the United States, is to allow each college to define its own learning goals, to choose its own means of determining success, and to adopt its own plan to use the results.

Where are detailed explanations of assessment methods and sample plans available?

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education has published a handbook, *Student Learning Assessment: Options and Resources*. It also has posted on its website, www.msache.org, examples that relate to each of the chapters in the handbook, including: Motivating and Involving Campus Communities, Learning Goals, Evaluating Student Learning, The Student Learning Assessment Plan in the Context of Institutional Planning, and Using Results to Improve Teaching and Learning. The handbook can be ordered with the Publications Order form on the Commission's website.

Will student learning assessment be burdensome to faculty, staff, and administration? Will new staff be needed?

Goals, processes, and data collection methods that are too complex may defeat the ultimate goals of explaining learning to the public and providing information to faculty that is clear enough for them to use for improvement. The aim is to focus on important learning goals, to use clear and simple assessment methods, and to draw on established processes.

> ➤ An assessment plan need not be long or complicated. It should use existing institutional processes or establish new ones that can be incorporated into existing structures to ensure that learning assessment is a part of routine institutional processes.
> ➤ Definitions of learning goals should already exist for many courses and programs, and institutional goals should be implicit in the institution's mission.

- Many assessment processes already exist on campus. Take an inventory and incorporate what already exists into a coordinated plan that integrates student learning in different parts of the college.
- Ask the college's own social science faculty whether existing and proposed evaluation methods work for your institution. Research designs need not be elaborate.
- Use the handbook *Student Learning Assessment: Options and Resources* as a reference and resource for explanation and suggestions you can use in your college.

How do we involve the campus community?

See Chapter 1 and appendices to the handbook and use the resources provided, such as questionnaires for academic leaders, an assessment practices quiz, and a brainstorming exercise to "break the ice."

How do we define learning goals?

- Start with successful assessment programs already used in the college. This gives the college community positive feedback, and it can serve as an example for other academic areas.
- Use materials such as the "Teaching Goals Inventory" in Chapter 2 of the handbook to help faculty articulate what types of goals they have in areas such as higher order thinking skills, basic academic success skills, discipline-specific knowledge and skills, liberal arts and academic values, work and career preparation, and personal development. Not every course must address every area.
- Use clear, straightforward, and meaningful goals that address key learning outcomes, that are widely agreed upon, and that can lead to improvement.
- Start with a few important goals rather than developing complicated lists of secondary goals.
- Determine which learning goals are already being assessed and what data may be available to assess other goals (e.g., syllabi, course descriptions, and analyses of student work and transcripts).
- Define learning goals before choosing assessment methods, and define them operationally so that data collection can be tailored to the defined goals.

How can learning goals be defined at the course, program, or institutional level?

A college should define learning goals at the course, program, and institutional levels and integrate them into an institution-wide curriculum. For example:

- Institutional level goals address learning for all students that stem from the institution's mission and are developed through a collegial process.
- Program level goals relate to the major, minor, concentration, general education, or information literacy, including non-academic and co-curricular programs where student learning is expected to occur. They should be consistent with institutional goals and with disciplinary expectations.

➤ Course level goals are articulated by faculty for their own courses. Faculty consult with other faculty to ensure coherence and consistency. Course goals can generally be found in syllabi, and students should be able to indicate at least a general awareness of the goals and purposes for the courses they are taking.

Here is one example of the relationship among learning goals at the institution and program levels:

Institutional Goals	Program and Program-level Goals			
	General	Residential Life	Business	History
Leadership	Function effectively as a team member	Apply conflict resolution skills	Develop leadership skill in self and others	Analyze historical perspectives on leadership

The process for defining goals usually is outlined in an outcomes assessment plan, but the plan need not specify every learning goal for every course or program or at the institutional level. The plan should contain the process for arriving at those goals, revising them periodically, assessing them, and using the results. It also should indicate where the goals for each course, program, and institution may be found and where the results from assessment and improvement can be found.

Which level should be used to assess learning?
Can different goals be assessed at different levels?

An institution that meets the standard on the assessment of student learning may choose to assess learning goals at any or all levels in accordance with the programmatic structure of the institution, as long as goals are specified for each level. For example, some institutions choose to assess all goals, including institutional level goals, through a process of course-embedded assessment. Other institutions may choose to assess institutional level goals or general education goals in a programmatic context (e.g., assessing achievement of general education goals in a capstone course in the major). Others may wish to assess the attainment of goals at an institutional level (e.g., testing all seniors prior to graduation or using a standardized test of basic general educational goals). See Chapter 3 of the handbook for examples of learning goals at each level.

How do we evaluate student learning?

The Commission's standards allow institutions to use numerical and/or non-numerical measures (e.g., student portfolios) and to choose whether or not to use standardized tests. Each college may select measures based on the type of learning goals and the educational mission of the college, and it should:

➤ Ensure that grades are useful by having them relate to the defined goals for the course.

➤ Use indirect measures (e.g., student surveys) to explain or support findings from direct measures (e.g., grades).

➤ Use mid-course ("formative") assessment to improve teaching and learning.

- ➢ Use common sense: Is the result logical?
- ➢ Choose an appropriate research design. See Chapter 3 of the handbook for information on:
  - ◇ key questions when choosing assessment instruments (e.g., balancing timeliness and practicality against efforts to create the "perfect" research tools, assessing over time, and evaluating important learning outcomes by multiple means);
  - ◇ methodological considerations (e.g., reliability and validity; pre-tests, post-tests and designs; self report measures; and statistical significance); and
  - ◇ specific tools and techniques (e.g., rating scales, self-reflection, comments from supervisors, placement rates, test blueprints, multi-dimensional tests, focus groups, *ad hoc* surveys and pre-graduation surveys, portfolios, and retention and graduation rates).

Here is one of many examples from the handbook of direct and indirect learning measures at each level:

Direct Measures (Excerpts)	Indirect Measures (Excerpts)
Course Level: ▪ Examinations and quizzes ▪ Observations of field work, internship performance, service learning, or clinical experiences	*Course Level:* ▪ Course evaluations ▪ Percent of class time spent in active learning ▪ Number of student hours spent at intellectual or cultural activities related to the course
Program Level: ▪ Capstone projects, senior theses, exhibits, or performances ▪ Pass rates or scores on licensure, certification, or subject area tests ▪ Employer and internship supervisor ratings of students' performance	*Program Level:* ▪ Registration or course enrollment information ▪ Employer or alumni surveys ▪ Student perception surveys
Institutional Level: ▪ Performance on tests of writing, critical thinking, or general kn owledge ▪ Rating-scale scores for class assignments in General Education	*Institutional Level:* ▪ Transcript studies that examine patterns and trends of course selection and grading ▪ The institution's annual reports, including institutional benchmarks and graduation rates

Must we assess all learning of all students at different times?

The Commission is interested in the ability of a college to graduate students who have the skills and knowledge that the college has selected as its goals. This can be evidenced by representative samples of students and may demonstrate skills of graduates without comparison to earlier evaluation(s).

What should a student learning assessment plan include?

A plan connects student learning assessment to institutional assessment and strategic planning, and it provides for the use of assessment results and earmarking of appropriate resources. The plan should articulate how the institution will demonstrate that its students have learned. Chapter 4 of the handbook gives greater detail, such as:

➢ the process for determining student learning at the institutional and program levels. (Course-level goals are unlikely to appear in an assessment plan, but they would appear in course syllabi.)

➢ methods for demonstrating that students have learned (i.e., measures such as testing instruments or criteria for evaluating student performance).

➢ process for analyzing results and implementing improvements.

Must a plan be written?

The concept of a student learning assessment plan usually assumes that the plan will be written. However, some institutions may be able to demonstrate, at least on a short-term basis, that student learning outcomes are being met in the absence of a comprehensive written plan.

How does the student learning assessment plan relate to strategic planning and budgeting?

The student learning assessment plan usually is a separate section within the overall strategic plan for an entire institution. However, it also may be referred to, as relevant, in other sections of the strategic plan, such as in discussions of the regular assessment of institutional effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals; implementing planning; resource allocation; institutional renewal processes; the efficient use of institutional resources; leadership and governance; administrative structures and services; institutional integrity; and assuring that institutional processes support learning.

How can an institution demonstrate that student learning assessment is used to improve teaching and learning?

The institution's commitment to analyze and use results may be demonstrated by regularized processes and protocols for ensuring its use, such as:

➢ sharing assessment results with the constituencies to whom they are relevant, including applicants to the institution, at a meaningful level of detail

➢ campus knowledge of, and discussion about, assessment results

➢ shared decision making about changes resulting from assessment results

➢ empowering relevant individuals, groups, or units to effect change

➢ making resources available for data collection, analysis, and changes resulting from assessment

➢ flexibility in processes and procedures to allow for change within a meaningful period of time and to avoid possible obstacles to change

➢ demonstrable evidence of curricular change at the course, program, and institutional levels (e.g., syllabus, course, and program revision; and before-and-after examples of student work)

What evidence is needed to satisfy Standard 14 on Assessment of Student Learning, and what should teams expect to find?

An institution that meets the spirit of the standard in its entirety can provide sufficient evidence in written form and in the context of team interactions with faculty, students, and administrators that demonstrates in various ways that students have achieved the learning goals that the institution has established.

The evidence may take the form of results of institution-developed measures; standardized disciplinary, licensure, or certification tests; analyses of portfolios and presentations; the results of focus groups and other qualitative analyses; and surveys of student perceptions and satisfaction. Measures should be meaningful, reliable, and valid. Direct measures of student learning are usually the only definitive form of evidence that learning has occurred. Indirect assessment of student learning goals is used when appropriate and is most helpful in explaining the causes of directly measured outcomes, confirming assessment results, and exploring potential means of improving learning.

Evaluation teams will verify that evidence exists by reviewing a sample of assessment materials. The Commission realizes that assessment of student learning is an ongoing, dynamic process and that not every learning goal will have been defined, assessed or achieved at the time of the institutional review. Institutions beginning to implement assessment plans may not have extensive evidence of curricular change at the time of the institutional review. Institutions that meet the spirit of the standards, however, are able to document the existence of a workable assessment process with a reasonable schedule for collecting and using assessment results.

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