ASSESSMENT GUIDE

Tailored to Small Programs

MOUNT MERCY UNIVERSITY
Cedar Rapids, IA
319-363-8213

SETTING THE STAGE

Faculty in small programs may have more difficulty than anticipated in making assessment work for them. This guide was prepared to provide support and ideas to small programs as they work through the assessment process.

Objectives for the Tailored Assessment Guide

By presenting issues, questions, and ideas in a compact handbook, we hope that the resulting resource can be used in a number of ways to enhance the experience and benefits of assessment. Colleagues using the Tailored Assessment Guide will be able to:

- Identify size-related challenges and opportunities potentially influencing their own assessment efforts;

- Apply pertinent suggestions to help address their academic assessment questions or concerns;

- Reflect on the ways in which they conceptualize, conduct, and apply assessment to strengthen student learning;

- Stimulate or inform discussion about assessment issues within their academic units;

- Engage colleagues in other small programs to think about ways they might work together to strengthen assessment approaches.

Overview of factors affecting small programs

For campus assessment processes to function at their best, important characteristics that distinguish various programs should be taken into consideration. Program size is a source of distinctiveness that, while not receiving a great deal of attention, may affect assessment practices or outcomes in notable ways. In particular, the following factors seem to characterize the way smaller academic units may experience assessment:

* Small programs face special challenges when it comes to assessment.

- Influence of a few students

Conversations with faculty in smaller programs indicate that concerns commonly arise about the influence a few individual students have on the identification and portrayal of their program outcomes. It is particularly challenging for faculty to sort out the value-added contributions of their programs when one or two especially strong or weak students can markedly shape the year's assessment results. Adding to this challenge, transfer students and those who declare or add programs at a later stage particularly affect smaller programs' confidence that they are adequately portraying learning outcomes.

- Difficulty in adequately analyzing data

Perceiving that the typical assessment techniques do not fit their situation represents another noteworthy concern. While smaller programs are often able to collect more in-depth data about student learning, portraying and responding to that data through descriptive or inferential statistics may prove particularly challenging. Problems likely to be expressed by small programs include difficulty in dealing with variability in student performance, potential faculty bias toward students who are well known to them, and difficulty in drawing meaningful conclusions from their assessment data.

- Lack of perceived benefit

Faculty members have reported some frustration with spending time documenting results they feel are understood quite well already, based on their knowledge of individual students. When there are fewer programs in a program, the process of analyzing and reporting on annual outcomes may be more likely to be seen as adding little benefit.

- Limited support

With fewer faculty members to handle the full range of administrative, campus-wide, and teaching-related expectations, smaller programs may find it more difficult to devote resources and energy to assessment activities. Such typical techniques as performance assessments and rubrics may appear less useful and more burdensome in those instances, despite lower numbers of graduates.

Naturally, small programs' experiences with assessment vary widely, and concerns do not paint a complete picture. Similarly, it is important to note that "small" is a relative term, best conceptualized in relation to the institution's profile. The ideas suggested in this guide were developed as an outgrowth of working with programs whose annual graduate numbers seem distinctly small in comparison to others.

* *Potential assessment challenges also yield special opportunities.*

While concerns certainly exist, it is important to highlight some of the factors that can yield potential advantages to smaller academic units. Greater awareness of these attributes can help encourage faculty in small programs to think positively and creatively about assessment. With this outlook, we believe that smaller programs can offer campus leadership in this area. The brief list below serves to indicate factors that, while sometimes associated with challenges, also generate interesting opportunities:

- A higher proportion of the faculty in the program or program get to know each student in terms of characteristics and performance, even if they join the program later;

- Smaller numbers of faculty make it easier to collaborate closely and exchange ideas about student learning, course or program design, and assessment techniques or results;

MOUNT MERCY UNIVERSITY

- With fewer students, more in-depth or long-term measures may be implemented particularly well, with multiple approaches and qualitative analysis techniques also especially manageable;

- Programs smaller in scale may be able to implement change more adroitly based on assessment data;

- Faculty in smaller programs are likely to find their alumni, with the close bonds established during their studies, especially willing to help gather data or evaluate work samples from current students.

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF OBJECTIVES

This section is designed to help faculty in formulating student learning objectives that capture the most important program results. Objectives that are meaningful and informative to faculty are the foundation of a good assessment plan, and it is worthwhile to review and refine objectives regularly.

1. Establish clear and relevant objectives.

This is an area in which the needs of smaller and larger programs are generally comparable, and established guidelines apply quite well. The most useful objectives are those which:

- Use verbs that convey the level and type of student learning expected. Lists of action verbs, such as the sample included in the appendix, can help in stating objectives that communicate your intentions. The more sharply you can articulate these intended learning outcomes, the greater the likelihood that your assessment approaches will be informative. Do the objectives clearly state the observable, identifiable ways in which students will convey their growing understanding, for example, such as interpreting a position, contrasting opposing views, or creating a model?

- As the objectives are reviewed and refined, check for a desired balance of knowledge, skills, and affective or attitudinal/values-oriented indicators. While cognitive or knowledge-focused objectives often come to mind most readily, each program should consider including general or discipline-specific skills as well as affective outcomes such as application of ethical decision making.

- Link your program statements to college-wide objectives. All too often, programs design assessment plans, including learning objectives, as part of an internally focused process. Ample consideration should be given to the institutional mission, goals, and objectives to demonstrate clear alignment.

- Develop a reasonable number of objectives for each program. In cases where the list of objectives grows too long, assessment can become burdensome, and it can be harder to focus attention on the most important areas for planning and improvement. On the other hand, of course, specifying too few

objectives limits the program's ability to portray the richness of student learning or identify areas where further attention may be warranted.

If 5-8 well-chosen statements are assessed regularly and with care, results can be more satisfying than doing a cursory review of more numerous objectives. Consider, for example, asking within your program: *When our students walk across the stage at graduation, what do we especially hope they carry away with them? How well do our program objectives convey those aspirations?*

2. **Be alert to some common stumbling blocks.**

Stating objectives that meet the criteria noted above is challenging, and it is a task that may become frustrating on an individual or program level. Those responsible for managing the assessment process may find it useful to reassure colleagues that no set of objectives need be or will be a perfect reflection of the complex and changing endeavor of teaching and learning.

Set a reasonable timeframe for developing or refining objectives, allow opportunities for discussion and feedback within the program, and plan to move ahead. It is useful to review objectives periodically and make improvements, especially as the program grows and changes, but devoting too much time to how the statements are worded has caused well-intentioned assessment efforts to stumble. This is a case where the process of collaboration and reflection may be at least as important as the "product."

The vocabulary of planning and assessment has proved to be another obstacle for some programs. Terms like goals, objectives, and outcomes are used differently in various contexts. Try to keep the focus on communicating a progression from more general to more specific statements of what students should learn.

If you use the terms objectives and outcomes to represent distinct types of statements, with the latter including a form of measurement or situation in which the learning will be demonstrated, it may be helpful to create a set of clear examples reflecting diverse disciplines and share these widely. Overall, the most helpful approach may be to emphasize that the degree of generality in stating intended student learning occurs along a continuum. Different programs may state their intents with varying degrees of precision, as long as they communicate clear plans for measuring or documenting the results for assessment purposes.

SELECTING THE MOST APPROPRIATE ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

The specific elements of an assessment plan, in essence the "who, what, where, when and how," may need to be adjusted when programs have relatively few graduates. Techniques such as portfolios, capstone seminar projects, and student self-evaluation may be especially helpful to smaller programs. Innovative ideas such as telling your story over time, use of reviewers outside the program, and collaboration among small programs are also suggested for consideration.

1. **Link your method to your objectives.**

   The right method of data collection depends on your specific objectives. You may be able to collect information for several objectives from one student assignment. A few common data collection methods for small programs include:

   o Senior capstone project/paper. If you require a capstone paper or project from your seniors, this assignment might be able to provide data on several of your program objectives. Develop an assessment rubric that is directly linked to your objectives and re-read the assignment using the assessment rubric. Consider using two different faculty readers. Having multiple readers is a great way to encourage more faculty to participate in the assessment process and provides more reliable feedback to your program.

   o Portfolio. Have students save and collect exhibits of their work that relate to your program objectives. It is especially useful to have students reflect on these works and ask them to consider how the work is a good example of the program objective. Faculty members can then evaluate the portfolio using rubrics developed by the program. Again, engaging multiple readers of the submitted portfolios has many benefits.

   o Course embedded activities. Working collaboratively, identify key assignments that can become part of the ongoing program assessment process. Designing a focused writing exercise, oral presentation, problem solving exercise, or other experience can shed light on how students have performed on important objectives as they entered the program or at other points along the way.

2. **Consider using an indirect measure of student learning.**

   One of the advantages of working in a small program is getting to know students better. These relationships often extend beyond graduation, making it more likely that you will get strong response rates to alumni surveys or other indirect indicators.

   o Alumni surveys. Alumni can provide valuable feedback to your program, sharing their perspective of your program and its contributions. Consider periodically surveying your alumni to ask for feedback about the curriculum, what they found most useful, and self-evaluations in relation to key program objectives. Alumni Relations offices often facilitate this type of formal contact with alumni from your program.

o Employment data. Alumni or Career Services offices maintain employment data from graduates. If you have an employer that hires a number of your alumni or has worked with your program in various ways, consider asking their perspective in relation to your objectives. Employment related questions may yield useful feedback as part of your overall assessment approach.

3. **Consider incorporating longitudinal data.**

Small programs may be able to capture data about their objectives from students when they affiliate with the program. Consider developing a few questions that you can ask students upon entry into the program, either through a writing sample or an interview with a member of the program. Keep your evaluation of those answers in the advising folder.

As a student nears the completion of the program you can ask the same questions or have the student respond to the same writing prompt. You can then compare answers and see what progress has been made over time. If you do not have an entry level class in which to collect data, consider collecting pre-test data when you register students or at an advising meeting.

4. **Collaborate.**

There are a number of ways that you can collaborate with other programs to help in your assessment efforts. One way is through the sharing of rubrics used in other programs. Often, reviewing a rubric developed by colleagues in the discipline, whether at your institution or through a professional organization or website, provides very helpful insight into ways to focus the assessment of a particular type of student performance. Resources for locating rubrics, such as those listed in the Appendix, can provide a helpful starting point for ideas and conversation within or across programs.

Another good form of collaboration is to have someone from outside your program read and evaluate student work. Consider a colleague at a similar institution, or faculty members in a similar program. An outside reviewer can help guard against bias that might develop from knowing your students so well. Depending on the number of pieces of work you are asking someone to evaluate, you may consider a small stipend. A form to submit funding for an outside reviewer is in the appendix.

5. **Reassess as needed.**

Assessment is not a one-time activity; rather, it is evolutionary, ongoing, and incremental. Over time, assessment efforts should become more comprehensive, systematic, integrative, and organic. Be prepared to periodically assess and revise your assessment plan. Since you do not need to collect data on every program objective every year, it is good to develop a rotation plan and build in a time for evaluation of your plan.

MEANINGFUL ANALYSIS OF DATA
... especially when you don't have much of it!

Many small programs struggle with how to think about and present data when there are limited numbers of students enrolled. This section of the Tailored Assessment Guide provides suggestions to help faculty focus their thinking about the data, and ideas for applying best practice from qualitative approaches are discussed.

1. **Organize your data analysis around the questions you want answered**.

   All good data analysis begins with a question. What is it that you want to know about your students? This should be foremost in your mind when you devise your data collection method and also when you are analyzing your data. Data collection and analysis strategies should be devised to answer questions that are important to the program. If you don't hold as a priority how well students can use visuals in an oral presentation, there is really no reason to include that as a criterion in your oral communication rubric or to report on that data. Focus on the most salient learning areas and the analysis techniques that will inform you about those.

2. **Select the right statistic.**

   When you have a large data set, you can let the numbers tell the story of your success. For example, when you have a sufficiently large sample size (usually defined as 30 or more students) discovering that your graduating seniors' average writing score was 52 out of 60 might be meaningful to your program. However, when you have five students, for example, the mean is likely to be highly influenced by one very talented student or one student who performs poorly. With small sample sizes, the mean can be a misleading statistic. The same can be said of findings reported as percentages. The median or mode may be more useful, and with any of these tools, reporting the range of scores is suggested.

   It might be helpful to divide your data into three categories (e.g. unacceptable, average, or exceptional) and provide in this framework the number and percentage (if desired) of students who performed at each of the specified levels.

3. **Break data into more meaningful categories.**

   Global scores are limited in their usefulness and make it difficult for a program to respond to the data. Instead of solely reporting that 98% of your students were able to give an effective oral presentation, for example, it might be more useful to report the sub-scores that went into an effective presentation (e.g. completeness of content, organization, correct use of terms, vocal delivery, and visual delivery.) Discovering that students' presentations were effective overall is gratifying, but knowing that the principal strength is their ability to use the language of the discipline accurately and the main weakness is organization of the content might give you more information to reflect on and use to improve student learning.

4. Tell the story behind the numbers.

Small programs are in a unique position to tell the story behind the data they report. Do not be afraid to describe what you know about your students. The knowledge that you have about your students and their abilities can convey a rich story worth telling. Be careful, however, not to explain away poor performance by citing "lack of motivation" on the part of the student. Instead, consider describing factors that have influenced the students' work.

A recent example from a philosophy program underscores the value of this approach. In this case, senior theses were evaluated relative to subject matter knowledge within the discipline. Two students performed more poorly than the program found satisfactory. In conveying their narrative, the faculty clarified that students were allowed to select their own research topics for the senior paper. The two apparently underperforming students had selected topics they found meaningful and important, but that drew them into areas not studied formally in classes. Therefore, the students' knowledge of philosophy in these areas was limited. The program discussed this situation and decided that it was worthwhile to allow students to grapple with a topic of interest, applying analytical skills but with limited coursework background. The resulting assessment would have been misleading without this rich explanation.

REFLECTION ON THE DATA

Without meaningful reflection on the results, the assessment process becomes a task to complete instead of a useful way to improve student learning. Reflection adds value, as well, to our work as faculty members. This section includes suggestions for reflecting on assessment data, including meetings with programs in "pairs" to promote conversation and exchange of ideas.

1. Discuss your results reflectively.

Once the data have been compiled, present the findings at a program meeting. Do not work in isolation. Too often, whoever collects the data is asked to respond to the data, and a truly collegial process is short-circuited. Without discussing findings and methods, the program risks having assessment becoming a hoop to jump through instead of a dynamic process that can help shape its improvement efforts.

Consider inviting adjunct faculty and students to meet with the faculty and discuss what the data might be signaling about student learning. Let the data serve as a springboard for conversation about the performance you would like from your students and how well you are meeting that expectation. Questions will naturally arise, but here are a few that are useful as you think about assessment data:

- *Are these results meaningful to us? Why or why not?*

If the results are not meaningful, then you might be asking the wrong questions. If you can "explain the results away," you might need to redesign the process to get at information you really want to know. If the results are not meaningful to your program, they are unlikely to be meaningful to any one else.

- *Where are these skills/knowledge/attitudes taught and reinforced in our curriculum?*

Assessment data is a great place to begin an important discussion among faculty about how we are working together to ensure that graduates have the skills, understandings, and attitudes or values they will need to be successful. Small programs often have adjunct instructors teaching some of their classes. Have you communicated with your adjuncts the essential skills that you want your graduates to possess? Program objectives should articulate these skills clearly. Can you readily map each objective to courses in your curriculum? If you can't, this might be a great exercise to engage in as a program.

- *According to the assessment data, what are our students' strengths? What are their key weaknesses? What can we do to build on the strengths and improve the weaknesses?*

This is a great opportunity for a program to formulate clearly what you do well, so that you can articulate it to others. It is also an opportunity to think about where the gaps are in your curriculum and to develop creative ways to address those limitations.

2. **Use your data actively.**

Once you have discussed the findings, you are in a good position to start putting them to use. There are four primary uses for assessment data:

- o *Improve student learning.* The first and most important way assessment data can be used is to improve how we teach, so that students are more likely to learn the knowledge/skills/values we think are necessary for graduates of our discipline. If your assessment efforts don't ultimately improve student learning, it might be time to redesign your system. Examples of ways assessment can improve student learning include: offering a new class, adding assignments to existing classes to reinforce important ideas or skills, changing readings, or developing a new way to teach a concept or principle.

- o *Accreditation.* Assessment data are essential as we tell our story about how students are performing to accrediting bodies. Naturally, consulting guidelines and expectations on a regular basis, attending conferences and seminars for further training, and working with other programs across the institution are all important steps.

- o *Recruitment.* Assessment data also provide small programs the opportunity to tell your story in a clear, precise way to potential students. Often students are unaware of the value of a degree in a certain field. By clarifying and celebrating the knowledge, skills, and dispositions your students develop through studying the discipline, prospective students might be more interested in pursuing your field of study.

- o *Faculty learning.* Assessment data can be useful to faculty members to learn about what is working effectively and what is not working effectively in our classrooms. In short, it can serve as a meaningful faculty development stimulus and tool.

"BIG IDEAS FOR SMALL PROGRAMS"

A number of the key ideas small programs may wish to consider cut across specific phases or aspects of the assessment process. In this section, several of those important recommendations are highlighted. Based on the challenges and the opportunities described earlier, the "big ideas" are set forth not as fully developed solutions, but to offer useful springboards for reflection. We hope, too, that they stimulate productive discussion with others engaged in assessing student learning.

You know your students better than most, so tell their story.

- Think about individual students' progress as a story unfolding;

- Take the long view of their development through portfolios or ongoing work samples along with senior capstone projects;

- Put multiple measures to work, incorporating diverse facets of your program outcomes;

- Consider prospective students as an audience for the assessment story, incorporating what they would value knowing about your strategies and results.

Bring other viewpoints into your assessment plan.

- Add the students' perspectives through self-evaluation;

- Bring external colleagues into the process;

- Collaborate with other programs to gather and analyze data;

- Reference professional criteria and standards.

Portray your findings in the most meaningful ways for your program size.

- Use statistical tools only as they suit smaller data sets;

- Use qualitative techniques to advantage, seeking advice as needed;

- Don't apologize for having fewer students to discuss, but create the richest picture you can of the graduates you have.

Trust your judgment, while remaining open to the need for change.

- Incorporate key observations and insights, but also explain your thinking to make assessment findings and conclusions clear to others;

- Use your insights to improve by actively completing the assessment cycle and putting the results to use in your program;

- Refer to the Tailored Assessment Guide regularly for questions and ideas that can initiate conversation and spark creative thinking.

APPENDIX

Action Verbs for Learning Outcomes

Intellectual	Verbal	Skill	Attitude
Discrimination, Concrete and Defined Concepts, Rule and Higher-order rule, Cognitive Strategies	Reciting from memory	Performance	Demonstration of a newly acquired value
- Discriminate - Distinguish - Compare - Contrast - Classify - Recognize - Identify - Apply - Explain - Describe - Organize - Solve - Verify - Express - Review - Indicate	- List - Define - Recite - Produce - Repeat - Recall - State - Name - Label - Arrange - Duplicate	- Analyze - Test - Assess - Determine - Develop - Design - Create - Write - Demonstrate - Perform - Select - Construct - Prepare - Report - Practice - Write - Solve - Assemble - Communicate - Compute - Design - Estimate - Implement - Measure - Manage - Operate - Interpret	- Prefer - Choose - Emulate - Accept - Adopt - Integrate - Demonstrate - Select

http://sunny.crk.umn.edu/courses/itc/itc510/action_verbs_for_learning_outcomes2.htm