

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT GUIDE

**A Resource for Coordinators, Department Chairs, and Faculty
at Mount Mercy University**

COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT

Writing Strong Objectives

Guideline 1: Establish clear and relevant objectives.

- ✓ Use verbs that convey the level and type of student learning expected. Lists of action verbs, such as the sample found on the assessment tab of the intranet, 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.
- ✓ 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 for each 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?*

Guideline 2: Avoid common pitfalls related to objectives.

Stating objectives can be challenging, and it is a task that may become frustrating on an individual or program level. No set of objectives need be or will be a perfect reflection of the complex and changing endeavor of teaching and learning. The goal is to write objectives that reflect the *most important attributes* you want to see in your graduates.

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. 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.

Guideline 3: Build student awareness of objectives for the program.

Familiarity with the intents or desired outcomes of their coursework, internships, and other experiences in the program adds to a sense of purposeful learning. Students who are aware of key expectations for graduates are better able to gauge their own growth as they progress through an academic program. In addition to their familiar use in helping faculty make curricular and instructional decisions, learning objectives can contribute to students' understanding of the priorities and distinctive features of the programs they have chosen.

Some recommended ways to increase student knowledge of these objectives include:

- Having course syllabi include the learning objectives for the program that are addressed within that class. These would be accompanied by any course-specific objectives that the instructor has established.
- Highlighting objectives for student learning at the start of a course or when substantial assignments used for assessment in the program are being explained.
- Including the objectives in brochures or on the web pages for the program.
- Developing surveys or informal tools to check awareness levels within senior seminars, during advising meetings, or at other times.

Selecting the Most Appropriate Assessment Method

Guideline 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 include:

- Senior project/paper. If you require a 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Guideline 2: Consider using an indirect measure of student learning.

One of the advantages of working in a small college 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. The Alumni Relations office can provide up-to-date contact information for the alumni in your program
- o Employment data. Career Services maintain employment data from our 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.

Guideline 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 during an advising meeting.

Guideline 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. The assessment page on the intranet has a number of rubrics for your consideration.

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.

Guideline 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.

ANALYZING DATA EFFECTIVELY

Guideline 1: Organize your data analysis around the main 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.

Guideline 2: 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.

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.

Guideline 3: Tell the story behind the numbers.

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.

REFLECTING 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.

Guideline 1: Discuss your results reflectively.

Once the data have been compiled, present the findings at a meeting of the faculty in the program. 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.

Invite 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.

- *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.

Guideline 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:

- ❖ *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.
- ❖ *Accreditation.* Assessment data are essential as we tell our story about how students are performing to accrediting bodies.
- ❖ *Recruitment.* Assessment data also provides you with 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.
- ❖ *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.