Mary Allen. *Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education*. Boston, MA: Anker Publishing, 2004

Two boys are walking down the street. The first boy says, "I've been really busy this summer. I've been teaching my dog to talk." His friend responds, "Wow! I can't wait to have a conversation with your dog!" The first boy shakes his head, "I said I've been teaching him. I didn't say he learned anything." (1)

Increased attention in higher education connects faculty decisions about teaching with student learning. "Faculty work collaboratively to decide what they want student to learn, and they develop courses and curricula to systematically help students synthesize, practice, and develop increasing complex ideas, skills, and values. . . . Assessment involves the use of empirical data on student learning to refine programs and improve student learning" (2). Assessment provides information on what teaching approaches are effective for whom.

The presumptions that students learn only or best through listening to lectures, reading texts, and independent work are being challenged as faculty are exposed to or experiment with a greater variety of approaches in helping students acquire and process knowledge related to their disciplines. Grading based on an exclusively competitive model is supplemented or replaced by grading practices that include collaborative work, portfolios of a range of work, and tasks that reflect lower to higher forms of cognitive activity, competence interviews (examination orally administered).

Knowing that content coverage in any discipline is impossible, many faculty are experimenting with alternative curriculum configurations that allow for greater faculty collaboration. Faculty are also guiding the ways in which student access knowledge outside the classroom so that class time can be used more effectively for critical thinking, authentic dialogue, problem solving, encouraging the development of skills for lifelong learning, apprehending how different cultures approach an issue, and so on. In some cases, integrative projects across courses are feasible along with intentional synergy with other forms of education. "Thinking of a course in terms of learning, rather than teaching, can lead to major changes in its structure" (28).

Comprehensive data collection is neither possible nor required. Assessment processes can be carried out with purposeful samples; and/or on regular cycles.

In general, accreditors must be assured that an institution has the capacity to carry out its mission (financial stability, adequate resources); and that the institution is carrying out serious examination of effectiveness—most particularly in student learning. ". . . the bottom line in higher education is the generation of learning" (19).

"Assessment requires more than just collecting data; assessment involves using results to effect change" (19). Assessment viewed as compliance rarely affects institutional development. Effective assessment is embedded in institutional process and is ongoing (not just frantic activity immediately prior to a site visit). Further, accreditors expect that faculty and staff will be involved comprehensively in assessment processes.

Assessment processes can be embedded at strategic points in student work. For example, during a capstone course, during and after an internship, at the end of their first nine hours of course work, and so on.

Assessment processes need to be both reliable (the measure is stable and measures what it is supposed to be measuring) and valid (how well a procedure assesses what it is supposed to be assessing).

Typically, assessment processes are exempt from federal guidelines related to protection of human participants because research whose sole purpose is to improve educational institutions is exempt. Good practice would suggest that research that is questioned should be discussed with the institution's review board (IRB). Allen (2004, 67-68) offers selected ethical concepts in relation to assessment processes:

Selected Ethical Concepts

Anonymity. The identity of participants in assessment studies is not recorded or is recorded in such a way that data elements cannot be associated with individuals.

Autonomy. Participants in assessment studies have the right to self-determination and to make decisions about participation without undue pressure that would reduce this right.

Beneficence. The assessment study is designed to maximize possible benefits and to minimize or eliminate possible harm.

Competence. Faculty are competent in the methodologies they use. When lacking formal training or experience with a method, faculty should seek appropriate training or assistance.

Confidentiality. The person who conducts the assessment study is aware of who participated, but does not disclose this information.

Data ownership. Faculty determine who has control over the assessment data, who has the right to see the data or to allow others to see them.

Data security. The security of assessment data and other information that could lead to the disclosure of confidential information is preserved.

Deception. Deception involves giving incorrect or misleading information to participants. lt is difficult to imagine an assessment study that requires deception.

Disclosure of rights. Faculty inform potential participants of their rights, such as their right not to participate and to know the degree of confidentiality associated with their responses.

Dual relationships. Dual relationships exist when participants in assessment projects have more than one relationship to the person collecting or analyzing the data, such as student-teacher or employee-employer relationships. Having two or more roles can create competing expectations that may bias results, threaten objectivity, and lead to harm. For example, student participants may be subtly penalized for honest but critical statements.

Exploitation. Exploitation involves taking advantage of people over whom one has authority, such as students, supervisees, employees, and research participants. Participants in assessment studies should not be exploited.

Fair and accurate. Assessment reports are based on data, not on the assessor's desires, biases, or other factors extrinsic to the assessment process.

Harm. Avoiding the risk of physical or emotional/psychological harm is a primary principle in the ethical guidelines of most organizations (e.g., American Psychological Association, 1992), and assessment studies should be reconsidered if collecting the data or reporting the results might harm participants.

Informed consent. Participants agree to participate in assessment projects, and this agreement is based on knowing the purpose of the project, the expected use of the data, the rights to not participate and to discontinue participation, and if data will be anonymous or confidential.

Various types of indirect assessment are possible: surveys, individual interviews, focus groups, reflective essays. Questions such as the following stimulate reflection:

- Describe the most valuable thing YOU learned in our program, and explain how this will be useful to you in your future.
- Which of the program's learning objectives are the most and least important to you? Why?
- Explain how you have grown as a person and as a nurse during your experience in the program. To what do you attribute your growth?
- Thinking about your experience in our program, describe how the program could be improved to increase your learning.
- Many students are understandably interested in preparing for a career. How might our program be changed to better prepare you for your anticipated career?
- Faculty vary in their teaching styles. What types of teaching have been particularly effective in helping you learn?
- Faculty have asked you to complete a number of group projects and activities. What did you learn about effective teamwork and how did you learn these lessons?
- Faculty are concerned that too many students do not complete reading assignments before coming to class. If you were an instructor at this university, how would you motivate your students to complete reading assignments?
- Reflect upon your experiences with diversity on our campus. What have your experiences taught you about diversity?
- How might the psychology club be improved to better serve your personal interests and goals?
- Explain why you selected the items for inclusion in your portfolio and what they reveal about your growth.
- Reflect upon the process of preparing your portfolio. Did it help you better understand yourself or your education at our campus? Explain. (Allen 2004, 125)

Questions for interviews can include any of the above and other questions such as, In what ways was your program congruent with your present work? How did the program help you in your present work? Describe the particular aspects of the curriculum and course most effectively contributed to your learning? What one thing could the department do to help you learn more effectively? In what ways have course experiences developed your capacity to engage in …..?

Rubrics are useful tools to help faculty and students differentiate various aspects of a learning experience. Allen provides the following samples (139-141).

HOLISTIC RUBRIC FOR ASSESSING STUDENT ESSAYS

Inadequate. The essay has at least one serious weakness. It may be unfocused, underdeveloped, or rambling. Problems with the use of language seriously interfere with the reader's ability to understand what is being communicated.

Developing Competence. The essay may be somewhat unfocused, underdeveloped, or rambling, but it does have some coherence. Problems with the use of language occasionally interfere with the reader's ability to understand what is being communicated.

Acceptable. The essay is generally focused and contains some development of ideas, but the discussion may be simplistic or repetitive. The language lacks syntactic complexity and may contain occasional grammatical errors, but the reader is able to understand what is being communicated.

Sophisticated. The essay is focused and clearly organized, and it shows depth of development. The language is precise and shows syntactic variety, and ideas are clearly communicated to the reader.

SUGGESTIONS FOR USING RUBRICS IN COURSES

- Hand out the grading rubric with the assignment so students will know your expectations and how they'll be graded. This should help students master your learning objectives by guiding their work in appropriate directions.
- Use a rubric for grading student work and return the rubric with the grading on it. Faculty save time writing extensive comments; they just circle or highlight relevant segments of the rubric. Some faculty include room for additional comments on the rubric page, either within each section or at the end.
- Develop a rubric with your students for an assignment or group project. Students can then monitor themselves and their peers using agreed-upon criteria that they helped develop. Many faculty find that students create higher standards for themselves than faculty would impose on them.
- Have students apply your rubric to some sample products before they create their own. Faculty report that students are quite accurate when doing this, and this process should help them evaluate their own products as they are being developed. The ability to evaluate. edit. and improve draft documents is an important skill.
- Have students exchange paper drafts and give peer feedback using the rubric; then give students a few days before the final drafts are turned in to you. You might also require that they turn in the draft and scored rubric with their final paper.
- Have students self-assess their products using the grading rubric and hand in the self-assessment with the product; then faculty and students can compare self- and faculty-generated evaluations.