

Considerations for an Assessment Strategy

Linda Cannell, 2014

Accrediting agencies require seminaries to have a plan for student learning. They will want to know how the data are being used to inform institutional development, and program and course improvement.

Obligations

To articulate what it is we value (our mission statement and purpose); to determine, together with our stakeholders, what it is that will indicate that our values are consistent with our Christian commitment and demonstrated in the learning and ministry of our students and alumni; to develop a reasonable, do-able, sustainable assessment process to help us determine that we are actually accomplishing what we intend; to constantly review (with a view to informing programs and courses) how students discover and orient themselves in the learning process.

Indicators of an Effective Assessment Process

More than compliance with external accreditation requirements; represents and includes all stakeholders at appropriate points in the process; embedded in ongoing institutional processes related to student learning and development; faculty and other stakeholders view assessment as a necessary element in the ongoing improvement of their professional responsibilities and programs; multiple quantitative and qualitative measures are used; data are used to promote continued development in that which affects student learning; a suitable organizational structure oversees ongoing assessment practices.

Definition

Assessment involves continuous feedback for reflection and development. Since objective *proof* about student learning is not possible, assessment in higher education is the gathering of *indicators* for decision-making. Because of the complexity and variability of factors in higher education, and the difficulty in securing completely “objective” data, quantitative *and* qualitative measures are necessary.

Processes

Clarification of mission and purpose; determine what it is that we intend students to learn, and at what levels of competency; gather evidence about how well students are achieving these outcomes; synthesize and analyze the evidence and make judgments about the meaning and significance of the data; determine areas of ongoing development and improvement in program and other institutional activities. The ultimate purpose of assessment is to enable informed improvement in all areas that affect student learning and development

First Steps

Interview faculty about the processes they are using foster student learning—*learning* they expect of students and at what levels; how this learning is assessed in their courses; how data about student learning are used in ongoing course development; and how data are used in program evaluation. Prepare a *report* (what is being done) and determine what, if anything, the review suggests about an assessment *plan* (what will be done in the future).

Acquire, Examine, and Make Use of Data

Secure and create surveys, and design interview protocol to elicit information about student learning. Determine what sorts of assessment are a good “fit”, what instruments are most useful, and continue to identify the questions needed. Determine ways in which to embed assessment in basic institutional activities.

Inquiry into what affects student learning?

1. Point the assessment process toward Purpose.
2. Survey and/or interview faculty about learning outcomes for programs and courses.
3. Survey and/or interview staff about their perceptions of student learning.
4. Survey and/or interview faculty about course evaluation forms given to students at the end of a course.
5. Survey and/or interview students about the nature of their learning experiences in courses.
6. *Examine artifacts of student work as indicators of student learning and the extent to which degree programs are achieving their stated outcomes.*
7. *Survey and/or interview selected alumni and their colleagues, co-workers, and supervisors, about the long term effects of learning.*
8. *Use data to promote program and course development and improvement.*

Instrumentation

Initially select professionally prepared survey instruments designed to assess particular aspects of student learning. Design interview protocol for individual and focus groups interviews. Since qualitative measures (in this case predominately interview) yield large amounts of data which has to be analyzed, coded, and interpreted, make judgments about when to use qualitative approaches and how to select representative samples from the various groups to interview.

Embedding Assessment in Basic Institutional Processes

It is appropriate to consider the ways in which institutional support systems affect student learning and development. Undertake the following:

1. *Inquire into what characteristics of the institution promote/interfere with desired outcomes for student learning and development.*
2. *Embed assessment in basic and ongoing institutional processes.*
3. *Use data from assessment to inform inquiry into curricular effectiveness.*
4. *Use data from assessment to shape professional development.*

Coordinating Ongoing Assessment

Maximum effectiveness of ongoing assessment requires a team and a coordinator who works at the direction of the president. Issues clarified in the process of gathering and interpreting data become legitimate initiatives that are then presented to the Trustees.

Possible Conversations because we are a Theological School

- The nature of our work (*Christian* education and *spiritual* development) calls for considerations beyond what is normally considered in an outcomes assessment process. “Is there a theology of assessment?”

- David Kelsey observed that in the Scripture what we have described as requirements of a profession (the clergy, church staff) are really mandated of the whole people of God. If this is true, what are the appropriate outcomes for the equipping of leaders? How is the church involved in our assessment processes?
- Christian education has a *telos*. For instance, we don't understand the future solely with a backward look. We may gain greater understanding of our present condition with the backward look (assessment); but we understand our future by examining the imagination of leaders.
- What particular considerations about assessment are suggested by the fact that we are concerned about spiritual growth?
- To what extent can we assess something that may not come to the sort of maturity we would desire until almost a lifetime has passed?
- What behaviors, attitudes, commitments, and organizational practices follow from our espoused theology?
- To what extent does the “elephant in the room” (theological schooling is struggling with issues of identity and purpose and an overcrowded curriculum) affect this process we are undertaking?
- Do more than measure outcomes. Outcomes can result in a static curriculum (once outcomes are developed who wants to do that again!); they can be stated incompletely or in too much detail; they can lead to a lack of recognition of the importance of the unplanned; and they can be formulated while ignoring institutional realities that mitigate against their achievement.