Why do we assess?

To find out what students are learning. An important reason to assess student learning is to find out how well students are learning what we say we are teaching—to what degree are they accomplishing the learning outcomes we hold for them. Information from assessments can tell instructors, programs, and institutions if they need to make changes in what they teach or how they teach it.

To talk about what is important to learn. The process of developing assessment plans, assessment tasks, and scoring rubrics also provides an opportunity for discussion among faculty, staff, and students about what is important to learn. When there is so much that could be highlighted, how do instructors and programs decide what is worthy of their limited time with students? How do students become aware of the skills they are developing across their experiences at an institution? Increased awareness of the intended learning outcomes can help faculty, staff, and students be more intentional and systematic in their teaching and learning—which has a positive impact on student learning.

To improve, improve, improve. Ongoing assessment of student learning allows us to engage in continuous quality improvement of our programs. Even when our evidence shows that students are doing well and achieving the desired learning outcomes, we can always do better. We are always seeking to foster student success and support continued learning and development—assessment of student learning gives us useful information helps us continue to improve in our efforts.

To demonstrate accountability. Finally, we also assess student learning because, for better or worse, we are often required to provide evidence that students are gaining value from the experiences we provide. Parents, governing boards, lawmakers and students themselves increasingly want to know what students learn from our programs. Accreditation bodies also require that we provide evidence that we are thoughtful about what we want students to learn, that we gather evidence to help us understand our students’ learning, and that we use the information we gather to improve our programs.
**How does it work?**

Academic assessment takes place at multiple levels from the individual student, to the program, to the institution. Ideally, assessment done at the level of the individual student through a classroom assignment, project, or test can be “rolled up” and used at the program and institutional levels to gather information about how a program and the institution are contributing to student learning.

*It all starts with well-defined, clearly stated student learning outcomes.*

Student learning outcomes (SLOs) are statements of what a student will know or be able to do when they have completed the learning experience. The process of developing SLOs requires a careful consideration of what is important for students to learn and what skills are important to develop from the experience. SLOs at all levels should align across relevant groups, including the program, University, College, and accrediting agencies. SLOs should be specific and measurable. Check out the Tool Box on the Academic Assessment webpage for some helpful information for developing SLOs.

**Develop a plan!**

- Start with the SLOs that are most important to the program and identify ways to collect data on these.
- There are many different strategies for collecting data, so think about what will be useful and realistic.
- “Data” can be numbers, or themes from comments on a survey, or a graph of where your alumni work—it’s any information that helps you understand student learning.
- Remember to build in a systematic process for talking about your data. Some units set aside a retreat once each year and talk about the year’s assessment in detail; others set aside shorter meetings throughout the year.
- Over several years, plan to assess all your program’s SLOs. Identify when and where in a curriculum it makes sense to assess.
- Over several years, use a variety of methods. A mix of direct and indirect, internal institutional and external, and quantitative as well as qualitative information gives a well-rounded picture of student learning. Consider including surveys of student, alumni, faculty/staff opinions; scores on actual student performance on classroom assignments and/or outside tests; and summaries of discussions with students, faculty, alumni.
- And don’t forget to see what the institution already has done for you. The Offices of Academic Assessment and of Institutional Research & Planning have data from campus-level and national surveys that might be very useful, and they continually work to make the data more easily accessible and more useful.
**Just do it!**

Once you have a reasonable—not a perfect—plan, implement it. You’ll make some mistakes and you’ll find things that could be done better, but that’s okay. It’s fine to start small, with just one or two SLOs, with a small group of students, and with only one or two assessments. Analyses don’t have to be complicated. A look at average scores or a simple categorization of themes in student comments can be very informative. *The important thing is to get the information, analyze it, and figure out what it tells you.*

**USE the information!**

- Talk about the data. Discuss it with your unit, with your students, with your Advisory Board, with your alumni—with whomever might be interested and might be able to give useful insights about what it means and what you can do with it.
- Identify changes needed, additional information desired
- Implement the changes
- Set additional assessment goal/s
- Repeat (and repeat…and repeat…). That’s the thing about assessment—you’re never done, so the fun just keeps on going!

**What does the Office of Academic Assessment do?**

- We help with the assessment of student learning at course, program, college and campus levels
  - Define learning outcomes, align with LEAP ELOs
  - Design assessment plans
  - Develop rubrics, assessment tools
  - Close the loop: Link data with action
- We work to disseminate and support campus recommendations for direction and focus of campus-level assessment
- We promote best practices in assessment through consultations, faculty development, workshops, serving on committees—any way we can.
- We provide information, resources, feedback, suggestions, brainstorming about assessment data collection, interpretation, and use
- We help campus units meet accountability needs, including requirements of the Higher Learning Commission, the University of Wisconsin System, and program and college accreditation.
- We collaborate with the Office of Institutional Research & Planning to help make data more accessible, easier to understand and to use.