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 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 provides an opportunity for faculty, staff, and students to discuss 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 helps 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 lets us continuously improve the quality of our programs. Even when the evidence shows that students are doing well and achieving the desired learning outcomes, we can always do better. Assessment of student learning can provide information to help us continue to improve in our efforts.

_to demonstrate accountability_. Whether we like it or not, 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.
Academic assessment takes place at multiple levels, including the individual student, the program, and 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 other levels to provide 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 thoughtful consideration of what is important for students to learn and what skills are important to develop from the experience. SLOs should be specific and measurable, and they should align across different levels (including the program, college, university, and accrediting agencies). Resources are available on the Academic Assessment website to aid in 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, themes from comments on a survey, or a graph of where your alumni work—it’s any information that helps you understand student learning.
  - Embedded assessments are carefully designed assignments that are integrated within a course. These can reduce extra work on the part of instructors and increase student motivation to do well on the assessment. More information on embedded assessment is available on the Resources page of the Academic Assessment webpage.
  - Use a variety of methods. 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.

- 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.
- And don’t forget to see what the institution has already 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 easy to access and use. Visit University-Wide Surveys for examples.

### 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

- This is critical! If you don’t use the data in some way, it’s a wasted effort.
- Talk about the data. Discuss it with your unit, with your students, with your Advisory Board, with your alumni—with whoever 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 and 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 support assessment of student learning at course, program, college and campus levels by helping people across campus:
  - Define learning outcomes that align with LEAP ELOs
  - Design assessment plans
  - Develop rubrics, assessment tools
  - Close the loop: Link data with action

- We 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 college and program accreditation.
- We collaborate with the LEARN Center to help make information on assessment best practices, tools, and strategies available to people across campus.
- We collaborate with the Office of Institutional Research & Planning to help make data more accessible, easier to understand, and easier to use.

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