User’s Guide: Assessment Plan Tips

Purpose of Assessment

- When creating a plan, keep in mind that, besides accountability, the main purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning. A good assessment assesses “what matters most,” the key learning outcomes in an educational program.
- After completing your educational program, what should a student know, be able to do or perform?

Context of Assessment Plans

- Learning outcomes should be put into a degree program, general education, national benchmark and/or accreditation standards context. They must be an indicator of how well the major goals of an academic program are achieved.
- In undergraduate assessment plans, learning outcomes should be linked to their Academic Learning Compact (ALC) degree program outcomes. ALCs should be reviewed periodically. It is recommended that every degree program have a Curriculum matrix (table of degree outcomes mapped to courses where outcomes are introduced, reinforced, or mastered).
- In graduate programs, degree learning outcomes should be provided. It is strongly recommended that a curriculum matrix table be included in your assessment plan. A Curriculum Matrix table has degree learning outcomes (what students should know and be able to do) in the columns and, at least, core degree courses in the rows. Cells will indicate where learning outcomes are introduced, reinforced, or mastered.
- General Education learning outcomes should be linked to the Intellectual Foundations learning outcomes.

Learning Outcomes

- Creating student learning outcomes should start with a faculty/staff meeting or forming a committee and begin brainstorming. This process could also be based on past experiences and results. Faculty communication and collaboration is important in accomplishing these tasks.
- The number of outcomes should be 3 to 5 (no more than 8 maximum) clear, specific measurable key outcomes.
- The use of analytic rubrics is recommended, with specific, measurable learning outcomes. Outcome statements describe how students can demonstrate their learning, (e.g., specific writing criteria learning outcomes as in the WAC rubric, critical thinking skills such as identify assumptions and evidence) should be written in clear language students can understand.
- The outcomes should be attainable within a specified time period (a year for the assessment reports).
- Students should be acquainted with program outcomes (even participate in creation and use of rubrics). Students may use rubrics to guide their own learning and for peer formative assessments. Besides direct assessments, indirect assessments such as student surveys could ask students for their ideas about improving the program or courses. To be able to learn more effectively, students should understand the goals, rationale, and structure of courses and programs. Providing them with the curriculum matrix and/or assessment rubrics would help them to accomplish this important goal.

Implementing Strategy and Assessment Method

- The outcomes should not be mixed with methods and assessment activities.
- The Implementation Strategy may include, for example, which classes will be assessed, timetable, and possible random sampling.
- Student assessment activities should be specified in the methods section. Assessment activities might include: embedded exam questions, argument driven paper graded with an analytic rubric that is shared with students prior to grading.

Criterion for Success

- Targeted level of performance (not grade), such as the percent of students expected to score above average on the assessment, should be clearly stated for each learning outcome. Even if target is met, improvements should be suggested. For future plan, new goals could be provided.

Data Summary: Analysis and Evaluation

- Report the assessment data results. Include the total number of assessments collected, with a breakdown of scores for each learning component. Provide a brief analysis and evaluation of the results, commenting on what the faculty believe the results mean for the program.

The Improvements Should be Related to the Results

- Interpretations of the assessment results should identify weaknesses/areas for improvement, and the results should indicate sufficient evidence to formulate recommendations. The plan must provide description of how assessment results have been used to improve student learning through changes, for example, in instruction method, learning opportunities, and/or curriculum. The weaknesses identified should guide the improvement process.
- Improvements may include modification of the outcome components, curriculum changes, additional teaching and learning techniques: e.g., use of clickers, peer to peer grading with rubrics, use of rubrics as a teaching tool, increased time in practice lab versus lecture. The assessment committee or all faculty should meet to discuss and recommend program changes based on assessment outcomes.
- There should be a connection between the learning outcomes and the suggested improvements. The outcomes should be related to a sufficient number of courses for each program, so that improvements could be developed with a global view in mind (for the whole program not just the course).