Assessment of Graduate Programs: Clear, Simple, and USEFUL

Barbara E. Walvoord, Ph.D.
Professor Emerita
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame IN 46556
Walvoord@nd.edu
Mobile: 574-361-3857
SACS Standards

3.3.1 The institution identifies expected outcomes, assess the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas:

- 3.3.1.1 educational programs, to include student learning outcomes
- 3.3.1.2 administrative support services
- 3.3.1.3 educational support services
- 3.3.1.4 research within its educational mission, if appropriate
- 3.3.1.5 community/public service within its educational mission, if appropriate

3.5.1 The institution identifies college-level general educational competencies and the extent to which graduates have attained them.


2.21: The Required QEP (Quality Enhancement Plan)

- Derived from the ongoing institutional planning process
- Has improvement and student learning as its starting and ending points
- Focused; does not try to solve all the institution’s problems
- One-hundred-page document containing:
  - Five-year plan linking focus and outcomes of the QEP to resources
  - Topic linked to improvement of student learning
  - Clear identification of student learning related to the focus of the QEP
  - Documentation of broad based involvement
  - Well crafted goals that can be measured
  - Documentation of research on best practices
  - Implementation plan inclusive of timelines, budgets, assessment schedule, and personnel
  - Evaluation plan

Adapted from “The Anatomy of the QEP” powerpoint by Joseph H. Silver, Sr. Vice President, SACS COC (Commission on Colleges)

The Required Five-Year Report

Major component is “Impact Report of the QEP on Student Learning

- Succinct list of initial goals and intended outcomes of QEP
- Discussion of changes made to the original QEP and reasons for those changes
- Description of the QEP’s direct impact on student learning including the achievement of goals and outcomes outlined above
- Unanticipated outcomes of the QEP if any
Definition of Assessment
Assessment of student learning is the systematic gathering of information about student learning and the factors that affect learning, undertaken with the resources, time, and expertise available, for the purpose of improving the learning.

The purpose of assessment is informed decision-making, including the use of information about student learning.

If you are gathering information you are not using, then either stop gathering it or start using it.

The Three Basic Steps of Assessment

1. **GOALS**: Articulate learning goals
   “When students complete this [course, major, gen-ed program] we want them to be able to….”

2. **INFORMATION**: Gather information about how well students are achieving the goals and why

3. **ACTION**: Use the information for improvement
The Basic, No-Frills Departmental Assessment Plan

1. Learning goals (at the end of the program, students will be able to…)
2. Two measures:
   a. One direct measure (direct means student performance is directly evaluated, as in qualifying exams, theses, practicums, laboratory work, etc.)
      i. Review of end-point student work
      ii. If students take a licensure or certification exam, this will be added as a second direct measure
   b. One indirect measure (indirect means an intervening step, such as asking students what they thought they learned, or tracking their career placement)
      i. My preference: exiting student surveys and/or focus groups asking three questions:
         1. How well did you achieve each of the following departmental learning goals [use scale such as “extremely well, very well, adequately well, not very well, not at all”]
            [list each department goal, with scoring scale for each]
         2. What aspects of your education in this department helped you with your learning, and why were they helpful?
         3. What might the department do differently that would help you learn more effectively, and why would these actions help?
      ii. Second choice: Alumni surveys
      iii. In some fields, job placement rates will be important
3. Annual meeting to discuss data and identify action items.
   a. Set aside at least 2 hours to discuss ONE of your degree programs.
   b. Put the annual meeting in place NOW, without waiting for the perfect data.
   c. At the meeting, consider whatever data you have about learning, no matter how incomplete or inadequate.
   d. Outcomes of the meeting:
      i. ONE action item to improve student learning, with a timeline and assignment of responsibility
      ii. ONE action item to improve the quality of data, if needed, with a timeline and assignment of responsibility
   e. Keep minutes of the meeting
      i. To serve as your own record and reminder
      ii. To document for accreditors that assessment is taking place
Sample Assessment Report for Ph. D. Program

1. Goals for Student Learning
   When students complete the Ph.D. they should be able to:
   1. Conduct original, publishable research in the field.
   2. Demonstrate a broad knowledge of theory and research across several sub-disciplines in the field.
   3. Demonstrate in-depth knowledge of one area of expertise.
   4. Follow ethical guidelines for work in the field.
   5. Write and speak effectively to professional and lay audiences about issues in the field.
   6. For those entering teaching: grade and comment effectively on undergraduate student work, lead discussion and recitation effectively for undergraduates, demonstrate familiarity with the literature on learning and pedagogy, write a thoughtful teaching philosophy, and plan an effective undergraduate course in the field.

2. Gathering and Using Information about Student Achievement of the Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Goals Addressed</th>
<th>Use of the Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Each January the Graduate Committee reviews all theses and dissertations produced during the previous year for originality and cogency of the theoretical and empirical work, and clarity of the presentation. The committee produces a report of overall strengths and weaknesses, as well as recommendations for the program.</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
<td>The report is presented annually to the graduate faculty for discussion and action as appropriate. Summaries are presented for review and recommendations every 7-8 years as part of academic review.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The department tracks graduates’ employment and placement for a period of 5 years.</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The department tracks students’ presentations and publications.</td>
<td>1,2,3,4</td>
<td>As above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university’s Graduate School conducts student exit interviews that ask students about their learning and the factors that influenced their learning. These are reported annually to the Director of Graduate Studies.</td>
<td>all</td>
<td>As above</td>
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<tr>
<td>For those entering teaching: Each faculty member with an assigned TA writes an</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>As above. Reports by faculty with TA’s and by the</td>
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annual report that evaluated the quality of work the TA has done.

The instructor of the one-credit graduate teaching course analyzes strengths and weaknesses of students’ written teaching philosophy statements and their course plans.

teaching course instructor are presented annually to the Graduate Director, who summarizes them in a report to the Grad Committee.

3. Examples of Changes Based on Assessment Information

- In 2001, an analysis of student publications and presentations, compared to those of peer departments, showed the number of publications was not as high as the department wished. We instituted a one-credit required seminar for all graduate students focusing on the production and placement of articles and presentations. Since then, the number of articles and presentations has risen 32%.

- Analysis of theses over several years raised faculty concerns about the quality of the writing. In response, the department hired a writing coach to work individually with each candidate on his/her writing.

4. Recommendations for Changes in the Assessment Process

- Faculty have requested more guidance in writing their reviews of TA work, and the Graduate Director has asked for more unanimity in those reports, to facilitate the work of analyzing them. A sub-committee has been formed to draft guidelines for students’ work in grading papers and in leading discussion/recitation sections.
Resources

The Short List

- Walvoord, B. E., and Anderson, V. J. *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*. (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009. Shows how the classroom grading process can be enhanced and how it can be used for assessment. Helps classroom teachers make the grading process fair, time-efficient, and conducive to learning. Contains a case study of how a community college used the grading process for general-education assessment.
- Web pages and publications of your regional and professional accreditors

General Education Assessment


Additional Resources

Education. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1993. A thoughtful treatment of the values and theoretical frameworks behind various assessment practices, as well as very practical advice about gathering and interpreting data, from one of the most respected higher education researchers.


- http://ericae.net: provides links to what the sponsors consider some of the best full-text books, reports, journal articles, newsletter articles, and papers on the Internet that address educational measurement, evaluation and learning theory

Practical ideas for classroom and institutional assessment of online courses as well as other computer-based applications such as on-line testing.

- [www2.acs.ncsu.edu/upa/assmt/resource.htm](http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/upa/assmt/resource.htm). North Carolina State University maintains a website with links to numerous resources on assessment.
- **Subscribe to Assessment Update** for the most recent examples and developments in assessment. Published monthly, it contains brief case studies of successful practice, updates on new developments, and reflections on issues of theory and practice. Order from the web page ([www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)) or by phone, 888-481-2665. Back issues are available.
- **Conferences:**
  - National Assessment Institute, held in Indianapolis under the auspices of the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, organized by Trudy Banta, one of the leading experts in assessment ([www.planning.iupui.edu](http://www.planning.iupui.edu)). Click on conferences.
  - Annual conferences of your regional or disciplinary accreditor