

# **S**tudent Learning Assessment Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Assessment is a type of action research to help gather indicators that will be useful for improving student learning through our curriculum and teaching strategies. It focuses on student learning and what the student will be able to do and not so much on what we are going to teach. The following Q & A will attempt to provide answers to some frequently asked questions that may further your understanding of the assessment process.

## **Q. Why do assessment FOR student learning?**

**A:** To do assessment for the goal of doing assessment and writing a report would be a waste of time. Link your assessment practices to compelling and consequential processes such as department review or program validation. You can link it to curriculum revisions, distance learning, retention, service learning, and improving student learning and teaching strategies. There is considerable evidence that assessment drives student learning and curriculum. Most importantly, our assessment tools tell our students what we consider to be important and make clear our expectations of what the student will do to be successful in the course or program. They will learn what we guide them to learn through our assessments. By using appropriate assessment techniques, we can encourage our students to raise their level of learning.

## **Q. How will assessment improve learning?**

**A.** Assessment is a tool; however, it is a tool by which we can communicate with our students about learning with learning opportunities and ongoing feedback. Assessment does not accomplish learning—but it provides information to the student and the faculty who may use it to improve learning.

## **Q. What is the Higher Learning Commission?**

**A.** The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) is an independent corporation and one of two Commission members of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), which was founded in 1895 as one of six regional institutional accreditors in the United States. The Higher Learning Commission accredits, and grants membership in the Commission and in the North Central Association, to degree-granting educational institutions in the North Central region: *Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, New Mexico, South Dakota, Wisconsin, West Virginia, and Wyoming.*

## **Q. Why is the Higher Learning Commission making us assess?**

**A.** Right now, higher education is concerned with two national issues regarding the “learning” college and accountability. Most faculty have been engaged in some type of assessment throughout their teaching careers and have found it to be a tool for understanding what their students are learning.

## **Q: I already give tests and grades. Isn't that assessment?**

**A:** Tests and quizzes are an evaluation of learned material. Assessment involves a sample of behavior from your student that can be observed and judged on the basis of specific criteria developed and assessed in multiple modes and contexts. For example, a project, presentation, a number of writing assignments, labs, and more. Traditional testing methods are limited measures of student learning and of limited value for guiding student learning. We can't just say that 73% of our students are getting A's and B's, so we must be doing okay. It is possible that faculty teaching common courses may emphasize different learning goals or learning outcomes, and so students who took the same courses from different faculty may have learned different things. It is also possible that students forget what they learn in their classes. So an assessment program is designed to determine whether the program is accomplishing what the faculty intend it to accomplish. Faculty as a group then look at the assessment results, analyze

them, determine whether anything has to be changed to make their program more effective, and implement those changes. A letter grade itself does not give enough information about the learning that is occurring. (*To identify ways that grades can be used for assessment purposes, read Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Anderson's **Effective Grading**. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.*)

**Q: How does assessment FOR learning help faculty? Who should be doing assessment?**

**A:** Assessment for student learning provides faculty with useful information about their students, including the student's quality as learners and readiness for learning. Ongoing assessment informs faculty about the pace and progress of student learning in their classroom. All faculty, both full time and adjunct, administrators, and staff should participate in assessment. All have a stake in the success of their respective program or discipline.

**Q. Is this something extra for me to do?**

**A.** No, it's not extra. You're already assessing. It's those learning opportunities that you have designed in your curriculum where you can give your students on-going feedback so that they can improve learning. Only faculty who guide the learning process can identify the student learning outcomes of that process, what it is they expect to happen to/for the student. It is the faculty who teach in that program, who can interpret the results, and recommend improvements in pedagogy and curriculum.

**Q. How can I assess attitudes and understandings which are simply not quantifiable?**

**A.** It seems a common misunderstanding that assessment requires that everything be reduced to statistical measures. The thrust of assessment is objective results such that anyone will know that the learning goals are being met; but this need not be quantifiable. If the faculty identify as an important result that which is not quantifiable, the process simply asks them to specify some objective means to demonstrate that the results are happening as intended.

**Q. How do faculty within a department identify student learning outcomes?**

**A.** Some learning outcomes can be mandated by outside agencies or advisory boards. Others are identified through discussion among faculty who have tried to answer the question of what knowledge or skills their students should demonstrate upon exiting the course or program. Learning outcomes inform our curriculum, teaching, and assessment.

**Q. What is a program outcome?**

**A.** Think about what your students will need to be able to DO "out there" (in the rest of life) that *you* are responsible for in your program?" (*The Outcomes Primer*, 2002. Stiehl, Lewchuk) *When* developing your program outcomes, encompass several levels of learning through the learning sequence of the program. One program outcome will encompass more than one course. Look at the big picture, not tiny details of skills that could be checked off.

**Q. What is "high stakes testing"?**

**A.** "High stakes testing" refers to tests that determine whether individual students have reached a specific level of proficiency and are intended to be used to determine whether the student is qualified to advance to another level or has met minimum standards. Examples of tests are the (PRAXIS), the examination for certification of teachers, and the Graduate Record Exam (GRE). The debate over the value of high stakes testing is quite heated, especially in the public school arena. If we use a standardized test, such as the CLA, MAAP, or CAAP to measure critical thinking and/or writing, a key question concerns what incentive(s) do we need to provide students to try and do well on the test(s).