

Chapter 34

Assessing General Education Outcomes Across Programs

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ABSTRACT

As the pressure to provide accountability in education escalates, the assessment of student learning becomes increasingly important. This chapter describes an approach to the assessment of learning outcomes, in both online and face to face programs, as developed for an independent, non-profit university in Ohio. The approach includes three major components: a curriculum mapping process that determines where particular learning outcomes are being assessed, a visual representation of this curriculum map with links to assessment data (Success Path©), and a cyclical assessment process that assists with the continuous improvement of programs and student learning. This chapter leverages current research in the field of student learning, assessment, and curriculum mapping theory.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet and many other technologies are transferring education from teaching-centered to learning-centered (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This shift requires regularly updated data on faculty and student satisfaction, assessment of student learning outcomes, and the examination of factors associated with student learning. Only with

such close monitoring can continual improvement and growth of an online program be successfully sustained (Hartman, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2007). It becomes axiomatic not only for an institution to conduct program assessment, especially outcomes assessment, on a routine and ongoing basis, but also to interpret the resulting data to make informed decisions about program improvement.

Program assessment, according to Gardnier, Corbitt and Adams (2010), is measuring whether or not students are learning what they should be

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learning. They stated, “The mission and goals of the program need to link directly to learning outcomes, what the students do, know, or value, and that feedback on the learning outcomes needs to improve the program.” (p. 140). Specific to online programs, the protocols for measuring student learning outcomes will migrate from objective, non-authentic, and non-contextual to interpretive, authentic and contextual (e.g. portfolios, products, projects, productions and other creative activities) (Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy-Ellison, & Shea, 2007). Educational institutions, regardless of type, are faced with the need to produce, analyze and act upon assessment data. How does one assess the effectiveness of an online program? How is it possible to evince the learning outcomes being measured throughout the curriculum? Can we identify the problems and resources needed to improve an online program? These questions are important in assessing the effectiveness of programs, especially when they are offered online. This chapter provides an overview of some main program assessment models gleaned from the literature. It then presents a case study on how a university developed and implemented the assessment approach which systematically incorporated existing programs assessment models and a visual display, Success Path©, for its general education outcomes.

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT MODELS

College Impact Model

The program assessment model can be traced back to the 1970s, when Astin (1970) proposed a college impact model of how students are affected by their college experience based on his work from a multi-institutional, longitudinal study. Astin believes the college is comprised of three distinct components: student inputs, student outputs, and the college environment. Student inputs are the “talents, skills, aspirations, and other potentials for

growth and learning that the new student brings with him to college” (p. 225). Student outputs refer to measures of students’ achievements, knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, aspirations, interests, and daily activities. College environment refers to the aspects of a higher education institution that might affect students. College environmental variables include administrative policies and practices, curriculum, physical plant and facilities, teaching practices, peer associations, and other characteristics (e.g., size, selectivity, permissiveness). Student inputs can affect student outputs directly or by interaction with environmental variables.

Following Astin’s college impact model, Schroeder (2005) recommends a wide-ranging, multiple-measures assessment model gathering information in three areas: input, environment, and outcomes. This model incorporates student data, satisfaction surveys, outcomes assessment, national standards assessment, cost-effectiveness studies, and comparable institution assessment. He further suggests eight principles for effective program assessment. They are:

1. Beginning with educational values;
2. Stating purposes clear and explicitly;
3. Paying attention to both outcomes and experiences that lead to those outcomes;
4. Providing ongoing assessment;
5. Involving representatives across educational community;
6. Promoting change;
7. Understanding learning is multidimensional, integrated, and improving students’ performances; and
8. Providing opportunities for educators meet their responsibilities to students and to the public.

Practical Program Assessment Model

Due to the complexity of program assessment, an effective process should consist of multiple steps

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