

Assessment: What It Is, What It Isn't, and What It Could Be in U.S. Higher Education.

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Abstract

In the United States, assessment and subsequent feedback to students looks different than in many other countries. Individual student feedback is provided by way of assignment and course grades. In most cases, grading/marking is the purview of the faculty member teaching the course and falls under the umbrella of academic freedom. A more systematic assessment approach is often found in relationship to the assessment student learning outcomes at the program level. At the program level, feedback is often provided to faculty and administrators in hopes of improving the program and thus student learning outcomes. However, by incorporating a process by which feedback is provided at the individual student level as well, student feedback may actually have the potential to enhance current program improvement efforts.

Keywords: Assessment, program-level, improvement.

1. Assessment: What It Is, What It Isn't, and What It Could Be in U.S. Higher Education.

Unlike in many systems of higher education where assessment focuses on the evaluation of the individual, in the United States, assessment is often used to refer to a specific method of inquiry used for determining the extent to which program-level objectives are met or not met in an educational setting. This method of inquiry is usually depicted as a cycle (James Madison University, 2019) with the goal of completing the cycle being to improve student learning. A stage

common to most versions of this assessment cycle is the need to “disseminate results,” or provide feedback to relevant stakeholders such as to program faculty and administrators. It is at this feedback stage where the potential for improving program learning outcomes is either realized or lost.

1.1. Assessment defined.

Across the globe, the word assessment takes on a variety of different meanings. In some educational systems, assessment refers to the grading/marketing of individual students. Some educational systems assess individual student progress in more systematic ways. For example, in Ireland and the United Kingdom the process of assessing student work is supported by an external examiner system that attempts to maintain consistent standards across universities. In the United States however, the individual assessment of students, often referred to as grading, is the sole purview of each faculty member. Individual faculty members establish the grading criteria and carry out the grading, for both individual assignments and final course/module grades. “*Grading of undergraduates at American colleges and universities incorporates a system of standards that is almost always unregulated*” (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012, p. 2). At most institutions in the United States, grading criteria and procedures vary not only from class to class but also across sections of the same course if these sections are taught by different members of the faculty. While faculty members are held accountable for teaching toward specific agreed upon student learning objectives, the method by which students are taught those objectives and the methods used to assess those objectives at the individual student level often fall under the umbrella of academic freedom. “*Academic freedom protects a faculty member’s authority to assign grades to students, so long as the grades are not capricious or unjustly punitive*” (Nelson, 2010). In the United States, because the assessment of individual students through grades is often not systematic, grades are not considered to be a suitable metric for assessing program-level objectives (Rogers, 2003). Where we do find more systematic assessment procedures is at the program-level. Driven by both accreditation demands and the desire to improve student learning outcomes, all accredited institutions of higher education in the United States have implemented ongoing, systematic procedures for assessing student learning outcomes at the program level.

The systematic process for assessing student learning outcomes is often described as an assessment cycle. This cycle may take on slightly different forms; however, almost all of the cycles

include at least six broad stages. These stages include 1) defining the intended learning outcomes, 2) mapping curriculum to the intended outcomes, 3) selecting appropriate measures to assess the intended outcomes, 4) collecting assessment data, 5) disseminating findings, and 6) using the results to improve the program (James Madison University, 2019). Here the focus of the process is understanding how well students completing a specific curriculum are meeting the intended outcomes. It is the program that is being assessed, not the individual students. Feedback is provided to the faculty and program administrators. Inferences from findings focus on the effectiveness of the program, not the performance of an individual student. The assessment process is also designed to be formative, with findings used to identify program areas in need of improvement.

While the purposes of program-level assessment are varied, there are many professionals who believe that improvement to a program of study is of paramount importance. As the last step in the process, it could easily be seen as *the* purpose of program-level assessment. Yet, the net result of 30 years of implementing this assessment cycle has resulted in a lot of “sharing” reports and little demonstrable program improvement (Blaich & Wise, 2011). We believe these lacklustre results stem from two flaws in our current processes: what we are reporting and at what level we are reporting it.

1.2. Criticisms and cross-national solutions.

The most prevalent model of assessment encourages “sharing” of results as the penultimate step of the process. While this does not inherently mean that we need to write a report; in practice, a report is written. The report can only draw upon what has occurred up until this point in the process: the intended outcomes, connections to the curriculum, the assessment methods, the data collection, and the interpretation. The issue, we believe, is that if the call to improve a program comes after the sharing of a report, the report logically cannot include how the process led to an improvement. Once a report is written, there is often a sense of completion that can undercut any future efforts to improve. We believe that correcting the logical flow of the process to drive improvements prior to sharing results will refocus efforts of assessment to work towards, and share, the improvements to a program rather than the data collection process. Addressing the second flaw in our current processes may not be as straightforward.

While thinking and talking about learning at the program level are beneficial to both students and faculty, the resulting information is often too impersonal and high-level to remain compelling. Research and practice in our field suggests that action is unlikely to occur unless the results are “truly devastating” (Blaich & Wise 2011, p. 12). The changes exacted as a result of the assessment process are designed to affect the program wholesale, but, if the information is not overwhelmingly poor, it may be too easy to write-off the information as meaningless, untrue, or the fault of the assessment design. In these cases, nothing is done with the information once a report has been completed. Systematically addressing this issue likely requires our field to re-focus our efforts at a different level.

In addition to considering program-level information at the program level using averages and variability, we propose that it is crucial that we begin considering program-level assessment measures at the individual student level. Essentially, we suggest a hybrid model drawing from both U.S. program-level assessment practices and the emphasis in Ireland and the U.K. on student feedback. The new assessment cycle might take this form:

- 1) Define program-level intended outcomes including:
 - A. Individual student intended targets – how well do individual students need to perform on the assessments in order to suggest they have acquired or are progressing towards the knowledge, skills, or ways of thinking?
 - B. Program-level intended targets – how many students need to perform at the level denoted above in order to infer that the program-level curriculum is adequate to help students develop?
- 2) Align the outcomes with the relevant aspects of a curriculum across an entire program of study.
- 3) Create or select assessment methods that provide both summative information at the end of a program and formative information at key points throughout the program.
- 4) Collect and analyse the formative/summative assessment information.
- 5) A team of faculty and students meets regularly (multiple times during an academic year) to discuss the results of the formative and/or summative measures and answer two main questions.

Some readers might recognize question B in step 5 above as an opportunity for individual assessment feedback. The level and intensity of the feedback process will vary depending on the resources available to institutions and programs. Even so, we suggest that the lack of systematic program-level student feedback is a major hurdle to meaningful improvement. We believe that this modified process of program-level assessment addresses both of the issues hampering our improvement efforts.

2. Conclusion.

In the United States, assessment and subsequent feedback to students looks different than in most other countries. Individual student feedback is provided by way of assignment and course grades. In most cases, grading/marketing is the purview of the faculty member teaching the course and falls under the umbrella of academic freedom. A more systematic assessment approach is often found in relationship to the assessment student learning outcomes at the program level. At the program level, feedback is often provided to faculty and administrators in hopes of improving the program and thus student learning outcomes. However, by incorporating a process by which feedback is provided at the individual student level as well, student feedback may actually have the potential to enhance current program improvement efforts.

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