Program Assessment Made Easy

In higher education, we perform assessment activities to foster institutional improvement. Assessment helps us support excellence in our academic programs and services, and serves as the foundation for institutional effectiveness. It is a continuous cycle of inquiry to see what is working well and what needs improvement. Additionally, it is the key to making data-informed decisions about activities, programs, and initiatives within the institution. Today, there is more competition for limited resources so institutions must demonstrate accountability. We demonstrate accountability to our stakeholders by using assessment results to exhibit the quality of our programs.

Developing program assessment begins with systematic planning. An effective plan starts with a clearly stated mission and three to five measurable learning outcomes that can be linked to the institution's mission. The program mission statement should answer the question, "Who do you serve and how?" The learning outcomes describe the new knowledge and skill development students will demonstrate upon the completion of the program. Action verbs, such as those contained in Bloom's taxonomy, should be used to describe each learning outcome and differentiate between learning levels. Outcomes that are measurable, manageable and written in clear, simple language serve as the foundation for the entire assessment project.

Designing the assessment project and identifying the assessment method(s) that will be used to collect the information comes next. A successful assessment project should demonstrate that the program is accomplishing what it intends to achieve. It is best to include both indirect and direct assessment measures and a variety of qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods to measure your outcomes. Possible assessment strategies include surveys, assignments, multiple choice exams, and benchmarks.

After choosing the assessment method, the data needs to be collected, analyzed, and summarized. Data gained through assessment activities should be meaningful and must be used to improve teaching, learning, and services to students. Assessment results should be shared with key stakeholders. In addition, at the end of the assessment process, the entire program should reflect on its findings and collaborate so that everyone stays informed and engaged. This communication will set the stage for the next assessment cycle.

Program assessment is an essential component of a high performing institution and is the standard by which an institution is judged. An effective assessment program builds and sustains a culture of inquiry and provides evidence that supports excellence in academic programs and services. You cannot perform effective assessment without planning and you cannot plan without assessment. ■

2016 – 2018 Exemplary Assessment Reports
Academic Programs
• Developmental Math
• English Basic Skills
• Communication
https://bergen.edu/about-us/institutional-effectiveness/assessment/assessment-of-student-learning/

AES Units
• Information Technology
• Center for Health, Wellness and Personal Counseling
https://bergen.edu/about-us/institutional-effectiveness/assessment/administrative-and-educational-support-assessment/
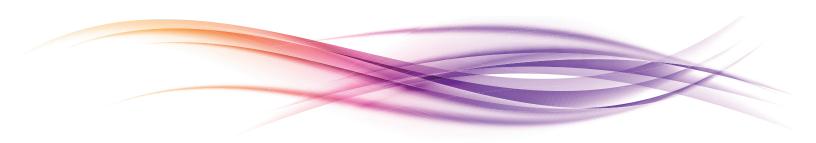
A Researcher in Philly

In early September, Bergen's Institutional Research team took a trip to Philadelphia to explore the world of assessment. Presenting at the Annual Conference on Teaching and Learning Assessment, Dr. Tonia McKoy, Jesse Jacondin and Monica Rodriguez took a break from their spreadsheets and Excel tables to talk to a crowd of mainly assessment professionals about the symbiotic relationship that exists between the two fields.

The conference took place in the heart of Philadelphia's University City at Drexel University's main campus – an urban oasis with academic, administrative, and communal buildings interspersed with green spaces, walking paths, and outdoor seating. The comfortable and friendly atmosphere established by the host institution set the tone for the entire conference. The coordinators fostered an environment of collaboration by encouraging discussion over lecturing and even making a group activity a mandatory part of every session proposal.

McKoy, Jacondin, and Rodriguez tweaked their presentation on The Student's Journey to fit with the theme of the conference – *Leading a Collaborative Revolution for Change*. Presenting during the first break-out session of the conference, the IR team included a group activity that encouraged attendees to think about their institution's data collection and usage. They drew parallels between their presentation's emphasis on student-level data to promote change and the conference's overall theme. The conversation centered on existing gaps in high school and admissions data and creative efforts to fill those gaps. The session was a success with twenty-five attendees active and engaged in the presentation and subsequent discussion.

With their own presentation completed, the three researchers had the opportunity to attend the rest of the conference and hear from other professionals about the great work being done in higher education. Many presentations spoke to the interplay between data and assessment and the IR team focused on these break-out sessions to improve their own skills in the area. Two sessions, in particular, both presented by professionals from New York University, gave blueprints on how to use surveys effectively in assessment. They focused on a collaborative approach to survey building where the researchers guide the question development, but ownership of the study stays with student affairs or academic affairs. With this method, decision-makers have a vested interest in and are more connected to the eventual results.

The more the IR team talked to assessment professionals, the more it became apparent that IR and assessment were two sides of the same coin. Every session the group attended made a causal relationship between the two fields more apparent. To conduct meaningful assessment, departments need data that is accurate, specific, and significant, but to get this type of data, it often needs to be laid out in the assessment plan first.

Attending Drexel's Assessment Conference was an invaluable experience for the IR team. It gave them a chance to step out from behind their computers and interact with some of the primary users of institutional data. The information exchanged will help improve assessment activity at Bergen Community College moving forward, and the enjoyable nature of the conference puts it at the top of the list for presentation proposals for the IR team next year. ■

Assessing Service Learning Projects

College teaching faculty recognize the positive impact of service learning as an instructional practice. Service learning provides students with opportunities to volunteer in their communities, expand their civic skills and facilitate reciprocal partnerships between local agencies/businesses and the college.

An element that can be overlooked when offering a service learning project to students is the assessment of student learning related to the experience. While it is expected that a reflection activity will be incorporated as a component of the project, not all reflection assignments will effectively assess the targeted course objectives or program learning outcomes. Depending on the course, academic discipline and selected service learning site, some additional aspects of effective pedagogy should be integrated within the service learning project and assessment design.

The following are suggestions that instructors should consider when planning a service learning project:

- Select a service learning project that aligns with program learning outcomes and course objectives.
- Schedule a meeting, either in person or via a phone call, with a potential service learning host, to describe the project. The requirements for students and the responsibilities of the host should be discussed.
- Provide the host with a copy of the course syllabus and inform him/her of the learning objectives/outcomes that the student should master through the volunteer experience.
- Contact the host during the semester to make sure the experience is running smoothly.
- Create and administer to the service learning host an end of semester questionnaire that aligns with the goals of the project. Survey items should include host experience, weaknesses and strengths of the project, rating of student performance, the positives/negatives of student participation, and whether or not the learning outcomes were addressed.

Evidence-based instructional methods support the value of having students and hosts preview the learning outcomes of the program and student objectives of the course. In the case of service learning, informing hosts of what students can potentially learn from the volunteer experience better supports students' learning. ■

Fall 2018 Conference Presentations

Using the Student's Journey to Transform Institutional Assessment at Bergen Community College
Dr. Tonia McKoy, Jesse Jacondin, Monica Rodriquez
Drexel University Annual Conference on Teaching & Learning Assessment

Addressing Standards II and VII Through a Policy Advisory Council
Dr. Michael D. Redmond and Dr. Gail Fernandez
MSCHE Annual Conference

Assessment Resources

University of Oklahoma, Center for Excellence in Transformative Teaching & Learning
http://sites.uco.edu/academic-affairs/cettl/cettl-resources/assessment/authentic-assessment.asp

Contact CIE (The Center for Institutional Effectiveness)

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