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We Know They are Smart, but Have They Learned Anything?: Strategies for Assessing Learning in Honors

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ABSTRACT

The independent assessment of student learning, or *outcomes assessment,* is a topic of national interest and one that is currently being addressed by many institutions of higher education. Honors programs, like all academic units, are being asked to create outcomes assessment programs. We provide here a brief history of outcomes assessment and an overview of the basic steps required for creating an outcomes assessment program. We then discuss suggestions for implementing outcomes assessment in honors.

INTRODUCTION

The focus on assessment in higher education began in the 1980s when several national commissions or committees called for improvements in American undergraduate education. Because of concerns that higher education was not meeting the needs of American society, the assessment of student learning, or *outcomes assessment,* was deemed necessary for the development of "excellence" in undergraduate education. This national focus on assessment resulted in changes in the federal accreditation policy implemented by accrediting agencies. The tenor of those changes is that institutions must specify educational objectives that are consistent with their missions and must demonstrate and document educational achievements in verifiable and consistent ways (Nichols, 1991). That is, there must be a focus on the *ends* or the results of learning more than the *means* or the process and resources that can promote student learning, and the ends should be related to the institution's mission (Nichols, 1995).

At this point, it is difficult to know if the current changes in the policies of regional accrediting agencies regarding student learning will fulfill the need for more quality assurance in education or if the state and/or federal governments will institute additional regulations regarding the assessment of student learning. One thing is certain: the assessment of student learning will remain a topic

of not only institutional concern but also regional and national concern for some time to come (Nichols, 1995). Because of this current emphasis on student learning, you are likely being asked to conduct outcomes assessment in order to fulfill the requirements of your institution's regional accrediting body (Maki, 1999). You might also be required to write learning outcomes to meet the requirements for your institution's general education program, as many honors program courses fulfill general education requirements. Outcomes assessment should also be included as a part of an external evaluation of your program. Additionally, it is a useful tool for constituents of programs who are simply interested in self-reflection and improvement.

The components of an outcomes assessment plan are (1) a clear institutional and unit mission; (2) identification of intended educational goals; (3) assessment of the extent to which intended outcomes are accomplished; and (4) adjustment of the unit's proposed outcomes based on the assessment findings. The goal of outcomes assessment is continuous improvement. That is, outcomes assessment is a tool for identifying and remediating weaknesses in an academic program. In each assessment cycle, new weaknesses should be identified for remediation so that the program is constantly striving towards greater levels of student learning (Maki, 2004; Nichols, 1995).

In this article, we will first describe and provide general suggestions for developing an outcomes assessment program, along the way providing advice related to honors education. Following the general description, we will provide suggestions specific to conducting outcomes assessment in honors.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR CREATING AN OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

The creation of a successful outcomes assessment programs includes the following steps:

Appoint an Outcomes Assessment Coordinator

A survey in 1990 (Nichols & Wolff; as cited by Nichols, 1995) found that the most often cited factor facilitating successful implementation of outcomes assessment is the appointment of a single individual to coordinate the process. Thus, the designation of an o*utcomes assessment coordinator* will greatly facilitate the successful completion of the assessment process. More detail is given below regarding the selection of this individual in an honors program.

Create Outcomes Assessment Committee

Once the outcomes assessment coordinator is selected, he or she should assemble a committee to assist in the current assessment cycle (Maki, 2002). This should be a committee of both students and faculty affiliated with the honors program as outcomes assessment should be a collaborative process that is built upon the consensus of its constituents (Maki, 2002; 2004). Additional

constituents such as alumni and the honors director, if this person is not the outcomes assessment coordinator, can also serve on the committee if desired.

Create Learning Outcomes

Once the outcomes assessment committee has been formed, its first job is to create learning outcomes. *Learning outcomes* are statements reflecting what students should be able to demonstrate, represent, or produce as a result of what they have learned in the program (Maki, 2004). In other words, what will students know and be able to do after completing the program or portions of the program. Learning outcomes should also reflect, or be "linked" to, the mission, purpose statement, outcomes and/or goals of the institution, and any administrative units directly overseeing the honors program (Maki, 2002; Nichols, 1995).

Learning outcomes can fall into one of three domains: the *cognitive domain*, which includes both knowledge base and the processes of knowing; the *psychomotor domain*, which includes the development of physical movement, coordination, or a set of skills; and the *affective domain*, which includes the development of values, attitudes, and commitments (Maki, 2004).

Sample learning outcomes statements:

- Students will demonstrate critically reflective thinking. (cognitive domain)
- Students will make an effective oral presentation. (psychomotor domain)
- Students will demonstrate an appreciation for learning outside the classroom. (affective domain)

Create Assessments of Learning Outcomes

Once learning outcomes have been identified by committee, then methods for assessing the outcomes need to be created. Methods for assessing learning outcomes are the most specific of outcome statements, and these statements should be:

- *Relevant:* These statements are actual assessments of the learning outcomes. It is easier than you think to write an assessment that does not actually measure the learning outcome!
- *Accessible:* The data outlined in these assessments can be collected.
- *Operationally defined:* The behavior to be measured is defined in clear and understandable behavioral terms such that different people collecting and interpreting the data can do so consistently and without confusion. For example, in the learning outcomes outlined above, the terms "critically reflective thinking," "effective oral presentation," and "appreciation for learning outside of the classroom" must be defined in concrete and behavioral terms.

- *Quantified:* A quantifiable amount is given to indicate acceptable performance.

If an assessment of a learning outcome has these four characteristics, then it can result in corrective action (Maki, 2004), which is the ultimate goal of outcomes assessment.

As examples that have all four of these characteristics, an assessment of the aforementioned outcome "Students will demonstrate critically reflective thinking" might be:

- 90% of Senior Thesis students will score a B or greater on the critical thinking portion of their Senior Thesis project.
- 80% of students will score a B or greater on the critical thinking portion of their end-of-semester paper in BOTH Honors Humanities II (HON 306) and Honors Civilization II (HON 311).

Please see the appendix for more sample learning outcomes and methods of assessment.

Additional Suggestions for Writing Assessments of Learning Outcomes

Do Not Rely on Course Grades for Assessment

Learning outcomes are most useful if they are *formative* instead of *summative* assessments of learning. *Formative* assessments seek evidence of progression along students' learning while *summative* assessments seek evidence of progression towards the end of students' learning. Summative assessments provide evidence that students ultimately learn things but do not provide clear information about what students are not learning and how/where the curriculum needs adjustments in order to remediate problem areas. Formative assessments, because they are assessments of progression along students' learning, can stimulate immediate changes in teaching, choice of curriculum, and student support services (Maki, 2004). For example, a nationally standardized exit-exam might be used as a summative assessment of students' learning throughout their academic career. However, if the exit-exam data suggest poor learning, then it is too late to adjust the curriculum for those students, and often it is unclear how/where the curriculum should be adjusted. On the other hand, a grade on a paper in a course that requires a comparison and analysis of two competing theories might be used as a formative assessment of students' critical thinking skills. If the data suggest that students' critical thinking skills are not at the level expected of them at that point in their academic career, then adjustments to that specific course or a subsequent course can be made. Because of the summative nature of course grades, many accrediting bodies are requiring that they not be used as indicators of student learning within an outcomes assessment program (Maki, 1999).

Another issue related to using course grades as assessments of learning is that a single course grade is a composite of many individual bits of learning. Even if overall course grades are sufficient to indicate learning, some portions of the course may not have been learned at an acceptable level, and this weakness in the course will be obscured by the overall grade. Evaluating the individual bits of learning as a result of creating learning outcomes will provide a more detailed assessment of learning than course grades alone. Remediations for portions of the course can be implemented even if course grades are acceptable.

Use Direct Assessments When Possible

Direct assessments measure what students have learned (e.g., score on a writing assignment). Indirect assessments measure students' perceptions of their learning (e.g., how well students believe that they write). Direct assessments of learning are always more powerful indicators of student learning than indirect assessments. However, indirect assessments can be good complements to direct assessments of learning (Maki, 2004).

Use Multiple Assessments of Each Learning Outcome

At least two assessments of each learning outcome should be made as multiple assessments allow one to have a more complete understanding of student learning (Maki, 2002). These assessments should come from different components of the curriculum, if possible.

Use Samples of Student Work

In large honors programs, taking a direct assessment of each student's work may be unnecessarily time consuming. In such cases, taking a random sample of students' work can significantly decrease the amount of time required for data collection. Additionally, the performance of some subsets of students such as minority or non-traditional students may be of special interest when assessing learning (Maki, 2002; 2004).

Create Scoring Rubrics

If direct assessments are to be made across course sections, instructors, or events, then agreement about the dimensions of learning to be assessed is essential. A solution to this problem is to create a scoring rubric to standardize the grading process among all who will be collecting the data for the assessment. The creation of scoring rubrics is also a mechanism by which abstract constructs such as critical thinking and writing quality can be operationally defined (Maki, 2002; 2004).

Strategically Select Goal Quantity

The choice of the goal quantity attached to each specific outcome is completely up to the assessment committee and coordinator. One should select an

amount that is reasonably attainable but a bit of a stretch for the program. For example, if 80 percent of the students in the honors program regularly score a B or higher on the critical thinking portion of the senior thesis project, then set a goal that is five to ten percent higher at 85 or 90 percent. When current levels of performance are not known, then an educated guess is in order with the understanding that an adjustment in the quantity may be needed after the next round of data collection. Also, appropriate amounts will vary from program to program. For example, 60 percent of the students in another honors program may score a B or higher on the critical thinking portion of the senior thesis project. In this program setting the goal at 65 or 70 percent would be appropriate.

Complete the Assessment "Loop"

Once the data have been collected, the assessment process is not complete until "problem areas" within the program have been targeted and remediations have been put into place. Even the most successful programs will have areas that need focus for the upcoming assessment cycle. Identifying and remediating problems has been termed "closing the loop" or "completing an assessment cycle" (Maki, 2004; Nichols, 1995). It is important to keep in mind that the purpose of outcomes assessment is critical reflection upon the programming and the consequent student learning that results from it. The "problem areas" revealed in an assessment cycle may be minor within a well-functioning honors program, but even minor problems should be resolved. Additionally, it is not necessary to assess all areas of learning focus in each assessment cycle. Different areas of learning can be targeted in successive assessment cycles.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONDUCTING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT IN HONORS

Now that we have discussed some general guidelines for assessing learning, here are some suggestions specific to assessing learning in Honors.

Involve Faculty Knowledgeable in Assessment

The ability to conduct assessments of learning is connected to some disciplines more than others. In addition, some individuals have more experience conducting assessment than others. Honors programs are unique in that they are often multi-disciplinary and include individuals from the more assessment-oriented disciplines or individuals who have experience with conducting assessment. Honors directors who do not themselves possess these skills can save time and energy by involving honors-affiliated individuals with such skills in the Honors assessment process.

The honors assessment coordinator must have skills in assessment. It is also helpful if the faculty members who serve on the committee used to create learning outcomes also have some skills in assessment. If possible, compensation for assessment work in honors, which can come in many forms, will be

greatly appreciated by both the honors assessment coordinator and committee members.

Create a Faculty-Driven Assessment Program

Faculty teaching in honors are often a volunteer army; they are choosing to teach in Honors. In this situation, honors directors must keep their faculty happy in order to maintain an excellent and well-functioning program. Creating an outcomes assessment program, even if it is mandated by the institution, can seem counter to this goal as it will likely increase faculty workload. Faculty are also often sensitive that learning outcomes data might reflect poorly on their individual courses, and this can lead to resistance to the process. For example, faculty could "forget" to collect assessment data or "selectively" collect data, e.g., from those students who will "make them look good." Faculty involvement in the selection of the learning outcomes and methods of assessment is one step toward ameliorating faculty fears.

Creating a *faculty-driven* assessment program with plenty of administrative support gives faculty control but does not overly burden the already overworked faculty member. As was described earlier, a faculty-driven assessment program begins with the appointment of an honors assessment coordinator and a committee to determine the learning outcomes.

Once created, the learning outcomes should be shared with the entire honors faculty. Responsibility for creating assessments to be conducted in Honors courses, along with the creation of any rubrics or other necessary assessment tools, can then belong to the individual faculty or groups of faculty members,. Thus, faculty "in the trenches" can maintain control over the types of assessments that will be made in their classrooms or activities. Friendly instruction and/or feedback on creating assessments of learning can be provided by the assessment coordinator prior to data collection in order to ensure that assessments are sufficient. Faculty should then collect data when it is most convenient for them. To decrease faculty workload and maintain faculty morale, the assessment coordinator should offer to analyze assessment data. Faculty should then be given the power to determine the specific remediations that are necessary to improve programming.

If assessments are more global in nature, then the measurement tools and information needed can be created, administered, and analyzed directly by the assessment coordinator. Necessary remediations for such global assessments should be suggested by the outcomes assessment committee.

The assessment coordinator should be responsible for keeping records of all assessments, results, and remediations as well as reporting required data at the university level. In this manner, the assessment coordinator supports the faculty efforts to assess and remediate student learning while ensuring that the learning outcomes for the honors program are met.

Additionally, the assessment coordinator (and other honors administrators) must assure faculty that data will be treated confidentially, will be used for the

purpose of improving student learning, and will not be used to evaluate individual instructors. Ultimately, the faculty's cooperation in assessment activities will depend on their perceptions of how assessment data have been used in the past and will be used in the future.

Give General Skills Context

Academic majors focus on specific content and the development of skills such as writing in a discipline-specific format (e.g., APA-style paper). Honors courses, however, often fulfill general education requirements where there is less focus on content and more focus on skills. These skills are often not discipline-specific, and it can be difficult if not impossible to assess such skills in the abstract. Putting the general skills that are the focus of your honors program in some context can facilitate the assessment of these components of your learning program. For example, you might assess oral presentation skills in an upper division honors course that includes a significant speaking component, or you might assess writing skills in the senior thesis project.

Create Learning Outcomes that are Unique to Your Honors Program

When we think of outcomes assessment in honors, we generally think of assessing classroom skills such as reading, writing, and making oral presentations. However, the educational experience in most honors programs goes far beyond the classroom and the development of such skills. For example, do you strive to become a community of learners? Is it a goal to provide a majority of your students with cultural enrichment through study abroad? Would you like to help a significant number of your students win prestigious national and international scholarships? Would you like to develop life-long learners who enjoy learning outside of the classroom? Do you strive to develop students who will become active members of their communities following graduation?

Do not be afraid to identify your more broad-based and unique goals such as those listed above and include these in your outcomes assessment program. The creation of assessments for such outcomes can be a bit more challenging, but identifying and assessing the unique learning goals of your honors program will solidify your program's individual identity and provide you with information about your success at achieving *all* your program-specific learning goals. Such information can also be useful when presenting your program to both internal and external funding sources in order to demonstrate that your program is successful at broadly educating students.

Use Existing Learning Outcomes

One way to decrease the amount of time required for conducting outcomes assessment is to borrow learning outcomes from related units. If your honors courses fulfill general education requirements, you can use the

general education learning outcomes outlined by your institution for the categories fulfilled by honors courses. Similarly, honors programs that reside within academic majors can borrow learning outcomes from the major. You should then create assessments of these outcomes that are relevant to your programming. In addition to decreasing workload, this will ensure that the honors courses align with the mission of your institution and related units and that your program is fulfilling institutional requirements.

Tease Out Sources of Student Excellence

Because students enrolled in honors are demonstrated good learners prior to entering the program, they will often outperform non-honors students in learning assessments. This can pose a problem when attempting to assess learning in honors. Are the students excelling because they are excellent students or because they are receiving excellent instruction?

There are several techniques that can be used to tease apart the role of the student and the role of instruction in honors learning. One technique is to use pre-test/post-test assessments of learning. Ask students to provide a writing sample or answer a pop-quiz on the first day of class, and then re-administer the assessment at the end of the semester. The change in performance across the course is the learning that occurred via course instruction. Change can be examined at the individual, sub-group (all seniors, juniors, etc), or entire-class level.

A second suggestion is to include a control group of non-honors students in an assessment of learning and conduct an analysis of covariance using SAT/ACT scores as a covariate. For example, if your college or university is conducting an assessment of general education using a nationally standardized test, you can identify the honors students who completed the assessment (this may need to be done prior to test administration, so planning can be helpful) as well as a control group that contains an equal number of non-honors students. Conduct an ANCOVA to determine if the honors students are excelling at the assessment independent of SAT/ACT score. A related alternative is to use a matched control group in which students who are not in honors are matched with students in honors based upon SAT/ACT score. This controls for student quality, and any differences in performance on the general education assessment are therefore due to differences in curriculum and instruction.

A third suggestion is to collect information on variables other than membership in honors that could affect performance on a standardized assessment of general education (e.g., SAT/ACT score, major, specific courses completed, high school, etc) and enter these variables into a regression analysis. This will allow you to determine the amount of variance in performance that is related to these alternative explanations of student excellence. For more information regarding these statistical techniques, you may consult knowledgeable faculty or staff or Green, Salkind, and Akey (2004).

CONCLUSIONS

We hope that the suggestions in this article provide you with helpful information regarding your outcomes assessment program. Please keep in mind that each institution must adapt assessment guidelines to meet its unique needs and structure. It is also inevitable that we will have learning goals that are difficult to assess but are important components of our honors programs. Such learning goals should retain their prominence in our programs as we attempt to discover appropriate methods of assessment. Learning outcomes assessment seems to be here to stay (Nichols, 1995). Embracing the process and looking forward to the improvements that an outcomes assessment program can bring to your program are the best ways to approach the assessment of student learning.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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APPENDIX

Sample Learning Outcomes and Assessments

Note: Assessment method in parentheses.

1. Students will demonstrate critically reflective thinking.
   A. 100% of Senior Thesis students will score a B or greater on the critical thinking portion of their Senior Thesis project. (Grading Rubric.)
   B. 80% of students will score a B or greater on the critical thinking portion of their end of semester paper in BOTH Honors Humanities II (HON 306) and Honors Civilization II (HON 311). (Grading Rubric.)

2. Students will make an effective oral presentation.
   A. 100% of Senior Thesis students will score a B or greater on the oral presentation portion of their Senior Thesis project. (Grading Rubric)
   B. 90% of students will show at least a letter grade of improvement in their oral presentation of their senior thesis over their final course presentation in Honors
   Rhetoric (HON 102). (Comparison of Videotaped Records of Presentations using Grading Rubric)
   C. At least 60% of the students presenting a Senior Thesis will have participated in at least one state, regional, or national panel presentation. (Count)

3. Students will demonstrate an appreciation for learning outside of the classroom.
   A. 80% of students will indicate on the Activities Survey that they attended 5 or more out-of-class enrichment activities during the academic year.
   (Internal Survey)
   B. 80% of graduating seniors will indicate on the Senior Survey that they plan to attend an educational or cultural event within six months after graduation. (Internal Survey)

4. Students and faculty in the Honors Program will become a community of learners.
   A. Students living in the Honors Dorm will indicate on the Residence survey that living together enhances their educational experience. (Internal Survey)
   B. 80% of students will indicate on the Activities Survey that they participated in 5 or more Honors sponsored academic and/or social activities. (Internal Survey)
   C. Students completing, and faculty teaching Honors courses will indicate on the Team Teaching survey that team taught courses enhance their educational or teaching experience. (Internal Surveys)