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Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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Memo to Departments: Outcomes Assessment Really is a Good Idea

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Outcomes Assessment has an image problem. For some people, it calls to mind standardized testing and centralized data collection systems. Others may think of file drawers full of unexamined reports. For many, it gets pictured alongside those other “A” words (accountability and accreditation) that they associate with satisfying someone else’s expectations. For some people, in some places, at some times, these are the kinds of images that outcomes assessment has evoked.

But these are not the only ways to see outcomes assessment, and it has never meant just those things. Outcomes assessment is first and foremost for departments: It helps them identify what their students are learning, across courses and over time, and it helps them reflect on the effects that their educational programs are having. Departments that associate outcomes assessment primarily with accreditation requirements or institutional reports might miss out on the most valuable conversations that it could help their faculty members have: How are we doing, as a group, at helping students learn and challenging them to excel? What are the collective effects of our individual efforts to engage students in our discipline?

Outcomes assessment may have other audiences and purposes as well, but it serves them best when it serves departments first. This essay proposes a set of guiding principles to help departments develop productive approaches to outcomes assessment, and to help them gain the greatest benefit for the department from their assessment efforts.

Principle 1: Collaborative Engagement

First of all, outcomes assessment is best thought of as collaborative engagement in teaching and learning, similar to the natural cycle of teaching and learning that occurs in almost every course. In their courses, faculty members typically have particular goals in mind for what they want students to learn, and they take a variety of actions (lectures, discussions, assignments, projects, and a wide range of other activities) to help students learn those things.

As they teach their courses, most faculty assess learning in a variety of ways, both formal and informal, by observing indicators of student learning such as how they are doing on assignments and tests, how engaged they seem during class, and what kinds of questions they ask.

These observations become a basis for faculty reflection and review of their teaching in the course: What should I expand on and further develop? What should I re-visit and re-iterate? What should I do differently next time?



In outcomes assessment, the goal is to look beyond an individual course to examine what students are learning through their overall experience in the program. In the same way that faculty members **individually** engage in a cycle of teaching and learning in their own courses, so also faculty members as a group can engage in this process **collectively** to reflect on and review their curriculum as a whole.

A curriculum is inherently collaborative. Faculty members decide together on goals for the curriculum, and work together to give students reasonable opportunities to achieve those goals. Outcomes Assessment is the part of this cycle in which faculty members come together to examine and reflect on what students are learning across the curriculum, much in the same way that an individual faculty member examines and reflects on learning in a course while teaching it. This collective review sets the stage for collective action:

Where can the curriculum expand or develop? What needs to be re-iterated or re-emphasized? What should we do differently next time?

Examining a curriculum differs in at least three important ways from reflecting on a course:

1. A curriculum is distributed across a longer period of time, a larger group of instructors, and a wider range of learning experiences.
2. A course may naturally evolve from one iteration to the next, but a curriculum tends to remain in place unless intentional steps are taken to review and revise it.
3. Like the curriculum itself, the reflection and review requires a collective effort, rather than an individual one.

The most useful assessment plan is one that is based on the question, “What do we need to know, as a department, in order to work together to examine the effects of our program on our students?”

Principle 2: Transparency, Reason, and Evidence

Second, outcomes assessment reflects the same commitment to open, rigorous examination that we bring to all our scholarly work. Collective efforts to design, implement, and examine a curriculum are best when they are transparent and systematic so that all faculty members can see what is being learned about the program, what actions are being taken, and why. Many departments are attentive to informal feedback and anecdotal reports that might come their way, but it is not always clear how broadly this incidental evidence represents the overall experience of their students. The advantage of outcomes assessment is that the department takes initiative to gather and examine evidence in regular, intentional ways so that it is clear who and what the evidence represents, identifying what is working well in the program as well as possible areas for change.

Evidence of learning should reflect the nature and complexity of the department’s learning outcomes. Some outcomes are best demonstrated by direct indicators (such as samples of student work), while others require more indirect observations (such as surveys of students, alumni, or employers). Since no single source will provide comprehensive information about student learning, outcomes assessment should incorporate evidence from a variety of sources that each contribute partially to a composite picture of learning in the department.

Principle 3: Useful, Timely Information

A third important principle is that outcomes assessment is always a means to an end: Supporting well-informed decisions about teaching and learning in the department. Outcomes assessment is never an end in itself, and should be designed in ways that provide useful information for the department, at a time when the department is in a position to act on it.

An outcomes assessment plan is best thought of as a multi-year effort. Most departments have identified multiple learning outcomes for their students, and departments should have assessment plans that address each outcome – but not necessarily at the same time. Some departments might be in a position to gather comprehensive information about their programs every year, but very few are in a position to take comprehensive action every year. Partial evidence that the department can act on is worth far more than comprehensive evidence that doesn't get used.

A multi-year assessment plan may need to be modified, even before it is fully implemented, in order to accommodate unanticipated events or changes in the department. Even so, approaching outcomes assessment as a multi-year project can help the department keep track of assessment efforts, sustain them over time, and avoid unnecessarily repeating work that has already been done.

Principle 4: Faculty-Based, Department-Led, Centrally Supported

Finally, the collective expertise of faculty members working together remains the best resource for assessment at the university, but faculty cannot be expected to do it all on their own. Faculty observations of student learning in their courses can provide both direct evidence for outcomes assessment and context for other more indirect evidence that comes in. However, few faculty members are in a position to examine learning across courses, over time, and it requires both department leadership and central support to bring together the parts into a more integrated whole. Outcomes assessment brings department-level breadth and purpose to faculty examination of student learning. **Departmental leadership** for outcomes assessment can include:

- *Coordination*: Bringing faculty members together on a regularly scheduled basis to review assessment findings and to participate in decisions with program-wide implications.
- *Context*: Keeping the department's overall learning outcomes in view, as well as diverse perspectives of faculty, students, the discipline, and the institution.
- *Continuity*: Maintaining the memory of lessons learned as the program has developed over time; ensuring that ongoing efforts are systematic, thorough, and moving forward.

What we share across departments is a common commitment to the quality of our programs, and the institution can provide central support that helps departments carry out that commitment. **Central support** for outcomes assessment can take the form of:

- *Capacity*: Providing recognition and reward for assessment efforts, offering opportunities for faculty development, creating grants and other support for department initiatives.
- *Community*: Facilitating exchange of ideas and resources so that departments aren't faced with re-inventing the wheel each time they develop or expand assessment efforts.
- *Connections*: Remaining informed of developments in the higher education community and expectations of institutional stakeholders such as governing boards and accrediting bodies.

A wide variety of assessment methods can be found online and in print, and there is virtually no limit to how they can be applied and adapted by faculty members and departments. Methods may vary, but they will be most worth the effort when they support collaborative faculty engagement in examining student learning, across courses and over time, in ways that are systematic, timely, and useful for the department.

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