

Frequently Asked Questions about Academic Degree Learning and Program Assessment

Is it OK to use grades as a measure of learning? Grades are not a reliable measure of assessment because they often incorporate criteria such as attendance, participation and effort that are not direct measures of learning. Assessment goes beyond grading by systematically examining patterns of student learning across courses and analyzing this information to improve educational practice.

What is the difference between formative and summative measures? Formative assessment monitors student learning by providing ongoing feedback used to improve teaching and learning. The goal is the identification of strengths and weaknesses to target areas that need work.

Summative assessment evaluates student learning at the end of an instructional unit by comparing it against a rubric, standard, grading guide, or benchmark. A midterm, final, or research paper serves as a summative assessment.

Can you use an indirect measure to assess student learning? Direct assessments are far superior to indirect assessments as they assess a student's direct application of a knowledge or skills. Examples are: summarize a process, apply a theory, solve a problem, or synthesize literature. Surveying students about their learning is called indirect assessment, and while that may be a valuable process for students to vocalize (and hence demonstrate that they have internalized learning objectives), it is used sparingly in program assessment. One accepted usage would be in the portfolio collection of learning artifacts previously assessed in a summative fashion; students might be asked to rate their knowledge about a topic after taking a course as compared to what they believe they knew before taking the course. In this case, the indirect measure serves as a small qualitative piece in a multi-disciplinary examination.

For collecting data, what is the difference between a prospective or retrospective study? Cohort studies classified as prospective or retrospective rely on when outcomes occurred in relation to the enrollment of the cohort. In a prospective study, baseline information is collected from all students using exactly the same questions and data collection methods. Students then are followed "longitudinally," from 2 to more semesters, to determine if curriculum is effective. Retrospective studies are conceived after the outcomes of interest have been developed. The investigators then look to identify a student cohort at a point in time before they have developed the outcomes of interest, and then determine whether the subject subsequently developed the outcome of interest.

Is it acceptable to select a criterion of 60% or higher as a measure? Let's put it this way, would you feel comfortable putting your life in the hands of a surgeon who passed all of their coursework at 61%? The concern many have is that if a program has high standards then there may be some criterion which will not be met (and have to be stated as such in a report). A good program takes a "not met" criterion as an opportunity to examine why the failure occurred and address it with an intervention.

What is the difference between lower and higher order learning goals? This directly refers to the incorporation of learning taxonomies such as Bloom's; some fields put forward a revised version of Bloom's or recommend a taxonomy closely aligned with field skills and expectations. While it is appropriate for students in general education coursework to be operating at the lower levels of thinking, extensive research indicates that even in early courses, lessons that incorporate higher levels of thinking promote more meaningful student engagement with content. Most accreditation bodies expect to see a range of lower and higher order thinking goals with students in coursework near the end of the degree program reflecting the kinds of experiences that an entry-level employee would expect to encounter. For graduate level programs, evaluators will expect to see emerging leadership skills in global or highly specialized settings.

What are accreditation bodies expecting in terms of a departmental assessment expert? While a given department may not have a faculty member who has taken assessment coursework, it is our experience that our faculty proactively seek expertise in areas such as assessment and curriculum development through service on committees, field work and research, and developing their own practice. Cataloging the submission of degree assessment reports helps SWOSU codify and recognize our faculty as field experts.

Should program and student learning assessment be completed by one person or a team of faculty? It is always desirable to have a team participation as that structure is more reflective of multiple perspectives. In addition, this model allows your department to foster the inclusion of new faculty into an area where they might need to build credentials by relying on the mentoring experience of our veteran faculty. Regional and discipline-specific accreditors expect substantial participation by faculty.

Looking for more information on assessment? Try these resources:

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)

<http://learningoutcomeassessment.org/>

Maki, P. (2004). *Assessing for Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

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Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing student learning : A common sense guide* (Second edition ed., The Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Here's Linda's blog with assessment articles: <http://www.lindasuskie.com/apps/blog/>