2010

Extreme Makeover: Assessment Plans Edition

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Assessment Plan "Essentials"

I. **List or descriptions of the "intended student learning outcomes" for your program.**

These should answer the question: "What should our students know and be able to do when they complete our program?"

For example, "When students complete the program in ornamental horticulture, they should be able to explain the value of integrated pest management in landscape maintenance."

Or-

"Students should be able to write technical reports that address substantive issues in the profession, using standard English grammar and punctuation."

Or-

"They should be able to develop a research proposal."

In other words, the "intended outcome statement" can be relatively detailed or relatively broad. (The next part of the plan will provide greater detail.)

II. **List or descriptions of the ways in which you will determine how well students meet the intended outcomes.**

This part of the plan (we might call it the "assessments" or "measures," or tests, or assignments, or….) should also indicate how well the students need to perform in order to meet the expectations for the program. We should answer the question: "How will we know that students know and can do the things we have identified as important?"

For example, "Students will complete an original research project. The project will be evaluated using the rubric developed by the program's assessment committee. (attach a copy of the rubric to your plan) Students must achieve a rating of 3 or better on all elements of the rubric."

Or-

"Student responses to questions 5, 8, 12, and 42 on the common final exam will be collected and analyzed. At least 80% of students taking the exam each semester should respond correctly to all four of these key questions."

Or- "At least 90% of the students completing the program should receive passing scores on the national certification exam after no more than two attempts."

Again, the level of detail will vary, but the descriptions should always provide enough information to allow other faculty (and students!) to understand program expectations.

Opinion or satisfaction surveys may provide some useful data about the program, but they do not indicate how well students actually perform on tasks that are valued—or how much they know about the content and structures of the discipline.

Course grades are rarely a source of helpful information. What does a "B" tell us about how much the student knows? Exceptions to this would include programs in which the grades are criterion-referenced. If we assign grades based on specific descriptions of student performance (and everyone who is grading students applies the performance measures equally), we may be able to make some claims about student knowledge and ability. However, this is a much more complex process than that of identifying tests, assignments, or other measures that will inform our assessment of student learning. Often, we think of grades as a "shortcut" or even "shorthand" for measuring student performance, but the process of making sure that the grades reflect the expected performance is much more time-consuming and perhaps "invasive" to our colleagues' pedagogy than other approaches to assessment.

For example, we can agree to apply a "critical thinking" rubric to one assignment in each core course within the major—without forcing all faculty to give the same assignment. If the rubric is written in a way that emphasizes the elements of critical thinking rather than the elements of the assignment, it can be applied across multiple settings. Note that the rubric can be applied even if it's not being used as part of the course grade. The time commitment from each faculty member is relatively low, but the aggregated results can provide direction for program improvements. (It's good practice to periodically select several sample assignments [photocopies of student work with names removed] and have faculty members apply the rubric to the samples during a faculty meeting or retreat. When faculty members compare how they evaluated the samples and perhaps discuss the results, we can often arrive at a common understanding of the expectations—and also make changes to the rubric as needed to provide clarity in its use.)

III. **Schedule for administering the assessments (and/or collecting the results).**

It's important to identify the "*who*" and "*when*" along with the "*what*" and "*how*." We want assessment to be a part of the regular work of faculty and students—but we will rarely accomplish things that aren't clearly defined.

For example, "At the end of each semester, faculty members who teach BIOS 1500 will record student responses to the key questions from the final exams using TracDat. The responses will be aggregated annually prior to the fall faculty retreat for presentation and discussion at the retreat."

IV. **Explanation of how assessment results will be used by the faculty to improve the program.**

This step of "closing the feedback loop" is one of the most important parts of assessment—and the one that is often overlooked. Unless we USE the results of assessment, it's a waste of everyone's time to DO assessment.

For example, "During the fall retreat, the chair of the department assessment committee will provide a spreadsheet showing the results of assessments in the five outcome areas. The faculty as a whole will determine next steps to improve student performance, gather more useful data, or revise the outcomes or measures. Notes from this discussion will be circulated to the faculty prior to the first regular faculty meeting of the year."

TracDat's "findings" section provides a mechanism for recording the decisions of the faculty about next steps. Think of TracDat as the "garage where you store your assessment stuff."