

CHAPTER 1: DESIGNING A DEPARTMENT ASSESSMENT PLAN

This chapter provides guidelines for designing an assessment plan. It explores the possible players and outlines the important components of an effective plan.

Planning is essential to the success of assessment efforts. It is important to determine what will be done and how the results will be used **before** assessment efforts begin. Planning allows for discussion among and involvement of the critical players before any work begins.

Topics Presented

- Definitions of assessment and evaluation
- Key participants in the design of an assessment plan
- Key components of an assessment plan
- Characteristics of an effective assessment plan

Definitions

Assessment is “any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 18).

Evaluation is “any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional, or institutional effectiveness” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 19).

Assessment and evaluation are often combined due to their obvious link. It is important to remember that they are not the same, however. Assessment is the collection of data for the purpose of evaluation. Evaluation is any action taken based upon information from an assessment.

General Information

Participants

Who should participate in designing a department assessment plan?

An assessment **team** plans and coordinates assessment efforts. The make-up of the team is important to the ultimate success of the assessment.

Faculty are crucial members of the team. The most effective assessment plan is one that involves and has the support of the faculty. They should be involved in every step of the process from developing assessment objectives to reporting the results.

Department chairs are important because of their role in the implementation of results and the allocation of resources. **Assessment consultants**, such as the Office of Academic Assessment and Institutional Research, are useful in developing or revising assessment plans, gathering institutional data, completing specialized analyses, assisting with conducting the assessment, or providing professional development support. **Students, alumni, and employers** can serve on committees and provide valuable feedback about assessment activities.

Assessment Plan Components

What should be included in the assessment plan?

An effective assessment plan usually includes the following (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 39):

- Subject matter
- Methodology
- Timeline
- Use of assessment information
- Provisions for administering the plan
- Provisions for assessing the assessment

Subject Matter - What are we assessing? Why?

The first step in planning any assessment is to determine its **purpose**. An assessment can be used to **document outcomes** (to determine if a class is meeting general education goals). A department might hold focus groups with its majors to

assess department advising, an assessment activity aimed at **improvement**. The assessment team must clarify whether the purpose of the assessment is documentation or improvement, because the purpose will guide many of the planning decisions.

Assessment should focus on subject areas that are important to the department (student learning, critical thinking skills, career success of graduates, advising in the program). Any assessment effort is sure to fail if its subject matter is not something that faculty care about. For this reason, assessment is often linked with department goals and objectives. (More information about linking goals and objectives with assessment is included in Chapter 2.)

The assessment team may also need to consider **other assessment requirements** such as general education evaluation, Commission for Higher Education review, North Central Association accreditation, professional accreditation, and professional licensing.

Methodology - How will we do the assessment?

This component of an assessment plan should include determining how the assessment will be conducted and identifying the **assessment tools, data, and participants**. The methodology should be closely linked with the subject matter. (Chapter 3 discusses selecting assessment tools. Chapters 4 through 8 discuss in depth the specific types of tools, including their advantages and disadvantages.)

Timeline - When will we complete each component?

Specifically, the **timeline** will include **when assessment activities will take place, who will participate, and who will coordinate the activities**. Assessment activities can be cyclical (annual, bi-annual, etc.) or single instance activities. The timeline is important because it outlines not only when things will occur but who will be involved. Careful attention must be paid to the timeline so that participants and assessment team members are not overloaded.

Using Assessment Information – How will we analyze and use the information?

A number of decisions must be made about how the assessment information will be used, in particular how the data will be analyzed, who will see the results, and what types of reporting will be most effective. The **type of analysis** should flow from the purpose of the assessment, the objectives measured, and the tools used. **Who will see the assessment results** can be more complicated. Assessment data is often for department use only. Assessment provides an opportunity for the department to take a critical look at its programs, to identify strengths and weaknesses. There are instances when a department is gathering assessment data for a particular audience such as a general education subcommittee, curriculum and advisory committees, accrediting bodies, and the Commission for Higher Education. Finally, what **type of reporting** or sharing of information will occur? Short handouts and internal discussions are all that will be needed in some circumstances; official reports are useful or required at other times. (Chapter 9 discusses reporting and using assessment results.)

Provisions for Administering the Plan - Who is responsible for what?

Administration of the plan goes hand in hand with the timeline. The focus is on determining **who will do what activities**. Who will instigate the meetings to discuss goals? Who will manage survey distribution? Who will analyze the data? Who will write the final report? Who will share the results?

Assessing the Assessment - How is the plan working?

Ideally, assessment is a process that includes reflection and improvement on assessment efforts. Assessing the plan should include **evaluating each part of the plan** from department goals and objectives to use of the information. Although this is often an easy step to overlook, it can be one of the most productive because it guides and improves future assessment efforts.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the characteristics of an effective assessment plan?

Characteristics of a good assessment program (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p.16)

- Asks important questions
- Reflects institutional mission
- Reflects programmatic goals and objectives for learning
- Contains a thoughtful approach to assessment planning
- Is linked to decision making about the curriculum
- Is linked to processes such as planning and budgeting
- Encourages involvement of individuals from on and off campus
- Contains relevant assessment techniques
- Includes direct evidence of learning
- Reflects what is known about how students learn
- Shares information with multiple audiences
- Leads to reflection and action by faculty, staff, and students
- Allows for continuity, flexibility, and improvement in assessment

Where do we begin?

Start by examining department goals and statements of objectives. What are the intended outcomes of the program? Which of these outcomes are most important to the program? (Chapter 2 discusses goals and objectives and how they can be linked to assessment.)

Topics Reviewed

- Assessment is the gathering, analyzing, and interpreting of data; evaluation is action based upon results of the assessment.
- Faculty, department chairs, assessment consultants, students, alumni, and employers are all possible players in designing a departmental assessment plan.
- The key components of an assessment plan are the subject matter, methodology, timeline, use of assessment information, provisions for administering the plan, and provisions for assessing the assessment.

Sources of Additional Information

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