PA State System of Higher Education
Board of Governors

POLICY 1997-01: ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

See Also:

Adopted: January 16, 1997
Amended:

A. Purposes

1. To insure that State System universities design and implement appropriate strategies for assessing student learning outcomes and for using assessment findings for continuous improvement of teaching and learning.

2. To set forth general principles and guidelines for the implementation of learning outcomes assessment at System universities.

3. To provide for periodic reporting to the Office of the Chancellor, the Board of Governors, and other System constituencies on the various approaches to outcomes assessment being used at System universities, including examples of how assessment findings have led to program improvement.

B. Rationale

The State System of Higher Education has made a commitment to the principles and practices of Continuous Improvement as means of assuring institutional effectiveness and ongoing enhancement of all institutional functions. Assessing student learning—the outcomes of the university's educational programs—is at the heart of these efforts. Outcomes assessment is based on explicit learning goals or expectations associated with particular educational programs; it involves the systematic collection and analysis of data—both qualitative and quantitative—to determine how well student performance matches expectations and standards. The major purpose of outcomes assessment is to improve student learning and growth.

Both the recently adopted State System plan and the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association call for comprehensive and systematic assessment of learning outcomes. While this policy requires no more than what is spelled out in the Middle States Association's "Framework for Outcomes Assessment," by adding the imprimatur of the Board of Governors, it is intended to give impetus and direction to the assessment activities already underway at System

universities. Moreover, the policy provides assurance to the State System's various constituencies that the state-owned universities are committed to the continuous improvement of their educational programs.

C. Requirements

1. System universities shall develop and implement methods for assessing the most important student learning goals or outcomes in the following areas:

   Basic Skills or Developmental Programs
   General Education
   Undergraduate Academic Majors
   Academic Minors (where no major is present)
   Graduate Programs
   Co-Curricular Programs (with student development goals)

   Assessment findings should be systematically analyzed and used as a basis for making changes in curriculum, instruction, advising, or other aspects of an educational program in order to strengthen student learning and development.

2. Although outcomes assessment must be an ongoing, cumulative process, reporting (for System-level purposes) normally will occur in conjunction with the five-year program review cycle, in accord with Board Policy 1986-04-A. Summaries of individual program reviews submitted to the Division of Academic and Student Affairs should list strategies that have been employed during the past five years to assess learning outcomes for that program and note changes that have been or will be implemented as a result of assessment findings.

3. Proposals for new academic programs should include the major student learning outcomes that the program expects to produce, along with some indication of how faculty plan to assess student achievement of those outcomes.

D. Principles and Guidelines

1. Assessment of academic and co-curricular programs should be designed, implemented, and interpreted by the faculty, students, and staff most directly associated with the program. Administrators should provide coordination, support, professional development opportunities, and technical assistance, as needed. Each university should establish some mechanism for monitoring the extent and effectiveness of learning outcomes assessment in its educational programs. External reviews of the assessment process should be included, as appropriate.

2. Outcomes assessment strategies provide data about student needs, progress, and achievement and about the strengths and weaknesses of educational programs. Findings from outcomes assessment are to be used to improve programs, not to evaluate the performance of individual faculty or staff members; other processes exist for that purpose.

3. Students must be informed early of the university's commitment to assessment and of their obligation to participate in assessment activities. Findings from formative assessments at the beginning and during the course of their studies and from course-embedded assessments should be shared with students to assist them in understanding and working toward learning goals. The university may require students to participate in most assessment activities, but, ultimately, the goal is to establish a "culture of assessment," in which both faculty and students regard outcomes assessment as a critical part of teaching and learning.

4. Given the multifaceted, cumulative nature of learning, assessment is most effective when multiple strategies are employed. "Indicators," including what students and alumni say on surveys or in interviews, as well as many other kinds of data, provide indirect evidence of student learning and of program strengths and weaknesses. Measures of student performance—comprehensive examinations, problem-solving exercises, demonstrations, observations of student behavior, research projects, analysis of student work through portfolios, for example—more directly assess students' learning in relation to particular program goals. Indicator data are often more easily obtained and can be very useful, but direct measures of student learning also must be developed for and integrated into each educational program.

5. Direct assessments of student learning generally are linked to particular learning goals or desired outcomes in terms of acquisition of knowledge, skills, behaviors, and values. Such goals need not be regarded as unchangeable; rather, they are likely to evolve and change as increasing amounts of data become available on actual learning outcomes and on the expectations of employers, graduate programs, and, indeed, students themselves. To be most effective, assessment should focus on learning outcomes that are regarded as important by the faculty, staff, and the students involved.

6. Although extra time for planning and professional development may be required when assessment is initiated, both formative (including classroom assessment) and summative assessment strategies must be incorporated into the regular instructional and scholarly activities of an academic department or other unit; development and testing of new assessment strategies and analysis of assessment findings and their implications for continuous improvement are essential scholarly activities, for which faculty most involved should be recognized and rewarded.

7. Given the differences in programs for student preparation and in assessment strategies used within and across universities, assessment findings cannot be used for comparative purposes; however, the quality, comprehensiveness, and effectiveness of a department's or an institution's overall assessment program in promoting improvement are important indicators of organizational performance.

E. Implementation

Implementation of the expectations enunciated in this policy already is under way at State System universities. Summaries of assessment activities undertaken by individual academic and student affairs units are to be submitted, along with the summary of the unit's five-year program review, to the Division of Academic and Student Affairs by the annual July 31 deadline.

In addition, university presidents should submit general plans for assessing the outcomes of basic skills programs, General Education, co-curricular programs, and graduate programs, along with a description of the institution's mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the overall outcomes assessment effort, by a deadline to be assigned by the chancellor. The vice chancellor for academic and student affairs will report progress to the Board of Governors in January of 1998 and will issue written summaries periodically of how assessment is being used to continuously improve State System educational programs.