

# American Association for Higher Education (AAHE)

## Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning

[The AAHE Principles and *comments* on each, as presented in Banta, Lund, Black, and Oblander, 1996, are given below.]

### 9 Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning

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- a. **The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.** Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement. Its effective practice, then, begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for students and strive to help them achieve. Educational values should drive not only what we choose to assess but also how we do so. Where questions about educational mission and values are skipped over, assessment threatens to be an exercise in measuring what's easy, rather than a process of improving what we really care about.
  - *The college mission must be understood not just by the school's faculty and staff but also by its students and the community it serves. Assessment must be based on that which is truly important.*
- b. **Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.** Learning is a complex process. It entails not only what students know but what they can do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes, and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom. Assessment should reflect these understandings by employing a diverse array of methods, including those that call for actual performance, using them over time so as to reveal change, growth, and increasing degrees of integration. Such an approach aims for a more complete and accurate picture of learning, and therefore firmer bases for improving our students' educational experience.
  - *Successful assessment techniques embody creativity, adaptability, reliability, and validity. Through the use of multiple methods, triangulation, and the measurement of knowledge and performance over time, effective assessment techniques can begin to capture and reflect the complex nature of learning.*
- c. **Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.** Assessment is a goal-oriented process. It entails comparing educational performance with educational purposes and expectations -- those derived from the institution's mission, from faculty intentions in program and course design, and from knowledge of students' own goals. Where program purposes lack specificity or agreement, assessment as a process pushes a campus toward clarity about where to aim and what standards to apply; assessment also prompts attention to where and how program goals will be taught and learned. Clear, shared, implementable goals are the cornerstone for assessment that is focused and useful.
  - *Assessment is most effective when it is based on clear and focused goals and objectives. It is from these goals that educators fashion the coherent frameworks around which they can carry out inquiry. When such frameworks are not constructed, assessment outcomes fall short of providing the direction necessary to improve programs.*
- d. **Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.** Information about outcomes is of high importance; where students "end up" matters greatly. But to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way -- about the curricula, teaching, and kind of student effort that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment can help us understand which students learn best under what conditions; with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve the whole of their learning.

- *Effective assessment strategies pay attention to process. Educational processes are essential to the attainment of an outcome. Successful assessment practitioners understand that how students get there matters.*
- e. **Assessment works best when it is ongoing not episodic.** Assessment is a process whose power is cumulative. Though isolated, "one-shot" assessment can be better than none, improvement is best fostered when assessment entails a linked series of activities undertaken over time. This may mean tracking the process of individual students, or of cohorts of students; it may mean collecting the same examples of student performance or using the same instrument semester after semester. The point is to monitor progress toward intended goals in a spirit of continuous improvement. Along the way, the assessment process itself should be evaluated and refined in light of emerging insights.
- *Assessment strategies must be continually nurtured, evaluated, and refined in order to ensure success.*
- f. **Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.** Student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility. Thus, while assessment efforts may start small, the aim over time is to involve people from across the educational community. Faculty play an especially important role, but assessment's questions can't be fully addressed without participation by student-affairs educators, librarians, administrators, and students. Assessment may also involve individuals from beyond the campus (alumni/ae, trustees, employers) whose experience can enrich the sense of appropriate aims and standards for learning. Thus understood, assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement.
- *Successful assessment is dependent upon the involvement of many individuals – each person contributes his or her knowledge, expertise, and perspectives, thereby enhancing the overall assessment program. Assessment therefore works best when it is conceptualized as a group effort.*
- g. **Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.** Assessment recognizes the value of information in the process of improvement. But to be useful, information must be connected to issues or questions that people really care about. This implies assessment approaches that produce evidence that relevant parties will find credible, suggestive, and applicable to decisions that need to be made. It means thinking in advance about how the information will be used, and by whom. The point of assessment is not to gather data and return "results"; it is a process that starts with the questions of decision-makers, that involves them in the gathering and interpreting of data, and that informs and helps guide continuous improvement.
- *Successful assessment programs know how to use data. Assessment makes a difference when meaningful data are collected, connected, and applied creatively to illuminate questions and provide a basis for decision making. Only then can data guide continuous improvement.*
- h. **Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.** Assessment alone changes little. Its greatest contribution comes on campuses where the quality of teaching and learning is visibly valued and worked at. On such campuses, the push to improve educational performance is a visible and primary goal of leadership; improving the quality of undergraduate education is central to the institution's planning, budgeting, and personnel decisions. On such campuses, information about learning outcomes is seen as an integral part of decision making, and avidly sought.
- *Successful assessment is directed toward improvements. Those improvements may occur in teaching, student learning, academic and support programs, or institutional effectiveness. The bottom line is that assessment information must be applied systematically toward improvements if it is to have a lasting impact on the institution.*

- i. **Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.** There is a compelling public stake in education. As educators, we have a responsibility to the publics that support or depend on us to provide information about the ways in which our students meet goals and expectations. But that responsibility goes beyond the reporting of such information; our deeper obligation -- to ourselves, our students, and society -- is to improve. Those to whom educators are accountable have a corresponding obligation to support such attempts at improvement.
- *Effective assessment programs measure outcomes and then inform their many publics of the ways in which campus programs and services positively affect students, the community, and society. Assessment, then, is an important component in demonstrating institutional accountability.*

Additional principle put forward by Banta, Lund, Black, and Oblander, 1996:

- j. **Assessment is most effective when undertaken in an environment that is receptive, supportive, and enabling.** More specifically, successful assessment requires an environment characterized by effective leadership, administrative commitment, adequate resources, faculty and staff development opportunities, and time.
- *Without a supportive environment, most assessment efforts will fail to take root and grow.*