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Assessment Basics

What is Assessment?

Assessment is a cyclic process for educational improvement. An effective assessment program can be used to improve student learning, facilitate institutional improvements, and validate institutional effectiveness. PVCC's commitment to assessment enables the College to realize its core value of **Learning**.

The Higher Learning Commission provides a more formal definition: "**Assessment** is the systematic collection, examination, and interpretation of qualitative and quantitative data about student learning and the use of that information to document and to improve student learning."

Assessment of student learning is a systematic attempt to...

- Understand what students are/aren't learning
- Provide feedback to reinforce student learning
- Improve student learning!

Assessment is NOT...

- Solely an administrative activity.
- A means of punishment. It is for improvement only!
- An intrusion into a faculty member's classroom or an infringement on academic freedom.

Many people's immediate reaction to assessment is bewilderment.

"We already set our graduation requirements, update our curriculum, test student performance, and assign grades. Why isn't this assessment?"

The following chart attempts to clarify the difference between evaluating student performance and assessing student learning outcomes:

Evaluation	Assessment
Purpose: primarily summative.	Purpose: primarily formative.
Focus on individual performance.	Focus on group performance.
Helps individuals know how they performed.	Helps instructors/dept/school know how they and students performed.
Results in a grade for the activity or course.	Results in a plan for improvement.
May or may not be used for improvement of instruction.	Always used for improvement of instruction/ learning.

In particular, course grades do not provide the same insight that a course assessment does.

- Grades give a global evaluation but do not provide sufficiently detailed information about which course outcomes students are mastering well and which are giving them trouble.
- Course grades alone don't stimulate faculty discussions about how to improve student learning of particular course outcomes.
- Grades sometimes are based on more than mastery of course content; for example, participation, attendance, bonus points.
- Grading standards often vary widely among different instructors and do not indicate the same degree of mastery of course outcomes.
- Grade inflation (easy tests, generous grading, extra-credit bonuses) sometimes presents a misleading indicator of student mastery of course outcomes.

Course assessment benefits students when it leads to improved learning of the course content; the faculty benefit as well. The course assessment process provides one of the few opportunities for faculty to discuss course content with each other and, based on the results of an assessment, determine how they can improve student learning in the course.

Using assessment results as evidence, instructors might decide to:

- Revise the course outcomes to include more higher-order thinking and greater intellectual rigor
- Obtain more consistency in large multi-section courses
- Reduce grade inflation by linking test and course grades to mastery of all outcomes
- Increase contact with adjunct faculty
- Explore active learning strategies and other teaching methods
- Explore other ways of assessing outcomes
- Explore technological enhancements (labs, equipment, CD tutorial, etc.), using the assessment evidence to support a request for increased funding
- Conduct a retreat or workshop for instructors

B. Outcomes and Competencies

A student learning outcome is “A statement of what students will be able to do outside the classroom (in context) with what they have learned. The statement should be clear enough to be understood by the stakeholders and significant enough to drive the curriculum.” (Stiehl/Lewchuk)

Learning outcomes have three distinguishing characteristics: the specified action by the learner must be observable, measurable, and done by the learner.

The *Outcomes Primer* suggests a few examples:

- The student will be able to manage projects and project teams in a high technology lab.
- The student will be able to manage a caseload for a state division of children’s services.
- The student will provide community leadership in resolving environmental hazards and issues.

Some of the Course Competencies in the Maricopa course bank are learning outcomes, but many are not. Many of the Course Competencies are statements of specific course topics and skills that are necessary building blocks, but not statements of what students should be able to do outside of the classroom with their learning.

C. Components of Effective Assessment

These principles were developed under the auspices of the AAHE Assessment Forum with support from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education with additional support for publication and dissemination from the Exxon Education Foundation. Copies may be made without restriction. The authors are Alexander W. Astin, Trudy W. Banta, K. Patricia Cross, Elaine El-Khawas, Peter T. Ewell, Pat Hutchings, Theodore J. Marchese, Kay M. McClenney, Marcia Mentkowski, Margaret A. Miller, E. Thomas Moran, and Barbara D. Wright.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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—these 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.

4. 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.

5. 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 over time is best fostered when assessment entails a linked series 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.