Developing Assessment Plans

The most common components of assessment plans are the who, what, when, where, why and how of assessment for each learning goal (Nichols, 1995, p. 48). A well-designed plan describes a series of assessment activities that systematically addresses all outcomes in a multi-year cycle. The plan specifies how a relevant, representative sample of students will be selected for each assessment, how data will be collected and analyzed, and how the campus will close the loop by identifying and integrating implications for change (Allen, 2006, p. 18).

The major elements of the assessment plan include (Allen, 2006, p. 132):
1. How each outcome will be assessed
2. Who will collect and analyze the data
3. Where and how data will be collected
4. When and how often each outcome will be assessed
5. Who will reflect on the results and close the loop, when needed, by implementing appropriate changes
6. How results and implications will be documented

- How each outcome will be assessed

To determine how each outcome (or objective) will be assessed, think about what students do to demonstrate what they have learned for each objective. These activities are the assessment tasks—activities used to assess student learning of the objective. Typical course-embedded tasks include papers, projects, portfolios, presentations, performances, and specific parts of examinations, to name a few. For some programs, a national standardized test might serve as the most appropriate assessment task. Along with identifying the task, the assessment instrument or measure should be selected or developed. Sometimes the measure is the average score on a task for all students. A commonly used instrument is a rubric. Other assessment instruments include surveys of employers, alumni and recent graduates. These surveys are considered indirect forms of assessment because they measure a perception of learning as opposed to more direct forms of student learning (course-embedded tasks, national tests, etc.)

- Who will collect and analyze the data

Collection and analysis of the data may be the responsibility of instructors who administer the task or it may be teams of faculty assigned to conduct the assessments.

- Where and how data will be collected

One of the considerations for assigning responsibility for the data is where and how data will be collected—the assessment points. Because assessment is about determining the level of student learning for a program, it is typically conducted at the end of the program, for example, in a capstone course. However, the general rule for assessment points is whenever students should have achieved a level of proficiency for the given objective. Two things, therefore, are identified: 1) the point in the curriculum when students should reach a level of proficiency and 2) the course or outside of class event from which assessment data is gathered. Then the responsibility for collecting and analyzing the data can be assigned. An additional consideration includes the sample of the students to be assessed. When assessment occurs in a capstone course at a four-year institution, the sample of students is the senior class. Data need not be collected from every student in the sample, but the sub-sample of students must be representative of the entire sample. Another consideration occurs when the assessment task is not a course-embedded task (such as a national test) because if students are not receiving a grade for the test, they will need an incentive to take the test and perform well.

- When and how often each outcome will be assessed

Assessment implementation requires some thought about logistics, including when (at what point in the semester) and how often will each outcome be assessed. Alternating years or semesters is an appropriate level of frequency for assessment. However, these activities should be considered in view of the frequency of program reviews and other curriculum changes and should be determined by the dean or department chair. The frequency also depends on the frequency with which the assessment tasks occur. Alternating years is appropriate if a reasonable sub-sample of the students can be assessed. Otherwise, alternating semesters might be appropriate. When using national tests, the budget for purchasing the tests might dictate that assessment occurs less frequently than every year or every semester. The logic of alternating time periods is that any changes made to the pedagogy or curriculum will take some time to affect student performance. In other words, changes in student performance will not likely be observed the following semester or even the following year. Nevertheless, some program administrators decide to collect assessment information every semester or every year to keep the faculty engaged. Two-year programs might observe differences in student performance after a change sooner than four-year programs, so annual assessments might be desired.

- Who will reflect on the results and close the loop, when needed, by implementing appropriate changes

Someone has to be responsible for assessment analysis. The data needs to be aggregated and reviewed to identify where learning should/can be improved. However, the responsibility for "closing the loop" ultimately rests with the faculty. Therefore, a process for communicating the results of assessment to the faculty should be part of the assessment plan. Otherwise the results could end up sitting on a shelf or buried in a database without any follow-up. The follow-up is what is known as "closing the loop" (see the assessment cycle). In the analysis, the learning objectives that need the most improvement are identified. In closing the loop strategies for creating change to enhance student learning are developed.

- How results and implications will be documented

The reporting function of assessment includes setting up a repository for the data which also includes reporting the changes made to enhance student learning. Several commercial software packages exist to assist with this function. Internally-developed web-based systems can also serve in this capacity. The system should have report-generating functions and be able to accommodate many different types of assessment data. Planning for documentation is essential, not only for anyone to view results of assessment and generate reports, but also for ensuring that the process continues should a key faculty or staff member leave the institution.

Allen, M. J. (2006). *Assessing general education programs.* Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, Inc.

Nichols, J. O. (1995). *Assessment case studies: Common issues in implementation with various campus approaches to resolution.* New York: Agathon Press.