



Student Learning Assessment

Live, Learn and Thrive.

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Why Academic Program Assessment?

What is academic program assessment?

Academic program assessment is the ongoing, systematic investigation of various aspects of a program of study *in an effort to continually improve student learning.*

What is authentic assessment?

Authentic assessment is grounded in the desire to provide optimal learning opportunities for students that result in their best possible achievement of a program's stated learning objectives. Authentic assessment examines something a student has produced as evidence of attaining key program objectives. Authentic assessment is flexible and faculty-driven

What's the bottom line?

Assessment is a necessary and expected part of academic life. Done well, it directly serves the immediate needs and desires of faculty to develop courses, curricula, and program structure in ways that best promote student learning. Done well, assessment also provides external accountability by documenting internal processes that provide evidence for thoughtful, inclusive decision making.

Program Assessment or Program Evaluation?

Program *assessment* strives to identify strengths and weaknesses in a program so learning experiences can be solidified or improved. As a result, the program continues to offer appropriate learning opportunities that best suit the needs of the students. Assessment is an *internal, ongoing process*. The goal of participating in the assessment process is to *improve student learning.*

Program *evaluation* strives to demonstrate that a program meets minimal (or better) standards, usually to an external evaluator. Program evaluation calls for a judgment about the *quality of the program*. Showing evidence of an ongoing assessment process is usually *a part* of program evaluation. Program evaluation is most often *externally driven*. The goal of program evaluation is to *establish, maintain or improve program standing.*

Because of the loose and often interchangeable use of the terms 'evaluation' and 'assessment', it is sometimes unclear whether it is advantageous for programs to identify and expose 'weaknesses' (often the goal of authentic assessment), or, instead, 'put their best foot forward' (often the goal of evaluation).



What are the driving forces for academic program assessment at NMSU-Las Cruces?

1) *Student Learning at the Program Level*

The bottom line for developing and maintaining a continuous assessment process is to ensure students are attaining the values, skills and knowledge the program strives to impart. Documenting involvement in authentic assessment of student learning demonstrates that programs continually use evidence of student learning to shape learning opportunities. If assessment is not producing evidence that is useful to faculty in guiding curricular decisions, the assessment is ineffective.

2) *State of New Mexico Higher Education Department Accountability*

As a state institution, NMSU is required to meet the state's Accountability in Government Act reporting requirements. In compliance with this requirement, NMSU reports annually institution-specific measures to the New Mexico Department of Finance & Administration. For one of these measures, NMSU reports the number of academic programs "using the results of assessment of student learning." This report does *not* include an *evaluation* of programs; instead it focuses solely on the engagement of programs in authentic assessment of student learning.

3) *Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association*

Academic program, general education, and university-wide assessment expectations are explicit in the HLC criteria for reaccreditation. Like the State of New Mexico, the HLC's primary concern is that programs are involved in authentic assessment of student learning. The HLC is interested in the findings of any given program's assessment process only to the extent that the results inform the continued *development and improvement of student learning*. The HLC is *not* interested in using findings to make an *evaluation* of any program or institution.

4) *External Accreditation Agencies*

Many colleges, programs and departments have external accrediting bodies whose criteria must be met to maintain continued accreditation status. External accrediting bodies are primarily involved in program *evaluation*. This is necessary in many fields to insure programs meet minimal, often nationally developed, standards. However, because accrediting agencies recognize the value of assessment and are aware that assessment done well will help sustain the viability of any program, their standards increasingly include the assessment of student learning. While many agencies emphasize evaluation, some focus on assessment.

Data that gets stored is of little (at best) to no use. If you are collecting data simply to complete a report, you are not doing assessment. Data that provides meaningful information on a topic of interest is useful. If you are collecting data that is of interest, is used to foster discussion by faculty, and that guides decision-making, you are doing assessment.