

Assessment in Higher Education

Fundamental to education is the need to evaluate student learning and the effectiveness of teaching methods and the programs offered. Assessment allows faculty to determine what, and how well, students are learning. Assessment also allows faculty to fine tune teaching methods. Finally, assessment allows department or division heads to evaluate the effectiveness of entire programs.

“We need to be sure we’re giving students what they need, and preparing them for their careers or advancement in their careers,” says Dr. Cheryl Fenno, Chair of the Division of Humanities at Urbana University in Urbana, Ohio. Assessment is three tiered at Urbana University: assessment of the department or entire program, assessment of the class, and assessment of individual students.

To assess a department or program, a rubric is created that assesses the goals of the program. The assessment rubric goes beyond A-B-C grades and looks at how well students have grasped the learning goals set by the faculty. For an English program, the assessment rubric would include how well students write, including the development of content and organization of the writing. For a math program, the assessment rubric could include how well students are able to grasp concepts as well as solve specific problems.

In the Urbana University model, the final exams are also included in the rubric, more to look at how well students grasped the content of the course than for grading.

The same model can be used in each class with the faculty member looking at course goals and asking the question: Does the assessment show that students were able to learn and meet the goals I set for this course?

Assessing the course and assessing the whole program allows both individual faculty members and department or division chairs to refine and design course materials that allow for the maximum learning for all students, both traditional and adult learners. Assessment of individual students must be an ongoing process throughout the semester or quarter, and assessment must be able to measure higher-level skills.

A written midterm and final exam that evaluates only a student’s ability to memorize and recall information is inadequate in today’s educational environment. Active learning curriculum objectives focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills that will help students in their lives outside the classroom. Students need knowledge and skills that will help them function at a higher level than the rote learning skills once expected at college. Today’s students need critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and human relations skills.

Ongoing classroom assessment provides a continuous monitoring of student learning. Faculty receive ongoing feedback about their effectiveness, and students receive a measurement of their progress. Assessment may or may not require assigning A-B-C grades. Certainly quizzes and formal tests can be part of the ongoing assessment process, but other methods of assessment should also be used to keep the class interesting and to provide a more accurate measurement of student learning.

Although assessment strategies used to depend on the course, most courses lend

themselves to a variety of methods. A speech class lends itself to oral measures, such as oral reports and speeches. The same speech course could also use written measures by having students write reports on professional speakers. Students could also keep a journal of self-evaluation for the instructor to evaluate, or students could participate in cooperative learning groups by giving group speeches for assessment of both performance and human relations skills. Additionally, a speech course lends itself to classroom discussions where students are invited to speak about the course material while the instructor is able to assess which students are grasping the concepts and reaching the goals and which students need additional attention.

Regardless of the assessment strategies used, all assessment must focus on improving students' learning, with a secondary focus of improving teaching methods. Since assessment requires students' active participation in the process, it is to the teacher's advantage to get the students to buy into the assessment strategy. By continually showing your interest in students and your investment in their learning, students will be more motivated to participate in assessment methods. As students become more used to ongoing assessment, they will begin to see that ongoing assessment reinforces their learning and adds to their self-assessment skills.

Assessment strategies must be related to the course material and relevant to students' lives. Provide assessment strategies that relate to students' work, such as product analysis or portfolios. Have students use simulated activities for computer courses, keep a log of performance ratings or references, or role play job interviews, mock trials, or historical moments.

Assessment strategies may influence the students' final grade; however, the assessments themselves need not be graded. Assessment is for the purpose of improving students' learning rather than for providing evidence for grading students. Assessment strategies cry out for more in-depth evaluation than an A-B-C grade allows. Assessments lend themselves to either written evaluations or one-to-one meetings with students.

Assessment strategies—whether of the individual, the course, or the entire program—give faculty an impressive tool to measure learning. With assessment, educators can find those students who need an extra hand, fine-tune their own teaching methods, or redesign whole programs.

Sources:

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