

## **PRINCIPLES OF BEST PRACTICE IN PROGRAM STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT**

*The list below summarizes principles of “best practice” in program assessment that resulted from discussions with experienced assessment coordinators at UTRGV. Although these principles are not intended to stipulate UTRGV policy, they will help assessment coordinators know about different approaches to establishing a sustainable and effective assessment model.*

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### **1. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.**

Assessment is a goal-oriented process and your program should establish a clear educational purpose with explicitly stated expectations about student learning. Without this key information, it becomes difficult to prepare an assessment plan that is not only achievable, but can produce data that can be used to improve your program. Thus, we recommend that program faculty spend sufficient time defining, discussing and developing well-articulated goals.

Equally important is communicating the goals and expectations of the assessment plan, particularly to the faculty who will assist in evaluating student learning. Assessment activities that have clear expectations will help faculty value the process.

Program assessment plans often identify key courses in a curriculum to collect student-level data; this may alarm the faculty teaching in these courses who misperceive that their performance is being indirectly evaluated. Thus, it is critical to clearly communicate to the faculty teaching in the curriculum that the focus of assessment activities is to evaluate student learning systematically across the program, rather than in a specific course.

### **2. Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated throughout your program, revealed in performance(s) over time, and affected by pedagogy.**

**Assess the totality of students’ experience.** Although assessment of student learning at the end of a program can provide valuable information about where students “end up,” it is often more effective to implement assessment plans that can evaluate the performance of students while student learning is taking place. In particular, it is recommended that faculty determine various points throughout the curriculum to assess learning. Students can be assessed at multiple times in the same semester or at different stages of their undergraduate career. Curriculum maps can help identify where and when student learning/assessment should occur in a program.

**Use multiple assessment measures.** Collect more than one kind of evidence to better evaluate different dimensions of student learning. Having more evidence of student learning will increase your confidence in pinpointing what students have learned well and what they need to improve on.

**Use rubrics to directly assess learning.** Rubrics are effective at establishing criteria for evaluating many components of student learning. Course grades, graduation rates, and job placement statistics are metrics that can be used to determine the overall quality of a program, but they cannot be used to identify what exactly students have and have not learned.

**Embed assessments in your courses.** Encourage your program faculty to identify signature course assignments that can be pooled for assessing student learning throughout the program.

**Unpack the black box of student learning.** In addition to describing student performance on key learning objectives, program faculty should explore how and why programs can be more effective.

### **3. Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic.**

To adequately determine whether and to what extent your program is meeting its key student learning objectives, it is essential to measure student performance frequently over time. This not only facilitates longitudinal analysis of student performance, but also helps faculty to plan any changes in their programs. Many programs plan a semiannual data collection process to ensure that assessment is frequent and consistent.

**4. Make assessment activities manageable.**

**Align.** Be efficient by aligning your SLOs with your professional accreditation needs. That is, try not to “reinvent the wheel” when it comes to putting together a program assessment plan for UTRGV.

**Make Modest Demands of Professors’ Time & Expertise.** As you plan assessment activities, involve program faculty only where absolutely essential (defining outcomes, interpreting results, selecting an appropriate methodology).

**Set Achievable Goals.** Identify 3 to 6 SLOs that can be assessed in a reasonable amount of time and can generate meaningful data to help you know how well students are learning the program objectives. Take into consideration available resources, time, and significance of the goals to the academic program.

**Catalogue Ready-made Assessment Methods & Reports.** As your program gains experience in conducting assessment activities, build an inventory of useful methods and techniques that can be used for planning and reporting. If there are particularly innovative approaches to assess SLOs, keep a good record for future reference. More importantly, however, share your inventory with other programs within and across your college to help others at UTRGV implement effective and efficient assessment strategies.

**5. Assessment coordinators and department chairs should actively work to build and sustain an assessment infrastructure to promote effective assessment practices.**

**Make Assessment Activities Routine.** Integrate assessment planning and analysis into your department’s regular operational activities to ensure that assessment becomes a valuable tool for improving your program. Also, have a clear plan and process for conducting assessment activities. That is, set deadlines for submitting plans, collecting data, and filing reports.

**Document Assessment Processes and Decisions.** Document meeting minutes and key decisions for assessment planning and analysis to keep a record for new faculty and assessment coordinators.

**Regularly Evaluate Your Assessment Process.** To make the best of your efforts to evaluate student learning, organize with your colleagues to evaluate the process for assessment. In particular, ask how effective and sustainable are your assessment activities and whether they are helping your program make improvements.

**Incentivize Participation in Assessment Activities.** As faculty are increasingly asked to do more with less at institutions of higher education, we recommend that departments actively find ways to reward faculty who commit to assessment activities. Some departments encourage faculty to supplement their tenure and promotion files with assessment services. Other departments offer course release time for leading assessment planning. These mechanisms can help establish sustainable assessment practices that can lead to meaningful program improvements.