

How Are We Doing?

Assessment Tips With Gloria Rogers



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The *Assessment Tips* column is exclusive to *Communications Link*.

Just returning from a national assessment conference where over 1,200 attendees were crowding too small rooms to learn about program and/or institutional assessment, I have been reflecting on the burning question: “What has really changed after 10 years of focus on learning outcomes assessment?” The following “report card” is based on interaction with and review of multiple institutional and program assessment plans and discussions with other assessment professionals who have had

similar experiences. I want to admit right up front that this is not a scientific study. As a proponent of valid, direct assessment methods, I recognize the limitations of my observations (in other words, hold those cards and letters).

Development of educational objectives¹: B+

Although most non-ABET-related programs have not considered the importance of articulating the needs of their stakeholders related to student learning, this is not the case for ABET-related programs. Most of these programs are doing a good job of involving stakeholders in identifying their expectations for the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful integration into the workforce or graduate school.

Development of learning outcomes²: C

For the most part, institutions across the country are now articulating the broad outcomes that should be demonstrated by a student graduating from their institutions. For programs that have their own accrediting agency (e.g., business, nursing, education, psychology, and engineering), specific outcomes are identified for the programs, reducing the necessity of independent work. Why not a better grade? For the most part, many ABET-related programs have either just taken the outcomes listed in the accreditation criteria or have reworded them without considering the unique nature of their program that requires additional or revised out-

comes. At best, this makes the evaluation of performance on this part of the process “average.”

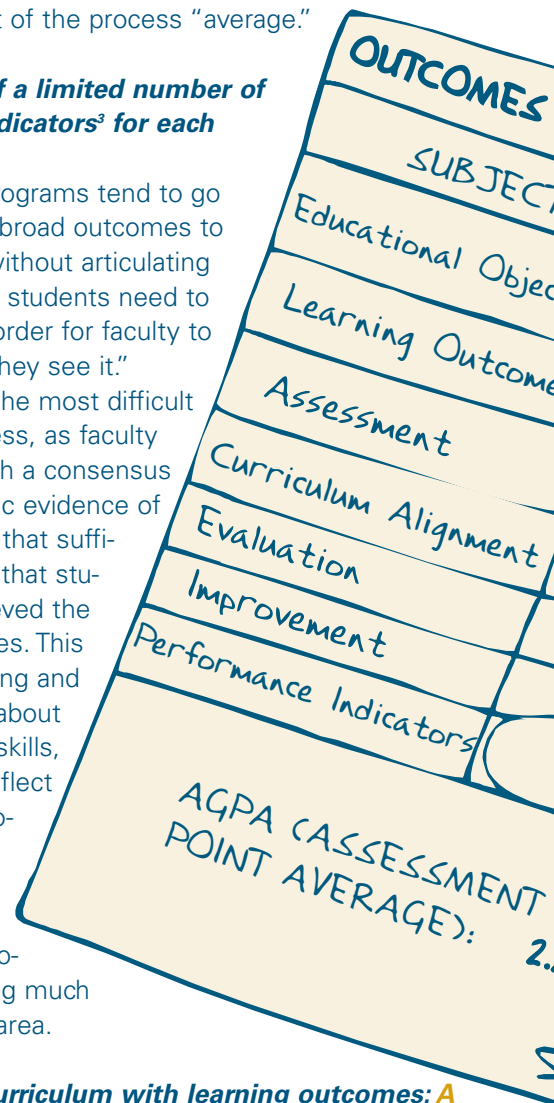
Identification of a limited number of performance indicators³ for each outcome: F

Unfortunately, programs tend to go from identifying broad outcomes to data collection without articulating specifically what students need to demonstrate in order for faculty to “know it when they see it.”

Granted, this is the most difficult part of the process, as faculty will need to reach a consensus about the specific evidence of student learning that sufficiently indicates that students have achieved the learning outcomes. This requires prioritizing and making choices about the knowledge, skills, etc., that best reflect the individual program. Little evidence has been observed that institutions or programs are making much progress in this area.

Alignment of curriculum with learning outcomes: A

Course and program matrices demonstrating the alignment between individual courses and student learning outcomes are in abundance. This is especially true in ABET-related programs. Most programs have done a meticulous job in identifying those courses that are aligned with the specific learning objectives and outcomes.



¹Educational objectives are statements that describe the expected accomplishments of graduates during the first few years after graduation.

²Learning outcomes are those skills, knowledge, attitudes, values and/or behaviors that students should have by the time of graduation in order to meet the educational objectives.

³Performance indicators are those statements that define the learning outcome and enable faculty to measure student competency.

Assessment⁴: D

This score may be surprising, as both institutions and programs have been collecting a lot of “evidence” related to student learning for a number of years. However, the move from indirect to direct methods of assessing student learning has not been sufficient to receive a passing grade. Most educational units are still depending on indirect methods such as surveys, questionnaires, and grades⁵ as the basis for making decisions about institutional or program effectiveness. Although these data are necessary, they are not sufficient for quality decision-making. This is the most serious flaw in the current data collection methods observed and, although there are pockets of progress, much more progress will need to be evident before a passing grade can be given. Poor performance in this area may be related to the “F” received in the development of measurable performance indicators. If you do not define the learning outcomes, it is impossible to measure them directly.

Evaluation⁶: B

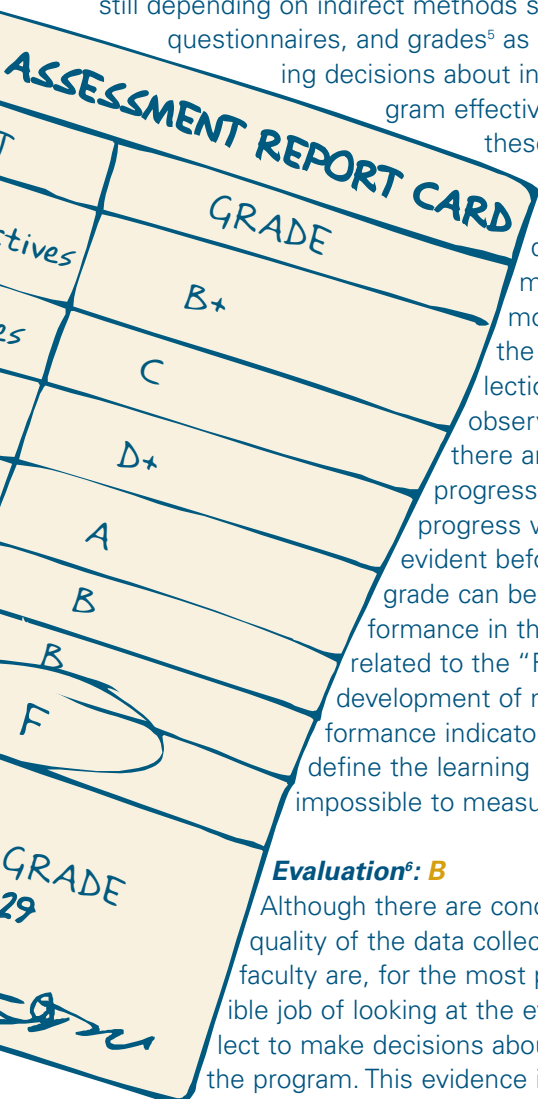
Although there are concerns about the quality of the data collection processes, faculty are, for the most part, doing a credible job of looking at the evidence they collect to make decisions about the value of the program. This evidence includes reviewing the results of the alignment of courses with outcomes, review of survey and questionnaire data, and course-level evaluations. It is believed that the quality of faculty conversations about student learning has been elevated significantly, since the

move to outcomes assessment as the basis for accreditation. The only thing that stands between a “B” and an “A” is the paucity of direct measures being used, which impacts the quality of the evaluation.

Use of evaluation data to make improvements: B

This is the “payoff” for the work being done in outcomes assessment. Most institutions and programs can point to several things that have been done to improve the curriculum as a result of this process. Courses are better aligned with the outcomes, faculty are engaged in serious discussions about what is important related to student learning, and stakeholders are increasingly involved in these discussions. Again, it is the lack of clearly articulated outcomes (performance indicators) and use of direct methods that stand between a good grade and an excellent grade. The quality of the improvements will be enhanced greatly by serious attention to these areas.

What’s your AGPA? A self-assessment to assist programs in identifying improvements that need to be made in the areas listed above can be downloaded at www.assessmentplan.com. Take the test.



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Stakeholder	Performance	Learning Outcomes	Outcomes aligned with assessment practice	Program and Institutional Assessment	Evaluation
Stakeholder (those who have a vested interest in the success of the program)	Performance (measurable, specific, and aligned with the program's purpose)	Learning Outcomes (measurable, specific, and aligned with the program's purpose)	Outcomes aligned with assessment practice (measurable, specific, and aligned with the program's purpose)	Program and Institutional Assessment (measurable, specific, and aligned with the program's purpose)	Evaluation (measurable, specific, and aligned with the program's purpose)

⁴Assessment includes the processes used to identify, collect, and prepare evidence that can be used to evaluate achievement.
⁵For a discussion about why grades are not an appropriate measure of student learning outcomes, see “Do Grades Make the Grade for Program Assessment?” at www.assessmentplan.com/grades.pdf.
⁶Evaluation is the process of reviewing the results of data collection and analysis and making a determination of the value of findings and action to be taken.