

## **Assessment 101: Assessment Tips with Gloria Rogers, Ph.D.**

### **Lessons Learned : Things I Wish I Had Known**

November 2003

When developing program assessment plans, there are many lessons we can learn from those who have gone on before. The list below represents some suggestions for those beginning the journey.

**1. You cannot do everything.** When involved in program assessment, it is important to remember that there is neither time nor resources to do everything. When identifying student learning outcomes<sup>1</sup> a program should demonstrate that it is not possible to measure every attribute that constitutes a major area of study. Decisions must be made based on high-level performance indicators<sup>2</sup> and the objectives<sup>3</sup> graduates must achieve in their early careers. It is important to stay focused and create a timeline that reflects the unique elements of the program. For example, if there are 12 outcomes to be measured (each with a limited number of performance indicators), a program may decide to assess only two per semester or three per year. Developing a systematic, focused process will enable the program to assess and evaluate program outcomes in an effective and efficient manner.

**2. One size does not fit all.** There is no one right way to do program assessment, and no two programs or institutions are alike. What one program/institution can do, another may not be able to do. Many programs have posted their assessment plans on their website, but this is not a guarantee of quality, nor does it mean that the plan will work at a variety of sites. It is important to learn from others and adapt the features that are appropriate to the program and consistent with good practice.

**3. More data are not always better.** We all have had students who have stayed up all night before a test, and when they come across an open-ended question on the exam they do a “data dump” in hopes that the faculty member will find the answer somewhere – or at least give partial credit. Sometimes this is the way we approach program assessment. If the assessment question is not clearly defined and the outcomes and performance indicators are not measurable, we do a data dump in hopes that the ABET team will at least give us “partial credit.” Program outcomes need to be clearly defined with a limited number of performance indicators, and data collection should be focused and efficient. You don't need 10,000 data points if you can answer the assessment question with 500.

**4. Pick your battles.** There is enough assessment and evaluation theory to get us through to the next millennium. If we could implement the ideal assessment plan for our programs, if the faculty were all eager to participate, if students were willing to give the assessment effort 100%, this column would be unnecessary. However, we don't live in Utopia, and our zip codes aren't even close. The reality is that we don't have a perfect assessment plan, faculty are not always willing to participate in meaningful ways, and students don't see any value in taking the process seriously. Review your assessment processes carefully and be prepared to enter into negotiations along the way. It may be necessary to give up some things to get others. The battles are different for different programs/institutions, but be sure that there is an understanding of the “essentials” that cannot be compromised, and be willing to bend on the “nonessentials.”

**5. Take advantage of local resources.** Find out what resources are available at your institution to assist in the assessment process. If you have a comprehensive institution, it is likely that there is college of education or similar program that has expertise in writing measurable learning outcomes, crafting assessment plans, developing assessment methods, etc. Find out what expertise is available. If you are in a small or two-year institution that does not have this

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expertise, is there a larger institution nearby? One of the most valuable resources are graduate students in education, education psychology, or related fields. They are often available, willing to work on assistantships, and often have experience in the field that is invaluable.

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1 **Outcomes** here are defined as the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, or behavior that students should have by the time of graduation.

2 **Performance indicators** here refer to the measurable attributes that define the learning outcomes and are focus the of the data collection process.

3 **Objectives** here are defined as the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, or behavior