



## USING COMMERCIAL EXAMS FOR PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

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Choosing the appropriate assessment tool is critical in determining the extent to which the program is meeting its student outcomes. When evaluating how useful a commercial examination might be for your program assessment needs, a few factors should be considered.

Faculty should have a clear notion of what is meant by any learning outcome (i.e., what are the underlying knowledge or behaviors that are important to your faculty and your program). Another consideration is the extent to which the program has embedded the identified student performances necessary to assess the attainment of an outcome into the curriculum. Based on this information, it is necessary to identify an exam that is compatible with the identified knowledge and/or behavior. Because of the focus of commercial testing, it is highly unlikely that you will be able to identify a single test that will meet all your assessment needs. This means that each of the program outcomes should be defined in specific measurable terms before a commercial instrument is sought. Choosing an instrument that is compatible with faculty understanding of the outcome maximizes the validity of the findings.

Some programs have worked backwards: found a test that they thought was consistent with important characteristics and identified curricular strategies that emphasize and reward achievement of the desired performance. One could argue that this approach is “teaching to the test” but it is important to remember that if the knowledge being tested is NOT important, then the “test” should not be used. If the knowledge IS important, someone should be teaching to it.

What questions should you ask if you are considering a commercial, standardized assessment instrument?

1. Does the instrument measure your outcome as directly as possible? That is, are the assessment instrument items consistent with how the faculty have defined the outcome and what is being taught and/or reinforced in the curriculum? If the test has multiple sections or tests students over multiple concepts, will you be able to segment or dissect the results in a way that will provide you with the information that you need to take necessary action?
2. When you get the results, will you know what to do with them? That is, is the curriculum aligned with the desired performance as reflected in the examination?
3. Is there a testing strategy that ensures the students taking the test are representative of the population about whom inferences will be made and that students will take the test seriously?

Many times, faculty look to use a commercial, standardized exam (especially for the non-technical outcomes) because it appears to be the easiest way to get needed assessment data. However, if the results do not provide useful information or if it isn't clear how the results can be used to improve the program and student learning, then the instrument cannot provide meaningful data for program assessment.