



TO SAMPLE OR NOT TO SAMPLE?

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In assessing an academic program, it is important to remember the focus of program assessment is the PROGRAM, not the individual student. In order to keep the collection of data manageable and the overall process both efficient and effective, programs should look at ways to use sampling of student work effectively. There are several things that need to be considered when sampling:

Representation

The sample must be representative of the student body. That is, if data are collected from a subset of the population, are the relevant characteristics of that subset representative of the entire population? For example, you would not want to assess students who are only in an honors course or a course that is designed for students who need additional academic help. However, you would want to be sure that these students were included in your sample at the same proportion as they appear in your cohort population. When determining what factors to consider, think about what student characteristics are most likely to impact success (e.g., overall grade point average). Gender and ethnicity may also be a factor for a specific program or institution. This is an area where your institutional research office may be able to provide some assistance. The bottom line is whether you can defend your sample as being representative of your student population on characteristics meaningful to your program.

Size of the program

When thinking about how many students should be included in the sample, it depends on the size of your population. If the number of students in a cohort (e.g., number of students completing the program) is small (under 60) it may not be reasonable to sample. If the program is large, sampling may be an efficient way to focus the data collection effort. It is important in any sampling methodology to meet the requirements stated above — representation.

Frequency of data collection

The decision may be made to collect data on every student in the cohort, no matter the size of the program. In this instance, the assessment results are those of the entire cohort population, and inferences do not need to be made from a sample (presenting the opportunity for a sampling error).

It is important to note that small programs (e.g., less than 20 graduates per year) may have to collect data every year to accumulate enough data to have a reasonable data set from which to make inferences. This is a more complicated process, as faculty would need to be sure to document any changes made during the time of data collection to be sure their evaluation of results is not confounded by factors other than student performance.

It is important that programs use sound assessment practices and the inferences made about student learning are based on valid data collection. At the same time, programs must find ways to reduce the faculty workload and burden for data collection that does not add value to the findings.

If you are considering sampling, be sure that you have a sample size from which you can draw valid conclusions. This website provides an easy to interpret and use calculator to determine an appropriate sample size: www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm.