



## THINGS I WISH I HAD KNOWN

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When developing program assessment plans, we can learn many lessons from those who have gone before us. The list below provides suggestions for those who may have been recently assigned responsibility to lead the student learning assessment efforts for their program.

### **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, a program should realize that it is not possible to assess every attribute that constitutes a disciplinary area of study. Decisions should be made based on high-level performance indicators that will provide evidence of the level to which students have attained the outcomes. These outcomes should support and lead to the accomplishment of specific objectives the program wants its graduates to achieve early in their careers. It is important to stay focused and create a timeline that reflects the unique elements of the program. For example, if there are eight outcomes to be measured (each with a limited number of performance indicators), a program may decide to create cycles of assessment where only a sub-set of all outcomes are assessed in a given year. Developing a systematic, focused process will enable the program to assess and evaluate program outcomes in an effective, efficient and sustainable manner.

### **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 processes on their website, but this is not a guarantee of quality, nor does it mean that the plan will work in other programs. It is important to learn from others and adapt the features that are appropriate to the program and consistent with good practice.

### **More data are not always better**

We all have had students who have stayed up all night before a test, and, when they faced with 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 review 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.

**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 percent, this article 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 negotiate along the way. It may be necessary to give up some things to obtain 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."

**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 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 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 have invaluable experience in the field.