



UNDERSTANDING THE ACCREDITATION QUESTION

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Most of us have watched quiz shows where contestants are asked a critical question to win the “grand prize.” The music in the background heightens the tension and, as time runs out, the contestants nervously ask the MC to repeat the question. Is it because they did not hear the question, or are they unsure of their answer and choose to stall for additional time to think?

One thing is certain — the stakes are high and the contestants do not want to make a mistake that might cost them dearly. To give the “right” answer, it is important to understand the question being asked. However, many of us do not stop to think about the question we are trying to answer before we dive into the assessment process related to accreditation and program effectiveness. This can create a lot of random activity to collect as much “stuff” as we can with the idea that more data are better.

What question is being asked in the accreditation process? Based on the nature of the question, what are the implications for the design of the assessment process?

- Are you assessing individual students or groups of students?
- Are you assessing for formative or summative purposes?
- Are you assessing students or departments/programs?
- Are you interested in demonstrating “value added” or only outcomes at the end of a course/program?

The answers to these questions will focus the assessment process and promote the development of both efficient and effective assessment systems. For example, the current ABET criteria for accrediting programs indicate the following:

From Criterion 2, Program Educational Objectives: *The program must have published program educational objectives that are consistent with the mission of the institution, the needs of the program’s various constituencies, and these criteria. There must be a documented, systematically utilized, and effective process, involving program constituencies, for the periodic review of these program educational objectives that ensures they remain consistent with the institutional mission, the program’s constituents’ needs, and these criteria.*ⁱ

From Criterion 3, Student Outcomes: Each of the accreditation commissions articulates the purpose of program outcomes a little differently. In common, they all indicate that programs must have documented (publicly stated) student outcomes that support the attainment of the program educational objectives (professional practice). Some of the Criteria explicitly state that programs must have an effective process for the periodic review and revision of the stated outcomes.

Given this information, what question are we trying to answer? The Criteria indicate that we are trying to determine program effectiveness through the assessment of student learning. This suggests a holistic approach to developing our assessment processes, not an analytic approach.

An analytic approach implies that we are examining each individual student to determine competence for the purpose of diagnosing areas needed for his or her improvement.

When a holistic approach is used, the focus is on an overall examination of the status of the performance of a group of students (cohort). How would the understanding of this process as a holistic approach affect assessment planning? There are two primary ways:

First, every student in every course would not have to be assessed for the purpose of determining program effectiveness. In fact, some courses and/or students may not be assessed at all. Faculty tend to be more comfortable with classroom assessment because that is where they have the most experience. Program assessment is generally not intuitively different from classroom assessment, but it is different. For course assessment, it would be considered unreasonable for us to give each student in the class the average score for the entire class as a final grade in the course. However, for program assessment, we look at the performance of a group of students and make inferences from the data about the effectiveness of the program.

Second, we do not have to assess every outcome every year. When using a holistic approach, it is important to remember that the focus is on the program, not the individual student. If there are eight outcomes being assessed, the focus could be on a limited set each year. It may be found that there are some outcomes that require more attention than others. If so, these may be assessed more frequently to see if interventions that have been put in place are being effective. Other outcomes may be consistently of high quality and may not be assessed as often.

Always remember, this process must work for you and not consume you. Stay focused on the question, while using sound assessment techniques. If the assessment question is framed in terms of “value added,” then additional assessment processes would need to be in place. In this case, the process would need to ensure that appropriate assessment data are collected at the beginning of the program, which can be used to compare with data collected at the time of program completion. Those data must allow for making inferences about the added value of participation in the program, such as recognizing that students come to the program at different levels of competency and maturity in some areas of study.

For example, students with good verbal skills may have participated in high school activities such as debate clubs or the school newspaper. These students may already demonstrate excellent communication skills when entering the program and will be less impacted by program offerings in these areas than other students. We need to be comfortable with this fact and recognize that we are comparing the scores of groups of students and not individual students.

In developing assessment processes, it is important to remember that the quality of the assessment will be reflected in the sharpness of your assessment question. Stay focused and develop efficient and effective processes to ensure a “lean, mean assessment machine” that can truly meet your needs for program effectiveness — without burying the program in random acts of assessment.

ⁱ ABET Criteria for Accreditation, Criterion 2. <https://www.abet.org/accreditation/accreditation-criteria/>