

Questions and Answers on Assessment of Student Learning

Did you know that UND's accreditor, the HLC (Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association), is making a return visit to UND in April 2008? Did you know that the university did not meet the HLC's standards for progress on assessment of student learning at our last visit in Fall 2003?

As a result of problems that the HLC observed in their last full visit to UND, we have been scheduled to receive a "focused visit" for the purpose of ascertaining our progress on assessment of student learning. This will be a very important event for the university. Here's what you need to know.

Why does assessment matter so much?

The short answer is this: It matters because the U.S. Congress and the Department of Education are requiring that all regional accreditors take assessment seriously. And no institution is qualified for federal dollars of any sort, from student loan dollars to research dollars, without accreditation. The longer (and better) answer is this: Assessment of learning simply requires that we take student learning seriously. Administrators and accreditors know that faculty work hard and are highly dedicated to teaching. But, to use an outrageous example for the purpose of illustration, if you teach brilliantly but entirely in Swahili, it's extremely unlikely that your students will learn well. Similarly, it's possible for teachers to work hard and programs to be carefully designed, but still, for any of a variety of reasons, the desired level of student learning may not occur. Assessment gives us a chance to find out if desired learning is happening and collect information about how learning could potentially be improved. It's that simple. Why *not* do assessment??

How will the HLC know if we're doing assessment "well enough" during this year's visit?

We'll submit a report that describes, as honestly as possible, our successes and failures in assessment. Team members will read that, and then they'll begin looking for information to confirm or disconfirm what we've told them. The first thing they'll likely look at is the 2007 annual reports, so it's extremely important that your department's assessment work is fully documented there. They may also look at some committee reports, at departmental and university-wide assessment plans posted on the Assessment Committee's website, and at other documents. Finally, they may want to visit with you. We hope you'll be prepared to answer their questions about assessment within programs with which you're involved.

What is "good" assessment anyway?

Good assessment of learning is all about looking at student learning outcomes. One way of determining what's "good" is to consider your assessment work in light of the rubric used by members of the Assessment Committee when they review assessment sections of annual reports. They look for four markers of quality work:

1. Are there clearly articulated goals for student learning, listed in the posted departmental assessment plan, and (ideally) mentioned in the annual report as well?
2. Are faculty collecting information about academic program effectiveness using methods that make sense, given those goals? Are they using methods that allow them to look at *actual learning* outcomes as well as what students and/or faculty *believe* occurred? (Opinions are useful, but they're no substitute for student work that actually demonstrates the learning.)
3. Are results reported? Are the results or findings clearly related to the learning goals? Do they shed light on possible program improvements?
4. Were any actions identified that should take place as a result of going through this process (also known as "closing the loop")? Did faculty find support for continuing specific aspects of the curriculum or program? Did they find reason to make changes in the curriculum, in teaching strategies, in assessment, etc.?

Want to know more? Please contact your college's HLC Steering Committee representative (Helen Melland, Kim Kenville, Paul Sum, Richard Schultz, Kirsten Dauphinais, Margi Healy, Sherrie Fleshman, Renee Mabey, Wayne Swisher, Lillian Elsinga, or Jane Sims). Or contact Joan Hawthorne, Assistant Provost.