Outcomes Assessment

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Outcomes assessment is an intense topic that has been debated and discussed on university campuses around the world. Educational accountability is a very important topic. There is tremendous pressure from accreditation agencies to comply with outcomes assessment requirements to maintain accreditation. In addition, to be competitive in a market of many choices, students, employers, and legislators are seeking trustworthy programs. This has raised many questions for Provosts, Deans, and Department Chairs. What are the purposes of outcomes assessment? What should we assess? What methods should we use? How do we overcome faculty objections? Do we need to hire additional administrators to conduct or assist with outcomes assessment? What type of training do we need to provide to our faculty? What do we do with the data that we collect?

The fundamental goal of the accreditation process is to determine if the institution is satisfying its mission and accomplishing its goals. Measuring student progress through outcomes assessment is a good way to determine if a school is achieving its goals. Consequently, institutions must establish measurable goals and methods to assess those goals. All of the major accreditation bodies are requiring outcome assessment, however, it is the regional accreditation agencies that set the standards for the individual institutions. The decentralized structure in higher education accreditation is an obstacle for the outcomes assessment process because expectations of outcomes assessment fluctuate by accreditation agency. In addition, definitions of outcomes assessment vary. Some institutions view statistics such as graduation rates, retention rates, and employment rates as student outcomes. However, these statistics do not indicate what students have learned. Outcomes assessment should reflect a measurement of learning.

This concept of measuring student learning is not a new initiative. Benjamin Bloom created a taxonomy of educational objectives in 1956 that separates objectives into three categories: affective, psychomotor, and cognitive. Today, Bloom’s Taxonomy focuses on the cognitive domain. Bloom’s taxonomy has six categories: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

There are many purposes of outcomes assessment. Many institutions focus on outcomes assessment to comply with accreditation requirements. Although this purpose is very important, the data obtained is often not used for any other purposes. According to Schilling (2006), “Most institutions think about assessment now as a means to appease the accreditors, not necessarily as a way to learn about their own institutions” (p. 6). In addition to accreditation, assessment is an important way to prove accountability in this very competitive world. With the increasing number of higher education institutions opening around the world, outcomes assessment data is a valuable tool in helping determine what institutions are accomplishing their goals. Students, parents, employers and legislators want to know what institutions and programs are credible. The outcomes assessment process can improve education. According to Banta (2005), “Just by defining their learning objectives and deciding where and when these will be covered, faculty improve their curriculum because they will ensure that essential skills are introduced and practiced in a variety of settings” (p. 36). Banta (2005) argues, “If faculty share their goals with students, students will understand why professors take certain approaches or cover
specific issues. They’ll understand they’ve been given a particular assignment because it will influence their learning of important concepts” (p. 36). Results of outcomes assessment can be used to improve the quality of education. Assessment should guide, support and enrich learning (Shulman, 2007).

Choosing what to assess is a challenging decision. Some schools look at assessment on a broad level – assessing skills such as critical reasoning and writing abilities and others look at assessment on a more narrow level – and assess more factual and conceptual knowledge. Deciding what should be assessed is a difficult decision that many institutions differ on opinions. University presidents, provost, administration, and faculty often have different opinions on what should be assessed. Despite this, the University must make a united decision. This decision making process can be very difficult, but is critical.

Faculty members often resist outcomes assessment for a number of reasons. Faculty may not understand the value of outcomes assessment. Outcomes assessment may be viewed as a fad. Consequently, they do not want to waste their time on a fad that will eventually disappear. Faculty may be uncertain of how to devise effective tests that will measure outcomes assessment. Also, they may believe students are already being tested and do not understand the difference. Since many faculty members are not formally trained as teachers, they lack the formal training on assessment. One of the most serious reasons that faculty may resist outcomes assessment is that it may negatively affect their jobs. There may be fear that results of assessment can be used against them in regards to tenure, merit, review, and reputations. Faculty members may also fear that unfavorable results may label them as an ineffective teacher. Assessment is “something that infringes on an institution’s autonomy and faculty members’ academic freedom and adds to their workload” (Weinstein, 2006, p. 1). It takes additional time. According to Banta (2005), “Learning outcomes assessment requires a professor to define learning goals and objectives, and then devise a way to tell whether or not students have mastered those objectives” (p. 36). Institutions many not have the resources such as research assistant, analysis support, or assessment administration to assist faculty. It is “viewed by the faculty as one of those unfunded administrative mandates that is above and beyond the real job of teaching, research and service” (Carey & Gregory, 2003, p. 216). According to Carey & Gregory (2003), “With all the other pressures in faculty life, it is easy to postpone or argue against doing yet another seemingly bureaucratic procedure” (p. 218). Although outcomes assessment provides new challenges for faculty, it is vital for the success of the institution.

There are several different methods of outcomes assessment. According to Shulman (2007), “Any one form of assessment, however rich, is a compromise, a choice among a set of legitimate possibilities” (p. 23). Each institution varies by size, financial resources, number of faculty and number of administrators. Therefore, the type of assessment that may work for one institution may not be effective for another. At each institution must decide what method is best. Senior capstone classes are often used as a way of assessment. Learning portfolios are a good way of demonstrating learning. Senior projects or learning portfolios are excellent ways for students to demonstrate their mastery of program goals or objectives. Interviews with students and examples of student work are often good ways of assessing. Many graded assignments, projects, and exams that faculty members already use for course assessment may be able to be modified to provide useful assessment data. Weinstein (2007) says “As much as you can, utilize what’s already in place. Utilize the good work and good tools that faculty already have, but find ways to tweeze outcomes information out of it and document it accordingly” (p. 2).
Some institutions are requiring standard tests to assess learning (Banta, 2005). One of the popular designers of standardized exam is Educational Testing Services (ETS). One of the major issues with standardized testing is the fear that the teachers will teach to the test (Shulman, 2007). This has become a major problem with K-12. Often, pressure is placed on teachers for students to do well on the standardized exams. Therefore, many teachers find themselves focusing on the information that is covered on the exams. Thus, important information that is known not to be on the exam is not covered in class. Another issue with overall program standardized exams is that many students may not take the exam serious because it does not affect their grade or GPA. In a study conducted by Napoli & Raymond (2004), student performance on assessment that is not linked to their course grades cannot be considered reliable indicators of the student learning due to lack of motivation. An alternative to a program standard exam is creating standardized course exams. However, it is often difficult to get faculty to agree on the questions that should be standard on each exam. Also, many faculty members view this as an infringement on their academic freedom. Another choice may be to use a grouping of standardized exam questions that all faculty teaching a particular course agree to include on their exams. Since the questions are exam questions, students tend to take them more serious because they affect their grade. It may still be difficult to get faculty to agree on the questions that should be standard on each exam. However, many faculty members are more receptive to this option because they still have the freedom to ask many other questions of their choice on the exam as long as they intermingle the agreed upon set of questions. Some critics may still argue that teachers may teach to the questions that they know are outcomes assessment questions.

Schilling (2006) stresses the importance of linking the assessment methods with the overall school’s mission. According to Banta (2005), “Once schools have begun to measure student learning, they should start using the data they collect. Outcomes assessment is simply not worth doing unless it is used to enhance the learning experience” (p. 38).

Training is a key component in the success of outcomes assessment. Unfortunately, few faculty members have received formal training on outcomes assessment. Therefore, they may resist or not properly design good assessment tools (Friedlander & Serban, 2004). In order for outcomes assessment data to be useful, there must be measurable outcomes that can be aligned with the curriculum (Friedlander & Serban, 2004). Without formal training or an internal support person who is knowledgeable on the outcomes assessment process, the process can seem overwhelming or result in incorrect results. It is critical to provide faculty with training and development so that they can effectively assess. There are many workshops and seminars around the country that offer assessment training. For example, AACSB International, The Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement, and the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) have been offering assessment workshops (Banta, 2005). In addition, many graduate programs are requiring courses in pedagogy. Eventually, the attitudes towards outcomes assessment will change as faculty becomes more familiar and educated on the subject (Banta, 2005).

In conclusion, outcomes assessment has become a priority for many higher education institutions around the world. This requires institutions to develop clear goals, offer courses and experiences to meet the goals, and create ways to assess the goals. Accreditation bodies are demanding proof of learning outcomes. Each institution must determine what methods of assessment to utilize. Although accreditation is an important reason for outcomes assessment, it should not be the only reason. Faculty
members and administrators must review the data and use it to improve student learning. Mandating outcomes assessment is essential; however, it must be done in a non-threatening way for faculty to not resist. At a minimum, faculty must be educated on the importance of assessment and provided with assessment training to be effective. Ideally, additional administrators that are knowledgeable on the outcomes assessment process should be hired to assist with the assessment. In addition to merely meeting the essential task of accreditation requirements, the outcomes assessment data should be used to help improve the quality of education and meet the external demands of accountability.

References


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