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Assessing Student Learning and Institutional Effectiveness

Understanding
Middle States Expectations

Middle States Commission on Higher Education

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Assessing Student Learning and Institutional Effectiveness

Understanding Middle States Expectations

In 2002, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education introduced updated accreditation standards that simplified requirements for resources and processes and concentrated instead on *assessment*: evidence that the institution is achieving its goals. Every accreditation standard now includes an assessment component; the assessment of student learning is addressed in Standard 14 (Assessment of Student Learning); and the assessment of *all* key institutional goals, including those assessed in the other thirteen standards, is addressed holistically in Standard 7 (Institutional Assessment).

Because Standards 7 and 14 are a significant change from prior standards, and because the Commission gives institutions great latitude in choosing approaches to comply with them, these two standards have engendered many questions. This statement is intended to address these questions and to clarify the Commission's expectations regarding these standards and their relationship to other standards such as Standard 2 (Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal).

What is the Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness (Standard 7)?

Assessment may be characterized as the third element of a four-step planning-assessment cycle:

1. Defining clearly articulated institutional and unit-level *goals*;
2. Implementing *strategies to achieve those goals*;
3. *Assessing achievement* of those goals; and
4. *Using the results* of those assessments to improve programs and services and inform planning and resource allocation decisions.

The effectiveness of an institution rests upon the contribution that each of the institution's programs and services makes toward achieving the goals of the institution as a whole. ***Standard 7 (Institutional Assessment) thus builds upon all other accreditation standards, each of which includes periodic assessment of effectiveness as one of its fundamental elements.*** This standard ties together those assessments into an integrated whole to answer the question, "As an institutional community, how well are we collectively doing what we say we are doing?" and, in particular, "How do we support student learning, a fundamental aspect of institutional effectiveness?"

(Standard 14). Self-studies can thus document compliance with Standard 7 by summarizing the assessments within each accreditation standard into conclusions about the institution's overall achievement of its key goals.

What is the Assessment of Student Learning (Standard 14)?

Assessment of student learning may be characterized as the third element of a four-step teaching-learning-assessment cycle that parallels the planning-assessment cycle described above:

1. Developing clearly articulated *learning outcomes*: the knowledge, skills, and competencies that students are expected to exhibit upon successful completion of a course, academic program, co-curricular program, general education requirement, or other specific set of experiences;
2. Offering courses, programs, and experiences that provide purposeful *opportunities for students to achieve those learning outcomes*;
3. *Assessing student achievement* of those learning outcomes; and

4. *Using the results of those assessments to improve teaching and learning and inform planning and resource allocation decisions.*

Because student learning is a fundamental component of the mission of most institutions of higher education, the assessment of student learning is an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness (Standard 7) and is the focus of Standard 14 (Assessment of Student Learning).

Why Does the Commission Expect Student Learning and Institutional Effectiveness to be Assessed?

The fundamental question asked in the accreditation process is, “Is the institution fulfilling its mission and achieving its goals?” This is precisely the question that assessment is designed to answer, making assessment essential to the accreditation process. Assessment processes help to ensure that:

- Institutional and program-level *goals are clear* to the public, students, faculty, and staff.
- Institutional *programs and resources are organized and coordinated* to achieve institutional and program-level goals.
- The institution is indeed *achieving its mission and goals*.
- The institution is *using assessment results* to improve student learning and otherwise advance the institution.

What Are the Characteristics of Assessment Processes that Meet Middle States Expectations?

Effective assessment processes are useful, cost-effective, reasonably accurate and truthful, carefully planned, and organized, systematic, and sustained.

1. ***Useful*** assessment processes help faculty and staff make appropriate decisions about improving programs and services, developing goals and plans, and making resource allocations. Because institutions, their students, and their environments are continually evolving, effective assessments cannot be static; they must be reviewed periodically and adapted in order to remain useful.
2. ***Cost-effective*** assessment processes yield dividends that justify the institution’s investment in them, particularly in terms of faculty and staff time. To this end, institutions may begin by considering assessment measures, indicators, “flags,” and “scorecards” already in place, such as retention, graduation, transfer, and placement rates, financial ratios, and surveys. New or refined measures may then be added for those goals for which evidence of achievement is not already available, concentrating on the institution’s most important goals. Effective assessments are simple rather than elaborate, and they may focus on just a few key goals in each program, unit, and curriculum.
3. ***Reasonably accurate and truthful*** assessment processes yield results that can be used with confidence to make appropriate decisions. Because there is no one perfectly accurate assessment tool or strategy, institutions should use *multiple kinds* of measures to assess goal achievement. Assessments may be quantitative or qualitative and developed locally or by an external organization. All assessment tools and strategies should clearly relate to the goals they are assessing and should be developed with care; they should not be not merely anecdotal information nor collections of information that happen to be on hand. Strategies to assess student learning should include *direct*—clear, visible, and convincing—evidence, rather than solely indirect evidence of student learning such as surveys and focus groups.

4. **Planned** assessment processes that are purposefully linked to institutional goals promote attention to those goals and plans and ensure that disappointing outcomes are appropriately addressed. Institutions often have a variety of plans, such as a strategic plan, academic plan, financial plan, enrollment plan, capital facilities master plan, and technology plan. Just as such plans should be interrelated to ensure that they work synergistically to advance the institution, assessments should also be interrelated. At many institutions, effective institutional planning begins with academic planning, which in turn drives the other plans. If the academic plan calls for a new academic program, for example, the technology plan should ensure faculty and students in the new program will be able to use appropriate instructional technologies. Assessments of the technology plan should evaluate not just whether instructional technologies have been put in place but also how effectively those technologies have helped students to achieve the program's key learning outcomes.

5. **Organized, systematized, and sustained** assessment processes are ongoing, not once-and-done. There should be clear interrelationships among institutional goals, program- and unit-level goals, and course-level goals.

What Should Institutions Document Regarding Assessment?

When submitting information on their assessment efforts to the Commission, institutions are expected to document:

- * clear statements of key goals, including expected student learning outcomes;
- * an organized and sustained assessment process (referred to in some Commission documents as an "assessment plan") including:
 - o institutional guidelines, resources, coordination, and support for assessment;
 - o assessment activities and initiatives that are presently underway;
 - o plans to develop and implement future assessment activities and initiatives;

- * assessment results demonstrating that the institution and its students are achieving key institutional and program goals; and
- * uses of assessment results to improve student learning and advance the institution.

How Should This Information Be Organized and Formatted for Review by the Commission and its Representatives?

Assessment documentation that is organized into a coherent presentation of what the institution is doing regarding assessment provides a roadmap that facilitates the work of evaluation teams, reviewers, and the Commission. Assessment documentation is typically a living, fluid, organized collection of documents and/or online resources, often with references and/or links to further documents and online resources, that are routinely updated as the institution's assessment processes evolve. There is not, however, any prescribed format or organization for these materials; institutions have maximum flexibility in designing and assembling assessment documentation that fits best with the institution's mission, organization, and needs. *A single, formal, polished document is not required* and, for many institutions, may not be the most suitable format, because it may discourage the continual modifications that are made in effective assessment processes. The existence of an effective process, clearly described to the community and the Commission, is more important than a formal plan.

Institutions may choose to include an appropriate combination of the following in their assessment documentation:

- * **An overview in a self-study, periodic review report, or follow-up report** gives the Commission and its representatives a useful introductory synopsis of the institution's assessment processes.
- * **A chart or "roadmap" outlining assessment documentation**, provided within a self-study or periodic review report or as an appendix, can be especially useful for large or complex institutions with a broad array of goals and assessment processes.

- * **A written or online assessment plan** that documents an organized, sustained assessment process (including institutional guidelines, resources, coordination, and support for assessment, assessment activities and initiatives that are presently underway, and plans to develop and implement future assessment activities and initiatives) can be an excellent way to initiate, structure, and demonstrate compliance with Standards 7 and 14, although it is not required. Assessment plans can guide and support the institutional community in its efforts to assess its mission and goals by:
 - o helping to ensure that assessment is efficient, effective, and purposeful, rather than just a collection of available information,
 - o providing information needed to carry out assessment practices, and
 - o helping to ensure that assessment is supported with appropriate resources and that results are used appropriately.
- * **Assessment documentation incorporated within the institutional (strategic) plan** or in separate documentation clearly linked to the institutional plan.
- * **Separate assessment documentation for each institutional division** that is linked together may be a feasible approach, especially for large, complex institutions.
- * **More thorough information in an on-site resource room and/or online** enables evaluation team members to review a cross-section of program- and unit-level assessment processes.

How Are the Documentation of Institutional Assessment and Student Learning Assessment Related?

As noted earlier, because student learning is a fundamental component of the mission of most institutions of higher education, the assessment of student learning is an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness. An institution may therefore create institutional effectiveness documentation that includes a component on assessing student learning, or it may create a bridge between two separate sets of documentation, one for the assessment of student

learning and one for other aspects of institutional effectiveness.

What Might the Commission and Its Representatives Look For in Assessment Documentation?

Evaluation team members, reviewers, and Commissioners might look for information on the following questions in an institution's assessment documentation:

1. **Do institutional leaders support and value a culture of assessment?** Is there adequate, ongoing guidance, resources, coordination, and support for assessment? (This may include administrative support, technical support, financial support, professional development, policies and procedures, and governance structures that ensure appropriate collaboration and ownership.) Are assessment efforts recognized and valued? Are efforts to *improve teaching* recognized and valued?
2. **Are goals, including learning outcomes, clearly articulated at every level:** institutional, unit-level, program-level, and course-level? Do they have appropriate interrelationships? Do the undergraduate curriculum and requirements address institutional learning outcomes and the competencies listed in Middle States' Standard 12 (General Education)? Are all learning outcomes of sufficient rigor for a higher education institution? Are learning outcomes for, say, master's programs more advanced than those for undergraduate programs?
3. **Have appropriate assessment processes been implemented** for an appropriate proportion of goals? (Expectations for an "appropriate proportion" are increasing as time elapses since the adoption of the new *Characteristics of Excellence* in 2002.) Do they meet Middle States expectations, as characterized above?
4. Where assessment processes have not yet been implemented, **have appropriate assessment processes been planned?** Are the plans feasible? Are they simple, practical, and sufficiently detailed to engender confidence that they will be implemented as planned? Do they have clear ownership? Are timelines appropriate, or are they either overly ambitious or stretched out too far?

5. ***Do assessment results provide convincing evidence*** that the institution is achieving its mission and goals, including key learning outcomes?
6. ***Have assessment results been shared*** in useful forms and discussed widely with appropriate constituents?
7. ***Have results led to appropriate decisions*** and improvements about curricula and pedagogy, programs and services, resource allocation, and institutional goals and plans?
8. ***Have assessment processes been reviewed*** regularly? Have the reviews led to appropriate decisions and improvements in assessment processes and support for them?
9. ***Where does the institution appear to be going with assessment?*** Does it have sufficient engagement and momentum to sustain its assessment processes? Or does it appear that momentum may slow? Are there any significant gaps in assessment processes, such as key areas where no assessment plans have been developed?