

Assessing Program Learning Outcomes at Boston University (7/11/2013)

Why Assess?

Program assessment provides faculty a means to ask a fundamental question about the programs they design and teach: by taking a given set of required courses, do students actually acquire, in the end, the particular knowledge and skills faculty intend? If not—or if not fully enough—what pedagogical and curricular reforms can be undertaken to improve student learning? A similar question can be asked of the co-curricular and extra-curricular programs that contribute so significantly to a well-rounded education at BU. One of the most valuable results of taking a look at what our students know is the conversation about curriculum it occasions among faculty.

It is also the case that U.S. regional accrediting organizations, including the Commission of Institutes of Higher Education (CIHE) (part of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges), are being increasingly pressured by the federal government and a skeptical public to demonstrate that their member institutions are able, on their own, to assess rigorously and seriously the success of their academic programs. We can do this.

Indeed, some departments, schools and colleges at BU already do regular, organized assessment, often, but not exclusively, for the purposes of professional accreditation. Others are doing assessment by another name, sometimes occasionally and in response to a particular question or problem.

It is now time to share information about assessment efforts across the university, to coordinate them, and in some instances to make them explicit or begin them.

The Purpose and Principles of Learning Assessment at Boston University: (Approved by the Council of Deans on May 21, 2013)

Learning Assessment at BU:

- asks the fundamental question: does the curriculum we have designed (i.e., the collection of courses we require for the degree as a whole) add up to what we intend? In other words, at the end of a degree program, do our students have the knowledge and skills we want them to have as the result of our program?
- begins at the **program (or major)** level: while program assessment has necessary implications for course goals and should be articulated with them, our assessment efforts focus on the program (major) as a whole ;
- belongs to the faculty, just as the curriculum does, and is a broad-based faculty activity;
- should promote ongoing conversation among the faculty about the curriculum, teaching, and their improvement;

- over time, should result in changes (perhaps small, perhaps large) to the curriculum and/or its component courses;
- should be simple and efficient;
- should make use, wherever possible, of existing structures of evaluation (e.g., departmental curriculum committees; qualifying exam and dissertation committees) and occasions for evaluation (e.g., thesis defenses, senior seminars, portfolio reviews, performances);
- need not evaluate all program goals all the time or all at once: begin with a few of the learning outcomes that seem most important and about which faculty are most curious.

Organizational Structure:

Assessment will be coordinated and facilitated by the Office of the Provost for the University as a whole, by the Office of the Dean for each School/College, and by the Department or Program Chair.

University:

Provost Leaders: The Associate Provosts for Undergraduate and Graduate Affairs will lead the effort and assure coordination of graduate and undergraduate assessment. They focus on education, best practices, definitions, coordination and collaboration.

Steering Committee: The Council of Deans serves as the Steering Committee to oversee the university effort with the Provost.

University Working Committees (Undergraduate; PhD; Other Graduate and Graduate Professional Degrees): The three Working Committees provide the opportunity for sharing best practices and responding to the results of assessment across colleges. The Working Committees meet separately, as needed. The three committees will meet together once or twice a year to assure coordination across degrees.

Members:

- one representative from each school/college, 3 from CAS (one/disciplinary area), 3 from CFA (one/school);
- must be faculty members with knowledge of/responsibility for curriculum;
- are the designated leaders of the assessment effort in their colleges;
- work both with each other and with the faculty in their schools/colleges to shape appropriate approaches to assessment at the department, college and university level, and to assure that assessment is a useful, simple, well-informed, and coordinated faculty undertaking;
- report annually to the Office of the Provost the assessment results for the programs in their schools/colleges;
- may serve on more than one Committee.

The Undergraduate Committee will also include a representative from Athletics and one from Student Affairs. All committees include a representative from Study Abroad/Global Programs.

Schools and Colleges:

The Deans of the schools/colleges will establish their own assessment processes and structures. Other universities have found that a college/school-level assessment committee (which can be an existing committee such as the curriculum committee) is an effective means of sharing knowledge and coordinating the assessment activity. Assessment of the general education program for undergraduates might best be undertaken at the college/school level, but this is a school/college decision.

Schedule for 2013-14:

Committees meet once or twice over the summer to organize their work, and begin regular meetings in September.

October 15, 2013: 3-5 program learning outcomes due from each degree program (#1 on attached draft template, "Report on Student Learning").

December 15: url for program outcomes (#2 on attached draft template, "Report on Student Learning").

May 2, 2014: Assessment process determined by each program (# 3 on attached draft template, "Report on Student Learning").