A Very Brief Faculty Guide to Assessment

Assessment of student learning outcomes, and, in particular, general educational learning outcomes, is a necessary part of today’s higher education environment; it is, quite simply, no longer optional. Indeed, this is one of the very few areas where the Middle States evaluation team specifically suggested the need for improvement at Rutgers as a whole,1 and the University has committed itself to improving assessment. The paragraphs that follow are meant to give departments and individual faculty members and other instructors a short, operational orientation to assessment at the course and department or program level. For information on more in-depth discussions of the topic, questions about assessment instruments, or assistance in developing ones appropriate to your course or program, contact Associate Dean John Gunkel at 973.353.5299 or at jgunkel@newark.rutgers.edu.

“Assessment,” refers, first and foremost, to the evaluation of student learning that occurs whenever an instructor marks a student exam, paper, lab practical, or other kind of exercise that the instructor assigns to allow students to show what they know and can do. The kinds of exercises that are best for such evaluations general vary with subject matter, of course, and the individual exercises themselves can be designed better or worse (as everyone who has written an unintentionally ambiguous essay question, for example, knows). Especially in the case of essays, papers, practicals, and other assignments that cannot easily be resolved into answers that are either right or wrong, the evaluation itself often can be made more perspicuous to the students and instructors both by the use of a “rubric” – an analytical articulation of standards that capture what the instructor views as representing work of different levels of quality (A vs. B+ vs. B, etc.) along various different appraisals relevant to the assignment (e.g., perhaps quality of research, cogency of argumentation, descriptive accuracy, and effectiveness of written presentation for a short research paper).2 The point is that you should be self-conscious about the criteria you use in assigning particular grades for particular assignments, and that it is extremely helpful to students when you are able to explain those criteria to them. Such exercises also often can be improved specifically as measures of student learning within a course by comparing the results of such an assignment given towards the end of a semester with those from a similar assignment given towards the beginning of a semester, as in a “pre-post test.” These norming devices aside, however, at the end of the day every instructor in FASN conducts “assessments” of this kind in every course that he or she teaches (I hope) and is more than familiar with what they involve.

Most of the current emphasis on assessment by accrediting agencies and other organizations is not about familiar course-level assessment of the sort just discussed, but rather about program-level assessment. “Program” here really can mean any kind of organized academic enterprise, ranging from minors and certificates, through majors and general education curriculum, and up to a student’s entire academic experience. For convenience, the discussion here will focus on majors, but the basic ideas are applicable to the other cases with a few adjustments and a little creativity.

---

1 “The University should continue working on the assessment program for general education – the University should complete its efforts to define student learning outcomes, to identify direct and indirect assessments of student learning that inform the University community about students’ ability to meet and exceed these objectives, to specify how faculty, staff, and administration will discuss and create recommendations for improvement of student learning using such assessments, and how to document that such recommendations are enacted over time” (Report to the Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey New Brunswick, NJ 08901 by An Evaluation Team representing the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, Prepared after Study of the Institution’s self-study report and a visit to the campus on March 9-12, 2008, p. 20). More generally, see “Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education: Requirements of Affiliation and Standards for Accreditation, Middle States Commission on Higher Education,” Online Version - Revised March 2009, p. 48: “An accredited institution offering undergraduate...are expected to possess or demonstrate...assessment of general education outcomes within the institution’s overall plan for assessing student learning, and evidence that such assessment results are utilized for curricular improvement.”

2 Many professional organizations, such as MLA or APA, have been drafting sample rubrics that members have found to be useful or appropriate for courses within their own disciplines. Check the organization website for information.
There are two main ideas or expectations involved in programmatic assessment:

- Just as instructors periodically take the time to review the extent to which students are learning what they are supposed to be learning in their individual courses, so departments should also periodically review the extent to which students are learning what they are supposed to be learning in their major as a whole.
- Just as instructors review student performance in individual courses on the basis of concrete artifacts (that is, exams, papers, etc.) produced by students themselves, so departments too should conduct their reviews for their majors on the basis of concrete artifacts produced by the students themselves.

In some cases, the artifacts for a program review may be exams that have given or papers that have been written independently of any particular course within the major, but such a practice can cause a number of problems administratively (such as getting the students to take the exam) as well as academically (especially when the exam is a standardized exam purchased from a company that has not specifically designed it to meet the goals and expectations of the department). More frequently, at least in higher education, program-level assessment uses artifacts that are sometimes said to be “embedded” in the courses within the program. In this case, the department or its curriculum or assessment committee, if it has established one, reviews examples of students’ work (usually a random sample) and evaluates them not in light of the instructor’s goals and expectations for the course from which the artifacts are drawn, but rather in light of the department’s goals and expectations for the major to which the course contributes. The point of such a departmental evaluation is not to revisit the grade originally awarded by the course instructor for that particular exam or paper—grades are meant to reflect the quality of a student’s work in a class relative to the instructor’s expectations for that class. The aim, rather, is to ensure that departments occasionally devote at least some of their members’ very scarce time to investigating the extent to which their majors really are mastering the skills and knowledge that the department expects them to acquire from the program as whole, to doing to on the basis of concrete examples (rather than anecdote or the like), and – if and when the department finds it necessary, to using these investigations as a springboard to further discussions within the department about how to improve curriculum and/or instruction for the major.

Generally speaking, program-level assessment is meant to take place entirely within the program. From time to time, a faculty committee or the Dean’s Office or University Academic Affairs or Middle States might ask for a summary of program-level assessments that have been conducted and any findings, which might contribute to their own program-level assessments or be incorporated into summary reports for yet higher-level agencies. Fundamentally, however, the emphasis on assessment in higher education, especially at an institution like Rutgers, is not about proving to some outside agency that your programs are meeting standards set externally by that agency, but rather about ensuring that internal governance structures already in place are devoting adequate time and energy to the task of maintaining and striving to improve educational outcomes for the students in their programs.