

## The Benefits of Program Review

*Two boys are walking down the street. The first boy says, "I've been really busy this summer. I've been teaching my dog to talk."  
His friend responds, "Wow! I can't wait to have a conversation with your dog."  
The first boy shakes his head. "I said I've been teaching him. I didn't say he learned anything."*

That's how Mary J. Allen starts her 2004 book on Academic Programs Assessment. Unlike the boy in the story, all faculty are concerned about what and how much their students learn. But it isn't always easy to determine those outcomes, and the many assessment tasks faculty have been asked to perform in the past have not always instilled confidence in the practical usefulness of such attempts.

This year, ten departments are undergoing program review on our campus, and we hope the results will be meaningful to these departments. A few things from the literature to keep in mind: "assessment is about student learning; it is not about faculty evaluation." (Lopez, 1999) "Effective assessment focuses on improvement rather than accountability." (Peterson & Vaughan, 2002). And "one of the most valuable aspects of program assessment is that it provides a forum for faculty discussion of student learning." (Allen)

The remainder of this Bulletin tries to make the case for program assessment. It raises the three major questions that program reviews need to address and briefly illustrates how the pursuit of these questions can benefit departments in their daily work.

### Q1. What does our program try to accomplish?

This question requires a mission, goals, and objectives statement for the academic unit. Without such, any further assessment attempts will be relatively meaningless. Mission, goals, and objectives should define the unit's unique purpose and strengths. The program ought to be cognizant of the contexts in which it functions. Contexts include: The student body and what interests, needs, and capabilities students bring to the table; similarly the faculty body; the University and its mission within the geographical area; potential employers; and finally the profession itself and the direction in which it is moving.

What benefits result from this type of assessment? Faculty come to an agreement on how to focus their work as a department. They describe who their students are and what they need; what niche their program fills within the region (a marketing issue); which new options are emerging and how the program needs to change to take advantage of those options. This analysis impacts the definition of the desired qualities in new faculty hires, needed changes of the curriculum and co-curriculum, student recruitment efforts, and building of alliances beyond the campus. Declining enrollments on our campus and across Chicago illustrate the importance of researching one's mission, goals, and objectives periodically.

### Q2. How do our program goals align with what happens in individual courses?

Curricular alignment is one of the key requirements of an effective academic program. It is also often one of the most neglected tasks of curriculum development and review. The recent assessment of NEIU's Gen-Ed

Program has indicated a frequent lack of coordination between different sections of the same course taught by different instructors. While exacerbated in Gen-Ed, the situation in your major may show a similar picture.

A curriculum is supposed to provide a blueprint that allows students to gradually become familiar with the relevant aspects of a field. These aspects include concepts, theories, skills, procedures, values, and behaviors that have to be acquired over years of studying. If coordination between courses and course sections is lacking, students are not likely to acquire the components necessary to become competent practitioners.

Checking for curricular alignment in a program review requires a detailed investigation of how individual program objectives are integrated into different courses and co-curricular activities to ensure that all goals are sufficiently addressed over a student's move through the program. Years of teaching the same courses by changing instructors are likely to create holes in curriculum implementation. Only a systematic assessment can reveal those holes.

### Q3. What do our students actually learn?

If certain aspects of the intended program goals are not addressed in the curriculum (s.a.), it is unlikely that students will live up to the expected learning outcomes. But misalignment in the curriculum is not the only reason why student learning may not match desired outcomes. Outcomes assessment attempts to capture student learning that endures beyond the end of the course. Teacher input alone—what an instructor covers—is not indicative of actual learning outcomes, as the story at the beginning of this Bulletin illustrates. To measure complex learning, we need clear performance criteria and multiple ways of assessing program results. Some measures are direct (requiring students to demonstrate their achievement), others are indirect (based on opinions such as student self-reports of skill improvement). Much can interfere with student learning, which is why both self-reports and direct measures are helpful in gaining a more complete picture. An effective curriculum generates *longterm* learning. A series of letter-grades earned in different courses is poor evidence for that. Only program assessment with its emphasis on the integration of learning and on longterm retention can reveal to what extent students have achieved the objectives detailed in the program's mission and goals statement.

**Conclusion:** A meaningful program review needs to address all three questions above and utilize a variety of targeted measures. This task may seem daunting, but it doesn't have to be. Not everything has to be done all at once. Assessment should be meaningful, manageable, and sustainable. Program faculty should focus on a few measures each time. They should also avoid mammoth tasks that will discourage ongoing assessment. One way to do that is by using *embedded* assessment, e.g. including strategically selected exam questions, in-class activities, fieldwork activities, and homework assignments into certain classes to serve both course and program assessment purposes. Finally, for program reviews to be effective, the assessment should be "forward-looking," i.e. try to uncover what is possible in the future, not simply providing an inventory of what has already happened (Allen).

#### **Sources:**

Allen, M.J. (2004). *Assessing academic programs in higher education*. Bolton, MA: Anker.

Bresciani, M.J. (2006). *Outcomes-based academic and co-curricular program review: A compilation of institutional good practices*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Lopez, C.L. (1999). *A decade of assessing student learning: What we have learned; what's next?* Retrieved November 2007, from <http://cai.cc.ca.us/Summer2005Institute/Lopez-ADecadeOfAssessingStudentLearning.pdf>

Peterson, M.W. & Vaughan, D.S. (2002). Promoting academic improvement: Organizational and administrative dynamics that support student assessment, In T.W. Banta & Associates (Eds.), *Building a scholarship of assessment* (pp. 93-96). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wergin, J.F. (2003). *Departments that work: Building and sustaining cultures of excellence in academic programs*. Bolton, MA: Anker.