

IBHE FACULTY ADVISORY COUNCIL  
POSITION PAPER ON ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
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Executive Summary

Assessment of student learning outcomes is an important on-going function and responsibility of institutions of higher education. Each institution and its academic programs do and should have unique and distinctive purposes. Each serves students who have diverse, differing and distinctive backgrounds, interests, resources, needs and educational objectives. The faculty and academic administration leadership of each institution should develop assessment standards and procedures that reflect and relate to the mission and goals of each academic unit or program, the general education curriculum, and the institution's academic program as a whole. Such measurements should take into account the institution's resources and objectives and not include standardized assessment instruments applied statewide. The findings and responses should be evaluated, making accounts of results available on request.

Assessment is a Complex Process

Nationally and locally, legislatures, citizens and academic groups are discussing ways to measure or assess the effectiveness of educational programs from preschool to postgraduate levels. Some have sought national or statewide testing regimes to determine: 1) how well curricula are designed, 2) how well teachers are teaching and, 3) what students are learning. Much of this approach is aimed toward ascertaining whether monies are being spent effectively. Some of these discussions focus largely on increased testing with little concern for the complex factors affecting measurements of learning and particularly the long-term contributions of the entire educational process from elementary school and continuing through the collegiate level.

For us, the IBHE Faculty Advisory Council, the issue of assessing how effective we are in delivering academic programs is of primary concern. We believe assessment is an ongoing process and already part of the academy's regular tasks. Assessment must be based on the overall learning experience of students who may have diverse social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Assessments must be conducted at regular stages of their educational careers and consistent with the mission and goals of the institution as a whole and of individual academic programs in particular. As academics we believe, with Socrates, that the unexamined life is not worth living and likewise, that the unexamined curriculum is not worth teaching. Faculty are reflective scholars who fully appreciate that teaching and learning take place in multiple and overlapping contexts with multiple goals and methods of achieving them.

Assessment as an On-going Process

Educational institutions have not ignored the necessity to examine the programs they offer. Also academic institutions are involved in the public arena; we are not isolated from or independent of the broader community. We receive support from public monies and our students are part of the population. There is always feedback to what we do. Corporations and other groups, alumni, civic and religious organizations, employers, volunteer groups and service organizations provide information about our students and critiques of our programs. Examination of academic curricula over a period of years will show that courses and curricula have changed reflecting, in part, needs of the society in which the education is offered. Informed by the multiple sources, faculty ask and

discuss fundamental questions: What are our goals? How do we seek to achieve them? How do we know if we are successful? What shall we do differently in the light of what we learn through this process?

Faculty are committed to appropriate assessment processes. We regularly review our own courses and academic programs including general education, majors and professional curricula.

### Assessment Needs Clearly Articulated Goals

In order to assess programs we need clearly articulated goals and purposes of our academic programs. Some of these goals and purposes are held in common by all educational institutions but others are unique to the particular mission and objectives of institutions and programs. In higher education, faculty and students pursue a range of learning processes and goals. These include: acquisition of factual knowledge; learning concepts and methodologies; understanding modes of analysis and synthesis; making informed judgments; and applying relevant theories to practical problems. All these processes and goals are interdependent. We commence assessment locally with assignment of grades in each class. Regularly colleges and universities reexamine their curricula drawing from internal experience, the evaluations of external review committees, particularly national accrediting bodies, and feedback from alumni, employers and other groups. But we are concerned not only about the effectiveness of our programs as taught. We need also to know how useful our teaching is years after students graduate. We strive not just to provide a group of details and facts but more importantly to provide a framework for asking appropriate questions and learning to solve problems not specifically addressed in the collegiate educational process. Examining the 'effectiveness' of our programs several years beyond graduation is an important phase of assessment and the BHE is working toward this with its questionnaires sent one, five and nine years after graduation.

### Measuring Learning Outcomes

The faculty of each institution has the primary obligation to develop valid and relevant standards that reflect the mission and goals of its academic programs individually and collectively and to determine instruments and other means that enable it to measure and evaluate the advancement of its students. Because each institution's mission, programs and student body is unique and distinctive, and because diverse learning goals require multiple means of assessing them, a standardized instrument to be used in all institutions is an insufficient means for measuring learning outcomes. The standards and instruments used should be subject to the practices and procedures of shared governance and results made available for interested or affected parties for comment as to their appropriateness and validity.

At a minimum, assessment should:

- ❑ Measure the intellectual or academic level of each class of students entering the institution for the first time and determine their educational objectives. An assessment should also be made at completion of the program of study to identify programmatic or other changes that should be considered or implemented to better serve the students in the context of the institutions mission and goals.
- ❑ Assess the changes that have occurred in each class of students at regular intervals during their educational experience and in the context of the institutional mission and goals. The general education program as well as the student's major and minor areas of study should be assessed separately based on the goals of each.

Because the issue of assessment is a broad one affecting all of the educational stages from preschool to postgraduate education it is not surprising that it is an area still undergoing significant study. In “Knowing What Students Know... the Science and Design of Educational Assessment,” J. Pellegrino, N. Chudowsky and R. Glaser editors, [National Research Council (2001)] the authors stress among their dozen recommendations that:

- Research should be conducted to explore how new forms of assessment can be made practical for use in classroom and large-scale contexts and how various new forms of assessment affect student learning, teacher practice and educational decision making.
- Developers of assessment instruments for classroom or large-scale use should pay explicit attention to the three elements of assessment including: cognition, observation, and interpretation as well as their coordination.
- Policy makers are urged to recognize the limitations of current assessments, and to support the development of new systems of multiple assessments that would improve their ability to make decisions about education programs and the allocation of resources.

Although focus of their studies is on assessment in elementary and secondary education their study shows that evaluation of learning is a complex process regardless of the educational level of students or programs. Assessment is an ongoing process from grade school to high school, to two- and four-year colleges as well as graduate and professional programs. What we do at the level of higher education must cohere with and positively influence that which is done at the K-12 level.

While some facets of student assessment can be measured by standardized tests, most other aspects of educational achievement are much harder to measure through traditional testing formats. We need to know, are we turning out prepared students? As indicated we do receive information on this from several sources. We also have to recognize that within the collegiate years many students “find themselves” and are “turned on” to specific careers through specific courses and faculty members. This too is a measure of the effectiveness of a program and its range and scope will vary with programs and institutions. We must recognize that higher education operates within multiple contexts with multiple goals and means of achieving them. We strongly urge that the BHE not consider a uniform standardized mode of assessment for measuring student progress.