ON USING ASSESSMENT INFORMATION AND CLOSING THE LOOP

The resources in this handout provide a variety of questions to stimulate conversations and suggest starting points for action on information gained from assessment activities. This handout is divided into three sections:

> *Reflecting on Assessment Data—Some Questions for Discussion*
> *Assessing the Assessment—Considerations for Evaluating Assessment Strategies*
> *Responding to the Data—Potential Action Steps Based on Assessment Findings*

Some Questions for Discussion

 [Consider] the extent to which your findings can help you answer the following questions.

- What do the data say about your students' mastery of subject matter, of research skills, or of writing and speaking?

- What do the data say about your students' preparation for taking the next step in their careers?

- Are there areas where your students are outstanding? Are they consistently weak in some respects?

- Are graduates of your program getting good jobs, accepted into reputable graduate schools, reporting satisfaction with their undergraduate education?

- Do you see indications in student performance that point to weakness in any particular skills, such as research, writing, or critical thinking skills?

Do you see areas where performance is okay, but not outstanding, and where you would like to see a higher level of performance

[From page 106 of *Tools & Techniques for Program Improvement; Handbook for Program Review & Assessment of Student Learning*, Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Testing, Western Washington University, September 2006. Retrieved September 17, 2007, from http://www.wwu.edu/depts/assess/prog_handbook.pdf.]

What should faculty focus on when discussing assessment data?

The specific measures created for assessment purposes are useful only insofar as they provide faculty with information about strengths and weaknesses in student learning, each of which provides valuable information for the development of quality educational programs.

How will an analysis of strengths and weaknesses improve educational programs?

1. **Analysis of strengths: What are students doing well?** Identify the features of your program in which students excel. This information can be valuable for marketing and recruitment of students to your program. Identification of strengths will also help faculty identify assignments and activities that produce high quality learning. These assignments and activities need to be protected and preserved. You do not want to accidentally lose some of your best teaching strategies in the heat of a course or program restructuring. Evidence that supports the effectiveness of a course, a class project, or other teaching strategy keeps us focused on which aspects of a program we need to keep.

2. **Analysis of weaknesses: Where are students struggling or encountering difficulties?** Knowing about the areas where students encounter problems can help departments think about interventions that might address these problem areas. What might be done to help students be more successful? Would implementation of a peer tutoring program help students acquire the skills they need? Would a change in advising practices prevent students from floundering because they took a course out of sequence, before they gained the foundation skills developed in a different course? Might a different teaching strategy produce a higher success rate among students in this skill? The analysis of

weaknesses might suggest interventions such as providing additional support for student learning, revising the curriculum, or adopting new teaching strategies that might improve student learning. Assessments conducted after changes are introduced will inform faculty of the success of these modifications.

What questions might be raised during a discussion of assessment evidence?

The list below identifies some of the questions posed and decisions a department might make based on the interpretation and discussion of assessment data:

- How might student learning improve if a new class were developed to address a specific issue or set of skills?
- Would students be more successful if prerequisite courses were established so that students would complete courses in which skills are introduced before enrolling in more advanced courses?
- Should student learning outcomes for a program be modified? Has the focus of the discipline changed recently, suggesting the need for additional or different learning outcomes?
- Might student learning improve if instructors adopted a different teaching strategy or if students completed different types of assignments?
- Do the current assessment methods provide useful information? Was the quality of information provided by this year's assessments disappointing? Would a different approach to collecting assessment data provide more useful information?

[From the University of West Florida Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, *Tip Sheet #21*, "Creating a Sustainable and Meaningful Process of Assessment." Retrieved September 17, 2007, from http://www.uwf.edu/cutla/SLO/Tip21.pdf.]

Evaluation, Reflection, and Taking Action

To gain a rich perspective on the data, assessment results should be disseminated widely and a variety of stakeholders should be engaged in the evaluation to ensure the obvious is not overlooked. . . .

• *Return to the program's mission, goals, and outcomes.* How do the results line up with previous expectations? Did student do better, worse? Did you make incorrect assumptions or use incorrect information during the previous planning stage? What are the outside stakeholders telling you?
• *Review the performance levels set earlier in the process.* Were those expectations met? Are the established standards adequate, or did you set the bar at the wrong height? What level of performance is good enough for undergraduates, graduates?

From the *Program Learning Outcomes Assessment Handbook*, from the University of Texas-El Paso. Retrieved July 15, 2010, from http://academics.utep.edu/Portals/951/Step%206%20Using%20the%20Results%20in%20Evaluation.pdf

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Continue to the next page for "Assessing the Assessment."

<div align="center">**Assessing the Assessment**</div>

Evaluating the Process

- Did you have a positive or negative experience implementing your assessment methods?
- What were students' reactions to the assessment process?
- What did you find especially effective in the assessment process?
- What did you particularly dislike about the process?
- What would you change about the process? Why?
- What will you do again? Why?
- What do the results suggest for program review at WWU?

[From "Assessment Reporting" in the appendix to *Tools & Techniques for Program Improvement; Handbook for Program Review & Assessment of Student Learning*, Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Testing, Western Washington University, September 2006. Retrieved September 17, 2007, from http://www.wwu.edu/depts/assess/prog_handbook.pdf.]

Some questions that need consideration when planning [to evaluate and share results]:

In connection with the collection of measures

- Are faculty or other knowledgeable personnel available to supervise the collection of information intended to measure student learning?
- Is space available to maintain information securely so as to assure confidentiality?
- If measures are to be repeated on a regular basis, or longitudinal studies are to be done, is staff available to assemble the information in a useable fashion? Are there software programs available that can assist in the storage of data such as is to be used?
- Are students made aware of faculty advocacy of the assessment process and the agreed on measures to assess their learning? Faculty attitude and contribution are known to have an effect on student participation and motivation.

In connection with the interpretation of measures,

- Are faculty available to score, analyze, and interpret the findings of the measures to be used? If not, are there university or college resources available to assist in these tasks?
- If externally developed (standardized) tests are used, is there assurance that the interpretations from these tests will provide the information required?

[From Step 5 of *Six Steps to Continuous Improvement of Learning; A Guide to Support the Assessment Process* from Kent State University. Retrieved July 15, 2010, from http://explore.kent.edu/aa/guide/step5.html.]

Make Changes

Some believe when the words 'improvement" or "enhancement" are used that something is wrong. That is not the case. Most faculty, for example, are accustomed to reviewing and looking to improve what occurs during class time, at the end of a course, or in committees that discuss curriculum, pedagogy, and other educational matters. The intent of step six is the same -- to plan, often with others, new ways to accomplish their goals for students.
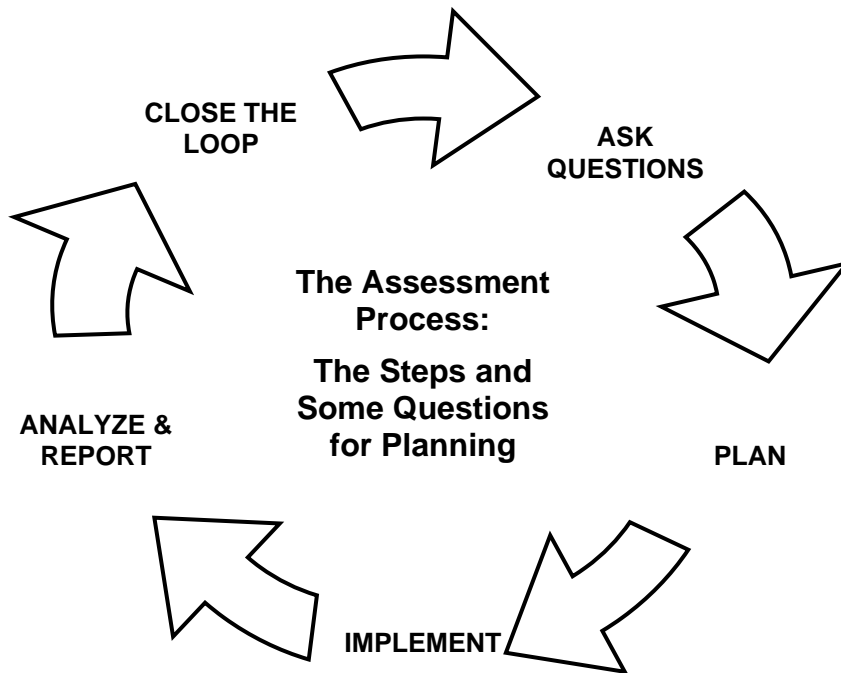
Some questions that need consideration at this juncture follow.

- Do the objectives and findings define as well as answer the questions that are important to understanding and enhancing student learning?
- Are faculty and students motivated to participate in the assessment process? If not, why not?
- Has thought been given to the use of benchmarks based on comparable student groups?
- Are there resources available to assist in areas of assessment that are found problematic?
- Is there adequate support from the university to allow for continuous implementation and evaluation of the assessment plan?

[From Step 6 of *Six Steps to Continuous Improvement of Learning; A Guide to Support the Assessment Process* from Kent State University. Retrieved July 15, 2010, from http://explore.kent.edu/aa/guide/step6.html

See also, "Closing the Loop" in the model on the next page.

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The Assessment Process:

The Steps and Some Questions for Planning

CLOSE THE LOOP

ASK QUESTIONS

ANALYZE & REPORT

PLAN

IMPLEMENT

Ask questions

- Who is involved in assessment?
- Who is responsible and how?
- How are discussions organized?
- How are ideas captured?
- What do we know?
- What do we want to know?
- What do we need to know?
- Why are we asking?

Create a plan

- Who makes final decisions on the plan?
- How is the plan communicated?
- Where is the plan kept?
- How is access to the plan gained?

Implement the plan

- Are the mechanics of the plan clear?
- Who does what when and where?
- Who oversees implementation?
- What preparatory steps are needed?
- How are data collected & stored?

Analyze and report

- How/where are the data stored?
- Who gets what data in what form?
- Who analyzes the data?
- Are the data what was expected?
- If not, what might be reasons?
- How can successes be shared?

Close the loop

The plan
- Was it doable?
- Was it implemented as planned?
- Was the timing right?
- What changes would you make?

Data
- How did the data collection tools work?
- Was data analysis effective?
- How useful were the data?
- What else would you like to know?

Program decisions
- What might explain student successes?
- Why might student achievement vary from the expected or desired?
- What resources might students need to succeed?
- What changes could be made in learning outcomes? Courses? Assignments? Curriculum?

Systems
- How are changes introduced and implemented?
- How are changes documented?
- Are reports working?
- Are documentation, storage and retrieval processes working?
- Are lines of communication and collaborative processes working?

Responding to the Data

Some Ways to Use Assessment Data

- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of students in the program(s) related to specific content knowledge

- To identify the strengths and weaknesses of students in the program(s) related to broader degree-related skills, such as writing, oral communication, critical thinking, research/information seeking, etc.

- To analyze and/or improve content, assignments, etc., for specific courses within the program(s)

- To compare current performance of students in the programs with previous performance of students in the programs

- To compare student performance with levels of performance expected by employers and/or graduate or professional programs

- To identify resources (programs, services, etc.) that could add to levels of student achievement in the program(s)

- To determine potential program changes for the curricular review cycle (e.g., additional courses, courses to delete, courses to revise, etc.)

- To provide information for determining needs for specific faculty expertise when hiring faculty members

- To identify information that can be used in recruiting students to the program(s) and/or providing information on the program(s) to such groups as parents, employers, etc.

- To analyze and/or improve program assessment procedures

- Other . . .

Some Action Steps:

- Modifications, additions, deletions to courses in the curriculum

- Changes, additions, deletions to course assignments

- Modifications to program requirements (e.g., prerequisite courses, course sequence, specified levels of attainment, etc.)

- Revisions to program goals and outcomes

- Changes to the assessment methods, strategies, timing

- Non-curricular changes (i.e., laboratory facilities, departmental policies and procedures)

- Addition, deletion, modification of services/support for students

- Other . . .

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