

Debunking Assessment Myths

Before you get started, here are some myths to consider.

Myth #1: Assessment should be time-consuming and involve a detailed and complicated process.

This myth comes from two sources. First is the design issue. Assessment can be as complicated as you want it to be, but as complexity increases, usefulness decreases. A sustainable process can start with tests, activities, projects, or assignments you already have students complete. It should be something all sections of the course and faculty are using. Faculty own the assessment process for academic units and staff own assessment for non-academic units like student affairs. Design a process that makes sense to you, and that gives you something you can use and report.

The second issue is how assessment can be perceived as a waste of time if the results are not used. Program reviews and external accreditation reports require program-level assessment. There are guidelines and requirements for accredited programs. When units (departments, degrees, programs, non-academic programs) use assessment to make changes, the next step is to see if they worked. If they didn't, your assessment is still a success because you learned something about student learning.

Myth #2: If we are externally accredited, the University does not want to hear about our assessment activities.

External accreditors have standards for assessment that accredited programs have to follow. Those activities are essential to students and the institution and will be part of your brief, one-page annual assessment report. You don't have to do anything in addition to what your accreditor wants. The annual report to the institution gives you a roadmap to indicate your process. If there is not an external accreditation, then there are regular programs reviews for both academic and non-academic units. Those are typically on a 7-year cycle. These programs also provide an annual assessment report.

Myth #3: We have to have an objective for everything we do because if we do not assess it, it isn't important.

If you have external accreditation, they may require you to assess objectives and outcomes that are part of their standards. If you are not externally accredited, your program review process that occurs every seven years asks you to report your program's objectives. A rule of thumb in assessment is that there should be no more than five objectives for the program. Faculty and staff in non-academic units decide program objectives based on the most important things they want students to achieve in their program. In addition to the program, course design means that there are

course-level objectives. These may be in addition to program-level objectives or cover additional items faculty think are important.

Myth #4: We have to assess every objective every academic year or term.

No, you don't! If you have five objectives and you assess all five every year, you will then find yourself mired in Myth #1 – too time-consuming. After you decide on your objectives, pick one or two to assess each year. When you collect the data, you will reflect on the changes you want to make. If you collect data in the fall and discuss it the following spring, you will first be able to "close the loop" and make changes the next fall. Collect, talk, and make the change. To document this, make up a schedule on a spreadsheet and note what you are assessing, how you are closing the loop (using your assessment data), and what you found when you closed the loop.

Myth #5: We have to assess every student.

It is ok to select a sample of students if you have multiple sections and many students. Smaller classes should assess each student. If you want to match demographic data with your students and look at the effect of those, you can assess each student.

Myth #6: If we find a problem or an issue, it can be used against our program or faculty.

Administrators are required to take the assessment safety pledge each term. If you feel your assessment results were used against you or your program, you should discuss your concerns with your supervisor. If there are unresolved issues, please contact the assessment office.

Myth #7: We assign final grades to our students, so that should tell us everything we need to know about how they are doing.

Grades can include items that are important, including attendance, on-time submissions, or following a required format that can affect the final grade in the course. Assessment focuses on a specific segment of learning you decided to include in your objectives. Think about it this way. A student who just reports their GPA on their resume doesn't help an employer know what they can do or what they learned. The class objectives communicate this information. For example, a student in a program that had an objective indicating that students will learn to "evaluate all the options and make a business decision" has something to talk about. They can show how they learned to look at all sides of a problem, the steps they took to find solutions, what they included in their analysis and how they made a decision. This is much more informative than "I got an A in a case study class."

Myth #8: There is no place to go for help when we have questions about assessment.

The Idaho State University Office of Assessment is available to help. Also, many faculty serve as assessment coordinators or on committees related to assessment. Idaho State University has an assessment web site with information and links on assessment topics. The University Assessment Review Committee consists of Associate Deans and, for units that have them, full-time assessment professionals. Student Affairs has an Assessment Committee and individuals responsible for the assessment.

Myth #9: If we do program assessment, we don't have to assess other courses, skills, or concepts.

Departments and units meet and discuss what they want students to know and learn. What takes place in classrooms is the foundation of programs. The building blocks of classroom activities involve introducing, reinforcing, and mastering skills and knowledge. Class objectives are collaborative with the department and those who currently or might teach the course. Come up with no more than five objectives for classes and follow the same strategy to assess them as you do for program objectives.

Myth #10: Doing assessment is not valued.

We value what we report, and assessment is no different. The Office of Assessment will work with the Faculty Senate to develop ways for faculty to report and be credited for their assessment activities. The time spent should be recognized.