

Frequently Asked Questions About Assessment

Q1. Why are we developing this new process now? Don't we already do enough evaluation and data-gathering?

A1. The new assessment process reflects current best practices in the field of academic assessment, as well as new requirements from various agencies and accrediting bodies (most significantly, the Higher Learning Commission). Both internal and external constituencies see a need for clearer and more uniform data collection and usage across our institution. Most importantly, we need data we can use in our programs, to improve teaching and learning, to improve student satisfaction, and to support requests for resources.

Q2. My program already has external accrediting responsibilities and compiles data according to their requirements. Isn't this a duplication of effort?

A2. The Assessment Task Force recognizes that some programs compile and analyze a significant body of data, which is reported in a range of formats to external professional accrediting agencies. Consequently, the new process was designed to allow programs that are externally accredited to fulfill "program-level" assessment expectations by simply reporting their data on assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) in the same format as all the other academic programs.

Q3. The university-level SLOs that were approved by the Faculty Assembly seem very general and fairly extensive. How can my program address them all?

A3. Programs are not expected to assess how students are doing on the university-level SLOs. They are expected to assess how students are performing on their "program-level" SLOs. Part of the process of creating an SLO Assessment Plan for each program is to link the program-level SLOs to the university-level SLOs so that by assessing how students perform on a particular SLO at the program-level, and reporting these assessment results to the Assessment Task Force, the University can determine how it is doing on the university-level SLO that is linked to the program-level SLO.

Q4. Does the new Program SLO Assessment Plan replace the existing Program Review process?

A4. No. The SLO Assessment Plan only addresses student learning, whereas the Program Review process addresses many facets of an academic program, including research productivity, services provided to meet students' needs, quality and currency of the curriculum, cost of the program, and other faculty and staff related issues. While all program activities should ultimately serve teaching and learning, the SLO Assessment Plan focuses on setting expectations and measuring student performance on specific student learning outcomes. The resulting data can then be used in Program Review to report on the overall teaching effectiveness of the program and as part of program-level strategic planning.

Q5. I already evaluate my students' work and provide grades and detailed comments. Why add more evaluation to my duties?

A5. Grading is a key part of what we do, but it should be kept separate from program assessment for several reasons. First, reported grades tend to be based on the evaluation of entire assignments and activities, and as such they do not assess specific SLOs. Second, grades are a way of communicating individual data to and about individual students, whereas program assessment communicates aggregated data about student learning in a program. Third, assessment data includes information and measures that go beyond grading (including indirect measures such as surveys, employment or graduate placement, and scores on standardized tests). Finally, while grading rubrics can be used to relate assignment grades to program and course outcomes, not all instructors employ uniform rubrics.

The new assessment system respects the integrity of faculty grading while providing a unified process for assessment of SLOs at the program level.

Q6. Isn't assessment just another way of evaluating faculty?

A6. Student Learning Outcomes Assessment is **not** faculty evaluation. Rather, it is a process that produces data about student learning at the program level. This assessment data is neither intended nor appropriate for evaluation of individual faculty performance; instead, it provides aggregated data on student performance on program-level SLOs. The data is meant to be used as part of a process of continuous program improvement, not as a means to evaluate individual faculty members.

Q7. My students already evaluate their own progress using IDEA. Why not just use this data to assess SLOs?

A7. IDEA is a valuable tool for gathering data about students' experiences and sense of their own learning in a given class or set of classes. However, student ratings represent self-reported (rather than expert) evaluation of progress on IDEA course-level objectives, which can be linked to but are different than program-level SLOs. The IDEA organization advises against using IDEA student ratings as the sole instrument for evaluating teaching effectiveness (=student learning). For purposes of program-level assessment, data from IDEA Group Summary Reports may be used as an indirect measure of overall student learning in the program.

Q8. The jargon used by you assessment people is confusing. You use language like outcomes, objectives, goals, summative, and formative and sometimes you don't even seem to agree on what the terms mean.

A8. Academic assessment is a complex and growing field – one that attempts to serve the needs of educators, students, administrators, and external constituencies, from K-12 to graduate level. The Assessment Task Force (ATF) has created a Learning Guide that establishes our own internal process, and includes a Glossary of Terms. This did involve some lively discussion between representatives of various disciplines and assessment philosophies, but the charge of the ATF was to choose a system and a set of terms that seemed best to serve our institution and our students, and that could be implemented in a timely manner. Every program's faculty will need to discuss and interpret the result, and we welcome your questions and suggestions as we implement the new process.

Q9. I am teaching in a graduate program. Is there any difference in the assessment plan for my graduate program than an assessment plan for an undergraduate program?

A9. The overall structure and elements of an assessment plan are the same for graduate programs as they are for undergraduate programs, but the expected level of student performance would likely be different. Namely, in order to meet a student learning outcome, you would probably expect the students in a graduate program to perform at a higher level than students in an undergraduate program. You may also choose a different method and/or a different measurement tool to assess the student learning outcomes.