

Teaching Moment: Using Direct and Indirect Measures to Assess

Student Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Assessment is one of the critical, contemporary accreditation issues facing institutions around the world. For many the question of how to best assess student-learning outcomes remains a prime concern. Should assessment be limited to direct measures or should indirect measures be included? This teaching moment briefly discusses the use of both measures.

As educational institutions strive to meet the increasing demands from state and federal governments as well as regional and national accreditation agencies, assessment and student-learning outcomes have become more important than ever before. New stricter standards from AACSB, ACBSP and other accreditation agencies as well as recent changes in the guidelines for receiving performance-based funding have dramatically changed how many educators think about assessing student performance. Traditional enrollment-based funding has now been replaced performance-based metrics, which include academic progress rate, graduation rates as well as job placement rates. Although the standards and metrics used vary from agency to agency and state to state, the question of how to best assess student learning remains a key concern. Institutions spend millions of dollars annually to educate and prepare faculty to meet these new demands

Direct measures are an essential part of the assessment process. Exams, portfolios, pretests, posttests as well as standardized tests are still an essential part of the assessment process, primarily because they provide evidence of students' actual performance. According to Krentler

(2017), “one direct measure should be used for each learning objective.” In many instances, additional measures are added in an attempt to glean more information. However, faculty should be careful to avoid adding unnecessary measures, which tend to complicate the process and reduce faculty support and engagement.

More recently, indirect measures have increased in importance. These measures can provide valuable insight and opportunities to improve courses with high failure rates. Discussion forums are a great way to gather student input about courses. Typically, this should be implemented during the midpoint or final week of course as a course reflection. In this forum, three important questions should be included: What do you like about the course? What do dislike about the course? What recommendations or suggestions do you have to improve the course? This information can be invaluable for course redesign and curriculum development initiatives. Although most institutions still tend to utilize more traditional methods to gather information regarding students’ and employers’ perceptions about programs and concentrations, faculty and administration should not overlook valuable, less expensive opportunities that are readily available in the face-to-face as well as online classrooms.

A more comprehensive approach combines direct and indirect measures. This helps ensure that accreditation reports contain the essential direct measures as well as indirect measures, which may be used to develop more highly skilled graduates and more competitive programs.

References

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