

An Introduction to Curricular and Student Learning Assessment

1.1. What is 'assessment'?

In Higher Education, “*assessment*” is shorthand for the methods and data that facilitate evidence-informed decision-making.

The purpose of a particular assessment activity or project is to obtain *reliable information* that can help guide our decisions.

- Sometimes findings indicate that changes are needed.
- Other times, they show that things are going exactly as planned.

At its core, assessment is an opportunity to ***pause, reflect, and discuss:***

1. **What are we trying to accomplish and why?**
2. **How well are we succeeding?**
3. **Where might improvements be made?**

1.2. Why assess student learning?

For every course and every academic program, faculty set learning goals for their students. Progress towards these goals is evaluated when we assign grades. However, grading is the analysis and use of data to make judgments about an individual student's performance. If we want to consider how students' learning might be improved in a course or academic program, we need ways to think about learning overall.

Learning assessment places our focus on ***learning***, and ***learning research***.

Learning is a complex process with cognitive and social dimensions that involves not only knowledge and understanding, but also attitudes and habits of mind.

Research-based approaches to learning can not only improve the efficacy of courses and programs, but also facilitate valuable interdisciplinary discussions about how students learn.

Teaching as an ongoing process of *inquiry, experimentation, and reflection*. Assessment data are meant to support this process.

2. Assessment Questions at Different Levels of Assessment

I. Student-level

- ***How well is an individual student learning?***
 - What are the student's strengths and weaknesses?
 - Has the student's work improved over the semester?
 - How well is the student meeting course learning goals?



II. Course-level

- ***How well is the class learning?***
 - Are students meeting some course learning goals better than others?
 - Does student work point to areas where pedagogy, sequencing, or assignments could be modified to benefit student learning?
- ***How well does the course curriculum support student learning?***
 - How well do learning activities align to and support course learning goals?
 - Do students have enough opportunities to develop needed skills?
 - Are assignments structured in ways that help students evaluate their own progress?





III. Department/Program-level

- ***How well are majors in the program learning?***
 - Do the majority of graduates meet our program's goals?
 - Are students meeting some program goals better than others?
 - What does students' work tell us about our program's strengths and challenges?
- ***How well does the program support its students?***
 - What do we want students to take away from their experience in our program? Are we fostering mastery or growth?
 - How does the curriculum support and reinforce what we want students to learn?
 - How well are majors prepared for capstone courses?



IV. Institution-level

- ***How well is the institution fulfilling its mission?***
 - How is the college mission supported by academic programs?
 - How is the college mission supported by administrative services?
 - How well are students meeting general education learning goals?
 - How well is the institution meeting CUNY university-wide goals?
 - How well are our students prepared for life after graduation?
- ***How well is institutional effectiveness being achieved?***
 - Is the institution a responsible steward of NYC public investment?
 - Can institutional effectiveness be demonstrated?
 - How well is the institution meeting its strategic planning goals?

Student Level	Course Level	Department Level	Institution Level
❖ Assessment of an individual student's learning in a course	❖ Assessment of learning across students in a course	❖ Assessment across courses (academic) or across services (administrative)	❖ Assessment across departments (academic and administrative)
			

3. A Few Important Distinctions

Assessment vs. Accreditation

While assessment is not new, what is new is its relationship to accreditation and institutional accountability. Accreditation is a process by which an educational institution is certified by an independent body to award degrees. In pursuit of accountability, accrediting organizations have required that colleges conduct self-studies that show:

- The majority of students achieve mastery of disciplinary content/skills,
- Administrative departments effectively meet their goals, and
- The college as a whole achieves its mission.

This means that departmental-level assessment activities (academic and administrative) serve secondarily as evidence cited within a college's accreditation self-study. At CUNY, we continue to see assessment as an opportunity to engage in evidence-informed planning and decision-making. While accreditation self-studies aim to demonstrate that resources are invested responsibly, faculty and staff assess to better serve their students, facilitate valuable discussions with colleagues, and offer evidence for needed resources.

Assessment vs. Grading

The goal of grading is to evaluate individual students' learning, whereas the goal of assessment is to improve learning overall.

Grading	Assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Product-oriented (<i>what students learned</i>) • Judgmental: assign a letter grade 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process-oriented (<i>how students learn</i>) • Diagnostic: identify areas for improvement

Grades can provide useful evidence of student learning when they are based on direct measures (tests, projects, papers, etc.) that are closely aligned to course learning goals.

However, assessment methods typically go beyond grading by systematically examining patterns in student work to inform instructional decisions.

Assessment vs. Research

Assessment and research are similar in many ways: Both involve asking questions, collecting data, analyzing results, and using results as reliable evidence. However, there are important differences.

- **Research** is meant to confirm/challenge hypotheses to **guide theory**
- **Assessment** is meant to yield information to **guide local practice**

Due to limitations on time and resources, assessment findings have implications for a just single course, program or institution.



Assessment vs. Faculty/Staff Evaluation

No individual faculty or staff member has the sole responsibility for ensuring that program or office goals are met. Therefore, assessment results **may not** be used to evaluate any individual faculty or staff member.

Assessment vs. Course Evaluation

Course evaluations can be helpful when comments point to areas of instruction or course design that could be improved. However, they are not a reliable way to measure the overall learning happening in a course or program. Furthermore, course evaluations are summative. Although they may help us improve future courses, they can't help us respond to the needs of current students.

4. Guiding Principles for Meaning Assessment

Our Guiding Principles for Meaningful Assessment promote a shared understanding of assessment at Queens College and provide guidelines for effective assessment practices.

- I. The primary purpose of assessment is to direct the strategic improvement of the student experience and student learning. A culture of assessment at Queens College is a culture of inquiry, evidence, and innovation.
- II. Assessment is more likely to lead to improvement when the faculty and staff who deliver our programs and services own the process of assessment. Faculty determine the goals and means of assessment for courses, majors and other academic programs. Staff determine the goals and means of assessment for administrative offices.
- III. The process of assessment is more meaningful when guided by the curiosity and intellectual dialogue that characterize the culture of higher education. Meaningful assessment begins with genuine questions.
- IV. Assessment findings are more reliable when they follow principles of research and draw on multiple measures. Reliable assessments utilize quality data and expert analysis.
- V. Assessment activities are more effective when they are designed to be manageable and sustainable.
- VI. To ensure assessment activities are meaningful, reliable and sustainable, assessment processes should be subject to periodic assessment themselves.

5. The Assessment Process

The process for assessing *student learning* includes:

1. Articulating your learning goals and defining the measurable objectives you want your student to achieve, aka "*Student Learning Outcomes*" (SLOs).
2. Mapping your learning goals and objectives to the curriculum and to assessment methods.
3. Formulating assessment questions and implementing the assessment methods.
4. Analyzing and summarizing the student data.
5. Using results to guide decisions, aka. 'Closing the Loop'.

6. Important Considerations

You are not in this alone! The [Queens College Assessment Website](#) has loads of resources. You can also take a free online course here: [CUNY Assessment 101: A Free Online Course](#).

Treating assessment as an end in itself is a sure way to obtain useless results. Remember, meaningful assessment begins with *genuine* questions.

Sure, some goals cannot be meaningfully assessed. However, we can learn a lot by assessing progress towards our goals that can be measured.

Assessment findings are only as good as their data. Quality data, adherence to research principles, and expert analysis must be ensured.

The Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) is here to help. Write to gc.oie.gc.cuny.edu to request assistance.



To ensure we assess meaningfully, we mustn't forget to **assess our assessments**:

- *Did I learn what I wanted to learn?*
- *Should I do anything differently when I assess again?*

Technology is your friend. Think creatively about the data available from various technology platforms. Regularize and standardize the collection of data. Trend data is the best way to determine whether you are making progress. So, try to report at least three years for a metric using a consistent methodology. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness can help by identifying data sources and developing metrics (including metrics from surveys).

Let's not forget why we are assessing.

Our educational values are made clear by what we assess and how we assess.

