

Institutional Assessment

The institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals and its compliance with accreditation standards.

Context

Assessment may be characterized as the third element of a four-step planning-assessment cycle:

1. Developing clearly articulated written statements, expressed in observable terms, of key institutional and unit-level goals that are based on the involvement of the institutional community, as discussed under Standard 1 (Mission and Goals);
2. Designing intentional objectives or strategies to achieve those goals, as discussed under Standard 2 (Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal);
3. Assessing achievement of those key goals; and
4. Using the results of those assessments to improve programs and services, as discussed under Standard 2 (Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal), with appropriate links to the institution's ongoing planning and resource allocation processes.

The effectiveness of an institution rests upon the contribution that each of the institution's programs and services makes toward achieving the goals of the institution as a whole. This standard on institutional assessment thus builds upon all other accreditation standards, each of which includes periodic assessment of effectiveness as one of its fundamental elements. This standard ties together those assessments into an integrated whole to answer the question, "As an institutional community, how well are we collectively doing what we say we are doing?" and, in particular, "How do we support student learning, a fundamental aspect of institutional effectiveness?" Because student learning is a fundamental component of the mission of most institutions of higher education, the assessment of student learning is an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness and is the focus of Standard 14 (Assessment of Student Learning). Self-studies can thus document compliance with Standard 7 by summarizing the assessments of each accreditation standard into conclusions about the institution's overall achievement of its key goals.

The fundamental question asked in the accreditation process is, “Is the institution fulfilling its mission and achieving its goals?” This is precisely the question that assessment is designed to answer, making assessment essential to the accreditation process. Assessment processes help to ensure the following:

- Institutional and program-level goals are clear to the public, students, faculty, and staff;
- Institutional programs and resources are organized and coordinated to achieve institutional and program-level goals;
- The institution is indeed achieving its mission and goals; and
- The institution is using assessment results to improve student learning and otherwise advance the institution.

While the Commission expects institutions to assess institutional effectiveness, it does not prescribe a specific approach or methodology. The institution is responsible for determining its expected goals and the objectives or strategies for achieving them at each level (institutional and unit), assessment approaches and methodologies, sequence, and time frame. These may vary, based on the mission, goals, organization, and resources of the institution. Whatever the approach, effective assessment processes are useful, cost-effective, reasonably accurate and truthful, carefully planned, and organized, systematic, and sustained.

Useful assessment processes help faculty and staff make appropriate decisions about improving programs and services, developing goals and plans, and making resource allocations. To assist with interpretation and use of assessment results, assessment measures and indicators have defined minimally acceptable performance targets. Because institutions, their students, and their environments are continually evolving, effective assessments cannot be static; they must be reviewed periodically and adapted in order to remain useful.

Cost-effective assessment processes yield dividends that justify the institution’s investment in them, particularly in terms of faculty and staff time. To this end, institutions may begin by considering assessment measures, indicators, “flags,” and “scorecards” already in place, such as retention, graduation, transfer, and placement rates, financial ratios, and surveys. New or refined measures may then be added for those goals and objectives for which evidence of achievement is not already available, concentrating on the institution’s most important goals. Effective assessments are simple rather than elaborate and may focus on just a few key goals in each program, unit, and curriculum.

Reasonably-accurate and truthful assessment processes yield results that can be used with confidence to make appropriate decisions. Because there is no one perfectly accurate assessment tool or strategy, institutions should use multiple kinds of measures to assess goal achievement. Assessments may be quantitative and/or qualitative and developed locally or by an external organization. All assessment tools and strategies should clearly relate to the goals they are assessing and should be developed with care; they should not be merely anecdotal information nor collections of information that happen to be on hand. Strategies to assess student learning should include direct—clear,

visible, and convincing—evidence, rather than solely indirect evidence of student learning such as surveys and focus groups.

Planned assessment processes that purposefully correspond to institutional goals that they are intended to assess promote attention to those goals and ensure that disappointing outcomes are appropriately addressed. Institutions often have a variety of plans, such as a strategic plan, academic plan, financial plan, enrollment plan, capital facilities master plan, and technology plan. Just as such plans should be interrelated to ensure that they work synergistically to advance the institution, assessments should also be interrelated. At many institutions, effective institutional planning begins with academic planning, which in turn drives the other plans. If the academic plan calls for a new academic program, for example, the technology plan should ensure faculty and students in the new program will be able to use appropriate instructional technologies. Assessments of the technology plan should evaluate not just whether instructional technologies have been put in place but also how effectively those technologies have helped students to achieve the program's key learning outcomes.

Organized, systematized, and sustained assessment processes are ongoing, not once-and-done. There should be clear interrelationships among institutional goals, program- and unit-level goals, and course-level goals. Assessments should relate clearly to important goals, and improvements should clearly stem from assessment results.

As noted earlier, because student learning is a fundamental component of the mission of most institutions of higher education, the assessment of student learning is an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness. An institution may therefore create institutional effectiveness documentation that includes a component on assessing student learning (see Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning), or it may create a bridge between two separate sets of documentation, one for the assessment of student learning and one for other aspects of institutional effectiveness.

A commitment to the assessment of institutional effectiveness requires a parallel commitment to ensuring its use. Assessment information, derived in a manner appropriate to the institution and to its desired outcomes, should be available to and used by those who develop institutional goals and carry out strategies to achieve them. As discussed under Standard 2 (Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal), an accredited institution uses the results of assessment for institutional renewal: to maintain, support, and improve its programs and services. Assessment information should be used as a basis for assessing the institution's effectiveness in achieving its stated goals, for monitoring and improving the environment for student learning, and for enhancing overall student success; to these ends, it should be linked to the institution's ongoing planning and resource allocation processes.

Assessment results also should be used to evaluate the assessment process itself, leading to modifications that improve its relevance and effectiveness.

Fundamental Elements of Institutional Assessment

An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate the following attributes or activities:

- documented, organized, and sustained assessment process to evaluate and improve the total range of programs and services; achievement of institutional mission, goals, and plans; and compliance with accreditation standards that meets the following criteria:
 - a foundation in the institution's mission and clearly articulated institutional, unit-level, and program-level goals that encompass all programs, services, and initiatives and are appropriately integrated with one another (see Standards 1: Mission and Goals and 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal);
 - systematic, sustained, and thorough use of multiple qualitative and/or quantitative measures that:
 - maximize the use of existing data and information;
 - clearly and purposefully relate to the goals they are assessing;
 - are of sufficient quality that results can be used with confidence to inform decisions;
 - support and collaboration of faculty and administration in assessing student learning and responding to assessment results;
 - clear realistic guidelines and a timetable, supported by appropriate investment of institutional resources;
 - sufficient simplicity, practicality, detail, and ownership to be sustainable;
 - periodic evaluation of the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of the institution's assessment process;
- evidence that assessment results are shared and discussed with appropriate constituents and used in institutional planning, resource allocation, and renewal (see Standard 2: Planning, Resource Allocation, and Institutional Renewal) to improve and gain efficiencies in programs, services and processes, including activities specific to the institution's mission (e.g., service, outreach, research); and
- written institutional (strategic) plan(s) that reflect(s) consideration of assessment results.

Institutions and evaluators must consider the totality that is created by the fundamental elements and any other relevant institutional information or analysis. Fundamental elements and contextual statements should not be applied separately as checklists. Where an institution does not possess or demonstrate evidence of a particular Fundamental Element, the institution may demonstrate through alternative information and analysis that it meets the standard.

Optional Analysis and Evidence

In addition to the evidence inherent within or necessary to document the fundamental elements above, the following, although not required, may facilitate the institution's own analysis relative to this accreditation standard:

- analysis of the institutional culture for assessing institutional effectiveness, including:
 - the views of faculty and administrators on assessment;
 - faculty and administrators' understanding of their roles in assessing institutional effectiveness;
 - campus-wide efforts to encourage, recognize, and value efforts to assess institutional effectiveness and to improve programs and services;
- analysis of the quality and usefulness of institutional support for assessment efforts, including the quality and usefulness of:
 - written statements of expectations for assessment work;
 - policies and governance structures to support institutional assessment;
 - administrative, technical, and financial support for institutional assessment activities;
 - professional development opportunities and resources for faculty and staff to learn how to assess institutional effectiveness and how to use the results;
- clear, appropriate criteria for determining whether key institutional goals and objectives have been achieved;
- analysis of whether the institution has sufficient, convincing, written evidence that it is achieving its mission and its key institutional goals;
- analysis of results of surveys of students and other relevant groups;
- review of evaluations of special, mission driven programs or projects, with recommendations for improvement, and evidence of action based on recommendations;
- evidence that institutional assessment findings are used to:
 - improve student success;
 - review and improve programs and services;
 - plan, conduct, and support professional development activities;
 - assist in planning and budgeting for the provision of programs and services;
 - support decisions about strategic goals, plans, and resource allocation;

- inform appropriate constituents about the institution and its programs;
- evidence of renewal strategies, made in response to assessment results [included also under Standard 2 Optional Analyses]; or
- analysis of evidence that renewal strategies made in response to assessment results have had the desired effect in improving programs, services, and initiatives.