

Quick Guide to Using Assessment to Inform Decision-making

This quick guide was prepared by the WSU Office of Assessment for Curricular Effectiveness (ACE) and is intended to help WSU programs and faculty consider good practices for using assessment to inform decision-making. ACE is also available to collaborate with WSU undergraduate degree programs to facilitate faculty discussions to use assessment in decision-making. Contact us at ace.office@wsu.edu for more information.

Introduction

Program assessment activities and results are intended to inform regular faculty reflection and discussion about effective teaching, learning, and curricula, and ultimately contribute to decision-making to support student learning.

Decisions may include intentionally choosing to continue current effective practices, building on the program's existing strengths, and/or making changes to the program. Importantly, use of assessment can occur at any point in the process of collecting, analyzing, or discussing direct and/or indirect measures of student learning.

Value of Using Assessment to Inform Decision-making

Program assessment activities and results can provide valuable information to faculty and program leadership to assist in making informed decisions and taking actions to provide students with the best possible educational experience. While all forms of program assessment can provide useful information for program improvement, using assessment aligned with specific learning outcomes is crucial to supporting quality undergraduate curricula and student achievement.

In this context, using assessment to inform decision-making can:

- Help programs demonstrate or build on academic strengths
- Help programs set priorities for improvement and feasible action
- Allow programs to act on matters of vital interest, including curriculum design, instructional practices, student development, and issues of equity
- Support accountability to others (e.g., external accreditors) about educational quality and program improvements
- Offer a meaningful and systematic collaborative process for shared decision-making and actions, with involvement from, and intentional consideration by, program faculty and leadership

Types of Decisions / Actions Which May Be Informed by Assessment Activities

Curriculum, Instruction, or Assignments

- Refining, reorganizing, or refocusing curricula
- Making curricular changes to improve student learning; making changes to courses or assignments
- Redesigning content or pedagogy of specific core assignments or courses; increasing alignment of assignments across courses

- Modifying program requirements or course scheduling
- Verifying that course sequencing and scheduling are appropriate
- Changing sequencing of courses in major curriculum; refining pre-requisites
- Guiding changes in scheduling rotations, course offerings, etc.; changes in scheduling or frequency of certain courses
- Adding or deleting courses
- Changing the number of students allowed in course sections so that student learning and effectiveness of teaching are maximized
- Developing or refining student learning outcomes; better aligning course, program, department, college and institutional goals and outcomes

Faculty/TA Development

- Designing needed professional development program(s)
- Improving pedagogy and/or curricular cohesion; implementing new teaching techniques
- Supporting more effective use of TAs
- Helping faculty learn how to develop and assess learning outcomes

Program Assessment Processes

- Refining or changing measures, tools, methods, sampling, or timing; gathering additional or different information; disaggregating or aggregating data into meaningful groups
- Identifying bottlenecks and improvements to logistics of assessment (data collection and storage, analysis, and dissemination)
- Identifying benchmarks
- Including new stakeholders, or involving stakeholders in a new way (e.g., creating a student advisory board or employer advisory board; inviting participation from other WSU programs or colleges)

Other

- Checking expectations (i.e., what do faculty members think the situation is and then see if that's accurate)
- Changes to facilities, departmental policies, and procedures; refining design or use of lab facilities
- Adjusting faculty teaching loads and assigned release time
- Re-assigning faculty or requesting new lines
- Reorganizing or improving student support systems, such as advising, library services, and student development initiatives to improve the academic success of students in the program
- Reorganizing or refocusing resources to advance student learning; inform changes about how resources are used in department/school
- Identifying and promoting partnerships between departments or units to leverage efforts or share resources

How to Use Assessment to Inform Decision-making: Steps to Get Started

Step 1: Bring together faculty and leadership (as appropriate to the program context) for constructive dialogue about results of assessment activities

Ideally, bring together individuals who can:

- Effect changes to relevant programs and courses
- Determine priorities for change
- Understand the technical and contextual limitations of program assessment results

Step 2: Review and interpret the results of assessment activities, setting aside time for discussion

Questions to consider when interpreting program assessment results:

- What question is the program trying to answer with this assessment?
- Where are students doing well or excelling?
- Where are students struggling or encountering difficulties?
- Are there patterns or themes emerging?
- How does the program define success? (e.g., Are students achieving the learning outcomes of the curriculum/degree?)
- What are the limitations of this assessment as a measure?
- Would further assessment help clarify these results?
- Are there other assessment findings that could be considered in conjunction with these results?
- What are the main takeaways from these results?
- What actions do the results suggest? How could faculty facilitate these actions?
- Who else in the program would benefit from seeing the results?

Follow Up Steps

- Create an executive summary and outline recommended actions the program could take; share appropriately
- Consider carefully to whom the findings or conclusions apply
- Seek feedback from key population (students, faculty, staff, etc.) on the meaning and interpretation of the findings or conclusions