Assessment Guide

Morehead State University

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Introduction

MSU is committed to and focused on student learning. The goal of our assessment process is to continuously improve student learning and programs that support student learning.

Assessment is the ongoing and systematic process of identifying outcomes/objectives and means to measure them, gathering measurements of the outcomes/objectives, using the information to make decisions about improvement, and implementing improvements based on the data gathered. The most important aspect of this definition, if emphasis could be drawn to one item, is the *using* of information.

Good assessment can promote quality enhancement at all levels of the university by providing necessary evidence to guide effective decision making in many areas including programmatic changes, classroom teaching modifications, support services adjustments, policy or procedure revisions, campus climate improvements, and structural reorganizations.

Simply put, we need to know how we are doing before we can do better. In addition to these internal purposes, we also use assessment to respond to external requests for accountability.

Assessment findings and use of results are of major importance to the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS-COC) and to external accrediting bodies for many MSU academic programs and services. It is also important to assure students, parents, legislators and other stakeholders of the univeristy's effectiveness.

Thinking in these terms, it is easy to understand the three key purposes of assessment:

- To improve – This evaluation is formative. Assessment activities provide a feedback loop to help shape or form better programs and services.
- To inform – Assessment activities can show a clearer picture of what is really happening in a program or unit and can inform others of contributions the program or unit makes.

- To demonstrate – This evaluation is summative. Assessment activities provide evidence to sum up what a program or unit is accomplishing and providing in a way that can be persuasive to students, faculty staff and the larger community.

This assessment guide is designed to help departments and units better understand the assessment process utilized by Morehead State University.

This institution-wide effort will allow MSU to document effectiveness and show commitment to ongoing improvement in both educational programs as well as administrative and educational support units.

MSU's Model for Assessment and Quality Enhancement

Discussions with faculty, deans, vice presidents and directors tell us that most units are already doing some form of assessment. We have established a university committee framework for ongoing assessment efforts to ensure that all units participate in the process. MSU's goal is to weave the various strands of planning, program review, assessment and evaluation into a tapestry that truly tells the story of our university — a tapestry that integrates these various strands in a seamless institution-wide vision. This tapestry will demonstrate the many ways MSU effectively accomplishes its mission and will show our process for continuing improvement.

Each department and unit are part of a much larger effort; every department and unit within the university is involved in this implementation and assessment of institutional effectiveness as MSU works to:

- **W**rite expected outcomes
- **E**stablish criteria for success
- **A**ssess performance
- **V**iew assessment results
- **E**ffect improvements
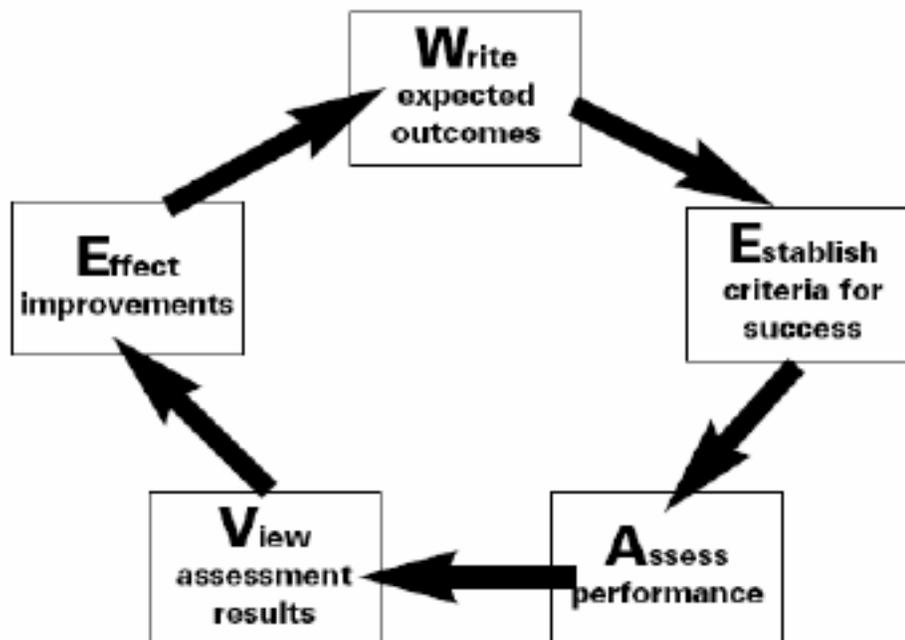
The WEAVE cycle begins when goals and objectives are articulated. Once these are established, each unit must determine how to measure those goals and objectives and decide how well they are being met. Next, conduct the assessment activities and determine the results and findings. Then the department or administrative/educational support unit reviews the results and determine any actions to be taken, including any changes that need to be made to improve learning or services.

Academic Program Assessment

When developing and implementing assessment strategies for an academic program, it is important to keep in mind three purposes: to improve, to inform and to demonstrate. Each department or program needs to design an assessment process that provides information that can be used to determine whether intended outcomes are being achieved and how programs can be improved.

Write Expected Outcomes

Step 1: Articulate the mission or purpose of your academic program.
Your program's mission statement or statement of purpose links the program or department to your college or school and ultimately to the overall mission of MSU. In formulating or revising a purpose or mission statement that is integrated into the university's mission, review the university's mission and identify how your academic program supports MSU's mission.

Step 2: Define educational and programmatic goals and objectives, including desired student learning outcomes.
If any single step is the key for assessment planning, this is it. You will assess student learning relative to the educational goals and objectives you agree upon and establish for your program or department.
A goal is a general statement about the aims or purposes of education in your program. Goals are long-range outcomes that are written in broad, sometimes vague language.
An objective is a specific statement that describes a desired learning outcome for your program. This concept of a learning outcome seems to be the most difficult type of objective for people to understand, but it is really quite straightforward. Peter Ewell, a well-known national assessment researcher, puts it this way: "A student learning outcome is defined in terms of the particular levels of knowledge, skills and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences."

You might choose the following objectives to assess:
- Knowledge outcomes:
  - Major or discipline content
  - Modes of inquiry

- Core curricular outcomes (MSU Specific)
  - Communication skills
  - Intellectual skills
  - Quantitative skills
  - Knowledge of human cultures
  - Knowledge of the natural world
  - Knowledge of aesthetics
- Skills outcomes
  - Those required for effective practice in the discipline or in future employment
  - Ability to work with others
  - Listening skills
  - Teamwork or leadership
- Attitudes and values
  - Personal
  - Social
  - Ethical
- Behavioral outcomes (most of these are outcomes that are important to your program but do not give direct evidence of student learning):
  - Current students
    - Persistence and choice of major
    - Course selection and completion
  - Former students
    - Employment information
    - Graduate school or other further education
    - Professional activities
    - Community contributions
    - Evaluation of satisfaction with the program's preparation

Establish Criteria for Success

Step 3: Identify and describe appropriate assessment instruments or methods.

After you have identified goals and objectives, decide on appropriate assessment approaches. What sources of evidence could you gather that would convince you (and others) that your students are reaching the desired learning objectives?

Comprehensive assessment strategies frequently require the use of more than one assessment to determine program effectiveness. Before you feel overwhelmed, here are a couple of points to keep in mind:

- It is possible to stagger assessments – not every assessment has to be conducted every semester or every year. They can be done on a biennial or triennial basis, if appropriate.
- Course grades – while a source of information about individual student achievement, these do **not** provide information about overall programmatic outcomes.

Step 4: Establish criteria for learning success.

It is important to know what level of achievement will tell you that your program helps students achieve learning success. Here are only a few examples; think of what is important to you:
- 70% of students can solve a complex, real-world program using skills developed in your program.
- A panel of faculty members rate highly (using a common rubric) the performance of students on their oral presentations in a capstone course.
- 75% of students can take reference materials and write an acceptable speech for a town council.
- An employer survey indicates that graduates have appropriate entry-level skills.
- 80% of students can pass your professional licensure exam on the first attempt.
- Panels of reviewers confirm that student portfolios reflect progressive development of critical thinking skills over time in your program.
- 95% of students indicate satisfaction with your program.
- Interviews with graduating seniors indicate that students are satisfied with your program, but desire more internship possibilities.

Assess Performance of Students

Step 5: Conduct assessment activities

Put your plan into action. Conducting assessment activities could include having a panel read a set of papers, taking a sample of oral presentations and reviewing the videotapes, or conducting a focus group with seniors. This time is useful to see what students can do, find out what they think and look more closely at your curriculum. Think through developing the tools you will need.

If you plan assessments so that they are comparable over time and the sample sizes are adequate, you can gather valuable feedback on your program's effectiveness.

View Assessment Results

Step 6: Analyze the findings from your assessments
What are the implications of the findings? How did students do compared to your expectations? What program changes could you make to improve student knowledge and skills that did not reach criterion success levels? What can you infer from the data? What future actions should your program take?

As you discuss the assessment results and their implications with others in your program, remember to celebrate what the program has accomplished in relation to what it hoped to accomplish. Are students achieving expected outcomes? This is also a time for you to revisit and improve your assessment measures.

Remember to document assessment findings. Summarize the results for reporting purposes, but be sure to retain details of documentation in your own files so that you can review performance, and progress, over time.

Step 7: Implement changes to enhance quality.

The results of this process should not sit on your shelf. To avoid having done a hollow exercise, you must "close the loop." If you have moved through the steps of this model, you will have evidence in hand that is important to you; use it to make improvements in your academic program in order to improve student learning. How can you help students develop the outcomes you wish to see? Perhaps you need to add or modify learning opportunities, give more chances for students to develop their skills in certain areas, or improve advising so that students take courses in a sequence that helps them develop key skills.

Also, review the assessment plan. Is it time to make changes in goals and objectives? Are the assessment methods giving you the quantity and quality of information you need?

Benefits of Using a Formal Assessment Model

Even without formal assessment procedures, faculty have constantly explored in their own ways what worked well and what didn't, and then used those observations and impressions to make changes in their courses and curriculum. Formal assessment (like the type discussed here) simply makes those informal activities more systematic, more focused, more effective, and more public. Assessment can facilitate improvement through a variety of venues. When faculty members are directly involved in the development, implementation, and analysis of assessment activities, a number of specific benefits result.

Administrative and Educational Support Program Assessment

SACS-COC uses the term "Administrative and Educational Support Units" for a wide range of programs and activities that do not award degrees. At a university like MSU, these units have many different missions and serve many different people. Even so, it is possible to work through the WEAVE process to develop appropriate assessment approaches for any unit. While you are "WEAVEing", consider how you can integrate any relevant professional standards, criteria, etc., into your thinking.

Write Expected Outcomes

Step 1: Articulate the mission or purpose of your unit.

Your unit's mission statement or statement of purpose links the functions of your unit to the overall mission of MSU. In formulating or revising a purpose or mission statement that is integrated into the university's mission, you should review the university's mission and identify how your unit supports MSU's mission.

Here are a few questions to consider in formulating the purpose or mission of your unit:
- What is the primary function of your unit?
- What core activities are involved?
- What should those you serve experience after interacting with your unit?

Step 2: Define your unit's objectives

Here are three categories of objectives:
- ***Outcome statements*** concern gains you want those you serve to make – for example, what can someone do after interacting with your unit?
- ***Process statements*** concern the accomplishments of your unit's functions, such as:
  - Level or volume of activity
  - Efficiency with which you conduct the processes
  - Compliance with external standards or regulations
- ***Satisfaction statements*** describe how those you serve rate their satisfaction with your unit's processes or services

In drafting objectives, it may help to create a flowchart of your unit's work processes to determine what your unit will accomplish and what students, faculty, staff, and others will think, know or do following the provision of the service.

Consider such questions as:
- What are the most important results or impacts that should occur as a result of your unit's activities?
- What are your critical work processes and how should they function?
- What does the end user experience through interaction with your unit?

SMART is an acronym that is often used to determine how well an objective is formulated. A good objective is a SMART objective when it is:

Specific – Be clear about what your unit plans to accomplish, as well as when, where or how. For example, "we will expand our services" does not specify how or by how much or for how many customers the services will be expanded. Words such as develop, encourage and enhance lack specificity. Action words such as locate or reduce make objectives more specific.

Measurable – Quantify your objective as to targets and benefits, so that your unit can determine if it has reached the objective.

Achievable – Know the objective is something that your unit can accomplish. It is fine to accomplish your objective in incremental steps over several years.

Realistic – Make sure the objective is something that can be done practically in a specific time frame or for a specific amount of money.

Time-bound – When will the objective be completed? Tie the objective to a specific time frame.

Establish Criteria for Success

Step 3: Determine appropriate assessment measures and criteria

Once you establish your unit's objectives, define and identify the sources of evidence you will use to determine whether you are achieving expected impacts. You must detail what will be measured and how it will be measured. For each outcome, create measures that help your unit in making critical decisions about its processes and services.

Build an inventory of existing evaluation and assessment activities. Ask colleagues in similar units at other institutions how they assess their efficiency and effectiveness. When designing your assessment, you should use multiple measures. A composite of results can yield a more realistic picture of your unit's performance.

Common types of assessment

- Attitudinal – measures of satisfaction from those you serve
- Direct – counts of unit services
- External – validation (neutral party, auditor, professional standards)

Criteria or targets for success

Always aim for a criterion level that stretches your unit's performance. For example:

- How well should we serve our clients?
- 95% of our users will be "very satisfied or satisfied" with our services
- At least 80% of eligible employees will participate in training
- 90% of the transcripts will be sent within three days
- 90% of the forms will be processed without errors

Assess Performance of Unit

Step 4: Conduct assessment activities

Put your assessment plan into action. You must set a schedule for conducting assessment activities. Some assessments may take place monthly, others annually and others even on a triennial basis. Conduct a focus group of those you serve,

survey people who have participated in your unit's activities, have an expert come through and review your processes. This time is to find out what others say about your operation.

View Assessment Results

Step 5: Analyze the findings from your assessments.

Once the results from your assessments have been collected, see what they can tell you about your unit. Consider asking questions such as:
- What can you infer from the data?
- What future actions will you take?
- What changes have you made (or will you make) based on assessment results?
- What are the budgetary implications?

As each unit discusses the assessment results and their implications, celebrate when the unit has accomplished what it planned to accomplish! Come to a clear understanding and agreement on areas that still present opportunities for growth and improvement. Document the findings of assessment. Summarize the results for reporting purposes; and, be sure to put these into the WEAVE Online Assessment Management system. As you discuss results, revisit and improve your assessment measures.

Effect Improvements to Increase Unit Performance

Step 6: Use your results

The quality enhancement process is not completed until the "loop is closed" and the results are used to make improvements to services. Typical changes in services might include:
- Revising organizational structure
- Reallocating resources
- Revamping administrative procedures
- Modifying or expanding relations with public or external agencies

The decisions made regarding the course of action for the following year also may lead to a restructuring or revision of your unit's objectives for the following year.

Assessing the Assessment Plan

While specific learning outcomes will differ widely from unit to unit across campus, there are some elements of an assessment plan that should be included. An assessment plan rubric approved by MSUs Assessment Oversight Committee will be utilized in order to give meaningful and appropriate feedback to departments. In addition, each department/unit is encouraged to use the Assessment Plan Rubric to regularly update and modify their existing plan so that the specific assessment plan meets the needs of the department/unit. The Assessment Plan Rubric is designed to be constructive and formative in terms of helping to continuously improve the assessment process across campus.

Assessment materials from Texas Christian University, University of North Carolina – Greensburg, and WEAVE Education were helpful in compiling this document.