Committee Draft

Theme One: Improving Learning Through Assessing Program Outcomes

BYU-Hawaii has a long-standing practice of program reviews. These reviews are conducted by departments, by the school or college in which they reside, by a university faculty committee chaired by one of its members, and by a university administrative committee chaired by the Vice President for Academics. The program review process is directed by the President's Council of the University.

Building on these program reviews, the University, as a community of learners, was desirous of developing a culture of learning assessment and accountability. In March 2001, Jim and Karen Nichols were invited to meet with BYUH faculty and administrators. The purpose of this visit was to help BYUH initiate and develop assessment plans that focused on student learning and program outcomes assessment. Following their visit, BYUH organized an institution-wide University Assessment Committee (UAC) to oversee annual departmental assessment efforts.

The UAC requested that each of the departments/programs at BYUH create an annual assessment plan. These plans were initially submitted in the fall of 2001.

Each plan consisted of:

1. An indication of the segments of the University’s Mission Statement that were applicable to the program.
2. The program’s mission statement.
3. Three to five expected learning outcomes associated with the program’s mission statement.
4. Two measurable means of assessment for each of the learning outcomes.

Under the direction of the UAC, every program at the University has now embarked on an annual cycle of assessment and evaluation. At the end of each year, the departments report on their assessment of the learning outcomes. Success and weaknesses are noted, and the departments submit action plans to improve their outcome results.

After the initial assessment and evaluation cycle, several departments refined their learning objectives as well as their means of outcome assessment. We expect that modifications will continue as departments develop additional skills in specifying outcomes and measuring performance.

The current program learning outcomes can be broadly classified into two groups; 1) development of specified skills and/or knowledge, and 2) employment or graduation school
attendance following graduation. Although a variety of means of assessment were detailed, the assessment measures can be summarized into the following categories:

1. External, nationally administered exams and tests
2. Locally created and administered exams and tests
3. Student Portfolios
4. Capstone papers, presentations and/or performances (including video or audio recordings)
5. External reviewers of student skills and performance
6. Internal reviewers of student skills and performance
7. Service projects
8. Surveys of students, alumni, and employers
9. Other methods

With the implementation of the review process, the University must evaluate whether individually and collectively the department learning outcomes are consistent with WASC expectations. This means that the University needs to respond to the following questions:

1. To what extent are BYUH’s educational programs appropriate in content, standards, and nomenclature for the degree level awarded, regardless of mode of delivery, and staffed by sufficient numbers of faculty qualified for the type and level of curriculum offered? (Note: This may be a capacity issue.)

2. How are BYUH’s outcomes for learning and student attainment developed and what process is used to widely disseminate these among its members (faculty, students, staff, and where appropriate, external stakeholders)?

3. At what level do BYUH’s faculty take collective responsibility for establishing, reviewing, fostering, and demonstrating the attainment of these outcomes?

4. How do BYUH’s academic programs actively involve students in learning, rigorously challenge them to achieve high expectations, and provide them with immediate and appropriate positive and corrective feedback as needed?

5. To what extent can BYUH demonstrate that its graduates consistently achieve its stated levels of attainment and ensure that its expectations for student learning are embedded in the criteria and standards faculty use to evaluate student work?

6. What processes are in place to demonstrate that BYUH actively values and promotes scholarship, curricular and instructional innovation, and creative activity, as well as their dissemination at levels and of the kinds appropriate to its Mission Statement?

7. How does BYUH undertake to regularly identify the characteristics of its students and assesses their needs, experiences, and levels of satisfaction to shape a learning-centered environment and to deliberately promote student success?
With the University having commenced with program assessment, the next step in the assessment process is to encourage the faculty to develop learning objectives and assessment measures for their individual courses. The learning outcomes for the courses in a program should complement the overall program objectives. Each course should be linked to one or more of the learning outcomes specified for the program. As faculty assess the learning outcomes of their individual courses and strive to improve their courses, the program outcomes will be improved as well.

This step is a difficult one as it requires a commitment by the faculty to document the learning outcomes and assessment measures for their courses. Since many faculty perceive that they are already informally measuring their students’ learning, they believe that documenting the process has high costs in time and effort and yields no additional benefit. In fact, it is expected that through formalizing the course assessment process and improved data collection and documentation, the faculty will gain additional insights that may not be available through informal, anecdotal observations.

Possible methods to be used by the University to support development of individual course outcomes assessment include:

1. Creation of a University web-page with links to resource materials including summaries of research on the effectiveness of outcomes assessment and examples of course well-crafted course syllabi. Examples of low cost methods of assessment will be particularly helpful.

2. Provision of incentives for faculty to develop course objectives and assessment methods. These could be financial incentives and/or course load reductions.

3. Training seminars conducted by faculty who have successfully implemented a learning objectives and assessment process in courses they teach.

4. Inclusion of course assessment efforts in merit evaluations, continuing faculty status, and rank advancement reviews.

5. Request additional reviews including presentations by the deans and associate deans to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the UAC of department annual assessment reports and course assessment efforts.

However, none of these efforts is likely to have much impact if the faculty believe that the assessment process is not making a difference in the educational effectiveness at the University. The current assessment efforts may be viewed by some faculty members as just a means to provide accountability data to campus administrators while producing little or no value to students and faculty.

To overcome these attitudes, the faculty must be presented with evidence that outcomes assessment indeed enhances the learning environment. Our faculty are highly committed to
enhancing the learning of our students. If they believe that outcomes assessment will improve their ability to teach and the students capability to learn, they will embrace the process.

Only through closing the loop to include feedback and changes by individual faculty in their course will the departments/programs achieve continuing improvement in their outcomes. This will require efforts in assessing results and undertaking actions for improvement at department, program, and course levels.

To help the faculty understand the effectiveness of outcomes assessment, the University could:

1. Follow-up with department action plans to improve learning. Departments and faculty should report on the improvements to teaching and learning that have resulted from the assessment process.

2. Publicize successes that departments and faculty are having in assessing student learning in their programs. The University should develop a mechanism to share what departments and faculty are learning about the effectiveness of their assessment efforts. This should include the sharing of *best practices* being used in assessment at BYUH.

3. Have faculty members participate in national and regional assessment conferences. After returning from these conferences have those who attend report to their departments.

4. Identify faculty *champions* of assessment at the department level. Deans and department heads should provide opportunities for these champions to engage the faculty in discussions at the department level on why assessment efforts are critical.

5. Insure that discussion of assessment occurs regularly in faculty meetings and other faculty events. These discussions could include presentations by nationally recognized experts on assessment. Continually reminded of its importance, the faculty will understand that assessment should be a standard part of their teaching rather than just a passing fad.
Resources


