

Defining Assessment

Hello! As the new Director of Assessment and Institution Research at Morningside College, I have been doing quite a bit of thinking about how I can help the assessment efforts on campus. If an institution asked me to serve as a independent consultant to their assessment program, the first three questions I would ask are: (1) "What is your institution's definition of assessment?", (2) "Based on that definition, to what extent does your institution have a shared understanding of the purpose of assessment?", and (3) "Does your institution have a set of guidelines for assessment that clearly identifies who is responsible for what, how and when?".

One of my goals for this academic year is to work with CPC and the faculty to develop a set of guidelines for assessment so that we have a common definition, work toward shared understandings, and document what the College's expectations are in regard to assessment. In addition to guidelines, I will also be working on an assessment handbook and holding workshops and consultations to help faculty and departments with their assessment efforts.

Let's start with a definition of assessment as assessment can mean different things to different people. Assessment can mean (1) to measure something, (2) an instrument used to measure something, (3) findings or results, and (4) a process. In higher education, assessment usually refers to a process used to gather, analyze and use information for the purpose of improvement. Since, at this time, we are most concerned about assessment of the academic components, a definition of academic assessment that I have recommended to CPC is:

"The systematic and ongoing process used by faculty and students to gather, analyze, and use information to improve student learning."

Let's consider components of that definition.

"To improve student learning". The purpose of assessment should be aligned with an institution's mission. The most basic component of any institution of higher education is student learning. Certainly, learning is an important part of Morningside's purpose. In particular, Morningside's mission emphasizes lifelong learning, and that could be interpreted to mean that we should also be assisting students to learn how to self-assess their learning and their learning needs so that they can continue their learning after graduation.

"By faculty and students". Those individuals most directly involved in the activities or processes to be improved, should also be the ones empowered to make necessary changes. The literature on assessment in higher education consistently observes that academic assessment is the responsibility of the faculty. As stewards of the curriculum, faculty members are most directly involved in designing and providing the formal learning experiences for students and should also be the ones most directly involved in gathering, analyzing, and using information for the improvement of those

learning experiences. The obvious role for students is participating as the subjects of study. However, as the individuals most directly affected by the experience, students should also be involved in all facets of the assessment process. This matches with Morningside's vision statement, which notes that the College is a "student-centered participatory community".

"Systematic and ongoing process". To have a process means that we have an agreed upon approach to assessment. For our process to be systematic, we need to have agreed upon plans, procedures and timelines. To be ongoing, we need to carry out and sustain the process throughout the year, and not be engaged in assessment on an episodic basis.

"To gather, analyze, and use information". For our assessment process to be complete, we need to include all three steps - gather the information, analyze the information, and use the information. Of the three steps, gathering is usually the step individuals new to assessment worry about most. Their questions center on what to assess and how. More experienced practitioners know that the "how" of gathering the information is actually not that different than what already goes on inside the institution, and it is the use of information that they are concerned about.

In closing, I'd like to note that my own involvement in assessment as a faculty member grew out of my curiosity about student learning. Academic assessment, as defined above, is a process that starts with a question about improving student learning. The process is the approach we can use for trying to answer that question. In the end, I think that the most important characteristic of someone involved in assessment is intellectual curiosity.