

Best Practices in Learning Outcomes Assessment

American Association for Higher Education (AAHE): Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning¹

These nine principles were developed under the auspices of the AAHE Assessment Forum with support from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education with additional support for publication and dissemination from the Exxon Education Foundation.

1. Educational Values: The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.
2. Multidimensional & Longitudinal: Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.
3. Clear Purpose: Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.
4. Outcome Related: Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.
5. Ongoing Process: Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic. Assessment is a process whose power is cumulative.
6. Educational Community Involvement: Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.
7. Stems from Important Issues: Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.
8. One Part of the Larger Whole: Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.
9. Meeting Responsibilities: Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.

Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U): Elements of Good Assessment Practice²

These eight elements describe emerging consensus among education leaders towards liberal learning outcomes that are essential for baccalaureate graduates.

1. The use of both formative assessment, for the purpose of giving feedback and making improvement, and summative assessment, for the purpose of identifying levels of attainment.
2. Multiple methods that include both qualitative and quantitative evidence.
3. Authentic methods that arise from students' actual assignments and learning experiences, which might be both curricular and co-curricular.

¹ Authors: Alexander W. Astin; Trudy W. Banta; K. Patricia Cross; Elaine El-Khawas; Peter T. Ewell; Pat Hutchings; Theodore J. Marchese; Kay M. McClenney; Marcia Mentkowski; Margaret A. Miller; E. Thomas Moran; Barbara D. Wright.

² Association of American Colleges and Universities. *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree*. (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities 2004) chapter 3.

4. Assessments that are developmental, so that students and others can observe progress toward valued outcomes, perhaps through the use of portfolios.
5. A focus on higher, more sophisticated knowledge and capacities rather than on more easily measured basic skills.
6. Faculty ownership of not just the education but also, because it is inherent to the learning process itself, the assessment of students; whether they teach major or general education courses, faculty need to create, implement, and sustain the program to educate and assess students.
7. Assessment as continuous, systematic, and multi-dimensional.
8. An ongoing, systematic process for using assessment results to improve teaching, learning, and the curriculum.

Assessing Learning Outcomes: Consortium Benchmarking Study, Best-in-Class Report:³

11 key findings for best practices in assessing learning outcomes:

1. Good assessment plans are strategic in nature. They clarify the purposes of the assessment activities and tie each to the organization's mission, vision, and key goals.
2. Widespread involvement of all stakeholders, established early and maintained over time, yields an organizational culture that embraces assessment.
3. The adoption and implementation of an assessment plan is best begun promptly when the need is recognized and then allowed to evolve slowly. It is important to balance the need for buy-in with the time required for a sound implementation.
4. In-depth analysis and periodic review of the needs and interests of internal and external stakeholders drive the choice of which learning outcomes to assess and how they are assessed.
5. The use of multiple methods of assessment can enhance reliability. Additionally, to ensure that a process is valid and measures what it is intended to measure, each activity and instrument should be tied to its purpose and the strategy for achieving that purpose.
6. Integrating assessment with other ongoing performance improvement efforts within an organization enhances the long-term viability of the assessment program and its usefulness to the overall organization.
7. Successful organizations take a decentralized approach to assessment, pushing responsibility and ownership to those on the front lines.
8. Assessment is integral to learning and most effective when included as a responsibility for each member of the organization, as opposed to being an add-on effort.
9. The primary purpose of obtaining and reporting assessment findings is to improve the organization and, in particular, its employees' and students' learning. Accordingly, the findings are best used in non-punitive ways.
10. Educating those who will use the assessment data is the key to shifting the focus of assessment from the data to an overall process.
11. Best-practice organizations continually communicate the assessment activities and results to their constituents.

³ American Productivity and Quality Center, *Assessing Learning Outcomes. Consortium Benchmarking Study, Best-in-Class Report* (Houston: American Productivity and Quality Center, 1998), 9-10. 43 institutions participated in the study.