Center for Teaching Excellence
Hampton University
Teaching Matters

Outcomes Assessment: A Step Toward Continuous Improvement

By Spencer Baker

As an assessment geek, I have always found outcomes assessment beneficial to growth and improvement in both my professional life and my personal life. However, the language used to discuss outcomes assessment makes it hard to communicate. We try to simply put it as "begin with the end in mind" but it is more complicated and time-consuming. At Hampton University, we have always endeavored to measure those important outcomes to indicate our growth. On the academic side, we made a major step during the fall semester of 2004. We established student competencies for each year of our majors' matriculation. We then went further and identified competencies for all general studies areas and established a strong foundation for measuring whether we were achieving our goals. These steps led to our current endeavor of establishing what our graduates should know and what they can do. This endeavor is not an individual effort but requires a concerted effort from all associated with departments and programs. During several meetings with administrators, deans, chairs, and department assessment facilitators, a broad outline was established to develop outcome assessments. These assessments are not new because you will find the same requirements in our Institutional Program Review criteria and our different external accreditation criteria.

The broad outline began with brainstorming sessions with faculty to determine what knowledge, skills, and abilities our graduates should possess and be able to demonstrate. This brainstorming should include information from outside sources such as your graduates and places where our graduates are seeking employment. The next step was to identify the level at which our graduates should possess these skills and knowledge and be able to perform. These steps could then be identified as specific intended learner outcomes using action verbs and observable behavior of the student. When reviewing these specific intended learner outcomes, similar areas can be grouped to form your department or program objectives. This is a complicated procedure of ensuring your department or program objectives are aligned with the University's mission and your goals. These specific intended learner outcomes must be measurable. However, the department or program determines what is most important and what should be measured. To ensure that the specific intended learner outcome is measured well, more than one measure should be used. A procedure must then be established to collect data on those specific intended learner outcomes that you decide are important.

Once a year, or more often, these measures should be reviewed to provide faculty information on how well you are achieving the department or program objectives. What if you are not achieving the specific intended learner outcomes? Should courses be modified or should new ones be added? What if the specific intended learner outcomes are easily achieved? Are there redundant courses or is the level inappropriate? Are we measuring the right specific intended learner outcomes? Are our department objectives or program objectives realistic? Based on these questions and their answers, you should make adjustments to your courses and requirements. Of course, this is an ongoing process.

Although establishing your foundations is time consuming and involves hard work, it pays multiple dividends in monitoring your majors' knowledge, skills and abilities. These efforts will provide you with data for you to make decisions and become more efficient. Each of us will be able to create input and become a part of the entire process. As I began this article acknowledging that I am an assessment geek, it all makes sense to me. However, it may not be clear to all. I will continue working with assessment facilitators to help clarify outcomes assessment and how it is a step to continuous improvement.

As the Institutional Assessment Coordinator, Dr. Baker assists departmental assessment facilitators with training in assessment of student learning outcomes, analysis, development and alignment of curricula, development of outcome-oriented objectives, use of classroom research techniques, analysis of learning objectives, and with methods to motivate department colleagues to become actively involved in measurement of student learning outcomes and improvement of instructional skills.

Upcoming Events

Evaluating Faculty to Improve Classroom Performance Conference

June 7 - 9, 2006 : Vail, CO
For a full program and to register, please visit the website at
https://www.academicimpressions.com/conferences/0606-evaluating-faculty.php

Professional Grant Development Workshop
May 30 - June 1, Proposal Writing I
George Washington University
Arlington Campus

June 5 - June 7, Proposal Writing I
Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia

Sponsored by: The Grant Training Center
(Online at: http://www.granttrainingcenter.com)
Please visit the website for a full program and to register.