

Report of the Task Force on Assessment
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Charge to the Task Force on Assessment (from the University Plan Steering Committee): “The University needs to develop and employ both divisional and institution-wide tools to ensure that academic programs are meeting their objectives. The benefits of such an approach are substantial. How do we move in that direction?”

The Need for Educational Outcome Assessment at Case Western Reserve University

Educational outcome assessment is the process by which the University asks itself questions like: “Are CWRU students achieving the educational goals the university has identified?” and “What can make learning a more effective experience?” As a University that values discovery and self-improvement, research on the learning processes that take place on our campus should be a natural and regular part of our academic enterprise, one that should find acceptance within all segments of the University community. Such activity will help Case Western Reserve University to progress towards its aspiration for excellence.

Educational outcome assessment is the means by which the University determines whether expectations for learning are actually being met. The benefits to developing and implementing an effective and encompassing outcome assessment plan are many. These include, among others: (1) identifying beneficial modifications to courses or curricula; (2) benefiting the manner in which instruction is delivered; (3) specifying and providing access to appropriate resources for approaches that lead to improved learning within the various curricula; (4) informing the University where we are succeeding in our educational mission, benchmarking our success, and pointing where improvements need to be made; (5) providing information to help the University to be accountable to its constituencies and be responsive to their needs; and (6) building a climate that values the scholarship of teaching and learning.

In addition to improving our students’ learning, there are other secondary benefits to performing educational outcome assessment. For example, outcome assessment data can be used to challenge myths and assumptions about the learning that goes on in our academic programs. Such data can also be used as a basis for strategies to improve efficiency and economy of our teaching enterprise. Also, in some circumstances, educational outcome assessment data may be useful as a benchmark of our performance compared to other peer or aspirant universities.

Desirable Characteristics of an Educational Outcome Assessment Plan

In order for an educational outcome assessment plan to be meaningful and effective, the core philosophy underlying the process must be improvement of the quality of student learning. Data collection, analysis of the results, and any actions taken in response should all be performed for the goal of advancing learning on our campus. Collection of data, without subsequent analysis and action, is insufficient.

The focus of assessment should be on explicit academic outcomes (e.g., expectations of student performance in courses and curricula, plus results that last beyond) which are defined in a manner that makes them measurable (assessable) by understandable techniques. Such outcomes need to be specified at multiple levels, ranging from the school down to individual academic programs. Educational outcomes need to be described in a more detailed manner than global program objectives. School- or department-based committees are essential to this process.

In order for educational outcome assessment practice to be effective and accepted by the University Community as a legitimate basis for quality improvement, assessment should be based on evaluation of specific evidence (data). In addition, assessment should be done on a regular basis, especially to monitor the changes and quality improvement that are intended to result from assessment activities.

External Drivers for Outcome Assessment

There are approximately twenty organizations or professional societies that provide accreditation for many of the University's schools or programs. Most of these external accrediting bodies now require some level of educational outcome assessment, and the trend is to increase the level of significance placed on educational outcome assessment for future accreditation actions.

At the institutional level, Case Western Reserve University receives its accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), one of the seven regional accreditation bodies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. CWRU currently enjoys accreditation status, and will stand for reevaluation of its status in the year 2015. However, our University is currently out of compliance with the HLC/NCA accreditation criteria.

For example, one of the core components from HLC criterion 3 reads: "The organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible." At the present, not all educational programs at CWRU have explicitly stated the expected student learning outcomes. In addition, one of the core components from HLC criterion 2 reads: "The organization's ongoing evaluation and assessment processes provide reliable evidence of institutional effectiveness that clearly informs strategies for continuous improvement." Currently, not all academic programs at CWRU perform outcome assessment.

In addition to pressures from accreditation, the Ohio Board of Regents is calling for universities throughout the State to be more accountable for the learning achievements of students. The

Regents request that each university develop and publicize a Student Success Plan (<http://regents.ohio.gov/StudentSuccess/>). This requirement provides additional focus on the need for rigorous outcome assessment process.

Plans for Advancing Outcome Assessment at CWRU

The Task Force recommends the following steps for improving, implementing, and establishing value of outcome assessment across the University.

- 1) Catalog and publish (on the web) educational objectives for each academic program. Establish educational objectives in those areas where now none are explicitly stated.
- 2) Identify and record the expected learning outcomes for each degree program. Describe how these learning outcomes are addressed through the set of curricular and other academic experiences of the students in each program.
- 3) Perform a review to ensure that the school objectives, program objectives, and course objectives are all aligned.
- 4) Identify and organize outcome assessment data currently being collected within the University
- 5) Build a culture of assessment at the University.

While the first four items are relatively straightforward to pursue, there is a significant amount of work involved to complete these four tasks.

The fifth item is expected to prove more challenging. There are numerous potential barriers to address, including: (1) the reluctance of some faculty to believe in the value of assessment; (2) the belief of some faculty that assessment interferes with (is a time drag on) their teaching; (3) the resistance of some faculty who may feel forced into acting on assessment results in which they do not believe; (4) the fear of some faculty that the consequences of assessment could be punitive; (5) the preference of some faculty to believe they understand the effectiveness of their teaching, and the corresponding reluctance to know the actual data; (6) the unwillingness of some faculty to let someone external to the course/program to evaluate progress toward achieving educational outcomes; (7) having assessment understood and valued by all stakeholders (i.e., assessment is not done just for the purpose of complying with accreditation criteria); (8) reluctance of some leaders and faculty to commit necessary resources (people and money) to assessment activities and (9) a culture of the faculty and administration that values research and scholarship more so than teaching.

In order to advance a culture of assessment, several approaches can be followed. For example, the University can follow the UCITE model to promote awareness and advancement of assessment. This could entail sponsoring seminars/lunch discussions on outcome assessment, providing limited funding for assessment initiatives, bringing a national expert to campus to promote assessment activities and help departments develop their assessment plans, or hosting a national conference on outcome assessment. In addition, a top-down component would be valuable; University leaders would first need to express buy-in to the advantages of a stronger emphasis on outcome assessment (including the notion that it is a regular expectation of the

academic process), and could even commit resources to outcome assessment activities. Faculty members who have done good work on outcome assessment could be celebrated, encouraged to continue this activity, and given “credit” for this work as part of his/her performance review.

Resources for Advancing Educational Outcome Assessment at Case.

In order to make effective progress toward improving educational outcome assessment at CWRU, financial and personnel resources must be identified and dedicated to this goal. Several categories of activities requiring new resources can be envisioned:

- 1) Training and education about outcome assessment for those departments and faculty who are at the nascent stages of assessment.
- 2) Additional institutional research personnel whose role would be to analyze outcome assessment data.
- 3) Hiring of a staff member whose (part-time?) activities would be to promote effective assessment practice within the units.
- 4) Facilities for the storage and archiving of outcome assessment data (such as an electronic portfolio).
- 5) Acquisition of external tools for outcome assessment (such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment instrument).
- 6) Resources toward building the culture for assessment.
- 7) Resources to accomplish the changes that the assessment results point out.
- 8) Hiring of faculty member(s) whose academic interest is assessment.
- 9) Establishment of an identifiable home office for educational outcome assessment. (Candidates include UCITE, Institutional Research, or the Provost’s Office.)