

Best Practices in Assessment: Top 10 Task Force Recommendations

from the APA Board of Educational Affairs Task Force on Psychology Major Competencies (2002)

1. Encourage department ownership to drive the process.

Faculty resistance to assessment activity can defeat the best designed assessment practices. Assessment planning should grow out of the fundamental questions the faculty have about how their contributions shape program success. This emphasis may involve addressing differences between an individual faculty member's personal goals (e.g. income, convenience, lifestyle, security, autonomy) and the collective goals of the department.

2. Define your objectives in the context of your institutional mission.

Create a shared mission and goals statement that reflects an emphasis on student learning. The values of the institution should be reflected in your department's plan. Faculty identification with the institution will reinforce assessment activities, particularly if faculty can envision that their results will have a positive impact on how the institution works.

3. Focus on collaboration and teamwork.

Faculty members must agree on assessment goals for planning to be meaningful. They may have to rise to a higher level of collaboration than may have been traditionally practiced in most departments. Collaboration within the department, across departments, and with higher administration will facilitate the best outcomes from assessment planning. All constituents must recognize that assessment skills must be developed and that colleagues can assist each other by sharing practices and strategies.

4. Clarify the purpose of assessment.

Assessment can serve dual purposes: Assessment can promote student learning or provide evidence for accountability requirements through an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses. Wherever possible, students should experience a direct, positive benefit from their participation in assessment activities.

5. Identify clear, measurable, and developmental student learning

Explicit identification of learning expectations facilitates the department's coherence about their goals. Sharing those expectations explicitly with students can provide an effective learning scaffold on which students can build their experiences and render effective performance. Outcomes can be specified in a developmental hierarchy, where possible.

6. Use multiple measures and sources consistent with resources.

Effective assessment planning can only occur when properly supported with appropriate time, money, and recognition for good work. The expansiveness of the assessment plan will depend on those resources. As resources permit, additional measures can be added to planning. These measures address variations in learning style, differences in types of learning, and interests from variable stakeholders.

7. Implement continuous assessment with clear, manageable timelines.

Better assessment practice involves spreading out assessment activity throughout the year and across years rather than conducting a marathon short-term assessment effort in a single year. Projecting a schedule of regular formal reviews can facilitate appropriate interim activity.

8. Help students succeed on assessment tasks.

Students will fare best in assessment activities when faculty make expectations explicit, provide detailed instructions, and offer samples or models of successful performance. They will benefit most with opportunities to practice prior to assessment and when given detailed feedback about the quality of their performance.

9. Interpret and use assessment results appropriately.

Assessment should be a stimulus for growth, renewal, and improvement, not an action that generates data to ensure positive outcomes. Linking funding to assessment outcomes may encourage artificial results. Assessment data should not be used for personnel decisions. If cross-institution comparisons are inevitable, care should be taken to ensure comparisons across comparable institutions (benchmarking).

10. Evaluate your assessment practices.

Results from assessment activity should be evaluated to address their reliability, validity, and utility. Poor student performance can reflect limited learning or an ill-designed assessment process. Examining how effectively