

Glossary of Assessment Terms
Compiled by Senate Assessment Council
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Assessment is essential to higher education, but, as Andrea Leskes, Vice President for Education and Quality Initiatives at AAC&U notes, “Higher education lacks a common vocabulary about assessment; and individuals use terms in mutating ways to refer to varying levels of analysis.” To address this issue, the WP Senate Assessment Council has compiled a glossary of assessment terms, drawing upon some seminal assessment sources.

Assessment has been variously defined. The following are two standard definitions:

- Assessment is “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development.” (Palomba & Banta, 1999).
- Assessment is “An ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. (Angelo, 1995).

Assessment for accountability: Assessment of some unit (could be a department, program or entire institution) to satisfy stakeholders external to the unit itself. Results are often compared across units. Such assessment is always summative (see “Summative Assessment”). Example: to retain national accreditation, the achievement of a 90 percent pass rate or better on teacher certification tests by graduates of a school of education. (AAC&U, 2002)

Assessment for improvement: Assessment that feeds directly, and often immediately, back into revising the course, program or institution to improve student learning results. Can be formative or summative (see “formative assessment” for an example). (AAC&U, 2002)

Assessment of individuals: Uses the individual student, and his/her learning, as the level of analysis. Can be quantitative or qualitative, formative or summative, standards-based or value added, and used for improvement. Would need to be aggregated if used for accountability purposes. Examples: improvement in student knowledge of a subject during a single course; improved ability of a student to build cogent arguments over the course of an undergraduate career. (AAC&U, 2002)

Accreditation: A process of peer review that the educational community has adopted for self-regulation since early in the 20th century. It is a voluntary process intended to strengthen and sustain the quality and integrity of higher education, making it worthy of public confidence. Institutions choose to apply for accredited status, and once accredited, they agree to abide by the standards of their accrediting organization and to regulate

themselves by taking responsibility for their own improvement. (MSCHE, nd) William Paterson University is accredited by the Middle States Commission of Higher Education (MSCHE). A number of William Paterson's academic programs are also accredited by external accrediting bodies (see Fact book, <http://www.wpunj.edu/dotAsset/e69f8a89-f3ed-446a-8094-188a3677a067.pdf>). Also note that discipline-specific accreditation is often required of specific programs, as, for example, CAEP formerly known as NCATE.

Articulation: Also known as Transfer Articulation, this process involves cooperation between two or more higher education institutions to match courses and facilitate the transfer of students' credits from one college or university to another. (MSCHE, nd)

Assessment of institutions: Uses the institution as the level of analysis. Can be quantitative or qualitative, formative or summative, standards-based or value added and used for improvement or for accountability. Ideally institution-wide goals and objectives would serve as a basis for the assessment. Example: how well students across the institution can work in multi-cultural teams as sophomores and seniors. (AAC&U, 2002)

Assessment of programs: Uses the department or program as the level of analysis. Can be quantitative or qualitative, formative or summative, standards-based or value added, and used for improvement or for accountability. Ideally program goals and objectives would serve as a basis for the assessment. Example: how sophisticated a close reading of texts senior English majors can accomplish (if used to determine value added, would be compared to the ability of newly declared majors). (AAC&U, 2002)

Benchmark assessments: Common assessments given periodically throughout the school year, at specified times during a curriculum sequence. The assessments evaluate students' knowledge and skills relative to an explicit set of longer-term learning goals. The design and choice of benchmark assessments is driven by the purpose, intended users, and uses of the instruments. Benchmark assessment can inform policy, instructional planning, and decision-making at the classroom, school, and district levels. (AACC, 2010)

Closing the assessment loop: Use of assessment findings in stimulating improvements; that is, studying assessment findings to see what improvements might be suggested and taking the appropriate steps to make them. (Palomba & Banta, 1999)

Direct assessment of learning: Gathers evidence, based on student performance, which demonstrates the learning itself. Can be value added, related to standards, qualitative or quantitative, embedded or not, using local or external criteria. Examples: most classroom testing for grades is direct assessment (in this instance within the confines of a course), as is the evaluation of a research paper in terms of the discriminating use of sources. The latter example could assess learning accomplished within a single course or, if part of a senior requirement, could also assess cumulative learning. Other examples include program level direct assessment, such as portfolios and standardized assessment instruments. (AAC&U, 2002) (See also "Indirect Assessment" below.)

Distance learning: An educational process in which all or the majority of the instruction occurs with the instructor and student in different locations. Instruction may be synchronous (in real time; simultaneous) or asynchronous. While distance education for many years took the form of correspondence study or classes delivered via television or pre-recorded video, in recent years much of distance education has moved to the Internet. MSCHE requires that a member institution obtain prior approval, through the Substantive Change process, before offering 50 percent or more of a degree or certificate program through distance education. The 50 percent standard includes only programs offered in their entirety via distance education, not programs utilizing mixed delivery methods. (MSCHE, nd. For current MSCHE guidelines on distance education, read the policy on [Substantive Change](#).)

Embedded assessment: A means of gathering information about student learning that is built into and a natural part of the teaching-learning process. Often used for assessment purposes, classroom assignments that are evaluated to assign students a grade. Can assess individual student performance or aggregate the information to provide information about the course or program; can be formative or summative, quantitative or qualitative. Example: as part of a course, expecting each senior to complete a research paper that is graded for content and style, but is also assessed for advanced ability to locate and evaluate web-based information (as part of a college-wide outcome to demonstrate information literacy). (AAC&U, 2002)

Evaluation: A process through which MSCHE and member institutions periodically and jointly conduct a review of the institution's adherence to the Commission's seven new standards. (MSCHE, nd. See more at <http://www.msche.org/documents/RevisedStandardsFINAL.pdf>.)

External assessment: Use of criteria (rubric) or an instrument developed by an individual or organization external to the one being assessed. Usually summative, quantitative, and often high-stakes (see below). Example: GRE exams, AACU's VALUE Rubrics. <https://www.aacu.org/value> (AAC&U, 2002)

Family Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA): The primary federal law that regulates student records and what limited information may be released without a student's permission. (MSCHE, nd. See more at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>.)

Formative assessment: The gathering of information about student learning-during the progression of a course or program and usually repeatedly-to improve the learning of those students. Example: reading the first lab reports of a class to assess whether some or all students in the group need a lesson on how to make them succinct and informative. (AAC&U, 2002) (See also Summative Assessment, below.)

“High stakes” use of assessment: The decision to use the results of assessment to set a hurdle that needs to be cleared for completing a program of study, receiving certification, or moving to the next level. Most often the assessment so used is externally developed, based on set standards, carried out in a secure testing situation, and administered at a

single point in time. Examples: at the secondary school level, statewide exams required for graduation; in postgraduate education, the bar exam. (AAC&U, 2002)

Indirect assessment of learning: Gathers reflection about the learning or secondary evidence of its existence. Example: a student survey about whether a course or program helped develop a greater sensitivity to issues of diversity. (AAC&U, 2002) (See also “Direct Assessment,” above.)

Local assessment: Means and methods that are developed by an institution's faculty based on their teaching approaches, students, and learning goals. Can fall into any of the definitions here except “external assessment,” for which is it an antonym. Example: one college’s use of nursing students’ writing about the “universal precautions” at multiple points in their undergraduate program as an assessment of the development of writing competence. (AAC&U, 2002)

Prior learning: Learning that has occurred outside the classroom and typically, before enrollment in college. In many cases credit can be awarded for prior learning through various means of assessment. Policies on credit for prior learning can vary between colleges, so consult the catalog of the institution in which you plan to enroll. (MSCHE)

Qualitative assessment: Collects data that does not lend itself to quantitative methods but rather to interpretive criteria (see the first example under “standards” in this document).

Quantitative assessment: Collects data that can be analyzed using quantitative methods (see “assessment for accountability” for an example). (AAC&U, 2002)

Rubric: A scoring tool that identifies the various criteria relevant to an assignment or learning outcome, and then explicitly states the possible levels of achievement along a continuum (poor to excellent or novice to expert).

Self-Study: The decennial evaluation of each MSCHE member institution consists of an extensive institutional self-study process that produces a written self-study report. This report and the Commission’s accreditation standards serve as the basis for an on-site evaluation by a team of peer evaluators. During self-study, the institution carefully considers its educational programs and services, with particular attention to student learning and achievement, and it determines how well these programs and services accomplish the institution’s goals, fulfill its mission, and meet the Commission’s standards. (MSCHE, nd; *See also Self Study: Creating a Useful Process and Report.*)

Stakeholders: At a college or university are those responsible for setting goals for student learning and for evaluating the achievement of those goals. including faculty, students, staff, administrators, and the general public. (MSCHE, nd)

Standards: Sets a level of accomplishment all students are expected to meet or exceed. Standards do not necessarily imply high quality learning; sometimes the level is a lowest

common denominator. Nor do they imply complete standardization in a program; a common minimum level could be achieved by multiple pathways and demonstrated in various ways. Examples: carrying on a conversation about daily activities in a foreign language using correct grammar and comprehensible pronunciation; achieving a certain score on a standardized test. (AAC&U, 2002)

Summative assessment: The gathering of information at the conclusion of a course, program, or undergraduate career to improve learning or to meet accountability demands. When used for improvement, impacts the next cohort of students taking the course or program. Examples: examining student final exams in a course to see if certain specific areas of the curriculum were understood less well than others; analyzing senior projects for the ability to integrate across disciplines. (AAC&U, 2002) (See also “Formative Assessment” above.)

Syllabus: A syllabus describes how a course will be taught, including the planned sequence of content, materials, activities, and assignments. A syllabus typically will also include a description of grading and attendance policies for the course. (MSCHE, nd)

Value added: The increase in learning that occurs during a course, program, or undergraduate education. Can either focus on the individual student (how much better a student can write, for example, at the end than at the beginning) or on a cohort of students (whether senior papers demonstrate more sophisticated writing skills-in the aggregate-than freshmen papers). Requires a baseline measurement for comparison. (AAC&U, 2002)

References

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Additional assessment terms can be found at McGraw Hills assessment dictionary. <https://www.ctb.com/ctb.com/control/assessmentGlossarySortViewAction?startLimit=C&endLimit=D&p=underAssess>