Program of Assessment

Summary

In fall 2016, NSC introduced a new assessment format. It incorporates two primary modes of assessment, with one emphasizing a deeper analysis of student learning (the Nichols method) and the other complementing this approach with a broader look at program elements. The former method is referred to as "Outcomes Assessment" (originally referred to as "even-year assessment"), and the latter is identified as "Program Assessment" (previously known as "odd-year assessment"). In this new format, assessment occurs every year, with outcomes assessment alternating against program assessment. The underlying premise, which emerged as one of the takeaways from our 2016 summer institute on assessment, was that the different information provided by each method – deep but specific for outcomes assessment and comprehensive but shallower for program assessment – would provide us with a fuller picture of program strengths and areas of improvement. Moreover, the comprehensive approach gives faculty an opportunity to examine an array of potential interest areas, from audits of assignment quality to surveys of program alumni. The catalyst for both types of assessment is an all-day retreat that was selected to improve the efficiency of the process and yield more time to respond to the assessment results, which had been an identified challenge in the past.

Learning Outcomes Assessment

During even years (e.g., 2016, 2018, etc.), NSC engages in program-level assessment, which uses a method pioneered by James O. Nichols to measure the student achievement of meaningful and measurable learning outcomes.[1] To begin, faculty use the five-year assessment schedule to determine a program-level learning outcome and the student artifacts that they will use to assess it. The Deans and Library Director, in consultation with area Department Chairs as appropriate, select assessment chairs for each program under review, who in turn select a three-person committee of faculty reviewers. This committee typically consists of three individuals with expertise in the discipline under examination, but often will include a strategically-selected faculty member from outside of the discipline. The Associate Vice Provost of Academic Initiatives and associate deans of the Schools assist with the collection of artifacts and the removal of any information that could link a student name to an artifact. In the fall semester, faculty from all colleges gather for an all-day retreat. During that retreat, the faculty assessment committees convene to evaluate student artifacts, using a defined rubric, and complete an initial draft of the Outcomes Assessment Report, which documents the committee's findings and their recommendations for program improvement. In the spring semester, following meetings between the assessment chairs and representatives from the Office of the Provost, the faculty furnish an Assessment *Progress* Report that details program improvements that have been implemented, identifies challenges, and outlines next steps.

The Assessment Retreat

In 2016, guided by faculty feedback and evaluation of the College's program of assessment, Nevada State began conducting the core assessment work at an all-day, off-campus retreat. Faced with a comparatively small number of faculty to conduct the work of assessment, the underlying idea was to collect all of the assessment data in a single day, thereby freeing up more time for faculty to focus on interpreting the results and, critically, exploring possible program improvements. In anonymous surveys, our faculty have almost universally preferred the retreat to the old assessment method, and the quality and breadth of program reporting and improvements arguably has increased in the wake

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[1] Prior to and during this process, faculty consistently re-examine the relevance and measurability of the student learning outcomes for their programs, and this review was a core component of the 2016 summer assessment institute.

of this new method. The retreat is guided by the Office of the Provost and includes the following core elements:

- The Office of the Provost (led by the AVP of Academic Initiatives) provides the Assessment Committee with a general draft template for the evaluation rubric. During the morning of the retreat, faculty refine the template by creating criteria to specifically measure the outcome being assessed and make minor adjustments to the language of the rating scale as needed.
- Committee members then rate two sample artifacts, compare ratings, discuss their interpretations of the criteria and ratings categories, and make final refinements to the rubric as needed. This helps ensure consistency in committee members' understanding and application of the assessment rubric and is an initial step toward good inter-rater reliability.
- During the afternoon session committee members rate all artifacts on a 4-point scale where 1= "Unsatisfactory," 2 = "Satisfactory," 3 = "Proficient," and 4 = "Excellent." After rating the artifacts from a single course, the committee discusses their overall impressions of the artifacts and students' mastery of the outcomes and notes general trends or themes as well as potential recommendations, before moving on to the next set of artifacts.
- After completing all assessments, the committee chair enters all ratings into a spreadsheet and sends the results to the Office of the Provost, along with a draft of initial recommendations, based on an established Outcomes Assessment Report template. The Provost's Office (represented by the Executive Vice Provost and AVA of Academic Initiatives) then meets with the assessment committee chair to discuss both the qualitative and quantitative results of the assessment and discusses possible areas of improvement, both in relation to the data and in the context of the assessment results for other programs. The chair is then asked to consult with the committee and other faculty in the department about the implementation of program improvements.
- At the end of the spring semester in the academic year in which the assessment occurred, the committee chair submits a completed Assessment Progress Report detailing a) areas identified for improvement, b) improvements, c) next steps, and d) optional commentary (e.g., challenges faced in the improvement process). This report, in turn, is expected to inform the next round of outcomes assessment in a cyclical fashion.

Outcomes Assessment Methodology
Several essential methodological elements enhance the quality and consistency of the Nichols assessment of student learning outcomes:

1. *Outcome alignment:* Faculty strive to develop clear, measurable learning outcomes that reflect meaningful achievements in the area of study. At the outset of each assessment cycle, faculty also are asked to carefully align these learning outcomes with institutional and school-wide missions and consensus goals of the field. In this fashion, we consistently ensure that each program contributes to larger strategic objectives and maximizes each student's potential for success in his or her respective field.
2. *Clear rubric:* Assessment is most effective if the evaluation of student performance is guided by a rubric that minimizes ambiguity by relying on clear, widely understood definitions and rating scales. A rubric is "a predefined scoring scheme to guide the analysis of student performance or artifacts" (Nicholas & Nichols, 2005, p. 110). It is applied as a set of rules for evaluating student performance, and it establishes a criterion by which the student will be deemed successful (e.g., at least a 3 on a 4-point scale).

3. To this end, rubrics "set a common understanding among multiple judges about what represents success in student learning" (Nichols & Nichols, 2005, p. 110). The rubric answers fundamental questions about how student performance will be measured, it discriminates between high- and low-quality student work, and it helps ensure that our judgments are valid and reliable. In general terms, it does this by clearly identifying several criteria by which a student's performance can be judged (e.g., relied on empirical data, provided a clear thesis statement) and then by delineating performance levels for each criterion (e.g., unsatisfactory, satisfactory, proficient, & excellent).

4. *Random Sampling:* A random and robust sample of student work (referred to as "artifacts") in this circumstance is our best chance of taking a representative snapshot of NSC student performance, and thereby is most likely to guide improvements that assist a broad proportion of our student population. Moreover, the artifacts selected for analysis are "key assessments" – culminating assignments that are designed to showcase important student knowledge and skills.

5. *Interrater Reliability:* Evaluating student work is an inherently subjective process that is particularly susceptible to the predilections of an individual evaluator. To minimize this subjectivity, each artifact is assessed by multiple independent raters, and the mean of these ratings is the critical outcome variable that guides recommendations about program changes. Moreover, the ratings from each evaluator are held to a high standard of inter-rater reliability to ensure that there is strong agreement among the different ratings, thereby ensuring that the outcome variable is not unduly influenced by the biases of a single individual.

6. *Value added:* For each outcome we assess a sample of student artifacts from lower-division classes and a separate sample from upper-division courses. In this fashion we can estimate how much progress students have made over time as a result of the quality of the instruction and curriculum in a particular program.

7. *Iterative philosophy:* Importantly, the act of assessment does not exist in isolation; rather, it is a process that yields recommendations, the implementation of those recommendations, and a follow-up assessment to determine the effectiveness of the changes. At the close of this basic three-stage cycle, the process begins anew, which in many ways is the only response to constantly evolving disciplines and the ever-changing needs of businesses, organizations, and the community.

Program Assessment

During odd years, the process of "program assessment" gives faculty an opportunity to evaluate the degree from a wider perspective, while asking questions of interest that provide a different perspective on student achievement. To this end, programs often do unique evaluations based on their five-year assessment schedule and examine elements of their program such as: the quality of assignments (via an assignment audit), student surveys, alumni surveys, and consistency in various syllabi. This assessment also includes a comprehensive report from Institutional Research of the program's "vital signs" (e.g., enrollment, retention, and graduation trends).

Program Assessment Methodology

Like the program-level outcomes assessment, this form of assessment asks faculty to meet for an all-day retreat. Prior to the retreat, the AVP of Academic Initiatives and associate deans of the Schools collects artifacts and removes identifying information if necessary. Faculty then develop a means of evaluating the artifacts (if they exist), complete their assessment, and work on developing a report which details their findings and makes suggestions for improvement. If the assessment does not involve artifacts, such as with a survey or focus group of students/alumni, the faculty develop the

process and parameters by which that evaluation will be conducted. In this assessment, the Office of Institutional Research also provides faculty with a data-driven report that captures the "vital signs" of the program, including yearly trends in enrollment, retention, and academic good standing rates, all disaggregated by mission-specific variables (e.g., race/ethnicity).