

QU Assessment Lexicon

Assessment:

A general definition of assessment (i.e., academic and co-curricular) at Quincy University speaks to the basic question asked by countless members of the academy throughout time. “What do we want our students to know, value (i.e., awareness, attitudes, and beliefs), and be able to do?” This simple question, by its very nature, often sparks a logical flow of additional questions including:

1. How do we (faculty and staff) know they (students) know it?
2. Have students learned what we intended or expected them to learn?
3. If not, what modifications can I make to help promote student learning in the outcome areas believed to be important to program (i.e., as reflected in the programs objectives)?

The process of assessing student learning, although seemingly daunting to many, is simply a formalized way of doing what faculty and staff members have always done. That is, evaluating where students are in regards to where we believe they should be, and making necessary modifications to help them get there.

Assessment is a process by which individuals utilize a variety of evaluation procedures (e.g., tests, measures, observations, interviews, surveys, etc.) to make informed decisions about the status of the subject under investigation. For example, one might use a survey questionnaire to measure student engagement (i.e., investment in subject matter, commitment to coursework outside of class, enthusiasm, motivation), a multiple-choice test to measure historical knowledge (i.e., timelines) in a particular discipline, an essay test to measure the ability to analyze historical significance (i.e., context in time), and a speech rubric to measure the student’s ability to articulate a historical position argument. As academic assessment is directly tied to student learning outcomes (i.e., what you want students to know, value, and be able to do), it is imperative that assessment processes reflect this goal. Therefore, if our stated student learning outcomes suggest that we want students to be actively engaged in their learning, demonstrate basic historical knowledge respective to the discipline or co-curricular objective, demonstrate the ability to engage in higher order analysis, and demonstrate the ability to effectively communicate a thesis argument, then it seems that we have chosen appropriate tools to help us learn what we want to know about what our students are learning.

On the other hand, should one wish to know whether the stated objectives of a co-curricular peer leadership program are being fulfilled, different evaluation tools may prove more appropriate. For example, it may prove wiser to conduct a survey of perceived benefits with students who’ve completed the peer leadership program. We might also want to compare perceived benefit scores to academic grades to evaluate the level of relationship between the two variables. This might allow us to make inferences about benefits of peer leadership on other factors (i.e., grades) representing the student’s experience. We could also explore the effects of peer leadership on employment stability and alumni donations through comparisons of individuals who’ve completed peer leadership programs versus those who have not. Should our peer leadership program objectives and student learning outcomes reflect the desire to promote sense of community, academic and career leadership, and service, we appear to be headed in the right direction.

Quincy University Assessment Lexicon

The Quincy University Academic Assessment Committee, in conjunction with the Assessment Academy Team, recommends the university's adoption of a common lexicon for the discussion, implementation, and evaluation of assessment-related activities on QU's campus. The assessment lexicon is designed to promote a common language and conceptual understanding regarding the communicating and implementation of assessment initiatives here at QU. To this end, the following assessment definitions are conceptually designed to reflect the spirit, mission, and vision of the QU campus community.

Benchmarks—are criterion by which we evaluate competencies of students specific to developmental expectations. We might expect that a senior-level student, based on her/his educational experience at QU, should be able to demonstrate a certain level of critical thinking. To assess this, we might have them complete a “capstone” project that exemplifies critical thinking skills (i.e., as we have operationally defined “critical thinking”). By using benchmark measures, we are essentially suggesting that by a certain time in program X, each student will be able to think critically as exhibited by a measurement tool. Benchmarks are innately tied to curriculum maps as they serve to exemplify how and when learning takes place throughout the student's development.

Competencies—refer to the mastery of a particular set of skills or abilities. Thus, they are closely connected to student learning outcomes (SLO's). When discussing student competencies, it is common to refer to behavioral or operational indicators of mastery. For example, we may know (i.e., operational definition) a student is competent in the use of punctuation when he/she can write a four-page paper that contains three or fewer punctuation errors as indicated by our scoring rubric.

Construct Definitions—one of the most challenging aspects of assessment to grasp by the novice evaluator is the ability to understand how construct definitions, and their subsequent application, affect the assessment process. For the purposes of this lexicon, constructs are the phenomena under observation by the individual(s) conducting the assessment. The construct is essentially the “what” that is under investigation. Concepts like critical thinking, reasoning ability, writing ability, competency, and knowledge are all constructs that, in the literature, have a multitude of definitions that represent them. For purposes of assessment here at QU, there are two main types of construct definitions we need to be aware of: Conceptual and Operational.

Conceptual Definitions—are definitions of constructs that are commonly understood by experts in a particular discipline. Conceptual definitions typically refer to the make-up of a particular phenomenon in terms of common characteristics, mechanisms, or theoretical underpinnings. Take the construct of intelligence, for example. A common conceptual definition for intelligence might reflect various cognitive ability-related aspects such as memory, verbal reasoning, processing speed, and so on. Regarding co-curricular assessment, a common conceptual definition for teamwork might reflect one's ability to work in collaboration with others.

Operational Definitions—reflect the way in which assessment-specific constructs are defined for a particular method of inquiry. In other words, operational definitions will tell the audience how a particular construct was measured and determined to be present in your assessment process. Based on the domain of critical thinking literature, one might make the case that she/he is measuring critical

thinking in students by examining students' abilities to engage in higher order thinking as depicted in Bloom's taxonomy. Another department might say that they are measuring critical thinking skills by assessing students' abilities to create new methods for examining old problems. This process for developing operational construct definitions particular to your assessment is no different for the assessment of co-curricular SLO's. In order to measure "demonstrated commitment to community service" as a learning outcome, one might create a survey evaluating the number of volunteering, mentoring, and advocacy-related activities students participate in during their time at QU.

Curriculum or Competency Maps—visually depict program-specific developmental benchmarks throughout a typical student's course of study. Depending on the focus of illustration (i.e., curriculum or competency), mapping clearly outlines which student learning outcomes students should meet at various stages of their programs (i.e., academic and/or co-curricular), how these outcomes are assessed at each stage of development, and what remediation plans exist for dealing with students who do not meet stated benchmarks.

Evidence-Based/Informed (Data-Based/Informed) Decision Making—is simply a part of the assessment process by which individuals make informed decisions based on their interpretations of data.

Faculty Evaluation—separate and distinct from program evaluation, faculty evaluation serves as a means of promoting academic excellence through teaching, service, and scholarship. See faculty handbook for a more detailed description of faculty evaluation procedures at Quincy University.

Feedback—the process by which individuals are informed of the results of interpretive evaluations of others. Feedback is an integral part of the assessment process as it allows for meaningful dialogue between the subject of evaluation and the evaluator. This dialogue provides the venue for clarification regarding expectations, results of measures, and evaluator interpretations. In the context of student learning, feedback is the primary mechanism to promote student understanding of ways in which they meet, exceed, or remain deficient regarding student learning outcomes. Feedback alone, however, is insufficient to promote self-awareness. One must also be adept at closing feedback loops.

Feedback Loops (Closing)—speak to the flow of communication and understanding involved in the feedback process. While feedback is a necessary component of effective assessment for reasons mentioned above, it is the closing of feedback loops that truly promotes clarity and understanding between evaluator and subject. The need for clarity between the evaluator and subject is a natural symptom of the ambiguous nature of perceived meaning. When giving feedback, the evaluator often believes that she/he is clear in the delivery of a message (e.g., reasons for a certain score on a paper or performance evaluation), however, the recipient (i.e., subject) of the feedback derives a distinctly different meaning from the feedback. The process of closing the feedback loop involves the evaluator "checking-in" with the recipient of the feedback to explore the meaning the recipient derived from the feedback. Often, the evaluator's intent with feedback will not match the recipient's interpretation, therefore additional dialogue and clarification may be needed in order to promote desired outcomes.

Goal—at QU, goals are referring to the program-level expectations we have for our students, faculty, and staff.

Guiding Principles—are philosophical underpinnings that guide program development and modification. Guiding principles work best when directly tied to the organizational mission and vision.

Instrument—See “Measure”

Learning Frameworks—at QU, learning frameworks describe models of understanding the variation in types and levels of learning. These learning frameworks assist us in assessing student learning by providing a common structure and language for our understanding of how to assess learning from a developmental perspective and how to intentionally promote the progression in learning for our students. One common “framework” utilized in higher education is Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning. [Bloom’s Taxonomy](#) suggests that there are six levels of cognitive understanding by which students can grasp and utilize concepts. These levels move from basic to ever-more complex ways of cognitive processing. By looking at what we want our students to know, value, and be able to do in this manner not only allows for us to have a means of assessing student learning outcomes, but it also informs us regarding which types of measures are best suited to evaluate specific outcomes. For example, if one wishes to assess a student’s ability to analyze (i.e., breakdown) a social science research article in terms of research integrity, she probably wouldn’t utilize a multiple-choice test to measure such a competency. Instead, she might have them write an analysis paper and making sure scoring rubric indicates aspects of an effective research analysis critique. According to Bloom’s Taxonomy, one can also assume that students have also developed the lower level cognitive processes (i.e., knowing, understanding, and applying) in order to complete such an analysis.

Measure—a method of inquiry utilized in the assessment process to inform evaluators of individual and group differences. Sometimes referred to as tools or instruments, measures appear in various forms to help evaluators in their understanding about subjects of inquiry. Regarding Student Learning Outcomes (SLO’s), measures help evaluators know how close they are to meeting desired outcomes for what they expect their students to know, value, and be able to do when they complete courses. There are two major categories of assessment measures that will commonly be referred to here at QU: Direct and Indirect.

Direct Measures—give information about the nature of a construct through examining actual products of student work. These products (i.e., samples) are meant to exemplify the student’s level of attainment regarding SLO’s. Therefore, a direct measure of an SLO geared towards student mastery of basic chemistry terminology might be directly measured through a multiple-choice test. Other examples of direct measures of student work might include student writing assignments, portfolios, performance evaluations, exams, artwork, audio/visual recordings, and so on. While direct measures are often seen as the truest indicators of student competency, indirect measures also play a vital role in informing evaluators of the “how” and “why” underlying SLO’s.

Indirect Measures—give information about the nature of a construct through examining secondary sources of information regarding SLO’s. In other words, evaluators typically look for evidence of students meeting or exceeding SLO’s. However, the examination of such data that is only descriptive

at best. Using the above example of the SLO geared towards mastery of basic chemistry terminology, we might find that the course evaluation plays an integral role in informing us of the perceived knowledge each student believed she/he arrived to the class with (i.e., whether true or false). The course evaluation survey may also inquire about the student's perception of their ability to master basic chemistry terminology upon completing the course. One might look at this indirect measure in comparison with the above-mentioned direct measure of basic chemistry terminology competence and find that 90% or the students believed they had mastered the concepts as a direct result of the course, while only 70% of the students, according to the direct measure (i.e., multiple-choice test) actually did. This could inform teaching in many valuable ways. Other examples of indirect measures might include attendance rates, surveys, focus groups, job placement rates, retention rates, alumni contribution, and so on.

Objectives—at QU, when we refer to objectives, we are speaking at the course level. These course objectives should reflect the instructor's general course-related goals for the semester. Course objectives generally speak to the aims or scope of the course. More specifically, course objectives tend to reflect what the course will teach, promote, or require from a pedagogical position. These course objectives, however, should be closely related to student learning outcomes (SLO) as a direct reflection of the connection between teaching and learning.

Program—refers to an academic field or co-curricular function

Program Review—process by which programs conduct evaluations of program functioning, including program-related goals, as a part of a systematic review process.

Unit—refers to the collection of academic programs under the heading of a “college” or “school”. Academic units intend to promote dialogue, scholarship, and collaborative efforts among faculty members from related disciplines.

Rubric—a measure commonly utilized to evaluate and interpret data in which scoring is subjective. The benefit of utilizing scoring rubrics, however, is twofold. Not only does a well-designed scoring rubric increase inter-rater reliability (i.e., the likelihood that multiple evaluators will arrive at the same conclusion), but it also teaches the student about expectations that lead to them meeting or exceeding SLO's. In theory, when students understand what they need to accomplish in order to improve their learning, they are better suited to become responsible stewards for their own educational endeavors. Well designed scoring rubrics include, but are not limited to:

1. Scoring criteria—range of scores indicating satisfactory, good, poor, etc., performance or mastery.
2. Mechanism for scoring—in each range, what do students need to demonstrate in order to meet criteria?
3. Clarity—clear expectations for student performance.
4. Direct relationship to stated SLO's
5. [Park University](#) provides an excellent resource for developing academic scoring rubrics.

Student Learning Outcomes (SLO)—represent the primary motivation behind academic assessment at Quincy University. SLO's represent what we want students to know (knowledge), value (awareness,

beliefs, and attitudes), or be able to do (skills). SLO's are evaluated at multiple institutional levels in order to provide a comprehensive view student learning.

Student learning outcomes are generally developed in regards to university mission and vision (i.e., particularly at the institutional level), discipline-specific standards of practice (i.e., at the program level), academic accreditation standards (i.e., at the program and unit level), and reflective faculty and staff evaluation practices. Student learning outcomes should reflect the knowledge, values, and skills we suggest as being important indicators of student success at Quincy University. They should be written in a manner that speaks to their ability to be evaluated as part of a systematic plan of assessment. Writing measurable outcomes, however, can be a bit overwhelming. One strategy to help with the writing of measurable SLO's is to employ the S.M.A.R.T. model. Well written SLO's should be:

Specific

Measurable

Attainable, Action-Oriented, and Appropriate

Results-Oriented and Realistic

Time-Specific and Timely