

- Encourage faculty members to assess their courses by giving credit for SoTL articles for promotion and tenure and research records; course assessment can then be built into the program assessment plan.
- Online courses provide a wealth of data stored in electronic format, e.g., discussions, quizzes, student participation (engagement).

In sum, regardless of whether the assessment process is done as a compliance exercise or primarily driven by the department and the faculty, it can—and should—be useful to the department and to the educational endeavor. Assessment should demonstrate student learning knowledge and skill development, and identify a roadmap of how to improve learner outcomes in the future.

Some Thoughts and Suggestions on Assessing Student Learning

—Linda Suskie,
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Pressure to assess student learning more carefully and systematically is clearly mounting. Federal and state agencies are increasingly calling for solid, compelling evidence of student learning, while higher education leaders are challenging faculty to improve the quality of curricula and pedagogies. Efforts to assess student learning thus serve two ends: one, to demonstrate the worth of our programs to external constituents and, two, to inform our understanding of the effectiveness of our teaching strategies.

In response to these forces, faculty today are grappling with understanding the nature, methodology, and value of assessment. Fortunately, there is a growing body of literature on the assessment of student learning in higher education, and the emphasis is on simple, flexible approaches. The assessment process begins by clearly articulating expected student learning outcomes: what faculty expect students (both political science majors and those taking political science courses as part of a general education core) to be able to do upon graduation. Encouraging faculty to discuss their aims and arriving at some common ground may be one of the greatest benefits of the assessment process, and one that the American Political Science

Association can encourage through continued cross-institutional dialogue. The discussion can then move to reviewing the curriculum to ensure that every student, regardless of the particular courses or tracks he or she elects, has sufficient opportunity to achieve those goals. Again, this discussion can be of great benefit to the faculty and can be promoted by APSA through cross-institutional dialogue.

Once goals for student learning are in place, the assessment process itself can begin by compiling and systematically reviewing evidence of student learning of those goals. Often this evidence is already at hand in the form of student papers, tests, projects, surveys, and/or evaluations by field experience supervisors. The process of program-level assessment entails examining this information from a new angle, evaluating not just individual students' performance but also the effectiveness of curricula and pedagogies revealed by examining this evidence holistically. A tally of faculty ratings of student papers using a rating scale or rubric, for example, might indicate that, while students' writing skills are generally very good, their ability to analyze and synthesize the sources they have identified is disappointing. Faculty can use this information to launch a discussion on strategies to improve students' skills in analyzing and synthesizing research sources and then try out these strategies in their courses.

Effective assessment is thus not an intrusive burden but an opportunity to provide students with an even better education than they are now receiving. The key to a successful assessment effort is therefore to foster an institutional climate that prizes not only assessment efforts but also efforts to improve teaching. A campus with a thriving assessment program values efforts to assess student learning and improve teaching in a number of ways:

- Assessment results inform important decisions. If a department finds that its students have inadequate technology skills, for example, the institution makes an effort to fund the hardware or software needed to improve their skills.
- Innovation and risk-taking are encouraged. Faculty are encouraged, for example, to address disappointing assessment results with new pedagogies, even if those innovations may lead to temporary declines in end-of-course evaluations.
- Assessment efforts are valued in promotion and tenure decisions. The work of a professor who develops a new approach to teaching American government, validates the effective-

ness of the new approach through careful assessment, and publishes the results in a respected peer-reviewed journal is valued as much as that of the professor who publishes more traditional research.

- The burden of assessment is eased as much as possible, through support from both the institution and from the American Political Science Association. While an institution can provide coordination, technical assistance, and professional development opportunities, the APSA can develop a clearinghouse of model curricula, statements of expected student learning outcomes, and assessment tools such as rubrics and surveys.

For more information on assessing student learning in higher education, the following readings are recommended:

- Angelo, T. A., and K. P. Cross. 1993. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
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- Leskes, A., and B. Wright. 2005. *The Art and Science of Assessing General Education Outcomes: A Practical Guide*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education. 2003. *Student Learning Assessment: Options and Resources*. Philadelphia: Author.
- Palomba, C. A., and T. W. Banta. 1999. *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, Improving*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Suskie, L. 2000. "Fair Assessment Practices: Giving Students Equitable Opportunities to Demonstrate Learning." *AAHE Bulletin* 52(9): 7–9.
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- Walvoord, B. E. 2004. *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Walvoord, B. E., and V. J. Anderson. 1998. *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
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