

Frequently Asked Questions - Assessment

FAQ 1: What do you mean by “authentic assessment”?

Answer: There are various definitions of this term, but at Norco College, we define it as the use of direct (rather than only indirect) assessment methods that can be used for improvement. You’re assessing “authentically” when you look at student learning in your classes or programs and uncover problem areas that can be addressed. Authentic assessments produce data and result in reports.

FAQ 2: What’s the difference between indirect and direct assessment?

Answer: Direct assessment focuses on work students actually do that demonstrates their learning. Indirect assessment uses proxies of student learning—like student self-reports, focus groups, alumni or employer surveys—to assess whether students have achieved course or program competencies. It’s fine to use indirect assessment measures in addition to direct ones—not just instead of direct ones.

FAQ 3: What are the stages of the assessment cycle?

Answer: Stage 1: developing an assessment plan for a course or program; Stage 2: conducting the assessment and generating data; Stage 3: analyzing the data and implementing changes to improve the course; Stage 4: assessing improvements in the course.

FAQ 4: What does it mean to “close the loop”?

Answer: Closing the loop happens when you do a second round of assessment in order to see whether the improvement efforts you’ve employed after the first round have worked. It’s a kind of “gold standard” for authentic assessment.

FAQ 5: Most of my students demonstrated that they achieved the SLO I assessed. How can I close the loop?

Answer: First, be sure that your definition of “most” is reasonable. Benchmarks need to be established on a discipline-by-discipline basis, but most courses will probably see at least a 70% (and perhaps 80%) success rate as desirable. If you show 90% or above, it’s possible you just won’t need to look at that SLO again for a while—look at another, more problematic one. Authentic assessment should be a kind of stress test for a course or program—you’re actively looking for the fault lines in it. (Short answer—there’s no loop to close if your results are above benchmark; so just congratulate yourself.)

FAQ 5: What are some examples of direct assessment we can use to assess our courses?

Answer: You can embed common questions—mapped to SLOs—tests, quizzes, or class exercises; develop a common final exam; use portfolios or sample performance-based activities (essays, presentations, lab experiments, musical performances, etc) and evaluate them against a common rubric. Minimally, you can focus on a particular student assignment and use a four-point scale to rate how well students demonstrate achievement of a particular SLO. See the course assessment guidelines and models for further help.

FAQ 6: I teach a section of a course that has many sections. If I assess the section, does that mean that the course has been assessed?

Answer: Not really. It's certainly better than nothing, but all multi-section courses (those with four or more sections, especially) should be assessed collaboratively.

FAQ 7: I am supposed to do both course and program assessment this semester. Can I combine them?

Answer: Often, you can. Pick an SLO that maps to a particular PLO, and assess both in the course simultaneously. A couple of provisos: you will probably need to look at two or more courses in the program to generate good program-level data, and you will need to capture student ID numbers or employ some method of tracking how many other courses the students have taken in the program to see whether the program is working.

FAQ 8: I need help developing my assessment project or analyzing data. Whom do I go to?

Answer: Start with Arend Flick (arend.flick@norcocollege.edu), who is the college assessment coordinator. He will refer you to Greg Aycock, the Dean of Institutional Effectiveness, for issues he can't resolve.

FAQ 9: What do I do to complete an assessment report?

Answer: Ideally, use the course assessment template at this website, and combine it with supporting data, rubrics, etc. When it's finished, send it to the Office of Institutional Effectiveness. Beginning in 2014, we'll be using TracDat to do all assessment reporting.

FAQ 10: I'm an associate faculty member. Am I compensated in any way for this work?

Answer: Yes. You earn \$50 for attending an assessment workshop (this can be either a scheduled session on campus or a private meeting in the office of the coordinator) and another \$50 for submitting a report.

FAQ 11: How am I supposed to find time to do assessment? Sometimes I feel like that's all I do!

Answer: It's possible to do meaningful assessment of a course or program in three or four hours of work. Some people take longer because they have become genuinely interested in tracking and analyzing learning gains in a particular course or program that they don't mind the time it takes. If you are spending considerable time on assessment projects without feeling they are beneficial, please talk to Arend or Greg. They can probably help you do more in less time.