

## What Is Transformative Assessment?

The term *assessment* does not bring happiness and joy to most people in higher education. Assessment has, for decades, been a required method for gathering information to show accountability to certain stakeholders, most notably, the accreditation process. It is a time-consuming process that has often been viewed as a waste of time. “Wait until this passes, and we can go back to doing things the way we want to!” is something that more than one faculty member, college president, and board member has said. If students are asked to think about “institutional assessment,” they rarely have any ideas about it. Yet hundreds of conferences have been held and thousands of books and articles written on this topic. How can something be so disliked by faculty and college administrators and ignored by students, yet be hugely popular in terms of conferences and publications? More important, what has assessment done for higher education? Is higher education better because of all of the time and money spent on assessment-related issues? Has this time been well spent and meaningful? Unfortunately the answer to these questions in most situations is no.

Higher education has not used assessment information well. Yes, data have been collected and filed. Accrediting visitors have searched through hundreds of thousands of binders, files, Web sites, and folders. Countless hours of faculty and administrative time have been spent on collecting data for accountability purposes. Thousands of students have taken pretests, posttests, and satisfaction surveys and attended focus groups designed to discover what they are (and are not) liking, learning, and remembering.

But very little of this has made a difference in student learning. The teaching and learning process has not changed much. Yes, technology plays a greater role than it did a decade ago, but this is not the result of using assessment data. As a matter of fact, there is much that is still unknown about the impact of using technology for teaching on the learning that actually occurs. It seems that higher education has been assessing for many of the wrong reasons. "It may well be that undergraduate education has not suffered any discernible decline in quality over the past 50 or 100 years. But is that really a satisfactory outcome? Most human enterprise improves with time and experience. . . . Given the vastly expanded resources colleges have acquired, thanks to growing private donations, steadily rising tuition, and massive infusions of federal financial aid, isn't it fair to expect the quality of education to improve as well?" (Bok, 2006, p. 29).

Data have been collected (and filed, piled, and stored) for the benefit of others. But it seems clear that higher education has not done a very good job of using assessment data to improve student learning or the quality of the undergraduate experience.

Lee Shulman (2007) indicated that assessment and its use for accountability is actually a way to tell the story of the department or unit for which the assessment is done. In Shulman's metaphor of storytelling, assessment becomes a means for building the narrative that can be shared outside the department: "The story told by an assessment is thus ultimately a function of the dimensions of measurement that determine the possible directions the narrative might take. So accountability requires that we take responsibility for the story we commit ourselves to telling. We must make public the rationale for choosing that story as opposed to alternative narratives. . . . Only then should we defend the adequacy of the forms of measurement and documentation we employ to warrant the narratives we offer" (p. 22). Viewing the assessment process as a means to sharing information is essential. Nevertheless, the assessment process should not be developed only for others.

Assessment must provide meaningful and appropriate information to those who created the process.

## **Why Hasn't Assessment Been More Successful?**

Tom Angelo (1999) proposes several reasons that the assessment movement has not created the type of enhanced student learning that many thought that it would: "I'll argue that most assessment efforts have resulted in little learning improvement because they have been implemented without a clear vision of what 'higher' or 'deeper' learning is and without an understanding of how assessment can promote such learning" (p. 3). In addition, assessment is often seen as a mechanistic process, one that treats learning as an assembly-line process rather than an attempt to measure something extremely complex. Higher education, in an attempt to provide an easy-to-use measurement of learning, has often oversimplified the process. This oversimplification has led to a certain amount of disgust. "No matter how much they [outcomes assessment practices] purport to be about 'standards' or student 'needs,' they are in fact scams run by bloodless bureaucrats who, steeped in jargon like 'mapping learning goals' and 'closing the loop,' do not understand the holistic nature of a good college education" (Fendrich, 2007, p. B6). It is truly unfortunate that some view assessment as only a bureaucratic process rather than something that could be created to inform our discussions about teaching and learning. However, as Shulman reminds us, "We are limited in our recountings by the instruments we use to count" (2007, p. 22). The process for assessment can be seen as only about accountability for others, as Fendrich suggests. But assessment can also be about transformation, about the journey toward our vision of what higher education should be.

Another reason the assessment process may not have produced more successful programs is that some people, "probably conditioned by program evaluation and accreditation experiences,

see assessment as a necessary, periodic bother, like a visit to the accountant at tax time” (Angelo, 1999, p. 4). The thought that the assessment process is insinuated into the regular academic structure has caused some to view the process as “a judgmental tool for punishment [rather than a] source of illumination” (Musil, 1992, p. 4).

Without appropriate and sustainable measures that can give useful information to those who need it, assessment can become something that measures only the easily counted and not the conceptual level of information that is the most meaningful. Is it any wonder that not all within the higher education community have embraced assessment?

## Closing the Feedback Loop

One way to ensure that the assessment process gives information to those who create it is to make certain that the data resulting from the process are used to make informed decisions about the department or unit. There have been calls to “close the assessment loop” for decades. But why isn’t this being done on a regular basis? Why don’t all college and university campuses have this in place? The answers to these deceptively simple questions are, not surprisingly, complex. These answers stem from the different purposes of assessment: using assessment for accountability for an external audience and assessing student learning on a local level to contribute to learning.

Assessment at the local level has always occurred. Faculty often modify a particular part of a course they are teaching or an individual class period based on student confusion or comprehension. This type of assessment is often not even recognized as assessment of student learning by many faculty; it is just part of the process of teaching. In this assessment-for-learning paradigm, there is no dishonor in finding out that students are not understanding any given material. When this happens, good teachers

make modifications: they review material in class or add reading assignments, for example.

However, knowing about student learning at the local level (assessment for learning) may not ever enter into what becomes used as assessment for accountability. Instead the assessment-for-accountability data that are shared are often used to show the general public, stakeholders, and accreditors that institutions are doing a good job: in other words, that students are learning what the institution or department says that they should be learning. As a result, assessment for accountability does not often ask the hard questions or try to measure concepts that are difficult to quantify. These two purposes of assessment are often at odds with each other, which makes it difficult to close the feedback loop.

The phrase “closing the feedback loop” of an assessment cycle refers to the process of using results from appropriate and meaningful student learning outcomes to make modifications in the teaching and learning activities within a course. These should lead to changes in the results of the student learning outcomes in the next cycle (see Figure 1.1). Unfortunately, institutions and faculty often stop short of completely closing the loop. They create outcomes, they measure those outcomes, and they may even analyze these outcomes. But then these results are written up in a report and filed away in a dusty drawer or stored on a computer, never to be seen again.

This process amounts to a lot of work with very little impact. But why would anyone go to the trouble of developing, measuring, and analyzing outcomes, and then not use that information to make curricular or pedagogical changes? Here, the answers are bureaucratically straightforward.

Although the concept of closing the feedback loop has been discussed for quite some time, a new concept of the assessment spiral has been used to describe the process where “at the close of each feedback loop, quality will have increased and moved the spiral up to the next level” (Wehlburg, 2007, p. 1).

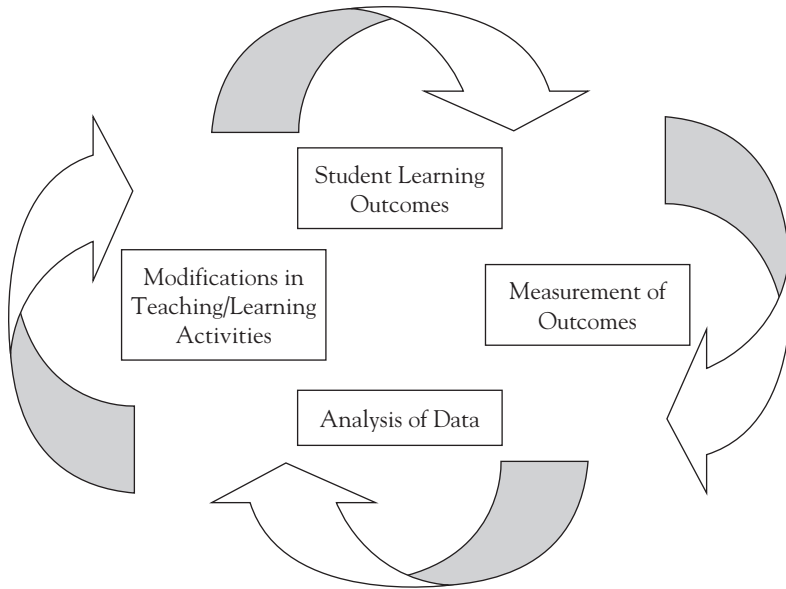


Figure 1.1 The Assessment Feedback Loop

## Accreditation as a Top-Down Process

Accreditation movements began in the late nineteenth century and focused on minimal standards (Alstete, 2004). Following this, accreditation organizations often focused on a quantitative approach (seen as more “objective” than a qualitative approach) to measuring elements of a campus that would provide calculable “input” variables (for example, graduation rates, numbers of books in the library, amount of an institution’s endowment). A great deal of attention was paid to the use of assessment data for accountability. Institutions essentially were being asked to show that they were doing what they said they were doing. But in the 1980s, more attention was being paid to the things that were not necessarily easily countable, and accreditation organizations and higher education in general began to move toward the qualitative areas that are such a large part of postsecondary education.

As part of this shift, more attention was being paid to student learning. Accreditation organizations began to require institutions to have an assessment plan that outlined what students should learn as a result of a particular program of study. And since these organizations were requiring assessment plans and assessment reports, these became highly important to higher education administrators, which meant that assessment plans and measures of student learning became important. Accountability was still a driving force behind the purposes of this type of assessment. However, missing in many of these early approaches to the assessment of student learning was requiring the data to be used in making changes in pedagogy or curriculum.

As a result, assessment offices sprouted up all over the country, and much emphasis was placed on creating and measuring student learning outcomes. Unfortunately, the purpose of assessment on many campuses was to demonstrate compliance with a regional accreditor. And once the outcomes were created, measured, and written in reports, the job was considered done. In the mid-1990s, visiting teams of accreditation evaluators would come to a campus, look for assessment plans and the resulting data, and hear much rhetoric about assessment. However, in many cases, the team members found that there was no real culture of using assessment data to benefit student learning. Cecelia Lopez, formerly the associate director of the Higher Learning Commission, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, analyzed reports from many visiting teams and used these results to create an assessment culture matrix (Higher Learning Commission/NCA, 2003). This matrix allows institutions to determine where they are in the development of an institutional culture that uses assessment results for making meaningful changes that may enhance student learning. According to Lopez (2002), "The matrix depicts three Levels of Implementation of assessment programs, each with four associated Patterns of Characteristics" (p. 358). Characteristics of institutions at the first level (Beginning Implementation) show

no “institution-wide understanding of the strategies to be used in conducting an effective assessment program.” In addition, “quantitative and qualitative measures are not aligned with academic program goals and objectives” (para. 1).

As assessment practices have become more institutionalized, the rhetoric of more advanced levels of implementation of assessment has become more common, but actual practice at many institutions following a successful reaccreditation visit has not demonstrated a true embracing of a culture of assessment. Instead, faculty may say things like, “Whew, I’m glad that whole assessment thing is over! Now I can get back to my real work of teaching and research.” This type of sentiment unfortunately leads to a filing away of assessment reports and checking them off as completed rather than finding a way to use the information to enhance teaching and learning.

Assessment of student learning outcomes can show how much or how well a student is learning, but it does not focus on the “input” part of the teaching/learning equation. Assessment data do not usually indicate what teaching methods are working, whether class size had an impact on student learning, or how much time a student spent in preparation and studying. The results of assessment give only part of the picture of student learning.

## **Teaching Enhancement as a Bottom-Up Process**

Teaching enhancement (sometimes called faculty development) has always played an important part in the teaching/learning process, but not until the 1970s did specific programs designed to improve teaching began to grow into specific professional development programs with institutional support (Gaff, 1975; Centra, 1976; Bergquist & Phillips, 1975). Now, many institutions have teaching centers and associated programs that are designed to increase teaching effectiveness and student learning.

Many faculty participate in workshops and programs that are designed to improve their teaching and help them actively

engage students in the course content. In addition, most academic disciplines have teaching-focused journals in addition to ones that are research or practice based. The growth of faculty development over the last thirty years has been astounding. Many books have been written on group discussion, student engagement, and incorporating active learning into a course. These types of practices are excellent methods to help faculty modify their teaching and better engage students.

At many institutions, faculty participation in teaching enhancement activities is not mandated. Faculty can choose to attend a workshop, schedule a time with a teaching consultant, or have their class observed and get feedback. With the possible exception of required new faculty orientations, many of the participants in faculty development activities do so because they want to. They choose to modify or enhance their teaching. Sometimes they do it to make a change in their course because of something new a colleague is doing, or they have received poor course evaluation results and want to improve their scores. Some faculty are looking for ways to increase student learning in their course or want to engage their students better. For these faculty, teaching enhancement activities can increase their satisfaction with their courses and their teaching, and this can certainly improve student learning.

But because it is usually not a mandatory practice, faculty who might most need developing often choose not to participate. An informal look at many teaching centers shows that a majority of faculty do not actively participate in faculty development programs on a regular basis. So although faculty development activities seem to have a positive impact on teaching behaviors (and potentially student engagement and learning), many faculty do not take part in the process.

For those who do participate in teaching centers or other faculty development activities, there is a lack of empirical evidence about how this contributes to student learning. Following many development workshops or events, faculty are asked to complete an evaluation of the workshop. These satisfaction ratings are

helpful in designing the next event or workshop, but they provide no evidence of change in the faculty member's teaching. And even if the faculty member makes a change in teaching or learning activities, what impact does that have on student learning? So we know that faculty development activities have an impact on teaching (at best), but it is very difficult to determine what impact that has on student learning. Faculty development activities are certainly related to student learning, but they are only indirectly measured. This is another part of the student learning equation. For example, faculty who are working to modify their courses to enhance student learning do not usually look at results from alumni surveys or other areas that would potentially have longer-term learning outcomes (Wehlburg, 2006). And it is possible that information about what alumni indicate was important learning could benefit the course modification process.

### **Meeting in the Middle: Using Assessment to Inform Teaching and Learning**

It seems, then, that the assessment of student learning process has become important to institutions but that the information is not always used to enhance student learning. Although calls to close the feedback loop have been going on for some time, many institutions still have little interaction between those who collect and report assessment data and those who focus on improving teaching and learning. It is essential, however, for assessment data to inform teaching/learning decisions and for faculty to create student learning outcomes with a focus on what is important for students to learn. Without this interaction, a lot of effort is going to be spent on collecting data with little impact on teaching and learning.

Assessment is important, and the accreditation associations are mandating that institutions have a process and use it. Therefore, most postsecondary institutions are regularly, perhaps grudgingly,

collecting information on student learning. But this information should be collected anyway, and many faculty have been doing this all along. The information that they have collected on student learning, however, has been used to measure an individual student's performance in class rather than looking at multiple students across time to see how well they are doing in general with regard to departmental student learning outcomes. There is an opportunity to use existing student work products to evaluate the student for a grade in the class and aggregate those data by looking across students to see what they are learning as a group. By integrating assessment with teaching activities, assessment data can be used for what this information was originally intended: to know how well students are doing and to use that knowledge to make changes in curriculum, pedagogy, or course design.

By meeting in the middle, where student learning outcomes are measured by using student work artifacts already embedded in courses, departments and institutions can develop outcomes that reflect what is actually happening without adding much testing time. One thing that is clear, however, is that "assessment techniques are of little use unless and until local academic cultures value self-examination, reflection, and continuous improvement" (Angelo, 1999, p. 5).

*Assessment* and *accreditation* are terms that often are used interchangeably, but they are very different. Accreditation is "a process by which an institution of postsecondary education evaluates its educational activities, in whole or in part, and seeks an independent judgment to confirm that it substantially achieves its objectives and is generally equal in quality to comparable institutions or specialized units" (Young, Chambers, & Kells, 1983, p. 21). The accreditation process uses assessment data, but it also uses other levels of information that focus on issues other than student learning. A look at any of the regional accrediting bodies will show that library resources, instructional technologies, and faculty credentials, for example, are crucial to the accreditation process.

Although these may be indirectly measured by assessment, the accreditation process is important because institutions must demonstrate that they have the resources necessary to fulfill their mission. Assessment is a necessary but not sufficient part of the accreditation process.

## **Transformative Assessment**

Student learning assessment is “the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decisions about how to improve learning” (Walvoord, 2004, p. 2). The key in this definition is that assessment is done for the purpose of informing decisions about improving student learning. Assessment data have often been used for accountability to others, but their explicit and primary purpose is to inform decisions about student learning. Higher education, and education in K–12 schools, has allowed this alternative and secondary use of assessment data. And that secondary purpose has become, in many cases, the perceived primary purpose of assessment. On many campuses, assessment is now seen as something imposed on the institution by the administration and by others (those in the regional and specialized accreditation process). Assessment of student learning has become something that is done for others rather than for its original purpose. “But with the publication in September 2006 of the report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education, suddenly the use of assessment of individual students to improve learning on a single campus is not enough. We must also provide evidence of student learning that can be compared across campuses” (Banta, 2007a, p. 3).

It is time to change this situation. Assessment data can and will be used for accountability. Parents, potential students, and the public deserve to know what higher education is doing. Accountability

has an important role. But to gather assessment data only to show others what is occurring seems to be a hugely time-consuming task that will never intentionally inform decision making about the teaching and learning process. Assessment that is designed to provide information to transform teaching and learning is both necessary and essential.

Transformative assessment is a process that will inform decision making that is appropriate, meaningful, sustainable, flexible and ongoing and will use data for improvement with the potential for substantive change. Although the data that are collected can also be used to demonstrate outcomes to others, transformative assessment is principally focused on how to enhance student learning. In order to be effective, each element of transformative assessment is essential, but because of the differing missions, institutional cultures, and needs, each may be implemented differently.

### **Transformative Assessment Must Be Appropriate**

The word *appropriate* is defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2002) as “suitable for a particular person, condition, occasion, or place.” What this means to the assessment process is that specific outcomes for a course, department, or institution will differ from other outcomes written for different purposes. An institution’s mission is a unique statement of purpose. The institutional-level outcomes must reflect that institutional identity, and the outcomes that are measured should align with the mission statement.

Cookie-cutter approaches to assessment will almost always fail to become transformative processes because the outcomes used will not be appropriate to the institution or department that is using them. Department-level outcomes will be specific to the content and context of that department at that specific institution. A biology department’s outcomes from a small, private, liberal arts college may be similar to a biology department from a large, research university with a large graduate student population, but

they will probably not be identical. The context of the institutional mission will have an impact on the department mission statement and resulting outcomes. The same holds true for outcomes for specific courses within a department.

Knowing that the assessment process is appropriate and focused on the unique perspectives of different institutions will help to ensure that the process is used to inform the decision making regarding teaching and learning.

### **Transformative Assessment Must Be Meaningful**

Without a meaningful approach to assessment, the process is almost always doomed to becoming an add-on task done for bureaucratic purposes. Meaningful assessment practices will result in data that will be used because the decision makers care about the results. If an institution has a focus on leadership, outcomes would likely be developed that would indicate levels and types of leadership that students would develop. Following this, measures of how many students are leaders might be an important data point. An institution that values leadership will likely care about the results of this measure.

Many doctoral students who are gathering data for their largest research project ever await the first results with bated breath. Getting those survey responses or seeing the lab results is quite exciting—and it is exciting because the event is meaningful. Assessment results could be viewed in the same way if they are truly meaningful. Institution and department assessment plans and assessment measures should result in data that faculty and staff care about. Knowing the percentage of students accepted for graduate school or seeing test results from graduating seniors should provide information useful for making curricular and planning decisions. If the data collected end up being stored, then they are not meaningful, and going to the effort of collecting them probably is a waste of time, resources, and space. But developing outcomes and measures that are important will help focus

on what needs to be changed or enhanced. These are the types of data that will cause transformation to take place.

### **Transformative Assessment Must Be Sustainable**

No matter how meaningful and appropriate an assessment plan is, it will not be used for longer than one cycle if it cannot be sustained. Often as an institution gets ready for an accreditation visit, elaborate and time-consuming assessment structures are put into place. Although the data that are collected may be useful and important, if the added time and resources to do the assessment are too great, the assessment process will not be sustained after a successful reaccreditation. And once again assessment will be seen as something that is done only for the purposes of gaining a particular accreditation status rather than as an ongoing, embedded process for benefiting teaching and learning.

Making an assessment process sustainable means that it has to fit into the regular cycle of the institution. Beginning a program just prior to an accreditation visit will likely result in an assessment process focused on accountability rather than transformation. The assessment planning and data collection must be something that can be done regularly. They must become institutionalized and embedded.

Institutions typically have a huge amount of data about student learning at any given time. Some of the information has been gathered by third-party vendors (for example, National Survey of Student Engagement or Cooperative Institutional Research Program data), but much of it is already embedded in the regular cycle of the university. Student papers and exams, alumni surveys, and participation rates are some examples of data that probably are already being collected. By using data in multiple ways, the assessment plan can become more sustainable. Every academic department requires students to submit work for courses. Homework problems, papers, exams, presentations, and even in-class discussions can demonstrate what a student knows

in a relatively authentic way. These examples of student work are usually used for determining an individual student's grade, but they can also be lifted out of the course setting and used to evaluate student learning outcomes across a department or even an institution. If those data are already being collected, a huge hurdle can be overcome when developing an assessment plan. Similarly, by sampling student work to measure a particular outcome, a faculty assessment committee can spend less time reading papers (for example) as part of the assessment plan while still gathering enough evidence of student learning to share with the entire department. The assessment planning process becomes more sustainable because it is something that can be viewed as requiring a reasonable amount of time to spend on the project.

### **Transformative Assessment Must Be Flexible and Ongoing**

Once an assessment plan is developed, measures measured, and findings used, what happens? If the assessment process is flexible, the assessment results should suggest modifications for the next cycle. It should be a formative process that is reevaluated at the beginning and the end of each cycle. This flexibility of the assessment plan will lead to its sustainability, which will promote the ongoing (or never-ending) characteristic of a transformative assessment program.

Just as any course taught might be modified each semester based on course evaluations, student responses on exams, and needs of the department, so should departmental and institutional assessment plans be modified. If a department is working on enhancing student learning, that learning will probably increase in particular areas. This should prompt the faculty to raise the bar in terms of student learning outcomes. What once might have been acceptable may no longer be the appropriate level of student learning. If assessment is working to transform higher education, there should be a corresponding increase (quantitatively or qualitatively) in what and how much students are learning and how they are using the information they have gained during college. Transformative

assessment should be flexible and ongoing enough to demonstrate the assessment spiral: “Many campuses with active assessment programs have moved away from the two dimensions of the feedback circle and are thinking of assessment as an upward spiral, still identifying goals and outcomes, still measuring those outcomes, but with ever-increasing improvement of the quality of student learning as the spiral moves upward” (Wehlburg, 2007, p. 1). A quality assessment plan that provides information to a department or institution will result in an upward spiral of ever-increasing student quality. This will require flexibility in the process of assessment planning (and replanning) and an understanding that the assessment plan is part of an ongoing process and is not cast in stone.

### **Transformative Assessment Must Be Used for Improvement with the Potential for Substantive Change**

Clearly if an assessment program is going to be successful, the data must be used for improvement, and there must be potential for change. Assessment is not a product or an end; it is a process that leads to enhanced teaching and learning, and informed decision making focused on the mission and values of a specific institution. The data that come from the assessment process are not meaningful unless they can be used to determine what a particular department or institution can do to increase the quality (and perhaps quantity) of student learning. “Doing assessment” is very different from using the results of an assessment process. If faculty and administrators think of assessment as something that must be done for an outside body (accreditation or a board of trustees, for example), the assessment process will never be truly transformative. But when the ongoing assessment planning provides information about what needs improvement, transformation that is based on student learning data can be accomplished.

Transformative assessment can provide evidence of areas that are not being accomplished at the levels that the institution

or department wants. In the past, this might have been seen as a failure because students did not learn what was expected. But since when did it become a bad thing to fail at something? When children learn to walk, they fall many times before they are successful, but they keep trying until they get it. Students too fail at many things before they succeed. If students knew everything before they came to college, there would not be much for them to do academically once they got into their institution. But the truth is that students do not know all that they need to know. This means that they have to learn it, and in learning it, they have to practice it correctly. First (and second and third) drafts of papers are needed as students learn writing and referencing skills. Many homework problems are worked over the course of the semester in order to learn a new skill or technique. Practice (and failing at being “perfect”) is an essential part of the learning process.

This need to fail is also part of the assessment process. As departments and units measure student learning outcomes, it is possible that not all outcomes are met at the level desired. Rather than viewing this as a bad event, departments and institutions should view this as an opportunity to make modifications to what they do. Assessment is a process that should give a better understanding of what is done well and, more important, what is not done well. Knowing where outcomes are not fully met allows that information to be better used to make informed decisions about what to focus on in the next academic year.