

Non-Academic Units (NAUs)

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1. What is assessment and why is it necessary?

Assessment is a process by which you measure your department against a pre-defined set of objectives or objectives. For non-academic departments, assessment is determining whether or not your department does what is expected of it and completes all of these tasks in an efficient and effective manner. Basically, assessment is a systematic method of finding ways for your department to become more streamlined. It is important to determine if your department does complete everything that is expected in an efficient and effective manner, or if there are procedures or processes no longer working for your department and needing change. Assessment is a collaborative effort that includes all staff members in your department, as well as any direct or indirect constituents that influence your department or are impacted by your department. Assessment planning enables faculty and staff to answer important questions posed by students, parents, employers, accrediting bodies, and legislators about university and department policies, procedures and other areas crucial to university operations. Assessment allows everyone involved to become a part of the whole system and to have an influence in policy and procedural methods adopted by every department on campus.

2. What are some misconceptions about assessment?

Assessment is not about collecting data, repeatedly sending surveys to everyone, or making your department conform to one particular business model that seems to work at some other school. Assessment is about evaluating the process, not the person. Assessment is not always quantifiable, nor is it measuring the effectiveness of a single person; assessment is NOT a performance evaluation of any single person; it is a **performance evaluation of the department**. For example, if a department had so many tasks expected of them and no way to compete them, the department assessment report should state what tasks could not be completed. By performing an assessment evaluation, it can allow for possible changes based on the results of the assessment reporting.

3. Who does assessment? We thought that this was something only faculty had to worry about.

Everybody does assessment in some form. Assessment is not just for faculty. In higher education, everybody from the administration to the students perform assessment. Our objective is to ensure that assessment is a collaborative effort between faculty, staff and administration. It should never be the case that an assessment guru exists in your department and he/she has the sole responsibility of creating and maintaining the department's assessment plan and report. Assessment only works when as many people are involved as possible. Every department at SSU has room for improvement, and assessment can identify places that need improvement as well as possible ways to accomplish this improvement. Quite often you will hear the words "student learning" when assessment is being discussed; rest assured that you do affect student learning. It does not matter what department you work in; you DO affect student learning. However, there is a big difference in how faculty conduct assessment and how non-academic departments conduct assessment.

4. How do we begin an assessment plan for our department?

The first thing is to determine your department's responsibilities. This can most easily be accomplished by looking at job descriptions or duties of employees, as well as departmental responsibilities. If your department has a mission statement, that should be the corner stone of your assessment. Once you have determined the overall responsibilities of your department, you will need to decide on a set of clear and concise objectives. These objectives should be directly related to your department's responsibilities and mission statement. After you decide on your objectives, determine if these objectives are being met. This involves measurement, but such measurements need not always be quantitative. It is impossible to say what you will learn from these measurements. If the department easily meets all of the targets, perhaps the targets are too low. Remember that it is OK if your department does not meet all of your targets every year. Assessment data is meant to be followed over time. If some target outcomes are not met in one assessment period this does not necessarily mean that anything needs to change; you should examine trends over time. After a period of time, if target outcomes are consistently not met, then action may be needed. Regardless, outcomes matter and meeting those target outcomes imply more than simply going through the steps. Too often, employees are told that measuring and reporting measurements are what really matter. Being obsessed with the process of assessment is never a substitute for improving your department.

5. What about student learning? Do we have to relate everything we are assessing to how it impacts student learning?

NO. You do not have to relate everything you are assessing to student learning. This is the big difference between how faculty and staff do assessment. If what your department does directly affects student learning then you can mention this in your assessment plan; but in general, non-academic departments do not need to mention student learning.

6. What role does our administrator play in assessment?

Since the phrase Student Learning does not need to be mentioned in every non-academic departmental assessment report, it is the recommendation of the Institutional Assessment Committee that department heads and directors create their assessment plans and reports. Then, selected SSU administrators such as Associate Vice Presidents or Vice Presidents will be responsible for managing these assessment plans and reports and describing how each of the departments they oversee affect student learning/student success and how it ties into the plans and reports. Effectively, most SSU administrators do not have an assessment plan for their own office; their assessment plan is a compilation and evaluation of all the plans for the departments that report to them and how their departments affect student learning/student success.

7. How do we encourage employees to participate in assessment?

Knowledge of the purpose of assessment usually encourages staff to participate. This is the best way to make improvements and to ensure that all staff in your department have a say. The best way to encourage your staff is by responding to the results and showing everyone involved that their participation is making a difference. Department heads or directors can also encourage their staff by setting aside a separate time in each department meeting where assessment issues are discussed.

8. What do we measure and what kinds of information do we collect?

NAU assessment measures are divided into two areas: Service Delivery Outcomes and Program Outcomes

Service Delivery Outcomes (SDOs) are the department's general job duties as well as anything that comes from the mission statement. The kinds of information to collect varies by department; examples include student surveys, faculty/staff surveys, number of training sessions provided/growth in attendance, timeliness of response, etc.

Program Outcomes (POs) are overarching to the department and address how the department can improve. Consider departmental needs such as additional staff, new technology, new equipment, staff professional development, etc. Program outcomes may be based on service delivery outcomes from the previous year for which targets were not achieved. These can serve as the basis for a newly established program outcome (additional personnel, increased staff development) and the corresponding target. Examples of information to collect could be timeliness of response to service requests, customer satisfaction surveys, number of complaints, etc.

9. What makes for good assessment measures, and how many do you need?

Good assessment measures include third party observations, self-administered questionnaires, interviews with students, faculty, and/or staff, and external assessment instruments (Audit reports, Federal or State reports, etc.). The number of measures needed greatly depends on the type of objective you have and the available measures for that objective. In general, you only need one measure if it is a direct measure; if all that are available are indirect measures then you may need more than one. For more help on this topic please talk to a member of the Institutional Assessment Committee with your specific examples.

10. What is the difference between direct and indirect measurements?

Indirect measures assess opinions or thoughts about whether or not your department meets its objectives of being effective, efficient, and whether or not your department completes all tasks that are expected. Indirect measures are most commonly captured by the use of surveys.

Direct measures assess departmental performance without the use of opinions, thoughts, or assumptions. A Direct measure will usually be very concise and easy to interpret. For example, a Finance department may have an objective of receiving an unqualified audit every year; a direct measure of this objective would be the State audit report of SSU's financial activities. If the IRPA department has an objective of submitting IPEDS data on time and accurately every semester, then a direct measure would be the records kept by the IRPA department that indicate whether or not IPEDS data were sent on or before the due date and whether or not any re-submissions were necessary due to inaccurate data.

11. Can't we just resubmit the same report as we did last year since we did not do anything different?

NO. Each year the departments benefit from assessment in some way, whether it is from changes made because of their own assessments or from those made because of a past year's assessments. Some changes can be made immediately. Other changes will take more time. Nobody desires that good assessment can reveal consistent trends. If staff are tempted to produce the same report each year with only minor modifications, then it could mean that you and your employees are overly concerned with the process of assessment rather than using it in a meaningful way. You should be ensuring that your department is doing all that is expected in the most efficient way possible with the tools and resources available. It is very likely that your assessment objectives will remain constant from year to year; but the report should not.

12. Should we consistently meet all of our objectives each year?

If every objective is met consistently from year to year, it may mean that the targets are set too low. Purposefully setting targets that are easily met defeats the purpose for having an assessment plan. On the other hand, usually you do not want to set targets that are impossible to reach. It is expected that sometimes you will meet your objectives and other times you may not. However, the goal of assessment each year is to improve an area of your service(s) to the institution and/or to our students. You do not need to assess your entire department each year, but you should assess areas of what you do over an extended period of time.

13. What is the due date for my assessment plan and report?

Assessment Plans are due in September of each academic year. Assessment Reports are due in August of the following year.

14. What resources can the Institutional Assessment Committee offer us?

Knowledge, experience, and examples of assessment

15. What if we don't have time for assessment?

Everybody has time for assessment. Assessment is essential for a department to stay focused on their mission and to stay current with Federal, State and University policy. It is necessary to make assessment a top priority in order for a department to know if they are consistently performing at or above what is required.