

Some Guidelines for Assessment in Course Syllabi and for Means of Program Assessment Embedded or Administered in Courses

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The purposes of this document are to provide some guidelines for:

1. Including assessment in course syllabi
2. Means of program assessment embedded or administered in courses
3. Informing students about assessment

This will be brief and to the point. If you want more information concerning course/ classroom assessment, syllabi preparation, assessing courses, and so forth, a brief reference list is provided at the end of this guide. The references include many examples from many disciplines, and some references are found at Lakeland College's John Esch Library.

Efforts should be made at Lakeland College, by all faculty and staff, to raise student awareness of assessment in general, and specifically of program assessment [assessment in majors, minors, and General Studies]. Lakeland College provides information about assessment through its web site, the catalog(s), the student newspaper, the course syllabi, etc. But, the most effective way to increase student awareness about, and create a climate for, assessment is through what you say to students. Moreover, the quality of improvement in our courses and our programs is determined by the instruction that takes place. Only when used in combination with good instruction, can assessment help improve education. Finally, with a learning centered approach to your course syllabus, you may ask yourself to what extent you can support and challenge students to assume increasing responsibility for actively shaping their learning.

Assessment in Course Syllabi

A typical course syllabus includes several sections that describe the course; goals; objectives; structure; significance within the program of study [major, minor, General Studies]; mutual obligations between students and instructor; and critical logistical & procedural information about what will happen when and where. At the end of this document is a sample checklist of typical syllabus elements (Grunert, 1997).

The composition of your syllabus is tied to the rationale for the design of your course. Decide what you want students to be able to do as a result of taking your course, and how their work will be appropriately assessed. If we are to determine whether academic programs are successful, we must initially determine the goals of courses and curricula. We must state in specific terms what we expect our students to be able to do and then design evaluation instruments and procedures that adequately assess whether students meet the criteria, at various points in the instructional process, including at the end.

Along with what you usually include in your syllabus, an effective syllabus should provide a clear statement of intended goals and student outcomes, and should establish standards and procedures for evaluation. The student learning outcomes and the assessment measures for each outcome could be shown side-by-side, perhaps in a table.

Plan your course with process, content, and product goals in mind. Besides the conceptual knowledge and technical skills of a discipline or field, your students will need other tools for living and working effectively in society. Students should be able to:

- Initiate, understand, assess, and assume responsibility for their ongoing learning process
- Access and use resources effectively
- Work alone and collaborate with others
- Resolve dilemmas emerging from complex situations

- Think and communicate effectively using appropriate means such as writing, speaking and listening, numbers, graphics, performance, etc.
- Clarify personal values, purposes, and goals
- Understand and respect differences

You need to develop statements that are useful to you and to your students. To be useful, objectives should contain three basic elements:

- A verb that describes an observable action.
- A description of the conditions under which the action takes place: “when given x , you will be able to ...”
- The acceptable performance level – that is, what percentage of correct answers will be considered acceptable, how many errors will be permitted, how many and which examples must be included, etc.

Use clear, concise words to describe student behavior in these objectives, words not open to misinterpretation. Suggestions for terms to use include: to write, to recite, to identify, to sort, to solve, to construct, to build, to compare, to contrast, etc.

You should ensure that useful statements are written, that they include all the elements that should be addressed, that they are measurable within your course, and that when students reach the end of the course, you can be confident that the goals established have been met.

Try not to produce so many objectives for your course that you are frustrated with finding ways to evaluate each objective. Objectives should be concrete, not abstract, but yet not trivial just because it is easier to write a long list of minutia. If it helps you, find someone to serve as a facilitator who will ask you, “If I’m your student, what do I have to do to convince you that I’m where you want me to be at the end of this lesson, unit, or course.” Then, without prompting from your own notes or other resources, try to verbally answer the question. Out of this discussion will come performance objectives that are measurable and that tend to be far more important and at a higher level than would be produced otherwise.

Whenever you formulate learning goals you should simultaneously address assessment procedures. Assessment has many definitions. One definition is a procedure for gathering information about the learning process that uses multiple indicators and sources of evidence. Become more conscious of your assessment philosophy and develop an understanding of how your approach to assessment fits with your beliefs about teaching and learning. Use multiple measures to avoid limiting judgments to one or two high stakes testing occasions or one particular kind of assessment task, keeping in mind that:

- The assessment process is connected to the learners’ world, frames of reference, and values.
- Demonstration of learning includes multiple ways to represent knowledge and skills and allows for attainment of the outcome at different points in time.
- Self-assessment is essential to the overall assessment process

As students accept increasing responsibility for their learning, students must develop the tools for self-assessment that will help them improve upon and internalize criteria for monitoring and judging their own performance. However, keep in mind that student self-assessment should be just part of the overall assessment procedures you develop for your course.

As you think through the design and implementation of your course, keep in mind that student assessment at the course level provides data both on individual student performance for grading purposes and on the overall effectiveness of instruction for identifying those areas that may require improvement. Another function is that it helps the student to assess his or her own progress in meeting course goals. As you develop your approach to assessment, make sure it includes the more complex goals of your course and that you build your approach in throughout the semester, having a good sense of what is and what is not working and opportunities to make adjustments immediately

as problems occur. What most likely will be new is the care that you will take to ensure that data you collect measure how well your students reach the specific goals established. You will most readily accept the results of your studies if you gather the data yourself.

It is possible to design procedures and instruments that serve four distinct purposes:

- Identifying student for remediation and exemption, requiring specifying anticipated prerequisites
- Determining whether the objectives (of individual units and of the course) are being met by measuring student performance – there should be a perfect fit between the stated objectives, the content of the course, and the student evaluation instruments that will be used.
- Determining whether and how students' attitudes toward the course and the discipline or field have changed.
- Determining whether the overall course design and the materials and procedures are efficient and effective.

Too often there is a gap between what we say our major goals are and the way we evaluate the competencies of our students.

Diamond (1998) provides specific examples of ways for you to assess (a) group work; (b) specific goals; (c) portfolios, journals, and simulations; and (d) your course [classroom assessment]. As part of an assessment model for assessing group work, a team response form allows students to evaluate one another's contribution to the group or team, even though you would evaluate the team's final report and presentation. You should explore whether your approach to assessment directly relates to the goals of your course; for example, some types of writing assignments that could serve to assess the writing skills of students include 1-2 paragraph responses to questions posed in class, 1-3 page synthesis/analysis papers, 2-5 page research papers, final reports, and essay examinations. The student products used for assessment should match what outcome is being assessed. Portfolios, journals, and simulations combine instructional techniques with an assessment element. For example, in portfolios, students are asked to demonstrate their growth in the course and their mastery of important skills by selecting materials they have created based on the specific goals of the course, such that the process of selecting what to include in the portfolios becomes an important learning experience.

Thus, you can establish creative forms of evaluation, beyond paper and pencil tests, with clearly stated standards and criteria, that will provide useful, ongoing, and final information for both you and your students (e.g., *product* assessment [essays, stories, research reports, writing portfolios, projects], *performance* assessments (music, dance, dramatic performance, science lab demonstrations, debates, experiments), and *process-focused* assessment [oral questioning, interviews, journals, observation]). Brookhart (1999) provides numerous possibilities for assessment techniques in the disciplines.

In the classroom assessment approach, you collect data early and often on how well your students are learning and on their reactions to your course. The purpose is to provide information and insight needed to adjust and improve teaching and learning as they occur. A simple method of classroom assessment is to give each student a blank 3x5 card and ask them to list the three best things about your course and the 3 things that could be improved, based on what they thought the course would be like. Ask them not to put their names on the cards. Not surprisingly, students respond well and honestly, and you receive useful information about your course.

Means of Program Assessment Embedded or Administered in Courses

Many of your program assessment plans [for majors, minors, General Studies] that you developed include means of program assessment that are embedded in your courses. For example, specific Mathematics tests given in MAT 322 and MAT 430 are used to assess students' mathematics ability to solve problems and relate math to applications. So, these tests are used by the faculty to assess the students in that course, but also [and this is the part that is usually invisible to the students] the assessments are used as part of the overall assessment of the Mathematics major at Lakeland

College. The students should be informed, as part of the syllabus and in your discussions with the students, that these specific assessments are used to measure specific program objectives for the purpose of improvement of the overall educational program. (See the section *Including assessment in course syllabi* for recommendations about development of statements of objectives.)

Sometimes courses are used to administer specific program assessment measures, even though the assessment(s) may or may not be included as part of the assessment measures for the course (i.e., the assessment(s) might not be used toward the students' grades in the course). This is true for some means of assessment in the degree programs offered in the Kellett School Centers (KSCs) and for some of the General Studies assessments throughout Lakeland. For example, one assessment measure used in assessing several outcomes in the Business Administration "core" are assessed by a comprehensive exam administered at the beginning of BUS 490 [formerly BA 499, still in the KSCs during 2004-05]. Sometimes program assessment measures are administered sometime during a capstone course for an educational program. Another example is the ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) modules that will be used to assess a variety of student learning outcomes of the General Studies program. In CORE I and CORE III course sections, the CAAP Critical Thinking module will be used as a pre-/post-test for assessing higher order thinking; in other courses (i.e., Writing-Intensive course sections) the CAAP Writing module will be used as a post-test assessment of students' abilities to communicate in writing. Again, the students should be informed, as part of the syllabus and in your discussions with the students, that these specific assessments are used to measure specific program objectives for the purpose of improvement of the overall educational program.

In many cases, the course instructor will administer the assessment measure, regardless of whether or not the assessment is used as part of the students' grades. Sometimes, as in the case of the CAAP modules, a staff member will come to your classroom to administer the assessment, with your help. And, again, the assessments are often "transparent" to the student, meaning that the student does not know that the assessment measure has a dual purpose, or that the course instructor will see the results of the individual student's assessment scores but that the main purpose of the assessment is for program improvement. It should be obvious that the instructor's influence on students in general will have a great impact on student motivation, on how well students try while completing the assessment. Your approach and attitude toward the assessment, regardless of its purpose, will in turn have a great effect on the students' attitudes. If the assessment is administered by another faculty or staff member, please remember how important it is for you to be in the classroom, not only helping with the administration of the assessment, but also just your physical presence will have a large positive impact on the overall process. Students should be informed that you will see their results. Prior to the use of the assessment measure in your course, you should inform the students about the assessment, how important it is to be on time to class (always, but particularly on that day), to bring a pencil (even though you know that extra pencils will be available), and that you support the assessment effort. Even though specific instructions will be given on the day the assessment takes place, following are some general comments you should make to your students, prior to the assessment date:

- For all program assessments, there is a great importance to students in terms of the quality and integrity of the programs offered at Lakeland College, including all programs in the Kellett School.
- For program assessments administered at the beginning of a course, such as a capstone course, the assessment measures content knowledge or competencies acquired prior to entering the course.
- For all program assessments, the results will be used to improve that specific program.

Informing students about assessment

Earlier in this document, there have been provided several ways that students can read about assessment. These are more useful, however, if they stimulate discussion. Near the end of this document is a one-page flyer (without a page number on it), which you may wish to print off and

photocopy to hand out to students in your courses. [The flyer has been used in the past for student enrollment/ orientation days.] Then, you could discuss assessment efforts at Lakeland.

Summary

As well as being told about the purpose of course requirements, students should know (through your syllabus and what you tell them) how their progress will be assessed and how their work will be evaluated. The shift toward describing goals in terms of student outcomes will require effort on your part, particularly if you are used to thinking about your teaching in terms of your content area rather than with reference to student outcomes. Keep in mind that the clearer your statements of outcomes, the easier it will be for you to design your course and assess your students' success in reaching the goals established.

It is important that your assessment strategies are consistent with your rationale. If your evaluation criteria are clearly understood and seem fair to your students, the students can more easily evaluate their own work and be more assured about the results. When students participate in determining the criteria by which work will be judged and then play a role in assessing their work (or the work of other students) against those criteria, their personal sense of responsibility for learning is more apparent.

Means of measuring student learning should match the outcomes. More than one approach to assessing each outcome should be utilized. Students need to develop the tools of self-assessment.

Faculty using the classroom assessment approach have found that if problems exist, they can respond almost immediately by revising what they do in the classroom and by improving exams. As a result learning improves.

Your 'attitude' toward assessment greatly affects the overall assessment process.

You may want to use the assessment flyer to start a classroom discussion about assessment.

References

- Angelo, T. A., & Cross, K. P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brookhart, S. M. (1999). The art and science of classroom assessment: The missing part of pedagogy. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report (Vol. 27, No. 1). Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development.
- Diamond, R. M. (1998). *Designing & Assessing Courses & Curricula*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Grunert, J. (1997). *The course syllabus: A learning-centered approach*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Co., Inc.



Lakeland College, Office of Academic Assessment

What is **assessment**?

Assessment is a process that focuses on student learning, involving reviewing and reflecting on practice in a planned and careful way. Assessment is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development. It is an ongoing process that accumulates, summarizes and evaluates students' and educators' experiences throughout their academic interactions. Assessment changes over time and responds to the demands of the changing learning environment. As a student, you will learn more about assessment through:

- your course syllabi and course requirements (your instructor will let you know when a college assessment is being used in your course)
- the Lakeland College web site, <http://www.lakeland.edu/Assessment/default.asp>
- the Lakeland College student newspaper, The Mirror
- the Lakeland College Academic Catalog

What is the **Assessment Committee**?

The purpose of the Assessment Committee is to provide evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates that Lakeland College is fulfilling its educational mission. The current Assessment Committee members are listed on the Lakeland College web site.

How can you **find out more** about assessment?

Contact your academic advisor or the Office of Academic Assessment:

Dr. Tom Marcy, Director of Academic Assessment

Phone: on-campus extension: **1488**; off-campus: (920) 565-1488

Fax: (920) 565-1556

Checklist of common elements of a syllabus:

√	Examples
	Title page
	Table of contents
	Instructor information
	Information (letter) to the student introducing the course
	Purpose of the course
	Course description
	Course and unit objectives
	Resources
	Readings
	Course calendar
	Course requirements
	Evaluation
	Grading procedures
	How to use this syllabus
	How to study for this course
	Content information
	Learning tools