

# GUIDELINES FOR JUDGING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING

## OVERVIEW

We provide a set of 50 Guidelines to use in judging the quality and effectiveness of an assessment.

The major areas are:

- ✚ **Having a clear purpose and readiness for assessment**
- ✚ **Involving stakeholders throughout the assessment process**
- ✚ **What and how to assess is critical**
- ✚ **Assessment is telling a story**
- ✚ **Improvement and follow-up are an integral part of the assessment process**

The following Guidelines are intended for use in planning, implementing, and/or judging the benefits and contributions of campus-based assessment efforts. The Guidelines were developed through conversations with institutional researchers, faculty, practitioners, and assessment scholars that focused on which aspects of the assessment process were most important in optimizing the utility of assessment efforts on college campuses. Additionally, the authors of the Guidelines reviewed the major publications focused on assessment utilization and drew from their collective experience of over 50 years working in the area of higher education assessment.

The Guidelines stress that assessment must be strategic in its intent and function and that stakeholders should primarily use assessment to improve the activities, programs, or institutions for which they are responsible and accountable. The Guidelines also focus on enhancing and fostering student learning.

### Having a clear purpose and readiness for assessment

1. We acknowledge the importance of aligning assessment approaches with the culture and mission of the institution.
2. We have developed a culture of assessment on campus in which we regularly assess student learning throughout all areas of the institution.
3. We acknowledge that assessment is often driven by external demands, but the primary commitment to assess is to improve student learning.
4. We assess so that we can understand what and how students learn as a result of their educational experiences.
5. We consider assessment to be an integral part of strategic planning efforts.
6. We purposefully view assessment as an important process in organizational decision-making.
7. We recognize the importance of developing a comprehensive assessment plan prior to collecting data.
8. We emphasize the use of assessment evidence in planning and implementation processes.
9. We have sufficient fiscal and human resources to address the feasibility of assessment plans.
10. We recognize that the social, cultural, and racial/ethnic backgrounds of students, faculty, staff, and administrators provide critical perspectives in the planning, data collection, and interpretation phases of the assessment plan.

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## **Involving stakeholders throughout the assessment process**

1. We include stakeholders in all phases of the assessment process, from determining central questions and issues to interpreting the meaning and merit of different findings.
2. We recognize the importance of including primary stakeholders (i.e., administrators, faculty, staff, and students) who are directly involved in educational experiences.
3. We design assessment plans to ensure a sense of ownership among the various stakeholders.
4. We identify assessment “champions” who demonstrate a sincere commitment to improving student learning.
5. We understand the importance of consensus-building among different stakeholders in developing the various phases of assessment plans.
6. We acknowledge the political nature of assessment and the importance of developing strategies for dealing with potential conflicts and tensions among different stakeholders.
7. We recognize that the varying goals, needs, and backgrounds of different stakeholders may influence how they interpret and use assessment evidence.
8. We develop specific sessions to ensure the assessment plan is understandable, relevant, and acceptable to the stakeholders.
9. We recognize that assessment is most effective and useful when it engages different stakeholders in conversations about what the evidence means to them.
10. We advocate a culture of openness, trust, and commitment to self-examination among different stakeholders.

## **What and how to assess is critical**

1. We stress the importance of collecting evidence that is congruent with the goals of the institution, including departmental and programmatic objectives.
2. We include evidence of student background characteristics (inputs), student educational experiences (environment), and student learning (outcomes) in data collection plans.
3. We advocate “high standards but not high standardization” in defining quality.
4. We recognize benefits and limitations in choosing either locally-developed or externally-based assessment instruments.
5. We acknowledge the importance of accuracy and feasibility in choosing different assessment approaches and consult with measurement and assessment experts accordingly.
6. We gather evidence using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to collectively understand what students learn and how they make meaning of their educational experiences.
7. We triangulate evidence to identify areas of consistency and inconsistency across different findings.
8. We employ pilot testing to ensure the face validity of survey instruments and interview protocols.
9. We recognize the limitations of different assessment approaches and take into account rival explanations and other potential threats to the validity of findings.
10. We acknowledge the importance of depth over breadth in developing assessment approaches that start small and avoid overly complex and cumbersome processes.

## **Assessment is telling a story**

1. We consider assessment as a special type of story – one that includes judgments of quality based on evidence.
2. We purposefully link the assessment story to key issues and decisions.
3. We work to make the story clear, focused, simple, and easily understood by different stakeholders.
4. We recognize how the story is communicated is critical (e.g., written, oral, group meetings) and that a variety of dissemination strategies may be needed to accommodate different stakeholders.
5. We communicate the story so that differences among students (e.g., social, cultural, ethnic/racial) are respected.
6. We recognize that how the story is interpreted will be based in part on the multiple experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives of key stakeholders.
7. We meet informally and formally with stakeholders, including students, to discuss, react, and make meaning of the assessment story.
8. We know that telling the story must be combined with conversations and deliberations for action by relevant stakeholders.
9. We know that the evidence and story must reach those who have the power and resources to make changes.
10. We acknowledge that the story may not be complete and that additional findings may be necessary to fill in gaps or address inconsistencies in the evidence.

## **Improvement and follow-up are an integral part of the assessment process**

1. We believe that assessment requires a willingness and caring among stakeholders to make adjustments based on lessons learned from the assessment process.
2. We develop either relative or absolute standards to make judgments and to inform improvement efforts.
3. We recognize that stakeholders often prefer comparisons and benchmarking, particularly in relation to peer and aspirant institutions.
4. We promote transparency in informing key stakeholders about how and why programmatic decisions were made based on the collected evidence.
5. We advocate for a dynamic, interactive, and ongoing communication process among stakeholders rather than a unilateral transmission of collected evidence.
6. We develop coordinated and on-going efforts to bring stakeholders together to discuss future directions and next steps.
7. We commit financial and human resources to ensure assessment evidence is not simply collected but used in making programmatic improvements.
8. We recognize the continuous nature of assessment and that programmatic improvements may require several years to produce identifiable results.
9. We continually evaluate the usefulness of assessment efforts and make changes when needed.
10. We change and adapt assessment strategies to meet the ongoing needs of those impacted and remain sensitive to the social, cultural, and racial/ethnic backgrounds of students.

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These Guidelines are posted on the website:  
<http://gpi.central.edu>

## Additional resources

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