



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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COURSE ASSESSMENT AND STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES: A GUIDE FOR FACULTY

Institutions document student learning when they collect evidence—information deliberately organized to support a claim or to help reconcile competing claims about the ways students integrate new knowledge and existing knowledge. The most significant component of course assessment is the action faculty will take to improve the quality of teaching and learning, based on what they learn from studying the evidence. By setting expectations, tracking progress, measuring outcomes, reporting on results, and determining effective ways to enhance learning goals, an assessment cycle can lead to continuous improvement. The faculty at Lord Fairfax Community College (LFCC) began this important journey.

Information: Why Should We Document Student Learning?

Faculty asked: “Why conduct course assessment when we already have grades as a measure of student learning?” Answers included: Grading practices are not standard across faculty, courses, departments, or levels; objectives and outcomes differ from course to course and instructor to instructor; grades do not specify what students have learned from the course and reflect more than course content and mastery; and assessment requires multiple procedures.

They asked: “When are the courses going to be assessed?” A committee would develop a three-year cycle to assess all courses, but the first cycle would assess only one course per department.

Implementation: How Should We Document Learning?

Task #1: Course Content Summary. Guided by department chairs (LFCC program leads), faculty collaborated on important decisions that affect teaching and learning practices. They reviewed pilot course content

summaries (the first courses on the three-year cycle) to determine whether they included necessary content components. Course content summaries incorporated information from Virginia Community College System (VCCS) (LFCC is in the VCCS), Master Course File about the course (Course Description), course objectives (General Course Purpose), major teaching topics, required texts, and course prerequisites. All course content summaries had to be revised before moving to student learning objectives. Revised Course Content Summaries would include “Student Learning Objectives.”

Task #2: General Education Requirements and Course Assessment Guide (CAG). All courses must adhere to state-level general education requirements. Faculty identified at least two VCCS general education requirements for each course, one in the area of critical thinking. Now it would be possible to assess general education requirements and student learning objectives, simultaneously.

Task #3: Student Learning Objectives. A student-learning objective (SLO) identifies the **measurable** knowledge, skills, behaviors, or attitudes of the learner as the result of engaging in a learning activity or program. Faculty asked: “What are the most important content and concept pieces for students to learn in this course?” Using Bloom’s Taxonomy, groups identified an action verb that clearly described the level of learning intended and stated what the learner would “do” or “show” (knowledge, skill, behavior, attitude) as a result of (end of) a learning experience or activity. Faculty were asked to think about “evidence” and “artifacts” that would demonstrate objectives had been met (e.g., documents from instructors or students). After completing one SLO as a group, faculty selected assessment tasks that captured measurable elements and shared “best practices.”

Task #4: Course Assessment Guides (CAG). Course Assessment Guides (designed by LFCC’s assessment committee) stated the SLO; identified the assessment task; described how instructors would measure the task, benchmark, or expected outcome; described the results (did students meet the learning benchmark?); and listed future actions, based on results (plans for improvement).



- To write the SLO, faculty asked: “What do students need to be able to do ‘out there’ for which the course will prepare them?”
- To develop the assessment task, they asked: “What will students do in the course to demonstrate evidence of the outcome? What learning is essential to the outcome?”
- To delineate “measurement,” faculty asked: “How will we measure the outcomes?”

The two final categories on the CAG would be included after students completed the assessment task and instructors analyzed the results.

- For “Results,” faculty asked: “What information do we have based on the tasks and measurement?”
- For “Actions Taken” faculty decided what they would do differently to enhance student learning.

Assessment Tasks: Faculty within a discipline maintained as much continuity as possible across tasks, which made compiling results and using data more efficient. Direct assessment methods would give instructors measurable data (e.g., written and oral exams, performance assessments, standardized tests, licensure exams, oral presentations, projects, demonstrations, case studies, simulations, portfolios, and juried activities). Indirect assessment methods provided additional information (e.g., questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, employer satisfaction studies, advisory board, and job/grad school placement data).

Faculty built assessment into courses throughout the semester. When instructors clarified learning goals and gave feedback on student learning, students were able to assess better their own progress in meeting the goals, and instructors could make adjustments along the way.

Measurement: Each course assessment guide detailed the task and the expected outcome in measurable terms (e.g., “95% of students will complete 100% of the skills on the standardized nursing skills checklists successfully (Prentice Hall Fundamentals of Nursing) and continue in the nursing program; 95% of students will complete standardized testing through an independent testing service (ATI Fundamentals of Nursing) successfully, achieving a benchmark of 64% on a proctored exam,” or as straightforward as “Class average of 70% or higher”). Data differed across disciplines, but faculty choices provided appropriate results for future decision-making situations.

Task 5: Evidence, Analysis and Evaluation. Student assessment at the course level provided student performance data for grading purposes, determining effectiveness of instruction, and identifying areas of improvement. During the “methodology” phase of implementation (tasks #3 and #4), faculty wrote the SLO, selected

the assessment task, and determined the time period to conduct the task. During the “evidence” phase, faculty conducted pre- and post-test assessments, submitted questions that became the exit exam for the course, used portfolios, and took random snapshots of the course. Further, they discussed using rubrics to evaluate student performance. Instructors were studying student learning in their own classes and viewing the course as it was taught across all classes, both traditional and online courses. Talking about student learning and planning ways to enhance it was a valuable and collaborative step for the faculty.

Reporting results in group dialog achieved the required results: educators shared professionally, considered best practices, evaluated student learning, and took action based on new awareness. They decided what they wanted to know about student learning. The action plans were valuable if faculty could answer their own question: “How will our analysis impact future teaching and learning at LFCC?”

Task #6: Action Plans. Instructors taught courses as usual, except that they were teaching with renewed commitment to clearly identified student learning objectives and conducting the assessment task at the designated time. After the assessment task was completed by students in all of the sections, program leads convened course instructors to discuss results. In some cases, instructors reviewed papers or tests together; in others, they reported their findings, depending on the methodology used in their department. The groups documented the process by taking notes that were later forwarded to the assessment coordinator and posted on a designated Blackboard site.

Building a Culture of Assessment and Continuous Improvement

This journey has been positive—we have established a commitment to conduct institutional, program, and course assessment, and to report on these findings so that students benefit from the learning environment at LFCC. Faculty have gained a sense of intellectual excitement and enjoy interacting and sharing best practices with their colleagues.

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