



# Determining a cycle for assessment activities:

## How do I set priorities when it's all important?

An overarching goal is for assessment of student learning to be a part of our regular practice, rather than an add-on. Whenever possible, embedding assessment into program or service activities is recommended. Making sure that 'end of program' questionnaires include questions on student learning, in addition to questions on satisfaction or logistics is an easy way to capture assessment information 'just in time'.

Our purpose is to use assessment for improvement. If you focus on an assessment area and it leads to new questions or areas for examination, then by all means continue working with that area. Following our natural curiosity ("I thought students would say they learned \_\_\_\_\_, but instead they said they learned \_\_\_\_\_.") is a part of the cycle of assessment.

### Some general guidance in setting priorities when it's all important:

- Any new program should have learning outcomes and an assessment plan. Student learning information collected during the first iteration of a program is valuable in making course corrections and changes. Plainly stated, there is no way to conclude that a program or service is leading to the intended learning and program outcomes if you do not assess it.
- It is difficult to assess "everything, all the time" – while everything is important, we are not in a position to act or make changes on "everything, all the time". We have to set priorities in all areas of our work, and assessment is no different.
- Setting an assessment cycle can be a way to assess what we value, and value what we assess, while still keeping assessment manageable, valuable, and do-able.

### The most effective way to determine an assessment cycle for individual programs/services is to anchor it in higher-level, departmental outcomes or institutional outcomes.

It may be as simple as looking at the themes across all the departmental outcomes you already have. For instance, say you examine all the outcomes you have and find that the four themes that encompass them are:

- Personal responsibility
- Multicultural competence
- Leadership skills
- Critical thinking skills

Programs and services in your area could be mapped to themes above, noting which programs respond to which outcomes as their primary focus. Then, the department could develop a cycle (say 4 years as an example), and choose an area from the above to focus on each year (e.g., Personal Responsibility, Year: 2010-11; Multicultural Competence, Year 2011-12; Leadership, Year 2012-13, etc.). Each program which has that outcome area as a primary focus would be assessed during that particular year. In this way, all overarching outcomes (and therefore all programs) are assessed for student learning in a cycle.

This process requires some disciplined mapping at the beginning to be sure that we look critically at what the primary ("essential") outcomes are for each program/service vs. "nice to see", or secondary outcomes. Keeping this process focused on what students really *must* learn in order for you to consider the program or service successful is important.

Another option would be to map programs to the four institution-level outcomes outlined below. Choose an overarching outcome area and assess programs that connect most directly to that area.

Because there are 4 overarching outcomes, if you use a 4-year cycle, no cohort of students at Iowa would be able to go their entire career without some outcomes assessment in each domain. The institution-level outcomes are:

- Gain broad-based knowledge and understanding of human cultures and of the physical and natural worlds.
- Acquire intellectual and practical skills.
- Develop personal, intellectual, and social responsibility.
- Be able to apply knowledge and skills in new settings and situations.

### Focus on the concept of assessment being *thorough over time*.

Your departmental assessment plan should address each of your department's learning outcomes, though not necessarily at the same time. In any given year, you might choose to focus on assessment of a particular outcome or set of outcomes, knowing that there is a plan in place for examining learning related to the remained over a two to four year period of time.