



Academic Assessment at USF

The purpose of this document is to provide the USF community with guidelines that can be used by faculty members and programs to define desired learning outcomes and develop appropriate and meaningful assessment programs that are valued and supported by students, faculty, and administrators.

Background

Higher education has undergone explosive growth during the post-World War II era, with total enrollment increasing 10-fold (from 1.5 million to over 15 million students) during that period ([Marchese, 1997](#))¹. One of the reasons for this is that possession of a baccalaureate degree is increasingly viewed by employers as necessary for success in the job market. Our challenge is thus to educate a student body that is highly diverse and, to a considerable extent, motivated by economic and market factors, in a fashion that remains consistent with core principles of liberal education.

We in higher education also face increasing pressures, from both internal and external entities, to assess student learning. While some of these constituent groups view this as an issue of accountability and have begun to impose or discuss the possibility of implementing “controversial” and some would argue “counterproductive” measures of student performance² in elementary, middle and high schools as well as in universities, we, as educators, also understand that assessment can also be a powerful force fueling program and pedagogical improvement as long as they are done appropriately.

In contrast to the more controversial accountability measurement processes that have been imposed upon learning institutions to date, appropriate assessment processes begin with individual student performance, although the focus is not on the individual student but rather an aggregate of students at the program level. Doing so enables the identification of weaknesses that can be addressed in the curriculum. The resulting assessment challenge for programs is thus not only to develop and implement assessment strategies that have this as their primary objective, but which also generate data that can satisfy external demands for demonstration of positive student learning outcomes.

¹ Marchese, T. J., 1997. U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE POSTWAR ERA: EXPANSION AND GROWTH. US Society and Values 4. <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/1297/ijse/marchese.htm>

² e.g., FCAT in Florida

Guiding Assessment Principles

Given the above factors, it is essential that we at USF continually assess our approaches to teaching, recognizing that success must be measured in terms of student learning. An assessment program that is embedded within curricula, and which involves the active participation of students and faculty, should thus be an essential component of any academic program. We thus propose that

Effective assessment must:

- be focused on student learning, determining achievement of learning outcomes and improving achievement of these outcomes
- be faculty and program driven
- be feasible to accomplish
- provide useful information for faculty, students, and administrators for course and program improvement
- be valid for assessing desired outcomes and appropriate for specific disciplines³
- be an integral part of a college's, and the university's, academic programs
- be performed at various key stages of student progression in academic programs
- include key internal, and if appropriate, external stakeholders in the process

Effective Assessment at USF

First and foremost, assessment's purpose is for improving programs and student learning outcomes. As such, it requires individual reflection by students and faculty and shared reflection by programs and the institution. Thus, primarily, it should be useful to programs and faculty for improving student learning

Although accountability and accreditation purposes are served, assessment should be guided by the needs, interests and outcomes of a program. It thus can and should be designed and streamlined to serve all assessment functions.

Assessment results should be used to guide change in strategies that will lead to improved learning, not to evaluate faculty performance.

Assessment, as discussed here, is at the course or program level, and is not focused on individual student performance, but rather aggregated student performance for a class, program, level, college, or institution (the unit of analysis is not the student). This is a primary reason why grades are not usually appropriate for assessment purposes. A grade is a holistic evaluation of performance in a course, and may not reveal what specific outcomes a student has achieved or what, in general, students know and can do or do not know and can not do. Further, grades, even collectively, do not reveal problems that could be addressed in the curriculum.

³ For example, if "more effective writing skills" is a desired outcome, students' writing should be assessed with a method that will permit faculty to detect writing weaknesses and strengths that can be addressed in future assignments, teaching methods or curricular change. Additionally, as programs may emphasize or require different writing skills, appropriate assessment of effective writing may vary from discipline to discipline.

Assessment typically is used to ascertain student performance, rather than just factual knowledge. What are students able to do and how do we know it? For example, are students able to judge the quality of evidence of an argument? What data or information do we have to support this? If students are not able to judge the quality of evidence, how can we address the problems or weaknesses?

The Statement of Academic Assessment Philosophy was approved by the USF Faculty Senate on April 18, 2007.