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32nd Academic Chairpersons Conference,
Austin, TX

Assessment: How to Survive It and How to Benefit from It

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Recommended Citation

Blumenthal, Robert (2015). "Assessment: How to Survive It and How to Benefit from It," *Academic Chairpersons Conference Proceedings*. <https://newprairiepress.org/accp/2015/Evaluation/4>

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Assessment of student learning outcomes is something with which every chair must grapple. Colleges and universities are under increasing pressure from the various regional accrediting agencies to demonstrate that students are, in fact, learning what we claim they are learning. This requires that each degree program identify a set of desired outcomes, design a means of assessing each outcome, identify a desired standard of achievement, report the results of the assessment, and interpret the results.

All too often, chairs and their faculty see this exercise as just another hoop through which one must jump in order to satisfy the requirements of accreditation. As a result, the whole thing becomes a mindless exercise for the purpose of satisfying what are felt to be arbitrary bureaucratic regulations. This then becomes an unfortunate waste of time and energy on the part of those faculty members who were unlucky enough to have been asked by the chair to serve on the department's assessment committee. Everyone concerned feels put out, and the department has derived no benefit from the enterprise.

It doesn't have to be this way. The important thing is that a department gives some thought as to how it might derive some benefit from an assessment strategy. The regional accrediting agencies generally allow a great deal of flexibility with regard to assessment strategies and their implementation. Departments need to take advantage of this flexibility so as to devise assessment mechanisms which will truly enable them to get a better understanding of their degree programs and ways to improve them.

In my department, we have grappled with this for several years, and we have moved from a climate of cynical compliance for the sake of satisfying institutional and accreditation regulations to a genuine appreciation of the value of an assessment mechanism which has been constructed for the purpose of program improvement. In this presentation, I will discuss this evolution. The aim will be to provide guidance to department chairs as to how to meet the various challenges associated with assessment, how to achieve faculty buy-in, and to offer some suggestions for constructing and implementing an assessment plan.