CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND: TOWARD A CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT

By taking ownership of assessment and developing an internally driven core process, colleges and universities can profile their students' learning within institutional educational practices and intentions. Moreover, within this context, assessment becomes a means to examine its educational intentions on its own terms within the complex ways that humans learn and within the populations an institution serves.

(Maki, 2004, p.15)

Topics Presented in Chapter 1

- ♦ Internal and external purposes for assessment
- ♦ Good practices in assessment

Internal and External Rationales for Assessment

Ball State University's 2012-2017 strategic plan calls for the University to be "relentlessly focused on learning outcomes," and includes the goals of "provid[ing] distinctive, high-quality educational experiences," and "becom[ing] a recognized leader for educational and disciplinary innovation." With these principles in mind, Ball State's assessment program is designed to create a culture of continuous improvement. We acknowledge and embrace the following benefits of assessment, as articulated by the University of Delaware (n.d.):

- Increasing our confidence that we are putting our time and resources into activities that we value as an institution
- Increasing our confidence that we are allocating resources to areas that are producing the outcomes we value
- Gathering and using data that will enable us to make decisions that lead to improved instruction, stronger curricula, and effective and efficient policies
- Strengthening our ability to say that our graduates are well-prepared to succeed in their future endeavors
- Having ready access to data that will satisfy the requirements of accrediting agencies and funding agencies, and will inform various accountability driven conversations
- Gathering and using data that will strengthen arguments for increased funding and/or resource allocations to areas that are producing valued outcomes
- Increasing the effectiveness of our communications about the value of a Ball State education

The [U]niversity is committed to building and sustaining a campus-wide student learning outcomes assessment program in which academic units define clear, concise, and measurable student learning outcomes, identify opportunities within and outside the classroom and the curriculum for students to achieve those outcomes; apply measures to assess whether the desired outcomes are being achieved; and use the results of the assessment for decision-making that improves instruction, strengthens the curriculum, and forms the basis for policy development and resource allocations.

While we recognize assessment to be crucial to our mission and as one of our responsibilities as educators, we are also aware of increasing calls for accountability for various external audiences including federal and state government, accreditors, the media, students and their parents, and the public at large. While we believe strongly that assessment should be driven by the faculty and staff members who have responsibility for Ball State's educational programs, we also carry out assessment efforts in order to satisfy the United States Department of Education, the Indiana Commission on Higher Education, and the North Central Association Higher Learning Commission.

Good Practices in Assessment

The following principles of good practice, adapted from the Astin et al. (1992), Northern Arizona University (2006), and the University of Delaware (n.d.) provide important guidance for Ball State's assessment efforts:

- The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.
- Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.
- Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.
- Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.
- Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic.
- Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.
- Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.
- Assessment is more likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.
- Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.
- Educational programs, in order to be successful, require full engagement of faculty and staff members in the conversations about, and the design and practice of, student learning outcomes assessment.

- Faculty and staff members determine the desired learning outcomes for students in their department/program.
- Faculty and staff members devise and implement the assessment methodologies that are most appropriate for their stated outcomes.
- Faculty and staff members maximize existing approaches: Assessments at the degree-program level should trend toward seamlessness, taking advantage of existing student projects, exams, and performances (i.e., *embedded assessments*). We caution ambitious programs to keep assessments manageable and informative.
- Academic, student affairs, and other units as appropriate are best suited to determine how to use the assessment results for internal programmatic improvements.
- The assessment process is iterative within units, is manageable within resource bases, is objective, and is meaningful to both faculty and staff members and students.
- Assessment is not an exercise, but a means of gathering and *using* information that faculty and staff members have determined to be important and integral to future decision-making about programmatic quality and capacities.

The University recognizes that units and faculty and staff members differ in their abilities to engage in student assessment, and that substantial assistance is required to fully involve them in meaningful assessment activities. The Office of Institutional Effectiveness offers a number of services designed to support and improve the efficacy of assessment throughout Ball State, including assisting units in formulating, collecting, and analyzing information about student learning; sharing assessment best practices from internal and external sources; providing leadership and support to the University Assessment Committee; and carrying out numerous institutional surveys.