



Making the Grade: Get Maximum Benefit From Course-Based Assessments

The past several years have seen increasing interest in higher education related to the assessment of student learning. Tom Angelo (1995) defined assessment as an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves

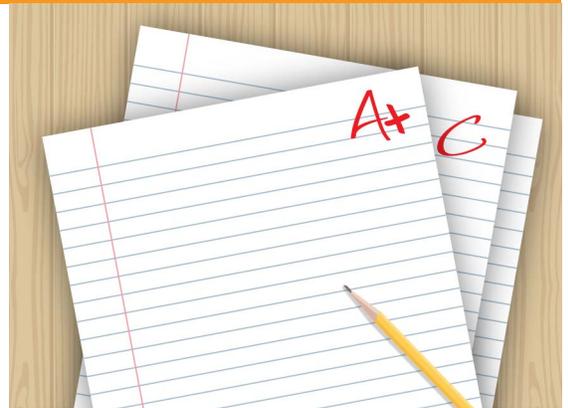
- making our expectations explicit to the public;
- setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality;
- systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and
- using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. (p. 7)

These criteria traditionally have been used to define university-wide assessment practices that are often tied to accreditation. Such principles also have significant implications for faculty as they plan and deliver the assessment of student learning at the course level. Using Angelo's definitions as a framework, the following questions can assist faculty in thinking through this process and possibly helping students become more successful learners.

Explicit/Known Expectations

The goal: Consciously and consistently remind students of the identified learning outcomes for your course and their connection to chosen assessments.

- At the beginning of each semester, as part of the course introduction, do you review course learning outcomes?
- As your courses begin, are students fully aware of all assessments and their relative contributions to the overall course grade?
- Does the course syllabus fully outline due dates and scheduled assessments?
- As the semester proceeds and you share new content or upcoming assessments, do you make a deliberate connection to course learning outcomes?



“
I think it's
very important to
have a feedback
loop, where you're
constantly thinking
about what you've
done and how you
could be doing it
better.
”

— **Elon Musk,**
CEO, SpaceX

High Expectations for Student Learning

The goal: Communicate your belief that students can be successful in your classes; also, delineate what success looks like. Kuh (2003) observed:

Students typically don't exceed their own expectations, particularly with regard to academic work. But students will go beyond what they think they can do under certain conditions, one of which is that their teachers expect, challenge, and support them to do so. (p. 28)

- For authentic assessments (e.g., presentations, product creation), do you provide students with rubrics that define excellent performance?
- Do you share (with permission) the work of previous students that rises to the level of excellence? (Catapano, n.d.)
- Do you provide students with scaffolding information (e.g., study guides, sample question formats) to help them prepare for quizzes and examinations?

Systematic Gathering and Interpretation of Student Performance Data

The goal: Use student performance data (e.g., areas of observed difficulty, item analyses of quizzes and tests) as diagnostic tools to identify areas of instruction that could be realigned to increase understanding and performance.

- Do you analyze student performance on course-related assessments to identify areas where modified forms of instruction may be warranted (e.g., putting more emphasis on or changing the way you teach certain topics)?
- Do you consistently modify your course design and delivery as a pathway to assist students in their learning?

Use Results to Document, Explain, and Improve Performance

The goal: Give prompt, meaningful feedback to students to help them improve performance. Kuh (2003) continues:

... Students read and write when we demand it. And in concert with other effective practices—prompt feedback, for example—they learn more. (p. 28)

- Are grades on objective assessments (e.g., quizzes, tests) quickly posted to your learning management system (e.g., within 72 hours)?
- Do authentic assessment results go beyond a letter or number grade to include constructive comments to encourage improved performance?
- Do you debrief quizzes and examinations to improve student understanding of course content? (Winkelmes, 2013)

Solid assessment practices are a critically important aspect of teaching and learning. Faculty play a key role in assuring that assessments are chosen, and results used, to assist students in their learning while also serving as a guide for course/program level modifications.

Help your students make the grade!

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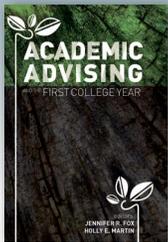


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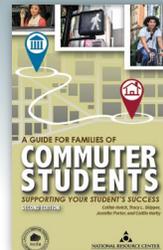
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The Toolbox

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