

WHY ASSESS?

The most common refrain that assessment directors the country over hear is, “1 grade students. So, why do I need to assess?”. Assessment has at least six key benefits that grading doesn’t.

- ***Assessment Stimulates Faculty Conversations about Teaching and Learning.*** Assessment may be understood as an organizing principle for engaging faculty in meaningful conversations about teaching and learning. Assessment’s requirement that faculty make deliberative collaborative decisions about how to improve student learning may provide the process’s greatest payoff in enhancing the quality of the education we deliver.
- ***Faculty Members’ Development of a Shared Understanding of their Programs’ Learning Outcomes.*** The second key benefit of assessment is that it requires faculty within a program to develop a shared understanding of precisely what **skills** and **knowledge** students need to **demonstrate** to merit a degree from our department and EWU. In so doing, it affords a valuable opportunity for faculty to reflect on our programs and develop clarity about their educational aims.
- ***Enhancement of Curricular Coherence.*** Third, in order for students to acquire the specified skills and knowledge, assessment encourages faculty to create a coherent curriculum and curricular structure to ensure that the program teaches what students need to learn. This entails discussion and agreement among faculty within (and, at times, between) departments about what will be taught in which courses. Therefore, through assessment student learning becomes a shared responsibility with faculty working toward a clearly articulated, well understood, and coordinated set of objectives.
- ***Instructors’ Increased Clarity about Purpose of Educational Activities.*** Fourth, assessment supports instructors to identify precisely what students will be expected to demonstrate by the end of an educational unit—that is, to develop written student learning outcomes (SLOs). The act of stipulating what students are to learn from an activity, assignment, course, or program is in and of itself surprisingly beneficial. The articulation of SLOs forces faculty to achieve a greater level of clarity about the purpose of the exercise, homework, test, class, or degree than a focus on inputs (content and coverage) does. The teaching methodology of specifying the desired student learning outcomes—the “what”—*before* one develops the activity, course, or curriculum intended to yield those outcomes—the “how”—is known in the education literature as “backward design” ([Wiggins & McTighe, 2005](#)) and is widely accepted as a best teaching practice ([Mooney & Mausbach, 2008](#)).
- ***Students’ Increased Clarity about Purpose of Educational Activities.*** Fifth, articulating student learning outcomes is also beneficial for students. The dissemination of course and program learning outcomes informs students what they need to demonstrate in order to pass a course and earn a degree. One can reasonably assume that students will be more likely to acquire specific knowledge and skills when they are told precisely what they are expected to learn.
- ***Evidence Generated for Improvement of Teaching and Learning.*** Last, assessment generates data (or evidence, if you prefer) that can inform faculty about which specific skills and knowledge our students are—and, more importantly, are not—learning to the degree that we, the faculty, expect. This provides us with information about which areas may need to be taught differently to improve student learning.