FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions on Course Assessment

1. How will course assessment results impact my evaluation?

They won’t. In the faculty evaluation model used at PDCCC there is no place for such information. The process for changing that evaluation model goes through the faculty; so any changes would have to be faculty generated.

Furthermore, the course assessment we are doing is not reported at the section level. There will be a large sample size as all course sections will be doing assessment and the information will be compiled for the course, not for individual sections.

2. Is assessment going to lead to everyone having to give only true/false or multiple choice tests?

Absolutely not; in fact, that would be strongly discouraged. Both SACS and PDCCC are particularly interested in how students are achieving at the higher levels of thinking and learning. This is not to say that knowledge is not important and that some short answer tests are not appropriate. However, it is important that every class give students the chance to use and develop critical thinking skills which involve work at the comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation level. These critical thinking skills measure whether or not students know ‘how to learn’ and apply their knowledge, even beyond specific course content.

It is expected that every course content summary include objectives that highlight and focus on critical thinking. The majority of assessment tools cannot be short answer tests and, in fact, may not be tests at all. Portfolios of student papers and assignments, surveys filled out by students, journals that reflect thoughts on their achievements, and even assessment measures completed by students after a course is concluded are all possible assessment measures.

It is important to remember also that assessment measures do not necessarily have to be counted in grading the course. A portfolio of student work does not necessarily have to be assigned a portfolio grade, and surveys and other ungraded assignments can be an important part of course assessment.

3. What if I have a largely unmotivated class? Will I be blamed for what they do not do or learn?

Again, the assessment is not going to be reported by section. There will be a large sample size drawn from all the sections of a given course. This will give an overall view of student success in terms of meeting the objectives our own faculty have set out. The assessment cycle covers five years, and some measures will not necessarily be done at the time the course is offered. For example, the VCCS does core competency testing in writing over a three year cycle and this might very well be one of the assessment measures that ENG 111 faculty chose to utilize. The results are not attached to any specific faculty member. The assessment is meant to help faculty evaluate what is successful in our courses and what needs enhancement.
4. Aren’t the SLOs essentially the same thing as the SOLs that are creating havoc in the public schools?

No, actually they are quite different. The SOLs really focus on student assessment, whereas our SLOs are meant to be course assessment. The goal of the SOLs is to evaluate individual student achievement in a state imposed curriculum and determine whether they are ready to go on to the next grade. SOLs are also used to evaluate whether teachers or schools are successful in getting all their students where they need to be to proceed to the next level.

Our SLOs are of our own choosing, within the parameters of the VCCS course guide. They are the specific, measurable skills our faculty have stated they want students to achieve in a particular course. It is our job to develop assessment tools that measure these, in a way that does not hinder individual teaching styles or methods and promotes sharing of best practice and good ideas.

5. Will course assessment methods be limited to tests, papers, and portfolios?

There are at least one hundred ways to assess learning. Some of these include evaluated practicums, pictures created, products developed, presentations given, problems solved, projects completed, and procedures demonstrated.

6. What is the role of administration in course assessment?

By SACS standards, learning assessment must be faculty driven. The program leaders play an integral role in leading faculty discussion to determine how learning assessment will take place. The role of administration is to act as guides. Several administrators have been through this process as faculty members and have some experience with what works and what doesn’t. Administrators may also be aware of resources that can be deployed to assist your data collection efforts, as well as plans in other disciplines that could assist your efforts, and vice-versa. Administration isn’t here to give you assessment tools; we are here to answer your questions.

7. Will learning assessment help the students once they finish the class?

Yes. Course assessment activities imbedded during a course can help students by giving them various types of completed projects or skills that they can use in pursuit of employment. Since many interviewers want behavior-based answers to job interview questions, students can use their portfolios or other outcome measures to demonstrate competency to potential employers. Course assessment activities which are conducted after the course is completed may help students identify subject matter material they should review in order to improve their performance in subsequent courses, and/or bolster their confidence about how far they’ve come in mastering the competencies of their discipline.

8. Will course assessment result in grade inflation because faculty will feel pressured to issue high grades to make their courses look successful?

No. A sign of quality course assessment is pinpointing areas for course enhancement, based on analysis of data and faculty discussion. Course assessment data, rather than grades, will be collected and reported at the course, not the section level. We hope that faculty will candidly assess areas for course enhancement and focus on enhancement strategies in discussion with peer faculty.
9. Will dual enrollment instructors be expected to participate in course assessment?

Yes. The same assessment tool should be used in all sections of the course(s) being assessed. This includes Dual Enrollment.

10. Will course assessment result in “dumbing down” the curriculum?

Faculty will determine the answer to this question by how they design course assessment. Although higher order thinking skills may be more difficult to measure than concrete skills, it is important that we make an attempt. Quality assessment involves a commitment to strengthening course rigor to promote student learning.

11. What’s the difference between Course Assessment and Student Assessment?

Course Assessment asks the question, “Overall, college-wide, do the students who complete this course achieve the objectives of the course?” Another version of this question would be, “Overall, do the students who complete this course develop the knowledge, skills, and values that the course is intended to develop?” Course assessment, as a process, determines ways that the course might be improved in order to help more students more fully achieve the intended outcomes of the course, and further to evaluate the effectiveness of changes made, again, college-wide.

Student Assessment, by contrast, asks the question, “How well is this individual student doing in achieving the objectives of the course?” Some student assessment may be formative, providing guidance to the student and the instructor on additional work needed in certain areas, while other student assessment is summative, usually for purposes of assigning a grade for the course.

12. Must data towards Course Assessment be limited to data collection at the end of the semester?

Absolutely not! In fact, some of the most valuable data can be captured in creative ways from students who completed the course being assessed during the previous semester.

For example, students who are beginning Chemistry 112 could be given a first-day-of-class assessment covering the course objectives from Chemistry 111. The CHM 112 instructor can review the results to get an idea of what the students have retained, and then pass those assessment forms to the individual responsible for collating the CHM 111 assessment data. This strategy obviously can work for any two-course required-sequence.

Finally, instructors may find that they can make arrangements with colleagues, either in their same discipline or across disciplines, to collaborate in activities for course assessment. An example of this could be in a nursing course, where it might be appropriate to include either a formative or a summative assessment of students’ knowledge of infant to adolescent developmental psychology. Aggregate student performance information on this assessment could then be turned over to the psychology faculty for use in their assessment of the Developmental Psychology course.
13. How important is it to design Course Assessment processes to include students from all locations that a course is taught?

Inclusion of students from all locations that a course is taught is crucial to the process of Course Assessment. This means that if a course is taught through dual enrollment or is web-based, at both campuses, or off-site, the mechanism for gathering data for assessment of that course must be designed to reasonably include students regardless of the location or delivery-method of the specific section in which they were enrolled.

Therefore, if an end-of-course or beginning-of-course activity is developed for the purposes of course assessment, the activity must take place in all sections of the applicable course during the semester that data is being collected. The practical logistics of this requirement may influence some choices of such activities. It is important when designing course assessment to consider the logistics of gathering college-wide data.