

# Black Holes and Gaseous Processes: Really Big Assessment Mistakes

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Assessment plans are seldom implemented easily or flawlessly. In fact, an important part of the assessment process is figuring out what assessment processes can work effectively and efficiently on a campus. Most of us have discovered that there isn't one right way to do assessment on a campus. But there are some common mistakes that have a high probability of limiting the success of an assessment initiative.

## Assuming That Assessment Will Go Away

All the regional accrediting agencies and most of the professional school accrediting organizations have increased their emphasis on assessment of student learning over the last ten years. Yet many schools are still trying to take a wait and see approach to assessing student learning—deciding to hold out until the last possible moment before a site visit to get started on it. The hope seems to be that somehow, magically, the emphasis on assessing student learning outcomes will disappear. After all, we managed to outlive TQM, didn't we?

Unfortunately for these schools, interest in assessment of student learning shows no signs of abating and in fact is clearly gaining momentum. And the stakes are getting higher. While a school might have had a reasonable excuse for lack of execution of an assessment initiative in 2001, there aren't many excuses left for the same lack of progress in 2011.

## Focusing on a Culture of Assessment instead of a Culture of Learning

About six or seven years ago, there was a lot of talk at Higher Learning Commission meetings about creating a culture of assessment. This was a well-intentioned concept but was unfortunately misinterpreted by a number of campuses to mean that the Higher Learning Commission was looking for tons and tons of data—data on anything and everything. So schools produced tons and tons of data on anything and everything. Assessment was alive and well, or so they thought.

But there was a problem. The culture of assessment movement became about the process of collecting data instead of actually using those data to improve student learning. Schools that got caught up in creating a culture of assessment were so busy generating data that they never had time to actually analyze any of it to figure out what it meant. Assessment is more than merely generating data sets. Instead of focusing on a culture of assessment, focusing on a culture of learning—of which assessment is a critical piece—seems to be a more useful goal.

## Not Aligning Campus Processes

Assessment is set up as a discrete process, separate from other processes, on many campuses. And we wonder why faculty members object to assessment on the grounds that it is an add-on to their other work. To be successful, assessment needs to be closely aligned with processes such as course approval and renewal, new program proposals, and program review.

It is surprising and not just a little disheartening that, on many campuses, proposals for new courses do not require an indication of the course-level student learning outcomes or the identification of how the proposed course supports the stated program-level student learning outcomes, assuming such outcomes exist. Proposals for new programs often do not require the identification of program-level student learning outcomes or a curriculum map showing how the proposed course structure supports these outcomes. And many program reviews still focus on inputs and outputs—enrollment and graduation rates—with only a cursory mention of student learning. If assessment is going to be taken seriously, it needs to be part of the culture of the institution, not a stand-alone entity.

## Choosing Assessment Methods before Identifying Student Learning Outcomes

It is absolutely critical for assessment methods to flow from the assessment plan. But that's not always the case. Often, assessment methods or tools are identified without the benefit of careful consideration of the outcomes that they are intended to measure.

A good example of this is when, at the start of the millennium, a number of schools decided that using portfolios would be a great way to document and presumably assess student learning (which, of course, they can be). But before a school or program can effectively use a portfolio, there first needs to be a set of student learning outcomes so that the portfolio is more than just a scrapbook. A good portfolio for use as an assessment tool provides documentation of specific university-, college-, and/or program-level student learning outcomes, and in a structured, organized manner.

Randomly pulling questions out of a textbook's test bank create essentially the same problem; students are being tested on issues that may not be related to the identified course or program outcomes. Unless the test questions are clearly tied to the course or program learning outcomes, just compiling information on passing the test does not provide data genuinely useful for purposes of assessment.

The same problem can be seen in capstone courses, which may not have been designed to demonstrate achievement of program-level student learning outcomes because (1) the course was in existence before the program identified outcomes, (2) the program doesn't have student learning outcomes at the program level, or (3) the capstone course is really not a capstone course at all, but just a course that is labeled as one. Capstone courses can be very effective in assessing student achievement of program-level learning outcomes, but only when they have been carefully constructed to do just that.

## Too Many Program-Level Student Learning Outcomes

An effective program-level assessment plan is one that can actually be implemented. Not all assessment plans can be. While it might be intellectually appealing to write an elegant plan featuring dozens of student learning outcomes, most programs can legitimately hope to assess somewhere between five and seven program-level student learning outcomes on an ongoing basis. Simply gathering all the learning outcomes from each required course in a program's curriculum into a large laundry list is not a program-level assessment plan. A smaller plan that actually can be implemented is worth far more than an overly elaborate plan that is paralyzing in its complexity.

## Poorly Written Student Learning Outcomes

The starting point of all assessment is a set of solid learning outcomes. This is where things often start to go wrong. Something about academe seems to compel us to write in threes—combining three actions and three outcomes into one Super Outcome, such as “Students will be able to identify, define, and analyze the major causes, effects, and implications of \$100/barrel oil prices on the transportation, food, and housing industries.” These Rubik's Cube outcomes, while perhaps efficiently stated in a single statement, are for all practical purposes unmeasurable. Student learning outcomes, both on the program and course levels, can be stated as simply as “Students will be able to <<action verb>> <<something>>.”

## Inappropriate Program-Level Student Learning Outcomes

It isn't uncommon to see program-level student learning outcomes that state that graduating students will have a “basic knowledge” of something, for instance, “Students will be able to demonstrate a basic knowledge of human anatomy” or “Students will have a basic knowledge of abnormal psychology.” While each statement might be the starting point for a course-level student learning outcome, by the end of an academic program, students should have moved beyond having basic knowledge of something to being able to use that knowledge in more cognitively complex processes, such as (to use Bloom's language) application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

## Allowing the Process to Become Gaseous

Though a complex process, assessment is not rocket science—not even close. Often, planning for assessment becomes far more complex than it needs to be to accomplish the task, taking on the property of a gas as it expands to fit the perceived space available. Timelines that allow eighteen months for the identification of program-level learning outcomes and another forty-eight months for the creation of assessment tools are clear indicators of gaseous assessment. The work can be accomplished more expeditiously.

Simply, a program needs to identify a relatively small set of learning outcomes that students should achieve upon graduation. Somewhere between five and seven student learning outcomes is a perfectly acceptable number from which to start. Given that most faculty members are deeply committed to their discipline, it shouldn't take more than a couple of hours—not a couple of years—to identify a short list of program-level learning outcomes from which to build an assessment program. Using the root phrase “Upon graduation from our program, students will be able to” should get a program started.

## Making Assessment of Student Learning the Responsibility of One Person

Assessment needs to be a collective effort on the part of faculty, staff, administration, and students. Some schools, sensing that their faculty will not enthusiastically embrace assessment activities, try to insulate the faculty and staff from assessment by centralizing assessment activities within a specific office or with a certain individual. While an office or individual devoted to assessment is an essential part of an assessment initiative and alone can probably generate a significant amount of institutional data on issues such as satisfaction and student engagement, there will be little understanding of student learning on the program level if the assessment office is exclusively centralized at the university level. The days of producing a self-study without “bothering anyone” on campus are long gone. It really does take a village.

## Allowing Each Faculty Member to Own the Program Outcomes

A number of schools have attempted to make assessment palatable to faculty members by allowing them to “own” the outcomes. For instance, there might be a college-wide writing outcome, but instead of having a shared understanding across campus of what constitutes competent college-level writing, each faculty member is allowed to define—and measure—the outcome any way that he/she would like. Grammar and mechanics might be the prevailing criteria in some courses, while style and voice might be the most important elements of writing in other courses. Still other courses might look at organization and use of sources. The end result is a lot of data that do not help the institution or program understand whether students can indeed write at the college level.

While allowing individual faculty members to define program or college outcomes any way they like might indeed increase buy-in into the assessment process, the end result is data that cannot be aggregated across the faculty. As a result, a meaningful understanding of students’ achievement cannot be obtained. There’s a look-ahead test in assessment that is important to remember, and it goes like this: “If we do this, what are we going to get back and how can we use that information?” All assessment activities could benefit from this kind of initial scrutiny.

## Rushing to Close the Loop

There seems to be a standard template for visiting team reports when it comes to addressing how schools use their assessment data. The template reads like this: “While <<name of program or institution>> has collected a significant amount of data related to <<outcome or value>>, they have yet to demonstrate evidence that they have used these data to effectively close the loop.”

Failure to close the loop is a widespread issue. But equally if not more distressing are cases of schools and programs rushing to take action on something, anything, anything at all, in order to demonstrate that they are taking their assessment efforts seriously. This sometimes can result in significant (and expensive) change efforts being undertaken based on very limited evidence, and for the sole purpose of having done something to put forward as evidence of having closed the loop.

The Higher Learning Commission talks about schools’ having established patterns of evidence from which they base decisions. One year’s worth of CCSSE or NSSE data is not a pattern of student engagement; it’s a snapshot and should be treated as such. Not until several years’ worth of data collection have occurred will any patterns emerge that legitimately point toward closing the loop.

## Creating Black Holes

Annual program-level assessment reporting is a common practice. At the end of each school year, programs develop documents or complete forms that outline their assessment activities for the last year. A lot of these reports never again see the light of day—ever.

Annual assessment reports can be an effective tool to help a program move assessment efforts forward, *if* the programs receive substantive feedback on them. But too often these reports go into a black hole. They are just another report to fill out without any expectation that they will be anything more than merely stamped “received.” If faculty members are going to take assessment seriously, then assessment processes—like assessment reports—need to be meaningful.

A number of schools have extremely effective faculty committees or assessment directors who use these annual reports as starting points for individual discussions with programs about their assessment efforts and student learning. If there is going to be an annual reporting process, it needs to be more than simply an exercise in paperwork.

## Assuming That Collecting Data Is Doing Assessment

Most schools by now have tons and tons of assessment data, piles and files of NSSE or CCSSE reports, CAAP scores, SSI scores, CIRP data, and CLA scores. While these are all potentially useful data to have, they do not, by themselves, constitute an assessment program. To be meaningful, the data need not only be collected and reported, but also analyzed and discussed. That's what doing assessment is all about. Collecting information is the first step, but not until it is actually explored does it take on any meaning.

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