Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Planning
Louisiana Tech University

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

This section offers some key insights and relevant guidance, using the Question & Answer format, in response to stakeholder inquiries regarding the development and implementation of the University’s mission-centered assessment improvement program.

The following is compilation of questions and answers that provides a snapshot into the mindset of stakeholders and the assessment culture that made Tech the beneficiary of a stakeholder-supported, University-wide, continuous improving program.

What are the Components of a Successful Assessment Plan?

Louisiana Tech has modeled Dr. James Nichols’ assessment-based Institutional Effectiveness Program of Continuous Improvement which represents a paradigm shift in improvement philosophy.

Specifically, this model presents the following components or stages of development:

- **Expanded Statement of Institutional Purpose** composed of the institution’s mission statement and action goals which drive assessment-based improvements. Therefore, units/programs must reflect relevant portions of this mission statement in unit mission plans. Units/programs must close the loop with the institution’s mission statement by demonstrating use of mission-inspired improvements.

- **Unit Mission /Goals** must be linked to and driven by the institution’s mission. The implementation of the institution’s mission takes place at the department/program/unit level through the identification of outcomes/objectives linked to the institution’s mission.

- **Intended Educational (Student) Outcomes** convey expected, measurable results to ascertain the mission’s success. Educational degree-granting programs must develop at least three outcomes per program, as well as Research and Public Service Outcomes. All outcomes must show what is to be accomplished (expected results) through the Means (Source) of Assessment & Criteria (Benchmarks) for Success.

- **Administrative and Educational Support Units**, like educational units, must develop at least three objectives per unit showing expected results and be linked to the institution’s mission and goals to ascertain success.

- **Use of Assessment Results** must be articulated by unit/program participants to determine whether the expected results were achieved. Then, they must delineate
how they will use assessment results to improve student performance, programs, public service, or customer service.

**How are Effective, Measurable Outcomes Developed?**

The “Six Guiding Principles for Formulating Administrative Objectives,” developed by Dr. James Nichols (Institutional Effectiveness Associates) follow:

1). **Be Realistic in Terms of Time and Resources:**
   - Must be something that can be done given current resources and staff.

2). **Be Limited:**
   - Degree-granting programs must select at least three core program outcomes and Research and Public Service outcomes for improvement. Non-educational units must select three objectives per unit for improving some aspect of their unit.

3). **Maintain Linkage:**
   - Unit/program mission statement must demonstrate linkage to the University’s mission statement by citing supporting portions of the University’s statement.

4). **Be Something that is Under the Control of the Unit:**
   - Faculty/staff/stakeholders must have control or controlling influence over results.

5). **Be Worded in Terms of what the Unit Will Accomplish or What Clients Should Be Able to Know (Cognitive), Think (Attitudinal), or Do (Behavioral/Performance) after the Provision of Services.**

6). **Lead to Improved Student Learning/Programs/Service:**
   - Unit must “close the assessment loop” by using assessment results (favorable or unfavorable) to make expected improvement in the stated venues.

**What is the Significance of a “Continuous Improvement” Improvement Program?**

The term “Continuous Improvement” embodies a forward-looking, enabling process that requires stakeholders to search for venues or areas of improvement within their domain. It involves a collaborative effort in which stakeholders synergistically identify multiple (and multi-year) areas for improvement that will ensure unit/program active engagement in the institution-wide improvement process each cycle.

**Should the Same Objective Be Used “Continuously” Under the “Continuous Improvement” Concept?**

Objectives/outcomes may be used repeatedly, at the stakeholder discretion, in the following circumstances:

- When *expected results* were not met. Visionary assessment planning should exclude assessing student-centered outcomes that do not have sufficient numbers of students or graduates in the program to provide statistical data.
- When stakeholders desire another cycle of data for confirmation of current assessment results.

- When stakeholders desire to raise the bar by increasing the Criterion (Benchmark) for Success. Other similar situations may also qualify for re-evaluation versus “retirement” of an outcome/objective.

**Should Grades Be Used As a Success Indicator?**

The short answer is “No.” The longer answer is that faculty, though in decreasing numbers, still use grades as the sole indicator of success at a great sacrifice to result reliability. Academia is moving away from using this easy, embedded means because of its proven lack of reliability and validity. The grades measure does not offer consistent, solid proof of student success or overall program effectiveness.

**What is the Downside to Relying Heavily on Self-Assessment Surveying Versus External Assessment Measures?**

Units/programs should endeavor to incorporate a broad mix of internal and external assessment means and success criteria in order to validate the data.

Exclusive reliance on a system of self-assessment surveys provides introspection and a snapshot into the mindset of internal stakeholders (faculty/staff/students). External assessors, however, can offer confirmation and validation of the internal “self-assessed” opinion of success.

**How Does Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness Relate to On-Going Strategic Planning?**

Both planning processes are necessary and complementary for a comprehensive approach to continuous improvement. However, they are different in their planning and implementation approaches.

Strategic planning, generally long-range in scope, is usually the product of broad-based consensual consideration of where the institution is going and how it is going to get there, using vision, mission, values, and strategic declarations to provide form and substance to the plan. Assessment of institutional effectiveness generally drills down to the program and unit level to measure outcomes in terms of student learning, client satisfaction, and process validation.

Both processes are integral to the institution’s Management Cycle in order to enhance processes, improve efficiency, and ensure continuous improvement in the short- and long-term.
Both processes involve stewardship of the institution’s resources by ensuring that improvement and enhancement are achieved within the institution’s mission and the institution’s fiscal and human resource parameters.

**Can Existing Assessment Activities Be Used in the Institutional Effectiveness Assessment Process?**

Yes. Current, on-going assessment improvement initiatives may be used in the following ways:

- If the activity is in its formative stages, it can be dovetailed into an Intended Objective format with its Means of Assessment & Criteria for Success. When assessed, the activity will produce usable results for improvement.
- The activity can be used as a “spin-off” improvement idea in the assessment cycle.

**What Does It Mean to “Close the Loop” with the Budget?**

The term “closing the loop” represents the integration of planning, assessment, and implementation processes into a comprehensive management paradigm where budget considerations are incorporated into the cycle to ensure successful short- and long-term outcomes congruent with the institution’s mission. Closing the loop ensures that assessment and strategic goals are feasible, reasonable, and meaningful.