

Co-Curricular Outcomes Assessment and Accreditation

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Assessing Co-Curricular Programs

On many campuses co-curricular learning is a shared responsibility of both faculty and student affairs educators (Dungy & Keeling, [2006](#)) and the learning outcomes of co-curricular programs, regardless of who facilitates them, should be assessed under established best practices. Co-curricular student learning can be assessed with the same types of methods used to gather evidence of curricular learning. However, assessment of co-curricular outcomes may seem more challenging because not all co-curricular experiences are structured in a manner similar to academic courses or programs. Collins and Roberts ([2012](#)) offer helpful strategies that can be used to address these challenges. Both institutional researchers and student affairs professionals should keep in mind that at the time these outcomes are being assessed consideration should be given to how the results can also be used for purposes of accreditation.

Methods that can be used to assess co-curricular learning include locally developed instruments, nationally administered instruments, performance assessments, and observations. Instruments used to measure noncognitive skills and student development have been created, refined, and published in the higher education literature. Instruments are also available for administration or purchase through non-profit and for-profit organizations. This chapter does not afford the space to list and describe all such instruments. However, institutional researchers and student affairs educators should identify possible instruments that can be used to measure co-curricular learning and critically evaluate any instrument prior to use. In particular, IR and student affairs professionals should examine the psychometric properties of instruments, paying close attention to reliability and validity; consider the resources needed to administer the assessment(s); and determine the instrument's appropriateness for the intended audience (Banta and Palomba, [2014](#)).

The assessment methods used may be direct or indirect. Direct measures of learning “include performance assessments that require students to demonstrate their competence in one or more skills” and indirect measures of learning “ask students to reflect on what they have learned and experienced rather than to demonstrate their knowledge and skills” (Banta & Palomba, [2014](#), pp. 79 and 80). Although accreditors do not prescribe the particular types of measures needed for accreditation, both direct and indirect evidence should be used to assess student learning (Henning, [2013](#); Provezis, [2010](#)). Using evidence from multiple sources can

provide a richer more detailed account of student achievement in a particular area such as teamwork or collaboration. Institutional researchers and student affairs educators should carefully plan their assessment strategy to include the appropriate types of evidence that are needed to inform institutional decision making as well as accreditation standards.

Indirect measures, such as student surveys, are frequently used to gather evidence of student learning. However, co-curricular learning experiences afford many opportunities for performance assessment. Performance assessment involves gathering data through observation of student behavior and evaluating that data using established performance criteria (Berk, [1986](#); Wheeler & Haertel, [1993](#); Wiggins, [1993](#)). For example, students often give presentations or talks as part of their participation in campus organizations, internships, or service learning activities. Student affairs educators can observe these presentations and evaluate student learning with the use of a rubric. Similarly, students learn to work with others through class projects, but they also learn the value of teamwork as they lead, plan, and execute programs for student activities and/or student organizations. Student affairs professionals who have the opportunity to observe students working in teams can use the same rubric that faculty use in to evaluate teamwork in their classrooms. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) offers 16 different learning outcome rubrics, many of which can be used in the co-curricular learning space as well as in the classroom (Association of American Colleges & Universities, [n.d.](#), VALUE rubrics). These examples demonstrate that assessing curricular and co-curricular learning can provide complete information that can be used to demonstrate compliance with accreditation standards.

Colleges and universities frequently collect data to evaluate programs and services. These data are also useful to the accreditation process if used appropriately (Henning, [2013](#)). For example, participation statistics can be gathered by counting attendees at events or obtained through campus ID card swipe machines. Satisfaction surveys also provide information about the effectiveness of speakers, performances, or workshops, and this information is used regularly to inform the work of the professionals who plan and execute campus programs. However, when these data are paired with measures of learning the results can be used to demonstrate achievement of co-curriculum outcomes or indicate student success.

Data gathered through nationally administered surveys such as NSSE also can contribute to institutional accreditation. NSSE measures student participation in many high-impact practices (HIPs). High-impact practices are curricular and co-curricular activities that positively impact student learning and retention, including first-year seminars, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative projects, undergraduate research, study-abroad experiences, service learning, internships, and capstone courses (Kuh, [2008](#)). Over time and with increasing frequency institutions began including NSSE data as part of their institutional self-study and other accreditation requirements such as the SACSCOC Quality Enhancement Plan development. Banta, Pike, and Hansen ([2009](#)) share several examples of institutions using NSSE data to demonstrate learning to external accreditors, including regional accreditors. To assist institutions in these endeavors NSSE developed regional accreditation toolkits for each of the six regions. The toolkits contain item maps demonstrating

which NSSE items correspond to specific accreditation standards. The toolkits also contain institutional examples of how NSSE data were used so institutions can compare to peer schools or seek collaboration from other colleges and universities who have successfully navigated the accreditation process.

Conclusion

College students gain valuable skills and knowledge through participation in co-curricular experiences such as service learning, undergraduate research, campus employment, membership in campus organizations, and participation in campus programs and activities. Therefore, co-curricular student learning and development have become an important aspect of the college experience. This importance is recognized by institutional stakeholders including faculty, administrators, and student affairs educators. In addition, the regional accrediting associations also recognize the value of co-curricular learning and include it as part of the institutional accreditation criteria.

Together institutional researchers and student affairs professionals can respond to the calls for accountability. Extending the collaboration between IRs and student affairs professionals can yield numerous benefits to both groups and result in an institution's ability to demonstrate successfully the ways in which student learning outcomes are achieved through co-curricular programs.