

ASSESSMENT MATTERS

ASSESSMENT: BACK TO BASICS WORKSHOP

Are you new to assessment? An incoming director of undergraduate or graduate studies? Need a refresher on how to develop a simple and effective assessment plan? Do we have a deal for you! The OIA assessment team is offering two interactive workshops (FREE!) to anyone who has an interest in program learning outcomes assessment. These workshops will take you through the steps of writing learning outcomes, creating an assessment plan and reporting out on findings and changes. (They are identical, so select the one that fits your schedule.)

When? February 26, 2019 from 9:30-11:30 [Register](#)

April 18, 2019 from 1:30-3:30 [Register](#)

Where? Library Room 112A

Questions? Contact Elaine (evm@email.arizona.edu) or Ingrid (novod@email.arizona.edu)

SETTING MEANINGFUL BENCHMARKS AND STANDARDS, REVISITED

The following is a blog post from Linda Suskie, posted January 16, 2019.

A recent discussion on the ACCSHE listserv reminded me that setting meaningful benchmarks or standards for student learning assessments remains a real challenge. About three years ago, I wrote a [blog post](#) on setting benchmarks or standards for rubrics. Let's revisit that and expand the concepts to assessments beyond rubrics.

The first challenge is vocabulary. I've seen references to goals, targets, benchmarks, standards, thresholds. Unfortunately, the assessment community doesn't yet have a standard glossary defining these terms (although some accreditors do). I now use *standard* to describe what constitutes minimally acceptable student performance (such as the passing score on a test) and *target* to describe the proportion of students we want to meet that standard. But my vocabulary may not match yours or your accreditor's!

The second challenge is embedded in that next-to-last sentence. We're talking about two different numbers here: the standard describing minimally acceptable performance and the target describing the proportion of students achieving that performance level. That makes things even more confusing.

So how do we establish meaningful standards? There are four basic ways. Three are:

1. External standards: Sometimes the standard is set for us by an external body, such as the passing score on a licensure exam.
2. Peers: Sometimes we want our students to do as well as or better than their peers.
3. Historical trends: Sometimes we want our students to do as well as or better than past students.

Much of the time none of these options is available to us, leaving us to set our own standard, what I call a local standard and what others call a competency-based or criterion-referenced standard. Here are the steps to setting a local standard:

Focus on what would not embarrass you. Would you be embarrassed if people found out that a student performing at this level passed your course or graduated from your program or institution? Then your standard is too low. What level do students need to reach to succeed at whatever comes next—more advanced study or a job?

Consider the relative harm in setting the standard too high or too low. A too-low standard means you're risking passing or graduating students who aren't ready for what comes next and that you're not identifying problems with student learning that need attention. A too-high standard may mean you're identifying shortcomings in student learning that may not be significant and possibly using scarce time and resources to address those relatively minor shortcomings.

When in doubt, set the standard relatively high rather than relatively low. Because every assessment is imperfect, you're not going to get an accurate measure of student learning from any one assessment. Setting a relatively high bar increases the chance that every student is truly competent on the learning goals being assessed.

If you can, use external sources to help set standards. A business advisory board, faculty from other colleges, or a disciplinary association can all help get you out of the ivory tower and set defensible standards.

Consider the assignment being assessed. Essays completed in a 50-minute class are not going to be as polished as papers created through scaffolded steps throughout the semester.

Use samples of student work to inform your thinking. Discuss with your colleagues which seem unacceptably poor, which seem adequate though not stellar, and which seem outstanding, then discuss why. If you are using a rubric to assess student learning, the standard you're setting is the rubric column (performance level) that defines minimally acceptable work. *This is the most important column in the rubric* and, not coincidentally, the hardest one to complete. After all, you're defining the borderline between passing and failing work. Ideally, you should complete this column first, then complete the remaining columns.

Now let's turn from setting standards to setting targets for the proportions of students who achieve those standards. Here the challenge is that we have two kinds of learning goals. Some are *essential*. We want every college graduate to write a coherent, grammatically correct paragraph, for example. I don't want my tax returns prepared by an accountant who can complete them correctly only 70% of the time, and I don't want my prescriptions filled by a pharmacist who can fill them correctly only 70% of the time! For these essential goals, we want close to 100% of students meeting our standard.

Then there are *aspirational* goals, which not everyone need achieve. We may want college graduates to be good public speakers, for example, but in many cases graduates can lead successful lives even if they're not. For these kinds of goals, a lower target may be appropriate.

Tests and rubrics often assess a combination of essential and aspirational goals, which suggests that overall test or rubric scores often aren't very helpful in understanding student learning. Scores for each rubric trait or for each learning objective in the test blueprint are often much more useful.

Bottom line here: I have a real problem with people who say their standard or target is 70%. It's inevitably an arbitrary number with no real rationale. Setting meaningful standards and targets is time-consuming, but I can think of few tasks that are more important, because it's what help ensure that students truly learn what we want them to...and that's what we're all about.

By the way, my thinking here comes primarily from two sources: [Setting Performance Standards](#) by Cizek and a review of the literature that I did a couple of years ago for a chapter on rubric development that I contributed to the <https://www.amazon.com/Handbook-Measurement-Assessment-Evaluation-Education/dp/1138892157> target="_blank">*Handbook on Measurement, Assessment, and Evaluation in Higher Education*. For a more thorough discussion of the ideas here, see Chapter 22 (Setting Meaningful Standards and Targets) in the new 3rd edition of my book [Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide](#).