

What is the purpose of assessment?

In the past, assessment was conducted for the purpose of accreditation. As a result, data was collected every ten years to demonstrate the university's merit in providing a quality educational program. Now, continuing accreditation expects that assessment is systematic and on-going to drive institutional decision-making for the primary purpose of improving student learning.

Wehlburg (2008) suggests that "we cannot continue to use assessment data to prove to others how wonderful our own institutions are. We must be gathering information that will give us direction in terms of what areas need attention. If higher education is going to meet the changing needs of society, we must keep looking at what we are doing, how well we are doing it, and where we need to be." (p. xxi)

Assessment is not a product or an end; it is a process that leads to enhanced teaching and learning, and informed decision making focused on the mission, vision, and values of the institution. The assessment process gathers meaningful data to determine how the particular department and the institution can enhance student learning. "Doing assessment is very different from using the results of an assessment process" (Wehlburg, 2008, p. 17). If faculty and administrators think of assessment as something that must be done for accreditation or the Board of Regents, the assessment process will not be integral to transforming the university. Transformation that is based on student learning data is accomplished when assessment planning provides information about what needs improvement.