

Practitioner's Corner: Is Your Learning Center Successful? Prove It!

By Rebecca Shepherd

Rebecca Shepherd is the Math Learning Specialist at the United States Naval Academy.

Consider the following scenario: A student enters a University course that has no learning objectives, no required homework and no interim tests. What will happen on the final exam?

After pondering the above scenario consider the following: 1) Does your learning center have objectives? 2) Is every program in the Learning Center designed to meet the objectives?

Everyday Learning Centers are faced with increasing costs and static or decreasing budgets. How can we be sure the programs offered are effective? Assessment is our most powerful approach.

The road to internal program assessment can seem daunting, but it need not be. Anticipate a lengthy process that will not be completed during a one-week retreat. Assessment is an on-going, dynamic process. It will not be "easy," but the end product will be worth the investment.

The following 6-steps can help you get started.

Step 1: Communication. Determine if your institution has an Assessment Specialist. This person is a great resource as he/she may work directly with institutional goals and will be able to help guide the process. Talk with staff members and invite them to participate. Communication will let everyone feel included and comfortable with the process. Remember, this may be something new to many and staff will respond at different rates. Anticipate that approximately 16% will be Early Adopters -- those who are anxious to become involved. 68% will be the Majority -- interested once they learn more about the process and concept, and 16% will be Laggards -- those who wait and hope this "new" idea fades, but eventually will participate (Gray & Banta, 1997).

Step #2: Determine Learning Center goals. Start by reviewing the school or department mission statement. This will help guide the thought process. Think outside of your daily paradigm and brainstorm about the ideal Learning Center.

Use the mission and brainstorming to develop clear statements of instructional goals. Keep each goal "student centered". To ease the process, begin each goal with: The student will ... (followed by the action performed by the student). Be careful to focus on student learning. One can inadvertently slip into administrative goals. For example, facility access after hours is not a learning goal; it is an administrative goal that allows a program to operate.

Step 3: Take ownership. Once the Learning Center has created a set of goals, each program must operate to meet the goals. Each program supervisor should review the Learning Center goals and determine how specific programs will function to meet the goals. It is expected that every program will not meet every goal; however, it is not expected for a program to not meet any Learning Center goal.

Step 4: Repeat the process performed to develop Learning Center goals, but apply it to the program level. Hence, the program supervisor will create a list of measurable program goals that are based on the Learning Center goals. In the event that a program supervisor creates a goal that does not support a Learning Center goal, one of two things will need to happen: 1) the Learning Center goals will need to be re-evaluated; 2) the program itself will need to be re-evaluated.

Step 5: Provide learning evidence. This is a source of action performed by the student that relates directly to each program goal. To develop a source of evidence, begin each statement with: "I know the objective is reached when ... (this specific action occurs). It is possible to have more than one action per objective. This may be an action that is observable by the person responsible for the program sessions.

Step 6: Determine an assessment method(s). This is an intentional activity on the part of the Learning Center staff member that determines a student's achievement of the program objective. To help develop assessment methods, begin each statement with: "The program objective will be measured by ... (the source of measurement). It is possible that the learning evidence and the assessment method are the same. For example, if the program was to measure test performance, one could "observe" a high mark on an exam as well as use the high mark as an assessment.

Assessment is an on-going process. Test your goals for an academic year, keep notes and discuss your findings with others. Make adjustments where necessary. Start small: do not let the process become too cumbersome. Assessment is a roadmap: use it keep your Learning Center on the road to success.

Additional Resources:

Gray, P.J. & Banta, T.W. (1997). *The campus-level impact of assessment: progress, problems and possibilities.* Jossey-Bass.
Diamond, R.M. (1998). *Designing and assessing courses and curricula: a practical guide.* Jossey-Bass.