

Facilitation Skills: A Key to Successful Program Assessment

By Monica Stitt-Bergh



A definition of program-level student learning outcomes assessment that I find useful is the following: assessment is a set of tools that faculty can use to collaboratively develop and maintain a coherent, effective curriculum that evolves to meet changes in students and society. When I speak this definition, I stress *collaboratively*, *effective curriculum*, and *evolves* because they encapsulate what I want my faculty colleagues to understand. These three are not easy to accomplish.

To help bring my definition of assessment to life, I incorporate facilitation skills in workshops that I offer for faculty who are assessment leaders/coordinators in their department or program (e.g., general education). My goal is to help them lead fruitful meetings about assessment because that increases the likelihood that their colleagues will see the benefits that assessment offers and increase participation in meaningful assessment activities. The following tactics provide assessment coordinators/leaders with a strong base in facilitation skills:

Create an action-oriented agenda with a desired product (outcome) and process. When meeting an outcome is a product that goes beyond information sharing, assessment activities gain traction and there is forward movement. Some examples are given in the table below.

Desired Meeting Outcome		Process
finalize student learning outcomes list	by	evaluating draft student learning outcomes
narrow a list of commercial tests to a best option	by	evaluating alternatives and “dot voting”
understand curriculum coherence and identify gaps	by	creating and analyzing a curriculum map
create an action plan based on results from an evaluation of student projects	by	brainstorming a list of possible actions and doing a pre-mortem analysis

Decide how to decide. A conversation about how decisions will be made is often overlooked and when disagreement occurs, a single voice can derail progress. I recommend the *consensus* method because it requires a participatory process that usually produces a superior decision that has widespread acceptance and support for implementation. Consensus has been reached when everyone agrees the deliberation process has been fair, transparent, everyone has had a say, good information was used to make the final decision, and everyone is willing to support—but not necessarily agree with—the final decision. The goal is unity, not 100% agreement.

Other decision-making options include (a) *85/15 rule*—85% agreement is enough to pass; (b) *super majority*—2/3 vote needed to pass; (c) *simple majority*— 51% agreement is enough to pass. A simple majority is usually not a good option because a 51/49 vote typically hinders implementation.

Make contributions visible. Record ideas using markers and large flip chart paper or a computer and projector. When everyone sees the conversation unfold, the group can build momentum and everyone feels involved. When a contribution does not pertain to the meeting outcome, the idea can be recorded in a separate location for future consideration and thus not sidetrack the conversation. This recording may or may not become the meeting minutes.

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Monica Stitt-Bergh is Associate Specialist, Assessment Office at University of Hawai'i and AALHE board member