

Unit-Level Assessment within Departments at HWC

What is Unit-Level Assessment?

Unit-level assessment looks beyond the individual course level and therefore includes

A) multiple sections of one course, B) a series of courses, or C) a degree program.

Unit-Level Assessment Liaisons: Who we are

Carrie Nepstad, *Applied Sciences*; Erica McCormack, *Humanities & Music*;

Paul Wandless, *Art & Architecture*

Unit-Level Assessment Liaisons comprise a subcommittee of the Harold Washington College (HWC) Assessment Committee. The Unit-Level Assessment Subcommittee reports directly to the Dean of Instruction. The goal of the HWC Unit-Level Assessment Subcommittee is to include at least one liaison per HWC department.

What we do

The Unit-Level Assessment Liaisons, in consultation with the Unit-Level Assessment Coordinator and their own department faculty, formulate and approve specific unit-level student learning outcomes within the department and then construct and implement an assessment of student learning as it relates to those outcomes. The goal is to improve student learning.

The HWC Unit-Level Assessment Subcommittee understands its central activity to be engagement in a comprehensive process that is ongoing, systematic, structured, and sustainable.

The HWC Unit-Level Assessment process includes the following six stages:

- 1. Department Buy-In and Outcome Definition**
- 2. Assessment Research and Design**
- 3. Pilot Assessment Tools and Processes**
- 4. Administer Specific Assessment**
- 5. Data Analysis**
- 6. Supporting Evidence-Based Change**

The final part of stage 6 also includes a review of the specific student learning outcomes under investigation and the continuation of the assessment process by returning to Stage 1. Unit-Level Assessment is a faculty-driven cycle of inquiry that includes the collection of assessment data, which is examined and then utilized in order to make evidence-based decisions to improve student learning outcomes.

What we've learned

Several of the insights included below are ones that a couple of us or all of us share, but the letter in parentheses refers to the statement's author. Please reach out to us if you have any questions.

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Assessment Myth-Busting

- **Assessment is not about "teaching to a test."** Once I understood this, a lot of my hesitancy and skepticism about assessment disappeared. (E)
- **Assessment is not the same as grading.** To some extent, you have to take your instructor hat off or at least tilt it stylishly to the side in order to think about assessment as a bigger picture than your own teaching experience. (C)
- **The goal of assessment is not to evaluate specific students or to evaluate faculty.** The goal of assessment is to understand student learning, and then to make informed decisions in order to improve student learning. (C)
- **The actions of the HWC Assessment Committee and Unit-Level Assessment Subcommittee are not imposed by District or Local Administration.** The outcomes that we write and the assessments we create and investigate are faculty-driven, to answer our questions about student learning. (E)
 - Keep in mind that an active and ongoing assessment plan is required by all accrediting bodies. Assessment is here to stay - we might as well make it meaningful. (C)

"Aha" Moments

- **All rubrics are not created equal.** A rubric with meaningful descriptions for levels of achievement and components/dimensions of the student learning outcome is worth the time it takes to assemble. A rubric with just numbers or letter grades unattached to descriptions will not provide the same rich information about our students' learning. (E)
 - Be able to define your scoring system and what the difference is between each one of the categories. (P)
- **You can't assess everything.** Therefore, what you assess should be important to you and your fellow faculty. (C)
 - Keep it simple. Focus on outcomes that can be assessed objectively. Or consider whether existing tests, etc. can be used as a starting point to create an assessment tool. (P)
- **Assessment is fun!** I mean it. Talking about assessment = talking about teaching and learning. That is fun stuff and it is kind of a luxury. (C)

Recommendations

- When you begin, think about what you would "die a thousand deaths" if your students did not know by the end of a course or program. Start from there, and it will help you to stay focused on what is most important. (C)
- Talk to as many colleagues as possible that have experience or expertise in the unit you want to assess. Share your work with them for feedback during the process and it will help with buy-in of using when it's completed. (P)
- Include adjunct as well as full time faculty in the process. (C)
- Assess a subject you are familiar with for your first time doing this process as a liaison. (P)
- Reach out to colleagues at other schools for help and advice. Most schools are doing this now and many colleagues are more than happy to share their experiences. (P)
- Communication is important. If you keep the communication focused on student learning, it will help you to get at the core of the work without going off track. Communication is key. (C)