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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## **Eight Big Ideas on Assessment**

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Theological schools and seminaries have been relative latecomers to rigorous practices of educational assessment. There are varied and plausible reasons for that which "make sense." However, in the current age of higher accountability to accrediting agencies, stakeholders, and educational consumers, those reasons must give way to the implementation of institutional and educational assessment practices that are congruent with the larger field of higher education.

Academic leaders in theological schools must ensure that their institutions demonstrate best practices of educational assessment. They must demonstrate the educational effectiveness of their curricular programs and satisfy, at least minimally, the requirements of their accrediting agencies. In other words, deans must ensure their schools demonstrate *bona fide* "industry standard" practices in assessment.

While assessment is often seen as a burden and distraction from the fundamental work of faculty and staff, it is a critical function for any organization. In truth, assessment is part of the job, no matter what job that is within the organization. At its core, assessment is an issue of integrity. It allows a school to answer for itself, and others, "Are we actually doing what we say we are?" "To what extent are we effectively carrying out our mission?"

Assessment can help the school's leaders answer questions like, "What value do we provide to our students? Our constituents?" "Are we making the right decisions, and how do we know?" and, "Do we have the right resources and capacities to carry out our mission?"

Published data and evidence from sound assessment practices can help prospective students with questions like, "Will I get a good education at your school?" "Will I have a satisfying and positive experience?" "Will my degree be recognized and valued?"

Educationally, assessment helps answer the questions, "We like our faculty members and think they are terrific, but how effective are they at teaching, really?" "How well does our curricular program of study achieve the goals we promise to students?" "What are the strengths of our programs? What are the weaknesses?" "Are we really the good school we claim to prospective students? Can we demonstrate it?"

It is not uncommon for educational institutions to get overwhelmed and lost in their initial initiatives into more rigorous assessment activities. Commonly, most tend to do too much, attempting to put a comprehensive assessment plan in place to make up for lost time. Often, this is a result of adopting a complex assessment plan model from a more mature organization. Sometimes it's a desire to satisfy immediately every line and element from an accrediting body's standards and accreditation manual.



Below are eight big ideas on assessment that can help provide a framework for approaching the task of institutional and educational assessment:

**1. You cannot improve what you do not assess.** Constant improvement, increased effectiveness, and greater efficiency need to be standing goals for any institution. We want our students to learn better, our faculty to teach more effectively, our organizations to run more efficiently, and our alumni to be demonstrably effective leaders in ministry. Wishful thinking and self-referenced public relations messages don't make those desires a reality, however. Leaders who want to improve any facet of the school's life and work need to assess it.

**2. Everything that exists, exists to a certain extent, degree, or quality.** Yes, anything can be assessed. Clarify what it is you are assessing or measuring and use the correct assessment method (direct or indirect assessment; quantitative or qualitative). Remember, however, that you do not have to assess everything altogether at the same time (see no. 6).

**3. Goals interpret standards, objectives interpret goals, and outcomes demonstrate**

**effectiveness.** Understand the distinct categories of assessment and ensure they align with each other. Don't confuse a strategy or activity for an outcome. Don't confuse a program standard for a goal.

**4. Goals are meaningless until you define how to assess them.** Review your degree program goals and determine if and where you can define them in a way that can be assessed. Effective goals are expressed as "demonstrable" outcomes.

**5. Publish only the program goals and outcomes you will assess.** I once consulted with a school that had eight broad program goals in one degree program, with over twenty derivative outcomes! Faculty and administration were overwhelmed trying to figure out how to align the eight lofty goals and interpret how they were manifested throughout the curricular program. In practice, they were trying to accomplish too much and attempting to evaluate too many things. Few of which integrated in to a coherent assessment, and even fewer aligned with the published goals.

**6. What you measure must be meaningful.** Avoid the temptation to assess everything---not every activity or facet of your institution or educational program is equally important. What are the "mission critical" aspects that give evidence of vitality, viability, and effectiveness? In terms of course-level assessment, follow the rule, "teach only what you will assess."

**7. Assessment is not meaningful if it does not change something.** Effective assessment practices "close the loop"---they change something at some level. Demonstrate and publish how your assessment practices change what you do. Remember that data do not change people's minds; ideas do---ideas that align with passion and vision. Turn your data into vision, then implement vision with strategies.

**8. Assessment is a formative practice.** Assessment is not a one-shot deal done in the harried and anxious anticipation of an accreditation visit. Effective schools have a culture of assessment and practice formative assessment---a process of intentional ongoing assessment that results in measured periodic improvement.

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