

# Assessment

## Director, Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation:

H. Craig Petersen  
Location: Merrill Library 301, UMC 3085  
Phone: (435) 797-0001  
FAX: (435) 797-1680  
E-mail: craig.petersen@usu.edu  
WWW: <http://aaa.usu.edu>

Educational assessment involves gathering and analyzing information about learning activities with the goal of improving academic programs. In essence, assessment is what we do to assure that what we do is what we say we do.

Educational assessment is important for a number of reasons. First, Utah State University is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, as well as a number of discipline-specific accreditation bodies. USU must have a credible assessment program to satisfy the requirements of those organizations. Second, by documenting the effectiveness of its educational programs, USU demonstrates accountability of resource use to the USU Board of Trustees, the Utah State Board of Regents, and the Utah State Legislature. Finally and most important, faculty and administrators at USU have an innate curiosity about how well students are educationally prepared to meet the challenges of life. Faculty and administrators also have a strong desire to help USU students by making the institution better. To meet these objectives, the following policy on assessment has been formally approved by the USU Board of Trustees:

*The University is committed to timely internal and external assessment of its programs to assist in productive academic planning and the fulfillment of its mission and goals. To meet this commitment, the University and all of its units shall gather, analyze, and publish data annually that relate to the planning for and evaluation of the accomplishment of the missions, goals, and objectives of the University and its units. Such assessments are intended to determine the extent to which University programs meet their goals and objectives and further the mission of the University; to establish a culture of evidence for assessment; and to meet the standards of the Regents, the Trustees, the Northwest Commission of Colleges and Universities, and USU. The assessment process shall be a continuous process which shall involve faculty and other concerned stakeholders in central roles. Furthermore, assessment results will directly inform planning and other decision-making activities. (USU Policy Manual, 103.7.4)*

There are several aspects of good assessment. The first is that the focus should be on outcomes. The goal is to demonstrate that students actually develop needed competencies and significantly add to their knowledge as a result of attending USU. The second is that evidence derived from multiple sources is preferable to a single measure. The third is that academic units should have flexibility in formulating their assessment plans—"one size does not fit all." Finally, an effective assessment plan should be structured as a process, rather than as an event. Assessment must be an ongoing activity that contributes to institutional improvement.

Consistent with these guidelines, USU has implemented a comprehensive plan for educational assessment. This plan focuses on the following areas:

- 1. Student Attitudes and Perceptions.** The Office of Analysis, Assessment, and Accreditation (AAA) conducts annual surveys of freshmen/sophomores, graduating seniors, and graduate students. Comparative surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement, are also administered.
- 2. Early to Mid-Program Assessments.** AAA is involved in ongoing analyses to evaluate USU's freshman orientation program, measure improvements in writing and mathematics skills, and determine mastery of content in general education courses.
- 3. End of Program Assessment.** This is the key component of USU's assessment effort. Academic departments have been given the primary responsibility for evaluating the preparation of their graduates. Each department is expected to have an easily accessible and user-friendly assessment website that shows program learning objectives, the relationship between learning objectives and curriculum, outcomes data from several sources that demonstrate the extent to which students are mastering program objectives, a description of the process by which assessment data are used for decision-making, and examples of program changes made as a result of assessment efforts. AAA assists the departments in this endeavor by reviewing departmental progress, recommending changes, and providing "best practices."
- 4. Alumni Satisfaction.** AAA conducts periodic surveys of alumni. Departments also obtain information from alumni through advisory groups and departmental surveys.
- 5. Dropouts/Noncompleters.** AAA provides in-depth analysis of factors affecting retention and graduation rates.
- 6. Employment and/or Employer Satisfaction.** AAA conducts surveys of employment and participation in graduate education of recent graduates. At the academic department level, employers are contacted through surveys and/or employer advisory groups to determine the strengths and weaknesses of USU students they have hired.
- 7. Facts and Figures Website.** The USU Facts and Figures website is a virtual "Factbook" that provides a broad range of information about the University. Of particular importance is the USU Performance Dashboard, which shows trends in key areas of institutional performance and serves as a key management information tool for University administrators.

Assessment at USU is coordinated through the University Assessment Coordinating Council, which consists of faculty, staff, and administrators. The process is broad-based, systematic, and ongoing. Assessment has had a significant impact on improving academic programs and will continue to facilitate changes that benefit students.