



Why We Love Assessment

Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Welcome to the Beyond the Podium podcast series at the University of Florida, and I'm your host, Alexandra Bitton-Bailey. We are here today to talk about assessment. I know that that is not the most exciting of topics for some of you, but assessment plans help us to define what exactly we want students to learn from their program of study. And they help us to become more intentional about what happens in our classes and in our programs.

Discussions about assessment have prompted the realization of the value of backward design, thinking first about what the end goals and outcomes are for students rather than planning an entire course around a textbook that we've segmented. Now, the importance of identifying what students should get from a course or program are taking center stage. Deciding how they can demonstrate this learning helps us to focus on what students do and what their needs are. And this is a huge step in teaching and learning. And Dr. Brophy is here to talk to us about it.

Dr. Tim Brophy

I'm a professor of music education, and I'm also the director of Institutional Assessment, and that's a story in itself.

Alexandra

Dr. Brophy joined the University of Florida in 2000, but before that, he was an award-winning teacher in the Memphis city school system, a recognized researcher, and had published numerous books. With this long rich K through 12 history in music education, why did Dr. Brophy shift to higher education?

Dr. Tim Brophy

Well, I was working with students, and it seemed to me to be an important change for me to make at that point in my life to begin to go into a higher education situation, where I could begin to influence and train the future teachers of these children, and therefore have even a greater reach to the students of the future.

Alexandra

So Dr. Brophy started a PhD program, while he maintains his position in the Memphis city schools. This gave him the opportunity to work on a project that got him hooked on assessment.

Dr. Tim Brophy

So my interest in assessment started over 20 years ago when I was in my doctoral program at the University of Kentucky. The whole time I was a doctoral student, I maintained my role as an elementary music teacher. So while I was working in my PhD program, there was a course called measurement and evaluation that I had to take. And it was an interesting confluence of events, because our Kentucky Education Reform Act had just been enacted by the Kentucky Congress. And that education reform act required all subject areas to create outcomes and develop assessment measures for student learning.

So I developed a project for the course, assessment and measurement and evaluation course I was taking, that was focused on, I should say, my being able to measure the vocal pitch accuracy of the students I was teaching. So it was a singing assessment. I got data from about 236 of my students, and I wrote that all up and submitted it to an international conference in 1996. And I was accepted to present it there, and I went to Amsterdam for that, and I was hooked ever since.

Alexandra

Dr. Brophy has continued to champion assessment at the University of Florida and internationally.

Dr. Tim Brophy

Shortly after that while I was writing my dissertation, I was also writing my first textbook, which came out in 2000, on assessing the developing child musician. So assessment's always been part of just what I do, and when I got here to the University of Florida, I began in 2007 a series of international symposia on assessment and music education, and those have continued every two years ever since then. The last one we just did was in March or April of this year in Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Alexandra

It's pretty remarkable to see the lasting impact Dr. Brophy has had through his international conferences on assessment. But how does this apply to our individual courses and programs?

Well according to Dr. Brophy, outcomes are really the foundation of any program and any assessment within that program.

Dr. Tim Brophy

Well, of course, without outcomes, we wouldn't really have a direction for our course or our program to go. We wouldn't have a clear understanding of what we expect students to be able to do, that is the knowledge they have, the skills they have, the professional behaviors they've developed. That's the primary reason they're important. They serve as a foundational framework for all the courses and programs and certificates that we have here at the university.

Alexandra

Dr. Brophy points out the importance and value of student learning outcomes, as they are the framework that consistently helps to determine the level of learning students have achieved, as well as the effectiveness of the programs they are in.

Dr. Tim Brophy

All programs repair student learning outcomes, and for them to provide evidence of the degree to which students have achieved these outcomes. So that they can then take that evidence, re-examine it, and review it, and use that information to modify and improve the programs. And that's the essence of program effectiveness, which is another reason why we have these outcomes and why they're important.

Alexandra

Some of the vernacular surrounding assessment may not be clear to everyone. So we wanted to clarify when we asked what the difference was between student learning outcomes and program goals.

Dr. Tim Brophy

A student learning outcome is a specific statement about knowledge, skills, behaviors that students are expected to obtain and demonstrate some time during the program, and certainly by the conclusion of the program. Program goals, on the other hand, focus on more programmatic elements like enrollments, admissions, and sometimes, there are professional programs on campus. Their students are required to take national exams of some kind as a measure of the program itself and its success. So that's the primary difference in that the outcomes are

measuring what the students know and are able to do. The program goals are measures of perhaps retention in the program, elements that are programmatically related.

Alexandra

Here's the best takeaway. How can we make sure that the learning outcomes that we create are of good quality?

Dr. Tim Brophy

A well-written student learning outcome contains an active verb. That is, it clearly describes the behavior that students are expected to display, or the output they're expected to produce, or the product they're expected to produce, and that becomes easily measurable. And I want to distinguish something here while we're talking about this, and that is, one of the things we avoid at the University of Florida and student learning outcomes is a reference to an ability to do something or a reference to demonstrate something. Because when faculty are measuring student's learning outcomes in the courses, they're measuring their achievement of those outcomes through some kind of examination, some kind of capstone, some type of presentation or paper, some product or performance, if you will, of the behavior that's stated. So they're not measuring ability.

In the psychological literature, when you look at the difference between ability testing and achievement testing, outcome testing, outcome achievement demonstration, is definitely in the achievement testing piece. So faculty are measuring student achievements, not student abilities. So we do ask them not to say, demonstrate an ability to do something. Instead, we want them to explain, describe, and write, or present, or produce, or draw, or perform, those kinds of behaviors.

Alexandra

Ultimately, these outcomes come together to form the academic compact. This academic compact helps students to understand what it is that their program will equip them to do when they graduate.

Dr. Tim Brophy

So when you look at each undergraduate program in the undergraduate catalog, when you see the academic learning compact, another way to think of that is the program's promissory note to the student. This is what we're going to deliver. When you leave our program, this is what you will know, be able to do. This is how we'll be equipping you for the workplace, and oh by the way,

here are the kinds of assessments also that you can anticipate in our program as well. And that's what an academic learning compact is.

Alexandra

Unfortunately, not all students are familiar or aware of the existence of an academic learning compact.

Dr. Tim Brophy

I just wish that more of our students knew about those.

Honestly, many students aren't aware that they even have student learning outcomes in their programs, just because, I think, the catalog is this distant thing they don't really look at too often. I'm not sure the actual real cause, I'm just speculating there. But our faculty and our program leaders should take steps, in my opinion, to help the students know this is what the academic learning compact is, these are the outcomes, and these are the kinds of assessments that you may have in the field or in the program I should say.

Alexandra

Helping students to discover and understand these tools is really essential to their success.

Dr. Tim Brophy

And also, each of the undergraduate program catalog entries contains what we call a curriculum map. That is a map of where the outcomes are measured in the course, what courses in the programs are actually tagged to be measured by student learning outcomes. They're where they're introduced, reinforced, and assessed. And it helps connect their course and program work to the world they're going into next. It is the framework for what they should expect.

Alexandra

So after all of this, what exactly should we as faculty be concerned about, and what steps do we need to take?

Dr. Tim Brophy

First of all, I want the faculty to try to dissociate the assessment process and student learning outcome process from accreditation. Accreditation is my job. I'm going to help our accreditor see that all of our programs are effective. The faculty should be focusing on how they can make their program the very best it can be. And even though you may have a top program, you got there because you are effective, because you were gathering information about the success of the students, about the programmatic elements, and how they're coming along, and how they're being evaluated. And you're using that information to continuously modify and improve. And that's really what our faculty do beautifully here because we're a highly effective institution.

The accreditation piece is my job, I take care of that, but we do ask that they report to us those success stories in their programs. And we have to have it in a specific format, but that's just their vehicle for sharing with me the good news of their programs. And that's how I go about gathering the information I need to share with our accreditor, and we've been very successful with that. We had a reaffirmation in 2014 with our accreditor. We passed all 99 standards with no recommendations, including our student learning outcomes one.

So our faculty are doing a tremendous job. So I don't want them to worry or try to associate this with having to do this for accreditation. They really should be concentrating on doing this for the health and the benefit of their own students and programs. And that's really where the focus is, because they own this process, and they just simply share with me what they've accomplished. And it's always very encouraging for me to see that.

Alexandra

So assessments, student learning outcomes, and academic compacts are exciting after all. They are tools that really help shape our students and inform our teaching. And faculty, well, we just get to keep doing the good work, and sharing our success stories with Dr. Brophy.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Beyond the Podium podcast series. We're happy you joined us, and we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies, ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.