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Ten curriculum assessment tools every dean needs. Part 6: Grade Distribution report

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Theological school deans are not just theological leaders for their institution, they must be EDUCATIONAL leaders. That is, they must implement sound educational practices related to curriculum, instruction, supervision, assessment, and administration. There is a variety of ways to assess the effectiveness of the curriculum, and there are several levels of assessment (program-level, course-level, student testing, student projects, etc.). While faculty members can focus on course-level and individual student learning assessment, academic deans need to focus on program-level assessment in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's curricular course of study. Here are ten basic curriculum assessment tools every academic dean needs:



Outcomes alignment worksheet
Syllabus assessment worksheet
Curriculum maps
Program-level rubrics
Alumni survey
Grade Distribution report
Program retention and completion rate worksheets
Entering student profile
Graduating class profile
Student course evaluations

In this series we review these ten assessment tools every dean needs. This month:

6. Grade Distribution Reports.

Grades have always been an anxiety-causing practice--something I've personally witnessed as an elementary school principle and a graduate school dean (once receiving a phone call from the mother who wanted to challenge the grade given to her seminarian son!). Few charges against higher education, or a school, however, are as cringe-worthy as that of engaging in "grade inflation." That's justifiable on many levels. At heart, grades are less a reflection of a professor's acuity, than an indication of how well the students learned.

Grades may be seen as everything from a necessary evil to a responsible pedagogical practice. On the positive side, using grades for assessing the effectiveness of a program of study can help the dean, and Faculty answer important questions:

How well have students, as a class or cohort, realized the course learning outcomes?
To what extent and how well can the student demonstrate mastery of knowledge and skill?
How does one class compare to another comparable class in student learning achievement?
How have students performed over time when comparing grades?

Can grades reveal how effective assessment tools are in evaluating student learning?
Are instructors consistent in how they assess student learning?
Do grades reflect changes made to the curriculum? Its content or learning methods?
Do grades help interpret the learning experience and achievements of particular student profiles?
How do grades impact the GPA profile of students by cohorts, entering class, particular student profiles?
Is there evidence of grade inflation?

Disseminating the analysis of student grades can help faculty identify and explore challenges and issues related to student learning. Here is a sample grade distribution report from the mythical Central Generic Theological Seminary, a small theological school. In addition to this general report, the dean presents a comparative profile on the grade distribution: (a) by comparison of students who work more than 20 hours per week; (b) by gender; (3) by ethnic profile; (4) by denominational profile; (5) by commuters verses residential; (6) by age profile. In addition, the dean maintains a three-year comparison of grade distributions. Download Grade Distribution analysis report

Validity in Comparisons

It is important that grading be consistent across courses in a program of study. The validity of the assessment, and fairness to students and constituents, necessitates there be consistent grading practices and means of evaluation among courses of the same level. A more accurate profile of grade distribution can be achieved by analyzing grades by course levels:

- Introductory and survey courses: open to first-year students; lacking prerequisites.
- Intermediate courses: generally not open to first-year students and requiring prerequisite(s).
- Advanced courses: ordinarily for students earning a major, in a concentration, or certificate. These courses tend to require prior knowledge or prerequisites and focus on a particular topic or specific area of knowledge within a discipline.
- Independent studies, tutorials, projects, etc.

Resources for grading

While grading can be more intuitive than rigorously-calculated in some cases, instructors must strive to accurately assess student learning achievement. For both instructors and students, providing objective measures for assessment of learning can promote better grading and learning. For example, both students and faculty should make use of standardized measures such as:

- Grading scale with qualitative description
- Program-level rubrics
- Course-level rubrics
- Standardized grades calculator

As with all program level assessment practices, a grade distribution analysis and report should lead to decisions about implementation.

<https://wabash.center/2016/04/ten-curriculum-assessment-tools-every-dean-needs-part-6-grade-distribution-report/>