Chapter 1. Introduction

A) The History of Assessment at IUS

Back in the 1980s legislators and community leaders concerned with the growing mediocrity in education began to ask schools on all levels to demonstrate academic effectiveness. As a way to accomplish this, the education establishment turned primarily to the formal assessment of student learning to demonstrate that effectiveness. At the post-secondary level, schools reported their progress to national accrediting agencies. That agency for IUS is the Higher Learning Commission of North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), which at the time mandated that all affiliated institutions develop an effective institutional assessment plan by June 1995. In so doing, NCA identified the following ten characteristics of an effective program:

1. *Successful assessment flows from the institution's mission and educational purposes.*
2. *Successful assessment emerges from a conceptual framework.*
3. *Successful assessment is marked by faculty ownership and responsibility.*
4. *Successful assessment has institution-wide support.*
5. *Successful assessment relies on multiple measures.*
6. *Successful assessment provides feedback to students and the institution.*
7. *Successful assessment is cost-effective.*
8. *Successful assessment does not restrict or inhibit goals of access, equity, and diversity established by the institution.*
9. *Successful assessment leads to improvement.*
10. *Successful assessment includes a process for evaluating the assessment program.*

Responding to the NCA mandate, most institutions initially attempted to develop assessment plans via voluntary contributions by departments. The results were mixed. Only a small group of campuses set up formal programs that set authentic assessment into motion. Most schools realized that a formal campus-wide assessment program was needed to move beyond the developmental stage. IUS was one such campus, and following the recommendations of an assessment task force in 1999, the faculty senate approved the Academic Assessment Committee (AAC). This committee's original composition of four faculty members and two ex officio members (the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and the Director of the Office of Institutional Research) was modified in 2003-04 so that each of the six schools at IUS would be represented. In addition, as it became clear that the AAC could not undertake the large and complex task of assessment, a Director of Assessment was appointed to assume the day-to-day operational responsibilities.

B. What is Assessment and why Assess?

Long before the term 'assessment' gained currency in higher education as a mechanism to demonstrate institutional effectiveness, the term was mainly used to denote the general process by which instructors assign students a grade: "Since the student Jane Doe received a B on the midterm, a B+ on the final, and a B- on her term paper, her final grade is a solid B." Assessment has come to mean much more than that, however, and among the more important reasons to do assessment are the following:

1) *Assessment clarifies student learning for students and provides information to them for improvement.* Improving the quality of learning in the classroom involves determining not only to what extent students have mastered course content, but also to what extent students are mastering specific kinds of content throughout their academic career. By using multiple forms of ongoing assessment whose results are then analyzed and updated, teachers can then relay to students their progress in ways that are understood and appreciated. A course with only a midterm and a final yields little if any metacognitive understanding for students.

2) *Assessment supports and encourages professional development.* Many programs have discovered that conducting regular assessments of learning in the classroom helps teachers to determine where they are successful and where they are less successful. Doug Eder of Southern Illinois Edwardsville notes that assessment is what "we faculty members can do in order to demonstrate to ourselves that we actually do what we say we do. It is our source of in-process feedback. . . . Assessment decomposes the curriculum (or an assignment, class, or course) into component parts and makes those parts visible." Another assessment practitioner, Linda Suskie, notes that "the thread that connects faculty commitment to their work inside and outside of the classroom is intellectual curiosity–the characteristic ability to question, challenge, look at an issue from multiple perspectives, seek more information before rushing to judgment, raise questions, deliberate, and craft well-reasoned arguments." Documenting students' academic improvement provides strong evidence of ongoing commitment to professional development, which among other things can be used in promotion and tenure as well as for annual reviews and post-tenure review.

3) *Assessment is required by external authorities.* In recent years the community at large has come to expect universities to open up their previously closed classrooms for public inspection. Faculty and departments have been asked to explain to external accrediting agencies what is expected of their students and to what degree those expectations have been fulfilled. Indeed some faculty who for years have enjoyed complete classroom autonomy have questioned this development. Yet as Eder reminds us, "Physicians, surgeons, lawyers, and nurses all practice their professions daily in front of their peers. They are constantly subject to peer review and feedback. Professors are perhaps the only professionals who habitually isolate themselves from peers behind closed [classroom] doors, there to practice the major activity for which they receive payment. Given the immense costs of higher education, if we the faculty don't use assessment to provide accountability, surely someone else will do it for us." Needless to say, the increasing climate of accountability in higher education is not a passing trend. All programs at IUS will continue to provide concrete evidence of student learning.

4) *Assessment helps secure external funding.* Applications for funding to support program development are strengthened by evidence from assessment. Agencies supporting the development of new program assessment require a plan for assessing the new program as part of the application.

Excerpts from *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* (Suskie, 2004):

Students benefit from good assessment practices because
θ Assessment expectations help students to understand where they should focus their time and energies;
θ Assessment feedback helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses;
θ Assessment information gives students documentation of what they've learned that they can use to apply for jobs, awards, and programs of advanced study.

Faculty benefit from good assessment practices because
θ Assessment activities bring faculty together to discuss important issues such as what they teach, how they teach, and what their standards and expectations are;
θ Assessment activities help faculty see how their courses link together to form coherent programs and how the courses contribute to student success in subsequent pursuits;
θ Assessment results can be used as compelling evidence of the quality of their teaching when they apply for tenure, promotion, and salary increases.

Administrators benefit from assessment because

θ Assessment information documenting the success of a program or institution can be used to convince employers, donors, legislators, and other constituents of its quality and worth;
θ Assessment can help ensure that institutional resources are being spent in the most effective ways possible–where they'll have the greatest impact on student learning;
θ Assessment can help administrators make informed decisions about such matters as resource allocations and faculty hires.

C) IUS Assessment Philosophy

One element of the IUS Mission Statement is to provide "a challenging, innovative, and supportive learning community committed to the intellectual and social growth of its students." Toward this end, the AAC has established an outcomes-oriented assessment approach with the goal of improving student performance. Moreover, since assessment is an iterative, adaptive process that informs changes to instructional practices, the feedback loop is the critical element in assessment. The basis of good assessment practice is a shared understanding of program goals to ensure that all those involved in curriculum delivery are working toward the same ends.

D) Assessment Administration

While the **Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs** has overall responsibility for academic assessment (Program Assessment and Classroom Assessment) at IUS, other administrative units also have responsibilities related to Program Assessment.

- **The Academic Assessment Committee**, a Faculty Senate committee, will be responsible for monitoring assessment of student academic achievement in the undergraduate majors and in the masters programs. The committee will determine to what extent the assessment of educational outcomes offers an opportunity for strengthening the University and enhancing its accountability. Specifically, the committee is charged with developing an institutional assessment plan that is consistent with the campus mission, recommending a time-line for its implementation, and identifying and recommending assessment, outcomes, and database needs to support the North Central Accreditation process.   [from IU Southeast Faculty Senate By-Laws, updated 7-05]

- **The Director of Institutional Research and Assessment** is responsible for assisting programs and faculty with development, implementation, operation, and maintenance of their assessment programs.

- **Deans** are responsible for the successful operation of assessment programs within their schools.

- **Program Coordinators** are responsible for developing, implementing, operating, and managing the assessment programs within their academic programs to achieve continuous improvement of student learning.

E) Learning-Outcomes Assessment in the Context Of the Feedback Loop

As has been the case with assessment at other institutions, the IUS Assessment Academic Committee embraces a learning-outcome approach to assessment. The working definition of 'learning outcome assessment' that will inform this handbook is the gathering and interpreting of information related to students' verifiable academic performance and behavior at various stages of their academic career that lead to curriculum changes or modifications. Thus, assessment can never be viewed as a single action, but as an ongoing process whose ultimate goal is obtaining the necessary feedback based on student performance to modify and improve student learning. Prior to the national assessment mandate, nearly all college departments simply listed goals and assured constituents that those goals were being met. The assessment movement now asks all academic programs to supply evidence of student behavior that has been explicitly measured and evaluated.

F) Assessment Expectations

Following a decentralized approach in which each program is responsible for its own assessment, faculty should establish curriculum maps in order to evaluate the extent to which students are being exposed to the program learning goals and outcomes. In conjunction with guidelines published by NCA, each program at IUS will submit both an annual assessment report, which is then stored in the centrally maintained Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA) database, and annual assessment summaries, which will then be posted on the IUS Assessment Web Page. Individual faculty are expected to participate in the assessment activities in the following ways: reviewing program goals and assessment plans; collecting and interpreting assessment data as required by assessment; reviewing assessment results and resulting decision-making processes. As a means to improve teaching and learning, faculty may be asked to adopt curricular changes based on the departmental deliberation of assessment results.

G) Distinguishing Levels of Assessment

Assessment practitioners recognize three different levels of assessment at the post-secondary level. At the course level, assessment examines the degree to which the objectives for a specific course are evidenced in student learning; faculty engage in course assessment by regularly evaluating student performance on assignments, projects, and exams and then fine-tuning their approach in the course to achieve a better outcome. At the institutional level,

assessment seeks to determine the degree to which broad institutional objectives are being met. At the program level, to which the AAC has devoted much of its time at this point, assessment seeks to determine the degree to which programmatic learning outcomes are being met. The mission of a Math program, for example, might be to prepare students for careers in graduate school, industry, and teaching. To accomplish this, students need to demonstrate certain learning outcomes: a basic knowledge of the math; mathematical and analytical problem-solving skills; experimental skills; information-handling skills; computing proficiency; communication skills; scientific method and approach; organizational skills; and personal/interpersonal skills. The distinguishing feature of assessment for this Math program, as it should be for all programs, is that it verifies achieved outcomes across multiple courses even as it isolates areas that need improvement.