

# Introduction

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For much of its history, higher education has taken what Hersch (2005) described as a faith-based approach to assessment. That is, it has taken on faith that what we do works. This is obviously no longer acceptable, as colleges and universities are under increasing pressure from external and internal forces, most notably the federal government, regional accrediting bodies, parents, students, and the general public, to demonstrate their effectiveness.

Assessment is imperative for other reasons. In addition to demonstrating to others what we are doing, assessment (a) assists in funding requests; (b) informs planning and decision making; (c) helps us make inferences about the overall quality of a program or educational approach; (d) allows us to celebrate our success; and (e) most importantly, provides a method of continuous improvement whereby we can modify and improve our programs.

First-year seminars have a long history in the assessment movement and are often noted as being the most frequently assessed course or innovation in higher education (Tobolowsky, Cox, & Wagner, 2005; Upcraft, 2005). This perception may be due, in part, to the seminar's early history. When the University 101 course at the University of South Carolina—arguably, the genesis of the modern first-year seminar—was created, assessment was built into the fabric of the course. As early as 1972, studies were commissioned to assess the effectiveness of the experimental program (Heckel, Hiers, Finegold, & Zuidema, 1973). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, course administrators conducted numerous assessments on University 101 to provide evidence of its effectiveness to the Faculty Senate, which approved the course. Results of these assessments found that the course was associated with higher retention and graduation rates, as well as better grades (Heckel et al., 1973; Morris & Cutright, 2005). The desire to use research methods to evaluate the merits of an educational program is an early example of the assessment movement, though it is interesting to note that the same level of scrutiny was not applied to other courses at the University. First-year seminars were, and continue to be, held to higher standards than other academic courses (Swing, 2001).

The positive assessment findings of University 101 led to the establishment of the first-year seminar as an accepted and valued curricular component at the University of South Carolina. An additional outcome was the rapid growth of first-year seminars across the nation; according to the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars, 87% of responding institutions noted they offered such a course on their campuses (Padgett & Keup, 2011).

While seminars are becoming more ubiquitous, assessment of these courses has not kept pace with their growth. In a 2001 monograph on assessing the first college year, Swing noted assessment of first-year programs was frequently limited to either surveys of student satisfaction or correlation analyses of participation and retention. While these are important metrics, they do not tell the full story of how successful a seminar is or what can be done to make necessary improvements. In the decade that followed Swing's criticism, not much progress was made in improving the sophistication of first-year seminar assessment plans. According to the 2009 National Survey of First-Year Seminars, just over half (56.5%) of the institutions indicating they offered a first-year seminar also reported that it had been formally assessed since 2006 (Padgett & Keup, 2011). As these authors noted, of the seminars that were assessed, most focused on simple and "easily acquired outcomes, such as retention rates and satisfaction measures, regardless of their alignment with stated goals of the seminar" (p. 56).

The focus on persistence as the primary assessment metric is understandable given the continued importance of retaining students on an institution's bottom line and the increased attention to this by external audiences. However, while retention is important, it is only one piece of a much larger strategy. Given the higher standards to which these seminars are generally held, as well as the climate of accountability surrounding higher education, having a thoughtful and thorough assessment plan for such courses is critical. If first-year seminars are to continue to thrive, improvements must be made in how they are assessed. The focus must widen from retention, graduation rates, and satisfaction to include direct measures of learning, evidence of the extent to which course learning outcomes were achieved, and a variety of lenses and perspectives to interpret the data. In addition, assessment should widen to include other stakeholders, such as faculty, campus partners, and former students. Most importantly, seminar leaders need to do a better job of putting data into action in order to make programmatic improvements. In essence, seminar leaders need to focus not just on proving that the seminar matters, but also on improving the experience each year (Swing, 2001).

Assessment is often challenging for first-year seminar administrators. Many questions continue to confound the leaders of these courses. Who and what should be assessed? How? When? Once we have findings, how should they be interpreted? This book seeks to provide practical advice and guidance in answering these questions.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of assessment, including various definitions and uses. In addition, a new model for assessing a first-year seminar is proposed. Several lenses for interpreting data are explained, including criterion-based, benchmarking, longitudinal, and value-added. A few major assessment designs, such as experimental and quasi-experimental, are provided to frame an understanding for how assessments might be structured. The chapter closes with important notes about the limitations of assessment.

Building on the discussion of value-added assessment in the opening chapter, chapter 2 uses Astin's (1993) Inputs-Environment-Outcomes model as a way of thinking about who and what to assess. The chapter begins with an explanation of this value-added assessment model and discusses ways in which programs and institutions have typically misapplied it, focusing on portions of the model rather than using it as an integrated whole. The chapter then breaks the model down into its three components (i.e., inputs, environment, and outcomes) and relates how they apply to assessing a first-year seminar. The discussion of inputs highlights ways to understand the pre-enrollment characteristics of students and how these might impact the assessment of outcomes. A brief overview of the environmental factors that could contribute to the intended outcomes follows. A list of the most typically assessed outcomes of first-year seminars and an organizing taxonomy provides guidance on what to assess. The chapter concludes with a thorough discussion of how to write clear and measurable learning outcomes. Examples from various institutions are provided.

Chapters 3 and 4 highlight techniques, methods, and strategies for assessing a first-year seminar, with a particular emphasis on data collection. The first of these chapters focuses on the *how* of assessment. It distinguishes between and offers guidance on using direct and indirect measures of student learning. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are discussed. The chapter also provides advice when considering whether programs should design their own surveys or use national instruments. Best practices in developing survey items are provided. In addition, sample rubrics for assessing student learning are offered. Chapter 4 focuses on the *who* of assessment, that is, the individuals

whose experiences form the basis of programmatic assessment. It provides an overview of sampling techniques and a discussion of strategies for increasing response rates. The chapter closes with ideas for other populations relevant to first-year seminars that could be assessed.

Chapter 5 offers advice and recommendations for analyzing, interpreting, and using assessment results. Reporting findings and applying them to practice are perhaps the most critical and overlooked aspects of the assessment process. There is often a rush to collect and analyze data, without much forethought as to how it will be used, with whom it will be shared, or what will be done with the information learned. Data have to be put into action for assessment to be useful. This chapter discusses how to effectively disaggregate, interpret, use, and report assessment findings.

The volume concludes with a discussion of the course review process as a natural starting point for assessment and as a strategy for refining learning outcomes and assessment plans. Chapter 6 also offers some brief closing reflections on the best practices for first-year seminar assessment.