A utilization-focused approach to developing, mapping, and assessing student learning outcomes in college foreign language programs
Module I
Understanding utilization-focused outcomes assessment

- Developing SLOs
- Mapping SLOs
- Situating
- Utilizing
- Reflecting
- Planning
- Implementing
Module I introduces an outcomes assessment approach that aims to enhance the use of assessment findings. The emphasis of assessment use has been articulated by regional accreditors, professional organizations (e.g., American Association for Higher Education, 1992) as well as prominent scholars (e.g., Banta, 2002; Ewell, 1987) who have laid the groundwork for outcomes assessment in higher education. However, promoting assessment techniques that result in real use of assessment findings (i.e., the concrete use of student performance information toward some program development aim) has been an ongoing challenge (Wright, 2006). Some researchers have argued this challenge has partly to do with the fact that assessment—especially in its accreditation-motivated form—generally does not “begin with issues of use,” or fails to focus on use to the extent that it might (Banta, 2002; Norris, 2006; Davis, Sinicrope, & Watanabe, 2009). Our aim throughout this module will be for the module users to give particular consideration to assessment use.
How to use the module

Because outcomes assessment should be a collective endeavor, we encourage you to go through this module together with your colleagues. The module includes tasks and resources that will help facilitate your outcomes assessment planning.

→ Work on the questions with your colleagues.

→ If you see this icon, access the resources for further information and examples by clicking on the link provided.
The term “assessment” is often used interchangeably with “evaluation” in higher education, creating some confusion. To be clear, the focus of program evaluation can include various elements of a program, including personnel management, budget, faculty development, etc.

“Outcomes assessment” is a particular type of program evaluation where the element under focus is student learning. The ultimate goal of outcomes assessment is to link program decisions regarding curriculum and instruction to the bottom line for an educational program: improved student learning.
What is student learning outcomes assessment?

"Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education” (Angelo, 1995, p.7).
Common concerns
(Watanabe, Norris, & Gonzalez-Lloret, 2009)

- No use or follow-through on findings
- Fear of misuse by external forces
- Low relevance, lack of bearing on what we do
- Lack of time, overburdened faculty
- No institutional support, funding, help
- Limited knowledge, expertise in assessment
- Faculty’s lack of willingness to engage

How should we go about assessment, in order to turn these negative perceptions around and ensure USEFUL assessment?
Responding to concerns and making assessment USEFUL

- **Clear & Comprehensible**
  - Transparent processes and outcomes

- **Educational & transformative**
  - Users learn by participating

- **Action oriented**
  - Action-based planning (intended use leads the design)

- **Responsive & relevant**
  - Context-relevant use & purpose, credible to local purpose

- **Participatory**
  - Active involvement of primary intended users = ownership

- **Iterative**
  - Evaluation pursued iteratively as a process

- **Manageable & feasible**
  - Consider available time and resources

All leads to... **USE**
Instead of doing assessment and figuring out how to use the results at the end of the assessment cycle, utilization-focused assessment identifies and anticipates intended uses of assessment at the very beginning of the assessment planning to inform the rest of the assessment process. **Assessment facilitators** need to emphasize assessment use from the very beginning, because “how everything that is done, from the beginning to end, will affect use” (Patton, 2008, p. 37).
Utilization-focused outcomes assessment is an approach to ensure and maximize use of assessment by the primary intended users of the assessment, from the onset of outcomes assessment planning to action-taking on the basis of assessment findings. Thus, the outcomes assessment starts with the following question: “Why are we doing outcomes assessment? For whom and for what purpose?”

**Primary intended users (PIUs)** are individuals or a group within program stakeholders who are responsible for making decision about the program and intend to use the assessment findings for improving student learning.

**Intended use:** How do you intend to apply assessment findings? What decisions are the assessment findings expected to affect?
Utilization-focused approach

Utilization-focused outcomes assessment is highly situational and contextualized, and it does not have a cookie-cutter answer for each and every assessment focus, purpose, design, methods, or use. Thus, the approach requires assessment facilitators to actively interact with the PIUs and be responsive and adaptive to their needs, priorities, and values.
Two overarching phases to outcomes assessment are first clarifying and then assessing outcomes.

The clarifying phase involves collaboratively developing comprehensive learning outcomes and ensuring learning opportunities exist for students to achieve the outcomes (i.e., mapping outcomes to curriculum and instruction).

The assessing phase is divided into four stages. At the first stage, Situating, assessment facilitators examine assessment readiness and needs, and identify those who will be involved in assessment. At the second stage, Planning, intended uses of assessment are set to guide the design and the plan. At the third stage, Implementation, the assessment plan is put into action with careful monitoring of the process. The final stage, Utilization, involves action planning and action taking on the basis of assessment findings. Finally, Reflecting, in the center of the diagram, denotes the ongoing review of assessment quality happening throughout the assessment cycle.
In order to ensure that outcomes assessment is useful, feasible, ethical, accurate, and accountable, The Program Evaluation Standards (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011) set by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation offer a good set of principles to follow. In the next slide, the Program Evaluation Standards are adapted to reflect outcomes assessment contexts.
Standards of Practice
Adapted from Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, and Caruthers (2011)

**Utility**
Assessment will serve the needs of intended users.

**Feasibility**
Assessment is practical, prudent, and frugal to the intended users.

**Propriety**
Assessment is conducted ethically and appropriately to protect the rights and welfare of those who are affected by the assessment findings.

**Accuracy**
Assessment reveals and conveys appropriate and credible information about student learning in the eyes of intended users.

**Accountability**
Assessment decisions and processes are fully documented so that assessment design, process, and use can be meta-evaluated against the standards for accountability and improvement purposes.
Are there any other principles of practice that should be addressed, but are not mentioned in the Evaluation Standards? Discuss with your colleagues how assessment should be undertaken in your program. Determine guidelines of practice, so that assessment will be conducted in a manner that is agreed upon by those involved in it.
Assessment working group (WG)

Who has a stake in your program? In the context of internally-driven outcomes assessment, those who facilitate assessment work will be from the *primary intended user group* (see slide 10). Often, an assessment committee or a working group needs to be formed so that there is collaboration in managing and learning from outcomes assessment.

Do you already have an assessment working group?

- Yes
  - Any other intended users who should be represented?
    - Go to slide 19.

- No
  - Who should be included in the assessment working group?
    - Go to slide 18 (next slide).
Identify key stakeholders of your program and list them clockwise according to the degree (greater to lesser) of impact they can potentially make in program decision making.

Within the stakeholders you identified above, who should be the primary intended users (PIUs) for your assessment project? Circle the group or individuals.
When choosing personnel to serve as committee members, you may want to think about the following:

*Is the person…*
- enthusiastic about outcomes assessment or curriculum work?
- able to commit their time and effort to an assessment project?
- in a position to effect change?
- able to bring in diverse perspectives on language teaching and learning?
- knowledgeable about or experienced with assessment?
Assessment WG: examples

Program A (a small, single-language department):
The department chair sent a general call to all faculty and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) for their interest in participating in the assessment WG. The WG consists of representative tenured and non-tenured faculty as well as GTAs.

Program B (a large, multi-language department):
A new department chair decided to intentionally include non-tenurable faculty in the WG in order to reflect their voices in curricular decisions. The working group consists of the department chair, interested tenured-track faculty, curriculum coordinators from each language section, and non-tenure-track faculty. The working group is over 20 members, thus there are level-specific subcommittees within the WG across languages, each one led by a curriculum coordinator.
Conclusion

Module I has emphasized the importance of focusing on assessment use from the very beginning stages of assessment. Undertaking assessment without first clarifying who will use assessment, and specifying in explicit terms what those people will use assessment for, can result in wasted time and effort and can even be detrimental to department/program assessment culture. Furthermore, assessment should be a collective endeavor and not accomplished by one person or a few isolated individuals. It is important, then, to form an inclusive assessment working group (e.g., an assessment committee) that is tasked to collaboratively work through each of the stages described above, with a clear and democratically conceived commitment to assessment use. The modules to follow (modules II, III, IV, and V) will guide you through the subsequent steps of stating, mapping, and assessing student outcomes, as well as reflecting on your assessment work.