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Key Elements of Effective Assessment

The faculty is becoming more reflective as they think about their instructional practices in relation to student learning outcomes and assessments as SFA begins the reaccreditation process for SACS. In addition, the university community is thinking about best practices and ways to improve student learning. **The 2013 Strategic Plan** includes an initiative stating that SFA will develop a learner-centered environment. These two current educational issues create a ripe environment for evaluating and rethinking student assessments.

In the first stage of our SACS reaccreditation process, program leaders were asked to create Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). The most effective SLOs are learner-centered. These outcomes clearly define what graduates of our programs should be able to do upon completion of the coursework. Outcomes of this type can be very helpful in curricular alignment within programs and for program evaluations. We as higher education faculty, however, would be remiss if we stopped here. Clear, measurable, learner-centered outcomes should also lead to learner-centered assessments.

Strategy 3 of Initiative Four of the SFA Strategic Plan states that instructors will increase use of teaching technologies, strategies, and active learning opportunities leading to greater student engagement. These technologies, strategies, and opportunities should be authentic and alternative forms of assessment. For far too long the standard assessment in higher education has been the traditional summative test. Many instructors feel comfortable with traditional testing methods, and the students have come to expect a traditional summative assessment. As we move to more learner-centered learning outcomes and a more learner-centered environment across campus, our assessments also should become more learner-centered.

Authentic assessment includes tasks that are based on problems and situations that the students will actually face in the world or work environment. In other words, in authentic assessments, students are actually doing what we are teaching them to do. One example of authentic assessment currently used on campus is the Management Plan completed by forestry majors. The forestry program culminates in formulating a management plan for an actual tract of land. Students are assessed on what they should be able to do when they complete the program.

Alternative assessments are any assessments other than the traditional pencil and paper test. Portfolios, projects, presentations, and papers are all considered alternative assessments. Alternative assessments provide a variety of ways for learners of different styles to share what they have learned. Some students learn better in small groups or with hands-on activities or by participating in class discussions. Alternative assessments let students give evidence of learning in an assortment of ways throughout the semester.

Authentic and alternative assessments used in conjunction with traditional testing offer a powerful assessment package. In turn, we discover what our students know and can actually do, as well as how we are doing in preparing them. The key to effective assessment is clear alignment to the learning outcomes. For example, if you want your students to know the official rules of golf, assessing them with a traditional test of multiple choice questions is effective and appropriate. If your second learning outcome is that students be able to properly tee off, then a pencil and paper test is not effective. The students must actually tee off for you to assess correct form and process. The two assessments together provide a detailed picture of what your students know and can do.

We are in the midst of exciting changes and challenges at SFA. The SACS reaccreditation and the new strategic plan have given us the opportunity to increase student learning through a more learner-centered environment.