

# Ten Myths of Academic Program Assessment at Baylor

Dr. Larry Lyon  
Dean of the Graduate School and  
Senior Vice Provost  
Baylor University

<http://www.baylor.edu/sacs/index.php?id=25925>

1. **Assessment is a necessary evil.** The regard with which most faculty hold assessment can be seen by the fact that this myth is typically used to *defend* program assessment. The idea is that while we all know that assessment is a waste of time that could do much harm and little good, we must do at least the required minimum in order to have our accreditation reaffirmed by SACS. Please don't use this defense with your colleagues. Instead, invite your colleagues to help create an assessment that pleases them as well as SACS. Assessment is a SACS-mandated necessity, but if it is an "evil" waste of time, it's our fault rather than SACS.
2. **Assessment is something we have to do for SACS.** Technically, of course, this is not a myth, but assessment ought to be something that we do to enhance student learning. Program enhancement, not SACS, ought to be the driving force behind our efforts.
3. **Assessment plans try to turn all of us into social scientists.** I admit to not seeing why this would be a problem, but for those of you in the "real" sciences or humanities, I promise that we will not get too caught up in statistical significance, random assignment, outcomes vs. goals, double-barreled questions, focus groups, exit surveys, or all the other measurement concepts that took up most of our workshop time. While we need to use defensible measures, the bottom line is not measurement, but program improvement. If you and colleagues come up with a plan that leads to demonstrable improvements in student learning, you're happy, I'm happy, and so is SACS.
4. **Assessment makes no sense at all in the humanities.** At first glance, this myth appears to be a variation of # 3, but the resistance in the humanities reflects more than a resistance to social science approaches to measurement. One of the problems in the humanities is the inherent difficulty in deciding what a graduate should know. Since there is little consensus around a single dominant paradigm or canon, the list of learning outcomes is difficult to create. Actually, this is also true in the social sciences, but IMO, this is what is appealing about the humanities and social sciences, and the fact that it is difficult to reach a consensus should not sway us from trying.
5. **Assessment is measurement of the trivial.** This may not always be a myth, but it should be. It's true that much of that which is crucial to our discipline is also that which is most difficult to measure. Thus, assessment plans often end up measuring that which is easily measured rather than that which is most important. You can steer a course between easily measured trivialities and impossible to measure profundities by choosing measures for which program implications exist. Ask what could be done differently if the results come back in a certain way and if it would be worth doing. This may not always produce the most profound measures, but it always produces measures that are not trivial.
6. **If I keep my head down, someone else, probably my chair, will get stuck with all this assessment, and then it will go away for 10 years.** The entire faculty should be involved in determining what their majors should know. Many of the faculty should be involved in implementing the assessment. And, it's not going away this time. SACS has wised up and now wants regular reports of our assessments, or more accurately, of our assessment-based enhancements.
7. **Program assessments can and will be used against us.** The assessments are internal instruments that are responded to by the program's faculty, not by the university's administration. Nobody is going to punish Sociology if only 20% of the graduates know who Durkheim is.
8. **Assessment is an intrusion on academic freedom.** It is true that assessment defines learning objectives that produce parameters within which we must teach. Still, if we understand academic freedom as existing in a disciplinary context, statement # 8 is a myth. I am not free to teach that Durkheim was a disciple of Satan bent on destroying religion. Instead, I must teach those interpretations that are accepted within the parameters of my discipline. The department defines the interpretations and assesses the degree to which our students have learned them.
9. **Assessment should prove that our program is successful.** If your assessment shows 100% success 100% of the time, it's useless for program enhancement. Assessment should provide information that allows you to improve your program. This is a key difference between the SACS program assessment and some of the other professional accreditations we have. The program assessment goal for SACS is not showing that you have enough books or enough faculty or enough credit hours (we have other SACS measures for that), the goal is improve your program.

10. **Assessment is another one of those top-down initiatives with no faculty input.** In the sense that SACS is at the top, this myth is true, but in a fuller and truer sense, this is a fully faculty-driven process. Faculty decide what the students should know; faculty decide how and when they should learn it; faculty assess the degree of learning; faculty implement changes based on their assessment. Administration is largely "out of the loop" on this one, and rightly so.

*Published with permission from Dr. Larry Lyon, Baylor University*