



THE IMPORTANCE OF DIRECT MEASURES

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There is sometimes discussion and confusion on whether the continuous improvement of educational programs requires direct measures of student learning to satisfy expectation of external accrediting agencies related to the demonstration of student outcomes. One of the concerns is that, if the expectations are for the use of direct assessment methods, there is going to be a return to a very prescriptive approach to accreditation. Silence in accreditation criteria concerning the use of direct methods should not be misinterpreted as indifference. Direct measures are a classification of assessment methods. These methods can be used to assess knowledge and skills attained by students through the direct examination or observation of student performance.

A direct method is NOT just one method but a set of methods that can be used to assess student knowledge and abilities. To say that a program should not be required to use a *specific* direct method is correct. The choice of which direct method is most appropriate for any given outcome for any given program squarely resides with the program faculty; however, not using direct methods should not be an option if evidence is required to demonstrate the extent to which student outcomes are being attained.

Experience would indicate that resistance to the use of direct assessment methods is rooted in the fact that a program has not defined their student outcomes in ways that support the use of direct measures. That is, it is not clear WHAT should be assessed. When the student outcome is not defined, a direct method of assessment cannot be used in any meaningful way. For example, if the student outcome, “an ability to function on teams,” has not been defined using a few measurable performance indicators that are the focus of program-level data collection, the outcome cannot be assessed using direct methods; its measure becomes a subjective assessment based on the “interpretation” of its meaning by individual faculty members. If the outcome is not defined, it cannot be measured in any valid way that is a true, consistent measure of student knowledge or ability. The results would not indicate where the students’ strengths and weaknesses are related to the outcome.

To say that the expectation that programs are using direct measures of student learning is not explicitly supported by the continuous quality improvement (CQI) process misses two important fundamental premises: 1) The fundamental principles of CQI require direct measures to assure quality. 2) Student outcomes cannot be assessed in any valid way without direct evidence of student performance.

Any debate over the use of direct methods of assessment needs to shift to a discussion about the underlying problem about the use of direct methods — that is, the expectation that programs are defining their outcomes in ways that are measurable. In the absence of recognizing the need for measurable outcomes, the debate over direct or indirect methods is hollow. Once the outcomes have been defined, the issue of direct measures generally goes away because then the program knows WHAT data to collect and can collect data in ways that produce information that can be used for meaningful, evidence-based improvement and not just “generate” data that can be reported to an external agency.