

Develop a plan for collecting data

At this point the department has identified goals along with processes and activities, brainstormed measures for each goal, picked a small number of the best measures, and identified the best method to collect the information. Now it is time to figure out how the information is going to be obtained. There are several important considerations:

- Why is this important? This is one last chance to weed out any bad choices that have been made about measures.
- From whom can we get this information? Identify the population to be assessed. Think about the kind of information being sought and who would have that information. Remembering the bias in self report data, it is important to consider other assessment methods. It might be useful to consider “stealth assessment” — records that exist in places like the Registrar’s Office or Financial Aid Office that might provide accurate information free from the drawbacks of self-reports.
- How can it be collected? Details are important. For instance, if surveys have been selected as a means of assessing student satisfaction, consideration needs to be given to how they will be administered—telephone, mail, WWW, e-mail, paper and pencil? The key is to balance costs and rewards such as response rates, credibility, and confidentiality.
- Can the data collection serve more than one purpose? If the department is interested in assessing both critical thinking and writing skills, it might be possible to design a writing exercise that requires the demonstration of both.
- When is the best time to collect the data? Timing is critical. Consider the rhythm of the academic year. Anyone who has distributed course evaluations during the final exam period has learned this fundamental lesson.
- How can the data be evaluated? Will the data have inherent meaning, or will the meaning come from triangulation with other data, benchmarks, or a baseline?

- How can the data be used? If it is not clear how the information will be useful, if it doesn't point to some process that can be improved, then it is not a good measure.
- How can the data be reported? Qualitative data is harder to collect, analyze, and report than quantitative data. On the other hand, qualitative data adds a powerful, often persuasive dimension to quantitative data.

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Department Level Assessment: Promoting Continuous Improvement

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