

**Title:** Harnessing Assessment.  
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**Source:** Tribal College Journal; Summer2008, Vol. 19 Issue 4, p24-27, 4p, 1 Diagram, 1 Chart  
**Document Type:** Article  
**Subject Terms:** \*OUTCOME assessment (Education)  
\*INDIAN universities & colleges  
\*EVALUATION  
\*EDUCATIONAL evaluation  
\*EDUCATIONAL outcomes  
\*INDIANS of North America -- Education (Higher)  
**Geographic Terms:** UNITED States  
**Abstract:** The article discusses ways for Native American colleges and universities to undertake assessment in an effective and culturally appropriate manner. Topics discussed include: embedding the assessment process in institutional practices so that it is tied in to teaching and learning; techniques for assessing student learning, including direct measures like essays and projects, and indirect methods like satisfaction surveys or focus groups; and tracking institutional data pertaining to enrollment, retention, graduation rates, transfer rates, etc.  
**Full Text Word Count:** 1785  
**ISSN:** 10525505  
**Accession Number:** 32043103  
**Persistent link to this record (Permalink):** <http://ezproxy.augsburg.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/live>  
**Cut and** <a href="http://ezproxy.augsburg.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/live">

**Paste:** ehost-live">Harnessing Assessment.</a>

**Database:** Academic Search Premier

Pulling together, administrators, faculty, and staff can improve student learning ASSESSEMENT DATA APPLIED RESEARCH IMPROVEMENT

**Assessment is a powerful tool** that can support tribal colleges in serving their communities and accomplishing their missions. It improves student learning through applied research. Assessment is not about evaluating individual student performance. Instead, it is about evaluating the overall achievement of a group of students in order to provide feedback to students, faculty, parents, the tribal college, policy makers, and the public about the current effectiveness and future refinement of educational programs.

Often the most basic assessment data are not available in tribal colleges because of the lack of financial resources, expertise, and technology, according to a 1997 study of tribal colleges by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Native American colleges: Progress and prospects, by Paul Boyer). Although many tribal colleges struggle with their assessment programs and efforts, Indigenous educators recognize assessment as an emerging priority — for internal improvement as well as for accountability (i.e., accreditation) purposes.

Based on six years of experience coordinating assessment efforts at Northwest Indian College (NWIC) and on an extensive evaluation of our efforts, I believe that assessment can be done in tribal colleges in a culturally appropriate and meaningful way. In this article, I make suggestions that might help tribal colleges to encourage dialogue when developing their assessment programs.

The plans and strategies and resources are described in the accompanying diagram. The processes and products are discussed below.

[Processes](#)

The processes of an effective tribal college assessment program fall into three categories: (1) how the assessment process is undertaken, (2) how assessment is embedded in institutional procedures and practices, and (3) how learning, teaching, and assessment are approached at the tribal college.

**1. Assessment process.** For example, to what extent is the process participatory, culturally appropriate, ongoing and formative, faculty-driven, streamlined and simplified, useful, meaningful, and relevant to the tribal college community?

Is assessment conducted in a responsible and ethical manner? Does the assessment process recognize Indigenous knowledge and skills and contribute to tribal self-determination and knowledge?

Does it start with interested and supportive faculty and staff and include employees from appropriate segments of the tribal college and students in its design? Does it result in a respectful and reciprocal relationship between the assessment coordinator and all staff?

Does the assessment process build cohesion, collaboration, relationships, and trust among staff through a consultative process? Does it educate administration, staff, and faculty to improve their assessment skills? Are results reported internally in an ongoing way so that the information is used to improve student success and learning?

Does the assessment process initiate meaningful conversations and create a shared vision for the future of the tribal college, based on common values? Does it redirect resources towards priorities outlined in the mission and goals and increase the tribal college's responsiveness to the needs of the tribal community?

Does it improve the instructional capacity of the tribal college and its public image and provide the basis for tribal college planning and budgeting decisions? And does the assessment process demonstrate accountability — the responsible use of limited resources — to the public?

## **2. Embedding assessment in institutional procedures and**

**practices.** For example, is assessment embedded in curriculum review, budgeting, the First Year Experience program (learning communities and cohorts), the college catalogue, tribal college publications, the website, job descriptions and announcements, and service learning?

**3. Learning, teaching, and assessment approaches.** Do faculty members use teaching and assessment strategies that include meaningful, relevant, and contextualized experiences? Do students learn something every time they are assessed? Do faculty incorporate elements traditionally used by tribal people, such as apprenticeships, observations, and practice? Is the curriculum integrated, experientially grounded, "place-based," and founded on traditional culture and knowledge? Do faculty use authentic assessment and learning approaches (e.g., self-reflecting and self-assessing, applying concepts to a relevant context, teaching material to peers, writing about a subject, and asking essential questions)? Do they employ formative classroom assessment techniques (informal, short, frequent, ungraded attempts to assess student learning) to provide immediate in-class feedback from students?

### Products

Effective tribal college assessment programs use three categories of assessment information to improve student learning. The first category is direct indicators of student learning, which requires that students demonstrate their learning through, for example, essays, capstone projects, and presentations.

The second category is indirect indicators of student learning, which asks students to reflect on and provide feedback about their learning through, for example, graduate or student satisfaction surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

The third category is institutional data, which are data that reflect the overall condition and effectiveness of the tribal college, such as retention and graduation rates and enrollment trends. Ideally, these three categories of assessment information are collected at the course level, program level, and college level — and eventually at the tribal community level. Each of the three categories of assessment information is elaborated upon below.

**1. Direct indicators of student learning (i.e., outcomes assessment).** To directly assess student learning the tribal college

creates a method for assessing college outcomes (both academic and cultural), program outcomes, and course outcomes and for using these assessment results. In order to do this, the tribal college derives college outcomes, program outcomes, and course outcomes from its mission. Instructors determine which courses will be used to reinforce and assess all college, program, and course outcomes at entry, midway, and exit and they articulate these specific outcomes on all syllabi.

Then the instructors determine the activities, capstone experiences, projects, essays, or assignments in required courses that assess outcomes at entry, midway, and exit. They develop course-level rubrics for these outcomes; and they assess students at entry, midway, and exit for the outcomes. Next, the assessment coordinator or instructors analyze the entry, midway, and exit assessment data; present analyses to faculty, staff, and students; consult on the results; use the data to improve and revise curriculum; and document the process. Finally, the tribal college educates students about the role of assessment in their education.

**2. Indirect indicators of student learning (i.e., students' perceptions of their learning).** To indirectly assess student learning, the tribal college asks the students in surveys, focus groups, interviews, and so forth about their experiences and learning at the tribal college and uses this information to improve its services, programs, and curricula. This is done both regularly, such as through course evaluations and graduate surveys, and occasionally, through student opinion surveys, alumni surveys, and student engagement surveys. Questions specific to tribal colleges may be appended to standardized national surveys to provide more meaningful and culturally relevant feedback.

**3. Institutional data (rates and numbers).** To improve tribal college services, programs, and curricula, tribal colleges track institutional data over time for different types of students (e.g., degree- and certificate-seeking, non-degree-seeking, and ABE/GED students).

Institutional data include:

student enrollment trends (e.g., full-time equivalent numbers and

Indian Student Count);  
retention rates (e.g., one semester, semester-to-semester, fall-to-fall, and fall-to-spring);  
graduation rates (three- or four-year rates) and numbers;  
program completion rates and numbers;  
course completion rates and numbers by level of course (e.g., CED, ABE/GED, college-level), by mode of learning (e.g., online, face-to-face), and by program;  
transfer data (e.g., from ABE to college-level and from the two-year tribal college to four-year colleges), including comparisons of grades and retention data; and,  
time to degree completion data.

## CONCLUSION

Although the task of developing an effective assessment program may appear daunting, significant progress can be made if it is approached systematically. A crucial first step is to clarify the tribal college's mission because all assessment programs ultimately derive from the mission statement. Many tribal colleges, of course, have already done this.

The next step is to start with small and simple projects that faculty and staff will support. Once one project is carried out successfully and people see positive results, they will be more willing to engage in future assessment endeavors. Over time, through a series of simple, systematic steps, a comprehensive assessment program can be developed.

Does the assessment process create a shared vision for the future of the tribal college, based on common values?

## Harnessing Assessment

Has the tribal college created or updated its mission statement (made it clear and concise)? Is the staff familiar with and supportive of the mission?

Does the leadership and staff know the history of their tribal college and of the tribal college and university movement?

Has the tribal college conducted a strategic planning initiative (including input from tribal community members, all tribal college staff, and students)?

Has the tribal college inventoried its current assessment practices and developed a systematic assessment plan, including direct indicators, indirect indicators, and institutional data?

Do the administrators financially support the assessment

- program?
- Do they respond in respectful, cooperative, and supportive ways?
  - Do they provide visible advocacy and real material support for assessment?
  - Do they provide necessary opportunities, incentives, material resources, and compensation to faculty and staff for assessment initiatives?
  - Do they solicit feedback, ideas, and input from staff and faculty and incorporate these suggestions into plans and decisions?
  - Do they streamline and simplify meetings and reduce administrative obstacles to the assessment program?
  - Do administrators publicly show appreciation of faculty and staff for their assessment efforts and achievements?
  - Do they refer regularly to the assessment program and its results in reports and presentations to both internal and external audiences?
- Are the following resources in place?

Full-time assessment coordinator who is knowledgeable about best practices in assessment and is sensitive to the cultural environment at the tribal college

Funds for the administration of assessment-related tasks

Adequate enrollment database system and an effective data collection system

Data administrator who is able to extract the data and create reports

Do the faculty members remain open-minded?

Do they respond in respectful, cooperative, and collaborative ways?

Do they take ownership of assessment and embrace assessment as an intrinsically valuable developmental process?

Do faculty members provide students with numerous, varied, and meaningful opportunities to practice skills and to receive feedback in ways that are integrated, contextualized, and experiential?

Do they use the assessment program and its results to improve student learning?

### [Examples of Activities at Each Level of a Tribal College Assessment Program](#)

Legend for Chart:

A - TYPE OF INDICATOR

B - TRIBAL COMMUNITY

C - COLLEGE

D - PROGRAM

E - COURSE

A

B

C

D

E

Direct indicators of student learning (outcomes assessment)

- update and/or increase familiarity and support for mission

- tribal community outcomes (e.g., number of Native

- language speakers; improving tribal leadership qualities)

- update and/or increase familiarity and support

- for mission

- develop and implement cultural outcomes

- develop and implement college outcomes

- develop and implement program

outcomes

- develop and implement course

outcomes