

Course Syllabi

Institutional Functions of the Syllabus

Teaching and Learning Functions of the Syllabus

Syllabi as Living Documents

Syllabus Checklist: Essential and Recommended Content

Access to Syllabi

Ownership of Syllabus Content

Student Learning Outcomes

What are Learning Outcome Statements?

**Outcome Statements as a Foundation for Student Grading
and Program Assessment**

Examples of Consistency Between Outcomes and Assessments

Using Outcome Statements to Guide Assessment

Instructional Quality and Continuous Improvement

Course Syllabi

See page 11 for Senate Policy on Syllabus Design.

Although the word syllabus (Latin for “list”) can be traced to ancient Greek words meaning “table of contents,” modern universities such as SDSU now depend on syllabi to fulfill many functions both within and beyond the boundaries of particular courses and/or classes.

Institutional Functions of the Syllabus

San Diego State University currently maintains no compendium of course descriptions beyond the 40-word (maximum) catalog description although, in recent years, it has begun to archive course proposals. This means that for the vast majority of our courses, the individual class syllabus is the only institutional record of the purpose or conduct of instruction. Syllabi thus constitute an important part of SDSU’s institutional memory which is accessed by diverse entities, including:

- Discipline-specific accrediting agencies as well as WASC, the Western Association for Schools and Colleges;
- Curriculum committees at various levels that are attempting to understand how the course fits into the curriculum as a whole or how to articulate courses with other departments or institutions;
- Technicians at other institutions who need to determine what kind of credit to assign to transfer students;
- Other instructors who will teach the course, perhaps after a primary instructor of record has retired or moved away;
- Advisers who are attempting to match student needs and interests with available courses or to help students address recency requirements for degrees;
- Personnel committees that are evaluating an instructor’s teaching effectiveness; and
- Students who want to make informed enrollment decisions.

Teaching and Learning Functions of the Syllabus

Although many syllabi are the product of collegial collaboration and consultation, maintenance and development of an effective syllabus is probably the single most important responsibility of an individual instructor.

Why? Because, by university policy, a class syllabus describes the purpose and scope of the course, outlines expected learning outcomes, describes the structure and sequence of activities and assignments, and explains grading policies. Thus, a syllabus reflects the organizing framework for most other course materials and learning resources.

Many instructors underestimate the powerful payoffs of a thoughtful and well-organized syllabus, which include:

More motivated students who are able to focus on expected student learning outcomes, required assignments, and grading standards because these are clearly explained—and more students who understand the overall purpose of the course and who “get” how individual assignments and activities are part of the “big picture.”

More organized and thoughtful students who can build on the syllabus document by adding their own notes and comments. Providing important instructions only as verbal announcements increases the likelihood they will be misunderstood, remain buried in lecture notes, or be missed entirely by students who come late or miss a class.

More students who plan ahead in preparing deliverables and meeting deadlines. Most SDSU students work and/or commute to campus and appreciate clear scheduling of dates for major deliverables and exams. But there are other reasons for emphasizing the scheduling functions of syllabi: Psychologists now understand that the brains of young adults continue to develop into their mid-twenties and among the last cognitive functions to mature are those concerned with planning and predicting consequences. Well-organized syllabi help students to plan ahead as they work on projects and other major assignments by suggesting intermediate milestones and recommended study plans. Although some instructors feel such planning should be left to students, reviews of explicit timelines can serve as scaffolding for maturation of student planning capacities.

Reduced instructor workload concerned with ad hoc clarifications and explanations of confusing expectations ranging from classroom etiquette, to access to learning resources, to due dates and exam content, to policies on contacting the instructor. Time savings to students and instructors from clear and well-organized syllabi are likely to increase as a function of class size. It only takes a few misunderstandings with a large number of students to cancel out any time saved by a cursory syllabus.

Reduced “hassles” and disputes resulting from incomplete information about due dates and grading methods and policies. The Office of the University Ombudsman has identified poor syllabi as the single most important cause of student grievances.

Syllabi as Living Documents

Students are often frustrated and confused by ad hoc changes in course scheduling and requirements. Indeed, University policy forbids major departures from a class syllabus, once it has been issued, except for compelling reasons. Yet, viewed across semesters, syllabi can be seen as “living documents” (to be revised repeatedly over many offerings of a course and benefiting over time from incremental improvements and iterative design). It is often difficult for instructors to develop a mature and robust syllabus without experimentation and some trial-and-error; it may take several iterations of a course to sort through the best ways to implement requirements and recommendations summarized on the following pages. Outstanding syllabi often evolve from humble beginnings as cursory documents.

For these reasons, instructors may find it useful to treat their own copy of the syllabus as a framework (or notebook) for capturing data about problems and opportunities as the semester unfolds. Evidence of student confusion, options for improved organization and mechanics, and possibilities for enhanced teaching and learning strategies can be noted and recorded for future, improved versions.

Syllabus Checklist: Essential and Recommended Content

1. Information from the official schedule of classes

Since students may acquire a syllabus through a variety of means or be unable to attend the first class session, include the essential information students need to locate and enroll in the course and class section.

Essential

- Course number and title.
- Semester and year.
- Meeting dates, times, and places.
- Schedule number unless suppressed in the official schedule of classes.

Recommended

- Special information on prerequisites, enrollment, and crashing policies.
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2. Explicit, public description of the course

University policy requires that a syllabus describe a course's purpose and scope. Include the standard catalog description of the course syllabi as well as an amplified description reflecting the way the particular course offering is "operationalized." Syllabi may be used routinely to determine course equivalency in transfer situations, to resolve grievance cases, and for other purposes involving administration and advisement.

Essential

- Description from the official course catalog.
 - Description of scope and purpose of course.
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3. Contact with instructor(s)

Policies and procedures for contacting instructors vary widely. At a minimum, university policy requires that faculty "shall hold regular office hours and shall post a schedule for those hours."

Essential

- Basic contact information.

Recommended

- Multiple points of contact (e.g., available by phone, in person, by email).
 - Variety of office hours convenient to students.
 - Rules and/or policies regarding contact (when and about what students may contact the instructor via phone, email, etc.).
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4. Student Learning Outcome Statements

University policies require that syllabi describe expected student learning outcomes. Almost all accrediting bodies now consider student learning outcomes and how they are assessed to be major issues in periodic reviews of institutional effectiveness. Accreditation standards have also shifted to emphasize the importance of outcomes that reflect the ability of students to actively analyze, synthesize, or evaluate rather than simply recall or comprehend information (i.e., more focus on broad competencies of transformation and less on storage and recall of topical content).

For more on how to formulate and write student learning outcome statements, see page 62 in this guide and go to <http://dus.sdsu.edu/assessment/>

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4. Student Learning Outcome Statements (continued)

Essential

- 5-10 student learning outcome statements for the course as a whole, consistent with the purpose and scope of the course.
- Expected learning outcomes stated as observable/measurable capabilities, capacities, or performance—not merely
 - understand
 - know
 - demonstrate knowledge of
 - be familiar with
- Student learning outcome statements are consistent with grading policies and procedures.

Recommended

- Outcomes emphasize dynamic student capabilities rather than mere recall or comprehension of content topics. They often employ “active verbs” to describe how students will demonstrate their capacities:
 - analyze
 - assess
 - compare
 - create
 - critique
 - depict
 - elucidate
 - implement
 - predict
 - solve
- Outcomes organized (e.g., listed, themed, grouped, or classified).
- Supplementary or more detailed learning outcomes are used to clarify the purpose or intent of specific assignments or activities.

5. Course activity sequences

A carefully designed and written description of course activities and assignments will help students stay on track and avoid confusion. Instructors often find that building in a few “buffer” sessions (not necessarily labeled as such) allows them to make adjustments in activities or assignments without the confusion attendant in re-issuing a course schedule.

Essential

- Due dates for major assignments and exams and method for submitting assignments.

Recommended

- Agenda for each class period, including topics, activities, and, if possible, expected learning outcomes.
- Major milestones for intermediate work products and dates identified or highlighted (e.g., drafts, practice exams, rehearsals, informal meetings).

6. Assessment and grading

No other aspect of syllabus content results in more confusion and disputes than grading. Lack of clarity about the nature and scope of exams often leads to misunderstandings as well. No exam can assess every possible topic or problem so that it is widely understood by students and instructors alike that exams will in some way sample the domain of the course.

However, such sampling should not reduce expectations about exams to mere guessing games that disempower students and can lead to fatalism and learned helplessness. Assist students to prepare for exams by reviewing student learning outcomes statements and by providing example and/or practice items consistent with both the outcomes statements and the actual exam items.

One of the most important strategies for developing well-rounded students and for accommodating diverse students' experiences and abilities is to vary assignments and assessment methods. Overuse of any one particular modality or measure of competence—such as formal exams or academic papers—can deny students the opportunity to demonstrate their competencies in other ways.

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6. Assessment and grading (continued)

Essential

- Grading methods consistent with stated student learning outcomes.
- Standards, logistics, timelines, and other requirements for students regarding submittals.
- Amount of assessment/grading appropriate to scope/purpose of course.

Recommended

- Explicit criteria for grading student work products issued early enough for students to use them as guidelines for preparation or study.
- Assignments varied in scope and emphasis (e.g., size and grade-weighting).
- Diverse modalities of assessment (e.g., journal, outline, essay, report, charts, tables, photo/audio/video).
- Varied assessment/grading methods (e.g., timed test, take home exam, oral performance, essay, multiple-choice).
- Methods used in major assessments such as exams are consistent with previous opportunities for practice and feedback.

7. Overview of venues, environments, and media to be employed

Student expectations regarding venues for course communications and activity are rapidly shifting towards a nearly universal assumption that basic course information and materials will be available online, particularly for larger courses. SDSU automatically creates a BlackBoard course site for every course and populates it with student enrollment data, although it does not require that such sites be activated by the instructor. For more information, go to <http://blackboard.sdsu.edu>

Faculty should check with your department administrative coordinator regarding requirements and options for notifying students in footnotes of the official schedule of classes regarding special scheduling or equipment requirements.

Essential

- Description of where and how materials, resources and environments provided by the university to students can be accessed/obtained.
- Policies and procedures or how these can be accessed.

Recommended

- Whether and how course will employ BlackBoard, the university's course management system.
- Description of activities and assignments, differentiates between team-group assignments and individual work.

8. Materials and resources to be obtained by students

Syllabi should identify specialized equipment and tools required of students as well as conventional print materials.

Aztec Shops offers extensive services to assist faculty to order textbooks and customized materials. See <https://www2.aztecshops.com/faculty.aspx>

The library summarizes online support for faculty at <http://infodome.sdsu.edu/faculty/faculty.shtml>

Faculty should check with your department administrative coordinator regarding requirements and options for notifying students in footnotes of the schedule of classes regarding special scheduling requirements.

Essential

- Description, approximate prices, and how to obtain.
- Purpose and use (e.g., will a book be read intensively or used as occasional reference).

Recommended

- Materials and resource descriptions well organized (e.g., by type, purpose, topic, theme).
- Additional descriptions of optional resources—conceptual or practical—as appropriate.

9. General appearance, readability, and usability of syllabus (additional criteria apply to Web sites)

The appearance and organization of a syllabus may influence student perceptions of the organization of the course's content and activities—and the organization and competence of the instructor as well.

Essential

- Readable fonts and font size.
- Headings, (and for longer syllabi, subheads) and page numbers.
- Adequate margin space for student notes.

Recommended

- Effective use of tables, lists, numbering, and other indexing devices to enhance reference to particular elements during discussions or other course-related communication.
- Elements requiring repeated access by students (such as dates and assignments) are organized concisely for ready access.
- Adequate white space throughout syllabus.
- Consistent formatting.

Additional Recommended Syllabus Content

10. Rationale for sequence of topics and assignments

Students often ask (or think about asking) for more guidance in understanding how class assignments and activities fit into larger themes related to the course's scope and purpose. Consider including in the syllabus flags and pointers that remind students of the connections between individual activities and larger themes and goals of the course. Then review and expand upon these at appropriate times during the semester.

- Overview explains how topics and assignments fit into the learning arc of the semester.
- Elements of the overview are linked to or related to projects and assignments.
- Specific activities and assignments are linked to or related to major course learning outcomes.

11. Support for general academic development and skills training

Consider using the syllabus as a device for orienting students to study strategies or patterns appropriate to the scope and purpose of the course. Many younger students have learned in high school to expect that “homework” is primarily designed to “follow-up” on themes introduced during a class session whereas college courses often benefit from homework preparatory to class sessions.

- Strategies for study, preparation, and engagement.
 - Time management skills.
 - Pointers to workshops or special training for skill, development related to course.
 - Implicit development of general academic skills not identified in student learning outcome statements.
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12. Accommodations for students with disabilities

University policy requires that faculty cooperate with Student Disability Services in providing authorized accommodations for eligible students.

Although not required by official policy, syllabi should include language that encourages eligible students to identify themselves to the instructor. For more information on faculty responsibilities, see <http://www.sa.sdsu.edu/sds/sds-main/facstaff.html>

- Explicit statement indicating respect for and willingness to accommodate disabilities and protect student's confidentiality regarding disability issues.
- Indicates the appropriate means by which an eligible student can confer with the instructor on a confidential basis or in a private setting.

13. Orient students to engage with activities and assignments

Although abbreviated syllabi often stick to the bare essentials, an amplified syllabus can reinforce connections and meaning for students. Use the syllabus to indicate ways in which the course design builds on students' prior knowledge and experience. Help students to understand the benefits of the new capabilities they will develop whether these benefits are psychic, or entirely practical.

- Build on students' prior experience and knowledge.
- Explain benefits or value (of assignments and learning outcomes).
- Relate learning to situations (real world or otherwise) that provide context and meaning.
- Structure social organization (e.g., individual, group-team, community forum, or discussion).
- Diverse modalities of deliverables (e.g., journal, outline, essay, report, charts, tables, photo/audio/video).
- Interactive (require more than mere attendance or passive reception of content).

14. Student privacy and intellectual property

Federal Law (FERPA) imposes important obligations on instructors to ensure the confidentiality of student grades and other evaluation of student work. For example, instructors may not distribute or post grades in a way that allows anyone other than the individual student to access them. In addition, university policy grants to students intellectual property rights to work products they create as part of a course unless they are formally notified otherwise. Therefore, syllabi should notify students of special provisions regarding use or distribution of their work.

- Policies and procedures assure privacy of student grades and feedback on individual assignments or ensure that students have granted written waivers.
- Students notified at the time of an assignment if copies of students work will be retained beyond the end of the semester and/or used as examples for future students or the wider public.

15. Syllabus as social “contract” or agreement regarding expected student behavior, performance, and deportment

Although university policy does not accord syllabi the status of formal legal contracts, a course syllabus provides an excellent opportunity for instructors to clarify the obligations and responsibilities of the members of the course “learning community.”

- Description/explanation of student and faculty responsibilities for contributing to a successful learning climate.
- Other policies regarding expectations—including consequences for behaviors such as academic dishonesty, uncivil, or disruptive behavior.
- Description of procedures and policies for addressing student or instructor concerns.

Access to Syllabi

University policy requires that instructors provide students with access to the class syllabus at or before the first class meeting except when circumstances beyond the control of the instructor prevent this. All instructors must make available to their department the most recent version of each syllabus.

Departments must retain and make accessible the most recent version of each syllabus. Although no formal policy currently requires that syllabi be available electronically, departments, in meeting this requirement, may want to consider the benefits of making syllabi available online or as downloadable files. Although many syllabi are posted on course sites maintained by BlackBoard, the university's course management system, they are only accessible to enrolled students.

Ownership of Syllabus Content

SDSU's generous intellectual property policies grant ownership of syllabus content to instructors in most circumstances, providing the instructor can clearly establish authorship. However, SDSU requires that it retain for use by its employees and students a license to any syllabus authored by an SDSU employee and used as a syllabus for an SDSU course offering. This allows syllabi to perform their function as part of SDSU's institutional memory while not preventing instructors from using the syllabus at other institutions or in other settings. Instructors who have developed content beyond the basic content required by university policy for all syllabi and who want to protect that content from the licensing requirement should distribute it to students in another document such as a reader, workbook, or handbook.

Student Learning Outcomes

For more detailed information on learning outcomes, including tutorials on how to write outcome statements, see the SDSU Center for Teaching and Learning Web site at <http://go.sdsu.edu/dus/ctl/>

Nearly every accrediting agency in the United States now expects colleges and universities to use student learning outcome statements to clarify the educational purpose of programs and courses and to provide a basis for assessment and improvement. The ability of SDSU faculty and administrators to use learning outcome statements as a basis for planning instruction, measuring results, and devising improvement strategies will be critical to future accreditation success and resource allocations.

As early as 1990, the CSU Board of Trustees endorsed the use of learning outcomes as a cornerstone for academic planning. Later it adopted learning outcome statements to articulate broad, system-wide priorities for CSU graduates. For example:

- Integrate knowledge across discipline boundaries.
- Locate, analyze, and synthesize information.
- Make both qualitative and quantitative assessments.
- Appreciate and value cultures other than one's own.

SDSU policy requires that all course syllabi and course proposals include statements of expected student learning outcomes.

Although policies do not dictate specific numbers of outcome statements, 5-10 outcomes, carefully aligned with the major course purposes and themes, are often enough to communicate essential expectations.

What are Learning Outcome Statements?

Student learning outcome statements succinctly describe student capacities – observable and measurable manifestations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes—attained as a result of some learning process or educational experience. The simplest format for outcome statements consists of an action verb and a noun phrase:

- Classify vertebrate specimens.
- Employ metaphors in rhetorical arguments.
- Explain convective effects.
- Predict returns on invested capital.
- Choose to participate in civic affairs.

Learning outcome statements express intentions for learning and describe how students can demonstrate what they have learned. In this sense, they describe some of the ways learning will empower or enable students. Thus, learning outcomes provide a foundation for communicating (and in some cases negotiating) with students about academic responsibilities.

At a collegial and programmatic level, learning outcome statements can help faculty and administrators understand and plan the structure of the curriculum, estimate student and instructor work loads, communicate with SDSU stakeholders, and market degree and certificate programs.

Learning outcomes seem strange to some faculty, perhaps because traditional approaches to academic learning often emphasize transmission of topical information (“covering the content”) with little regard for explicit student competencies. It is therefore unsurprising that, in their first attempts at writing outcomes, faculty often merely amend conventional topical expressions with very general verbs such as “know,” “understand,” “demonstrate knowledge,” and “appreciate.” These are essentially placeholders for more considered and precise action verbs.

For brief guidance composing student learning outcomes, reference http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~acserv/files/Action_Verbs_Developing_Objectives.pdf

Student Learning Outcomes

Place holder verbs	More precise action verbs		
Know the policies.	<i>Identify</i> the policies	<i>Analyze</i> policies	<i>Apply</i> policies to new circumstances.
Understand the margin of error.	<i>Define</i> "margin of error."	<i>Predict</i> the effect on the margin of error.	<i>Compute</i> the margin of error.
Demonstrate knowledge of catalysis.	<i>Describe</i> examples of catalysis.	<i>Explicate</i> catalytic effects.	<i>Predict</i> catalytic effects.
Appreciate mid-century 20th century jazz composition.	<i>Analyze</i> thematic development.	<i>Recognize</i> innovative technique.	<i>Choose</i> to attend jazz performances.

Syllabi often contain seeds of intention that can be developed into more concrete descriptions of expected learning outcomes.

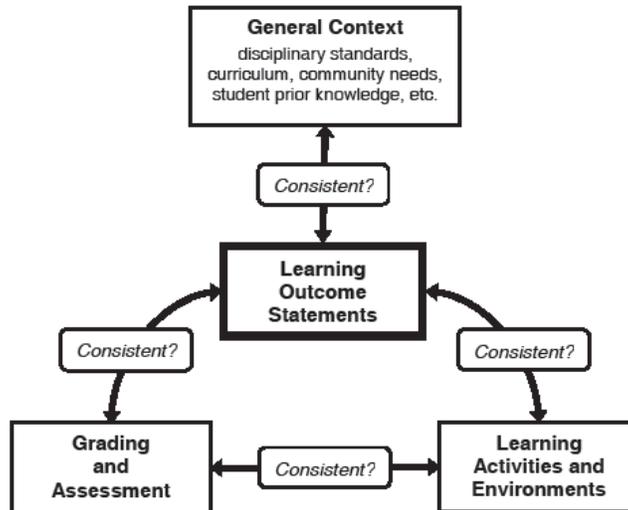
Syllabus Excerpts

Broad Statements of Abstract Intent	Possible Learning Outcome Statements
Students should have a thorough understanding of the statistical margin of error.	You should be able to describe and explain how the margin of error changes when standard deviation, population size, or confidence interval are altered.
We will explore the influence of traditional, modern, and post-modern perspectives on the role of religion in contemporary American spiritual life.	We will learn to compare and contrast the influence of traditional, modern, and post-modern perspectives on the role of religion in contemporary American spiritual life.
Discussion of political issues will encourage open exchanges and tolerance of other views.	During discussions about politics, students will be able to listen to other speakers well enough to: verbally summarize the other speakers' views, seek clarification from the original speaker, incorporate clarifications in a revised summary.

There is no final answer regarding what it means to "know the content" other than clarification through discussion and negotiation. Yet many students benefit from clarity of expectations and find clear outcome statements to be a useful guide to preparation, study, and engagement.

Outcome Statements as a Foundation for Student Grading and Program Assessment

Learning outcome statements serve as anchors for grading individual student performance as well as for measuring the overall effectiveness of courses and programs. As suggested in the diagram below, the underlying assumption in either case is that assessment instruments should be consistent with course or program learning outcome statements and learning activities and environments.



Examples of Consistency Between Outcomes and Assessments

Outcome Statement	Grading or Assessment Item	
	Inconsistent	Consistent
Identify the formula for the standard deviation.	Calculate the standard deviation.	Mark the formula for the standard deviation.
Predict effects of convection.	Define convection.	Use arrows to indicate air flow.
Critique pointillist compositions.	Match these impressionist paintings with the appropriate artist.	Outline the artist's presumed intentions and the likely effects on viewers of this painting.
Analyze environmental policy.	List the major causes of environmental degradation in the Coastal Redwood Forests.	Which of these is not a direct implication of the policy except on mitigation?

Student Learning Outcomes

Assessment of Individual Student Performance for Grading. Instructors can promote understanding of grading and assessment by reviewing learning outcome statements with students in conjunction with discussion of exams and assignments and by using outcome statements as a basis for designing exam questions and rubrics for evaluating assignments. Consistency between learning outcome statements and grading methods/policies reduces confusion about grading which is, according to the Office of the University Ombudsman, the most frequent source of student complaints and grievances.

Aligning grading methods with learning outcome statements also provides a framework for diagnosing individual student learning problems by allowing instructors or programs to target specific competencies for improvement. Some departments maintain individual student records of outcomes attained to ensure that students meet minimum competency requirements.

Assessment of Courses and Program Effectiveness. Measuring the effectiveness of courses and academic programs involves many questions about learning outcomes that transcend mere summation of student grades. Does a course promote lifelong learning? Will a program meet professional standards or employer expectations? Does it prepare students for civic engagement or appreciation of diverse cultural expressions?

These questions clearly go beyond what can be measured within the boundaries of course requirements or grades, but that does not mean such questions cannot be measured periodically as a basis for improvement or adjustment of courses or academic programs. When the purpose of such assessment is primarily improvement of SDSU courses and programs, methods of data collection and analysis need not be as comprehensive or rigorous as might be required for generalizable research studies.

Using Outcome Statements to Guide Assessment

Outcome	Examples of Possible Assessment Strategies (occasional or periodic)
Promote lifelong learning.	Randomized survey of students following graduation to estimate the extent they continue to learn on their own through reading or self-study.
Meet performance standards in a profession or occupation.	Focus groups with selected employers. Student performance on standardized tests.
Engage in civic affairs and appreciate diverse cultural expressions	Telephone interviews with students regarding volunteer community work, voting activity, participation in cultural events.

Instructional Quality and Continuous Improvement

SDSU has entered an era in which, more than ever, it must adjust educational programs and courses to changing realities: rapid expansion of human knowledge, changing demographics and cultural values, new global problems and opportunities, increased demands for cost-effectiveness and innovative technologies for learning and knowledge management.

Major accreditation standards and stakeholder expectations will increasingly challenge the university to employ systems of continuous assessment to replace older periodic or occasional data collection conducted primarily in response to pending academic reviews. Yet ultimately, as suggested by the diagram below, course and program assessment have little value unless faculty and program administrators employ assessment data to drive decisions about how to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

