Student Learning Outcomes

Assessing student learning outcomes is a critical faculty undertaking and the focus of this month’s supplement. Assessing learning outcomes is of great interest to faculty; a cursory search of Cumulative Index of Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL®) using the keywords “issues associated with assessing student learning outcomes” yielded 12,729 results! Moreover, the focus on assessing student learning outcomes is not limited to faculty efforts in the United States. For example, colleagues in Kuwait (Al-Kandari, Vidal, & Thomas, 2009), Sweden (Ulfvarson & Oxelmark, 2012), England (Price, 2012), and Canada (Thompson, Mallet-Boucher, McCloskey, Tamlyn, & Wilson, 2013) have reported on a variety of student learning outcomes.

Efforts to assess the influence of various course or pragmatic strategies on individual prelicensure or graduate student outcomes, as well as program outcomes, are addressed in one of the following formats in this issue: Research Briefs, Educational Innovation Briefs, or Syllabus Selections. Several investigators report on professional outcomes following specific interventions. For example, how to enhance professional development is addressed in two articles; in one of these, student confidence in speaking up for patient safety is examined after a senior practicum and leadership course. In another article, the authors report on the influence of a service–learning activity on student development. The effect of changing from a traditional curriculum to one that is concept-based is evaluated relative to program and student outcomes.

These faculty efforts become even more meaningful when placed within the context of a recent report by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014). Findings from this report are relevant for nursing faculty teaching at all levels of student preparation as they call for ongoing faculty involvement in the assessment of student learning outcomes. The following provides a brief snapshot of their findings, drawn from 1,202 institutions representing the range of U.S. academic programs:

- Being explicit about student learning outcomes is the norm in American higher education.
- Regional and discipline-specific accrediting agencies, such as Middle States or the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) and the Accreditation Commission for Education in Nursing (ACEN), are still the major drivers of assessment.
- The range of tools and measures to assess student learning has expanded significantly. Rubrics are used extensively in undergraduate programs.
- Campuses increasingly consider use of assessment evidence for internal use far more important than external use.
- Faculty are the key to moving assessment work forward. (Kuh et al., 2014, pp. 3-4)

There are five major implications resulting from the work of Kuh et al. (2014). One of the most important is that of continued faculty involvement assessing student learning outcomes to not only increase institutional effectiveness but also enhance faculty teaching and student learning. Thus, faculty need to be active participants not only in the collection of data but also in improvement efforts that are derived from the analysis of these data.

For nursing faculty, accreditation agencies help provide direction. However, involvement is more than simply participating in the preparation of a school or program’s self-study. Faculty need to be more involved “in meaningful ways in collecting student learning outcomes data and using the results” (Kuh et al., 2014, p. 34) as an integral part of the teaching–learning enterprise. Kuh et al. (2014) call for increased efforts to align assessment data (e.g., papers and tests) with course, program, and institutional outcomes.

Institutional efforts must be sustained, particularly in light of leadership turnover. Certainly, this point has particular relevance for nursing faculty, given the acknowledged aging of current faculty. Program, school, and institutional assessment efforts must be valued by all members of the academic community—faculty, students, and administrators. In addition, assessment efforts should be rewarded and valued as part of promotion and tenure decisions.

Assessment efforts need to be meaningful and useful so they can be used to improve learning and teaching. Not only is it important to capture learning that occurs in classrooms, laboratories, and clinical settings, but Kuh et al. (2014) also suggest that other professionals with whom students interact should be invited to share their perspectives on what assessment data should be assessed and how these data should be interpreted.

What does this mean for nursing faculty? The articles in this supplement
represent one step toward addressing some of the implications resulting from the work of Kuh et al. (2014). However, nurse educators continue to be challenged to determine which student outcomes are most appropriate to assess, as well as how best to assess these outcomes. Although more than willing to accept the challenge, nurse educators must become active, consistent participants in the assessment process. In addition, selecting outcomes that document student impact on patient care presents an opportunity for nurse educators to demonstrate student and program worth to key external constituencies. Ongoing efforts to align course, level, program, and institutional student outcomes will enhance assessment activities contributing to evidence-based improvement in teaching and learning.

References

Karen H. Morin, PhD, RN, ANEF, FAAN
Associate Editor

Janis P. Bellack, PhD, RN, FAAN
Editor

The authors have disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise. doi:10.3928/01484834-20150217-10