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Higher education often uses grades and feedback from class evaluations as their main comparison when assessing student learning. Relying on grades and evaluations may not accurately reflect how students learn and grow. Many students struggle with traditional testing methods but thrive in a real-world setting and excel in a hands-on environment, especially those with learning disabilities. My daughter has learning disabilities, and she works best in a real-life situation and collaborative group settings. Her downfall in many classes is when it is a test-based course. Focusing on grades ignores many aspects of the student's development, such as practical skills and personal growth outside the classroom. As we look at accreditation requirements like those from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), evaluating whether our current assessment method captures the extent of student learning becomes essential. This paper reviews the limitations of using grades and course evaluations as the primary source of learning and support. It explores alternatives that better align with HLC's Core Component 4.B, focusing on student growth and practical learning applications.

When student evaluations and learning assessments are based on grades, the focus is on testing, often measuring the student's ability to memorize rather than real-world applications, critical thinking, and problem-solving. My experience with a college student who has ADHD and Dyslexia has shown me that she excels at thinking outside the box and coming up with creative solutions to problems but struggles with memorization. Grades are looking at academics and not personal growth. Personal skills such as creativity, communication, and teamwork usually come with out-of-classroom work. Students with test anxiety and learning differences may not perform as well on traditional tests, even if they understand the material. Class grades do not account for the student as a whole, which includes mental health and the ability to display their knowledge in real-life, non-testing environments.

To create a bigger picture of student learning, rubrics, and real-life skill assessments offer alternatives beyond grades, providing a broader view of student learning. These assessment tools show the development of people skills like leadership, communication, and critical thinking that often surface in collaborative and hands-on experiences. It is the outside-of-the-classroom sources that shape the student. Learning happens inside and outside the classroom (Berrett, 2014).

Bowman's article (2013) notes the importance of using your classroom skills in the real world. He references foreign language skills and their development mainly by speaking the language inside and outside the classroom and getting feedback and grades. However, this can be misleading when evaluating leadership skills because leadership is not measured with clear input and is not usually judged by grades. Bowman (2013) also talks about how self-reported data is not enough to show true learning, and this connects with how grades may not demonstrate what the student has learned.

Northern Arizona University's approach to assessment encourages students to participate in out-of-the-classroom programs. Student organizations, internships, and campus employment are experiences that promote teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills, not entirely represented by grades alone (Butcher et al., 2009). NAU's Enrollment Management and Student Affairs (EMSA) departments use rubrics to ensure their programs match the university's learning goals. They have an annual assessment fair that brings faculty, staff, and students together, highlighting how assessment improves student learning outcomes and evaluates campus services (Butcher et al., 2009).

Assessment is Like a Box of Chocolates, Maxfield (2010) states the importance of flexibility in assessment models. NAU allows departments to be flexible in their assessment process to meet

specific needs while maintaining high standards. Midwestern University has a similar approach in allowing flexibility in assessing student learning in a dental clinic setting. MWU provides a more comprehensive evaluation of student readiness for private practice by adapting assessments and measuring their hands-on and real-world skills like patient interaction and professionalism. The analogy of packaging something like a box of chocolates points out how assessments are communicated and put into action, which is just as important as the results. NAU's assessment process focuses on practical skills to develop well-rounded students who are prepared for the world's challenges (Maxfield, 2010).

A comprehensive assessment approach is essential in addressing the gaps left by grades and course evaluations. Provezis (2010) emphasizes that practical assessment requires collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals to capture learning outside academic settings. My daughter, who is a student-athlete with learning disabilities, has faced many challenges in college, especially with traditional testing. She has developed many lessons through athletics, which include confidence, leadership, teamwork, and discipline. It is the experiences that created these strengths and skills from outside the classroom and are not reflected in her grades but are essential for her overall personal and professional growth. This demonstrates the importance of assessing all the areas of student development, especially for those students who do not excel in the classroom. Provezis (2010) also stresses the importance of ongoing data collection and reporting as part of an institution's assessment process.

Addressing these gaps is done through rubrics that assess student performance by setting clear and predefined standards that the students must meet. Rhodes (2010) highlights that rubrics help assess academic knowledge and evaluate broader skills such as leadership, communication, and teamwork, often cultivated through student organizations and internships. Schuh & Gansemer-

Topf (2010) also point out that student affairs professionals provide a unique assessment perspective because they understand student character, services, and learning outside the classroom, which adds valuable insights. Essential life skills are developed when students are involved in co-curricular activities such as athletics and student organizations. As the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA, 2010) notes, institutions must assess curricular outcomes, quality limitations, and student learning experiences to meet accreditation requirements and demonstrate improvement over time. Regular program reviews are essential to prove that the assessments remain practical and relevant. Bers (2011) highlights the role and importance of program reviews in evaluating the success of core education and extracurricular programs, permitting data-driven improvements to recognize the positives and negatives of these programs.

An additional idea for the institution to address Core Component 4.B is to recognize and assess athletic participation and the learning outcome from athletics. Student-athletes develop many life skills through their sports. They learn resilience, strategic and critical thinking, and dedication. These experiences teach them how to lead, work with a team, and face challenges head-on with the determination it takes to overcome life setbacks. This is important for students' overall development and many times goes unnoticed in traditional academic evaluations or assessments. By adding structured assessments to include athletic participation, NAU could better understand student-athlete development. Student athlete assessments, whether it is NCAA or club sports, could track growth in leadership, collaboration, and problem-solving, which aligns with accreditation standards, providing the bigger picture of students' learning beyond the classroom. This shows that NAU values athletics as a broader part of the education experience and is committed to co-curricular learning.

In addition to the athletic assessment, NAU could add questions such as: What practical skills that can be used in real life did you learn through this course? How did this course contribute to your personal and professional growth? They capture a better overview of what students are learning and are in line with NAU's goals and accreditation requirements.

The commitment to assessing learning outcomes in and out of the classroom is important for NAU, the institution, and student success. Including structured assessments like rubrics, performance-based evaluations, and assessments for co-curricular activities provides a clearer view of students' learning. The institution will benefit and will give students a more holistic view of learning. The article A Scale for Success discusses that tracking leadership, teamwork, and communication is crucial for understanding a student's readiness for world challenges. Levy et al. (2012). By implementing comprehensive assessment strategies, NAU will meet accreditation standards and ensure its students are prepared for academic and personal growth in the future.

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