

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education and The IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System



Insight.Improvement.Impact.®

In the document *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education*, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (Commission) emphasizes using the assessment of student learning outcomes as a foundation for the accreditation process. A clear alignment exists between The IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System (IDEA) and a number of the accreditation standards.

From its inception in 1975, IDEA has served as a valuable tool to assess student learning and to guide teaching improvement. IDEA uses self-report of student learning on specific course objectives as its primary measure of teaching effectiveness. Therefore, data collected from the system is uniquely suited to aggregate across courses to indicate student learning at the course, curriculum, program, and institution levels.

While originally developed to focus on the effectiveness of individual instructors, IDEA's emphasis on specific student learning outcomes makes it a highly useful tool for assessing programs or groups of courses as well. When combining data across courses, the focus of the question is changed from "How am I doing and what might I do to improve?" to "How are we doing in supporting student learning and what might we do to improve?"

IDEA and Student Learning

Every institution must tailor an accreditation plan to suit its culture, climate, and situation. The Commission does not prescribe the plan, but rather attempts to ensure quality and stimulate improvement by helping the institution through a self-study process.

This self-study process is guided by a set of 14 standards detailed in *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* (Twelfth Edition, Online Version-March 2009, Middle States Commission on Higher Education). These standards establish a level of accountability an institution must meet for accreditation. IDEA is well-suited to help institutions establish this level of accountability through reporting and reflection on individual, programmatic, and institutional progress.

IDEA is not prescriptive, but rather is intended to facilitate analysis and innovative thinking about how results can be used to support improvement processes as well as be

an indirect source of evidence to document institutional excellence.

Unique Features of IDEA

IDEA is uniquely appropriate to address the Commission's standards that focus on the assessment of student learning outcomes. It allows an institution to easily use results for programmatic assessment and accreditation purposes with a number of exclusive features:

Focus on Student Learning

The student learning model, that *specific teaching methods influence certain types of student progress (learning), under certain circumstances*, was used as the foundation for the IDEA student survey.

The core of IDEA is the focus on student ratings of progress on specific objectives. Research has shown there is no single, correct way to teach. As a result, IDEA tailors each report to address the instructor's selected learning objectives and offers recommendations for improvement based on our extensive national database of comparable instructional situations.

Faculty Establishment of Course Objectives

The IDEA Faculty Information Form allows faculty to rate the importance of 12 learning objectives as "essential," "important," or "of minor or no importance." Because the purpose of each course is different, IDEA allows instructors the opportunity to define their expectations for each course by identifying which of the 12 possible learning objectives are relevant (important or essential) to their courses. The process of selecting course objectives is often collaborative, with faculty as a group taking ownership of curricular goals by reviewing each course's purposes as they contribute to a coherent curriculum.

The IDEA Faculty Information Form is frequently used not only to facilitate individual reflection, but also to spark conversation across a department about student learning expectations, institutional goals, and how individual courses contribute to student achievement. Factors related to teaching methods, learning environments, learning outcomes, and student characteristics that impact learning are all considered from a faculty perspective.

Comparative Data

The accreditation process is often helped by access to useful benchmarking data. With more than 160,000 classes processed annually, IDEA provides solid national benchmark data for individual instructors, programs, departments, and institutions. While the confidentiality of individual institutions' results is strictly maintained, IDEA's database of information about similar groups of classes is a vital tool for comparative decision making.

Group Summary Reports and Aggregate Data Files

While student feedback can directly guide the personal reflection and improvement of individuals, the richness of the aggregated data is also a powerful information source. It can guide systematic assessment and improvement of academic programs. By better understanding the relationship of teaching methods to learning outcomes, targeted improvement processes can be pursued. Because of the richness of the survey items and the typically high survey response rates, IDEA results can be used to address a number of standards.

Groups of courses (e.g., sections of one course, courses that comprise a program, institutional summaries) are analyzed for accreditation purposes. Group Summary Reports serve as a "snapshot" of institutional status. Ongoing use allows monitoring of progress over time.

Aggregate Data Files provide complete course results in an Excel spreadsheet, allowing institutions to conduct customized research on their own data. A campus may analyze results to address specific, unique institutional questions and prepare custom reports to respond to self-study for the Commission.

Institutional Use of Results

Systematic, regular monitoring of progress through the Group Summary Reports and Aggregate Data Files, combined with reflection and implementation of change as indicated, can result in measurable improvements in student learning. Institutions can align their use of IDEA with their particular program goals for student achievement, and can chart

improvements resulting from analysis of results, supporting faculty collaboration toward greater overall effectiveness.

The Middle States Commission's Standards and IDEA

To guide the self-study process, the Commission has provided a set of 14 standards for accreditation. What follows is a brief discussion of the relationship between IDEA's emphasis on student learning and specific standards that also address student learning outcomes.

Standard 7: Institutional Assessment

The institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals and its compliance with accreditation standards.

– Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education (Twelfth Edition, p. 25, Online Version-March 2009). Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

The purpose of this standard is to ensure that the institution is committed to continuous improvement through the use of ongoing self-evaluation that is based on evidence. There are many ways to address this standard and many systems and processes can and should be employed to demonstrate an institution is fulfilling its mission.

Because IDEA is typically administered systematically across courses, the aggregated results can be disseminated and reviewed by key constituents as part of the ongoing process. The ongoing use of IDEA Group Summary Reports and Aggregate Data Files to evaluate teaching effectiveness and student learning, and to facilitate improved teaching and learning, addresses Standard 7. Group Summary Reports allow identification of areas of excellence and challenge. For example, longitudinal data from IDEA can be used to identify where improvements are needed; where improvement has been achieved in areas of concern; and where expectations are being met related to student learning, overall effectiveness, use of teaching methods/strategies, and student attitudes.

Fulfilling the Mission: Howard Community College (Maryland)

At Howard Community College (HCC), winner of the 2007 U.S. Senate Productivity Award, assessment of outcomes is everyone's responsibility. College administration and faculty know that ongoing evaluation is a must in order to achieve the college mission of "providing pathways to success." As a result, there are metrics that guide the work of every unit on campus. Every semester, IDEA Student Ratings results are gathered for all new faculty and up to 50 percent of veteran faculty. The information is reviewed by faculty and their supervisors during their annual evaluation sessions. Workshops are offered to aid faculty in the interpretation of the results. Additionally, new full-time faculty examine their own data and work to improve any deficits before being released from a three-year probationary period. Academic Affairs staff review the division- and institutional-level results every year. The IDEA institutional data is also a key performance indicator for the HCC Board of Trustees within their core end: *Student and Stakeholder Focus*.

Integrated processes are the key to effective utilization of information. IDEA provides tools to facilitate personal, programmatic, and institutional reflection, and to guide discussions with colleagues or mentors. IDEA serves as a data reference point to involve constituencies and focus the initiatives of stakeholders. IDEA provides shared tools and a shared language to develop a shared vision for improvement. Through ongoing reflection, discussion, and the use of targeted resources to support improvement, IDEA can have an impact on individual, program, and institutional success.

Standard 10: Faculty

The institution's instructional, research, and service programs are devised, developed, monitored, and supported by qualified professionals. – Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education (Twelfth Edition, p. 37, Online Version-March 2009). Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

This standard addresses the need to have qualified faculty who are responsible for facilitating and guiding student learning. Fundamental elements of this standard include demonstrating excellence in teaching and professional growth. A description of the systematic implementation of IDEA can show a commitment to excellence in teaching, document faculty strengths, and guide organizational efforts to support teaching effectiveness.

IDEA answers two basic questions that faculty might ask concerning the effectiveness of their teaching at the conclusion of a course:

- How did I do?
- What might I do to improve?

With IDEA, teaching effectiveness is determined by the self-report of student progress on goals chosen by the instructor. Research based on our large national database also allows IDEA to provide diagnostic assistance for those with disappointing results. IDEA provides feedback and resources (e.g., IDEA Papers, POD-IDEA Notes on Instruction and Learning) for continuous personal and collaborative improvement. An institution's investment in the IDEA System demonstrates a commitment to faculty members' professional growth and improvement.

IDEA's Group Summary Report helps address questions and provide recommendations that might be raised by this standard:

- Which teaching methods might we employ more effectively to better support student learning?
- Do our courses' overall student progress ratings compare favorably to courses at other institutions?

Teaching Effectiveness: Wilmington University (Delaware)

Wilmington University (WU) is committed to the value and use of a comprehensive outcomes assessment program. Using data such as those from IDEA, WU established standards and benchmarks for its programs. With appropriate standards in place, the school reviews fresh data on a regular cycle to look for patterns and trends. WU also documents any actions taken as a result of the data analysis.

As part of its Self-Study Report for Middle States re-accreditation in 2005, WU measured teaching effectiveness by analyzing three years of IDEA results (from 2001 to 2003, when the institution was known as Wilmington College). The benchmarks that WU had set were scores at or above the IDEA national norm in:

- (1) Student-reported progress on objectives
- (2) Overall excellence of course
- (3) Excellence of faculty
- (4) Improved attitude toward subject

Although the university consistently met the benchmarks, the data informed WU of possible areas for improvement. These areas were included in the Self-Study Report, along with the following strategies to address them:

- Enhance the scope and content of syllabi to clarify priorities for courses
- Improve new faculty orientation at a time of rapid institutional growth
- Improve validity of IDEA results by more careful and consistent selection of essential/important objectives
- Review the IDEA course codes used in analysis and correct any errors
- Following the opening of a new graduate center, monitor IDEA results to determine the impact of additional classroom space

WU not only identified areas for improvement and strategies to address them, but implemented each and every strategy.

Demonstrating Teaching Excellence: The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

Faculty at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey administer IDEA surveys to their students in every class, for every term. Such a comprehensive approach to Student Ratings of Instruction — combined with faculty members' individual professional development plans and colleague observations — provides consistent, reliable feedback to faculty members on how well their pedagogical goals align with the students' ratings of experiencing those same goals. Faculty and deans meet to review IDEA reports throughout the personnel cycle, and faculty members assemble tenure and promotion dossiers that include reflections on their IDEA results.

Educational Effectiveness Standards

The Commission states that the following standards are linked through their common focus on addressing the question "Are students learning what we want them to learn?" Underlying these Educational Effectiveness standards is the importance of creating a culture of assessment.

Standard 11: Educational Offerings

The institution's educational offerings display academic content, rigor, and coherence that are appropriate to its higher education mission. The institution identifies student learning goals and objectives, including knowledge and skills, for its educational offerings.

– Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education (Twelfth Edition, p. 40, Online Version-March 2009). Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Standard 12: General Education

The institution's curricula are designed so that students acquire and demonstrate college-level proficiency in general education and essential skills, including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, and technological competency. – Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education (Twelfth Edition, p. 47, Online Version-March 2009). Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Standard 13: Related Educational Activities

The institution's programs or activities that are characterized by particular content, focus, location, mode of delivery, or sponsorship meet appropriate standards. – Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education (Twelfth Edition, p. 51, Online Version-March 2009). Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning

Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution's students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals. – Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education (Twelfth Edition, p. 63, Online Version-March 2009). Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

IDEA can be used along with other sources of information to identify key issues relevant to student learning. IDEA provides input from the students' perspectives about their course experiences. This feedback can expand upon or confirm results from other key indicators collected by the institution.

Primary to creating a culture of assessment is the identification of expected learning outcomes. Although IDEA is used to evaluate faculty effectiveness and guide individual reflection and improvement, the results also can be used in an aggregate fashion to evaluate learning at the program level. The 12 IDEA learning objectives are likely to align with many of the specific student learning outcomes of educational programs.

Consistent with the Educational Effectiveness standards, IDEA requires that essential and important course objectives be identified through the completion of the Faculty Information Form for each course. In the IDEA System, objectives selected for courses in a program are typically determined by either the individual faculty member teaching the course, or by a committee of faculty members responsible for the curriculum. Many campuses have found that the process of selecting IDEA goals is highly useful in meeting expectations of these standards.

IDEA can facilitate inquiry into student learning achievements and challenges. This inquiry may identify several specific course objectives as needing improvement and may confirm important decisions when IDEA results align with other sources of evidence.

- Are our course emphases consistent with our stated curricular purposes?
- When a learning objective is selected as "essential" or "important," does student self-report of learning meet our expectations?
- Do our courses' overall student progress ratings compare favorably to courses at other institutions?

In order to identify strategies to strengthen learning outcomes, it is important to consider and evaluate learning environments, pedagogies, and services that are in place to support student learning.

Bridging Learning Outcomes: Gloucester County College (New Jersey)

Gloucester County College utilizes the IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System to assess student self-reported progress on learning at the course level. The project provided a unique opportunity to expand the use of the tool to bridge (connect) assessment of course learning goals to institutional competency goals and program learning goals.

Bridging course-level goals to institutional competency goals was easily accomplished, as Gloucester faculty had previously identified the institutional competency goals addressed in each course. A crosswalk between each institutional competency goal and the IDEA System's learning objectives defines the methodology for assessing the student's self-reported proficiency levels. Preliminary research on the relationship between students' self-reported proficiency levels and faculty's direct measures at the course level indicate that the two follow a surprisingly similar pattern. Specifically, students are reporting little progress in areas that faculty have also identified as being weak. This two-pronged analysis provides faculty with a valuable tool to help prioritize learning outcomes assessment efforts.

To facilitate assessment of program learning goals using course-level data, each academic program is currently developing a program "learning map." The learning map clearly illustrates the interconnectedness between the program's curriculum (course) goals, program goals and institutional competency goals. Once completed, crosswalks between program learning goals and the IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System will be developed.

Through IDEA, both faculty and students reflect on a number of learning environment factors. For example, faculty members document the mode of delivery, the impact of student characteristics on learning, and other circumstances as well. Based on student feedback, IDEA also provides potential improvement strategies by identifying teaching methods that may improve student learning on specific objectives if they were to be employed more frequently.

- How do our students' work habits and motivation compare to those of students at other institutions?
- How do students perceive work demands and difficulty of the course?
- Which primary and secondary instructional modes do instructors employ?
- Which teaching methods do instructors utilize effectively?
- What are faculty perceptions of the impact of various circumstances on learning?

The IDEA Center also has products that measure the effectiveness of key administrators. These products can be used as part of an ongoing improvement process. Please visit www.theideacenter.org for more information.

The IDEA Student Ratings of Instruction System is unique in that it serves numerous purposes, providing formative and summative feedback at both the individual and program levels. Conducting surveys is a time-consuming process, and achieving high response rates has become increasingly difficult. IDEA eliminates the need to conduct additional surveys. And, since student ratings surveys typically yield high response rates, the data obtained are more representative and reliable than other surveys. IDEA is a cost-effective solution to serving your multiple information needs, supporting improvement processes as well as documenting institutional excellence.

T: 800.255.2757

T: 785.320.2400

F: 785.320.2424

E: info@theideacenter.org
www.theideacenter.org

©2009 The IDEA Center
Manhattan, Kansas