

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### Learning Assessment vs Program Evaluation

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We appreciated Janke and colleagues' review of high- and low-impact programmatic evaluation activities.<sup>1</sup> This review seemed very helpful except for the authors' broad and problematic use of the term *assessment*. Early in their article they gave a well-meaning definition of assessment practice as "a process, procedural sequence or system that accomplishes a specific goal related to curricular or programmatic improvement, utilizes specific strategies, tool and techniques, and is implemented and repeated with intention and discipline."<sup>1</sup> This explicit definition was beneficial but also showed that their broad use of the term *assessment* was actually focused on *program evaluation*. Within this narrower focus, their message remains valuable. However, aside from their useful article,<sup>1</sup> it appears that pharmacy academia should add a qualifier before using the term assessment in future articles (eg, *learning assessment*, *programmatic assessment*) to facilitate communication.

Learning assessments from students are different from programmatic or curricular evaluation. While education disciplines (including medical education) use assessment to mean assessments of students' learning, it seems that many in American pharmacy education, as well as those in other areas of institutional assessment at American universities, use assessment to refer to program evaluation. This misuse of the term assessment for program evaluation seems unfortunate. There are textbooks<sup>2</sup> and internet-based resources<sup>3</sup> on program evaluation. It would seem to be advantageous for pharmacy education to use the same terms that other fields use. Notably and as further evidence of this, the Assessment Special Interest Group (SIG) for the Association of Faculties of Pharmacy of Canada (the Canadian equivalent of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy) define assessment as "evaluation of persons' performance (eg, students)" and program evaluation as "evaluation of programmes' performance."<sup>4,5</sup> In 2015, their Assessment SIG split into one SIG focused on Programmatic Assessment (Program Evaluation SIG) and another SIG focused on Learning Assessment (Educational Assessment SIG).<sup>6</sup>

Communication is foundational to building science. However, communication among disciplines will be more challenging if their meaning for terms such as assessment are dissimilar. Along with miscommunication among interdisciplinary colleagues, this also leads to a disjointed academic literature. For instance, a search for *program evaluation* produces a rich return of many current and seminal articles from many fields. Meanwhile, a search for *assessment* will produce a more-limited return of program evaluation articles from some fields, along with many articles from other disciplines focused on learning assessment. Because of this misuse of the word, the addition of a qualifier to assessment could foster improved communication among varied audiences, including when speaking with someone outside of American pharmacy education or even internationally within the discipline, such as with Canadian colleagues.

In the future, it would be helpful for communication if "assessment" in the *Journal* was not used so indiscriminately. Furthermore, in health professions education where "assessing" can also have a clinical connotation, authors would do well to be more specific rather than using the generic *assessment* term that can be easily misconstrued. Miscommunication can cause us to inadvertently misidentify, miscomprehend, and/or under-appreciate one another's perspectives. And no one intends to do that.

#### REFERENCES

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