

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### Response to Peeters and Schmude: Toward More Clarity in the Use of the Terms Assessment and Program Evaluation

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We appreciate the comments from Peeters and Schmude<sup>1</sup> regarding: the difficulties in using the terms *assessment* and *program evaluation*, and the utility of using qualifiers prior to the term assessment (eg, student learning outcomes assessment, institutional effectiveness assessment<sup>2</sup>) as a means of clarification.

Pharmacy education has a history of using programmatic assessment in reference to program-level data collection, data interpretation, and quality improvement efforts. Learning assessment also pervades our discussions as educators. However, these terms are often both communicated in general discussion as simply “assessment.” The work of our Canadian colleagues in differentiating between and supporting both assessment and program evaluation is inspiring and a model that we in the United States should examine further.

Outside of pharmacy, this terminology is also problematic. Universities may have an “office of institutional research” or an “office of institutional assessment,” when the work is largely evaluative. Assessment conference sessions include various forms of assessment and evaluation with few qualifiers in titles and descriptions. National organizations produce reports that advocate for change, often simultaneously, in both learning assessment and program evaluation without making clear distinctions or acknowledging when shifting from one to another. As practitioners in this space, we are regularly confronted by a lack of specificity, conflated terms, or inappropriate uses. In addition, we are often moving relatively seamlessly between these purposes and functions as we go about our daily work in assessment. The Association of Assessment of Learning in Higher Education recognizes this duality in its mission statement and acknowledges assessment practices as fostering and improving both student learning and institutional quality.<sup>3</sup>

Although the use of this terminology is muddy and the problems with use are pervasive, pharmacy educators can chart a path forward. To aid clarity, we can provide definitions. We can examine definitions for points of disparity or divergence from established norms and acknowledge

also when agreement is not present. When terms become clunky, inaccessible or potentially create confusion for our audience, we can provide context within our writing to help bolster those definitions and terms. We can also recognize the various facets of our work and the disciplines that contribute to them. In particular in pharmacy education, we can continue to educate ourselves on the evaluation sciences and their value in program evaluation.

Assessment practices encompass all of the assessments and tools we use to perform the process of evaluation. As assessment practitioners, our goal was to promote the use of effective, high-impact assessment practices and tools to improve student learning in our programs.<sup>4</sup>

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## REFERENCES

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