Sample Size

A common question is whether program/department faculty must assess every section of a course. The short answer is “no.” Outcomes assessment is to provide meaningful and manageable information to help faculty discuss student learning at the course level, not to meet cold statistical requirements. A program/department’s faculty may decide to include assessment data from all sections. However, this may not be necessary due to the amount of sections offered and resource constraints.

A random sample of course sections may be used. This is when from the total number of sections offered in a particular semester a predetermined set number of sections will be used for assessment. For example, from 10 sections a sample of four (4) is determined. Give each section a number from 1 to 10 and pick them out of a hat. Assessment data from those four course sections will be used for analysis. This is a randomly decided sample of course sections.

More effective might be a representative sample of course sections, which means as representative of that course’s enrolled student population as possible. Several considerations should be discussed and agreed upon about the basis of the characteristics of this sample so that it will provide information as to what the program/department faculty is trying to learn about the course. These considerations may encompass: sections offered at different times throughout the day (e.g. morning-afternoon-evening, or day students from evening students); the number of days the sections meet (those that meet more than once a week from once a week only course offerings); sections taught by full-time faculty from part-time faculty (initially the program may wish to begin with only full-time faculty but eventually involve all faculty); how the sections are taught (e.g. traditional face-to-face, self-paced lab format, at a distance—online or hybrid).

Now how often a course SLO assessment is required must be determined. This decision should be made by the program/department faculty and included on the outcomes assessment plan. To obtain meaningful data, the point of this process, determine if the same course should be assessed over more than one semester. Do you think that there is a difference between the students seen in the regular semesters versus the students seen in the summer or winter intersession? Do you think there is a difference between the students seen in the fall semester and the ones seen in the spring semester? If so, then assessing for more than one semester might be worthwhile.
Now the assessment activity for this course will be conducted according to the stated parameters. Once this is accomplished then the results will be collected, aggregated and analyzed, and then actions will be taken, based on this evidence to make improvements for student learning in the course.