

**Evaluating the Student Outcomes Assessment Plan:
Some Criteria and Questions for Discussion**

**A Resource Packet from the
UNI Office of Academic Assessment**

Fall 2007

To: UNI Deans, Department Heads, and Faculty Members

Date: October 15, 2007

How do we begin to develop a student outcomes assessment plan? How do we go about improving an existing plan? How will reviewers for the Academic Program Review at UNI evaluate student outcomes assessment plans? What will the Higher Learning Commission reviewers expect when they make their next re-accreditation visit to campus?

These are questions that faculty members, department heads and deans might ask as they consider assessment processes at UNI. The purpose of this packet of materials is to provide information that can answer some of these questions.

You will see some repetition in the ideas presented across the pages of this packet. Allowing such repetition has been a conscious decision in the construction of this collection of materials. What is worded and presented one way might make no sense to one reader and be perfectly logical and helpful to another.

There are many more resources that could have been included here and questions about assessment that are not addressed in these pages. For more resources or assistance, please visit the web page for the UNI Office of Academic Assessment (<http://www.uni.edu/assessment>) or call the Office of Academic Assessment at 273-2778 to set up an individual visit.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this resource and to working with you.

Sincerely,

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Director of Academic Assessment

WHAT IS ASSESSMENT?

The Higher Learning Commission defines assessment of student learning as a “participative, iterative process” that does the following:

- Provides data/information you need on your students' learning
- Engages you and others in analyzing and using this data/information to confirm and improve teaching and learning
- Produces evidence that students are learning the outcomes you intended
- Guides you in making educational and institutional improvements
- Evaluates whether changes made improve/impact student learning, and documents the learning and your efforts.

[From “Student Learning, Assessment and Accreditation: Criteria and Contexts”, presented at *Making a Difference in Student Learning: Assessment as a Core Strategy*, a workshop from the Higher Learning Commission, July 26-28, 2006.]

WHY DO ASSESSMENT?

Why do assessment? One could say we do it for the legislature, the Higher Learning Commission, U.S. Education Secretary Spellings, administrators, and any others from a list of those whose primary interests and responsibilities lie outside of the classroom. Another way to answer the question, though, offers the argument that we do assessment because it serves our students, our program, our university, our discipline. Peggy Maki, well-known writer and consultant in the field of higher education puts it this way:

Assessing for learning is a systematic and systemic process of inquiry into what and how well students learn over the progression of their studies and is driven by intellectual curiosity about the efficacy of collective educational practices. That professional context anchors assessment as a core institutional process guided by questions about how well students learn what we expect them to learn--based on pedagogy; the design of curricula, co-curricula, and instruction; and other educational opportunities. Through examining students' work, texts, performances, research, responses, and behaviors across the continuum of their learning, we gain knowledge about the efficacy of our work. . . .

This collective inquiry among faculty, staff, administrators, and students seeks evidence of students' abilities to integrate, apply, and transfer learning, as well as to construct their own meaning [Assessment] is a process of ascertaining how well students achieve higher education's complex expectations through the multiple experiences and avenues inside and outside of the classroom. This process that is embedded in our professional commitment to develop undergraduate and graduate students' knowledge, understanding, abilities, habits of mind, ways of thinking, knowing, and behaving then becomes the collective responsibility of all educators in our higher-education institutions. It brings constituencies together from across a campus or across a program, as well as external constituencies who contribute to our students' education through internships, practica, and community based projects. . . .

Educators are by nature curious: they observe and analyze from multiple perspectives. Learning more about how well students translate our intentions into their own work extends that curiosity into the profession of teaching. What we learn promotes programmatic and institutional self-reflection about our practices. This self-reflection, in turn, stimulates innovations, reform, modification, revisions, or rethinking of educational practices to improve or strengthen student learning.

[From page xvii of the preface to *Assessing for Learning: Building a Sustainable Commitment Across the Institution* by Peggy Maki. Sterling, VA: American Association for Higher Education, 2004]

WHAT DO HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION REVIEWERS EXPECT FROM ASSESSMENT PLANS?

The statement below is taken from *Evaluating the Organization's Efforts to Assess and Improve Student Learning*, a statement from the Higher Learning Commission. **Boldface print was added to the original for emphasis.**



Using the framework of the Criteria and Core Components, peer reviewers will evaluate an organization's efforts to assess and improve student learning within the context of the mission, values, and distinct learning goals of that organization. **Therefore, peer reviewers will not approach the review with expectations for specific ways in which assessment efforts are structured and implemented, since it is both inevitable and desirable that diverse organizations exhibit a wide variety of approaches and embed assessment of student learning in a variety of institutional forms and processes.** Rather, peer reviewers will approach their roles as generalists, focused on evaluating the evidence that the organization meets the Criteria and Core Components.

To remain focused on student learning and assessment within the context and design of the organization, **peer reviewers will use the fundamental questions as prompts to engage faculty, students, and administrators in conversations** about the organization's (a) **sustained effort** to assess and improve student learning, (b) **evidence** that students have achieved the stated learning outcomes, (c) **shared responsibility** for assessing student learning outcomes, and (d) **commitment to improving** student learning and educational quality. These conversations will assist peer reviewers in understanding the organization's efforts and commitment to assessment of student learning, in discerning areas for consultation and organizational improvement, and in identifying and validating evidence related to the Criteria and Core Components. Most importantly, peer reviewers will base their accreditation-related judgments and recommendations on this evidence as it relates to the Criteria and their Core Components, not as the evidence relates to the fundamental questions.

Finally, the Commission realizes that assessment of student learning is an ongoing, dynamic process that requires substantial time; that is often marked by fits and starts; and that takes long-term commitment and leadership. It is reasonable for organizations to use different approaches and timetables in implementing its assessment of student learning efforts. Nevertheless, **the Commission expects that each organization has developed assessment processes that are workable, has implemented a reasonable schedule for collecting and using assessment results, and can demonstrate a sustained effort to affirm and improve student learning, educational quality, and organizational effectiveness.**

[Retrieved from <http://www.ncahlc.org/download/AssessStuLrngApril.pdf>, October 11, 2007]

THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS: FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

Where do you begin the process of assessing student learning? It is helpful to start with the fundamental questions for evaluation outlined by the Higher Learning Commission in their statement “Student Learning, Assessment, And Accreditation” (retrieved from <http://www.ncahlc.org/download/AssessStuLrngApril.pdf>, September 26, 2007). The five questions are listed below, each with some questions for discussions and conversations listed below each in italics. The order of the five questions suggests a general order for processes of developing or improving an outcomes assessment plan, with each question indicating a step that can most effectively be taken if the proceeding question has been addressed thoughtfully and completely.

1. How are your stated learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs, students and degrees?

Do we have clearly stated, updated, agreed-upon statements of the learning outcomes intended by your program? Is there a relationship between the learning outcomes and the mission/goals of the department, the college, the university? Do the learning outcomes connect with course syllabi and with course assignments and activities? Are statements of learning outcomes available to faculty, staff, current and prospective students, alumni, and others who have interest in our programs?

2. How do you ensure shared responsibility for student learning & assessment of student learning?

Do we have clearly stated processes for assessment? Having clear processes involves deciding what will be done and when, who will do what, and how assessment data—whether quantitative or qualitative—will be collected and stored. Also involved here is the notion that student learning and the assessment of learning outcomes need to be collaborative activities that involve in some fashion all of those that are affected by program—including faculty outside of the group or committee charged with developing and/or reporting on department assessment activities and including as well, students, program graduates, and employers of graduates.

3. What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?

Does our plan include a mix of direct and indirect measures of student learning? Do the measures of student learning clearly relate to our stated learning outcomes? Do we have plans for reporting and archiving the evidence that we have collected?

4. In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of student learning?

Do we have benchmarks for performance? Clearly stated processes for evaluating student performance, whether information on performance is collected through tests, written or oral projects, portfolios or other means? Specific procedures for selecting and preparing reviewers of student performance artifacts? Do we have clear and systematic strategies for reviewing data and for discussing and determining possible implications of the data for decision making and action? Do we record and archive curricular, course level or other changes implemented as a result of assessment data?

5. How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your efforts to assess and improve student learning?

Do we have a systematic process for reviewing and revising student learning outcome statements to make sure that they continue to reflect program goals over time? Do we have departmental organizational structures to determine whether our assessment methods are producing the information we need for program improvements?

Discussing questions such as these in assessment committee meetings, department meetings and retreats, and Academic Program Review planning groups will help tie the broad concept of assessment to specific program area issues and needs and identify potential action steps for moving the assessment plan forward.

WHAT DOES THE UNI ACADEMIC PROGRAM REVIEW REQUIRE IN STUDENT OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PLANS?

The information below comes from Appendix N of the UNI *Academic Program Review Manual*. While the appendix below was taken from the 2007-2008 version of the manual, the topic areas below were outlined in the 1991 assessment policy statement and included in previous manuals.

Self-Study Criteria for Student Outcomes Assessment

The SOA Plan and the SOA section of the self-study report are reviewed by members of the Committee on Academic Program Review. Criteria used by the CAPR are listed below.

SOA Plan (Appendix K UNI SOA Policy)

- **Assessment philosophy and program goals:** consistent with strategic plan goals, program specific
- **Student outcomes and competencies:** includes skills and knowledge, capable of being measured, specific to program
- **Frequency of assessments:** identified for each assessment, reasonable frequency, appropriate timing with respect to program sequence and targeted group
- **Assessment methods:** precise, identifiable, clearly described, appropriate measure(s) for outcome/group, source of assessment method or how it was developed, details of administration--to whom, by whom, when, how
- **Methods of evaluating and interpreting results:** who will evaluate and interpret, how—including descriptors of evaluation criteria, minimum expectations, preparation of raters/evaluators

Self-Study Report on Student Outcomes Assessment (Appendix C Organizational Format for a Self-Study Report, Section V)

- Routine procedures for measuring student outcomes, as defined in the program's SOA Plan
- Summary of important findings from assessing student outcomes. Describe how these findings are shared with program faculty, students, and other interested parties. Describe specific changes made in the program as a result of information derived from student outcomes assessment findings.
- Recommendations for improvement in SOA processes.

A CHECKLIST FOR REVIEWING STUDENT OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PLANS

The checklist below may be of use to departments and assessment committees as they review and plan for work on their student outcomes assessment plans.

SOA Plan (Appendix K UNI SOA Policy)	Ready for use	Details needed	Not included
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment philosophy and program goals: <i>consistent with strategic plan goals, program specific</i> 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student outcomes and competencies: <i>includes skills and knowledge, capable of being measured, specific to program</i> 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency of assessments: <i>identified for each assessment, reasonable frequency, appropriate timing with respect to program sequence and targeted group</i> 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment methods: <i>precise, identifiable, clearly described, appropriate measure(s) for outcome/group, source of assessment method or how it was developed, details of administration--to whom, by whom, when, how</i> 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Methods of evaluating and interpreting results: <i>who will evaluate and interpret, how—including descriptors of evaluation criteria, minimum expectations, preparation of raters/evaluators</i> 			
<p>Self-Study Report on Student Outcomes Assessment (Organizational Format for a Self-Study Report, Section V) <i>This section of the APR Manual suggests further areas for SOA evaluation.</i></p>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine procedures for measuring student outcomes, as defined in the program’s SOA Plan (R1) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Are plans being implemented as proposed?</i> 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summary of important findings from assessing student outcomes. Describe how these findings are shared with program faculty, students, and other interested parties. Describe specific changes made in the program as a result of information derived from student outcomes assessment findings. (R2) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>How are findings reported and shared?</i> ○ <i>How are findings archived?</i> ○ <i>How are findings connected to program changes?</i> ○ <i>How are changes reported and archived?</i> 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendations for improvement in SOA processes. (R3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>How is the assessment plan evaluated?</i> ○ <i>How are changes to the assessment plan reported and archived?</i> 			
<p>Thoughts/comments:</p>			

AN ASSESSMENT METHODS CHECKLIST

Areas of Student Achievement Measured	✓
• Discipline-related content knowledge	
• Higher-order skills (critical thinking, problem-solving)	
• Writing proficiency	
• Personal and affective development (values, attitudes, social development, etc.)	
• Other:	
Direct Methods	✓
• Institutionally-developed pre-test	
• Institutionally-developed post-test	
• Commercial instrument or test:	
• Licensure or certification exams	
• Course embedded questions	
• Major project	
• Electronic or printed student portfolios	
• Observations of student performance	
• Video or audio tapes student performance	
• Other:	
Indirect Methods	✓
• Job placement of program graduates	
• Internship evaluations	
• Graduate school acceptance of program graduates	
• GRE, GMAT, MCAT or other admissions test scores	
• Exit interviews	
• Student program retention	
• Student graduation rates	
• Student program evaluations	
• Student satisfaction surveys	
• Focus group discussions	
• Alumni surveys	
• Alumni interviews or focus groups	
• Employer surveys	
• Employer interviews or focus groups	
• Other:	

ON USING ASSESSMENT INFORMATION AND CLOSING THE LOOP

The excerpts below were excerpted from assessment resources available from Western Washington University and the University of West Florida. They are included here because they provide a variety of questions to stimulate conversations and suggest starting points for action on information gained from assessment activities.

From *Tools & Techniques for Program Improvement; Handbook for Program Review & Assessment of Student Learning*, Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Testing, Western Washington University, September 2006. Retrieved September 17, 2007, from http://www.wvu.edu/depts/assess/prog_handbook.pdf

From page 106:

[Consider] the extent to which your findings can help you answer the following questions.

- What do the data say about your students' mastery of subject matter, of research skills, or of writing and speaking?
- What do the data say about your students' preparation for taking the next step in their careers?
- Are there areas where your students are outstanding? Are they consistently weak in some respects?
- Are graduates of your program getting good jobs, accepted into reputable graduate schools, reporting satisfaction with their undergraduate education?
- Do you see indications in student performance that point to weakness in any particular skills, such as research, writing, or critical thinking skills?
- Do you see areas where performance is okay, but not outstanding, and where you would like to see a higher level of performance?

These are compelling and central questions for faculty, administrators, students, and external audiences alike. If your assessment information can shed light on these issues, the value of your efforts will become all the more apparent.

From Appendix, Assessment Reporting:

Evaluating the Process

- Did you have a positive or negative experience implementing your assessment methods?
- What were students' reactions to the assessment process?
- What did you find especially effective in the assessment process?
- What did you particularly dislike about the process?
- What would you change about the process? Why?
- What will you do again? Why?
- What do the results suggest for program review at WWU?

From the University of West Florida Center for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, *Tip Sheet #21*, "Creating a Sustainable and Meaningful Process of Assessment." Retrieved September 17, 2007, from <http://www.uwf.edu/cutla/SLO/Tip21.pdf>.

What should faculty focus on when discussing assessment data?

The specific measures created for assessment purposes are useful only insofar as they provide faculty with information about strengths and weaknesses in student learning, each of which provides valuable information for the development of quality educational programs.

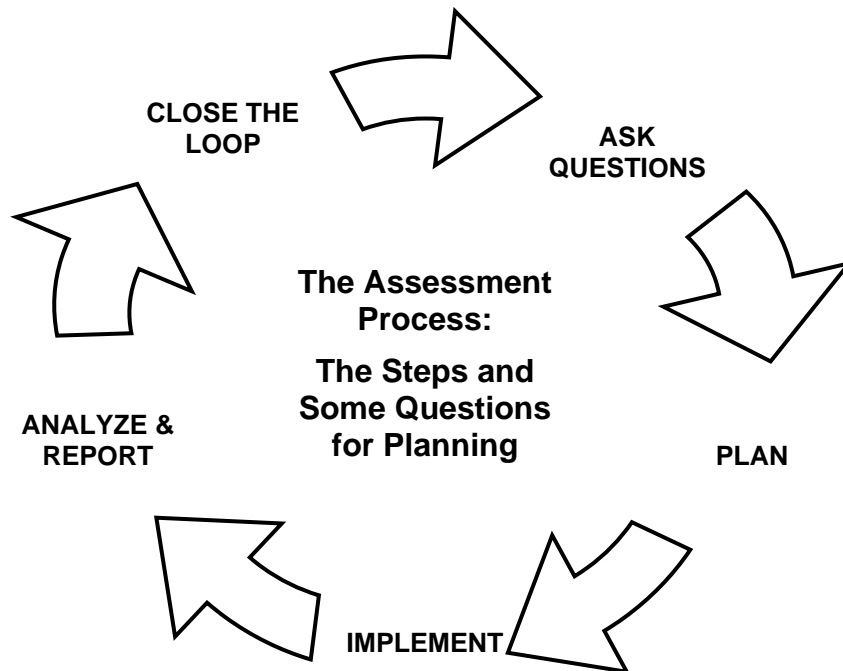
How will an analysis of strengths and weaknesses improve educational programs?

1. **Analysis of strengths: What are students doing well?** Identify the features of your program in which students excel. This information can be valuable for marketing and recruitment of students to your program. Identification of strengths will also help faculty identify assignments and activities that produce high quality learning. These assignments and activities need to be protected and preserved. You do not want to accidentally lose some of your best teaching strategies in the heat of a course or program restructuring. Evidence that supports the effectiveness of a course, a class project, or other teaching strategy keeps us focused on which aspects of a program we need to keep.
2. **Analysis of weaknesses: Where are students struggling or encountering difficulties?** Knowing about the areas where students encounter problems can help departments think about interventions that might address these problem areas. What might be done to help students be more successful? Would implementation of a peer tutoring program help students acquire the skills they need? Would a change in advising practices prevent students from floundering because they took a course out of sequence, before they gained the foundation skills developed in a different course? Might a different teaching strategy produce a higher success rate among students in this skill? The analysis of weaknesses might suggest interventions such as providing additional support for student learning, revising the curriculum, or adopting new teaching strategies that might improve student learning. Assessments conducted after changes are introduced will inform faculty of the success of these modifications.

What questions might be raised during a discussion of assessment evidence?

The list below identifies some of the questions posed and decisions a department might make based on the interpretation and discussion of assessment data:

- How might student learning improve if a new class were developed to address a specific issue or set of skills?
- Would students be more successful if prerequisite courses were established so that students would complete courses in which skills are introduced before enrolling in more advanced courses?
- Should student learning outcomes for a program be modified? Has the focus of the discipline changed recently, suggesting the need for additional or different learning outcomes?
- Might student learning improve if instructors adopted a different teaching strategy or if students completed different types of assignments?
- Do the current assessment methods provide useful information? Was the quality of information provided by this year's assessments disappointing? Would a different approach to collecting assessment data provide more useful information?



Ask questions

- Who is involved in assessment?
- Who is responsible and how?
- How are discussions organized?
- How are ideas captured?
- What do we know?
- What do we want to know?
- What do we need to know?
- Why are we asking?

Create a plan

- Who makes final decisions on the plan?
- How is the plan communicated?
- Where is the plan kept?
- How is access to the plan gained?

Implement the plan

- Are the mechanics of the plan clear?
- Who does what when and where?
- Who oversees implementation?
- What preparatory steps are needed?
- How are data collected & stored?

Analyze and report

- How/where are the data stored?
- Who gets what data in what form?
- Who analyzes the data?
- Are the data what was expected?
- If not, what might be reasons?
- How can successes be shared?

Close the loop

The plan

- Was it doable?
- Was it implemented as planned?
- Was the timing right?
- What changes would you make?

Data

- How did the data collection tools work?
- Was data analysis effective?
- How useful was the data?
- What else would you like to know?

Program decisions

- What might explain student successes?
- Why might student achievement vary from the expected or desired?
- What resources might students need to succeed?
- What changes could be made in learning outcomes? Courses? Assignments? Curriculum?

Systems

- How are changes introduced and implemented?
- How are changes documented?
- Are reports working?
- Are documentation, storage and retrieval processes working?
- Are lines of communication and collaborative processes working?

SOME TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED OR MOVING AHEAD

- Don't try to do everything at once.
- Think about what most needs to be done AND what is doable and most meaningful at the present time.
- Consider what data on students and student learning you already have, as well as places within the program curriculum where course assignments could double as assessment activities.
- Share the load—e.g., consider creating ad hoc committees, involving volunteers, using a portion of department meeting times for small tasks.
- Make use of available data and information where possible.
- Identify a starting point—then start!
- Create a plan of action, with who will do what by when.
- If you get off track and off your timeline, get back on.
- Make use of resources and models—you don't have to do this alone.
- Give yourself credit for what you have accomplished at each step along the way, and recognize the work of colleagues that further assessment activities and program improvement within your program area.