

**DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
STUDENT OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PLAN**

**Master of Arts Degree
Geography Major**

(revised August 1997)

I. Departmental Philosophy of Student Outcomes Assessment

The student outcome assessment (SOA) plan for the M.A. degree in Geography is intended to evaluate the learning progress made by students as they complete the program. Through this assessment, we hope to gather information which will help the faculty enhance student learning and future program development.

For this end, there are three interrelated goals for this assessment:

1. to ensure that our students attain an advanced degree of mastery in one or more subfields of the discipline in order to develop their capabilities of applying their geographic understanding to decision making and problem solving;
2. to ensure that our students attain a firm grasp upon the basic skills and tools needed to undertake geographic research;
3. to determine the effects the program has on subsequent performance of graduates in the workplace or further graduate studies.

Both the thesis and non-thesis tracks of the M.A. program have a common set of core courses. There are more elective hours within the non-thesis track as well as a research paper requirement. The mastery of the subject matter and technical aspects of a subdiscipline are of prime importance for the non-thesis plan. The level of research required in the thesis track is much more extensive culminating in the thesis itself. Despite these differences in emphasis, the outcomes and competencies involved are the same for both tracks. For non-thesis students, outcomes 1 and 2 have greater meaning than outcome 3, whereas the opposite is true for thesis-track students.

We have selected an advisor evaluation and alumni survey methodology to accomplish the goals of this assessment. The Graduate Studies Committee will serve as the department's M.A. Student Outcomes Assessment Committee for purposes of implementing and reporting SOA activities.

II. Outcomes and Competencies:

Outcome 1: Students shall possess a mastery of one or more subdisciplines of geography.

- Competency 1.1 Possess an advanced knowledge of the material within one or more of the subdisciplines of geography.
- Competency 1.2 Demonstrate the ability to apply his/her geographic training in subsequent studies or careers.

Outcome 2: Students shall be knowledgeable about the tools and methods necessary to conduct geographic inquiry.

- Competency 2.1 Be able to effectively use maps, graphs and other appropriate visual aids to display geographic information.
- Competency 2.2 Be familiar with the major qualitative and quantitative methods of geographic inquiry appropriate to his/her subdisciplinary interests.
- Competency 2.3 Be able to effectively use computer technology appropriate to his/her subdisciplinary interests.

Outcome 3: Students shall have the ability to conduct original research dealing with a relevant geographic problem.

- Competency 3.1 Be able to understand research design, develop and formulate a formal research problem or question, and carry out the necessary bibliographic research.
- Competency 3.2 Be able to structure, plan and carry out the appropriate methodology for a research project.
- Competency 3.3 Be able to analyze data, and logically interpret and report the findings for a research project.

Outcome 4: Students shall possess the capability to communicate orally and in written form according to the standards of the discipline.

- Competency 4.1 Be able to make oral presentations to a group of peers which successfully communicates a coherent message reflective of the geographic perspective.

- Competency 4.2 Be able to create a written composition (research paper for non-thesis track students; thesis for thesis-track students) in conformity with discipline standards for scholarly research and common standards of expression for the English language.

III. Frequency of Assessment:

Geography's M.A. students typically consist of a mixture of part-time and full-time students. Full-time graduate students are expected to complete their programs in a two-year time period. Given the potentially short time frame for students to be in the program, the SOA procedure is designed to provide information about students for the following times:

- (i) *entry*,
- (ii) *exit*,
- (iii) *post-graduation*.

IV. Methods of Assessment:

Two assessment methods will be utilized within Geography's M.A. SOA plan. The first will provide information for the (i) entry and (ii) exit evaluations, while the second involves the (iii) post-graduation time period. All students within the M.A. program will be included in the assessment procedure. When the alumni survey is conducted, an attempt will be made to contact all past M.A. graduates.

Advisor Evaluations: The advisor for each geography M.A. student will complete an advisor's evaluation form upon the student's completion of the program (see Appendix 1). These forms will be routinely filed by the department secretary.

In addition to the routine collection of these evaluation forms for graduating students, the Graduate Studies Committee will (in consultation with the student's advisor, if possible) periodically examine the records of students who have resigned from the program or who have not completed the degree in a timely fashion. This will be undertaken using the appropriate portions of the same evaluation form used by advisors for the graduating students (Appendix 1), in preparation for the tri-annual SOA report (see section V below). Thus, both successful graduating students and others who do not complete the program will be included in the evaluation procedure.

Alumni survey: Alumni surveys will be conducted every five years using an appropriate questionnaire (see Appendix 2 for the 1997 survey instrument). An attempt will be made to contact *all* geography alumni irrespective of graduation date. Appropriate portions of the alumni survey will be incorporated into the M.A. SOA report.

The relevant portion of these procedures for assessment of each outcome and competency is summarized in the table presented in Appendix 3.

V. Analysis, Interpretation and Reporting of Results:

During the 1990s, there have only been 1 or 2 students graduate per year. Although the number of resident students in the M.A. has grown considerably during the late 1990s, the sample of graduating students will likely remain small (less than half a dozen per year). Therefore, the geography M.A. SOA Committee will conduct a formal assessment of the program once every three years. This analysis will involve an evaluation of all graduating student advisor evaluation forms from the preceding three years as well as the analysis of the records of non-graduating students (as outlined in section IV above). The first formal report will be scheduled for September 1999, with subsequent reports in 2002, 2005, etc.

The department conducts alumni surveys (for undergraduate and graduate students) every five years (1992, 1997, 2002, ...). If an alumni survey has been conducted since the last M.A. SOA report, the M.A. SOA Committee will summarize and incorporate these results into the procedure.

The M.A. SOA Committee will then prepare an evaluation of each outcome and competency on the basis of this information, resulting in an overall summary report of findings. This report will also contain recommendations for future action with respect to curriculum, advising and other programmatic matters, as well as a critique and suggestions for improvement of the SOA plan itself. The report will be submitted to the whole geography faculty for comment and revision prior to final submission to the university-level graduate program SOA Committee and appropriate administrators. The results from the SOA process will also be used as an integral part of future departmental program reviews (conducted every 7 years) and strategic planning.

Appendix 3

Assessment Methods Relevant for Specific Outcomes and Competencies

| <u>Outcome/ Competency</u> | <u>Advisor Evaluation Form</u> | <u>Alumni Questionnaire</u> |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1.1 | 1 | II:1 |
| 1.2 | | I:5, I:7, II:2, IV:1 |
| 2.1 | 2 | III:1 |
| 2.2 | 4 | II:6, III:2 |
| 2.3 | 3 | III:3, III:4 |
| 3.1 | 5 | |
| 3.2 | 6 | |
| 3.3 | 7 | |
| 4.1 | 9 | |
| 4.2 | 8 | |