

Assessment of Student Learning

Assessment of student learning demonstrates that, at graduation, or other appropriate points, the institution's students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional and appropriate higher education goals.

Context

Assessment of student learning may be characterized as the third element of a four-step teaching-learning-assessment cycle:

1. Developing clearly articulated written statements, expressed in observable terms, of key learning outcomes: the knowledge, skills, and competencies that students are expected to exhibit upon successful completion of a course, academic program, co-curricular program, general education requirement, or other specific set of experiences, as discussed under Standard 11 (Educational Offerings);
2. Designing courses, programs, and experiences that provide intentional opportunities for students to achieve those learning outcomes, again as discussed under Standard 11;
3. Assessing student achievement of those key learning outcomes; and
4. Using the results of those assessments to improve teaching and learning.

This standard on assessment of student learning builds upon Standards 11 (Educational Offerings), 12 (General Education), and 13 (Related Educational Offerings), each of which includes assessment of student learning among its fundamental elements. This standard ties together those assessments into an integrated whole to answer the question, "Are our students learning what we want them to learn?" Self-studies can thus document compliance with Standard 14 by summarizing the assessments of Standards 11 through 13 into conclusions about overall achievement of the institution's key student learning outcomes.

Because student learning is at the heart of the mission of most institutions of higher education, the assessment of student learning is an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness (see Standard 7: Institutional Assessment), which additionally monitors the environment provided for teaching and learning and the achievement of other aspects of the institution's mission, vision, and strategic goals and plans.

The fundamental question asked in the accreditation process is, “Is the institution fulfilling its mission and achieving its goals?” This is precisely the question that assessment is designed to answer, making assessment essential to the accreditation process. Assessment processes help to ensure the following:

- Institutional and program-level goals are clear to the public, students, faculty, and staff;
- Institutional programs and resources are organized and coordinated to achieve institutional and program-level goals;
- The institution is providing academic opportunities of quality;
- The institution is indeed achieving its mission and goals; and
- Assessment results help the institution to improve student learning and otherwise advance the institution.

Assessment is not an event but a process that is an integral part of the life of the institution, and an institution should be able to provide evidence that the assessment of student learning outcomes and use of results is an ongoing institutional activity. While some of the impact of an institution on its students may not be easily or immediately measured – some institutions, for example, aim for students to develop lifelong habits that may not be fully developed for many years – the overall assessment of student learning is expected whatever the nature of the institution, its mission, the types of programs it offers, or the manner in which its educational programs are delivered and student learning facilitated.

While the Commission expects institutions to assess student learning, it does not prescribe a specific approach or methodology. The institution is responsible for determining its expected learning outcomes and strategies for achieving them at each level (institutional, program, and course), assessment approaches and methodologies, sequence, and time frame. These may vary, based on the mission, goals, organization, and resources of the institution. Whatever the approach, effective assessment processes are useful, cost-effective, reasonably accurate and truthful, carefully planned, and organized, systematic, and sustained.

Useful assessment processes help faculty and staff make appropriate decisions about improving programs and services, developing goals and plans, and making resource allocations. To assist with interpretation and use of assessment results, assessment measures and indicators have defined minimally acceptable performance targets. Because institutions, their students, and their environments are continually evolving, effective assessments cannot be static; they must be reviewed periodically and adapted in order to remain useful.

Cost-effective assessment processes are designed so that their value is in proportion to the time and resources devoted to them. To this end, institutions can begin by considering assessment measures already in place, including direct evidence such as capstone projects, field experience evaluations, and performance on licensure examinations and indirect evidence such as retention and graduation rates and alumni surveys. New or refined measures can then be added for those learning outcomes for which direct evidence of student learning is not already available, concentrating on

the most important institutional and program-level learning outcomes. Effective assessments are simple rather than elaborate and may focus on just a few key goals in each program, unit, and curriculum.

Reasonably-accurate and truthful assessment processes yield results that can be used with confidence to make appropriate decisions. Such assessment processes have the following characteristics:

- ✧ Because there is no one perfectly accurate assessment tool or strategy, institutions should use multiple kinds of measures to assess goal achievement. Assessments may be quantitative and/or qualitative and developed locally or by an external organization.
- ✧ Assessment tools and strategies should be developed with care; they should not be not merely anecdotal information nor collections of information that happen to be on hand.
- ✧ Student learning assessment processes should yield direct—clear, visible, and convincing—evidence of student learning. Tangible examples of student learning, such as completed tests, assignments, projects, portfolios, licensure examinations, and field experience evaluations, are direct evidence of student learning. Indirect evidence, including retention, graduation, and placement rates and surveys of students and alumni, can be vital to understanding the teaching-learning process and student success (or lack thereof), but such information alone is insufficient evidence of student learning unless accompanied by direct evidence. Grades alone are indirect evidence, as a skeptic might claim that high grades are solely the result of lax standards. But the assignments and evaluations that form the basis for grades can be direct evidence if they are accompanied by clear evaluation criteria that have a demonstrable relationship to key learning goals.

Planned assessment processes that clearly and purposefully correspond to learning outcomes that they are intended to assess promote attention to those goals and ensure that disappointing outcomes are appropriately addressed.

Organized, systematized, and sustained assessment processes are ongoing, not once-and-done. There should be clear interrelationships among institutional goals, program- and unit-level goals, and course-level goals. Assessments should clearly relate to important goals, and improvements should clearly stem from assessment results.

As noted earlier, because student learning is a fundamental component of the mission of most institutions of higher education, the assessment of student learning is an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness. An institution may therefore create institutional effectiveness documentation that includes a component on assessing student learning (see Standard 14: Assessment of Student Learning), or it may create a bridge between two separate sets of documentation, one for the assessment of student learning and one for other aspects of institutional effectiveness.

The improvement of overall educational quality and the enhancement of effective teaching and learning is most likely to occur when faculty and administrators work together to implement a sound, institution-wide program of assessment. Because the faculty guide decisions about curriculum and pedagogy, the effective assessment of student learning is similarly guided by the faculty and supported by the administration.

A commitment to assessment of student learning requires a parallel commitment to ensuring its use. Assessment information, derived in a manner appropriate to the institution and its desired academic outcomes, should be available to and used by those who develop and carry out strategies that will improve teaching and learning.

Assessment results should also be used to evaluate the assessment process itself, leading to modifications that improve its relevance and effectiveness.

Fundamental Elements of Assessment of Student Learning

An accredited institution is expected to possess or demonstrate the following attributes or activities.

- clearly articulated statements of expected student learning outcomes (see Standard 11: Educational Offerings), at all levels (institution, degree/program, course) and for all programs that aim to foster student learning and development, that are:
 - appropriately integrated with one another;
 - consonant with the institution's mission; and
 - consonant with the standards of higher education and of the relevant disciplines;
- a documented, organized, and sustained assessment process to evaluate and improve student learning that meets the following criteria:
 - systematic, sustained, and thorough use of multiple qualitative and/or quantitative measures that:
 - maximize the use of existing data and information;
 - clearly and purposefully relate to the goals they are assessing;
 - are of sufficient quality that results can be used with confidence to inform decisions; and
 - include direct evidence of student learning;
 - support and collaboration of faculty and administration in assessing student learning and responding to assessment results;
 - clear, realistic guidelines and timetable, supported by appropriate investment of institutional resources;
 - sufficient simplicity, practicality, detail, and ownership to be sustainable; and

- periodic evaluation of the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of the institution's student learning assessment processes;
- assessment results that provide sufficient, convincing evidence that students are achieving key institutional and program learning outcomes;
- evidence that student learning assessment information is shared and discussed with appropriate constituents and is used to improve teaching and learning; and
- documented use of student learning assessment information as part of institutional assessment.

Institutions and evaluators must consider the totality that is created by the fundamental elements and any other relevant institutional information or analysis. Fundamental elements and contextual statements should not be applied separately as checklists. Where an institution does not possess or demonstrate evidence of a particular Fundamental Element, the institution may demonstrate through alternative information and analysis that it meets the standard.

Optional Analysis and Evidence

In addition to the evidence inherent within or necessary to document the fundamental elements above, the following, although not required, may facilitate the institution's own analysis relative to this accreditation standard:

- analysis of institutional support for student learning assessment efforts, including:
 - written statements of expectations for student learning assessment work;
 - policies and governance structures to support student learning assessment;
 - administrative, technical, and financial support for student learning assessment activities and for implementing changes resulting from assessment; and
 - professional development opportunities and resources for faculty to learn how to assess student learning, how to improve their curricula, and how to improve their teaching;
- analysis of the clarity and appropriateness of standards for determining whether key learning outcomes have been achieved;
- evidence of workable, regularized, collaborative institutional processes and protocols for ensuring the dissemination, analysis, discussion, and use of assessment results among all relevant constituents within a reasonable schedule;

- analysis of the use of student learning assessment findings to:
 - assist students in improving their learning;
 - improve pedagogies, curricula and instructional activities;
 - review and revise academic programs and support services;
 - plan, conduct, and support professional development activities;
 - assist in planning and budgeting for the provision of academic programs and services;
 - support other institutional assessment efforts (see Standard 7: Institutional Assessment) and decisions about strategic goals, plans, and resource allocation; and
 - inform appropriate constituents about the institution and its programs;
- analysis of evidence that improvements in teaching, curricula, and support made in response to assessment results have had the desired effect in improving teaching, learning, and the success of other activities;
- analysis of the institutional culture for assessing student learning, including:
 - the views of faculty and institutional leaders on assessment;
 - faculty members' understanding of their roles in assessing student learning;
 - the quality and usefulness of institutional support for student learning assessment efforts;
 - campus-wide efforts to encourage, recognize, and value efforts to assess student learning and to improve curricula and teaching;
 - evidence of collaboration in the development of statements of expected student learning and assessment strategies;
- evidence that information appropriate to the review of student retention, persistence, and attrition, is used to reflect whether these are consistent with student and institutional expectations [also included in Standard 8 Optional Analyses];
- evidence of the utilization of attrition information to ascertain characteristics of students who withdraw prior to attaining their educational objectives and, as appropriate, implementation of strategies to improve retention [also included under Optional Analyses in Standard 8];
- analysis of teaching evaluations, including identification of good practices; or
- analysis of course, department or school reports on classroom assessment practices and their outcomes, including grading approaches and consistency.