

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES WITHIN ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AT WEST CHESTER UNIVERSITY

*“The assessment of student learning begins with educational values. Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement.”**

West Chester University is committed to providing the very best educational experiences and highest-quality programs possible for its students. In order to ensure that students are gaining the skills, knowledge, and abilities needed for personal and professional success now and in the future, West Chester University routinely engages in evaluation and assessment of course-level, program-level, and institution-level (or general education) learning outcomes. Faculty members are responsible for creating, conducting, and reporting this assessment. Student coursework, including but not limited to, exams, papers, written assignments, and presentations may be retained for the purpose of student learning assessment and improvement. In addition, students may be asked to directly participate in other assessment activities such as standardized tests, focus groups, surveys, questionnaires, and interviews.

Policy

Student learning outcomes assessment is the process that we, as educators, use to answer some very basic questions including “Are we accomplishing our mission?” and “Are our students learning what we think they are learning?”. It is the systematic evaluation of the knowledge, skills, behaviors, and dispositions that we expect our students to achieve as a result of their active participation in our academic programs. Good assessment practice requires that we think carefully about what knowledge and skills we want our students to acquire in our programs (i.e., we develop student learning outcomes). Then, we think carefully about the ways that students can provide evidence (i.e., empirically demonstrate) that they have acquired that knowledge and those skills (i.e., we utilize appropriate measures of those student learning outcomes). Finally, we carefully examine that evidence, look for strengths and weaknesses in our individual courses and program curricula, and make recommendations and plans for changes at the appropriate levels in order to improve students’ learning.

Assessment of student learning outcomes occurs at multiple levels across the university (course, program, and institution). “Students learn specific content and skills in each course. In aggregate, those courses, together with other program experiences such as academic advising, internships, and faculty-directed research by students, should result in the desired student outcomes at the program level. Similarly, goals at the program level combine with general education goals, extra- and co-curricular goals to create institutional goals. In other words, goals at the institution, program, and course levels are interconnected, complimentary, and reciprocal.” (MSCHE, 2007, p. 11)

Brief Summary of Assessment Process & Key Terms:

- Academic units (defined as individual departments and/or programs) are responsible for developing student learning outcomes, for delineating an assessment process, and for submitting assessment results/reports. [Academic Unit is not to be confused with the Professional Education Unit].
- Assessment results/reports are to be submitted to the appropriate dean’s office via the TracDat Assessment Tracking software (not to be confused with the TracDat Periodic Updates software in which department chairpersons report department achievements and activities related to department goals that are not, necessarily, student learning based) **by December 5** of each academic year. Review of annual assessment results and action plans is to be completed by each college dean’s office by **December 19** of each academic year. Thus, Academic Affairs offices can expect to have access to the most up-to-date student learning assessment data by this date each academic year for purposes of report building as needed.

*Taken from American Association for Higher Education’s “Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning”, 1992.

- Reporting groups (defined as individuals or committees) are responsible for implementing and overseeing the assessment process for individual programs and/or departments. They are responsible for collecting and organizing the assessment data and reporting that data to academic units. Some academic departments (each one an academic unit) contain multiple academic programs. In some cases, those departments might have multiple individuals serving as assessment coordinators, each of whom would represent a reporting group. In other cases, departments (with one or more academic programs) may have a department-wide assessment committee (perhaps chaired by one or more assessment coordinators) who work together to ensure the proper implementation of the student learning outcomes assessment process for all programs within that department.

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What Should be Assessed?

Student learning outcomes assessment must be conducted regularly for all undergraduate and graduate degree programs, minors without a major, certification programs, and certificate programs. In addition, student learning outcomes assessment must be conducted for the West Chester University General Education program. Assessment of the General Education program necessitates the involvement of academic units and/or reporting groups who are responsible for submitting course artifacts to the General Education Committee of the Curriculum and Academic Policies Council (CAPC) upon request. Academic units are also responsible for submitting student learning outcomes assessment data for individual general education courses to the WCU Program Review officer upon request. All new academic programs (undergraduate, graduate, certification, and certificate) that are submitted for approval to the university-wide Curriculum and Academic Policies Council (CAPC) must include a plan for assessment of the student learning outcomes that are specifically designed for the new program. And, where possible, assessment results should be used in the development of rationales for new course proposals within programs and for revisions to existing programs.

What Should an Assessment Plan Look Like?

A student learning assessment plan will contain the following core components: student learning outcomes, assessment methods, criteria for success, results, action plans, and use of results to improve student learning.

Student Learning Outcomes: Student Learning Outcomes should be stated in student-centered terms. They should be clear, observable, and measurable. They should articulate what students should be able to do, achieve, demonstrate, and/or know upon completion of their degree or program(s). Student learning outcomes should relate to the university-wide general education goals, designed to provide students with the knowledge, perspectives, and skills necessary for them to be successful citizens of the state and of the world. While academic units are not required to specifically include university-wide general education goals in their list of programmatic student learning outcomes, programmatic student learning outcomes should be linked (directly via the TracDat software) to the WCU General Education Goals, Middle States Competencies and, where appropriate, college and university strategic goals. Moreover, academic units should be able to clearly identify places within the curriculum where students encounter and are expected to achieve each outcome (i.e. they should have a curriculum map).

Assessment Methods: There is no perfect assessment instrument. Capturing the complexity of student learning requires identifying multiple methods of assessment (a minimum of 2 for each outcome) that incorporate direct (tests, exams, presentations, papers etc.) and indirect (i.e. student/teacher satisfaction surveys) measures. Indirect methods do not measure learning but rather inform the process. For this reason, they should not be used in isolation.

To be manageable and sustainable, assessments that are embedded in existing student work are preferable (i.e. course embedded assessment) to add-on assignments. Where assessments beyond curricular or co-curricular requirements are appropriate, steps must then be taken to maximize student participation and encourage their best efforts.

Assessment methods must contain sufficient information to provide justification regarding the data collection procedures. For example, if a program utilizes a rubric for assessment purposes the specific sections of that rubric that will be used to demonstrate student learning of the outcome must be identified. In other words, if the rubric is used to assess multiple student learning outcomes (or may potentially be used to measure more than any single outcome), then the specific section(s) of the rubric used to measure each student learning outcome must be identified. The same concept applies to examinations. How the exam results are interpreted to get a better picture of student learning as it relates to content should be made clear.

Criteria for Success: Criteria for success provide the base against which a program will determine whether or not students have achieved “success” as it pertains to the assessment measure for the outcome. This level of achievement must be justified. The level of justification can come from professional standards (e.g., Middle States, Disciplinary Accrediting Body) or a previous history of student work

within the program. An example of a criterion for success would be “All students will score at or above 75% for each of the areas of the rubric which focus on.....”.

Results consist of three common elements:

1. presence of results— results should reported in terms of specific student learning outcomes
2. a history of results— trends can be demonstrated when a history of results is created and reported
3. interpretation of the results—reasonable inferences about the scores should be based on the methodology used; interpretation of results does not, and probably should not, occur each year for each outcome; to make meaningful interpretations, however, results should be collected over time

A program can fall short of reaching their desired results, but can still provide a logical interpretation of the findings and reasons it believes the results fell short of expectations.

Action Plan – Using Results to Improve Student Learning: Upon review of assessment results, an action plan should be developed that clearly indicates how those results (the student learning evidence reported) will be utilized to improve student learning (i.e., the assessment loop should be closed). It is important to note that the utilization of assessment results to improve student learning (i.e., the development of an action plan) does not always imply the need for substantial changes at any level. Incremental changes are often sufficient to impact student learning. Student learning outcomes assessment is about the process, not the end result, and appropriate change may take place in several forms (at the course, program, and/or institutional level).

Examples of Possible Action Plans:

1. Course Level: make changes in teaching formats, revamp assignments and exams, provide mentoring, provide more feedback
2. Program Level: revamp departmental curriculum, revamp syllabi, reassess course content, assure consistency of teaching across all sections of a course, better align faculty time with needs, adjust the course schedule
3. Institutional Level: evaluate policy and resources that empower students and faculty, create more classroom/lab space, require first-year students to take general education courses, work with community to secure internships

Who Has Responsibility for Coordination and Reporting of the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes Process?

Student learning is a vital component of the mission of the institution. As such, it is important to recognize that the assurance of student learning is a shared responsibility among students, faculty and administrators. Students are responsible for active participation in the learning and assessment processes. Faculty members are responsible for ensuring that all programs have processes in place for the assessment of student learning. Administrators are responsible for ensuring that adequate processes are in place to help support faculty in ensuring student learning. Academic units must define learning outcomes for their program(s) and establish a process that outlines who, when and how assessment data is collected and reviewed. This includes preparing a written job description for assessment coordinators that outlines all responsibilities (with due dates) to the department, unit, college, and university. The process must also identify members of the academic unit who can assist with specific tasks and must allocate time at department/program meetings for sharing of information, questions, and needs. It is also the responsibility of each academic unit to ensure that assessment results are submitted to the Dean’s office via TracDat annually (see “The Assessment Process Timeline” for additional information about the submission of results). The academic dean is responsible for the oversight of the assessment processes in each college. This includes ensuring that adequate supports are available to help faculty facilitate this process.

The program-based assessment of student learning of university-wide general education goals is to be coordinated and reported by the appropriate committee and leadership of the university-wide Curriculum and Academic Policies Council. In addition, the assessment of general education goals (in approved general education courses) is to be reported by academic units regularly as part of the routine program review process. Programs who do not participate in the routine program review process (because they

participate in specific accreditation review processes) will be required to submit general education assessment reports on a regular schedule and in a manner to be outlined by the university-wide program review officer.

How Should We Apply the Results of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment?

“Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement” (AAHE, 1992). Thus, the results of student learning assessment are to be used specifically for improving student learning, improving academic programs, documenting student and program successes, and building academic programs in productive ways. Given that student learning lies at the heart of the mission of the university, documentation of student learning, as well as documentation regarding the need to improve student learning, should be incorporated into the plans and decision-making processes of all academic units. Documentation of student learning and the need to improve student learning should also be taken into consideration when decisions regarding the distribution of limited resources are required (i.e., budgetary decisions). In addition, results of the assessment of student learning processes across campus will be incorporated into a variety of reports that will be used to demonstrate the achievement of university-wide strategic goals, the achievement of university-wide student learning outcomes (e.g., general education reports), the achievement of strategic goals at the level of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), and the achievement of Middle States Commission of Higher Education mandated competencies.

What Is The Assessment Process Timeline at WCU?

Information required for the development of an overall university report regarding the results of student learning assessment across the university is to be available at the end of each Fall semester (via TracDat). This report will allow the Academic Affairs division of the university to document that all academic units were actively engaged in the assessment process during the previous academic year, to build a review of efforts across the university to assess student learning in the areas of the general education goals and the Middle States competencies, and to report general assessment results linked to university strategic goals. In order to allow for such a report to be built within TracDat, it will be necessary that all reporting units have complete (and final) assessment results and action plans for the previous academic year available in TracDat **by December 5** of each academic year. [This coincides with the deadline for submitting final program review materials including general education assessment results and the self-study narrative.] Keeping this program-based deadline in mind, individual academic deans will determine specific timetables for the submission of assessment results to TracDat within each of the colleges. College timetables should be made available to academic units by the end of the spring semester of the previous academic year. Review of annual assessment results and action plans is to be completed by each college dean’s office by **December 19** of each academic year. Thus, Academic Affairs offices can expect to have access to the most up-to-date student learning assessment data by this date each academic year for purposes of report building as needed.

Where Should the Results of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment be Published?

Student Learning Outcomes: Information about programmatic student learning outcomes must be easily and widely available to all members of the university community and to the general public.

Locations for publication include, but are not limited to:

1. department/program websites (with direct links to these sites easily accessible from other WCU websites including the Teaching, Learning, & Assessment Center web-page, college web-pages, admissions web-pages, etc.)
2. course Syllabi*
3. any and all descriptions of academic programs at WCU (e.g., student handbooks, marketing flyers, and accepted student packets,...)

Information for inclusion in publications must include, at minimum, a listing of all programmatic student learning outcomes, but could also include:

1. examples of the specific skills students are expected to acquire as a result of the experiences within a curricular program
2. types of knowledge and/or dispositions that students in a particular program are expected to demonstrate or develop with regard to each general programmatic student learning outcome

***Publication in course syllabi:** Both course learning objectives and programmatic student learning outcome information must be included on all course syllabi. Furthermore, the course learning objectives must be linked, directly, to programmatic student learning outcomes. With this linkage in place, individual course syllabi represent the place where students, faculty, and others can clearly identify the paths from courses to outcomes within any academic program. (The programmatic assessment plan identifies individual outcomes/indicators of student success for each programmatic student learning outcome. Curricular mapping identifies which outcomes are formally linked to each individual course. Faculty members are encouraged to use the curricular map as a tool to identify the programmatic student learning outcomes that should be linked directly to the learning objectives of their individual courses).

Syllabi for all approved General Education courses must also include a General Education statement and a listing of the general education goals/student learning outcomes to which the course contributes (as previously approved by CAPC). Course learning objectives should also be linked, directly, to general education goals/student learning outcomes (in the same way that they are linked to other programmatic student learning outcomes). If courses are also approved as writing emphasis (“W”), interdisciplinary (“I”), and/or diverse communities courses (“J”), syllabi must also contain a prominent statement that identifies the course as such and highlights the general education goals associated with each designation.

Student Learning Assessment Results: The posting/publication of student learning assessment results, by program, is a potentially important marketing tool. In some cases, accrediting bodies may require that some assessment results information is made available in particular ways and through particular venues. In addition, a report of the results of the annual assessment of the WCU General Education program is posted on the web-site of the Associate Provost each year. Beyond these publication methods, WCU encourages academic units to consider possible outlets for the publication of program strengths identified via student learning assessment. The level of detail included in the published information is, of course, at the discretion of each academic unit. However, a list of highlights (points of interest perhaps) strategically placed on a department’s web-site can be very informative and can provide important information to potential students and their parents. In addition, departments or academic units may want to provide a list of highlights that might be posted on the web-site of the university’s Teaching, Learning, & Assessment Center or as a point of interest on the WCU home-page.

What Supports and Resources are Available at WCU for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes?

A variety of support mechanisms and processes are available at multiple university levels. Department supports are available to facilitate the assessment of student learning in individual classes and within individual programs. College-level supports are available to assist academic units and individuals with the development and implementation of assessment processes. And, university-level supports exist to support student learning assessment across all levels of the university. Detailed information on resources, recommendations, exemplars, process descriptions, assessment tools, and descriptions of assessment supports and processes across the university is available on the homepage of the WCU Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Center at <http://www.wcupa.edu/TLAC/>.

References

- American Association for Higher Education (1992). Principles of good practice for assessing student learning. Washington, DC: AAHE.
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2007). Student Learning Assessment: Options and resources, 2nd edition. Philadelphia, PA: Middle States Commission on Higher Education.