

## Assessment of Student Learning

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

### Context

Outcomes assessment involves gathering and evaluating quantitative and/or qualitative information that demonstrates congruence between the institution's mission, goals, and objectives and the actual outcomes of its educational activities. While not all of the impact of an institution on its students can be readily measured, the assessment of student learning is essential whatever the nature of the institution, its particular mission, the types of programs it offers, or the manner in which its educational programs are delivered and student learning facilitated.

The systematic assessment of student learning is essential to monitoring quality and providing the information that leads to improvement. Implemented effectively, the assessment of student learning will involve the shared commitment of students, administrators and academic professionals. The assessment of student learning has the student as its primary focus of inquiry. It is related to the assessment of institutional effectiveness, which is important as a means to monitor and improve the environment provided for teaching and learning (see Standard 7: Institutional Assessment). Because the purpose for assessing student learning is to help students improve and to maintain academic quality, the assessment measures chosen should be those that provide the students, faculty, and others with information about student learning that is specific; address questions that faculty and the institution care about; and are useful for assessing and enhancing academic quality.

The mission of the institution provides focus and direction to its outcomes assessment plan, and the plan should show how the institution translates its mission into learning goals and objectives. The plan may be part of the overall institutional effectiveness plan (Standard 7), or it may be separate. It also may incorporate plans created by separate units. In order to carry out meaningful assessment activities, institutions must articulate statements of expected student learning at the institutional, program, and individual course levels, although the level of specificity will be greater at the course level. Course syllabi or guidelines should include expected learning outcomes. Moreover, institutions can be flexible in their approach to defining student learning at these different levels,

such as repeating goals (some general education goals, for example) across programs or defining the goals at the institutional or program level as being a synthesis of the goals set at the program and course levels.

While the specific learning goals at each level (course, program, and institutional) need not be included in the assessment plan itself, statements of expected student learning must be available on campus to those planning or implementing assessment activities and to those evaluating the institution. These learning outcomes should be interrelated, and their continuity, coherence, and integration among the three levels should be evident.

Although an assessment plan addresses learning goals at various levels, the assessment plan does not require necessarily a parallel three-tiered approach to outcomes assessment. The institution should specify those assessment measures, methods, and analyses that will be used to validate stated expectations for student learning. In addition, while the assessment of learning first occurs on an individual student basis within a particular course, institutions may select the level or levels at which they report assessment data.

At the course level, for example, grades are an effective measure of student achievement, provided there is a demonstrable relationship between the objectives for student learning and the particular bases (such as assignments and examinations) upon which student achievement is evaluated. The assessment of learning outcomes at the program or institutional level is likely to be reflected in an aggregation or a synthesis of course-level assessments, including capstone courses, and may incorporate data from such additional measures as professional licensure examinations. It also may be based on a representative sampling of learning outcomes or of students across the institution.

In developing their assessment plans, institutions should begin, of course, with those assessment measures already in place, such as course and program completion rates, retention rates, graduation rates, and job placement rates, as well as pre- and post-testing, scores on standardized tests, performance on licensing exams, graduate school performance, and studies of alumni and former students. Institutions also should consider developing new datasets related to learning outcomes. In all instances, institutions should utilize multiple approaches, which may be qualitative and/or quantitative, to demonstrate that graduates have achieved stated learning outcomes.

Assessment is not an event but a process and should be an integral part of the life of the institution. It is the responsibility of the institution to decide what assessment tasks should be performed, in what sequence, within what time frame, and for what effect. Not everything needs to be assessed each year. For example, the assessment of major programs might be tied to program review cycles, and the assessment of general education might proceed in a sequential fashion, assessing different sets of general education outcomes each year. Such institution-wide planning should provide a broad framework within which student learning may be assessed in ways consonant with disciplinary and institutional expectations.

Finally, and most significantly, 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 to the desired academic

outcomes, should be available to those who develop and carry out strategies that will improve teaching and learning.

## **Fundamental Elements of Assessment of Student Learning**

Relative to this standard, an accredited institution is characterized by:

- articulated expectations of student learning at various levels (institution, degree/program, course) that are consonant with the institution's mission and with the standards of higher education and of the relevant disciplines;
- a plan that describes student learning assessment activities being undertaken by the institution, including the specific methods to be used to validate articulated student learning goals/objectives;
- evidence that student learning assessment information is used to improve teaching and learning; and
- documented use of student learning assessment information as part of institutional assessment.

## **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:

- evidence of assessment approaches that derives from the institution's mission and which might incorporate such outcomes as cumulative learning, analytical and information skills, specific competencies, knowledge and cognitive abilities, student attitude development and growth, life skills, student activity involvement, and physical skills and techniques
- analysis of assessment results including
  - ◆ where applicable, basic skills development programs
  - ◆ subject area knowledge
  - ◆ development of general education and lifelong learning skills
  - ◆ attitudes and values that relate to the mission of the institution and to the programs of study
- analysis of direct and indirect indicators of student achievement such as persistence and graduation rates, student satisfaction and other evidence of student goal attainment, licensure examination results, alumni satisfaction and achievement, including consideration of parity of outcomes across different student groups

- analysis of results from a variety of assessment strategies, including standardized tests, local comprehensive tests, course-embedded assessment, self-reported measures, and portfolio assessment
- analysis of course, department or school reports on classroom based assessment practices and their outcomes, including grading approaches and consistency
- evidence that assessment findings are used to:
  - ◆ assist students in the improvement of their learning
  - ◆ assist faculty in the improvement of curricula and instructional activities
  - ◆ assist in reviewing and revising academic programs and support services
  - ◆ assist in planning, conducting and supporting professional development activities
  - ◆ assist in planning and budgeting for the provision of academic programs and services