

**SUNY Oneonta Academic Program Assessment Committee**  
**Guidelines for Academic Program Assessment at SUNY Oneonta:**  
**Developing Meaningful and Efficient Assessment of Student Learning**  
**Fall 2009**

**Preface**

At SUNY Oneonta, assessment of student learning is a faculty-driven process that assures students are engaged in meaningful educational experiences.

The Academic Program Assessment Committee (APAC) has been established by the Provost and College Senate to facilitate academic program assessment. APAC exists to help faculty apply best practice principles to procure meaningful assessment data in the most efficient manner. The members of APAC fully understand that faculty in departments and programs are the experts in their fields, are best able to determine the most meaningful educational experiences for their students, and are in the best position to assess the impacts of those experiences on students.

To that end APAC has reviewed various assessment models and identified the framework described in this document as the most useful for our campus. APAC's intent is that this model will serve as a guide to faculty, programs, and departments as they develop their own unique assessment plans. APAC chose this framework because it is simple, flexible, and centered on questions faculty frequently ask themselves as they work to strengthen their educational programs and enhance the experiences of their students both in and out of the classroom. These questions include the following:

1. What knowledge and competencies do we expect students to gain from our program?
2. How do courses and other experiences built into the curriculum relate to each other and contribute to programmatic goals?
3. How do we know students are achieving programmatic goals?
4. How can we use assessment of student learning to strengthen our program?

**Relationship of the Self-Study Process to Annual Reporting and Assessment Plans**

In preparing these guidelines, it was APAC's intent to show that the development and implementation of assessment plans can easily – and advantageously - be incorporated into existing planning, evaluation, and reporting requirements, in particular the annual reporting process which is specific to the College and the self-study process that is part of SUNY's Assessment of the Major requirements. Perhaps this objective (coordination) is best achieved by first defining each in some detail and then discussing how these three processes can be integrated.

The **Self-Study Process** at SUNY Oneonta takes place for most academic programs on a 7-year schedule as required by SUNY System Administration. This process is comprehensive in nature and focuses on a wide range of issues and questions of interest to the program (e.g., facilities, faculty workload and credentials, resources, faculty presentations and publications, student awards, student enrollment, as well as student retention and graduation rates). As part of this process, according to SUNY guidelines, each academic programs must include as part of its self-study the assessment of student learning.

Each academic program at the College is required to provide an **Annual Report** at the end of the academic year, using that report to develop plans for the subsequent academic year. According to the guidelines for preparing the Annual Report, academic programs are asked to describe the outcomes of student learning assessments conducted during the year, to include “a summary of the assessment methods that were used and the results, including benchmarking as appropriate. Also, whenever possible, detail course-specific student learning outcomes and their relationship(s) to departmental or programmatic expectations.” Programs also summarize other major accomplishments that took place during that year.

The specific and exclusive focus of the **Academic Program Assessment Plan** process is student learning. As described in this document’s next section, an assessment plan requires a program to identify with some specificity the knowledge base, skills, behaviors, and perhaps even attitudes a student of that program can be expected to exhibit upon graduation. The plan also addresses how the content and design of the program’s curriculum lead to students’ achievement of program expectations, how the program has assessed the effectiveness of its curriculum, and how it has used assessment information to strengthen the program as appropriate.

Although these three processes are separate and may on the surface appear to represent three very different activities – and to require three times the effort! – in fact, if organized and managed appropriately, these processes all contribute to a single, important goal: enabling an academic program to plan, assess, and document its efforts on an ongoing basis. To be specific, the Assessment Plan delineates the specific student learning objectives a program intends to assess in a given year, since it is not necessary for programs to assess all objectives every year. At the end of each academic year, the program can describe in its Annual Report the outcomes of its student learning assessments, along with its other accomplishments, and indicate which student learning outcomes it will focus on the following year. Finally, when the time approaches for the program to conduct its self-study, the program has access to a wealth of information obtained in its student learning assessments and annual reports from the preceding years. In this sense, the Assessment Plan process “feeds into” the Annual Report process, which “feeds into” the Self-Study process, actually making the Self-Study process far less formidable when it’s time to do it. More important, programs are getting important feedback every year regarding their most important priority: the effectiveness of their curriculum with respect to student learning.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The successful integration of these processes over time and across programs would also provide powerful evidence to Middle States that SUNY Oneonta is engaged in meaningful and sustainable assessment when institutional accreditation takes place.

## **Developing an Assessment Plan: Four Necessary Steps**

The remainder of this document describes a step-by-step assessment model that can be followed or adapted by any academic program. This prototype is not intended to be an inflexible "blueprint" for student learning assessments. In fact, it is generic enough to allow units to begin the assessment process, and it contains many concrete examples of issues that should be considered at each step as well as measures that might be used.

### **I. Establishing Objectives: “What knowledge and competencies do we expect students to gain from our program?”**

In this step, faculty members come to consensus regarding desired student learning outcomes, taking into account programmatic objectives specific to their own discipline as well as any stated institutional expectations regarding students’ intellectual growth. First and foremost, this step requires a focus on the following question: “What difference do we intend to make in our students as a result of their experiences with us and our curriculum, with respect to knowledge, behaviors, skills, and attitudes?”

In attempting to accomplish this step, faculty should consider the following actions:

- A. Examine and review existing program objectives.
- B. Elicit and discuss faculty members’ perceptions of program objectives (both actual and aspirational).
- C. Analyze and compare program objectives with (1) stated institutional expectations regarding students’ intellectual growth; (2) the College Mission Statement; (3) programmatic objectives at comparable institutions and in the field at large (e.g., as determined by examination of current textbooks, communication with national organizations in the discipline); and (4) criteria and standards of certification agencies and/or national associations in the discipline if applicable.

### **II. Activities and Strategies: “How do courses and other experiences built into the curriculum relate to each other and contribute to programmatic goals?”**

During this step faculty should review all activities that are aimed at accomplishing programmatic objectives. First and foremost, this step requires a focus on a different question: “Do we offer activities and experiences in our curriculum that make it possible for students to achieve programmatic objectives?” In addition, it is important that faculty members reach consensus on the rationale for individual courses, program requirements, and program structure when undertaking this step.

In attempting to accomplish this step, faculty should consider the following actions:

- A. Determine the extent to which program objectives are embedded in specific courses and make adjustments as appropriate (e.g., strengthening the coverage of objectives that are

not sufficiently addressed, de-emphasizing objectives that are covered excessively).

- B. Review and analyze curricular coherence, focusing on the role individual courses are intended to serve, the rationale for all program requirements (including distribution requirements in the major and cognates), and rationales for pre-requisites.
- C. As appropriate, review program components that serve different purposes in the curriculum (i.e., major, minor, concentration, service courses).
- D. Determine strategies for assuring comparability *vis a vis* programmatic objectives throughout multiple sections of the same course.
- E. Examine relationship of the program to other College requirements (e.g., General Education).

### **III. Assessment: “How do we know students are achieving programmatic goals?”**

The purpose of this step is to collect information that will provide direct feedback regarding the effectiveness of a program in terms of its stated learning objectives. First and foremost, this step requires a focus on a third question: “What evidence do we have to demonstrate whether students are meeting our expectations for their learning?”

Each department should have clear expectations about what constitutes good assessment practice and have strategies in place to help faculty develop effective tools for assessing their learning outcomes. Faculty members – especially those teaching different sections of the same course – should be encouraged to use comparable methods for assessing student learning outcomes. Programs would also be well served to rely primarily on course-embedded assessment, since this approach is the least time- and labor-intensive and assures student motivation to do well.

Departments need to collect and compile student data that are relevant to each programmatic objective. These tasks could be assigned to either an individual or a group (e.g., a departmental assessment committee.)

- A. To accomplish this step, departments and academic programs should consider the following actions: Establish expectations for measures being used to assess student performance, relying on existing literature on good assessment practice so as to assure that data are valid, reliable, and representative.
- B. At most, focus on 3-4 student learning outcomes each year.
- C. Encourage faculty to use a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative measures to assess student performance, including senior thesis/research projects, student portfolios, pre- and post-assessments within courses, departmentally generated exams, standardized tests, oral proficiency exams, and student teaching or internship evaluations.
- D. Leave the final selection of measures to be administered in a course-embedded fashion up

to the faculty members teaching the course.

- E. Examine program effectiveness through comparisons with information provided by other programs or other groups of interest (e.g., certification agencies, national organizations in the discipline).
- F. Capstone courses are an ideal context in which to collect outcomes assessment data.
- G. Evaluate student perceptions of the program through strategies such as senior exit interviews and alumni surveys.

#### **IV. Closing the Loop: “How can we use assessment of student learning to strengthen our program?”**

In this step, the program feeds back the information obtained from the assessment process directly into its objectives and its activities. This final step requires a focus on a three-part question: “What are we doing well, what could we do better, and how can we improve?” This process, which requires faculty in the program to review assessment data and discuss findings with each other, should result in the continuation of activities that lead to the realization of departmental objectives and the discontinuation or revision of activities that are not. It is also possible that the assessment process may lead to the revision or elimination of old objectives and/or the development of new ones. Perhaps most important is the fact that omitting this step means you did everything to this point for nothing!

In attempting to accomplish this step, faculty should consider the following actions:

- A. Provide aggregate data to faculty for review and discussion (individual faculty data should never be shared with other faculty members).
- B. Reach conclusions regarding program effectiveness as revealed for each learning objective, identifying both strengths and weaknesses revealed through the assessment.
- C. Offer recommendations for changes in curriculum and teaching as appropriate.
- D. Development new statement of departmental objectives for next assessment round as appropriate.