

# Assessment FAQ

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## Why do we do assessment?

Continuous improvement of our programs is an important priority for educators who want to do everything possible to prepare our graduates to perform in society, in the workplace, or in graduate school. Assessment planning and reporting allow faculty to report the specific learning outcomes they desire for their graduates and to collect solid evidence of how well those outcomes have been achieved. Assessment is required to maintain institutional accreditation as well as specialized program accreditation.

The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, ASU's regional accrediting body, places a particularly heavy emphasis on assessment. Assessment is at the core of Criteria Three and Four of HLC's Criteria for Accreditation, as well as being emphasized in the Documenting Fundamental Understandings: Minimum Expectations within the Criteria for Accreditation. There are approximately 100 programs at ASU that have specialized accreditation. Nearly all of those accreditation agencies require evidence of the assessment of student learning.

## When does assessment planning occur?

As soon as a new program has been approved, you will be expected to develop an assessment plan. We understand that many aspects of the new program may not be in place yet, and that students may not reach measurement points until two or more years from the time of approval. It is important, however, for program faculty to know the intended program outcomes at the time a program is created. It is equally important for faculty to identify where in the new curriculum that students will be exposed to program content, have opportunities to reinforce initial learning on that content, and ultimately to demonstrate their knowledge of the content. You may find it helpful to develop a curriculum map at this point.

The assessment team will review your draft plan and either approve it or return it for revision. When the recommended revisions have been made, please submit the plan for final review. The assessment team will notify you when the plan has been approved.

The assessment team is available to assist you with assessment planning and curriculum mapping. You will be asked to update your assessment plan each year when you submit your assessment report. Assessment reports are due September 30 of each year.

## What is the Academic Year?

Commonly, the academic year is thought of as Fall to Spring with Summer as an optional component at the end. The UOEEE academic year reporting, however, is centered around a Summer to Spring reporting cycle, thus survey and course evaluation data which may be used in an assessment plan, consists of graduates for the Summer through Spring terms for a given academic year. We encourage assessment reporting for each academic year to consist of courses, student materials and other data collected from Summer through Spring terms, however reports may include a different definition of the academic year if this corresponds better with the department's needs.

## Is Assessment the same as Academic Program Review?

Both are important activities, necessary for continued improvement, but the purposes and timelines are different. Assessment is an ongoing process that occurs during each academic year and focuses on student-specific outcomes for a single academic major or certificate program. An academic program review occurs every few years. It is used as a comprehensive evaluation of the overall effectiveness of an entire academic unit that may administer multiple degree programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Although an academic program review self-study will include information from the assessment activities of the unit's programs, it will also provide information about the unit's human and non-human resources, faculty qualifications, scholarship and service activities, and more.

## How does assessment benefit institutional effectiveness?

Student learning is the major component for determining institutional effectiveness. Though a review of institutional effectiveness will assess additional avenues of institutional activities, it is important for programs to assess their outcomes with the goals of the college and institution in mind. With this core principle established and integrated into the activities of the program, the best data will be available for assessing the mission statement of the university.

## Who must participate in assessment?

All academic programs – majors and certificates, undergraduate and graduate – are expected to participate.

Certificates have come under closer scrutiny by accreditation agencies in recent years. This is in response to U.S. Department of Education expectations that institutions demonstrate evidence of student learning outcomes for these programs that may be eligible for Title IV financial aid and are often marketed as preparation for certain areas of employment.

In the sections that follow, we will guide you through the preparation of an assessment plan for a single academic program, then illustrate the ways in which program faculty might use the data collected as a result of the assessment plan.

## Our programs have external accreditation, and they already evaluate our assessment. Is it necessary for us to participate in the institutional assessment?

Yes. Although most programmatic accreditors now require evidence that programs are measuring student learning, some still do not. We are still accountable to our institutional accreditation body for the assessment of student learning. There are some specialized accreditors that require programs to engage in the assessment of student learning, but are not prescriptive about how that should occur. Such agencies rely on the programs to participate in the institutional assessment activities and to document the evidence of those activities.

## Faculty already evaluate students, and students already evaluate faculty. Isn't this more of the same thing?

No. The purpose of academic program assessment is not to evaluate individual students or instructors. The purpose is to determine the extent to which program graduates possess the intended knowledge and skills of the program when they graduate, and to use the information gathered to support improvements over time.

## Will we be penalized if we do not meet all our outcomes?

No. The assessment team does not keep a tally of the number of outcomes met – or not. We do not report these numbers to deans, the provost, the state regents, the accreditors, or to anyone else. We do, however, maintain logs of units that have current assessment documents on file, and the quality of those documents. We provide feedback to units on whether their assessment practices are likely to provide meaningful information about student learning that can be used to improve learning over time. This is so important that units who identify simplistic outcomes, weak measures, and unreasonably low performance criteria receive lower ratings than units who set reasonable expectations, acknowledge when outcomes have not been met, and identify realistic changes to address any issues they identify. As an institution, we are evaluated by accreditors not on the number of outcomes we meet, but on the quality of evidence that we actively engage in the honest assessment of student learning at our institution. "Closing the Loop," the process whereby program faculty use assessment information to drive decision-making that is aimed at improved student learning is the sole purpose of program assessment, and is the basis on which our assessment efforts are evaluated – internally and externally.

**Remember: We are not "graded" on the number of outcomes we meet, but on our efforts to collect meaningful information about student learning and then use that information to improve student learning.**

## How is assessment different than grading?

Though both activities are used to measure the degrees to which students have learning concepts, grading is measure upon individual students whereas assessment focuses on the performance and gains of an entire cohort of students. Additionally,

- Grades do not provide meaningful information on exactly what a student has learned.** Assessments should address precisely the areas of strengths and weakness that students are having within the curriculum. A grade of a "B" does not accurately detail which elements of the curriculum were mastered and which were not.
- Grading and assessment criteria may differ** As course grades can be based upon a number of factors such as points for attendance and penalties for late papers, assessment practices should not consider these elements in their scoring, focusing entirely on the outcomes and performance of the students.
- Grading standards may be inconsistent** Assessment reviews should often be done through rubrics by committees to ensure consensus. Course and assignment grades may depend on the experiences and expectations of a singular reviewer.