Institutional Effectiveness,
Academic Planning and Review

Graduate Academic Program Assessment

General Information and Guidelines

Overview

The focus of graduate program assessment should be on measuring and improving student learning. Each department or program should design an assessment process that provides information that can be used to:

- Determine whether students are learning what we say they are
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of the program
- Make changes based on assessment results to improve the program

It should be stressed that good assessment requires the involvement of faculty at all stages of the process to improve student learning.

The implementation of meaningful assessment by academic programs will also satisfy a critical requirement of USF’s accrediting body, The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.1 requires that all educational programs identify expected student learning outcomes, assess the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provide evidence of improvement based on the analysis of the results. (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges 2012 Principles of Accreditation)

Assessment Process

1. Select or develop "measurable" student learning outcomes (course or program)
2. Select or develop measures consistent with the outcomes
3. Assess Student Learning Outcomes
4. Analyze Assessment Results
5. Make adjustments in curriculum, instructional strategies, or activities to address weaknesses and strengths identified
This resource provides guidance for developing a USF approved Academic Assessment Plan and a description of the process for submitting an annual report of the assessment results and the use of the results for program improvement. Please keep in mind that the way that the components of the assessment plan are operationalized in the units across campus is varied, but the common components are invariant and must include:

- Program Mission and Goals
- Student Learning Outcomes
- Performance Targets
- Methods of Assessment

**Developing an Assessment Plan**

**Step 1: Develop Program Mission**
Your program mission should link the program to the mission of the college and the overall mission of USF. The mission will also serve as a guide for the development of your learning outcomes. A mission statement should be:

- Specific to the unit (identifies what the program does that separates it from other departments)
- Clear and concise
- Aligned and consistent with the college’s mission
- Aligned with respective professional organization and specific accrediting bodies (if applicable)

**Step 2: Develop Learning Outcome Goals**
Learning outcome goals describe the general aims or purposes of the program and its curriculum. Effective goals are broadly stated, meaningful, achievable and assessable. Goals should provide a framework for determining the more specific student learning outcomes expected of all students. Examples of goals include:

- Understand and can apply fundamental concepts of the discipline
- Communicate effectively, both orally and in writing
- Conduct sound research
- Address issues critically and reflectively

**Step 3: Define Intended Student Learning Outcomes**
Student learning outcomes (SLOs) are specific statements that describe the required learning achievement that must be met on the way to attaining the degree and meeting the goals of the program. They should capture the knowledge, skills, abilities, capacities, attitudes or dispositions you expect students to acquire in your program. Student learning outcomes must be:

- Specific – Focus on stating what you want your students to know and be able to do upon completing the program
• Results oriented -- Include in clear and definite terms the expected abilities and knowledge a student who graduates from your program is expected to possess.
• Measureable – Must be feasible to collect accurate quantitative or qualitative data usable for making improvements to the program
• Connected to the mission of the program

Additional resources for developing student learning outcomes are available on the OIE website.

Step 4: Identify and Describe Assessment Methods and Instruments
It is important that the methods chosen enable you to evaluate the effectiveness of your program. A primary objective of assessment is to illuminate strengths and weaknesses in your program that can lead to improvement. Be sure to choose assessment methods that will provide useful (actionable) information.

Since graduate programs typically include built-in culminating experiences, these are natural areas to explore for program level assessment.

Possible areas of focus include:
  • Comprehensive/qualifying exams
  • Research proposals
  • Dissertation defenses
  • Portfolios

The assessment of student learning generally involves judging student performance. A common method used is to select or develop a rubric that can be used to systematically judge performance according to the standards defined in the rubric. If using culminating student experiences, teams of faculty will already be reviewing student performance. This would be a convenient and effective point at which to apply the assessment rubric and record the results. Faculty are often already involved in these types of activities but do not systematically record results.

Note: If rubrics are to be used, please be aware that evidence that the psychometric properties of the instrument have been evaluated must be provided. Specifically, you will need to provide evidence of the reliability and validity of the instrument.

Direct vs. Indirect Assessments - Direct assessments of student learning are those that provide for direct examination or observation of student knowledge or skills against measurable performance indicators. Indirect assessments are those that ascertain the opinion or self-report of the extent or value of learning experiences. Examples of direct assessment include but are not limited to quizzes, tests, inventories, team/group projects, standardized tests, licensure exams, internships, service learning projects, case studies, simulations, and portfolios. Indirect assessments include but are not limited to quantitative data such as enrollments; questionnaires; honors, awards, scholarships; interviews, focus groups; employer satisfaction measures; retention/graduation rates; and job/graduate school placement data.
It is best to have multiple methods of assessing the outcome. These can be both direct (actual measures of student learning) and indirect assessments (student or employer surveys, job placement, etc.)

Note: As a general practice, course grades are not an appropriate measure for assessing student learning outcomes. Course grades are summative evaluations of individual student work. Assessment of student learning outcomes is a formative evaluation of an academic program. Because the course grade often comingles various sources of direct assessment data other than that related to the SLO, the course grade does not directly represent the student’s achievement of the SLO. Therefore, faculty should identify the specific assessment that provides direct evidence of the student achievement of the SLO in this section of the plan.

Step 5: Define Levels of Expectation or Criteria of Success
Briefly state how you will define success on the defined outcomes. These statements should be specific and reflect the level of achievement that will tell you that your students are successful in meeting the learning outcome. If a rating scale or rubric is being used as an assessment method, success can be stated in terms of an acceptable score.

Measure Student Performance

Step 6: Conduct Assessments
Carry out the planned assessments. Activities in this step will depend on the methods of measurement selected.

Step 7: Data Analysis and Review of Results
The data gathered must be analyzed and formatted in a way that provides useful information for exposing program strengths and weaknesses in helping students meet the defined learning outcomes. A annual report of the results must be created and submitted to the Office of Institutional Effectiveness using the online System for Assessment Management (SAM). It is also extremely important for faculty to review the results and understand the implications they have for the program.

Implement Program Improvements

Step 5: Response to the Assessment Results
To “close the assessment loop” or continue the assessment process, the assessment results must be put into action. Faculty should review the reports with a focus toward uncovering areas of the program that could be improved. The annual assessment report must contain a description of the actions that were taken in response to the student learning results to better help students reach the defined outcomes.

For further information:

Institutional Effectiveness
BEH 322