

Thinking about Assessment

Each Request for Permanent Changes in an Academic Program and Request for a New Academic Program requires a plan for assessing student learning outcomes be included with the requests. In order to facilitate this process for academic units, below is the **minimum** information to be included in the plan.

1. A clear statement of program goals and objectives.

Goals and objectives of an academic program serve as the foundation for the assessment plan and so they should be clearly stated and defined. Goals should include statements of the type of learning outcome expected in terms of skills, knowledge base and, if appropriate, student attitude.

2. Methods of assessing student outcomes at appropriate stages in the program.

The methods used to assess student learning are those most appropriate to the goals and objectives of the academic program. Because it is expected that a variety of different types of goals and learning objectives will be identified, it is also expected that multiple measures of assessment will be employed. One commonly used method of assessment is an exit survey, designed to solicit students' perceptions of the learning process. An exit survey can provide academic units with valuable information about the student experience. However, in order to effectively assess student learning, it is also necessary to employ other types of measurement. Learning is a process and so measuring change over time is an important component of an assessment plan. For example, an academic unit has as a goal the expectation that students will be able apply critical analysis as a problem solving tool. One means of assessing this goal might be to have students respond to a short case study at the beginning of the major courses. At the appropriate time during the course of their study, they could be given the same case to analyze and the change in analysis skills documented as an outcomes measure. It is also appropriate for an academic unit to utilize already existing data as a part of the assessment plan.

In thinking about an assessment plan, consider ways to make the process manageable. For example, it is not necessary to assess every student on every goal. Sampling students, or assessing only two sections of a particular course are appropriate assessment methods. It is also not necessary to assess every program goal at the same time. If this is a new undertaking for your department you may want to concentrate on only two or three goals and add others at a future time.

Several institutions have chosen to share their departmental assessment plans via the web. The University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Colorado-Boulder both have comprehensive plans with fairly detailed information on how various departments have implemented student outcomes assessment. The locations of the websites are:

UW-Madison: www.wisc.edu/provost/assess.html

UC-Boulder: www.colorado.edu/pba/outcomes/

The purpose of assessment at MSU is to improve program effectiveness. The plan should indicate how the results of the assessment procedures will be used to strengthen the existing program. For example, assessment may result in curriculum changes to address programmatic weaknesses. Conversely, if results show that students are consistently meeting the defined objectives, assessment initiatives may be extended to other areas.