PROGRAM ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES

ANNUAL PROGRAM ASSESSMENT
Program assessment findings take many forms. Some view assessment as a research project, using descriptive statistics to analyze data, report conclusions, and make recommendations. Still others produce a narrative describing their assessment process, findings, and what they plan to do. The university uses Box as a repository to collect assessment information.

For your convenience, we have designed an assessment template that can be filled out and submitted to assess@gwu.edu.

The report should include the following information:

• The learning outcome(s)/objective(s) you are assessing. Units should have at least 3-5 outcomes that are each assessed over a five-year period;
• The evidence used to assess student learning, including a description of the assignment, project, etc. and a copy of the rubric or method for evaluating the evidence;
• Summary of the findings and what they tell you about student learning; and
• Description of how the program plans to make improvements (changes in curriculum or inspecific courses) based on the assessment findings.

Program assessments should answer two important questions:

• What skills and knowledge taught in the program do you expect students to know and be able to do by the end of the program, and to retain several years after they graduate?
• What evidence do you have (or need) that will convince you that students have achieved the learning goals?

It is important to remember that assessment is an iterative process, intended to provide useful feedback about what and how well students are learning. Below are steps to consider as you complete your assessment report:

1. Review your program goals to make sure they are still relevant. Program goals may be revised or deleted, and new goals may be added. Each degree program should have at least 3-5 learning outcomes. You can decide how to plan your assessment process; however, all learning outcomes should be assessed at least once in a five-year cycle.
2. Review your assessment strategies to ensure they are still relevant. Improving academic programs depends on gathering appropriate data about (or evidence of) student learning. Middle States requires that program-level assessment should include at least one direct measure of student learning. (A direct measure provides evidence that actual
learning has occurred and is in the form of a product or performance.) Many programs use assignments in capstone courses as evidence of student learning. Any assignment used for assessment should be designed to measure the relevant learning outcome(s). To assist with the interpretation and use of assessment findings, define minimally acceptable performance targets for your students. One simple way to do this is to clearly articulate what constitutes an unacceptable, acceptable, and exemplary performance for each assessment measure (i.e., a rubric). Please note that using final grades or a grade on a test without using a rubric delineating what the grade represents usually does not provide specific information about students’ strengths and weaknesses. The Association of American Colleges and Universities has developed a set of rubrics that address many of the outcomes typical in a college education (i.e., critical or creative thinking, integrative learning, oral and written communication, problem solving, and quantitative literacy). Copies of these rubrics can be found here. An extensive list of assessment measures is supplied in the supplementary materials accompanying these instructions.

3. Devote a faculty meeting to discussing the assessment results so that they make sense. What does the data suggest? In what areas do students often have difficulty in the program?

4. How will the department use assessment findings to improve the program? What changes in the curriculum will result?

As part of the annual assessment review, we will endeavor to provide meaningful feedback on your assessment submission using a Program Assessment Feedback Rubric. The rubric provides a clear indication of the type and level of information required by GW.

THE ASSESSMENT CYCLE
Whether one is assessing learning outcomes or objectives for an academic or co-curricular program or for a single course, it is important to remember that assessment is an iterative process, intended to provide useful feedback about what and how well students are learning. When developing the plan, it is important to think through all four steps of the cycle.

1. **Set program learning goals and outcomes**: decide and articulate what students should know and/or be able to do when they complete the program or the class, and at what points in the program they are expected to know it;

2. **Develop and implement assessment strategies**: design tests, assignments, reports, performances, or other activities that measure the types and quality of learning expected;

3. **Review the assessment data**: evaluate the results of the assessments to see what they show about student learning; and

4. **Create an action plan**: decide how to address issues raised by the assessment data to improve student learning.

**STEP 1: Setting Program Learning Goals**

*Nota bene: The terms goals, learning outcomes, and objectives are all used interchangeably. They represent what you expect students to know and be able to do once they complete the program and/or course.*

Program learning goals should be written as “expected learning outcomes,” that is, in terms of observable behavior that demonstrates the knowledge, skills, and competencies that students are expected to achieve upon successful completion of the program or certificate.

Each program should identify 3-5 of its most important learning goals. Each degree and certificate program is responsible for assessing at least one goal annually and for assessing all goals within a five-year cycle. (Programs may use learning outcomes defined by their accrediting bodies if this is more convenient.)

**Questions to consider**

- What knowledge, skills, and abilities do you expect graduates of the program to know and be able to do when they complete their degree?
- How will students be able to demonstrate these capacities?
- How do these goals reflect the mission and aspirations of the program?
- What discipline-specific outcomes are required for accreditation?
- How well does the program prepare students for careers, graduate or professional study, and/or life-long learning?

Individual courses and curricula should be developed within the context of the program's goals and reflect a coherent plan of study.
Curriculum mapping is a strategy that helps to identify which courses bear responsibility for particular outcomes and to make certain that the curriculum offers a rational sequence of courses. The curriculum should be organized so that knowledge and skills for each learning outcome are first introduced, then practiced, and finally reinforced.

Questions to consider

- To what extent are key program goals introduced and reinforced appropriately from course to course?
- How well do course objectives track with program objectives?
- Are there opportunities for students to organize, synthesize, and integrate what they are learning across courses?
- Are courses suitably preparing students for graduate school or a chosen career?

Creating a curriculum map

1. Download the Curriculum Mapping Worksheet.
2. Add the program's goals, outcomes, or objectives to the row across the top.
3. In the row on the left, list all the required courses and any electives that students are encouraged to take; include any courses taken outside your department if these are central to the program’s requirement.
4. Once the rows and columns are created, think about how each course contributes to the learning outcome: is the outcome first introduced (I), practiced (P) or reinforced (R) in the course. Add I, P, or R in the appropriate box indicating if the goal is introduced, practiced, or reinforced.
5. Once the curriculum is “mapped,” review it to make sure it reflects a coherent plan of study. If not, think about what revisions or changes should be made to the curriculum.

STEP 2: Developing Assessment Strategies

Improving academic programs depends on gathering appropriate data about or evidence of students' learning. Middle States requires that program-level assessment include at least two measures of assessment, one of which must be a “direct” measure of student learning. (Departments may include either two direct measures or one direct and one indirect measure.)

- **Direct measures** provide evidence that actual learning has occurred and is in the form of a product or performance (e.g., exams, projects, or performances graded with rubrics).
- **Indirect measures** tap characteristics that are associated with learning but imply that learning has occurred (e.g., number of hours students study, course evaluations, student satisfaction surveys).

Choose assessment strategies that align with and can provide evidence about the expected learning outcome. One good strategy is to use a rubric to evaluate students' work. To assist with the interpretation...
and use of assessment findings, define minimally acceptable performance targets for your assessment measures. One simple way to do this is to clearly articulate what constitutes an unacceptable, acceptable, and exemplary performance for each assessment measure.

Questions to consider

- What evaluation tools or approaches does the program have in place, and what information do they provide regarding how well students are achieving program and course goals and outcomes?
- How useful are the existing assessment findings?
- Do the tools include direct or actual measures of student learning?
- Do they provide information on why students have or have not learned?

STEP 3: Reviewing Assessment Findings

One of the more difficult aspects of assessment is making sense of the data, that is, understanding what it suggests about the program's collective strengths and weaknesses. To effectively make sense of the data, it is necessary to organize and examine it in a quantifiable way in order to identify significant trends in the data. These trends may well indicate the program's or course's overall strengths and weaknesses. An initial question concerns the validity of the data: that it is accurate, representative, and useful for deciding actions to improve.

Questions to consider about data quality

- Is it relevant to the outcome being assessed?
- Is it representative of students work or the situation being assessed?
- Does it provide guidance for action and improvement?

Questions to consider about data meaning

- What is the data telling you about what and how well students are achieving the learning outcomes for the program?
- Do the findings make sense?
- What additional information is needed?
- In what areas do students often have difficulty in the program or course?
- How consistent is student learning across multiple sections of the same course?

STEP 4: Creating an Action Plan

Data collection is of little value unless the data are shared at the institutional and program levels and used to improve teaching and learning. The data needs to be used to reevaluate and/or revise the curriculum or individual courses to achieve program learning outcomes. The assessment process is complete only when the information has been used to improve student learning. (Some accrediting agencies refer to this as "closing the loop.")
Assessment results should be discussed at faculty meetings on an annual basis and reported annually. For each outcome that has been assessed, add the actions your program/department is taking in response to the assessment. If the proposed outcomes require a change in courses in the curriculum, then these changes should be entered in the curriculum map for the next year’s assessment cycle. It is important to indicate who is responsible for implementing any changes and to include a timeline for the implementation.

Questions to consider

- What additional information or evidence is needed to understand how well students are achieving program goals?
- How will you use the information to improve student learning?
- How can the program improve learning more effectively in a time of tight or limited resources?