

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT UMUC STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT

1. WHAT IS STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

UMUC formally defines student learning assessment as “a systematic process of gathering and interpreting information related to the level of student achievement in relation to specific learning outcomes.” Student learning assessment is also commonly referred to as “learning assessment” or “learning outcomes assessment.”

Assessment of student learning is an ongoing process used by the university to improve student learning. The process involves several steps. The steps are:

- a) Identify student behaviors (learning outcomes) that provide evidence of student learning within programs and courses;
- b) Design and implement assessments that measure the specified learning outcomes;
- c) Analyze results from the selected assessments;
- d) Use assessment results to improve/refine assessment process, instructional techniques, pedagogy, placement strategies, and faculty development; and
- e) Report results to internal and external constituents.

2. WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

A critical reason for student learning assessment is to help answer questions about the core curriculum and the academic achievement of students. Results from student learning assessment also provide data that supports a wide variety of institutional needs. For example, data from student learning assessment can demonstrate program quality, supplement departmental budget requests, assist with fundraising and grant writing, and be used in marketing and student recruitment initiatives. Data from student learning assessment activities also provides responses to questions such as:

- What are the performance levels of UMUC students in specific skill areas?
- Are UMUC students graduating from different degree programs with the same core knowledge base or does learning vary greatly from student-to-student and/or from program-to-program?
- If learning is varied among UMUC students and programs, what are some possible influences upon the learning differences?

Assessment of student learning also provides an opportunity for faculty to be more reflective about teaching and learning. The process provides faculty with

valuable information for shaping learning goals and refining content. Used in a systematic way as a feedback mechanism, learning assessment data help faculty make decisions about curricular modifications and instructional choices to better achieve course and departmental objectives and to improve student learning.

3. WHAT IS THE INSTITUTIONAL STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT PLAN?

UMUC has a written plan that describes the framework for the assessment of student learning at University of Maryland University College. The plan defines the core learning areas, details the roles and responsibilities of faculty and staff, and outlines an implementation timeline for reporting the results of learning assessment activities.

The plan, entitled Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes, is revised annually to reflect updates and specify changes in assessment processes. A copy of the plan can be downloaded at <http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/>.

4. WHAT ARE “CORE LEARNING AREAS?”

UMUC has specified ten broad areas of content and/or skills as the expected knowledge for all graduates. The ten areas are referred to as core learning areas (or CLAs). The ten CLAs are defined in the Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. A copy of the plan can be downloaded at <http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/>.

5. WHAT ARE THE EXPECTED STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES AT UMUC?

UMUC has specified ten broad areas of content and/or skills identified as the expected knowledge for all graduates. Referred to as core learning areas (or CLAs), the ten broad areas represent the student learning outcomes for all UMUC graduates. The ten CLAs are defined in the Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. A copy of the plan can be downloaded at <http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/>.

Each UMUC degree program has identified specific program outcomes that are aligned with the overarching CLAs. The specific program outcomes represent the student learning outcomes for each program. The specific program outcomes are identified in each Program Assessment Plan and can be downloaded at <http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/>.

6. WHAT IS A PROGRAM OUTCOME?

A program outcome is a statement (or collective set of statements) that specifies what a student will know, understand, and /or be able to do upon successful completion of a UMUC degree program. The statement(s) may also be known as the learning outcomes for a degree program. At UMUC, each degree program has identified specific program outcomes that are aligned with the overarching core learning areas (CLAs). The specific program outcomes represent the student learning outcomes for each program. The specific program outcomes are identified in each Program Assessment Plan and can be downloaded at <http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/>.

7. WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN INSTITUTIONAL-LEVEL ASSESSMENT, SCHOOL-LEVEL ASSESSMENT, AND PROGRAM-LEVEL ASSESSMENT?

The Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes emphasizes the assessment of student learning at different levels of institutional operation, including institutional-level, school-level, and program-level assessment.

Institutional-level assessment is the assessment of students that crosses programs and divisions. Results broadly capture the current level of UMUC learning as an institution. School-level assessment is the evaluation of student learning using school-wide tools that assess students across programs and divisions. Program-level assessment is the evaluation of student learning experiences within one specific program of study.

More specific information about each level of assessment is provided in the Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. A copy of the plan can be downloaded at <http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/>.

8. DOES EACH UMUC COURSE HAVE TO ADDRESS ALL CORE LEARNING AREAS OR ALL PROGRAM OUTCOMES?

While each degree program is expected to imbed all core learning areas (CLAs) within the program of study, each course within a program is not expected to be aligned nor should be aligned with every CLA. Different courses are expected to have different emphases and, as a result, CLAs are emphasized differently within individual courses.

9. WHO AT UMUC HAS A ROLE IN THE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING?

Everyone at UMUC plays a critical role in the assessment of student learning. Therefore, all UMUC faculty, staff, and administrators should understand the

Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes, as well as the school-level and program-level assessment plans.

More specific information about the roles and responsibilities is provided in the Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. A copy of the plan can be downloaded at <http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/>.

10. WHAT ROLE DO FACULTY MEMBERS PLAY IN THE LEARNING ASSESSMENT EFFORT?

Faculty play a critical role in defining and assessing the expected program outcomes. The heart of learning assessment lies in the willingness of faculty to embrace responsibility for this role and to work collaboratively and continuously toward effective learning assessment practices.

More specific information about the roles and responsibilities of faculty is provided in the Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes, as well as the SUS Learning Assessment Plan and the GSMT Learning Assessment Plan. Copies of all plans can be downloaded at <http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/>.

11. ARE FACULTY ALREADY DOING STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT? HOW IS STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT DIFFERENT FROM REGULAR EVALUATION OF STUDENTS?

Assessing students in class is often called “classroom assessment,” as opposed to “program assessment” or “student learning assessment.” Within “classroom assessment,” faculty regularly conduct assessment to determine how much students have learned in a class and to provide a calculation of a course grade. Building upon these class-level activities, a comprehensive approach for student learning assessment assesses how the university is fulfilling the mission by looking at assessment results of groups of students in many or all programs. When assessment is summarized and reviewed as a group effort and not as performance of individual students, then results provide an expanded perspective of effectiveness. Results can then be used to inform curricular review and revision.

12. DOES STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT INFRINGE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM?

Learning assessment activities do not infringe upon academic freedom. Faculty set the standards for what a graduate of a particular program is expected to know, value, and be able to do. Faculty measure student performance and decide what curricular or program changes are necessary in order to improve student knowledge within the major.

13. CAN UMUC JUST USE THE CUMULATIVE GRADE POINT AVERAGE OF STUDENTS AS THE MEASURE OF STUDENT LEARNING?

The emphasis for student learning assessment is on what students are expected to know, express, and be able to do upon graduation. Therefore, a set of explicit performance indicators is necessary to measure outcomes that the cumulative grade point average of a student does not capture. Grades provide a measurement of individual performance. A comprehensive student learning assessment process provides a measurement of institutional-wide, school-wide, or program-wide performance.

Grades are assigned based upon what students accomplished in one class. An assessment program is designed to determine how well and/or how well students as a group have learned as a result of going through an entire program. Within a comprehensive assessment process, faculty can discover possible gaps in student learning.

14. IS THERE AN EXAMPLE OR MODEL FOR STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

There is no one prescriptive model for an effective student learning assessment process. Institutions are encouraged to design processes and tools that meet the needs of the respective institutional mission. The ways in which an institution carries out assessment activities and demonstrates the level of student learning is clearly an institutional prerogative. With that said, there are many examples of institutions that have effectively used assessment results to improve student learning and refine curriculum. The list of resources available at <http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/> provides examples of effective models and strategies.

15. WHAT ARE THE “PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE” RELATED TO STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

In 1992, nine principles of good practice related to assessment were developed by the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Assessment Forum to guide the development of effective assessment practices. The nine principles are:

1. *The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.*
Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement. Its effective practice, then, begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for students and strive to help them achieve. Educational values should drive not only what we choose to assess but also how we do so. Where questions about educational mission and values are skipped over, assessment threatens to be an exercise in measuring what's easy, rather than a process of improving what we really care about.

2. *Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.* Learning is a complex process. It entails not only what students know but what they can do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes, and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom. Assessment should reflect these understandings by employing a diverse array of methods, including those that call for actual performance, using them over time so as to reveal change, growth, and increasing degrees of integration. Such an approach aims for a more complete and accurate picture of learning, and therefore firmer bases for improving our students' educational experience.
3. *Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.* Assessment is a goal-oriented process. It entails comparing educational performance with educational purposes and expectations--these derived from the institution's mission, from faculty intentions in program and course design, and from knowledge of students' own goals. Where program purposes lack specificity or agreement, assessment as a process pushes a campus toward clarity about where to aim and what standards to apply; assessment also prompts attention to where and how program goals will be taught and learned. Clear, shared, implementable goals are the cornerstone for assessment that is focused and useful.
4. *Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.* Information about outcomes is of high importance; where students "end up" matters greatly. But to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way--about the curricula, teaching, and kind of student effort that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment can help us understand which students learn best under what conditions; with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve the whole of their learning.
5. *Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic.* Assessment is a process whose power is cumulative. Though isolated, "one-shot" assessment can be better than none, improvement over time is best fostered when assessment entails a linked series of cohorts of students; it may mean collecting the same examples of student performance or using the same instrument semester after semester. The point is to monitor progress toward intended goals in a spirit of continuous improvement. Along the way, the assessment process itself should be evaluated and refined in light of emerging insights.
6. *Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.* Student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility. Thus,

while assessment efforts may start small, the aim over time is to involve people from across the educational community. Faculty play an especially important role, but assessment's questions can't be fully addressed without participation by student-affairs educators, librarians, administrators, and students. Assessment may also involve individuals from beyond the campus (alumni/ae, trustees, employers) whose experience can enrich the sense of appropriate aims and standards for learning. Thus understood, assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement.

7. *Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.* Assessment recognizes the value of information in the process of improvement. But to be useful, information must be connected to issues or questions that people really care about. This implies assessment approaches that produce evidence that relevant parties will find credible, suggestive, and applicable to decisions that need to be made. It means thinking in advance about how the information will be used, and by whom. The point of assessment is not to gather data and return "results"; it is a process that starts with the questions of decision-makers, that involves them in the gathering and interpreting of data, and that informs and helps guide continuous improvement.
8. *Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.* Assessment alone changes little. Its greatest contribution comes on campuses where the quality of teaching and learning is visibly valued and worked at. On such campuses, the push to improve educational performance is a visible and primary goal of leadership; improving the quality of undergraduate education is central to the institution's planning, budgeting, and personnel decisions. On such campuses, information about learning outcomes is seen as an integral part of decision making, and avidly sought.
9. *Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public. There is a compelling public stake in education.* As educators, we have a responsibility to the publics that support or depend on us to provide information about the ways in which our students meet goals and expectations. But that responsibility goes beyond the reporting of such information; our deeper obligation--to ourselves, our students, and society--is to improve. Those to whom educators are accountable have a corresponding obligation to support such attempts at improvement.

The authors of these nine assessment principles were Alexander W. Astin, Trudy W. Banta, K. Patricia Cross, Elaine El-Khawas, Peter T. Ewell, Pat Hutchings, Theodore J. Marchese, Kay M. McClenney, Marcia Mentkowski, Margaret A.

Miller, E. Thomas Moran, and Barbara D. Wright. A tenth principle was later identified in Assessment in Practice (Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996):

10. *Assessment is most effective when undertaken in an environment that is receptive, supportive, and enabling.* More specifically, successful assessment requires an environment characterized by effective leadership, administrative commitment, adequate resources (for example, clerical support and money), faculty and staff development opportunities, and time. (p. 62)

16. IS STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT NEW TO UMUC?

Discussions about student learning assessment have been occurring at UMUC since early 2001. However, what is relatively new is the unified effort to implement Program Assessment Plans that are aligned with the specified core learning areas (CLAs). A detailed history of student learning assessment activities is described within the Institutional Plan for the Assessment of Student Learning Assessment which also details all completed learning assessment activities to date.

UMUC has always assessed student learning outcomes via course examinations, projects, papers, internships, etc. The difference about the institutional student learning assessment process is that UMUC is now demonstrating evidence of whether students are learning what is expected.

17. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DIRECT AND INDIRECT MEASURES OF ASSESSMENT?

Assessments may be carried out in many different ways, depending upon the depth of information and nature of what is being assessed. Assessment methods are categorized into the two categories of direct assessments and indirect assessments.

Direct assessment methods are actual student work that determines whether students have learned what faculty have expected to be learned. Direct assessment methods include: student portfolios, senior projects, examinations, standardized tests, internships and other field experiences, course assignments, etc.

Indirect assessment methods require that faculty infer actual student abilities, knowledge, and values rather than observe abilities through direct methods. Indirect assessment methods include: student surveys, exit interviews and focus groups, etc.

18. WHAT TYPE OF DOCUMENTATION IS A DEPARTMENT/PROGRAM EXPECTED TO PRODUCE IN ORDER TO DEMONSTRATE EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

At UMUC, student learning assessment is expected to be an explicit part of department culture where evidence of ongoing efforts and the use of results is planned and documented. Each degree program is expected to have a Program Assessment Plan that consists of a mission statement and program outcomes. The Program Assessment Plan must also demonstrate the alignment of curriculum with program outcomes and the institutional core learning areas (CLAs). The implementation of a Program Assessment Plan is an iterative and ongoing process. After preparation and implementation of the Program Assessment Plan, annual reports are expected from each program that review assessment activities, summarize results, and recommend action or follow up, if necessary. The Office of Outcomes Assessment provides guidance on the development of annual reports.

19. WHAT DOES THE LEARNING ASSESSMENT EFFORT MEAN IN TERMS OF CURRICULAR DESIGN AND SYLLABUS CHANGES?

Learning assessment efforts provide an additional source of information/data to consider in discussions of program development and curriculum planning. For example, there will be a need to determine where within the program of study a particular outcome is covered and assessed. The answer may result in revision of course learning objectives. In addition, there may be instances where faculty will select a common assessment tool(s) across course sections in order to best demonstrate an outcome and any resulting improvement in student learning. There will be no changes necessary if the program curriculum (i.e., the learning objectives) match the specified program outcomes and student learning data show positive performance gains.

20. WHAT ARE THE EXPECTATIONS OF MIDDLES STATES REGARDING STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

The Middle States Association of Colleges of Higher Education is the regional accrediting body for UMUC. Two standards are required for accreditation that speak directly to the expectations for student learning assessment and institutional effectiveness. The two standards are:

Standard 7 – The institution has developed and implemented an assessment plan and process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals, its efficiency in the of its resources, and its effectiveness in assuring that its students and graduates achieve the appropriate learning and other outcomes.

Standard 14 – Assessment of student learning demonstrates that the institution’s students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional goals and that students at graduation have achieved appropriate higher education goals.

21. IS THE UMUC STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT EFFORT TOTALLY MIDDLE STATES DRIVEN?

Assessment of student learning at UMUC is not totally driven by the requirement of the Middle States Association of Colleges of Higher Education. A critical reason for student learning assessment is to help answer institutional-level questions about the core curriculum and the academic achievement of students. The results from student learning assessment provide data that supports a wide variety of institutional needs.

Although the Middle States requires all accredited institutions to conduct an institutional assessment of student learning, Middle States is not the only group that requires the process. The Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC) and the University System of Maryland (USM) also require universities to assess student learning.

22. HOW LONG WILL UMUC BE DOING STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

Efforts are ongoing. The process of documenting student learning assessment is part of the fabric and culture of UMUC. The process is a critical component within the institutional strategic plan, as well as a required effort for continued institutional and program review processes. In addition, maintaining an institutional learning assessment process is strongly linked to professional and institutional accreditation.

23. WHERE CAN I GET HELP OR RESOURCES RELATED TO STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT?

A variety of resources are available to provide help with assessment efforts.

For general questions and issues related to learning assessment, you may contact the Office of Outcomes Assessment by email (learningassessment@umuc.edu) or phone (301-985-7358).

For questions and issues related to the [Program Assessment Plan](#), you may contact the SUS Assessment Coordinator or the GSMT Assessment Coordinator.

For details regarding the institutional plan and the school-level plans, you may download the plans from the Office of Outcomes Assessment website (<http://www.umuc.edu/outcomes/>).

For suggestions on reading materials and resources, you may refer to the resources lists provided by the Office of Outcomes Assessment (see Links and Resources).

24. I HAVE A QUESTION RELATED TO LEARNING ASSESSMENT THAT HAS NOT BEEN ADDRESSED WHO DO I ASK?

Please submit your question to learningassessment@umuc.edu. You will receive a response from the Office of Outcomes Assessment. In addition, new questions are regularly added to the Frequently Asked Questions link.