Western Carolina University Unit/Program Assessment Plan

PREFACE

Two versions of this template are available, one with directions and more detailed guidance, and one without. **This version contains directions.** Complete the version you feel most comfortable with.

An assessment plan outlines the ways in which educational programs and other units intend to review their effectiveness and determine the extent to which their goals are being met. At Western Carolina University, we define an educational program as any curricular program that offers a degree, certificate, or standalone minor. Other units include (a) administrative support services; (b) academic and student support services; (c) research units, sponsored research programs, degree programs and courses where research is an expected outcome; and (d) centers, institutes, units and formal programs that deliver community and public services.

An assessment plan is evolving, strategic, forward thinking, and tied to the mission of Western Carolina University and the individual program or unit. Assessment plans are most effective when designed to provide your program or unit with actionable information, giving insight into where your operations (and the curriculum in the case of educational programs) are working well and where they could be adjusted. The assessment plan guides the assessment process, which is at the heart of institutional effectiveness.

We recognize there are a number of assessment plan formats and operational definitions that work well for particular units and programs. To improve the consistency and clarity of Western Carolina University’s unique institutional strategic planning processes and enhance institutional effectiveness, we are adopting a uniform structure for unit and program assessment plans. This will enable the institution to more effectively gauge the quality of our overall institutional assessment system, provide support and guidance where needed, and demonstrate internally and externally our continual improvement processes. At the program and unit level, it will enhance the alignment between program review and annual reporting processes, enabling programs and units to use assessment results for multiple purposes.

What follows is a template with embedded directions outlining Western Carolina University’s AY 2016-17 Assessment Plan. Each section begins with a brief over and rationale, followed by a set of suggested best practices and occasionally institutional and/or SACSCOC mandates. Questions, concerns, or comments can be directed to the Office of Institutional Planning and Effectiveness, Dr. Stephen Wallace, Director of Assessment, [srwallace@wcu.edu](mailto:srwallace@wcu.edu), 828-227-2580.

The general format for a basic assessment plan is:

**Cover Page**

1. **Mission of the Unit/Program**
2. **Broad Goals**
3. **Measurable Outcomes**
4. **Explanation of Assessment Methods**

**Approval**

The cover page for the assessment plan is on the next page.

INSTRUCTIONS—COVER PAGE

Step 1. Insert Division here

Step 2 (for Degree Programs, Certificates, and Standalone Minors).

Insert College here

Insert Department or School here

Insert Degree Program or Certificate here

Insert Degree or Certificate here

Step 2 (for All Other Units and Programs).

Insert Office, Unit, or Program name here

Step 3. Insert Date of Plan (or revision) here

Step 4. Insert Name and Title of Person Submitting/Revising Assessment Plan here

**1. Mission of the Program or Unit—Why We Exist**

The mission statement of your office, unit, or program is to be inserted in the space provided below. A mission statement is a brief, memorable statement that communicates the **purpose**, and **primary functions** and **activities** of your educational program or unit. An effective mission statement identifies your **key stakeholders** and **supports other primary mission statements** (e.g., departmental, college, divisional, and institutional missions).

Hierarchical Relationship Among Missions, Goals, and Outcomes

INSTRUCTIONS-MISSION STATEMENT

Step 1. Insert your mission statement here

**2. Broad Goals—Where We Are Going, Generally Speaking**

Your educational program or unit goals and corresponding SACSCOC Comprehensive Standards are to be listed in the table provided below. There are differing, inconsistent, and often times contradictory definitions of goals and outcomes in higher education. While goals and outcomes are similar in that they are useful in providing direction and context for program and unit activities and for strategic planning purposes, they differ in their level of specificity. For clarify and consistency, we at Western Carolina University define **goals** as broad, strategic statements expressed in general terms that guide the main efforts of the program or unit over the next few years (e.g., students are academically successful, athletics has an enhanced level of competition, IT prepares the campus for changes to business processes, student retention rate is increased, student engagement is enhanced, post-graduation employment is aligned with student skills and desires, new faculty hire is secured, funded research opportunities are increased, non-recyclable waste is reduced, community outreach programs are increased, etc.). Goals are derived from the main components of the unit or program mission. They direct us towards a fulfillment of the institutional mission and guide the formation of more specific outcomes.

In contrast, we define **outcomes** as more precise statements that explicitly describe what is to be achieved at the end of a program or substantial operational process. Outcomes include terms and behaviors that are directly observable and measurable (e.g., students will be able to design a system, component, or process to meet a client need; students will lead the development and successful implementation of a change project that addresses an identifiable problem; the time for removing snow and ice will decrease by reducing the average 95% bare road surface time to under 4 hours; all audits will be completed etc.). Outcomes are more specific than goals; they communicate the ways in which success will be measured.

Hierarchical Relationship Among Missions, Goals, and Outcomes

Best practice suggests each unit or educational program have a manageable number of goals, with multiple outcomes supporting each goal. What number is manageable varies greatly, depending on the mission, purpose, size, and function of each program and unit. As a *rough* guideline, aim for a handful of broad goals addressing the main elements of your mission—4 to 6 would be manageable in most cases. To provide reliability and consistency, each goal is supported by several outcomes that, when taken together, provide a good picture of how well the goal is being met—2 to 4 outcomes per goal would be manageable. Getting the right number of goals and outcomes is an evolving process, dictated in large part by strategic directions and imperatives. Too few outcomes limit the program’s ability to make adaptive changes, too many becomes overwhelming, weighing the program down. Be strategic in setting outcomes, emphasizing important, valued, and essential priorities. And recognize that you do not have to measure all goals, all the time.

A few SACSCOC accreditation and best practice caveats for goals:

* For all educational programs, there is a mandate to set both **operational** *and* **student learning goals**. This is an essential element of Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.1, which states that outcomes must be linked to established goals. To provide breadth, include a minimum of at least one broad student learning goal with at least 3 distinct underlying student learning outcomes. Specific Professional Associations (SPAs) may have additional accreditation expectations beyond our institutional expectations. The differences are primarily attributed to differing intended purposes and levels of SPA and institutional specificity. The primary aim here is to support Western Carolina University’s mission and strategic planning processes.
* For appropriate educational programs and units, it is effective and efficient to include a **research goal** and underlying outcomes. Doing so provides unit- and program-level integration of goals aligned with Western Carolina University’s mission and SACSCOC Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.4 (Research). Programs and units are encouraged to integrate research initiatives and activities into their broader goals as long as they support the unit or program mission.
* For appropriate educational programs and units, it is effective and efficient to also include a **community service goal** and underlying outcomes. This fosters unit- and program-level integration of goals aligned with our institutional mission and SACSCOC Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.5 (Community/Public Service). Integrating student learning, research, and community service goals provides a balanced approach to program and unit goal setting.

INSTRUCTIONS—BROAD GOALS

Step 1. Insert the full text of your educational program or unit goals in the first column in the following table.

Step 2. Indicate if the goal is primarily a student learning goal or an operational goal in the second column.

Step 3. Indicate the primary SACSCOC Comprehensive Standard each goal addresses in the third column (Standards are described as a note below the table).

Broad Goals:

| **Number** | **Broad Goal** | **Student Learning or Operational Goal** | **SACSCOC Comprehensive Standard Primarily Addressed a** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. | Insert the full text of your first educational program or unit goal here | Indicate here if this goal is primarily a student learning goal or an operational goal | Indicate here the primary SACSCOC Comprehensive Standard this goal addresses |
| 2. |  |  |  |
| 3. |  |  |  |
| 4. |  |  |  |
| 5. |  |  |  |
| … |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Note:* a SACSCOC Comprehensive Standards focus on five institutional effectiveness areas: 3.3.1.1 (educational programs), 3.3.1.2 (administrative support services), 3.3.1.3 (academic and student support services), 3.3.1.4 (research within our mission), and 3.3.1.5 (community/public service within our mission). Educational programs and units will most likely have goals that address multiple areas (e.g., 3.3.1.1 for student learning goals, 3.3.1.4 for research goals, and 3.3.1.5 for community/public service goals). | | | |

**3. Measurable Outcomes—Where We Are Going, More Specifically**

Your measurable outcomes and aligned goals are to be listed in the table provided below. As noted earlier, outcomes are more specific than goals; they communicate the ways in which success will be measured. Outcomes are more precise statements that explicitly describe what is to be achieved at the end of a program or substantial operational process. Outcomes include terms and behaviors that are directly observable and measurable (e.g., students will be able to design a system, component, or process to meet a client need; students will lead the development and successful implementation of a change project that addresses an identifiable problem; the time for removing snow and ice will improve by reducing the average 95% bare road surface time to under 4 hours; etc.).

Hierarchical Relationship Among Missions, Goals, and Outcomes

To provide reliability and consistency, each goal is supported by several outcomes that, when taken together, provide a good picture of how well the goal is being met—2 to 4 outcomes per goal would be manageable. Getting the right number of goals and outcomes is an evolving process, dictated in large part by strategic directions and imperatives. Too few outcomes limit the program’s ability to make adaptive changes, too many becomes overwhelming, weighing the program down. Be strategic in setting outcomes, emphasizing important, valued, and essential priorities. Note that it is usually ineffective to measure all outcomes, all the time—plan to measure several each year based on your strategic priorities.

A few SACSCOC accreditation and best practice caveats for outcomes:

* For all educational programs, there is a mandate to set both **operational** *and* **student learning outcomes**. This is an essential element of Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.1. To provide breadth, include at least 3 distinct student learning outcomes for at least one student learning focused goal. Specific Professional Associations (SPAs) may have additional accreditation expectations beyond our institutional expectations. The differences are primarily attributed to differing intended purposes and levels of SPA and institutional specificity. The primary aim here is to foster a move towards best practices and support Western Carolina University’s mission and strategic planning processes.
* For appropriate educational programs and units, it is effective and efficient to include **research outcomes**. Doing so provides unit- and program-level integration of outcomes aligned with Western Carolina University’s mission and SACSCOC Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.4 (Research). Programs and units are encouraged to integrate research initiatives and activities into their broader goals as long as they support the unit or program mission.
* For appropriate educational programs and units, it is also effective and efficient to include **community service outcomes**. This fosters unit- and program-level integration of outcomes aligned with our institutional mission and SACSCOC Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.5 (Community/Public Service). Integrating student learning, research, and community service outcomes provides a balanced approach to program and unit goal setting.
* For all educational programs and all units, consider establishing **operational outcomes** related to resources that impact educational support services, such appropriate instructional materials and facilities, adequate housing facilities, and the like. Establishing, prioritizing, and assessing clearly stated operational outcomes supports more effective data-informed decision making.
* For all educational programs and appropriate units, **quality student learning outcomes** are:
* **student learning focused**;
* **observable and measurable**;
* **of sufficient number** to add depth/breadth (≥3), but so many as to become cumbersome/intrusive (<12), 6-8 is manageable (unless mandated by accreditation); and
* **differentiate the program** from similar programs, with graduate programs having more complex outcomes that similar undergraduate programs.

INSTRUCTIONS—MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

Step 1. Insert the full text of your program or unit outcomes in the first column in the following table.

Step 2. Insert the full text of the broad goal each outcome supports in the second column.

Step 3. Indicate if the outcome is primarily a student learning outcome or an operational outcome in the second column.

Measurable Outcomes:

| **Number** | **Outcome** | **Broad Goal the Outcome Supports** | **Student Learning or Operational Outcome** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. | Insert the full text of your first program or unit outcome here | Insert the full text of the broad goal the outcome supports here | Indicate here if this outcome is primarily a student learning outcome or an operational outcome |
| 2. |  |  |  |
| 3. |  |  |  |
| 4. |  |  |  |
| 5. |  |  |  |
| … |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| *Note:* All goals need multiple outcomes to ensure an accurate and reliable picture. Educational programs must include both student learning outcomes and operational outcomes. | | | |

**4. Explanation of Assessment Methods—How We Will Know We Reached Our Goals**

In the table below you will describe each assessment method you will use to measure the degree to which each outcome is met. This section is an explanation of each assessment method you will be using to measure each program or unit outcome. The description needs to be in enough detail to communicate to internal and external stakeholders what each assessment is, when it will be given, who is responsible for carrying out the assessment, and what the desired overall target level of performance is to say that the program or unit is meeting the outcome(s). The goal is to continually refine your assessment methods over time to meet strategic needs.

A few SACSCOC accreditation and best practice caveats for assessment methods:

* For educational programs and units with student learning outcomes, **direct assessment methods are a prominent feature** (e.g., paper, product, performance, portfolio, test, exam, report, and other artifacts), with complimentary use of indirect assessments (e.g., exit survey, teacher evaluation, alumni survey, etc.).
* For educational programs and units with student learning outcomes, **DO NOT USE COURSE GRADES** as an indicator of specific student learning outcomes. Course grades are appropriate indirect measures of broad achievement and progress goals, but do not have the specificity to provide detailed feedback on student performance on individual student learning outcomes.
* For all programs and units, **integrate both formative and summative assessment methods** into your assessment system. Formative assessments provide information during a process, while summative assessments provide information at the end of process. Portfolios are wonderful tools for collecting both formative and summative assessments. Capstone projects are very effective tools for summatively assessing the full range of student learning outcomes at a point in time.
* Educational programs and units with student learning outcomes can capitalize on **curriculum maps** to identify key courses in the curricular scope and sequence where course-embedded formative assessments and summative assessments can most effectively be used to fine tune the curriculum. Operational outcomes for units and educational programs can likewise capitalize on **process maps** to identify key points to measure performance.
* High quality assessment systems are those in which:
  + assessment methods are **clearly described**;
  + assessment methods are **appropriate**;
  + assessment methods clearly explain **program- and unit-level targets**;
  + the **timeline** and **person responsible** for each assessment method are identified;
  + there is **more than one assessment method for each outcome** (to capture a consistent picture of achievement or performance); and
  + there is at least **one direct assessment method for each outcome**.

Below is the table you will use to clearly communicate each of your assessment methods to internal and external stakeholders.

INSTRUCTIONS—EXPLANATION OF ASSESSMENT METHODS

Step 1. Insert the title of each assessment method in the first column.

Step 2. Insert a description of each assessment method in enough detail that internal and external stakeholders can get a good idea of what the assessment method is.

Step 3. Insert the overall program- or unit-level target of performance in the third column.

Step 4. Insert the date(s) the assessment methods will be carried out in the fourth column.

Step 5. Insert the name and/or position of the person responsible for carrying out the assessment method in the fifth column.

Step 6. Indicate which outcomes the assessment is designed to measure in the sixth column.

Step 7. Complete the approval section by inserting the required printed names and dates that approval was made.

Handwritten signatures are not needed provided the report is submitted to the Department/Unit Head and Supervisor.

Step 8. Submit the completed report to the Department/Unit Head and Supervisor. The Supervisor is to submit the completed report to Director of Assessment (Steve Wallace, [srwallace@wcu.edu](mailto:srwallace@wcu.edu)), Office of Institutional Planning and Effectiveness.

**If you have any questions or concerns, don’t hesitate to contact the Director of Assessment (Steve Wallace,** [**srwallace@wcu.edu**](mailto:srwallace@wcu.edu)**) in the Office of Institutional Planning and Effectiveness.**

Assessment Methods:

| **Assessment Method** | **Explanation** | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Description** | **Program- or Unit-Level Target a** | **When Data Will be Collected** | **Person Responsible** | **Outcomes Assessed** |
| Insert the title of the first assessment method here | Insert a description of the assessment method here in enough detail that internal and external stakeholders can get a good idea of what the assessment method is | Insert the overall program- or unit-level target of performance here | Insert the date(s) this assessment method will be carried out here | Insert the name and/or position of the person responsible for carrying out the assessment method here | Indicate which outcomes this assessment is designed to measure |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| … |  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Note.* a Program- and unit-level target is the desired overall target level of performance is to say that the program or unit is meeting the outcome(s). | | | | | |

**Approval**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **REQUIRED SIGNATURES** | **Printed Name** | **Signature** | **Date** |
| **Individual Completing Report** |  |  |  |
| **Department/Unit Head** |  |  |  |
| **Supervisor (Dean, Director, Vice Chancellor)** |  |  |  |