



Office of Institutional
Assessment

ACADEMIC PROGRAM ASSESSMENT HANDBOOK

H.F. Robinson Administration Building
Suite 550
Cullowhee, NC 28723
828-227-2264
assessment@wcu.edu

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Assessment Overview

What is assessment?

Assessment is a process for gathering, organizing, and analyzing data related to a program's performance against its stated goals/outcomes. At WCU, assessment focuses on **continuous improvement**, which means that your program may reach its student learning goals right away, but it may also reach them incrementally, over a period of years.

To keep track of its continuous improvement, each academic program at the university will collect data relating to student learning and will then report that data annually in the form of a **Continuous Improvement Report (CIR)**. All CIRs are submitted to the **Office of Institutional Assessment** through the **Xitracs** software program. Both **academic/educational programs**, as well as, **academic and student support service units** submit CIRs.

How can assessment benefit my program?

Collecting and reporting on continuous improvement data helps you keep track of student progress against your program's stated learning goals. In turn, this data can help your program:

- Contribute to student learning, growth, and development
- Inform best curricular practices
- Ensure program quality
- Convince others of the need and effectiveness of curricular initiatives
- Support accreditation

Ultimately, your program can utilize its assessment data to strengthen the effectiveness of its practices, to find areas of necessary improvement, and to help guide decisions regarding future curricular actions.

What terms do I need to know to successfully navigate the assessment process?

- **Continuous Improvement** - the process of incremental improvement that occurs when institutions commit to assessing their programs and services
- **Continuous Improvement Report (CIR)**- an annual report submitted by each program that details progress on student learning goals
- **Measurement** - the method utilized to assess an outcome. *For example*, this would be internal data collected by your program (student assignments or exams), surveys, exit interviews etc.
- **Outcomes**: a term often used interchangeably with goals or objectives
- **Program** - a term often used interchangeably with unit or department
- **Strategic Plan** - the plan created and used by an organization to promote its core principles and values
See [WCU's current strategic plan](#).
- **Xitracs** - the software system used to submit CIRs here at WCU

Assessment Process

What is an assessment plan, and how do I create one?

An assessment plan details *the student learning outcomes (SLOs)* your program wants to achieve and then explains *how* those outcomes will be measured and *when* they will be measured. The Office of Institutional Assessment suggests **six to eight total outcomes** for your academic program, but please keep in mind that you will not need to assess each of those outcomes every year.

Instead, you should create an assessment plan for a five-year cycle, and each outcome **should be assessed at least twice within those five years**.

Here is a [template](#) to help you get started on your assessment plan.

Your assessment plan should organize outcomes in a way that is meaningful to your program. For example, your program may offer a specific course every two years; therefore, you would assess that course only in the years it occurred.

Once you have decided on the timeline for assessing each outcome, you will need to select the method you intend to use for measurement of that outcome. Detailed information on measurement types appears later in this document.

Your completed assessment plan should include similar information to the example below, including **1) your program's SLOs, 2) the types of measurement that will accompany each SLO, 3) a baseline expectation for student performance, and 4) a timeline for assessment.**

For example: Potential Five-Year Assessment Plan

Years 1, 3, and 5	Measurement Type	Baseline Expectation
Students in our program will be able to critically compare and contrast the foundational theories of the discipline.	Course-embedded assignment – A written essay assignment in the program's capstone course captures student progress on this outcome.	75% of students will score as either "meets" or "exceeds" expectations against the assignment rubric.
Students in our program will demonstrate a commitment to service learning and community engagement specific to our discipline.	Student Portfolio – Students document their service learning and community engagement in a portfolio, which is then evaluated by faculty each year.	75% of students will score as either "meets" or "exceeds" expectations against the portfolio rubric.
Students in our program can identify and apply the necessary professional standards for our discipline.	Multiple Choice Test– A multiple-choice test measuring a student's knowledge of professional standards is given to all graduating seniors in the program.	At least 75% of students will earn a score of 80% or higher on the exam.
Years 2 and 4	Measurement Type	Baseline Expectation
Students in our program will engage in research-informed practice.	Course-embedded assignment – A written assignment in one of the program's courses captures student progress on this outcome.	75% of students will score as either "meets" or "exceeds" expectations against the assignment rubric.
Students in our program will engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in professional practice.	Course-embedded presentation – An oral presentation in one of the program's required courses captures student progress on this outcome.	75% of students will score as either "meets" or "exceeds" expectations against the presentation rubric.

What is the process for identifying appropriate student learning outcomes?

Academic programs should utilize **student learning outcomes** (SLOs) in WCU's continuous improvement process.

When creating your program's SLOs, all faculty in the program should collaborate to answer the following:

- **What specific information are we trying to teach the students in our program?**
- **What specific skills or knowledge do we want students to demonstrate by the time they graduate with a degree in our major?**

Also, please remember student learning outcomes are not necessarily static – **they can be changed over time to allow for adjustments in a program’s goals**. If your program starts out with one set of outcomes but is convinced by the resulting assessment data to revise those outcomes at a future date or to create new ones, that is perfectly okay. You simply need to let the Office of Institutional Assessment know about any change to your SLOs, and we will be sure to update our records.

Please note: If an academic program does not answer to an external accreditation agency, then the program itself is wholly responsible for formulating and revising its own SLOs. However, quite a few of WCU’s academic programs ARE externally accredited, especially in the Colleges of Health and Human Sciences and Business (among others). If your program works with an external accreditor, that accreditor may dictate specific SLOs to which you must adhere. **If that’s the case, please let the Office of Institutional Assessment know that your SLOs are set by an external agency so that we may make a note of it in our records.**

How do I measure outcomes?

You can measure student learning outcomes through **direct** or **indirect** measures, but please note that we prefer you focus on **direct measures of learning** in WCU’s continuous improvement process. There are conceptual differences between the two methods, and each method is described in more detail below.

	Direct	Indirect
Relation	Measures student performance against prescribed academic content and/or skills	Measures a student’s perception of their own learning
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Exams ○ Quizzes ○ Presentations ○ Papers/essays ○ Any assignment that directly relates to the skills measured by the SLO. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interviews ○ Focus Groups ○ Surveys ○ Reflection papers

Table 1: Adapted from Banta, T., & Palomba, C. (2014). Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

There is certainly value in utilizing indirect measures of student learning. For example, an exit survey for graduating seniors may ask students to reflect on their own experiences in the major. While programs may very well want to know how students perceive their own experience, that data should remain internal to your program. **When you report your assessment data to the Office of Institutional Assessment each year, please include assessment data relating only to direct measures of learning.**

Also, please note that your program’s direct measures of learning **should not rely on or report a student’s letter grade** as the “measure” of whether they learned or demonstrated a skill. Instead, our office (and SACSCOC, our university accrediting body) is more interested in knowing HOW students assessed on an assignment. For example,

- When citing a **multiple-choice exam** as the assessment instrument, please report both the test questions and correct answers.
- When citing a **written essay** as the assessment instrument, please detail the rubric that was used to score the student’s skill level against the learning outcome. For assessment purposes, we request that a rubric score student work as either “exceeding,” “meeting,” or “below” expectations, and the resulting rubric would detail exactly what characteristics the work should display to fall within each of the three categories.

How do I analyze the data?

Let's say you have identified an assignment as the direct measure of student learning. Students have now completed that assignment, and it has been scored against a rubric and/or an answer key. **The next step is to compile and organize the resulting data.** You may want to create a table or graph to see the patterns more easily. Once the data is organized, do any clear patterns emerge? What does the data tell you about student performance against the program's SLOs?

You should also keep in mind the comparisons you may make during data analysis. The various comparisons include:

- A group of students at a common point in time
- Tracking and comparing cohorts of students
- A group of students at a particular point in time to answer a relatively focused question
- Collecting data before a learning experience (through a pre-test, perhaps) and then asking the same questions after a learning experience to track student learning on a particular subject.

Disaggregating Data

As you assess your program's SLOs, please disaggregate your data when possible – meaning please break down the data into smaller informational categories. Examples could include showing data by **student year at the university, distance v. residential students, or performance on specific test questions**, though there are many ways to disaggregate the data that may be more appropriate to your program. Disaggregating a learning measure strongly supports the assessment process because it points out very specific areas of strength and/or necessary improvement.

Consider the following hypothetical example:

SLO: *Students in our program can identify and apply the necessary professional standards for our discipline.*

The direct measurement instrument: A five-question multiple-choice exam

(Usually you would need to include additional questions for a more robust assessment, but for the example's simplicity, we are assuming a five-question test.)

30 students completed the exam in the program's capstone course. Disaggregated results appear in the table below.

Exam questions	Results
Question 1:	12/30 correct
Question 2:	28/30 correct
Question 3:	30/30 correct
Question 4:	20/30 correct
Question 5:	29/30 correct

As the data suggests, students seem to be struggling with the concepts covered in both **Question 1** and **Question 4**. These results indicate that the program may want to make curricular improvements to better convey the content measured by those questions.

Continuous Improvement

I have analyzed the data – what’s next?

Now you need to use your data analysis to inform and implement improvement actions within your program; this is perhaps the most critical step in the continuous improvement process. Based on the story told by your data, what improvements might you make to further strengthen the program’s effectiveness and move the program closer to meeting its stated outcomes? **Decide on those actions and create a strategy for implementing them in the coming year.**

Keep in mind that some of the improvements you suggest may be minor and easy to implement, but others may require more substantial changes and take years to achieve their desired results. Both are acceptable and expected as a part of the assessment process.

Each year you will submit a summary of your annual program assessment in the form of a **continuous improvement report (CIR)** to the university.

What information do I need to include in my CIR?

First, you will share what improvements have been implemented for each outcome as a result of your last CIR assessment. Next, you will include a description of your assessment measure for the current cycle (i.e., exam, portfolio, presentation, etc.), along with specific details on how it was implemented. Then you will detail your assessment results, including whether the baseline target was met, how the data was analyzed, and a brief comparison to previous assessment results. Finally, you will list your recommendations for continuous improvement based on the assessment results.

What is the timeline for assessment at WCU?



What feedback will I receive, and what do I do when I receive it?

Once your CIR has been received by the Office of Institutional Assessment, we will review it over the next several weeks/months. When we review your CIR, we are looking to see if you answered each question thoroughly and provided substantial information about your assessment practices.

We use a CIR Checklist (a section of which is shown on the next page) to provide continuous improvement feedback to all programs/units on campus.

The most important aspects of continuous improvement are indicated by an asterisk, and you’ll notice you are given a **Yes**, **No**, or **Partial** score for each outcome. In addition, you will receive formative feedback for each section of the CIR.

SAMPLE FEEDBACK FORM: Academic Program CIRs

CIR feedback is based on two principal questions:

1. Are the responses to the guiding questions in each section of the CIR present?
2. Does the section in the CIR support expectations for continuous improvement of student learning and accreditation?

Feedback is organized by CIR section and by SLOs reported by the program for the 2021-2022 academic year. The most important aspects of continuous improvement of student learning are indicated with an *.

Responses to the feedback categories below are labeled **Yes (Y)**, **No (N)**, and **Partially (P)**.

	SLO 1	SLO 2	SLO 3	SLO 4
1. Student Learning Outcome				
*Outcome focuses on learning/educational experiences of students				
*Outcome is clearly defined with measurable action verbs				
A category/topic is identified for each outcome from the list in Appendix 1.				
Formative Feedback:				
1.1 - *Improvement Actions Since Last Assessment				
*Improvement actions focus on educational experiences (e.g., pedagogical and/or curricular) – See examples in Appendix 2.				
*The improvement action is related to the outcome				
The description supports an understanding of what occurred to improve student learning since last assessment				
Formative Feedback:				
1.2 and 1.3 - Assessment Process and Method – the When, Where, Who, How, and Why				
The timeline for assessment is described in detail.				
Documentation includes information re: the number and academic level of students included in assessment.				
Choice of assessment instrument is explained (why a particular course, assignment, or test?)				
*Rubric aligns with the intended outcome.				
*Learning outcomes are assessed with direct measures of learning (not solely student perceptions of their learning)				
*Assessment activities measure the outcome				
Formative Feedback:				

Resources and Contact Information

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions – we are here to help you!

Office of Institutional Assessment
Western Carolina University
H.F. Robinson Administration Building, Suite 550
Cullowhee, NC 28723
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Additional Resources can be found on our website: <https://www.wcu.edu/learn/office-of-the-provost/assessment-and-program-review/>

