

Student Outcomes Assessment Guide for Departments

Montana State University's Student Outcomes Assessment Policy places the primary responsibility for conducting and documenting assessment at the unit level (department or college as appropriate). This includes developing, and regularly reviewing, learning objectives and a coordinated assessment plan, collecting and evaluating assessment data, and making decisions based on what is learned. For accreditation purposes, it is important that this process, including the faculty participation and resulting decision-making, be documented. Units are not required to share data.

Many MSU units—primarily those with their own professional accrediting agencies—already conduct thorough and well-documented assessment. Many other units regularly gather information from students and faculty and make decisions based on that information. What is needed is to make that process more explicit and to document the process. Departments that have not maintained particularly active assessment programs are encouraged to keep their initial efforts modest. It is more important that assessment plans be implemented than for them to be comprehensive.

Timetable

Fall 2004: Each unit was required to submit an electronic document that provided an updated assessment plan.

Spring 2005: Plans were reviewed by members of the Assessment and Outcomes Committee and recommendations were forwarded to the units.

April 2006: Each unit was required to submit an assessment report in which the implementation of the plan for that year will be described. Note that there is never a requirement that data or results be made public, just that the collection and use of data be documented. A brief description of any actions taken, as a result of assessment, is what is required.

April 2007: Each unit was required to provide an updated assessment plan (to be repeated every two years) in addition to the annual assessment report.

Assessment Plan (submitted every second year, even if no changes are made)

The assessment plan should contain the information below. Plans are submitted electronically to the Provost's Office (jadams@montana.edu), reviewed by the Assessment and Outcomes Committee, and posted on the MSU web site.

- Cover Sheet (lists Assessment Coordinator and Degrees/Majors/Options)
- Assessment Management Structure
 - Clearly defined responsibilities for data gathering, interpretation, presentation, and action
- Degree Objectives

- A brief statement of what students are expected to learn in the major
- Expected Competencies—major specific
 - Discipline-specific knowledge, skills, and abilities
 - Communication skills (especially oral and written)
 - Problem-solving skills (e.g., critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, analytical synthesis, decision making)
- Additional Goals
 - Other desired outcomes of the major
- Plan for Gathering and Summarizing Data
 - This will describe data that will be gathered and how those data will be managed. It is better to carefully consider and act upon a limited data set than to gather more data than can be appropriately considered; both quantitative and qualitative data sources should be considered. Some possible data sources are listed in the appendix. The data will be most useful to faculty if they are summarized with the key finding emphasized. This summary document is intended to guide internal decision-making; it does not need to be made public.
- Plan for Utilizing Data
 - This will briefly outline how data will be shared with faculty (e.g., faculty meeting or retreat) and how the unit is organized to respond (i.e., what is the process for making curricular or other changes?).

We encourage you to involve faculty, committee members, and students in the assessment process. This type of involvement enhances faculty ownership, facilitates broader discussions, and allows for teaching and learning collaboration and integration.

Assessment Report (submitted annually)

Annual assessment reports are required each April. The purpose of this narrative document is to provide evidence that the assessment plan has been acted upon. It should describe the types of data gathered, give specific information about how the data were shared with faculty (including meeting dates and attendance if possible), and describe any changes that were enacted as a result. If any new assessments are planned to follow up on changes, these should be described. Reports will be submitted electronically to the Provost's Office (jadams@montana.edu), reviewed by the Assessment and Outcomes Committee, and posted on the MSU web site.

Appendix

The following is a list of potential data sources that could be adapted for use in departmental assessment plans. It is not intended to suggest that units need to be doing all, or even most, of these things. It is better to start with a modest plan and have it grow than to begin with an overly ambitious plan that fails because of lack of resources.

- Collect and review portfolios of students' work from several courses taken throughout the major.
- Conduct focus group interviews with students at different levels of the major to obtain student feedback on advising, courses, and curriculum.
- Conduct pre- and post-testing of student knowledge in a capstone course.
- Develop a checklist and rating scale for expected knowledge and skills. Have three faculty use these tools to evaluate major works such as senior projects, theses, and dissertations. Although many of these undertakings receive an "A" grade, reviewing content for specific knowledge and skills may reveal areas which, although acceptable, are consistently below expectations or standards.
- Evaluate videotapes of students' skills, such as student teaching or making class presentations.
- Invite outside examiners from business, industry, and the professions to provide feedback on students' presentations or projects.
- Assign a research/creative project to be evaluated by several faculty members.
- Administer the ACAT, CLEP, MFAT, or a locally-developed proficiency examination to test factual knowledge in the major.
- Administer a nationally normed, general education exam such as College BASE, ACT COMP, or CAAP, or develop one specifically tailored to institutional objectives.
- Conduct telephone surveys of students who left the major.
- Evaluate student performance in internships, practica, student teaching, etc., from the student's perspective, the faculty member's perspective, and the supervisor's perspective.
- Use "real-world" assignments such as case studies, recitals, and exhibits to evaluate whether students can integrate knowledge and skills developed throughout their progress in the major.
- Analyze performance on licensure and qualifying examinations for professional or graduate school.
- Try to get detailed information about performance from different areas of the examination
- Review course passing records. However, remember that percent passing is an accountability number; it does not relate to program improvement. Bragging about a high pass rate does nothing to improve the program. Program improvement comes by focusing on the failures, determining why they failed, and taking steps to correct any problems identified.
- Attach a short survey to forms required for graduation to capture feedback from students about to graduate. If you have a one-year-out alumni survey, avoid asking redundant questions of these two similar groups.

- Conduct exit interviews with graduating seniors, either individually or in focus groups, or ask for written evaluations of how well the major met their personal goals.
- Survey alumni.
 - Ask questions which relate to program objectives
 - Ask questions in such a way that the responses can be tracked back to program or curricular improvement
 - Administer the survey to a test group to see how long it takes and to determine whether those students interpreted the questions as intended
 - Consider the relationship between the length of time since graduation and the types of questions asked; career-related questions will provide very different information one year after graduation than five years after
 - Survey employers of alumni.
 - Determine whether you want general information about "our graduates" or specific information about "this graduate"
 - Make the survey short and pertinent
 - Recognize that the response rate is likely to be low
- Consider the possibility of focus groups with employers
- Evaluate students' written and oral communication skills in presenting their senior projects.
- Design one or two final exam questions to capture cumulative learning in the major and provide an in-depth assessment.
- Compare student writing samples from courses at different levels to assess student progress in writing.
- Assign students to cooperative working groups and evaluate the group project as well as group interaction and productivity.
- Maintain copies of student coursework to compare across course sections.
- When scoring writing samples, develop a scoring rubric and look for reliability across raters. Often the most meaningful outcome from this exercise is a common understanding among faculty of what constitutes good or poor writing.
- Remember--you can use samples!