

Developing an Assessment Plan for Academic Units

The primary purpose of developing and implementing an assessment plan for an academic unit is to document the achievement of student learning outcomes and the continuous improvement of the program.

The major steps in developing an assessment plan for an academic unit are as follows:

Step 1: State the purpose of your unit

The Purpose Statement describes why the unit exists. In writing the purpose statement, consider the following:

- Who is served?
- What are the primary functions?
- What are the core activities?

The purpose statement serves as a direct link between the college purpose statement and strategic goals and the more specific outcomes of the unit.

Step 2: Develop the intended outcomes for your unit (minimum of 3)

Intended outcomes are specific statements describing what students should know (cognitive), think (attitudinal) or do (behavioral) when they have completed a program. Developing your program outcomes is the most important step in assessment planning. Each instructional unit is expected to assess and document three intended learning outcomes annually, one of which will be a college-wide learning outcome (see note). The aim is to develop purposeful, substantive outcomes.

NOTE: In order to assess the FTCC General Education Core Competency related to critical thinking, all instructional assessment plans will incorporate this competency into Outcome #1 on their assessment plan. The outcome statement must include the following phrase “Students will be able to use information to analyze problems and make logical decisions (in, while, during, by, etc) ...”

Examples of types of student learning outcomes are:

Student knowledge of content specific to the major or the discipline

- Knowledge of content in the liberal arts
- Competencies attained in the General Education core requirements, i.e. oral and written communications, mathematics, critical thinking, problem solving, computer literacy

Behavioral Change and Performance:

- hands-on skills required for effective practice in the major or for employment
- interpersonal skills
- listening skills
- teamwork, leadership skills
- on-the-job performance; perceptions of employers or internship supervisors
- College transfer success; further education
- community contributions, professional activities
- job placement
- student persistence, completion

Attitudinal:

- current students', graduates', and early leavers' satisfaction with their program, the college, support services, learning resources, educational experiences, etc.
- employers' attitudes and opinions about program graduates
- student changes/gains in personal, social or ethical attitudes and values

One way to select a learning outcome:

A very good method for developing specific program outcomes is for the assessment coordinator and all other faculty teaching in the program to meet and prepare a list of the skills, knowledge and attitudes that all graduates of that program are expected to achieve. From this list, faculty can select the learning outcomes to include in their annual assessment plan.

Some good sources to review for developing the list of expected learning outcomes for your program's graduates are:

- The minimum skills and competencies required for entry-level employment in a field as identified by employers, advisory committee members or from occupational standards.
- Criteria and student competencies set forth by **accreditation, licensing and certification boards or agencies for occupations** such as nursing, radiography, pharmacy technology, real estate, accounting, cosmetology, welding, automotive, construction, truck driving and many other programs.
- Course syllabi
- Faculty group discussion and input
- North Carolina Community College's curriculum standards by program

Step 3: Establish the measures for each learning outcome

After developing your intended learning outcomes, ask yourself how you will collect evidence to prove students have the skills, knowledge and attitudes you have listed. Ask yourself what sources of information would provide you with data you need for determining student success? It is best to have more than one source of information to determine success. Remember not to use individual student grades as a method for measuring success but instead, you may use aggregate or group performance. Evaluations by an outside third party such as advisory committee members, a panel of faculty, criteria established by accreditation or licensing agencies or other experts in the field are all excellent procedures or assessment methods.

Here are a few examples of appropriate assessment methods that could be used for collecting data:

- Use of tests and exams locally or commercially produced to collect group performance
- Comparison of student performance against criteria established by accreditation, certification or licensing boards or agencies
- Student portfolios of work sampled and collected over time
- Pre-test and post-test comparisons of group performance
- Student juried exhibitions of work, products
- Clinical evaluations
- Products such as papers or oral presentations judged by peers, experts
- Observations of students in case studies or problem-solving situations
- Students' demonstration of hands-on skills
- Public performances
- Use of standardized exams for comparison of norms
- Licensure and certification exam group results
- Supported opinions of external or third party evaluators
- Use of surveys or interviews of graduates, current students and early leavers
- Use of survey or interviews of employers about learning demonstrated on the job or during Co-op experience
- College transfer student performance reports
- Graduate employment data
- Advisory committee opinions of the program and student performance

Step 4: Determine the achievement target

The achievement target is very important because it will establish the success criteria for that particular outcome.

The faculty should collectively decide the achievement target (success criteria). In doing this, you should think about the level at which students ought to perform or the "ideal state" rather than a modest target that you know can be achieved and is "safe" to assess. Using assessment data to improve a program is greatly

diminished when the criteria for success is not set at the level students ought to be achieving.

Here are just a few examples of achievement targets. Also included are the measures of assessment on which the targets are based. The achievement target is underlined and the measure (source of the data) is in **bold**.

- 95 percent of the graduates in automotive technology will be able to successfully demonstrate all the skills outlined in the NESA certification manual that are required for certification by NESA
- 95 percent of students taking the licensure exam for Nursing will pass on first sitting.
- 80 percent of accounting program graduates, as judged by a jury of faculty from the department, will successfully complete a major accounting project utilizing microcomputer applications during one of several classes their last semester.
- 85 percent of computer engineering graduates will agree or strongly agree with the statement on the Graduating Student Opinion Survey "The technology used in my program was up-to-date with technology in the computer engineering field."
- 85 percent of the college transfer students will have a GPA of 2.0 or greater the two semesters following transfer to a UNC 4-year institution as indicated on the annual Transfer Student Performance Report.
- 50 percent of the welding graduates will report employment in field on the Graduating Student Opinion Survey administered at the time of program completion.
- 80 percent of writing samples selected at the end of English 111 will pass the faculty written standards rubrics. No single rubric will show that more than ¼ of the ratings fell into the categories of "needs improvement" or "unsatisfactory".
- At the close of their final semester, 90 percent of the automotive students will correctly diagnose and estimate the cost of repairs needed on an automobile as assigned within a given period of time and evaluated by a panel of automotive of faculty.
- 90 percent of the program non-completers surveyed will report reasons other than dissatisfaction with the college or their program as cause for withdrawing from the college as indicated on their withdrawal form.
- A panel of reviewers will confirm that 90 percent of the student portfolios reflect the progressive development of critical thinking skills over time in the program.
- 95 percent of employers of the Business Administration graduates will indicate on the Employer Survey that they are 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with graduates' job performance and would hire them again.

Step 5: Conduct assessment activities/implement the plan

Put your assessment plan into action and begin collecting data. Determine which activities are to be conducted at the college level (such as surveys) and those to be carried out by you or others in your program. If you are using college surveys, check with the Research Office to be sure the questions relate directly to your learning outcomes so you will get back useful information.

Step 6: Report findings

Give a brief summary of your results, your findings and 'what happened'. Your summary should be complete enough to convince the reader the plan took place. Make sure your **results** relate back to the intended outcome. What did the findings tell you? Did you meet your targets for success? Is further planning and assessment needed? Keep a file or record of your more detailed documentation such as copies of surveys, skill check sheets, examples of student work, rubrics, etc. for reviewing progress over time.

Step 7: Develop an action plan (for unmet achievement targets)

For any outcome that did not meet its achievement target, state the changes, improvements or modifications will you make (or have already made) that will help improve student performance. Describe what future action the unit plans to take or has taken to insure the outcome is met. It may be the case that the achievement target itself should be reevaluated.

Step 8: Analyze your results

What did your results tell you? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment process? How did the students do compared to the level of achievement you expected? Is further assessment needed? In what direction will you go in the future? This step is accomplished by reporting any action, change, or improvement made as a result of how well your students performed compared to what was expected of them. Here are a few examples of some typical changes or improvements one might mention in the analysis section of an assessment plan:

- Teaching a new skill or concept in the curriculum to stay current
- Changes in the curriculum or course content
- Increasing time devoted to teaching a concept or skill
- Changes in teaching methods
- Pre-requisite course changes or changes to the program of study
- Amending syllabi
- Implementing advisory committee recommendations
- Integrating technology into the curriculum
- Raising your 'criteria for success' the next planning cycle
- Making organizational changes
- Changes in advising or support services

- Changes to policies or the creation of new ones

Steps 7 and 8 “close the loop” on the assessment process. They demonstrate that you use the information learned to effect **continuous improvement** in your program. This analysis lays the groundwork for the next year’s assessment plan and becomes part of a continuous cycle of reflection, investigation, and improvement.

Step 9: Develop an Assessment Plan for the next assessment cycle

Based on your analysis of what was learned, achieved, or examined in the recently completed assessment cycle, develop a plan for the upcoming cycle. Determine your outcomes (you may decide to assess a completely different outcome or revisit a current one), develop the measures for those outcomes, and set your achievement targets.