

Frequently Asked Questions about Assessment in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

Prepared by the
College of Liberal Arts & Sciences Assessment Committee
and Office for Teaching, Learning & Assessment

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What is the purpose of assessment?

The purpose of assessment is to take stock of what and how students are learning; to better understand the strengths and weaknesses in our students' learning. While the assessment project should involve faculty coming together to gather and analyze evidence of learning (usually student work), decisions about what aspects of student learning are to be assessed and the methods used to assess them are at the discretion of the department or program faculty doing the assessment. We encourage you to use the assessment to answer questions about student learning that strike your department/program as particularly meaningful and urgent. While typically assessment projects ask whether students are achieving a particular learning outcome, some have focused on questions about the kinds of assignments or activities that produce the strongest work around an outcome or have identified relative strengths and weaknesses in student learning at a certain point within the curriculum (e.g., gateway, capstone courses, etc.). The Office of Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (OTLA) is happy to work with departments at all stages of assessment, including design of the project, and can share examples of strong assessments done by other departments at DePaul.

Aren't grades already a form of assessment?

Grades do provide information about student achievement in a course, but they are different from assessment in a number of ways. Usually, grades are summary evaluations of *individual* student ability in a course or on a particular assignment. Individual courses are designed to accomplish many goals, and, as a result, grades provide an average score of overall achievement. Furthermore, different faculty have different grading practices and standards (so one person's B might be another's A) and some give grading weight to factors unrelated to a student's ability to demonstrate a particular learning outcome, e.g., deductions for absences or late assignments, class participation points, and extra credit.

So, by just looking at a grade of "B" in a course, one wouldn't necessarily know which things students were able to do particularly well or poorly. Assessment of student learning, on the other hand, looks at evidence of learning around a particular outcome for *groups* of students. This more focused assessment can provide more specific information about students' strengths and weaknesses and therefore offer stronger indications for whether and how we might strengthen our teaching or curriculum.

Why don't curriculum or syllabus reviews count as student learning assessment?

Syllabus reviews are sometimes used in departments for purposes of a peer or merit review, when a chair or program director needs to check that courses are meeting the standards of the curriculum or that course expectations and assignments are clear. A syllabus review may also provide information about whether the learning outcomes of a standardized curriculum or program are being communicated by instructors, but the syllabus alone cannot provide meaningful evidence that the assignments were properly met or that learning took place. Though, of course, a committee may use syllabi to plan assessment or provide context for student work. The primary purpose of the learning assessment project is to understand and address strengths and weaknesses in student learning. Our accreditor, the HLC-NCA, has asked for direct evidence that students are meeting our program- and college-level learning outcomes. So while other studies and types of assessments (satisfaction surveys, needs assessments, curriculum review, career plans, and so on) provide valuable information about our students' expectations, experiences and concerns, they cannot provide direct evidence of learning.

Isn't assessment really a form of faculty evaluation?

The LAS assessment committee not only sees assessment of learning as fundamentally different from evaluation of teaching but also expects that chairs and others with administrative authority will maintain this distinction by not using assessment results regarding an individual instructor in formal faculty evaluations (e.g., contract renewal, merit review, promotion and tenure process). Thus, while faculty evaluations address the question: “How well is Professor X teaching?” assessment asks: “How well are the students in our program learning, *how* do we know they are learning, and what would help them learn better?” In other words, faculty evaluation is focused on individual faculty performance while assessment is focused on collective student learning, and on using the results to improve future learning for our students. Assessing student learning should not focus on comparing one student or one faculty member to another. Instead, the focus is on understanding the students’ strengths or weaknesses in a given program/department

One way in which department or program committees can separate assessment from any perception that the process is really about faculty evaluation is by making sure collected student work is decoupled from syllabi and instructors before the assessment takes place (although it is recognized that in smaller departments, inferences can still be made. . Additionally, as the assessment committee members review student work, they should remain mindful of the many factors beyond quality of instruction that can affect student learning.

What is the difference between a learning goal and a learning outcome?

Learning goals describe what an instructor or program aims to do while learning outcomes describe what a student is able to do as a result of completing a course or program. For example, a learning goal might state that a course will “introduce students to the major research methods” in a discipline, while a learning outcome might state that students are able to “explain different research methods and identify strengths and limitations of various research designs.” In order to better focus on what students are able to do, learning outcomes should be clear, concrete, and significant (that is, they describe higher-order cognitive abilities). The OTLA can offer resources and suggestions for departments wishing to set or revise learning outcomes.

Do programs/departments need to assess a different learning outcome each year?

While programs and departments should aim to assess all of their learning outcomes at least once within each ten-year accreditation period, there may be times when it makes sense to reassess a particular outcome (e.g., to gauge the impact of curricular or pedagogical changes). Hence, when there is a good reason to examine the same outcome for two years in a row, or after only one year away from the outcome (e.g., to allow full implementation of curricular changes), we encourage you to do so. Departments and programs can access the learning outcomes on file with the TLA office through

CampusConnect, [Note: You need to first activate the TLA assessment page (instructions can be found at: <http://condor.depaul.edu/~tla/html/AssessmentResources.html>).]

Does my department have to restrict its assessment projects to a focus on student learning for majors? Or may we also assess how the non-majors are learning?

The committee recognizes that it can be difficult for departments to always know which students are (or will become) majors, especially in those courses that carry LSP credit where a variety of students may be taking the course to meet their general education requirements. . In other cases, focusing solely on majors would neglect the bulk of students taught by the department. For these reasons, we encourage departments to assess learning outcomes within their service courses **when** the course does not have an LSP prefix (i.e., LSP 110, 111, 112, or 200 , as these courses are assessed through their own LSP Advisory Committees, using liberal studies specific outcomes). If departments or programs decide to assess learning in non-LSP service courses, they should describe if/how the assessed outcome is different from what is expected of majors (level of ability, depth of understanding, etc.). Additionally, when it is possible to separate out majors from non-majors, we suggest that the majors be examined at the department’s expected level of learning for these students.

Can student perceptions and attitudes regarding a discipline or an area of study be assessed?

The committee encourages departments and programs to study students’ attitudes toward an area of study only to the extent that the assessment can show that positive, indifferent, or negative views are linked to learning outcomes in the discipline.

Should we assess graduate programs too?

The HLC-NCA advises that colleges and departments conduct routine outcomes assessment for all degree programs. We encourage departments that have both undergraduate and graduate programs to assess student learning at both levels. This could take the form of a single assessment that collects work from both bachelor’s and master’s students, but evaluates the work against different criteria. Some departments and programs rotate an assessment of graduate student and undergraduate student learning.

What about using interviews, focus groups or questionnaires to do an assessment?

The strongest assessments often do include multiple methods of gathering information about student learning. Interviews, focus groups, surveys, and observations can stand alone as assessment methods, especially where the collected data provides direct evidence of learning (demonstrated knowledge and skills). In some cases, these methods may best be used to complement a more direct assessment of student work, rather than to replace it.

In LAS, assessment committees have generally drawn on scoring rubrics, common test questions or writing prompts, or direct observations (of students' seminar behavior or public speaking, for example). That said, some departments have successfully used interviews and surveys to gather evidence of learning by, for example, conducting exit interviews to evaluate student knowledge or proficiency or using surveys that either specifically probe students' mastery of concepts or that ask internship/practicum supervisors to observe and evaluate student abilities.

How do I collect student work? Should it be final papers/projects/exams?

It depends on what you want to examine. Since not all assignments provide students with an equal opportunity to demonstrate specific learning outcomes, narrowing your collection to final assignments or exams can be an unpredictable way to gather evidence of a particular learning outcome. It might make more sense to begin the assessment by asking faculty if an upcoming course will focus on a particular outcome and, if so, what assignments or learning activities they will use to assess it. Whenever possible you will want to collect student work from more than one source e.g., multiple sections of the same class and or several classes that all cover the same learning outcome. For help on designing an assessment and collecting work, contact the OTLA.

What should the assessment report look like? How long should it be?

The LA&S report template can be downloaded from <http://condor.depaul.edu/~tla/html/AssessmentResources.html>. The template asks departments and programs to provide an abstract, identify the learning outcome(s) assessed, describe the process, provide results, and explain next steps. As you write the report, keep in mind that many of your readers will be from outside your department and discipline. Reports range in length from 2 pages to over 20, but most are about 4 pages in length and include appendices (e.g., data tables, scoring rubrics, etc.).

Who sees/reads assessment reports?

There are different audiences for assessment reports. In LAS, project reports are read by an Associate Dean and a six-member faculty committee (LAS/TLA), as well as by the Director and Associate Director of OTLA. The LAS/TLA committee provides individualized feedback to the various academic departments, and the reports further serve to acknowledge and support the assessment efforts made by each one of them. The LAS/TLA also may offer suggestions for future projects. Other readers of the assessment project reports (and feedback) may include administrators in Academic Affairs (e.g. Associate Vice Presidents), faculty committees (e.g. APRC), and, during periods of external review, accrediting teams. The reports are available to ALL DePaul faculty and staff through CampusConnect, though you need to first activate the TLA assessment page (instructions can be found at: <http://condor.depaul.edu/~tla/html/AssessmentResources.html>). Students and people outside of DePaul who wish to view assessment reports must contact the OTLA Office, which will secure permission from the department or program before sharing reports.

Who decides which academic unit will be the recipient of LAS' Annual Best Assessment Award?

Following review of all the LAS assessment project reports, the LAS/TLA Committee decides who will win the Annual Best Assessment Project in LAS Award. First and second runner-ups may also be named.

Can we use assessment results in our Academic Program Review process?

Yes. The components of the academic review process ask departments to identify their learning outcomes and to explain how they assess student learning of these outcomes, and what changes they have implemented as a result of doing assessment. Carefully executed assessment projects will result in a substantial collection of data and a documented history of assessments and subsequent actions.

Where can I go for help?

The OTLA can work with faculty from different divisional areas to assist in designing assessment projects that are best suited for the discipline's methods of inquiry. OTLA can help assessment committees with all aspects of assessment, including setting or revising outcomes, designing assessment projects, scoring work, and interpreting results. Please contact OTLA at 312 362-7177 or tla@depaul.edu.