

Developing a Program or Minor Assessment Plan

This document is intended to provide guidance on developing program and minor assessment plans.

Steps described below are interrelated. Your learning goals will affect what approaches you use to evaluate student learning, and thinking about these approaches can lead to refining the learning goals. Documentation of student learning can lead to curricular changes. One goal of assessment is to demonstrate the effectiveness of our academic programs—and another is to make our curriculum, and the experiences of our students, even better.

Step 1 – Identify student learning goals for your students

Identify key learning goals for students completing your major or minor. What do you want them to know, to be able to do, and to care about or better appreciate when they finish your program? Learning goals are an easily identified action that a student is expected to demonstrate in the terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes upon completion of a program or minor.

Well-written learning goals will allow you to determine if your students match what you have imagined; they should be able to meet specific goals that you have laid out for them. This is only possible if your goals are clear and measurable. One way to approach this is to consider the following questions while designing a learning goal:

- What ability will students have or what “action” will students be able to take if they reach the goal? Verbs like “design,” “estimate,” “compare,” “calculate” and “apply” might help you target the skills your students should have by the end of the course?
- Learning goals happen at multiple scales so keep in mind not only the lower order goals (e.g. “list” “describe” “define” or “identify”) but also the higher order goals (e.g. “apply” “contrast” “predict” or “critique”). Think about the level of detail and cognitive ability that you expect from your students for a given goal.

Step 2 - Develop an assessment plan

Identify--or create--aligned evaluations of student learning. How can you assess the degree to which your students achieve your learning goals? Direct measures of what students know and can do (e.g., their answers to targeted exam questions) and indirect measures (e.g., students’ reflections on their learning) are both

useful. A good first step is to think about what you already do, what information is already readily available. Do you conduct exit surveys? Do all your students write a substantial research paper in at least one course? These can be the foundation of your assessment plan.

Consider looking at other program outcomes. You'll often want to know more about your students and their experiences than "What did they learn?" and "What can they now do?" Possibilities include learning about their first destinations (what students do immediately after graduating) or their participation in relevant extracurricular activities. Or, it might be informative to see what other majors and minors they select or how many choose each concentration within your major. Compiling and analyzing this sort of information can be an important part of an assessment plan.

Build a timeline. You don't have to do everything at the same time. You might examine papers in advanced courses one year and answers to key exam questions in foundational courses during the next year. You might interview graduating seniors one year, but look at course and concentration selections in a different year. Your plan should involve assessing student achievement for each of your learning goals at least every 4 or 5 years.

Step 3 - Evaluating student learning

Departments and programs proposing new majors or minors, or changes to existing majors or minors, must present learning goals for their students and a plan for assessing the degree to which each goal is met. A key part of this process is identifying ways to find out what your students have learned—what they know, what they think, what they can do. Assessment plans will generally include two types of approaches:

- **Direct measures** allow students to directly demonstrate knowledge, capabilities, and ways of thinking related to the learning goals.
- **Indirect measures** get at this information in other ways. For example, you can gain insights on what students may now know and be able to do by asking them to reflect on their experiences. Surveys of alumni are another approach. Or, you can look at the content of your courses, and the patterns of courses your students take, noting connections with the learning goals. Faculty members, research mentors, and employers can provide helpful observations as well.

Some types of direct measures

- Performance on selected exam questions in foundational courses
- Scoring of a sample of student papers using rubrics linked to learning goals
- Comparisons of responses to exam questions given earlier and later in a quarter, or characteristics of papers written in lower-level and advanced courses
- Analysis of characteristics of senior theses

- Analysis of electronic discussion threads or of in-class presentations or discussions

Examples

- Students in our introductory and methods courses will have multiple opportunities to demonstrate critical thinking both orally and in writing, and will be assessed using criteria and rubrics discussed by the program faculty and tied to learning goals.
- During the penultimate quarter of their senior year, students submit one of the papers they have written for one of their 300-level seminars. The paper must be at least 10 pages with proper scholarly annotations and bibliography. The paper is reviewed and evaluated by the undergraduate committee, in part to assess achievement of the department's learning goals.

Some types of indirect measures

- Interviews of students completing Graduation Applications
- Responses to graduate survey questions
- Surveys of recent graduates
- Counts of students involved in faculty research or choosing particular types of courses
- Surveys of faculty regarding student preparation for advanced classes or surveys of employers regarding knowledge, skills, and attitudes your graduates bring to the workplace
- A curriculum map showing how the content and the learning objectives for individual courses, or for sets of courses fulfilling the same requirement, fit with your general learning goals