assessment handbook

NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE _ ST. PAUL, MN

INTRODUCTION

In the ***Handbook of Accreditation***, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools outlined their expectations for accredited institutions in five Criteria for Accreditation. The NCA's criteria specifically related to assessment is summarized below.

Criteria 3 – Core Component 3a. The organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each education program and make effective assessment possible.

Examples of evidence:

- The organization clearly differentiates its learning goals for all programs by identifying the expected learning outcomes for each.
- Assessment of student learning provides evidence at multiple levels, course programs and institutional.
- Assessment of student learning includes multiple direct and indirect measures of student learning.
- Results obtained through assessment of students' learning are available to appropriate constituencies, include students themselves.
- The organization integrates into its processes for assessment of student learning and uses the data reported for purposes of external accountability (i.e., graduation rates, passage rates on licensing exams; placement rates; transfer rates).
- The organization's assessment of student learning extends to all educational offerings, including credit and non-credit certificate programs.
- Faculty are involved in defining expected student learning outcomes and creating the strategies to determine whether those outcomes are achieved.
- Faculty and administrators routinely review the effectiveness of the organization's program for assessing student learning.

As indicated in this criteria, assessment of educational outcomes ultimately rests with the faculty member. Because assessing learning outcomes appropriate to the degree granted is a complex and sometimes difficult task, this Assessment Handbook has been developed to guide you through the process.

Assessment should not be viewed as an arduous task done to fulfill the requirements of our accrediting body. Rather, it is a matter of good stewardship to assure that programs offered are as effective as possible. It is important to continually collect assessment data to improve the education we provide. No program is ever perfect, and assessment helps identify areas of weakness and determine ways to improve programs and services. Assessment also offers opportunity to celebrate success and provide encouragement for the continuation of positive results.

ADMINISTRATION OF ASSESSMENT

All assessment efforts at Northwestern College are overseen by the Dean of Academic Programs who reports to the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. Assessment of programs at Northwestern College is the responsibility of the academic department and the faculty of that department. A standing faculty Assessment Committee reviews and evaluates institutional, departmental and programmatic assessment efforts following established institutional guidelines.

Following are the responsibilities of the Assessment Committee:

Provides leadership in the assessment of academic objectives.

Consults with and advises the Dean of Academic Programs on matters of policy and procedure related to academic assessment.

Oversees the development of institutional academic objectives.

Designs, develops, approves or selects instruments to most effectively assess institution-wide academic objectives.

Analyzes the results of academic assessment initiatives and publishes periodic reports to appropriate parties.

Receives, reviews and evaluates annual departmental assessment reports.

Evaluates assessment plans and reports of the academic departments in the program review cycle.

Periodically evaluates the campus-wide assessment plan.

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM ASSESSMENT FUNDAMENTALS

1. Programs should have a clearly stated mission or purpose statement that relates directly to the mission of the College.

2. Programs should have goals and objectives that flow directly from the mission and purposes of the program.

3. Objectives should be connected to the curriculum of the program.

4. Programs have selected "focus" objectives that are specific and measurable.

5. Multiple assessment tools should be used.

6. Criteria for success should be established.

7. Assessment results should be carefully evaluated.

8. Assessment should lead to improvement.

9. Assessment results must be communicated.

10. Assessment efforts are continuous.

PART I
ASSESSMENT FUNDAMENTALS

1. **Programs should have a clearly stated mission or purpose statement that relates directly to the mission of the College**.

NCA guidelines indicate that academic departments offering majors and minors are expected to have a " written statement of purposes and objectives for student learning that flow from the institution's mission and goals statements." The College mission statement is as follows:

> ***Northwestern College exists to provide Christ-centered higher education equipping students to grow intellectually and spiritually, to serve effectively in their professions, and to give God-honoring leadership in the home, church, community and world.***

Each program is required to have a written departmental mission statement. This statement should flow from the College mission statement and explain the departmental purpose, audience (who is served), expected outcomes and program distinctives. For example, the mission statement of the Communication Department is:

> ***The Communication Department at Northwestern College exists to prepare students for leadership in ministries or careers in communication-related fields. Through a careful balance of theoretical knowledge, hands-on skills, and the development of a Christ-centered worldview, our students will be uniquely qualified to be effective, critical thinkers and communicators***.

2. **Programs should have goals and objectives that flow directly from the mission and purposes of the program.**

Each academic major and minor is expected to have a set of written objectives or outcomes, which flow from the mission of the program and from the mission of the College. These objectives define what is expected of all graduates in terms of knowledge, skills and values.

Assessment of the major field should cover 1) the knowledge base of the discipline, 2) the skills essential to the discipline, and 3) the "intangibles" of the college experience such as integration of faith and learning, appreciation for professional development and lifelong learning, and those specific to the discipline.

Program objectives should be brief, clear statements that describe the desired learning outcomes for graduates of the programs. These outcomes should be comparable to those required of students in similar undergraduate degrees at similar institutions.

Classification of objectives:

Knowledge: Outcomes involving intellectual tasks. What students need to **know** to be considered competent in this major. Knowledge objectives typically include, but are not limited to outcomes related to:

History, philosophy and foundations
Terminology, vocabulary, major events, key individuals
Concepts or theories
Epistemologist - ways of thinking in the major
Content - the knowledge base of the undergraduate degree
Resources, careers, professional organizations, future directions of the field

Skills: Outcomes that involve doing something with that knowledge. What students need to be able to **do** to be competent in this major. Skill objectives typically include:

Writing required in the major (i.e. ,technical writing, business communication)
Speaking, presenting or performing
Manipulation of information-statistical analysis, problem solving, research skills
Products (artwork, scripts, multi-media programs, unit plans, etc.)
Ability to critique, analyze, evaluate
Skills in the use of technology, equipment, etc.
Physical skills

Attitudes/Values: Outcomes involving intangibles such as dispositions, attitudes, emotions and values. How students should feel or how they should be changed by completing this major. Attitude/value objectives typically include:

Appreciation
Worldview changes
Recognized values
Desire for additional study or lifelong learning
Spiritual applications
Emotional responses
Ethical principles

3. Objectives should be connected to the curriculum of the program.

When determining how objectives will be addressed in the program, it is helpful to develop a matrix showing where the outcome is introduced and developed throughout the curriculum and other experiences which students have as part of their program. Below is an abbreviated fictitious example.

Communication Major

At the completion of this major, graduates will:

Outcome	Method
Knowledge	
be able to identify, interpret and critically analyze major theories/theories in the field of communication	COM1005, COM2107
be able to identify the principle elements of the communication process and their importance to successful communication	COM1005
be able to define essential concepts and vocabulary used in the field of communication	COM1005
be able to critique communication events and processes	COM3106, Internship
understand the role and place of electronic media in the modern world	COM4105
understand the principle of communicating effectively through electronic media	COM4105
be able to analyze audience needs and tastes	COM3106, Project
have a breadth of knowledge of electronic media ministries	COM3106
understand the basic principles and techniques of electronic news gathering	CMC4345
be able to describe and analyze the characteristics of the major program genres	COM3106,Project
have the ability to apply communication theories to communication events	Project
Skills	
have the ability to use contemporary communication technologies	CMC4345, Project
be able to produce effective programming for electronic media	BEM1015, BEM2015, Project
be capable of writing acceptable scripts for broadcast	BEM1016
Values	
be committed to communicating the truth and to promote a Christian worldview and values	BUS4435 (Bible Elective)
be able to integrate faith, career goals and productions	Project

4. Programs have selected "focus" objectives that are specific and measurable

It is not possible to measure everything! As Nichols (1991) stated, "It is not necessary or even desirable for any unit of the institution to develop a comprehensive set of outcomes/objectives that describe every detail. . . Rather, each unit must identify the most important and key outcomes or objectives and concentrate on assessment of those outcomes" (p. 157).[1]

The faculty in the program should select outcomes which are most important, measurable, and preferably include all aspects of the educational experience - knowledge, skills and values. Between three and six focus objectives should be selected. Below is an example:

English - Writing Major

1. Graduates' ability to write will compare favorably with students completing a similar program nationally.
2. Graduates will demonstrate practical understanding of current mechanical convention and basic grammatical structures.
3. Graduates will be able to produce written work which is suitable for publication.
4. Graduates will understand the importance of and appreciation for professional growth and development.

In order to determine how the objectives might be assessed, it is helpful to develop a matrix similar to the fictitious example below which was developed for the English Writing major focus objectives. Following this matrix, Objective 1 - "demonstration of writing skills" will be assessed through requirements in two courses, a required publication, the CAAP essay test, and self-report data collected on Senior and Alumni surveys.

Assessment/Objective Matrix

	Research Paper	Publication submission	NWC developed Test	Standardized Test	Senior Survey	Alumni Survey
Objective 1 - Writing skills	**ENG3xxx ENG3xxx**	**x**		**CAAP Essay**	**x**	**x**
Objective 2 - Mechanics	**ENG3xxx ENG3xxx**	**x**	**NWC Editing Competency**	**CAAP Writing skills**	**x**	**x**
Objective 3 - Publication	**ENG4xxx**	**x**			**x**	**x**
Objective 4 - Professional growth					**x**	**x**

[1]Nichols, J.O. (1991) *A Practitioner's Handbook for Institutional Effectiveness and Student Outcomes Assessment Implementation*. Agathon Press, NY.

5. Multiple assessment tools should be used.

One of the challenging aspects of creating an assessment document is to select appropriate tools for assessment of outcomes. Below are some suggestions. Remember to keep things as simple and inexpensive as possible while still doing quality assessment. Use what is currently available, cooperate with other programs, and always keep in mind that assessment efforts already embedded in the program will be less intrusive and will provide very useful information. Some common assessment tools are:

Nationally Developed Standardized Tests
- Major Field Comprehensive tests (MFAT, ACAT)
- Licensure and professional exams (CPA, Praxis)
- Graduate School scores (GRE, GMAT)
- General Education (ACT COMP, CAAP, Academic Profile)
- Biblical Knowledge (AABC)

Locally Developed Tests
- Faculty-developed comprehensive tests
- Departmental examinations

Portfolios/Class Projects/Performances
- Collections of student work: papers, journals, projects
- Business plans
- Lesson and unit plans
- Scripts
- Senior recitals
- Exhibits
- Senior thesis, research paper

External Expert Evaluations
- Student teacher, internship, practicum evaluations
- Employer's/supervisor's evaluations
- External consultants
- Readers
- Peer juries
- Focus groups

Self -Reported Data
- Student surveys
- Alumni surveys
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Reflective papers/essays

Comparative Data
- Retention/graduation rates
- Job placement figures
- Graduate school acceptance/completions

6. Criteria for success should be established.

For each of the measures used to assess an objective, the criteria for success should be clear and explicit. Rather than use words such as *improve performance*, use specific benchmarks for improvement such as *improve performance on the GRE subject test by 10 percent over 2002 scores*.

If the data collected is self-report, the criteria for success might be

> "The mean score for each item on the XXX Satisfaction Inventory will be 3.25 or higher on a 4 point scale." Or "A minimum of 30 percent of all students completing the XXX Satisfaction Inventory will select "Strongly Agree" for each of the following items."

If course assignments are being used as assessment data, be sure to indicate the criteria for success.

> Rather than "80 percent of students will receive an A or B grade on their Business Plan," state it this way: " 80 percent of students will score at least 75 points of 100 for each of the three parts of their Business Plan: Conception, Presentation, Documentation."

Below is an example of criteria from the templates found in Appendix A.

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT - WRITING MAJORS

OBJECTIVE 1: Graduates will demonstrate the ability to write (including the adaptation of the writing style to various audiences) comparing very favorably with those students completing a similar program nationally.

MEANS OF ASSESSMENT
1. The overall mean score on the ACT CAAP Writing Skills Test will be at or above the national mean score for seniors.
2. Eighty percent of the writing samples in the graduating seniors writing portfolios will be deemed acceptable for publication or professional use by a panel of professional writers.
3. Ten percent of graduating seniors will have had submitted work accepted for publication by publishers deemed reputable by the English department.
4. The mean score of graduating seniors responding to the following supplementary questions on the Senior Survey will be 3.25 on a 4 point scale: a. The English program at NWC has prepared me well for my first permanent/full-time job. b. The English program at NWC prepared me to adapt my writing style to a variety of audiences. c. I feel prepared to compete with graduates from any other undergraduate English program.

7. Assessment results should be carefully evaluated.

It is not enough to merely collect data. When results are evaluated, the following questions should be discussed by the department:

1. How well were the objectives accomplished? Did we meet the criteria set? Were the criteria appropriate?
2. Did we have enough data to make an informed decision or should something in the assessment efforts be changed?
3. Does the data suggest we go deeper in our assessment? Should new instruments be found? Should other measures be added? Did we need more comparative data?
4. Would it be appropriate to wait and add more data before coming to a conclusion?
5. Does the data suggest the need for improvement? What action plans should be considered to address the issues identified?
6. Does the data suggest things are going well in some areas? Should we continue what we are doing?

Results will naturally fluctuate, so wait for patterns of evidence to emerge before implementing an action plan to fix a perceived problem. Suppose 95 percent of the students pass a state-mandated test this year, and the next year only 91 percent pass. Should you panic? No. Performances vary based on many factors and fluctuations in data should be expected. On the other hand, a drop from 95 percent to 42 percent should raise a few eyebrows and be acted upon quickly.

Results should be viewed as "indicators" not proof. There are too many variables to look at results with the confidence of empirical research. However, consistent results over time or obtained through the use multiple measures provide valuable information regarding program effectiveness. Repeated results showing lack of achievement of benchmarks or selected criteria should prompt review of methodologies, curriculum, or other factors which might contribute to disappointing results. In the same way, continuously obtained positive results may provide the department encouragement to continue current processes, methodologies, and programming.

8. Assessment should lead to improvement.

Assessment is more than collecting data and reporting results. Information must be used to provide meaningful change in the way the program educates students. Assessment efforts also provide the documentation that a program is successful in assisting students in meeting educational objectives. Assessment reports should chart the progress of new programs, support requests for faculty or staff, identify capital improvement needs, as well as suggesting curricular revisions.

9. Assessment results must be communicated.

Results of the assessment efforts should be available to stakeholders. As stated in the HLC documents *"Results obtained through assessment of students' learning are available to appropriate constituencies, including students themselves."* Others to whom the department is accountable might include, parents, faculty, administration, employers, churches, schools, etc. The Assessment office publishes institutional results which may include program information. However, departments and programs are responsible to make their constituencies aware of assessment results.

10. Assessment efforts are continuous.

Unfortunately, assessment is never "done." These efforts must be continuous with the goal of improvement of problem areas and maintenance of programs indicating successful outcomes. Data from the previous year should always be fed back into the system in order to make informed decisions for the next year.

PART II
ANNUAL DEPARTMENTAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

OVERVIEW OF ANNUAL REPORT PROCESS

At the end of each year, academic departments are required to review their assessment plan, analyze and comment on the results obtained and file a report with the Assessment Committee. Following are procedures which should be followed as you plan for your annual report.

1. **Review the Departmental Mission Statement**
   Review the departmental mission statement for possible changes and revisions. This statement is the core of the departmental assessment efforts so it should be up-to-date and accurate.

2. **Review the Departmental Objectives/Outcomes**
   Each department is required to develop a set of objectives for each major offered by the department. Objectives should include knowledge, skills and values. These objectives should be revisited to determine relevance for current programs. Newly established programs will need to develop these if they have not done so.

3. **Review the Focus Objectives**
   It is not possible to measure everything. The department will need to determine which outcomes you wish to focus upon. Focus objectives should be reviewed to determine whether they are a current and accurate reflection of the outcomes expected of the majors. Revise as needed. Changes in focus objectives should be noted on your assessment report.

4. **Review Methods of Assessing Focus Objectives**
   Using the templates provided, review the methods of assessing the departmental focus objectives. Revise as needed. Feel free to change the templates which are returned with the assessment report.

5. **Implement the Assessment Strategies**
   During the academic year, collect the data as indicated in the assessment plan. Enter the data onto the templates electronically.

6. **Comment on the Results**
   Using the template provided, review assessment results with the members of your department and comment on the findings.

ANNUAL REPORT FORMAT

Submit the Assessment Annual Report to the Assessment Committee. A template for this report is found in Appendix B. The following information is required.

- **General departmental information**
- **Departmental mission statement**
- **Focus objectives**. There must be focus objectives for each major if a department has more than one major.
- **Status of assessment strategies**. In this section comment on whether or not the assessment plan was implemented as planned. Some results may not be complete, some assessments may not have been administered, some case results may need to be combined or completed for more than one year to provide any indications.
- **Summary analysis of the results**. What is the data telling you? Do some results seem to indicate that the students are achieving the outcomes, or are there areas which seem to suggest the need for improvement?
- **Implications of results**. Include the changes, revisions, budgetary implications, etc. that might be suggested by the data collected.
- **Method of reporting results**. Comment on how the assessment findings have been or will be communicated to program constituencies. This may include information that is available, or information that is distributed.

This report should be received in the Assessment Office by October 1 of the following year. This will allow for the accumulation of data and the departmental review of the data. The report should include copies of the *Results Templates* for each focus objective.

Appendix C is an example of a completed Assessment Report.