11 Assessment of Student Learning

11.1 Scope

The following policy governs the system for regular and ongoing assessment of student learning in WSU undergraduate, professional and graduate degree programs.

11.2 Policy

Every degree must publish student learning outcomes and implement a faculty-developed plan to assess student learning, including measure(s) near the end of the program of study. The Office of the Provost, with input from the office of assessment for curricular effectiveness, the graduate school, and their respective advisory councils, may specify other requirements to support useful assessment and meet standards for WSU’s accreditation (see policies of interest, appended).

11.3 Definition

For the purposes of this policy, assessment refers to assessment at the program level, focusing on a) student learning in the program of study for a degree, and b) the related student experience. Program assessment is an ongoing process to support educational quality, curricular effectiveness, and student achievement.

11.4 Purpose

The purpose for program assessment of student learning is to provide an accurate and honest appraisal of: the extent to which students fully meet expected program-level learning outcomes; where there is room for improvement; and the strategies faculty, departments, colleges, and WSU are using to support and improve student learning. Assessment results can provide valuable information to faculty and program leadership to assist them in making informed decisions regarding their curricula and programs. WSU seeks to ensure that assessment occurs consistently and systematically and that its results contribute to university-wide planning that supports quality education.

To underscore the value of genuine inquiry into student learning achievement that supports educational quality at WSU, the Faculty agree that 1) assessment results identifying areas for improvement should be viewed positively, as an opportunity, and should never be used punitively; that 2) assessment results should not be used to evaluate an individual student, faculty member, or staff member; and that 3) assessment results by themselves should not be used for high-stakes decisions, such as program closure.

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11.5 Responsibilities and process

Roles and responsibilities for program assessment are outlined below. These may be adapted as needed by undergraduate, professional and graduate programs or by programs or colleges with specialized accreditation or highly individualized programs of study; the program’s assessment plan should specify any alternative distribution of responsibilities and processes. The purpose of designating roles and responsibilities is to efficiently provide useful assessment in each program’s context, meet requirements for specialized accreditation or licensure, contribute data to the institution, and support WSU’s accreditation.

11.5.1 Faculty

For each degree program, faculty with teaching responsibilities have a primary role in assessing student achievement of clearly identified, program-level student learning outcomes. Learning outcomes should guide the curriculum and be widely publicized (e.g. Department website, student handbook) and periodically reviewed for currency and utility, with input from appropriate stakeholders. Methods of assessment should include both direct and indirect measures, may vary from program to program, may rely on sampling, and may include external measures, e.g. Licensure examinations. Ideally, all faculty within a program, particularly those with teaching responsibilities, regularly review, discuss, and decide how to act on assessment data.

11.5.2 Department/school

The chair/school/program director is responsible for working with faculty to a) ensure each degree program has learning outcomes and an assessment plan that involves all campuses offering the degree, including online degrees, b) implement the program’s assessment plan, c) share results with faculty on all campuses offering the degree, and d) manage implementation of program improvements based on assessment results. For assessment in interdisciplinary undergraduate degree programs, all program chairs/directors are responsible to coordinate assessment and involve faculty who teach courses in the curriculum. For assessment in interdisciplinary graduate degree programs, all program chairs/directors are responsible to coordinate assessment and involve faculty from the various disciplines who work with students in the program.

With coordinating assistance from the office of the assessment for curricular effectiveness, the chair/director of undergraduate or professional programs reports on assessment annually to the dean, urban campus leadership for multi-campus programs, and the provost. Graduate program chairs/directors report to the graduate school on an annual basis. Reports include information adequate for interpretation of the data, including the role of faculty in assessment, and use of assessment data in decisions, improvements, or planning. Results and improvements should be coordinated and discussed with the dean and campus leadership, as appropriate.

Leaders of degree programs outside a department or school structure have the same assessment responsibilities as a chair or school director.
11.5.3 College dean/campus leadership

The dean is responsible for implementing effective assessment of student learning college-wide; establishing appropriate procedures and resources in the college; ensuring data flow and availability to appropriate constituencies on all campuses; monitoring aggregate and disaggregate results; using results of assessment of student learning to inform strategic planning and academic or learning support planning and practices designed to enhance student achievement. The dean is responsible for appropriately involving other campus leadership, such as vice chancellors, academic directors, or other designees who are responsible for implementing program assessment on their campuses.

11.6 Institutional leadership

11.6.1 Provost

Annually, the provost reviews and shares the status of assessment with leadership and appropriate university constituencies in a timely manner.

11.6.2 Dean of the Graduate School

The graduate school helps coordinate and reviews graduate assessment. Annually, the dean of the graduate school reviews and shares the status of graduate assessment with leadership and appropriate university constituencies in a timely manner.

11.6.3 Office of Assessment for Curricular Effectiveness

The Office of Assessment for Curricular Effectiveness assists with, coordinates, and reviews undergraduate program assessment. Annually, the director of ACE reviews and shares the status of undergraduate program assessment with leadership and appropriate university constituencies in a timely manner.

11.7 Participation in assessment

11.7.1 Annual review

The provost, deans, and department/school heads are expected to recognize and acknowledge faculty and staff participation in assessment activities through the annual review process at all levels.

11.7.2 Academic freedom

Faculty Senate affirms that assessment requirements do not violate academic freedom, and that responsibilities for assessment are addressed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities statement on academic freedom and educational responsibilities (2006):

Faculty are responsible for establishing goals for student learning, for designing and implementing programs of general education and specialized study that intentionally cultivate the intended learning, and for assessing students’ achievement. In these matters, faculty must work collaboratively with their colleagues in their departments, schools, and institutions as well as with relevant administrators. Academic freedom is necessary not just so faculty members can conduct their individual research and teach their own courses, but so they can enable students – through whole programs of study – to acquire the learning they need to contribute to society.

11.8 Resources and good practices

Good practices and resources are available through the provost office, the office of assessment of teaching and learning, and the graduate school to support faculty, programs, and leadership in assessment, and help coordinate efforts.

11.9 University accreditation

Program-level assessment activities and use of results are essential to maintaining WSU’s accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (see related policies of interest below).

11.10 Periodic review

The process of program assessment will be reviewed periodically by the provost, graduate school and college and campus leadership, and Faculty Senate, and necessary adjustments made so that assessment efforts provide useful data based on sustainable practices, and support continuing institutional accreditation. Periodic input will also be sought from colleges, campuses, and departments.

Faculty Senate 10/11/90; rev. 2009; 2014; 2016; 2018

11.11 Related policies

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU): https://nwccu.org/accreditation/standards-policies/standards/ See Sections 1.C.1 – 1.C.9, which include the central role of faculty to establish curricula, assess student learning for degree programs, and improve instructional programs.
WSU Executive Policy #29 (2015). This policy identifies responsibilities for multi-campus program assessment, including student outcomes assessment as follows: department and schools are responsible for overseeing student outcome assessment on all campuses contributing to/participating in the program. Campus academic directors are responsible for implementing departmental/school student outcomes assessment processes on their campuses.

WSU Faculty Manual, III C 4, Review of Faculty, updated for 2019