

**Academic Program Assessment Plans at California State
University, Sacramento:
Essential Elements and Effectiveness Criteria**

**Prepared by
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Introduction

California State University, Sacramento has demonstrated its commitment to excellence in assessment in a number of ways. Beginning in 1998, the university community began the work of creating individual departmental assessment plans which honored the autonomy and diversity of all of our programs while simultaneously recognizing our professional obligations to our public. In 2001 almost all of our programs had established learning outcomes and methods for assessing those outcomes. In 2006-2007 the vast majority of our departments created annual assessment reports which accounted for the ways in which these assessment plans had been implemented to support program improvement. In 2007-2008 Sacramento State established the Office of Academic Program Assessment and located the responsibility for coordinating assessment activities among all departments across the campus in this office. As this manual is being prepared, the university awaits its current crop of annual assessment reports, but all indications are that this upcoming set of reports will build on the important work that has already been done and will evidence a heightened awareness of where we are and where we must go as an institution.

Like most of California State University (CSU) campuses, our campus presents a range of assessment challenges. For one thing, many of our programs have been heavily impacted by a variety of assessment mandates for several years. Discipline-specific external accrediting bodies have required not just the existence of assessment plans, but clear evidence that these plans have been implemented and have generated decisions and actions that have led to program improvements. Because the various accrediting agencies have their own requirements for and definitions of assessment, it is virtually impossible for an institution of our size and scope to demand that all programs follow one institutional assessment plan template.

On the other hand, some of our programs and departments have been relatively untouched by external assessment mandates apart from the requirements of WASC, our institutional accrediting body. Just as Sacramento State has responded to competing designs and demands for assessment grounded in the differences among the special accrediting agencies by remaining flexible, WASC has remained flexible and has not placed burdensome demands for standardization of assessment plans.

This Handbook has been prepared as a resource for all of our departments and programs to use on a voluntary basis as they visit and revisit their assessment plans in the coming years. It contains a section that discusses the essential elements of an assessment plan; a second section provides a rubric that any program or department can apply to its current assessment plan as a way to think about possible improvements. The intention is not to impose another assessment mandate on our faculty; compliance with this rubric is not a requirement for good standing in our university community. The intention is to provide a modicum of clarity about common aspects of assessment plans that might be overlooked or misunderstood.

ELEMENTS OF AN ASSESSMENT PLAN

I) Clear, complete and measurable learning outcomes that highlight the particular skills, knowledge, values and attitudes that you seek to develop in your students. Programs vary considerably in how many learning outcomes they identify. The language below is adapted from University of Central Florida. Learning outcomes should be:

A. Specific

1. What are the critical outcomes for students in your program?
2. What are the big ideas concerning the skills, knowledge, values and attitude you want your graduates to have?

B. Measurable

1. You need to be able to collect data to determine whether or not students have attained the outcome.
2. Consider both what you want for your students and what is reasonable considering your resources.

C. Ambitious

1. Aim high but attainable
2. What would a “perfect” graduate look like? What “take-aways” from the major?

D. Results oriented

1. Identify the level of achievement of the learning outcome

E. Time bound

1. Determine a timeline for when you want to achieve the outcome

An example of an outcome that meets these criteria is as follows: All graduates will be able to describe the major events that shaped development of the modern U.S. economy.

II) A mechanism that links learning outcomes to the courses in which they are addressed. For example, a matrix aligning curriculum with learning outcomes would provide this information. The purpose of the matrix is to assure that you are addressing all your learning outcomes. A matrix can simply note which outcomes are addressed in which classes or be more specific by noting which classes outcomes are addressed (AD) (introduced), assessed (AS) (formative assessment of the developing skill), or attained (course in which student attainment of outcome is measured). Below is a sample matrix.

Course Outcome	1.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.2	3.1	3.2	3.3
100	AD, AS	AD	AD					
101				AD AS	AD AS	AD AS		
102	AS	AS					AD	AD
103			AS					
200								
201								
202			AT					
203	AT	AT						
204				AT	AT	AT	AT	AT

III) Varied assessment strategies linked to learning outcomes.

A. Assessment strategies can be formative and/or summative.

1. Formative assessment strategies will help a program know if students are progressing toward the achievement of particular outcomes. For example, an assessment at the end of the sophomore year for a student in chemistry to determine if that student has developed lab skills at a level sufficient to continue with more advanced training would be a formative assessment. Aggregating or sampling results across students would allow the program to determine whether or not students were on track to develop the competencies expected at graduation.
2. Summative assessment strategies will tell a program if students have successfully achieved the identified learning outcome. Assessing students' lab skills near the end of their senior year to determine if they have mastered the requisite level of skill required for graduates would be a summative evaluation.
3. Though PROGRAM assessment is rooted in STUDENT assessment it is also important to remember that program assessment is at the macro level. Therefore, for purposes of overall program evaluation sampling and/or aggregating of data may be common strategies.

B. Measures can be direct or indirect. Each learning outcome should have at least one direct measure.

1. Direct measures: These measures directly assess student behaviors or products that are linked to identified learning outcomes. Papers, presentations, projects, grades and tests are all examples of direct measures.
2. Indirect measures: These measures are based on a report of how well someone believes learning outcomes have been achieved. They may be reports of students, employers, graduates or faculty among others. Surveys, exit interviews and focus groups that focus on opinion are examples of these types of measures.

IV) Clear, explicit strategies for analyzing results

1. Evaluating results may include quantitative or qualitative analysis of the data gathered. Often samples of direct measures may be used to streamline the assessment process. Triangulation, the process of accessing more than one data source, is useful in validating assessment results. For example, the same learning outcomes may be assessed through a direct measure (an exit exam), and one or two indirect measures (student and employer report).

v) Strategies for using results for program improvement and development.

This step in the assessment process is often called “closing the loop.” The purpose of program assessment is program improvement. Thus the previous activities are meaningless unless the information is used in the context of program improvement efforts. Responding to results may include changes in the program such as:

- Re-arranging course sequence
- Changing syllabi
- Adding new courses
- Streamlining assessment measures
- Re-evaluating criteria

1. Determine how you are going to know if the implemented changes had the desired effect. If a program implements changes in response to the results it is important to have a mechanism for assessing the results of those changes. The timeline for determining whether any implemented changes had the desired effect will vary depending on what the program changes were. Therefore, it may be that you will expect to see improvement in the identified learning outcome fairly quickly or it may be that you won't expect to see a change in the learning outcome for several years. This would be the case for changes such as new courses, course sequences or a change to a first year course in which the outcome is not assessed until the senior year. The method for determining whether the change has had the desired effect may be as straightforward as repeating the measures that led to the program changes.

VI) Methods for reporting results in larger context and to public

Assessment results are to be shared with the university community as well as being available to the public. Such methods including posting on websites, incorporation into college or university reports and sharing with stakeholders in the community.

VII) Plan, timeline, responsibilities for assessment activities

1. Develop a timeline for implementing assessment plan. Some programs choose to assess all outcomes every year through an activity such as a capstone course. Other programs will choose to assess only some learning outcomes each year. For programs evaluating specific learning outcomes each year the assessment timeline should assure that all learning outcomes are assessed within each 6 year program review cycle.
2. Develop a clear plan of who will be responsible for the different activities within the assessment plan and of when they will be completed.

**Sacramento State Assessment Rubrics for
Evaluation of an Academic Program Assessment Plan**

Areas of the Rubric

- Set of Learning Outcomes
- Formative and Summative Assessment Strategies for Collection of Direct and Indirect Evidence
- Uses of Assessment Findings
- Qualities of the Assessment System

PART A: Learning Outcomes

Guiding Question #1: How **specific** and **measurable** are the **learning outcome statements**?

Learning Outcome Statements	Absent	Are Not Defined
	Needs Work	may be vague (e.g., “students will understand the knowledge base of the discipline” or “students will learn to read literary works”) or telegraphic (e.g., “familiarity with American history”);
	Acceptable	are mostly clear with substantives and active verbs (e.g., “students apply their knowledge of racism in American history to an analysis of current events”);
	Exemplary	previous plus statements communicate the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions graduates of the program have accomplished;

Rubrics For the Learning Outcomes

Absent	May not exist
Needs Work	May be vague
Acceptable	Has been vague
Exemplary	All previous plus discussed regularly

Guiding Question #2: How **integrated** are the **learning outcomes**?

Horizontal integration. Outcomes have been

Absent	not defined
Needs Work	assigned to specific courses in isolation
Acceptable	assigned to specific courses with the interrelationship of courses considered
Exemplary	prioritized and located within courses from a developmental perspective with careful attention to students' advancement to higher levels of education or career

Vertical integration: Links among program outcomes, department outcomes, College outcomes, and University outcomes

Absent	Are not clear
Needs Work	Are Not Clear
Acceptable	Are Made
Exemplary	are explained with a rationale provided

PART B: Evaluation of Formative and Summative **Assessment Strategies** for Collection of **Direct and Indirect Evidence** as described in the Assessment Plan.

Guiding Question #3: In the assessment plan, how is the **collection of direct evidence** of student learning organized and used?

Formative: Strategies are located

Absent	not in existence
Needs Work	in the individual courses
Acceptable	in the program and are used
Exemplary	in the program and are used by faculty as they revise courses and curriculum and in student assignments and engage students in thoughtful self-assessment and peer assessment

Summative: Strategies

Absent	may not exist
Needs Work	Exist, but do not show evidence of student learning for all the program learning outcomes
Acceptable	exist and show evidence of student learning for all program learning outcomes
Exemplary	All previous plus strategies are tested over time, are reliable and repeatable.

Guiding Question #4: In the assessment plan, how **is the collection of indirect evidence** of student learning organized and used?

Formative: Indirect evidence

Absent	not in existence
Needs Work	may be collected sporadically or idiosyncratically, may not be directly related to learning outcomes
Acceptable	is related to learning outcomes and is collected systematically at the beginning, middle, and end of the program
Exemplary	is collected systematically at the beginning, middle, and end of the program using multiple methods (survey, interview, focus groups, etc.); strategies make good use of student self-reflection and self-assessment

Summative: Indirect evidence

Absent	May not exist
Needs Work	exists with little faculty engagement (e.g., one person charged with the task)
Acceptable	includes multiple end-of-program strategies (e.g., exit interviews and/or surveys keyed directly to the learning outcomes)
Exemplary	includes continuous refinement and revision of measurement tools take place to address current concerns and issues

Guiding Question #5: In the assessment plan, how **are** faculty involved in **collaborative analysis** of direct and indirect evidence of student learning (as described in 3 and 4 above)?

Direct: Analysis of student work is carried out in

Absent	
Needs Work	isolation in connection with single courses; planned activities rarely if ever engage faculty in the collaborative examination of student work
Acceptable	planned activities that engage faculty in the examination of student work completed across the program at least once per year
Exemplary	planned activities that routinely engage faculty in focused studies of student work completed across the program

Rubrics related to learning outcomes

Absent	Are Absent
Needs Work	exist but are not applied collaboratively
Acceptable	are applied collaboratively
Exemplary	are applied and discussed with regard to specific examples of student work

PART C: Uses of Assessment Findings as reported in the Assessment Report.

Guiding Question #6: How **effective** is the plan in enabling the faculty to **use assessment findings for program improvement** and development (“closing the loop”)?

Assessment Findings

Absent	Does not Exist
Needs Work	are inadequate as justification for action plans;
Acceptable	are adequate as justification for action plans;
Exemplary	include evidence regarding the effects of implementation of past action plans and are organized over time in an easily accessible way

Decisions regarding instruction and curriculum

Absent	are not made based on assessment findings but for other reasons
Needs Work	are sometimes made based on assessment findings
Acceptable	are usually made with consideration of evidence of student learning related to the outcomes
Exemplary	are always made with consideration of evidence of student learning related to the outcomes (e.g., program offerings, course sequencing, course changes, new course proposals, new program proposals, requests for hiring, requests for resources are made with input from students and other stakeholders in light of assessment findings

Guiding Question #7: How effective and efficient are the methods for writing program assessment reports that meet the planning needs of the Department,

Methods for producing assessment reports

Absent	do not result in publishable reports
Needs Work	may require one individual to be responsible; the Faculty show little awareness of the accreditation needs of larger organizational units.
Acceptable	involve the program faculty in writing about claims and asserting concerns about student learning; faculty are aware of the accreditation needs of larger organizational units. Faculty assessment coordinator is supported by the D/C/U.
Exemplary	involve program, department, and cross-department faculty where appropriate as well as other stakeholders students, employers, etc.

Methods for producing assessment reports

Absent	do not result in publishable reports
Needs Work	result in overly long reports with irrelevant digressions and explanations or the reverse (overly brief); organization and structure of the report may be idiosyncratic
Acceptable	yield focused documents that are easily understood by external audiences and are formatted appropriately for easy access to information.
Exemplary	yield similarly focused documents that show awareness of the assessment history of the program

PART D: Qualities of the Assessment System Organizational structure and use of technology in Assessment Process.

Guiding Question #8: How **appropriately** is the assessment system **coordinated and managed**?

The program assessment coordinator

Absent	Is not identified
Needs Work	Has responsibilities that are informally assigned and shifting; assessment coordinator is not supported by the department or College or University
Acceptable	“coordinates,” i.e., facilitates and schedules assessment activities, including the collaborative examination of direct evidence, the collaborative analysis of indirect evidence, the preparation of assessment materials (e.g., signature assignments, survey tools, rubrics, etc.)
Exemplary	participates in larger assessment activities. Keeps informed about current trends in assessment and provides the program with information needed to keep the assessment plan updated

Guiding Question #9: How **effective and efficient** are the **uses of technology** to accomplish assessment work, when appropriate?

Technology is used

Absent	Never
Needs Work	Rarely, with primary reliance on hard copies
Acceptable	systematically to collect both indirect and direct evidence
Exemplary	In innovative ways that others can learn from

Collaborative examination of evidence

Absent	Does not occur online
Needs Work	rarely includes online activities.
Acceptable	is often done in face-to-face settings with some online activities
Exemplary	Includes quick and easy access to tools that support the analysis and reporting of assessment information