



The University of Tennessee Health Science Center Continuous Improvement at UTHSC Assessment Handbook





Mission

The mission of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness is to facilitate the systematic, research-based, enterprise-wide planning and evaluation process to support continuous improvement throughout UT Health Science Center.

Institutional Effectiveness is a set of ongoing, systematic processes that are designed to ensure that an institution is effectively achieving its mission and continuously striving to improve. It includes:

- Planning,
- Identifying or developing outcomes (including student learning outcomes for academic programs),
- Evaluating the extent to which those outcomes have been achieved,
- Using the results of the evaluations in concert with other data where appropriate to improve programs, services, and student achievement. Creating an action plan.
- Reevaluation of the action plan annually to ensure continuous improvement.

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Assessing Student Learning at the Program Level

Assessment of student learning outcomes (ASLO) is an important element of the teaching- learning process. Assessment serves several purposes, but the most important reason for engaging in assessment is to enhance the teaching-learning process. That is, the main goals of assessment are to identify those processes and pedagogies that are succeeding and plan how to continue their success and look to improve others.

UTHSC requires academic programs to establish student learning outcomes, assess the extent to which students in the program have achieved the outcomes, and use the results of assessment to improve the program and student success. The policy establishing this requirement is provided as an appendix to this handbook (EI100 Student Learning Assessment).

Reasons to engage in Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

- Student Success: To monitor student success across the program, identify areas for improvement, and provide guidance for enhancing the educational experience.
- Curriculum Evaluation: To confirm that what students are learning by completing the program is consistent with the intended outcomes of the program.
- Program Quality: To gather and aggregate data across the program to guide continuous improvement efforts.
- Accountability: To respond to increasing pressure from the public and our stakeholders to be accountable and to transparently demonstrate the value students receive from participating in our programs.
- Accreditation: To meet regional and professional accreditation requirements.

Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning

(Astin, Banta, Cross, El-Khawas, Ewell, Hutchings, Marchese, McClenney, Mentkowski, Miller, Moran, Wright)

1. Assessment of student learning begins with educational values (it's a process of improving what faculty members really care about).
2. Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.
3. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.
4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.
5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic.
6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the program are involved.
7. Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.

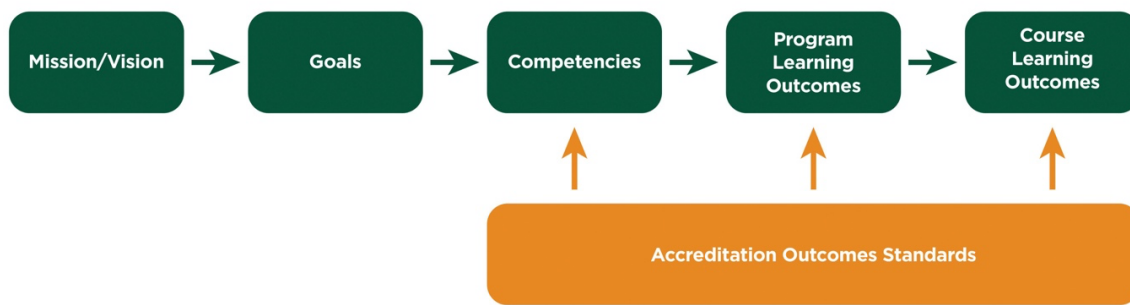
Visit the Office of Institutional Effectiveness website for more information
<https://uthsc.edu/institutional-effectiveness/>

8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.
9. Through assessment, we meet responsibilities to students and to the public.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is a “learning outcome”? How is an outcome different from a goal or objective?

Student Learning Outcomes are derived from Mission



These terms are often used interchangeably; however, an outcome is more specific and focused than a goal or objective. Student learning outcomes describe measurable knowledge, skills, and behaviors that students should be able to demonstrate as a result of completing an academic program. Goals and objectives are typically broader statements of program purpose that are more difficult to measure (e.g., “producing quality health professionals for the twenty-first century”).

What is meant by “assessment”? Don’t we already assess individual students’ performance in our classes, labs, and clinical experiences?

There are different uses of the term “assessment.” In this context, “assessment of student learning outcomes” refers to the process of gathering and reviewing evidence to determine the extent to which students in the program are achieving the educational outcomes and at what level. The primary difference between assessment in this sense and the type of assessment we do when we grade an individual student’s work is how the results are analyzed and used. The unit of analysis in assessment of student learning outcomes is the program, not individual students.

Data on student performance are gathered and reviewed in the aggregate to evaluate how well students as a group achieve the

program learning outcomes. If that evaluation indicates that students in the program met or exceeded expectations, further analysis should consider how we can continue, enhance, or extend such performance. However, if the evaluation indicates that the program did not meet expectations, further analysis should consider the reasons for this performance and what corrective actions can be taken. In contrast, assessment of individual student performance (typically but not always in the form of course grades) is conducted to provide feedback to students about their progress (among other purposes). Assessment of student learning outcomes is a form of program and curriculum evaluation.

What is a “program”?

For the purpose of assessment of student learning outcomes, an academic program is a credit-bearing course of study that results in a degree or a stand-alone professional certificate.

- “Programs” include all undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral degree programs and free-standing certificate programs. Certificate programs consisting only of courses from existing degree programs offered to matriculated students are excluded.
- Within degree programs, the focus is on the major. It is not necessary to prepare ASLO plans or reports for minors, concentrations, program tracks, and certificates offered only to degree-seeking students.
- Graduate programs that only admit students to pursue a doctoral degree but are approved to award a master’s degree as students progress toward the doctorate should prepare only one report.
- Programs with students in Memphis and at off-site locations should present evidence that graduates demonstrate equivalent knowledge and skills regardless of location or mode of delivery.

What are program faculty required to do?

Faculty in each program must develop an assessment plan that documents the student learning outcomes and how those outcomes will be measured. Most programs measure and review all their student learning outcomes every year. However, some programs have outcomes that are more complicated to measure and analyze, and their assessment plans may include a schedule for staggering the assessments across multiple years. At a minimum, all student learning outcomes should be assessed at least once every three years.



UTHSC policy, IE 100 Student Learning Assessment, requires that programs annually report their assessment activities to the Office of Institutional Effectiveness.

Developing Assessment Plans

All assessment plans include:

- Intended student learning outcomes, and
- A description of the methods and measures that will be used to determine the extent to which students in the program have achieved the intended outcomes.

Identify the intended student learning outcomes for the program

The program faculty should clearly define student learning outcomes in terms of **what a student should know, think, be able to do, or value as a result of completing the program**. Note that the focus is on determining what students actually learn, not what the faculty intended to deliver.

Student learning outcomes must be stated in measurable terms. Producing “caring health professionals” is a worthy goal, but it must be operationalized if the results are to be useful for program improvement. It helps to start the outcome with an action verb to describe how the student will demonstrate the outcome.

Select 5 to 10 of the most important student learning outcomes. It is entirely acceptable to have more than 10, but the practical ability of program faculty to adequately measure, analyze, and reflect upon the results becomes a challenge when there are too many.

Disciplinary accreditation agencies and professional associations can be good sources for identifying student learning outcomes for specific programs. **Many of these organizations have articulated outcomes and competencies; in many cases, disciplinary accreditation agencies require programs to assess specific learning outcomes articulated by the agency.**

Performance targets/Benchmarks

Programs include performance targets for each method of assessing outcomes. For example, programs may have specific targets for first time pass rates on licensure exams (“90% of our graduates will pass the

licensure exam on their first attempt”). Performance targets may be set according to the benchmark standards of the given specialized accreditor. In order to be useful, they should be set at a realistic but aspirational level. Setting targets so low that the program is almost guaranteed to exceed them is not helpful.

Identify how data will be collected and analyzed to assess student learning

Using **multiple methods** of assessing student learning is recommended. The simplest example is administering a test (or using the results of a licensure exam) along with observing students in a simulation or clinical setting to provide information on both knowledge and application of that knowledge.

Direct assessments are those that focus on student work – exams, papers, presentations – or direct observation of students – in the laboratory, clinical settings, or simulations. Consider the range of student work that faculty members collect or observe – in class exams, licensure exams, independent research projects, presentations, clinical rotations, simulations, team-based exercises, etc.

Indirect assessments examine secondary information about student learning; for example, student opinions about what they have learned, feedback from employers or supervisors of program graduates, or surveys. Indirect measures should not be the primary evidence of student learning, but they can add context that is useful in interpreting results of direct assessments or suggesting how processes might be improved to enhance learning.

Keep in mind that some very commonly used evaluation methods do not measure student learning.

- **Student ratings of instruction** – end-of-term course evaluations generally focus on students’ perceptions of the quality of instruction. These instruments may include items that ask students to rate their own learning, but these are (at best) indirect measures.
- **Graduation rates** – completing the program is not a measure of what students learned, although graduation rates may be a goal of the program (but not a student learning outcome).
- **Course grades** – course grades are poor measures of student learning for several reasons:
 - Grading criteria and standards are matters decided by

individual instructors, and thus the grades in one course cannot be assumed to be equivalent to grades in other courses (there is no “gold standard” to which all instructors adhere).

- The tests, assignments, projects, and/or papers in a course may not measure the program student learning outcomes of interest to the faculty. It is possible to map specific course assignments to program-level student learning outcomes and to develop standard measures of performance so that the results can be aggregated and reviewed as learning outcome data. For example, specific test questions that allow students to demonstrate their achievement of a specific student learning outcome could be identified and “tagged”; taken together, the results of these “tagged” questions could be analyzed as evidence of student achievement of the specific learning outcome.
- For some courses, the grading scheme includes a variety of factors such as class participation, adherence to deadlines, and attendance (to name a few). In these courses, the final grade represents a range of student performance other than the strict achievement of program learning outcomes.

Make decisions about the logistics of each assessment

Questions to consider:

- How often will the assessment be conducted?
- When will the assessment be conducted?
- Who will conduct the assessment?
- Who will ensure the assessment will take place promptly?
- Who will analyze and evaluate the assessment data (the entire faculty, the curriculum committee, or some other group of faculty members)?

The Annual Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (ASLO) Report

The Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes (ASLO) report incorporates elements of the assessment plan described above – the student learning outcomes, the methods of assessing those outcomes, and the performance targets (if included). The ASLO report is focused primarily on the findings of the assessments conducted, the analysis of the results, and the enhancements/improvements made based on those results and analyses.

Assessment Results and Analysis

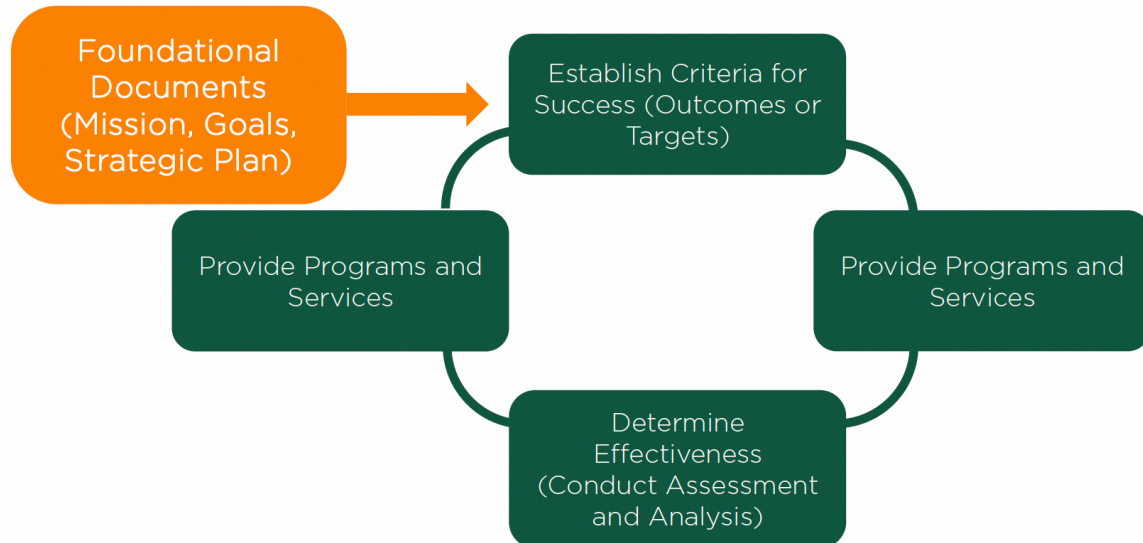
For each student learning outcome and method of assessment, describe the results of the assessment conducted during the past year. Summarize the quantitative data and report qualitative data by describing the major themes identified. Do not include individual student results in the ASLO report – the unit of analysis is the program.

A brief analysis of the results should also be included. For example:

The board licensure exam first attempt pass rate has been 90% over the past three years, only slightly below our target of 95%. The two students who did not pass the exam on the first try both had difficulties with the questions related to statistical methods and research design. Even among students who pass on the first attempt, responses to the research design questions, while acceptable, were somewhat weak compared to the strong performance observed across all other competency areas.

Even if your data are incomplete or difficult to aggregate, report what you have. You should avoid vague statements like “most students do fine.”

Program Improvements/Enhancements Made in Response to the Results Assessment Cycle



THIS IS THE MOST CRITICAL SECTION OF THE ASLO REPORT.

This section of the ASLO Report documents how the results of assessment have been used to guide improvements to the program.

In many cases, the use of results will be “action plans” for changes to be made in the future. In those cases, the annual report for the following year should review those action plans, indicating results related to the implementation. Similarly, the current year’s ASLO report should follow up on any action plans presented in the previous year’s report. Of course, some changes may have been implemented by the time the report is due, and those changes should be reported as such.

If your assessment activities yielded data that are unreliable or of insufficient quantity or quality, describe the data that you have and what it suggests, and include its limitations.

You may discover that your assessment methods are not giving you the information that you need to make judgments about student learning. In that case, the improvements you report may be plans to revise your assessment methods. However, it is important to remember that improving your assessment methods and procedures does not contribute to student achievement of the learning outcomes. No assessment method is perfect.

Many programs find that all their assessment results are very positive



and that students are achieving the learning outcomes. The goal of the assessment process is helping students achieve the student learning outcomes at a sustainable, optimal level. As an example, a program reported that 100% of its students authored or co-authored a publication before graduation (a metric used to assess a learning outcome related to research). Obviously, no improvement is possible in this case.

However, identification of those actions that contributed to such outstanding achievement can lead to plans to continue and extend those actions. For example, the program faculty reported “Our targets for student publications have been met for the past two years. We found that the addition of professional writing workshops provided a significant contribution to this achievement. Thus, it is incumbent that we continue to provide these workshops, extending one-on-one mentorship.”

As to improvements, they do not have to be major, they do not have to impact all students, and they do not have to be curriculum related. Relatively minor changes to processes or communications that help support student success can be reported in this section.

If the program consistently exceeds its performance targets, there is a tendency to report that “no changes are needed.” For what should be obvious reasons, accreditation reviewers are skeptical of such claims. Obviously, no improvement is possible in this case. As noted earlier, identification of those actions that contributed to such performance can lead to plans to continue and extend those actions.

Other Program Improvements

This section of the report covers other changes or enhancements made to the program that are not a result of the assessment process and results. For example, this would include curriculum redesigns, policy changes and implementations, and other changes made that will impact student achievement of the learning outcomes. This section also incorporates changes made in response to disciplinary accreditation reviews, program reviews, external changes in professional standards, or recognition of new knowledge and/or skills that graduates will need to be successful in their fields.

Program Strengths and Weaknesses

Report program strengths and any efforts undertaken to expand or build upon those strengths. Separately report on any program weaknesses and efforts to address them. To some extent, this is a summary of the previous sections of the report in addition to an opportunity to celebrate successes and recognize areas for improvement.

Tips for Preparing the ASLO Report

- A reviewer should be able to follow the chain of reasoning – in other words, the reviewer should be able to see how an improvement was a result of assessment analysis; how the analysis flowed from the assessment results (data); how the data came from an explicit assessment method (or measure); and how the method or measure captures student achievement of the learning outcome. Therefore, program faculty should ensure that the assessment methods will measure the student learning outcome; the results reported should come from the method; the analysis should be of the actual data collected; the analysis should logically guide the improvements made (or planned).
- Accreditation reviewers are faculty members at other institutions, but they are likely to be in a field other than yours. Brevity is important, but you should provide enough detail so that the reviewer can follow the logic and understand what you are doing to improve student achievement of the learning outcomes.
- Assessment results can and should be collected throughout the academic year. Likewise, faculty discussions and analysis of the data can be scheduled throughout the academic year, including a review of all results and analyses.

For any questions, contact :

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Continuous Improvement at UT Health Science Center Annual Academic Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

Program:

Academic Year:

Prepared by:

Program Mission Statement:

Program Learning Outcomes/Objectives:

Action Plan from prior year:

Progress Report (Repeat table as needed):

Student Learning Outcome(s):			
Measure:			
2 Years Prior	Last Year	Most Recent Year	Benchmark
Analysis:			
Plans for Improvement/ Extending Success			
Person(s) Responsible			

Program Strengths:

Program Weaknesses:

Note – this is a suggested outline and is not required. However, each of these elements must appear in the ASLO Report regardless of format. For programs using this outline, a complete template is available from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness.