NWACC
Archived Master Policy
Section 3: Learning Programs and Services
General Academic Policies

Assessment of Student Learning 3-9-4(1)

Policy:

All institutions accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, must develop an assessment program that is structured, systematic, on-going, and implemented. Specifically, the program to assess student learning should emerge from and be sustained by a faculty and administrative commitment of excellent teaching and effective learning; provide explicit and public statements regarding the institution's expectations for student learning; and use the information gained from the systematic collection and examination of assessment data both to document and improve student learning. A strong assessment program is founded on a plan that is widely accepted and routinely updated, it is ongoing, and it is related to other planning and budgeting processes (Handbook of Accreditation, 1997).

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Student Learning Assessment

A definition of student learning assessment:

A process of measuring what students
know (cognitive),
think (attitudinal) and
can do (behavioral)
to see if it matches what faculty intended for them
to know, think and do
in order to document and improve student learning.

How is assessment any different than the tests, quizzes, assignments, etc. already given in classes? Grades reflect individual student accomplishment of a number of different intended learning outcomes. NorthWest Arkansas Community College's assessment program focuses on the aggregate accomplishments by students of specific intended educational outcomes at the program and institutional level. The accomplishment of these outcomes reflects on the effectiveness of an educational program - not an individual student or instructor.

Note that the process is ongoing, cyclical and dynamic. In each cycle, changes can be made to instruction, outcomes or the measurements.

THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS HAS THREE ELEMENTS:

1. Assess (measure) student learning
2. Analyze the results of the measure
3. Adjust to the feedback by making changes to the outcomes, instruction or assessment instruments.

If student learning is to be measured, then it is assumed that a certain level of learning is expected. The expectations of what a student should learn are called intended learning (or educational) outcomes. Intended learning outcomes are descriptions of what academic departments intend for students to know, think and do when they have completed their course, degree or program. Other terms such as goals, competencies, indicators or objectives can also be used to describe these intended learning outcomes. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, the term outcome will be used, though the other terms may be more technically correct.

At NorthWest Arkansas Community College , four different levels of intended student learning outcomes exist in a hierarchy: institutional, program, course, and classroom. The table below describes the differences in the levels of outcomes.

2.

Level	Number	Specificity	Determined by
Institutional	few	very general	Assessment team with faculty consensus
Program	a few more	less general	Program faculty
Course	more	more specific	Faculty who teach the course
Classroom	many	very specific	Individual instructors

Regardless of the level, intended educational outcomes should be…

- Linked to institutional mission and/or higher level outcomes.

- Results oriented They focus not on what we as instructors will do, but what students ought to know, think, and do. They explain what students should gain from the program/ courses/ degree.

- Measurable. Measurable means being able to make a general judgment on whether students know, think, or do what we intend for them.

- Reasonable (not too high or too low).

- Set first before identifying assessment tools.

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Institutional Level Assessment

In 1994, a committee of faculty developed general education goals in an effort to be more explicit about what the college expects from NorthWest Arkansas Community College graduates. In 2000, the assessment committee proposed some refinements to the outcomes that, after additional input from faculty, were approved. Faculty understand that higher education includes much more than knowledge of facts and concepts. Higher education should also promote scholarship, the examination of values and the exercise of higher level thinking skills. The intended learning outcomes (we call them "institutional outcomes') express the faculty's view of the purpose of higher education.

The outcomes can be separated into two groups. The first group of institutional outcomes describes the overarching purpose of the two types of associate degrees offered by NorthWest Arkansas Community College. The Associate of Applied Science degree (AAS) is designed to prepare students to become employed and advance in a variety of occupations. The Associate of Arts (AA) and Associate of Science (AS) degrees are designed for students who plan to earn a bachelor's degrees at another institution. The differences in the following two outcomes reflect the different purposes of these degrees.

- Students are prepared to enter, continue to work, or to advance within their fields of study.

- Students are prepared to succeed in a four-year college program.

The second group of institutional outcomes describes general education expectations. These general education outcomes prepare students to pursue life-long learning. Regardless of the degree, all graduates are intended to achieve these outcomes. These skills will be developed across the curriculum. Whether or not there is a specific curriculum, all of the general education outcomes are addressed to some degree in most courses.

- Students develop higher order thinking skills.

Higher education goes beyond memorization and basic comprehension. Students must be able to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what they learn. While most first and second year college courses lay a foundation of basic knowledge of the subject matter, students will also be challenged to use their intellect, to think critically, to solve problems and/or to wrestle with complex issues.

- Students gain greater awareness of cultural perspectives.

One of the traditional benefits of a college education has been to expand one's understanding of the world by presenting students with diverse ideas and attitudes. In the pluralistic society in which we live, being aware of cultural perspectives is essential. An important element of this understanding is recognition of one's own culture and the impact it has on one's perspective. Across the curriculum, students will be exposed to different cultural perspectives to enhance their ability to understand and interact with others.

- Students increase academic skills.

Education doesn't end with graduation. Students must be able to continue learning either formally through transfer or informally by keeping up-to-date in their profession or for personal interest. The following academic skills are essential for both learners and workers. Here is what NWACC graduates can do:

Write

- Students can write a clear, coherent, well-organized essay, which is substantially free of errors.

- Students can write practical documents such as letters, memos, and reports.

Read

- Students can read selections at the appropriate level of education and describe the main ideas and supporting details.
- Students can evaluate written materials objectively.

Speak

- Students develop effective oral communication skills.

A college graduate should be able to speak effectively. Most NWACC students will develop public speaking skills to inform and persuade others. Some professional program students will focus on interpersonal communication skills essential in performing job-related duties. All students should have opportunities to improve their oral communication skills across the curriculum through class presentations and small group activities.

Use Math

- Students can perform basic computational skills.
- Students can use algebraic skills to simplify expressions and solve equations.
- Students can apply computational and algebraic skills to problems in science, business, and technical areas.

Use Computers

- Students can use computers proficiently.

Because of society's increasing use of computer technology, college graduates must be able to use the computer. Employers are expecting computer skills in those they hire. For most students, being proficient means being able to create, update and manipulate word-processing, spreadsheet, and database documents. Students will be capable of using e-mail for communication and the Internet for research. Other students will gain different cultural proficiency in specific computer applications related to their field of study.

Research and Communicate Information

- Students can use traditional and electronic sources to locate information needed to produce a well-written information-based document.

In pursuit of life-long learning, students must be able to locate the information they need on their own. With the ever expanding amount of information available (particularly over the Internet), students must be able to evaluate the reliability and relevance of information. A college-educated person should also be able to organize, synthesize, and cite findings properly when communicating them in written form.

The assessment committee has the responsibility of evaluating the institutional outcomes. They use instruments such as the CAAP exam, UA transfer data, and graduate surveys in addition to data collected from programs to determine if our students are accomplishing these outcomes. They prepare an annual report with their findings and recommendations. They also provide support to the academic divisions on program level assessment.

Program Level Assessment

Each academic program has adopted at least one program-level learning outcome and a plan of assessing student achievement of that outcome. An academic program is defined as any Associate degree, academic skills curriculum or adult education curriculum (GED and ESL). The faculty who teach in these areas, under the leadership of the division chairs, lead faculty, and program coordinators, drive all aspects of assessment. Faculty craft the outcomes, choose the tools, and interpret the results, and formulate the response to the results. Faculty should contact their division chair or the learning assessment coordinator to obtain a copy of program outcomes and assessment plans.

Connecting Assessment to the Classroom

The assessment plan recognizes that most student learning takes place in the context of a particular class. Institutional level and program level outcomes must be communicated and mastered in this context. In an effort to make the connection between institutional level learning expectations and the classroom, each NorthWest Arkansas Community College course has a course outline. The course outline serves

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NorthWest Arkansas Community College course has a course outline. The course outline serves as a guide for instructors as they set up their syllabus. Course outlines list the course description, text, and topics to be covered as well as general objectives. Like the text and topics, general objectives are common to all sections of the course regardless of the instructor. The objectives provide consistency in content and purpose for courses. Most importantly, general course objectives serve as course level expressions of institutional and program level learning outcomes.

The Role of Faculty in Assessment

NorthWest Arkansas Community College desires that the assessment process emanate from and be sustained by the faculty. Faculty can “emanate and sustain” assessment through activities such as:

1. Taking advantage of opportunities for training in assessment.

2. Learning what is and is not considered good practice of assessment.

3. Thoughtfully considering and discussing with peers the reasons for and uses of measuring student academic achievement across entire academic programs.

4. Becoming familiar with the institution's overall assessment program.

5. Helping develop explicit and measurable objectives (intended outcomes) for department programs These objectives are what faculty agree students will have learned when successfully completing a program (iii cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains).

1. Articulating department goals and objectives for learning to students and the public.

2. Choosing assessment measures and performance criteria that are appropriate to the intended outcomes (objectives).

3. Helping administer and grade certain assessment measures.

4. Helping produce summaries of assessment results.

5. Using assessment results to document and improve student learning.

6. In response to assessment results, making recommendations for improvements in teaching, curriculum, professional development, library holdings, student services, equipment, and personnel.

7. Helping prioritize recommendations and develop program plans and budgets.

8. Investigating the use of better instruments.

9. Helping prepare appropriate reports for other faculty, students and administrators.

10. Supporting the division chair is his or her responsibilities for the department's part in the overall assessment plan.

11. Periodically serving on the assessment committee.

The success of the assessment of the student learning process rests ultimately with the College President. The responsibility of overseeing the process has been delegated to the Vice President for Learning who is aided by the Instructional Directors, program coordinators, Learning Assessment Coordinator and Assessment Committee. To learn more about the assessment process, please refer to the 1995 Self Study, Building Today for Our Students' Tomorrows (Vol.II, pp.1-25), the NorthWest Arkansas Community College Assessment Handbook, or contact the Learning Assessment Coordinator.

Legal Reference: NCA Statement on Assessment and Student Academic Achievement,

October, 1989 Adopted: September, 2000