**Assessment 101: Materials from the Colorado College Assessment Website**

This handout presents an introduction to direct assessment of student learning (the kind of assessment our accrediting body requires us to do). Some of the information below has been modified from the website to improve it. A great deal of additional information can be found at the CC assessment website: <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/assessment/>

What is Assessment?

Assessment is the ongoing process of:

* establishing clear, demonstrable, observable (sometimes measurable) expected outcomes of student learning
* ensuring that students have sufficient opportunities to achieve these outcomes through teaching the relevant skills and/or knowledge
* systematically gathering, analyzing and interpreting evidence to determine how well student learning matches our expectations; and
* using the resulting information to understand and improve student learning as well as to celebrate current successes.

Assessment involves deciding what you want your students to learn and determining the extent to which they have learned it. Successful assessment helps you answer the following three questions: *What do your students know? What can they do? How do you know?*

Two Clarifications

Assessment is not *research*; it is not held to the same standards. An assessment project will rarely be peer-reviewed, published, or presented at a professional conference.

Assessment is not *program evaluation*, which focuses on literally anything about your department or ID program other than what students are learning at the level of learning outcomes. Academic program evaluation can focus on matters such as:

* Student satisfaction and other self-reported information about program experiences such as equity/diversity climate
* General curricular content and development
* Curricular structure and scaffolding
* Strategies for future faculty hires
* Administrative staffing needs and functions
* Disciplinary/interdisciplinary enrollment issues
* Interactions with cognate disciplines or interdisciplinary areas
* Capstone structure
* Division of teaching responsibilities; course assignments; faculty load
* Program structure (especially for ID programs)

**The Assessment Process**

Assessment of student learning involves a multistep [process](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/assessment/how-to-assess-learning/assessment-process.dot) that in turn includes a series of components. [*Curricular goals*](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/assessment/how-to-assess-learning/curricular-goals) establish in a general way what you want students to get out of your major or minor and[*learning outcomes*](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/assessment/how-to-assess-learning/learning-outcomes/index.dot) specify precisely what you want students to know and be able to do at the end of a course, major, or minor. You use a [*curricular map*](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/assessment/how-to-assess-learning/curricular-mapping.dot) to make sure the learning outcomes you care about are being taught in required courses so that students will know and be able to do what you intend. [*Demonstrations of student learning*](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/assessment/how-to-assess-learning/demonstrating-learning) are examples of student work (assignments) that are reviewed to determine whether the student did, partially did, or did not learn the knowledge and skills desired by the department or program. This is what we commonly refer to as the actual assessment. Finally, [*rubrics*](https://www.coloradocollege.edu/other/assessment/how-to-assess-learning/rubrics.dot) are criterion-based rating scales that simplify and standardize the demonstration of student learning (knowledge, skills, or both) for easier and clearer review.

**Definitions of Key Components**

***Curricular Goals*:** Broad, general statements of (1) what the department/program will do to provide students with desired knowledge and skills, and (2) what students will do so that they gain desired knowledge and skills. Curricular goals are not the same thing as the actual knowledge or skills; those are “learning outcomes.”

***Learning Outcomes***: Statements of what students will know be able to do at the program or course level. Learning outcomes use precise action-focused verbs and have the following structure:  (1) A phrase or sentence beginning “Students can” or “Students are able to”; (2) A verb that captures the action the student will be able to take the demonstrates the knowledge or skill in question; and (3) A concluding phrase that elaborates on the verb to specify the outcome in context of the particular course or department/program. Learning outcomes are always demonstrable/observable.

*Curricular Mapping*: The process of making sure that any learning outcomes that will be assessed in a course are taught in that course, or that any learning outcomes that will be assessed by the end of the major are taught in specific courses within the major that students are reasonably expected to take. Assessment without curricular mapping can be unfair to students if it expects them to demonstrate knowledge or skills they did not actually learn.

*Direct Assessment*:Assignments involving any tasks or activities that require students to demonstrate directly what they have learned in terms of knowledge and/or skills to a professor or other party. For a course these include class and homework assignments, exams and quizzes, papers and reports, lab work, fieldwork, research projects and oral presentations. For a department or program, direct assessment might involve a capstone requirement with its component elements (substantial research paper, performance, creative project such as a musical composition, choreographed dance, or painting).

Our accrediting body requires us to carry out systematic direct assessment in all departments with majors.

*Indirect Assessment*: Assignments involving any tasks or activities from which one can infer student learning but in which that learning is not demonstrated directly. This includes student evaluations, surveys, and other forms of student self-report, as well as external data such as acceptance to graduate programs. At Colorado College, a department may elect to include indirect assessment measures but these cannot be the entirety of its assessment program.

*Rubrics*: Criterion-based assessment scales that define each level of learning (e.g., unsuccessful, successful, outstanding) for each learning outcome and that incorporate descriptive criteria to determine the extent to which a particular student succeeded with a particular learning outcome. These are often most easily designed as grids with each row representing a learning outcome and each column representing a level of learning. Please see the additional handout for more information.

*Assessment Cycle*: The complete process for a particular assessment project, including selecting the project, collecting information, reflecting on the information, determining curricular/pedagogical/other changes to improve student learning, and implementing the changes.

Picking a Good Assessment Project

Your assessment project should be meaningful, manageable, modest, and demonstrable.

“Meaningful” means that your project should be useful to you. It should enable you to improve student learning in your department or program by specifying one or more areas where such learning is not currently occurring as desired.

“Meaningful” also means that the findings from your project should enable you to pinpoint whether to make curricular changes, pedagogical changes, both, or some other kind of changes to improve student learning, as well as what specific changes to make. While there are circumstances in which an assessment project leads to the conclusion that no changes need to be made, or that the assessment project itself needs to be retooled, a project driven by a strong sense that learning is weak in an area (often backed up by informal observations over time) will generally conclude with valuable ideas about how to modify teaching to improve learning.

“Manageable” means that your project is realistic in the context of the Block Plan and the many obligations you have regarding teaching, research, and service. While it may add somewhat to your departmental/program workload, it will not add so much work as to be untenable, nor will it be so extensive as to be impossible to carry out properly.

“Modest” means that your project addresses only two or three learning outcomes and that you collect limited information to do the assessing. You might review all theses of a capstone project on a given cycle. You might review the same assignment given out in several iterations of the same course. You are not expected to do a project larger than this.

“Demonstrable” means that you should be able to determine clearly whether students have learned the knowledge and/or skills described by your learning outcomes. There should be no ambiguity about the extent to which students learned what you intended, nor about what to do next to improve student learning.

The New Assessment Cycle

The CC Assessment Committee has recently decided to modify the assessment cycle that was previously in place in response to feedback from departments.

Thenew calendar involves a two-year, three-report assessment process in which some assessment work is done in the first semester and the second semester of the first year and the remainder of the work is done over the first six blocks of the second year. A small report is submitted at the end of semesters 1 and 2, and a slightly longer one is submitted at the end of block 6 of year 2. The reports are based on a template consisting of a series of questions; completing the report simply involves answering the questions and, where requested, attaching additional documents. A department or program can work with the Assessment Committee to request a more flexible assessment schedule under certain circumstances.

The first semester (always a fall semester) involves planning; departments/programs identify an area of learning weakness and the most appropriate learning outcomes to use for the assessment process (writing new outcomes for the project if necessary), and determine where, when, and how information will be collected to use in assessing learning. A brief report is due at the end of block 4.

The second semester involves collecting the information identified in the fall. A brief report is due at the end of block 8.

The second year involves reviewing and reflecting on findings and proposing department/program changes (curricular, pedagogical, both, or some other type) to address the concern. A brief report is due by the end of block 6.

The cycle starts again on semester 1 in the third year.

Current assessment cycle:

* Semester 1: Fall 2019 (reports due at 5 pm on Monday, December 9)
* Semester 2: Spring 2020 (report due date yet to be determined)
* Year 2: 2020-2021; report due at end of block 6, 2021 (report due date yet to be determined)

The templates for these three reports are being handed out separately, as is a mock example from the (non-existent) Department of Criminology to help departments and programs understand how to fill out the reports effectively.

Please contact Amanda Udis-Kessler at [audiskessler@coloradocollege.edu](mailto:audiskessler@coloradocollege.edu) with any assessment questions or requests for assessment-related support at any stage of the assessment process.