A building with many windows

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**HOW TO CREATE AN ASSESSMENT PLAN:**

A Step-By-Step Guide

## Purpose

# Purpose and Overview

The purpose of this document is to guide programs/units to develop a shared understanding of what constitutes an assessment plan, why it is important, and how to develop an effective assessment plan.

## What Is An Assessment Plan?

Assessment is a vehicle for continuous improvement to occur. By simply going through the assessment process, you create a greater knowledge base that informs future actions. An assessment plan is a key component of this process; it is a written document that describes how you monitor and evaluate your valued outcomes. It is a dynamic tool that is flexible and adaptive (not set in stone) and can change over time, as needed. As assessment reports come to a close each year, it is essential to think about what to assess and how in the next cycle(s). Through this process, assessment informs meaningful change and continuous improvement.

**Developing and implementing an assessment plan involves four key steps.**

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Description automatically generatedCreating and implementing an assessment plan should not be the responsibility of a single person or take place in a silo. An often-quoted African proverb says that “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.” While it may be tempting to shortcut the assessment planning process by doing it alone or by engaging a small team, long-term success is more likely to occur when you seek the buy-in and contributions of a diverse group of relevant stakeholders. By stakeholders, we mean individuals (internal or external to your program/unit/institution) who are interested in, can influence, or will be most impacted by the outcome assessment process. This collaboration should start at the beginning of the assessment planning process and continue into the implementation phases.

# STEP 1. Engage Key Stakeholders:

The level and phase at which stakeholders should be engaged is a critical decision to make.

* **Planning Stage**  
  During the planning stage, stakeholder engagement can range from collaborating with them to co-create the assessment plan to consulting them afterward for feedback.
* **Implementation Phase**  
  In the implementation phase, engagement may involve inviting stakeholders to data interpretation meetings to collectively analyze results and make decisions about how results will be used.
* **Improvement Initiatives**  
  Once improvement strategies are identified from the assessment results, engagement may include collectively determining who will lead improvement initiatives and bring them to successful completion.

Any number of stakeholders can be engaged in the assessment planning and implementation process, but it is important to ensure the right people are involved. Start with individuals from your program/unit and then expand your list to include those whose voices need to be heard or whose contributions/support are essential to the process. It is essential to build the habit of including broader groups such as students, employers, and other key players in our education ecosystem who are most impacted by the results your program/unit produces.

## Questions to Consider

Below are questions to considerto determine who to include and when throughout the entire assessment process. While the list of questions is not exhaustive, it serves as a useful starting point for considering stakeholder engagement.

| **Phase** | **Questions to Consider** | **Person(s)** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Creating the  Assessment Plan** | * Who should we collaborate or consult with to create the assessment plan? * Who needs to be informed about the  assessment plan? |  |
| **Data Collection** | * Who should be involved in the actual collection  of data? * Who needs to be informed about the timeline for data collection? |  |
| **Analysis and  Interpretation of Results** | * Who should we collaborate with to interpret the data? |  |
| **Use of Results** | * Are there teams or individuals who should take the lead on proposed improvements based on assessment results? * Who should be involved in determining how to implement and monitor improvements? |  |
| **Reporting Results** | * Who should be involved in drafting the  assessment report? |  |
| **Disseminating Results** | * Who needs to be informed about the results of the assessment process? * Who should we collaborate with to ensure the results are communicated in a way that leads to meaningful action and broader impact? * Who can we partner with to amplify the results? |  |

A hand holding a marker and a speech bubble

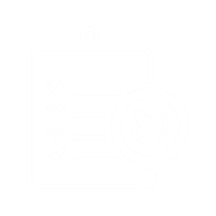
Description automatically generatedArticulating the foundation on which your program/unit lies (its mission and purpose) is crucial for establishing a strategy for assessment planning. In this process, it is also essential to articulate how the program/unit mission and core activities are aligned with broader mission and overarching goals within the organizational ecosystem. Doing this work will set the stage for your assessment planning. Additionally, SACSCOC expects programs and units to plan their assessments in alignment with their mission statements, mission/strategic plans of their home colleges/divisions, and institutional mission and strategic plan.

# STEP 2. Describe the Program/Unit:

Space is provided in the table below to articulate your program/unit mission and its alignment with college/division- and institutional-level priorities, as expressed in their missions and strategic plans.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Program/Unit Name** |  |
| **What is our program/unit**  **mission statement?** |  |
| **How does our mission statement align to our College/Division mission statement and strategic plan?** |  |
| **How does our mission statement align to the UHD mission statement and strategic plan?** |  |

As you go through the steps of creating and implementing an assessment plan, revisit this section to ensure there are strong logical connections between your plan and the priorities you outlined in the table above.

Useful assessment plans are not about what is easiest to implement, what checks the box, or what data are available to complete the assessment process quickly. Useful assessment plans provide the information you need to understand the impact you are making and guide meaningful improvements. The question, “What impact do we hope to achieve?” can help determine the best focus for your assessment. When considering impact, think of it as the ultimate, hoped-for end result you envision for your programs/services.

# STEP 3. Focus the Assessment & Create the Plan

Defining your impact helps in several ways: It will help you connect with your ‘why’ and signal areas where your efforts should be concentrated to produce measurable and meaningful results. It will also help identify and avoid misaligned assessment activities - those that attempt to cover too much or fail to address your highest priority information needs. As you think about the impact you aspire to have, draw inspiration from:

* your program/unit’s mission, the college/division’s mission, and/or the university’s mission or the strategic plan
* your program/unit’s priorities and/or core activities
* accreditation standards and expectations

You can define your impact statement(s) in any way you prefer, whether broadly or specifically. For example, a broad impact statement might be,

“*We want increased graduate school enrollment among our program completers*.” Alternatively, a more specific impact statement could be, “*We want our program to nurture students’ critical thinking skills so they can analyze and solve complex problems effectively*.”

You may find that you have a long list of answers to the question, “What impact do we hope to achieve?” There is no magic number or rule for how many items are too many, but if the list feels too long, consider refining it by prioritizing and narrowing focus. For example, review all your impact statements and select the ones that should be monitored periodically to track progress and assess success. Impacts that you don’t plan to assess on an ongoing basis should not be in your assessment plan. Additionally, you may have heard the saying, "Not everything that counts can be measured. Not everything that can be measured counts." To identify what truly counts, ask yourself: Which of these impacts can be improved upon if not achieved? This will help focus your efforts on areas where falling short would highlight actionable steps for improvement.

Space is provided below for you to engage in the mental exercise of identifying your intended impact.

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| **What impact do we hope to achieve? List impacts below and prioritize them to narrow your focus.** |
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Once you narrow the focus of your assessment plan, you can work backwards to develop meaningful outcomes that reflect the intended impact(s).

## Developing Outcomes

Determining the outcome type will facilitate narrowing the assessment focus further. You can use the seven outcome types listed below as a source of inspiration:

* **Learning outcomes:** These focus on the knowledge, skills, beliefs, and/or attitudes that stakeholders (e.g., students, faculty, staff) are expected to acquire.
* **Effectiveness outcomes:** These evaluate how well desired or intended results associated with a service, program or processes are achieved, reflecting on their overall impact and success.
* **Efficiency outcomes:** These measure the extent to which resources (time, people, money, etc.) are used optimally to achieve a desired or intended result. They typically reflect reductions in resources required to implement an activity (e.g., time saved, reduced number of steps, costs saved, etc.)
* **Compliance outcomes:** These assess the degree to which institutional policies, accreditation standards, or legal requirements are adhered to.
* **Satisfaction outcomes:** These assess the extent to which students, faculty, and other stakeholders are content with a service, program, or activity.
* **Utilization outcomes:** These track the extent to which services and resources are effectively used by stakeholders.
* **Needs outcomes:** These focus on identifying gaps or unmet needs within a program/unit/service.

While it is not necessary to have an outcome associated with each of these seven types, it is important to strike the right balance. Educational programs should naturally lean into learning outcomes as they are central to evaluating the impact on student learning. On the other hand, if a co-curricular or administrative unit is providing any type of learning opportunities, they should avoid over-relying on the other six types of outcomes. For example, a Testing Center that provides workshops on test-taking strategies for students should not only focus on outcomes like utilization or satisfaction – how many students used the center or how satisfied they are with the services provided – but should also include a learning outcome.

Once you identify your outcome type, you are ready to start developing your outcomes.

While there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to developing outcomes, there are key practices to follow and common pitfalls to avoid.

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| **Do This** | **Don’t Do This** |
| Write meaningful outcomes.Start with the question: What impact do we hope to achieve?Ensure that one or more of your outcomes align with a specific aspect of university/college/division mission and/or strategic plan. | Avoid writing outcomes that don’t reflect the program/unit’s mission, broader goals, or highest priorities. |
| Write concise and focused outcomes that directly reflect what you want to measure. | Avoid double- or multiple-barreled outcomes. Including multiple actions in one outcome makes it unclear what you are assessing. Also, overly broad, complex, or too wordy outcomes are often signs that the outcome lacks specificity. |
| Focus on a few key outcomes that provide meaningful insights. | Avoid the “everything but the kitchen sink” approach. Too many outcomes dilute focus and make it hard to track progress effectively. |
| Use measurable action terms in your outcomes. Choose Bloom’s taxonomy verbs. | Ambiguity is the enemy! Don’t use vague terms (e.g., appreciate, learn, know, become familiar with, understand, etc.).If the goal is to measure “understanding,” use the action verbs from the “Understand” category inside Bloom’s taxonomy to state your outcome. |

Here are examples of well-crafted outcomes, followed by others that present some issues:

## Examples of Well-Crafted Outcomes:

* The student defends a proposed solution to a provided scenario by drawing upon strategies and processes recognized as effective for leading healthcare organizational change.
* The student constructs a literature review that identifies gaps in knowledge and unresolved problems that educational research can address.
* Campus stakeholders who submit a service ticket and receive service will be satisfied with the timelines and quality of the service provided.

These examples are considered well-crafted outcomes because they each begin with a clear statement (i.e., they start with the ‘who’ and ‘what’). They use action verbs that can be measured, and they do not consist of multiple/compound statements.

## Examples of Outcomes Presenting Some Issues:

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| **Outcome** | **Concern/Issue** | **Suggestion for Improvement** |
| **Students will be able to develop soft skills.** | This outcome is vague and not easily measurable. The term “soft skills” doesn’t clarify which skills are being targeted (e.g., communication, teamwork,  critical thinking, etc.). | The outcome can be reworded: Students will develop effective communication skills by collaboratively solving real-world problems and presenting their findings clearly to an audience. |
| **Students will engage in teamwork, develop leadership skills, and communicate effectively  in group settings.** | This outcome tries to address three separate actions simultaneously (trying to do too much!). | The outcome can be improved by rewording it to be concise and focused, clearly reflecting the specific aspect intended to be measured. For instance, if the focus is on developing leadership skills, the outcome can be rephrased as: Students will recognize good and poor leadership in given scenarios OR Students will compare examples of effective and poor leadership. |
| **Participants will have a better understanding of effective communication in management.** | This outcome needs to be rephrased from a more action-oriented lens. “Have a better understanding” is subjective and challenging to assess because it does not indicate a concrete behavior or product that can be observed or measured. | The outcome can be reworded: Participants will explain barriers to effective communication in the management function. |
| **Adult programs will meet the needs of adult students.** | It is unclear what the program aims to achieve with this outcome. The phrase “meet the needs” is too broad. Specify “needs” that are being addressed (e.g., flexibility in scheduling, career-oriented curriculum, support services, etc.). | The outcome can be reworded: Adult programs will increase student satisfaction with flexible course scheduling and career-relevant curriculum options. |

## Selecting Methods

Once you have your outcome, ask: “How will we know if the outcome is achieved? What is the assessment method?” The expectation is that you select outcomes that can be assessed by more than one method, with at least one being a direct method. This is because if different methods yield similar results for an outcome, confidence in the findings will be strong.

* **Direct assessment** provides direct evidence of what a stakeholder (faculty, staff, students, etc.) knows, can do, or gains from a program, service, and/or activity by focusing on what they can demonstrate or produce (e.g., tests, papers, projects, presentations, portfolios, performances, etc.). It is also a method of assessing operational and/or strategic outcomes, such as measuring implementation and/or the demand, quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of key functions (e.g., number of training sessions, records of attendance, unit records on website analytics, grants obtained, courses developed, # of initiatives implemented etc.).
* **Indirect assessment** involves gathering data that reflects perceptions, satisfaction, and reflections. (e.g., satisfaction surveys, focus groups, course evaluations, participant feedback, exit surveys, etc.).

## Words of caution:

* The assessment method must align with the outcome to provide meaningful evidence of achievement.
* Be intentional when selecting your assessment methods. While multiple methods are helpful, too many can lead to an overwhelming amount of data. Avoid spreading resources thin across excessive assessments.
* If your assessment methods rely too heavily on self-reported data from students, faculty, staff, employers, etc., you are likely depending too much on indirect assessments, such as surveys. While these can provide valuable insights, they should be balanced with direct assessments.
* Avoid the tendency to use course or exam grades as a direct assessment method. Course grades typically don’t map directly to a specific outcome, and they combine multiple aspects of performance. In the same way, exam grades typically reflect overall performance, rather than focusing on specific learning outcomes. For meaningful direct assessments, it is important to use performance tasks or exam items that are explicitly aligned with learning outcomes.
* In educational programs, if the same learning outcome is assessed across multiple modalities/sections/instructional sites, the same method should be used to assess it to ensure consistency, fairness, and comparability.

## Defining the Success Criterion

For each assessment method, define what successful achievement looks like.  Success criteria may include thresholds (i.e., minimum acceptable level of performance) and/or targets (i.e., desired level of performance).

Here are some key practices to follow and common pitfalls to avoid while doing this:

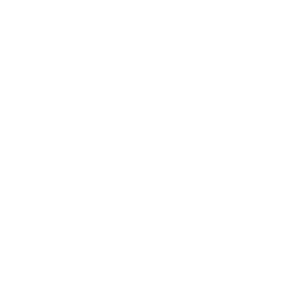
| **Do This** | **Don’t Do This** |
| --- | --- |
| Have one well-defined and realistic success criterion per method. This clarity helps ensure that everyone understands exactly what success looks like. | Avoid having two or more criteria per method as introducing multiple success criteria for one measure can lead to ambiguity, as it may blur the focus and make it hard to determine whether the outcome is achieved. |
| Express the success criterion as a percentage or numerical indicator.  (e.g., 80% of students will meet or exceed expectations on the rubric for this outcome, 80% of students who declare X as a major will complete the program in 4 years). | Avoid philosophical statements that are abstract (e.g., “A solid base in theory provides the cornerstone for practice”).  Avoid using the mean or average of student scores  as a success criterion. Averages are affected by outliers, and they may not accurately represent the center of a data set. |
| Set your success criteria based on past data, not on random numbers of percentages. For example, if the Honors program enrollment for the 22-23 academic year was 140 students and increased to 150 students in 23-24, you could set a target for a similar 7% increase for 24-25, aiming for 161 students.  If you don’t have past enrollment data, use the current year’s enrollment as your baseline (i.e., starting point). In this case, you can phrase your success criterion as: “Baseline, defined as the 2023-2024 Honors program enrollment, serves as the benchmark for success criterion,” or “Success criterion set to baseline (i.e., # of students enrolled in the Honors program in 23-24 academic year). If the 23-24 academic year’s Honors program enrollment is 150 students, you can set your success criteria as maintaining or surpassing this number in 24-25. Over time, as you collect more data, you can adjust the threshold. | Avoid setting an arbitrary threshold or target as your success criterion. For example: “Participation will increase by 5%. Without past data trends to justify the 5%, how can you be confident this is realistic or achievable? Your success criterion should be grounded in evidence rather than assumption. |

With your outcomes, methods, and success criteria in place, the next step is to develop a six-year schedule that ensures each outcome is assessed at least twice during that period.

One tool that is particularly useful to capture all this information in one place is an assessment plan grid. Not only is this tool helpful for visually organizing and aligning outcomes, methods, and success criteria, but it also helps foster a shared understanding of the overall assessment plan among stakeholders. The assessment plan grid can take many forms and should be adapted to fit your specific assessment and context.

## A Sample Assessment Plan Grid:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Outcome Type** | **Outcome** | **Methods** | **Success Criteria** | **Schedule to Assess** |
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****After creating your assessment plan, focus your efforts on collecting the data outlined in the plan. Then create time and space for structured and intentional conversations with key stakeholders to review the data, gain consensus on what the data mean, and collectively make decisions to use results to inform improvement efforts. The Key Considerations listed below can help identify various activities and decisions as the plan is implemented and data are collected. This is also a good time to revisit Step 1, where you first considered which key stakeholders to include throughout the entire assessment process.

# STEP 4. Implement the Plan:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Key Considerations** | **Decisions/Actions** | **Person responsible** | **When** |
| When will you have access to all the collected data, or at least part of it for the current assessment cycle? Will certain data sets become available earlier than others? |  |  |  |
| Based on when you’ll have access to the data, how do you plan to schedule time for analyzing findings and drafting the report? |  |  |  |
| Do you need support to transform collected data into a clear and informative visual? |  |  |  |
| How many conversations do you anticipate holding with your key stakeholders for analysis and interpretation of data? Who will facilitate the conversation(s)? How long will the conversation(s) last? Where will you hold them (in-person, virtual, hybrid etc.)? |  |  |  |
| Who is the designated person to draft the assessment report? How will you capture and synthesize the data conversations to develop the report? |  |  |  |
| How will you share the report with key stakeholders to promote accountability and facilitate action on the suggested improvements? |  |  |  |
| How will you monitor progress on suggested improvements? How will you track and document any implemented changes? |  |  |  |

Last but not least, remain open to an iterative process. The plan is not set in stone. It should be flexible and adaptive. It is flexible because priorities can change. It is adaptive because programs/services change, or your assessment results may lead to adjustments in your plan. As you refine and improve your plan based on new insights, be sure to document all changes to maintain a historical record of your assessment work.