

Assessment Briefing Report # 2

Issues in Program Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

Introduction

The organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible (Criterion Three, Core Component 3a).

As faculty and administrative leaders work in refining their program assessment plans, a few have expressed some confusion about (1) what constitutes a program in the eyes of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (hereafter referred to as NCA) and (2) how the assessments at the program level or other levels should be linked within the organizational structures of the university. This briefing report provides guidance on these issues.

Program Definition and Requirements

Generally speaking, programs from NCA's view can be either degree-granting or non-degree granting and EACH must have a program assessment plan. "The culture of assessment ought to extend to ALL education and training provided by the organization, not simply to the degree programs it offers." In fact, the university must be especially diligent in making sure that courses offered in nontraditional formats (ex. accelerated degree programs, learning in asynchronous settings, and reflective learning) can document that students achieve the mastery of skills, competencies and knowledge expected in established courses or traditional curricula or in keeping with predetermined learning outcomes.

Each degree-granting program must have an assessment plan. Thus, if a department offers a program of study leading to a Bachelor's degree and a program of study leading to Master's degree they must have on file *two* program assessment plans, one for each level.

Why is this so? While the two may have related learning goals, NCA expects that the learning outcomes stated for graduate students would differ significantly from the learning outcomes stated for undergraduate students. It is reasonable to expect that the outcomes for graduate students include mastery of material that is more complex, modes of communication and expression that are at a higher level, and more sophisticated forms of inquiry, analysis, synthesis and application of new knowledge. In addition, graduate programs and professional degree programs may foster in students advanced research skills, professionalism and leadership capacity in a given discipline or profession.

In order to achieve these learning outcomes then, NCA expects to see clear differences in the courses and experiences offered to achieve a graduate or a professional degree. It follows that different assessment tools and strategies would be needed to assess student learning at the graduate or professional level. As stated in the Higher Learning Commission's NCA accreditation handbook, they want to see evidence that "The organization *clearly differentiates* its learning goals for undergraduate, graduate, and post-baccalaureate programs by identifying the expected learning outcomes for each."

What about credit and non-credit certificate programs? Do we need to have a program assessment plan for those? Yes, non-degree programs must be assessed. NCA recognizes that learning can happen in multiple ways and in multiple venues. Providing an environment and learning experience that focuses on the accomplishment and assessment of stated learning goals and outcomes is important for all programs.

Levels of Assessment

If a department ensures that each of its courses has assessment measures, do they have to develop a program assessment plan? What if a college has developed an overall plan of assessment, do they have to have program plans as well? NCA is quite clear on this issue. Assessment of student learning must occur at multiple levels within the organization: course, program, and institutional.