FAQ on Assessment Expectations for Academic Programs, Certificates, and Stand-Alone Minors
March 7, 2014

In addition to ongoing attention to the assessment of undergraduate and graduate academic programs, SACSCOC is directing increased attention to how institutions manage certificates (undergraduate and graduate) and stand-alone minors (minors awarded by programs that do not also award a baccalaureate degree in the major, such as a minor in Spanish or French in the absence of a major in Spanish or French).

SACSCOC expectations for effective management of academic programs include the following:

- Articulation of student learning outcomes,
- Identification of courses that promote these learning outcomes,
- Documentation that the governing department regularly collects assessment data on these SLOs, and
- Documentation that the department uses assessment findings to guide decisions about improvements in curriculum and student learning.

What assessment activities must departments complete?
Each department that manages a certificate program or a stand-alone minor should complete the following activities in 2013-2014:

1. Articulate measurable student learning outcomes (SLOs) for each certificate program or stand-alone minor.
2. Create a curriculum map that aligns the SLOs for a certificate (or minor) with the courses students complete to earn the certificate (or minor).
3. Identify student work relevant to SLOs embedded in required courses that the department can use to harvest meaningful assessment evidence.
4. If possible, gather assessment evidence on at least one SLO and discuss this evidence at the next faculty assessment meeting.

What if a department is unable to gather assessment data for a certificate or stand-alone minor in the current academic year?
Many departments are at an early stage of assessment for certificates and stand-alone minors and will not be able to gather assessment data in the 2013-2014 academic year. All departments should complete the first three activities. A well-constructed curriculum map serves as a useful first program-level assessment of the curriculum if the faculty in the department discuss the curriculum map and evaluate whether the curriculum structure described is likely to support learning for the identified SLOs. A first documented use of assessment evidence might be decisions the department makes to strengthen the structure of the curriculum (e.g., take steps to ensure that all students experience meaningful learning activities for each SLO when they complete curriculum requirements). All departments must gather assessment evidence on their certificates and stand-alone minors in 2014-2015 and document evidence that they used assessment evidence to guide decisions about improvement.

How can a department use a curriculum map as a program-level assessment?
The curriculum map describes the structure of the curriculum. Faculty can examine a curriculum map and identify areas of strength and weakness in the curriculum. An area of strength is indicated when the map describes multiple courses that contribute to student learning on an SLO, especially when the usual sequence for completing these courses creates a progression from beginning skill through developing skill and mastery. Typical weaknesses include SLOs for which no courses appear to contribute to achievement of student learning, courses that make no contributions to any program-level SLOs, and courses that are

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both the initial (or, perhaps, only) exposure to the SLO but set expectations for mastery of the SLO in the course. The sample curriculum maps for certificates include both areas of strength and weakness in these programs. Faculty can detect patterns of strength and weakness in a curriculum map that are not readily apparent in the list of required and elective courses in the catalog. An important question for departments with flexible curriculum structures (e.g., required clusters of elective courses) is: Can a student evade one or more program-level SLOs by selecting (and avoiding) certain options among the clusters of electives? Departments that detect weaknesses in the curriculum structure can use this information to implement changes that strengthen the curriculum.

What is a complete cycle of assessment?
A complete assessment cycle includes collection of data on one or more specific SLOs, documentation of a faculty discussion and interpretation of the data gathered, and documentation of decisions made and any actions the faculty will implement during the following year to improve student learning.

Certificates and minors give students many options for course selection. Which courses should be included in a curriculum map?
Identify courses that all students must complete and identify clusters of courses that students select from when completing a certificate or minor. The handouts describe two examples of curriculum maps for certificates that include a mixture of required and elective courses.

Create a matrix for a curriculum map. The curriculum map is a matrix that lists all SLOs on one dimension and all courses students take when completing the program on the second dimension. Some maps are easier to construct and read if the shorter list (either courses or SLOs) is placed on the horizontal dimension. For example, if a certificate program identifies 4 SLOs, the curriculum map will fit on standard paper if the SLOs are described on the horizontal dimension and courses are listed on the vertical dimension.

Describe the alignment of courses and SLOs. For each course, enter information in the cells of the curriculum that describes how the course contributes to each SLO. Departments can choose among several methods:
1. If a course contributes to student learning on an SLO, place an X in the cell for that SLO in the row (or column) associated with the course. Criteria to use to determine whether a course contributes to a specific SLO:
   - The course syllabus describes a course SLO that is clearly related to the program-level SLO,
   - The course includes one or more learning activities that give students an opportunity to practice and develop skill with the SLO, or
   - The course includes an assignment, specific exam questions, a project, or other graded work that could be used to gather assessment data about the SLO. **Note:** Although graded work can generate assessment data, grades alone are not acceptable as assessment data. The grade for an assignment is usually based on multiple criteria. Some components of graded work can be isolated (e.g., an element in a grading rubric or a score for a subset of exam questions that are all related to one SLO) and serve as direct assessments of student learning.
2. Describe the nature of the contribution of the course to achieving the program-level SLOs:
   - Describe the level of skill expected for students in this course (beginning skill/introduction of skill, developing skill/practice or reinforcement of skill, mastery/capstone-level performance), or

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• Describe the assignment or other graded work that could serve as a source of data for an embedded assessment of the SLO.

Develop a plan to assess a 2-3 SLOs every year and examine every SLO in at least one cycle during the period covered by a program review (7 years).
Departments need not assess every outcome every year. Ideally, the department selects outcomes that it is prepared to address with specific actions for improvement in the coming year. Specific actions for improvement might include changes in academic advising, course modifications (changes in instructional materials, assignments, or learning activities), development of new courses, or creating sequences of courses. Remember, not every modification is guaranteed to produce the intended improvement; the goal is to continuously seek for areas that might produce improvement.

The handouts include descriptions of beginning, developing, and mature assessment plans.

What should a department do about assessment of a low-enrollment certificate program or stand-alone minor?
Programs with low enrollments pose unique challenges. A department with a program that enrolls no students in some years and only one or two students in other years might combine an examination of the program curriculum map with the program enrollment data for its evidence-based decision making. Perhaps enrollment is low because existing weaknesses in the curriculum make it unattractive. Enrollment might improve if the department can clearly identify the SLOs and associated value of the certificate in its marketing. If students can evade one or more SLOs and do not achieve a consistent set of SLOs when they complete the program, the certificate might have a reputation as a weak program. Improvements might improve enrollments. On the other hand, a department might consider the cost of maintaining a program with such low enrollments and decide to terminate the certificate.

Handouts and resources
Guidelines for writing SLOs for certificates and stand-alone minors.
Template for a curriculum map.
Examples of curriculum maps for three certificate programs.
Handout that describes a beginning, developing, and mature assessment plan.

Contact Claudia Stanny at the Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment for consultations on any of the following topics:
• Writing SLOs.
• Creating and interpreting a curriculum map.
• Identifying opportunities for embedded assessments.
• Developing a 7-year assessment plan.
• Using assessment evidence for continuous improvement.