FAQ for Five-Year Assessment Plans and Expectations for Annual Assessment Activities
Fall 2019

SACSCOC expectations for effective management of academic programs include the following:
- Identification of expected program-level outcomes and appropriate ways to measure these outcomes,
- Systematic assessment of student achievement of these outcomes,
- Documentation that department faculty analyze what the results of assessment mean, and
- Documentation that the department faculty use assessment evidence to inform decisions (that is, they document their Use of Results for Improvement of Student Learning and Program Improvement in annual assessment reports).

Underlying this process is the expectation of widespread involvement of department faculty in the process and evidence that the assessment process is ongoing.

In addition to ongoing attention to the assessment of learning outcomes and the use of findings to improve student learning in undergraduate and graduate academic programs, SACSCOC is directing increased attention to how institutions manage certificates (undergraduate and graduate) and stand-alone minors.

Note: Stand-alone minors refers to minors awarded by programs that do not also award a baccalaureate degree in the major. For example, the UWF minor in Spanish is a “stand-alone minor” because UWF does not offer a major in Spanish.

What assessment activities must departments complete?
Each department that manages an academic program (undergraduate, graduate, certificate, or stand-alone minor) should complete the following activities for each program annually:
1. Articulate measurable program-level student learning outcomes (SLOs).
2. Create a curriculum map that aligns the program-level SLOs with courses students must complete to earn the academic credential (degree or annotation of a certificate, or minor on the transcript).
3. Identify student work relevant to SLOs embedded in required courses that the department can use to harvest meaningful and useful assessment evidence about student learning.
4. Gather assessment evidence on at least one SLO annually in each academic program.
5. Discuss the assessment evidence at regular faculty assessment meetings, and identify specific actions that might improve student learning when evidence identifies an area where improvements might be needed or achieved.

Why complete all assessments in 5 years? The academic program undergoes Program Review once every 7 years.
As an institution, we expect students to complete a baccalaureate degree within 4 – 6 years of matriculation. Ideally, undergraduate students complete their degree program within 4 years. Thus, a best practice for assessment would be to examine all program-level SLOs related to the degree within the time frame associated with degree completion. Thus, for undergraduate programs, all SLOs should be examined with a full cycle of assessment within 5 years.

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 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.

FAQ: Assessment of Academic Programs, Certificates and Stand-Alone Minors (5-Year Assessment Plans)
October 2019
• 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 both the initial (or, perhaps, only) exposure to the SLO but set expectations for mastery of the SLO in the course.

• Departments with flexible curriculum structures (e.g., required thematic clusters of related courses) should ask the following question: Can a student evade one or more program-level SLOs by selecting (and avoiding) certain course options available within a cluster?

• 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 spans multiple years and includes
1. **collection of data** on one or more specific SLOs,
2. documentation of a **faculty discussion** and interpretation of the data gathered, and
3. documentation of **decisions made** and any **actions the faculty will implement** during the following year to improve student learning.

**Degree programs, certificates and minors sometimes give students many options for course selection. Which courses should be included on a curriculum map?**
Identify courses that **all** students must complete and identify **thematic clusters of courses** that students must select from when completing an academic program. Do not include elective courses, even when students are required to select one or more courses from a collection of 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. Either arrangement is acceptable. Select the organization that makes the map for your program easiest to read and interpret. See the CUTLA resource page [Curriculum Maps Guidelines](#) for specific instructions and several models for curriculum maps.

**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. If a course contributes to student learning on an SLO or a disciplinary competency, describe the assignment, exam, or other graded learning activity that will generate relevant assessment evidence about the SLO in the cell for that SLO in the row (or column) associated with the course.

**Use the following criteria 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 skills 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
Curriculum maps frequently describe the nature of the contribution of the course to achieving the program-level SLOs. Departments can choose among several methods:

- 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). Enter a code for each level (e.g., I for introduced, R for reinforced/practiced, M for mastered or assessed).
- Describe the assignment or other graded work that could serve as a source of data for an embedded assessment of the SLO.
- Describe the specific disciplinary competency that aligns with a program-level SLO (useful for programs with disciplinary accreditation).

Our program is accredited by a disciplinary accrediting body that requires us to evaluate multiple competencies. How do we reconcile the demands of disciplinary accreditation with the demands of SACSCOC for the assessment of SLOs?

Develop a crosswalk to describe how disciplinary competencies align with program-level SLOs. Usually, multiple competencies can be bundled together and described as a single, more global, program-level SLO. Curriculum maps can describe how different courses, supporting different competencies, work together to support a single program-level SLO.

Develop a plan to assess 2-3 SLOs every year and examine every SLO in at least one cycle during the period covered by a program review (5 years).

Departments need not assess every outcome every year. Ideally, the department selects one or more 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 reflect on learning and seek opportunities for actions that might produce improved learning.

Our disciplinary accrediting body requires our program to assess every SLO every year. Do we still need to create a 5-year assessment plan?

Yes. However, your 5-year assessment plan should describe how the department plans to reflect on, make decisions, and implement actions to improve specific SLOs. Programs that must assess every SLO every year may have difficulty finding time to reflect on their assessment evidence or identify actions they might implement to improve student learning in the curriculum. These programs should develop a 5-year assessment plan that identifies when the department will focus reflective discussions on specific SLOs. Programs are unlikely to have the resources to reflect on and implement meaningful decisions about more than one or two SLOs a year. For these programs, the 5-year assessment plan should identify when faculty will focus on specific SLOs and ensure that they attend to all program-level SLOs within a 5-year period of time.
What should a department do about assessment of a low-enrollment academic program, certificate, 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 program or certificate.

Handouts and resources

SACSCOC Principles of Accreditation (2018)
http://www.sacscoc.org/principles.asp

Template for a curriculum map.
https://uwf.edu/media/university-of-west-florida/academic-affairs/departments/cutla/curriculum-maps/Curriculum-Map-Template.xlsx

Template for a 5-year assessment plan.
https://uwf.edu/media/university-of-west-florida/academic-affairs/departments/cutla/documents/Template-5-Year-Assessment-Plan.xlsx

Examples of curriculum maps.
https://uwf.edu/academic-affairs/departments/cutla/supporting-pages/curriculum-maps-guidelines/

Example of an assessment plan.

Contact Claudia Stanny (Center for University Teaching, Learning, and Assessment) or Angela Bryan (Institutional Effectiveness) for consultations on any of the following topics:

- Writing SLOs.
- Creating and interpreting a curriculum map.
- Identifying opportunities for embedded assessments.
- Developing a 5-year assessment plan.
- Using assessment evidence for continuous improvement.