Assessment/Accreditation Council
Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Framework

Introduction
The Assessment/Accreditation Council at Northwestern University, comprised of faculty representatives from all schools, school and central administrators, and students, was charged by the Provost with facilitating a campus-wide effort focusing on the assessment of student learning outcomes. The Council acknowledges that assessment of student learning outcomes is being performed widely across the university. The Council recognizes that units are at different stages of assessment and utilize different approaches to assessment. A goal of the Council is to provide an assessment framework to be used by units to guide them in their assessment efforts. This document is intended to provide support for units that are at the beginning, intermediate and advanced stages of assessment efforts.

Statement of Assessment Purpose
Northwestern University’s varied efforts to engage in assessment activities have multiple purposes. First and foremost, these efforts derive from the position that a systematic approach to assessing the learning outcomes of students is necessary to evaluate and improve upon the quality of learning. Through assessment we are able to learn about our unique strengths and opportunities for improvement. Secondly, assessment efforts are increasingly important for articulating to external entities (e.g., governmental regulators, accreditation agencies, peer institutions, parents and prospective students) the quality of Northwestern’s educational programs, which are both curricular and co-curricular. Assessment enables us to express in concrete and often comparable terms the value of our educational programs as a leading institution in higher education.

This assessment framework is designed to serve as a tool to build upon the work that has been done by those with well developed assessment programs to contextualize them within the larger assessment goals and structures of the institution as well as those just beginning to employ more systematic assessment mechanisms, and to help develop and guide those initiatives. The framework should be seen as a resource providing a rough blueprint to be fleshed out according to the specific needs of the program. The groundwork already laid at Northwestern need not be re-created, thus enabling the assessment efforts to begin a few steps further along. How assessment within a unit or program or college links to and furthers the larger goals of the institution will become clearer when it can be placed within this framework. The framework focuses on student learning outcomes.

Scope
Rather than a centrally controlled and monitored student outcomes assessment process, the Assessment/Accreditation Council has determined that an assessment framework should support a systematic, faculty driven process that helps the understanding of the assessment efforts (curricular and co-curricular) that are currently underway across the University.
Guiding Principles
Guiding principles serve as a basis of reasoning and action that leads, shows the way, and directs movement. The following principles guide what we do, why we do it, and how we do it.

1. The primary purpose of assessment is the evaluation and the improvement of student learning, not the evaluation of faculty teaching or staff performance.
2. Faculty and departments, given their curricular role and responsibilities, have primary responsibility for the development, implementation, and maintenance of all academic assessment activities.
3. It is the responsibility and purview of each program or department to identify its own assessment procedures, methods, as well as interventions based on the results of its assessment of student achievement.
4. Assessment requires clearly defined objectives and outcomes; evidence collected at the program/unit level will form the most basic unit used for quality and improvement.
5. Assessment requires a feedback loop of assessing, evaluating, taking action, and reassessing to make and track progress.
6. Assessment and the use of assessment results should be attentive to diversity in its many forms and be conducted in a sensitive manner.

Measuring Student Learning and Performance
Whether at the course, program or school level, measuring student learning and performance begins with clearly defined objectives. Individuals collecting and evaluating data and other types of evidence determine the kind of learning, skills, and performance they expect their students to achieve. Learning objectives are measured using formative and/or summative assessments in order to monitor impact and affect change. An overall effective assessment usually contains both quantitative and qualitative elements.

Utilizing Assessment Data
There are four mains ways that assessment data may be used to evaluate student learning outcomes:

1. **Formatively**: Units use data as feedback to reform or revise for improvement in student learning outcomes going forward.
2. **Summatively**: Units use data to evaluate at an endpoint for the purposes of making judgments about learning outcomes, either in their own programs or in programs in unites over which they have responsibility.
3. **As baselines**: Units that have never measured learning outcomes before establish baselines for comparison going forward.
4. **As benchmarks**: Units use data to compare themselves with other units within and/or beyond the university, or to compare their own programs at points over time.

The utilization of assessment studies may be best described as a recursive pattern of assessing, evaluating the assessment data, determining action to take based on the evaluation, and then re-
assessing to see if the action taken resulted in an improvement. This pattern creates a feedback loop that enables those engaged in teaching and learning to make and track progress toward their objectives.

Assessment Process Cycle

The framework should be used as a resource providing a rough blueprint to be fleshed out according to the specific needs of the program.
Glossary of Terms

Like all areas of study, the field of assessment has a distinct lexicon. This glossary comprises a list of common terminology within the field, with definitions drawn from the literature. As in all fields, the definitions of these terms can vary, but the goal here is to provide a university-wide glossary so that members of the Northwestern community have a shared understanding of the assessment process and what it is meant to accomplish. Strategies for assessment will take different forms from one university unit to another. But all units that deal with students, whether to teach, to advise, to house, to help, etc., share the goal of our students learning to their fullest potential. How do we do this? How do we know we have succeeded? If we haven’t succeeded, what should we do? The terms below enable distinct units to design and implement their own assessment plans, while still enabling the university as a whole to articulate a Northwestern-wide assessment strategy that highlights what we do very well and identifies what we need to improve to provide our students with an outstanding education.

University Definition of Educational Assessment
Because there are many different technical and practical meanings and forms of assessment in higher education, the following provides a very general definition that may help to guide our efforts:

Assessment is the systematic collection and review of information about students and educational programs. It includes the evaluation and use of that information for the improvement of teaching and learning.

Formative and Summative Assessment

Formative assessment:
This type of assessment typically concerns development and on-going improvement. In a learning context, formative assessment may be used to provide feedback to improve learning, motivate students, diagnose a student’s strengths and weaknesses, or to help students reflect critically on their own learning. Usually it has several phases of reflection.

In a program context, formative assessment may be used, for example, to steadily improve quality, offer points of feedback and reflection, and diagnose program strengths and weaknesses.

Summative assessment:
This type of assessment typically concerns accountability, performance, and impact. In a learning context, summative assessment may be used to pass or fail a student, grade or rank a student, or predict a student’s success in other courses, or otherwise measure a student’s proficiency. Usually, it is obtained at the end of an instructional unit.

In a program context, summative assessment may be used, for example, to demonstrate performance, or serve as a benchmark to other programs and schools.
Evaluation

One or more processes for interpreting the data and evidence accumulated through assessment processes. Evaluation determines the extent to which student outcomes and program objectives are being attained. Evaluation results in decisions and actions regarding program improvement.

Distinguishing Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes

**Goals/aims** are best thought of as general statements of educational intent (whether for a course or other instructional unit or a program). Goals are usually broader and may not be specifically measurable. A goal may include one or more objectives.

**Objectives:** *Intended* results of instruction, curricula, programs or activities.

- **Learning objectives** are more specific and concrete statements of what students are expected to learn or be able to do upon completion of instructional unit or program. They will identify the learning behavior and criteria. Strong learning objectives avoid vague behaviors like “know,” “learn,” and “appreciate,” and instead use more specific language such as “analyze,” “evaluate,” and “create” that get at higher level skills.
- **Instructional or program objectives** are more specific and concrete statements of what a course or program intends to accomplish.

**Outcomes:** *Achieved* results of instruction, curricula, programs or activities

- **Learning outcomes:** specific observable/measurable statements of the learning students achieve. To what extent did the student achieve the stated learning objective?
- **Value added outcomes:** The amount of learning achieved as a result of instruction that has taken place within a particular context (e.g.: a classroom or a university), over and above the knowledge or skills a student had upon arrival. In some cases learning can be identified that may have occurred prior to experiencing the instructional context that is the subject of an assessment. The term value added is used to refer to those outcomes that are not derived prior to a student’s engagement with the setting being assessed.

**Benchmark**

1) A standard of excellence, achievement, etc., against which similar things can be measured or judged: *Programs with which we compare ourselves are sometimes used as benchmarks of excellence.*
2) Any standard or reference by which others can be measured or judged: *Standardized test scores are among the criteria used as benchmarks for admissions.*

**Baseline**

1) A basic standard or level; guideline: *to establish a baseline for future studies.*
2) A specific value or values that can serve as a comparison or control.