

## **Overview of Common Outcomes for Assessment Plans**

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An institutional conversation to identify shared learning principles or common outcomes is not an easy conversation to have. While many institutions begin at the institutional level by articulating learning values across discipline lines, others find that approach simply impossible due to organizational structure or political motivations. Still, others find it too cumbersome and spend an inordinate amount of time debating wording and thus arrive in the end with nothing.

Another entrée to the shared learning principles conversation is to allow each discipline an opportunity to articulate their program outcomes. In doing so, the program expresses their student learning values and thus embraces the learning principles as their own, knowing how to assess the learning outcomes, interpreting the evidence, and making decisions for improvement. Being motivated to complete their own assessment plans, divisions feel the freedom to articulate what they believe every undergraduate student should know and be able to do upon graduation. Programs are empowered to articulate their student learning values in their own words and to impact those outcomes in their own programs.

Once an institution compiles completed individual program or discipline assessment plans, the plans can be evaluated in order to identify common outcomes across the disciplines. The common outcomes can then be used to inform institutional conversations about shared learning principles while being embraced by the disciplines that espoused them. Furthermore, the common outcomes can inform discussions about

the general education or liberal learning program to see if the latter expresses values different from those referred to by the disciplines.

### **Purpose**

This paper illustrates the process used to evaluate assessment plans filed by the Committee on Undergraduate Academic Program Review (CUPR) at North Carolina State University in the spring and fall of 2002 in order to identify common outcomes across disciplines. This paper discusses the analysis of those plans and the summary of the results. It is hoped that the results will be used by CUPR and the Committee on Undergraduate Education (CUE) to inform the identification of the student learning principles for undergraduate students at North Carolina State University. However, the common outcomes included in this document are not intended to inform the planning process for those presently developing assessment plans.

### **Methodology**

Sixty-five undergraduate program assessment plans, gathered by CUPR, were analyzed using grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) in order to identify common themes in objectives and outcomes statements contained within the assessment plans. In grounded theory, a theory is “inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 23). So, contrary to scientific method, one does not begin with a hypotheses and attempt to prove or disprove it, rather, one begins with a topic of study, a phenomena, and allows what is relevant to that subject emerge. The researcher asked a

basic question in an effort to identify the common outcomes for the collective assessment plans: What are the statements or ideas that appear in more than one assessment plan?

The challenge of open, axial, and selective coding, which was particularly present in this study, was that many of the outcomes could be placed into more than one theme depending on the context in which the faculty described the particular outcome. Since context information was limited, due to the nature of the assessment plan, some outcomes were determined to fit multiple categories. The principal investigator, therefore, made a choice to place the particular categories into the themes that appeared to be most appropriate given the limited context of the assessment plan.

The full list of categories and key issues are described briefly in the next section of this report. The outline for this section can be found in Appendix A.

## **Findings**

*Communication.* Communication emerged as a predominant theme. Some of the plans included general information about graduates' ability to communicate effectively in writing and speaking, while other plans specifically indicated that a graduate would be expected to be competent in communicating information about his or her discipline across disciplines and professions. Although most of the statements regarding communication were focused on writing and speaking, several assessment plan authors (those assumed to have written the assessment plans) indicated that students from their programs should be able to communicate professional ideas through visual and graphic communication. It was also expressed in two plans that graduates would be expected to have strong interpersonal communication skills.

*Professional, ethical, and societal responsibility.* This category represents objectives and outcomes that indicated that graduates would be expected to understand the professional code of conduct for their discipline; would understand the ethical implication of their profession; would be able to make ethical decisions in professional practice; and would have knowledge of contemporary issues. The latter means that the students would understand how their professional actions impact, positively or negatively, the community or environment and understand how to appropriately respond to the changing needs of the community or environment.

*Critical evaluation.* The critical evaluation category includes objective or outcome statements about problem analysis, problem solving and informed decision-making.

*Understanding group dynamics* . In this theme, assessment plan authors reported that they would be assessing plans to determine whether or not students were able to work effectively in interdisciplinary or disciplinary groups and understand group dynamics.

*Lifelong learning*. This section includes those objectives and outcomes in the assessment plans that addressed participation in professional development activities, professional improvement activities, and professional organizations. Professional development and professional improvement activities appear to be very similar constructs. The term professional development was chosen to describe those activities that allow the individual to develop new skills and thus used the term professional improvement activities to describe those activities that afford the individual the opportunity to improve existing skills. The two terms are used in an effort to maintain consistency with the language used in the holistic evaluations of the assessment plans. Several assessment plan authors referred to professional development and professional improvement activities separately.

*Technological competence*. Although much of the information in the technological competence category was based on discipline specific competencies, there were some general statements made about technological competence. The general statements were related to graduates being able to use technology information gathering, specifically communication and presentations; problem solving; for information sharing; and, data management and to accomplish the skills necessary for entry-level employment or graduate studies.

*Graduate competitiveness.* This theme directly addresses practical post-graduation preparedness or preparation to perform in one's discipline by securing a job or a position doing graduate studies. Graduate competitiveness describes demonstrating professional activities or behavior; being competitive for entry-level professional positions or graduate school admission; advertising and stating professional skills and abilities through portfolio design, resume writing, and interviewing; and demonstrating leadership skills.

*Research.* Although this topic or related statements did not emerge in the majority of assessment plans, the research category was used to organize those key issues that addressed the expectation that graduates be able to identify and locate credible and valid research resources; critically review professional literature; and conduct research and fully develop a research question.

*Cultural competence.* The final category discussed in this report, cultural competence, was not a priority in most assessment plans. This category includes those key issues that focused on diverse ideas and cultural context; diverse ability and learning styles; and diverse people.

## **Recommendations**

It is recommended that the findings of this study be shared with the Committee on Undergraduate Academic Program Review, the Committee on Undergraduate Education, the SACS Institutional Effectiveness Team, the Learning in a Technology-Rich Environment (LITRE) Team, and the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Affairs in order to inform discussions of institutional-wide student learning principles and intended outcomes for the general education program. In turn, those committees will be asked for

recommendations of who should also see this report, so that conversations of shared undergraduate learning values can become evident in all facets of the university. Again, this report of common outcomes should not be used as a guideline or a checklist for assessment plan authors.

It is recommended that this study be repeated when the next round of assessment plans have been gathered from undergraduate academic programs and academic and student support programs in order to evaluate the sustainability of such undergraduate learning and development values.

## References

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990) Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Undergraduate Academic Program Review Process (2002). North Carolina State University. [http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/academic\\_programs/uapr/UAPRindx.html](http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/academic_programs/uapr/UAPRindx.html)