

Student Learning & Assessment at Minnesota State University, Mankato
Executive Summary
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The assessment of student learning is an essential component of Minnesota State University's efforts in evaluating overall institutional effectiveness. In the mission and goals of Minnesota State University, Mankato is this statement: "The University, as a whole and in all of its parts, will establish **priorities** through **planning and assessment processes** that anticipate our needs and focus our efforts and **resources** in support of our mission and goals." Minnesota State University, is an institution driven by planning and prioritization, and this planning and prioritization requires the evidence provided by assessment.

The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association is in the process of developing a revised statement on Student Learning, Assessment, and Accreditation. As part of this revised statement, HLC poses five "fundamental questions" concerning student learning and assessment. We frame this brief summary of assessment and student learning at Minnesota State University, Mankato around these five questions:

1. How are stated student learning outcomes appropriate to mission, programs, and degrees?
2. What evidence is there that students achieve stated learning outcomes?
3. In what ways is student learning evidence analyzed and/or used?
4. How is assessment of student learning a shared responsibility?
5. How is assessment of student learning efforts evaluated and/or improved?

Student Learning Outcome Appropriateness

University goals and outcomes clearly relate to Minnesota State's mission of "promoting learning through effective undergraduate and graduate teaching, scholarship, and research in service to the state, the region and the global community." MSU goals and outcomes are appropriate for a comprehensive university within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System. The academic life of the university is organized into seven colleges: Allied Health and Nursing; Arts and Humanities; Business; Education; Science, Engineering and Technology; Social and Behavioral Sciences; and Graduate Studies and Research. MSU offers 150 undergraduate programs and 82 graduate programs of study, including 16 pre-professional programs. The University offers six baccalaureate degrees, six master's degrees, a specialist's degree and other advanced programs, two associate degrees for two year programs, and fifth- and sixth-year certificates. Specifically, student learning is addressed in the following university goals (i.e., 2&3) and outcomes related to the development of overall student knowledge, skill, and dispositions.

Goal Statement 2: The University will prepare students for careers and for life-long learning by providing a clearly defined general education program and focused undergraduate pre-professional, professional, and liberal arts programs.

Outcome 1: Upon completion of the general education program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, students will have the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for continued education, vocations and civic engagement.

Outcome 2: Upon completion of degree requirements at Minnesota State University, Mankato, students will have the knowledge, skills and dispositions required for successful employment and continued education in their specific disciplines.

Goal Statement 3: The University will strengthen its role as a major provider of graduate education, offering intensive, scholarly graduate programs including collaborative efforts with other institutions and professionals, culminating in student expertise at professional levels.

Outcome 1: Students completing graduate degrees at Minnesota State University, Mankato will demonstrate sufficient knowledge, skills and dispositions to succeed professionally.

Evidence of Student Learning Outcome Achievement

Evidence of student learning outcome attainment is gathered from three basic sources: general education, program, and other institution level data (i.e., institution-wide surveys)

General Education Evidence

MSU assesses general education outcomes through reviews of student work. Collections of randomly selected student work are examined and assessed by small groups of faculty teaching courses within 12 of the 13 general education categories (Category 2, Critical Thinking, is infused throughout the other categories and is assessed by each GECCIG). These faculty groups, known as General Education Category Course Instructor Groups (GECCIG), are responsible for assessing their respective general education categories. Category 12, First Year Experience, undergoes annual assessment through the Office of First Year Experience, but is also assessed as part of the regular general education assessment cycle.

A four-year cycle of review is implemented to allow for student learning assessment of all General Education categories. Assessment reports are developed according to this cycle and are reviewed by the General Education Committee, the Program Review and Assessment Committee and the Executive Director of University Assessment. Additionally, following each category assessment, faculty who teach in this category are invited to a meeting to discuss assessment results and plan for changes in the category courses based on assessment data.

Program Evidence

All academic degree-granting programs participate in regularly scheduled formal “Program Review,” annual student learning assessment reporting, or regularly scheduled external accreditation reviews. Program Reviews are scheduled every five years and require a comprehensive review of all program activities, with an emphasis on assessing and reporting on student learning. Program reviews reports are reviewed by the program Dean and the Vice President of Academic Affairs. More information can be obtained on the Program Review process through the following website: http://www.mnsu.edu/acadaf/pra/program_review/

Annual assessment data is also collected, analyzed, and reported by all degree-granting graduate and undergraduate programs. Student learning outcome evidence and the accompanying reports are based on the student learning outcomes listed in individual program assessment plans. The reports are reviewed by the program faculty, the program's Dean, the Executive Director of University Assessment and Program Review and Assessment Committee.

All externally accredited programs are engaged in regularly scheduled accreditation visits. These accreditations are governed by the specific accrediting body, but all include an emphasis on assessing student learning. More information can be obtained regarding accreditation through the following website: http://www.mnsu.edu/acadaf/pra/program_review/

Other Institution Level Evidence

Use of national surveys of student attitude and expectations (National Survey of Student Engagement; Student Satisfaction Survey; College Students Expectation Questionnaire; College Students Experience Questionnaire) and use of locally developed surveys to gauge student satisfaction and success (Career Development and Placement Alumni Survey; Departmental Alumni Surveys) help provide evidence of student learning outcome attainment.

Analyzing and Using Student Learning Evidence

“The important question is not how assessment is defined but whether assessment information is used...” (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Assessment evidence is analyzed and used at the individual, program and institutional levels at Minnesota State University.

Individual Faculty Level

Minnesota State University faculty collect, review, and use assessment information. Most MSU faculty (78%) agreed to strongly agree in a 2004 institutional survey of faculty assessment beliefs, uses, and confidence that “assessment information was important in affecting their current and future instructional planning.” In addition, 88% of faculty reported in the same survey that they felt confident in using assessment feedback for course improvement.

Program Level

Minnesota State University academic programs document assessment information use primarily through Program Review, external accreditation and yearly assessment report processes.

Programs submit yearly assessment reports that focus not only on results but how programs will specifically use the information from those results to make changes or impact pedagogical and curricular decision-making. Programs also report how they made use of results from the previous year as a means to gauge year to year assessment and program development. MSU programs, on average, tended to describe program improvement in global or ambiguous terms, or described plans for improvement that did not always match assessment results based on an analysis of 2003-2004 program assessment reports. However, programs also reported that on average they used the previous year results (for 2003-2004) for program improvement.

Program Review also requires the reporting of how departments are using various data to make changes. Specifically, Category 2 (Student Achievement) of the self-study document asks

programs to respond to what program improvements have been made since the most recent program review. In addition, new program goals and an assessment plan may be developed based on the findings and recommendations of the program review process.

Institutional Level

Two institutional level committees (Assessment Coordinating Council and Program Review & Assessment) review student learning evidence and provide recommendations for change or further review to other related committees (i.e., Undergraduate Curriculum & Academic Policy Committee and the Graduate Committee). The Assessment Coordinating Council oversees institutional assessment activities by helping to develop and promote institutional assessment, support assessment activities in all divisions, and help coordinate the institutional assessment practices that the university already utilizes. This committee is comprehensive in its impact and recommendations as it draws membership from each of the five divisions of the University: Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Fiscal and Administrative Affairs, Information Technology and University Advancement. The Program Review & Assessment Committee's role is to propose policies and procedures related to academic program review and assessment, to be available as resources for departments undergoing accreditation/ program review, to review the institution-wide assessment plans and to help enhance an "assessment culture" at the university.

Assessment Shared Responsibility

Assessment, to be successful, must involve all participants in the process: students who are studying, learning and receiving university services; faculty and staff involved in teaching, advising and student support services; and administrators and others in leadership positions that seek, gather and use assessment information in decision-making. We attempt to regularly involve all constituencies at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

The divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs have the most active and developed assessment process, both because of the need (being the divisions working most closely with the core mission of the university of learning, scholarship and student development) as well as because of efforts on behalf of the leadership and members of the divisions.

On the academic side, to some extent, all teaching faculty and students are involved in assessment as every degree-granting program has an active assessment plan and is engaged in assessment activities. In addition, all academic units involved in general education take part in academic assessment. Students contribute by engaging in activities (surveys, and other more direct assessment activities such as capstone papers, presentations, portfolios, etc.) and by serving on academic assessment committees (i.e., Assessment Coordinating Council).

In the division of Student Affairs, staff and students are also actively involved in assessment. The mission of Student Affairs assessment is to provide information regarding: student demographics, student expectations and experiences, student engagement, campus climate and the quality and improvement of services and programs provided by the division. To achieve this mission each department within the division engages in ongoing assessment of program outcomes and students participate in various assessment activities such as surveys.

The remaining three divisions (Finance and Administration, Technology, and University Advancement) are in the process of developing their own assessment procedures. Although always having engaged in assessment initiatives, each division is currently developing its own assessment plan. These assessment plans provide direction in measuring the supportive functions and features of each division. Surveys of student satisfaction and attitudes of expectation (with services and facilities) and use of those services are examples of information collected. In addition, response time, equipment usage and replacement rates all help to provide a more complete picture of the level of non-academic divisional effectiveness.

Evaluation and Improvement of Assessment Efforts

The evaluation and improvement of the assessment of student learning efforts occurs through two processes: yearly program assessment reporting and the institutional goal evaluation system.

Program Assessment Reporting

Yearly feedback and ratings are provided by the Executive Director of Assessment for all annual assessment reports completed by all degree-granting programs at MSU. Feedback and ratings are related to how well reports match “best practice” principles of assessment when describing student learning outcomes assessed that year, the assessment methods used, the population assessed, the results of the assessment, and what the department or program plans to do or has done in response to the assessment reports. Follow-up meetings and presentations are regularly scheduled by the Executive Director of Assessment to work with programs that display less than adequate or targeted levels of assessment quality.

Institutional Goal Evaluation System

A method of examining institutional assessment progress (i.e., report card) is currently being developed by the MSU Assessment Coordinating Council. The purpose of this process is to provide internal and external constituency feedback as to how well Minnesota State University is achieving institutional outcome progress (including student learning). Currently, the goal evaluation system is designed to evaluate MSU institutional goal progress as related to three variables: assessment indicator quality; assessment performance level; and goal strategies & initiatives. Assessment of indicator quality will provide feedback as to the quality, quantity, and variety of the assessments used to measure institutional goal attainment. This will help the institution determine the meaningfulness of the information and data generated. Assessment of the data collected will allow some determination as to whether the data suggests the current status or direction of change is either at an acceptable level or heading in the right direction. Assessment of goal strategies & initiatives is designed to provide institutional feedback as to whether initiatives are appropriate, efficient, and effective or may need some change in course of action, funding, and/or number needed to provide sustainable momentum in a goal area.