

TIP Sheet #17

Update on the Status of Assessments at UWF and Plans for 2006-2007

We closed the 2005-2006 academic year with a good demonstration that departments made substantial progress toward developing meaningful assessment of undergraduate programs. The First Monitoring Report to SACS, which will be submitted in early October 2006, will demonstrate clear progress on the Quality Enhancement Plan and Institutional Effectiveness. Although we made significant progress and can document the collection and use of assessment data in many departments for student learning in undergraduate programs, we are not yet able to document broad collection and use of assessment data on either General Studies/Academic Foundations or Graduate Programs. The goal for 2006-2007 is to maintain our work on assessment of undergraduate programs and establish meaningful and maintainable assessment processes for General Studies/Academic Foundations and Graduate programs.

The University has two opportunities (in each of two SACS Monitoring Reports) to document that it has established an ongoing process of assessment and *use of assessment evidence for making decisions about student learning and teaching strategies*. The 2006-2007 academic year is our last opportunity to collect and document the use of assessment data for program improvements for the second and final SACS Monitoring Report, which is likely to be due in September 2007 judging from this year's submission due date. Failure to remediate deficiencies cited by a SACS accreditation team within the two-year time frame can have serious consequences for a university.

The following questions address the plans to successfully establish ongoing and sustainable assessment processes in all three academic arenas.

What types of assessments should departments conduct during 2006-2007?

The university will be engaged in three major assessment projects during 2006-2007.

- All departments will continue assessment of undergraduate programs.
- All departments that contribute one or more courses to General Studies will collect assessment data on two Student Learning Outcomes in the Academic Foundations matrix (see TIP Sheet #16 for a copy of the matrix).
- All departments that offer graduate programs will complete an initial cycle of assessment on graduate Student Learning Outcomes.

How can a department manage the demands on time and resources if it must collect and use assessment data for all three arenas (General Studies/Academic Foundations, Undergraduate Programs, Graduate Programs)?

Departments should not attempt to do all assessments in one term. The plan is to collect assessment data related to General Studies/Academic Foundations during the Fall Term. Undergraduate programs and graduate programs can be assessed more effectively in the Spring Term, when many undergraduate students complete capstone courses in their degree programs and graduate students complete thesis and internship

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projects. These are likely to be the most useful locations for embedded assessments for these programs.

What is Academic Foundations? Is this the same thing as General Studies?

Academic Foundations is comprised of First Year Experience, General Studies, the university diversity requirement, and student activities. Integrating General Studies with these other educational experiences in a larger organization called Academic Foundations captures the spirit of the Quality Enhancement Plan, which acknowledges the value of learning associated with co-curricular activities. Academic Foundations represents the first in a series of educational experiences in which skills are introduced (General Studies and other Academic Foundations experiences), reinforced and developed (courses in the major), and brought to mastery (capstone projects). Academic Foundations is intended to establish basic skills that will prepare students for the more sophisticated learning experiences they will encounter in courses in their major. The student learning outcomes associated with Academic Foundations include engaging in an appropriate orientation to academic life; demonstration of development of skill in communication, critical thinking, ethical reasoning and project management; and behaving in a manner that demonstrates integrity. Thus, the overarching goal of Academic Foundations is to establish the initial stages of student learning that will be reinforced and developed when students begin work on courses associated with their major.

Must assessment data be collected in every section of a department's General Studies course?

If a department offers more than one section of a course, the department can randomly select 50% of those courses for measuring **as long as the courses share outcomes and syllabi for the tracking that you plan to do**. Thus, if a department elects to use a representative sample of course sections for assessment purposes, it must document that all sections of the course include the assessed student learning outcomes in their syllabi. An audit of course syllabi would be a suitable method for this documentation. However, if the syllabi, assignments, and course plan differ substantially across sections, the department's understanding of achievement will be best determined by separate monitoring of these sections.

My department offers several different courses for General Studies. Must we collect assessment data in every course offered?

No. Select at least one course from your course offerings in General Studies and concentrate on meaningful assessment of the two student learning outcomes identified for your department. In future years you will turn your attention to these other courses in series. At this stage of the assessment process, it would be useful for the department to examine the syllabi from its collection of General Studies courses and determine whether these courses all include appropriate student learning outcomes that are relevant to the two outcomes the department has made a commitment to address as its contribution to General Studies/Academic Foundations. This will establish the basis for assessments in these courses in future years.

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Must the method of assessment used for a student learning outcome in one department's course (e.g., ethical reasoning) be identical to that used to assess this outcome in another department?

No. Recall that Project Management student learning outcomes and other ALC student learning outcomes for undergraduate programs are defined and assessed in domain-specific, discipline-specific ways. Similarly, the definition of a student learning outcome in Academic Foundations should also be specific to the discipline of the department. For example, a department such as biology or psychology might define *ethical reasoning* in terms of the ethical conduct of research (e.g., the use of animals for research purposes, ethical considerations for informed consent and the protection of human participants in research, authenticity of data generated for research, etc.). In contrast, philosophy might focus on other aspects of *ethical reasoning* (e.g., the nature of ethical, just, or moral choices).

What are the implications of using specific courses for assessment of student learning outcomes?

Logically, a course that includes an embedded assessment of a particular student learning outcome ought to include a suitable outcome among the course SLOs listed in the syllabus. In addition, the syllabus should include a description of the required assignment, exam, or activity that will be used as the basis of the assessment (although it need not be explicitly described as an assessment assignment). For example, a set of multiple choice questions included in a larger set of questions on a course exam might be used to assess a particular SLO (e.g., evaluation of evidence, ethical reasoning about research). The syllabus should include a description of the required exam in which these questions are embedded.

I've already created my syllabus for my General Studies course for the Fall Term and did not include the SLOs for Academic Foundations. Must I create an amended syllabus?

Assuming the omitted SLOs are an implicit component of the course, the revision of the syllabus to include appropriate SLOs for Academic Foundations can be delayed to the Spring 2007 term. By Spring 2007, all courses in General Studies ought to include appropriate the SLOs for Academic Foundations that the department claims to address in these courses.

What is the time line for the collection and use of assessment data for General Studies?

- Data collection will take place during the Fall Term 2006.
- Departments will report summaries of their assessment data to CUTLA no later than December 8, 2006.
- Departments with course offerings in General Studies will convene in January, 2007 to discuss the assessment data collected, determine how these data should be interpreted, identify actions that can be taken to improve student learning, and establish a plan for the collection and use of assessment data during 2007-2008.
- Department chairs will include information on the assessment of student learning in the Annual Report (June, 2007), including identification of the SLOs assessed,

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description of the method used for assessment, summary of assessment evidence, decisions made about curriculum, teaching strategies, class activities, etc. based on assessment evidence.

My department plays only a small role in General Studies. We offer only one course that can be used to meet a General Studies requirement. Shouldn't the burden of assessment of General Studies/Academic Foundations be placed on departments that play the major role and offer many courses to meet these requirements?

The rationale for including any course in the General Studies curriculum is that the course makes a meaningful contribution to the learning goals of General Studies/Academic Foundations. If a department believes that its course plays a minor role in achieving these goals, it might want to reconsider the appropriateness of continued participation in the General Studies curriculum.

Any department that contributes a course to the General Studies curriculum should be making a meaningful contribution to student learning outcomes associated with the goals of the General Studies curriculum. The effectiveness of this contribution should be assessed. Thus, any department that is a player in General Studies is expected to be a player in the assessment of student learning in General Studies.

What about Graduate Programs? Can we let them wait until next year?

Absolutely not. It is critical that we have meaningful assessment data, including evidence that assessment data are used for decision making ("closing the loop"), on **all** educational programs (General Studies/Academic Foundations, undergraduate programs, and graduate programs) during 2006-2007. Failure to collect and use assessment data in all three educational arenas would result in a 2007 SACS Monitoring Report in which we would continue to demonstrate deficiencies cited by the accreditation visiting team and would produce unwelcome consequences for the university's standing on accreditation. More importantly, as professional educators and scholarly teachers committed to ensuring the quality of educational experiences at UWF, we should be interested in seeking empirical evidence that will inform us about the nature of student learning in all of our programs.