Houghton College

Policy Statement on Assessment of Student Academic Achievement

Part I: Introduction and Purpose

Student learning outcomes assessment enables ongoing monitoring of the extent to which students are developing the knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes that are appropriate for graduates of our academic programs. Two primary questions are addressed: “What do we want our students to be able to do?” and “How will we know they can do it?”

Creating learning outcomes and the follow up assessments are at the core of assessing broader institutional effectiveness, for they monitor the mission execution of the college. Doing assessment assists programs in defining course goals and provides information for faculty to develop stronger programs, more effective curricula, and innovative teaching. While outcomes assessment assists with our obligation to improve intentionally programs, departments, and the institution, it also enables accountability to our accrediting agencies as we provide evidence of quality teaching and learning.

Despite the complex structure of the college and a wide variety of disciplinary visions represented by our academic departments, a common set of assessment principles can be identified. While the focus of the following principles is on academic programs and departments, these principles and values of assessment apply as well to operational assessment of student financial services, finance and physical plant management, advancement, enrollment management, student life, and spiritual life aspects of the college.

Part II: General Principles, Processes, and Responsibilities

A. Several general principles define our philosophy of academic assessment and serve as a touchstone for the diverse assessment activities on campus:

1) The college is committed to the central role of faculty in the assessment process and allows academic programs flexibility to choose assessment methods that most suit their needs.

2) Many of the regular activities of academic life are evaluative and analytical, making them forms of assessment that can simply be more formalized.

3) Academic assessment is essential to informed decision-making at all levels. Since assessment includes integrative studies requirements, electives, academic majors, and some non-major programs, that information is needed to support quality judgments about their value and costs associated with their management.
4) Academic assessment is ongoing and periodic, and used both as a procedure for maintaining program excellence as well as for answering questions about students' educational experience. Thus, academic assessment is conducted both regularly and on an ad hoc basis when warranted.

5) Student learning outcomes assessment supplements rather than replaces curricular, departmental, and other types of ongoing review for improvement.

B. Assessment processes will occur at five levels, creating a comprehensive program across the institution. However, the chief focus of this policy will be on student academic learning outcomes, which are emphasized in levels 3, 4, and 5:

1) Institution level: national benchmarking assessments are ways we review how we compare with similar institutions on measures of student satisfaction, academic ability and achievement, financial sustainability, and other factors.

2) Unit, area, and departmental level: assessments of offices and processes will focus on broad areas within the college like academic, student life, finance, enrollment management, spiritual life, alumni, public relations/marketing, and advancement.

3) Major and program level: students in majors, honors programs, and completing the Integrative Studies program are assessed for accomplishment of student learning outcomes as a group (focused rubrics, major field tests, self-evaluation). The students participate in giving feedback for improving the program. In addition, 10-year academic evaluation reports of each program help determine the degree to which all goals—beyond learning outcomes and including financial, staffing, library resources, lab space, etc.—are being met.

4) Course and instructor level: course evaluations through IDEAonline will enable faculty and curricular development through benchmarking performance outcomes and learning outcomes across departments, within the institution, within broad disciplines, and against the national IDEA database.

5) Student evaluation by instructor level: individual assessment of learning using specialized exams or quizzes and rating rubrics for class projects, portfolios, and papers.

The assessing department, major, or unit decides the student learning outcomes for its area, which are to be measured, and how often those outcomes are assessed. Implications shall be drawn from the findings through shared discussions among the program faculty or staff.

Finally, the process for sharing the data with stakeholders is also the responsibility of the program, departmental, and unit leaders. The assessment should stimulate further discussions among faculty of the appropriate learning goals, the curriculum, and relevant pedagogy, with further cycles of assessment.
The raw data that result from assessment activities are retained by the department chair. The findings, and the analyses that result, are to be available to the Assessment Committee, the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment, the Academic Dean, and other appropriate constituencies including students. Student learning outcomes assessment information may not be used for personnel decisions nor shall it be the sole criterion for resource allocation decisions.

C. Responsibilities and assessment

1) Assessment is collaborative, although ought to be principally carried forward by the faculty of a program. A culture of evidentiary assessment should be an improvement process for students, faculty, and programs.

2) The Office of Institutional Research and Assessment may provide support, sample rubrics and reporting templates, and other resources and expertise as requested.

3) It is the responsibility of each group of instructors in a major, the department chair, and area Associate Dean, to submit a brief annual report to the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. The Academic Dean's Office, with the support of the Academic Council and by action of the faculty, requires reporting on assessment activities and how information gleaned from such activities has been used effectively.

4) Student learning outcomes and their measures (but not the findings) shall be reviewed and approved by the Assessment Committee and made available to all campus groups. These will be published in the respective departmental websites as well as centrally filed on the Institutional Research and Assessment website. The findings will typically be restricted to the campus intranet.

Part III: Outcomes Assessment in the Program/Major

The disciplinary academic departments and the Integrative Studies Committee have specific responsibility to:

A. Develop a program (an academic major, an academic non-major, or Integrative Studies curriculum) assessment plan. This may be rather simple and can emphasize the capstone seminar experience or the IS experience as the focus for data-gathering regarding the program.

Assessment of learning outcomes is based on multiple direct and indirect measures. Direct measures require student performance and the results are fundamentally not arguable, such as the ETS Major Field Test results or expert judgment of performance using a rubric. Indirect measures might be correlative, not require actual performance, and could allow for some argument about the meaning of the results, such as student self evaluations or alumni surveys. Best practices suggest at least two direct assessments for each learning outcome.
The plan should consist of at least five components. There should be a description of:

1) The outcomes written from the student perspective so a student will know what needs to be done to show achievement.

2) The assessment methods (measures for each outcome) to document achievement of learning.

3) How the program faculty will disseminate the outcomes and the assessment methods to students early in their program.

4) The collection and analysis procedures (i.e., how and when data will be collected; from which students; how often)

5) How program faculty will use the results (i.e., what type of feedback and who will receive it by what means)

B. Create a simple structure within the department or program (such as assigning an assessment coordinator) to help ensure that assessment activities will be completed in a timely manner.

C. Implement assessment activities according to the established timelines which include developing a brief report on an annual basis in conjunction with the chair.

D. Evaluate some but not necessarily all outcomes each year, after establishing a timetable for the assessment plan. That plan should be filed with the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment.

E. Review assessment plans and activities periodically to ensure that they are leading to program improvement.

F. Discuss regularly the assessment activities among program colleagues, share the assessment information with constituencies including the students participating in the assessments, and promote conversation about improvement.

G. Involve students in meaningful ways in assessment activities and the results.

H. Communicate to the Institutional Research and Assessment Office ways in which any specialized accreditation requirements address the needs outlined here.

Part IV: The Assessment Committee

A. The Assessment Committee is a standing committee of the faculty. It is charged to suggest policy to the Academic Council and ensure fulfillment of the relevant assessment standards of the Middle States Commission. Its membership and functions are:
1) Membership: Seven members

*Ex officio* member: Associate Dean for Institutional Research and Assessment, Chair

Three elected faculty members on staggered two year terms

One student member elected annually by the Student Government Association

Two resource members: Director of Retention, Faculty Development Committee representative

2) Functions:

a. Provide support to the faculty with particular emphasis on valuing and benefiting from monitoring student learning progress.

b. Provide guidance to the faculty, but not carry out assessments directly, unless the assessment is of its own activities.

c. Initiate and oversee the development of the following specific areas by recommending policies to the Academic Council and ensuring follow-through regarding:

   (1) institution-wide essential student learning outcomes that directly emanate from our mission statement and our college goals.
   (2) student learning outcomes in our Integrative Studies program (working with the Integrative Studies Committee) and which relate to the institution-wide essential student learning outcomes.
   (3) student learning outcomes tied directly to academic majors and programs (working with academic departments) and which relate to the institution-wide student learning outcomes.
   (4) established departmental goals (that is, to review and further refine those that were approved by Academic Policies Council in 2003).
   (5) IDEA online course evaluations for all programs, including P.A.C.E.
   (6) national assessments that allow the college to benchmark among other colleges.
   (7) academic programs’10 year evaluation report (i.e., review the process and make recommendations for improvement, but not have direct involvement in the assessments)

B. This committee is not directly responsible for faculty evaluations related to rank and tenure decisions, decisions regarding faculty development monies, assessments about college-wide units outside direct teaching and learning processes (e.g., advancement, student life, alumni), and performance appraisals of department chairs or other administrators. However, the
committee should be willing to discuss and perhaps provide advice about assessment issues or concerns outside their purview, when appropriate, but would have no responsibility to do so.

**Part V: The Institutional Research and Assessment Office**

The IR/A Office is responsible to the Academic Dean, and through that office, to the faculty. The office is primarily staffed by the Associate Dean for Institutional Research and Assessment, who reports to the Academic Dean and works with the Assessment Committee. Regarding assessment, the office has responsibility to:

A. Disseminate assessment-related information to the campus community, provide expertise, and support faculty development activity related to assessment.

B. Work with campus units, areas, and departments to coordinate, as appropriate, opportunities for gathering information about student learning (including information on student retention, persistence, and graduation).

C. Develop and communicate a timetable of due dates for programs’ annual assessment plans that will be incorporated into the more comprehensive program self-study completed every ten years.

D. Lead the Assessment Committee to assist those responsible for assessment planning through encouragement, resource development, and workshop presentations.

E. Create and maintain a data warehouse and the Institutional Research and Assessment website, including:

1) Housing the student learning outcomes and general assessment plans of all programs or majors and any minors that are not majors.

2) Monitoring the status of each program's assessment planning processes.

3) Receiving annual summary reports of assessment activities from the academic and non-academic programs. Digital copies of the reports shall be sent to the IR/A office and published on the intranet portion of the website.

4) Providing regular reports to the campus community on learning outcomes assessment and other benchmarking assessments with aspirational and peer institutions.

5) Managing the information disseminated based on these records through official Houghton publications, website, and reports for external accreditation agencies.

6) Assisting the Academic Dean with assessment of the IR/A office.