

**The Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes at  
Western Washington University:**

*Plan, Progress, Organizational Developments,  
and Future Activities*

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# **The Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes at Western Washington University: Plan, Progress, Organizational Developments, and Future Activities**

## **Overview**

In April 1998, a 17-member committee representing the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges' Commission on Colleges conducted an intensive site visit at Western Washington University to reaffirm the University's accreditation. Following the site visit the University received a detailed 37 page report from the committee summarizing the observations, commendations, and recommendations generated from the site visit and review of the University's self-study. One of the committee's major recommendations addressed the need for the University to develop an overall assessment plan and to advance educational assessment at the course and program level. Specifically, the committee recommended the following:

*The commission stresses outcomes assessment as essential to institutional planning and evaluation of institutional effectiveness. Each institution is asked to formulate a plan that includes outcome measures that are consistent with its mission, goals, and structure. The evaluation committee recognizes the value of the Office for Institutional Assessment and Testing. The office has actively responded to state mandates in accountability as well as developed useful studies, surveys, and data analysis relative to student characteristics and profiles, satisfaction and quality of life surveys, selected needs assessment, graduation and retention data, alumni and employer surveys and a longitudinal writing portfolio project. There is evidence that the requesting departments and the administration in defining and shaping a variety of goals and programs has used OIAT data. Individual educational programs have also responded to the challenge of educational assessment and have developed and implemented activities that measure their learning objectives. These achievements are noted in the respective sections of this report. However, while there are numerous assessment activities that have been conducted and planned, there is no overall formal institution assessment plan. In addition, the Committee observed selected deficiencies in educational assessment at the course and educational program level. Commission Policy 2B2 requires institutions to identify and publish expected learning outcomes for each of its degree and certificate programs.*

*The WWU catalog notes a strong institutional commitment to strategic planning and educational assessment. This institutional commitment to strategic planning and educational assessment warrants the immediate attention of the academic leadership to actively engage faculty in defining learning objectives and developing specific plans to assess and evaluate outcomes at the course and educational program level (pp. 36-37, Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges' Commission on Colleges Final Evaluation Committee Report).*

The following report is a response to the Commission's recommendations. Since the University received the evaluation summary considerable activity has taken place to respond directly to the student learning outcomes assessment recommendations. Activity and progress has been varied and extensive. The report describes the nature of the activities, program developments, progress, a University-wide outcomes assessment plan, and the collaborative arrangements established with campus committees, centers, and offices.

## **Introduction**

### Background and History

Assessment activities at Western are not new; beginning around 1970, these activities have included academic program reviews, end-of-program capstone assessments of students, and periodic surveys of entering students, returning students, and alumni. Until about 1988, these activities were sporadic, were conducted by a number of individual offices, and were not coordinated in any way. Assessment began to expand significantly with the advent of accountability reporting in 1988.

The 1987 Washington State Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) Master Plan for State colleges and universities asserted the importance of assessment efforts to state authorities by imposing measurement and reporting requirements for a number of specific institutional outcomes. These first mandates for accountability reporting rather quickly led to research on a wide range of related topics, and have measurably improved the quality of undergraduate education at Western.

Ten years' experience has given Western an extensive assessment database and sophisticated analytical expertise, in the Office of Institutional Assessment, the Office of Survey Research, and the new Office of Institutional Research and Resource Planning. This expertise has been applied well beyond the requirements of accountability reporting to a wide range of assessment activities, including, for example:

- ◆ Creation in 1990 of the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing to gather, analyze, and report on a variety of institutional research issues of interest to University decision-makers;
- ◆ Establishment of a Junior Writing Exam and a Math Placement Test as measures to assure students' readiness to progress toward their degrees.
- ◆ Incorporation of assessment findings into programs and practices across the curriculum and the administration.
- ◆ Creation of the Enrollment Management Group in 1992 to better monitor and predict enrollment trends and enhance coordination of students' access to majors and progress towards degree completion.

- ◆ Publication of 53 technical reports, 27 Focus research summaries in both hardcopy and on an extensive website with links to a multitude of student learning assessment activities and resources occurring nation-wide, and seven DIALOGUE forum papers (see <http://www.wvu.edu/~assess>), which present scholarly discussions of teaching, learning and assessment issues in a threaded discussion format on the Internet. These studies, for example, contributed significantly to Western's 1997-98 accreditation review and self-study process, to the development of budget proposals, and to the building of a foundation for continuing monitoring and assessment of retention, progress to degree, graduation rates, writing competency, information technology literacy, employer perceptions, and student and alumni satisfaction with their educational and extracurricular experiences.
- ◆ Distribution to each department, college Deans, and the Provost of reports of graduates' describing their perceptions of various performances by each department, including ratings of advising, level of intellectual challenges and support, support for efficient conclusion of the degree, and level of knowledge and skill added in a wide range of areas. Such comments have been distributed to departments, Deans, and the Provost on a regular basis. In addition, more detailed data has been collected for specific departments during their evaluation cycles, beginning in 1990.

Assessment activities at Western have been guided since 1990 by an Assessment Committee comprised of members of the faculty and the Director of OIAT, reporting to the Provost, and acting with the consent and advice of the Faculty Senate.

Most recently, in 1999, the Academic Coordinating Commission of the Faculty Senate approved a restructuring of the Assessment Committee into the Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (CLTA). The restructuring reflects the importance Western places on the many linkages among teaching, learning, and assessment. Collaborative partnerships have been forged with the assessment activities of the OIAT and the Office of Survey Research (OSR) on the one hand, and the instructional innovation and faculty development efforts of the newly established Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) and the Office of Institutional Research and Resource Planning (OIRRP) on the other. Many of these activities are to be coordinated by the CLTA, along with the departmental assessment plans that are being developed as an essential feature of Western's assessment plan. The nature of the collaborative partnership and the role it plays in the development and monitoring of Western's assessment plan will be discussed in more detail in later sections of this report.

The refocusing of assessment on teaching and learning is part of a nationwide paradigm shift in higher education. The shift is away from traditional measures of institutional quality, which have focused on educational inputs, and toward measures of institutional outputs centered on demonstrable evidence of actual student learning and development. As stated in the handbook of Alverno College, a recognized pioneer in assessment:

*The fundamental role of assessment is to shift the center of the educational universe from the traditional view of what teachers provide to the new view of what learners achieve.*

## Assessment and University Mission and Goals

The first rule of good assessment is to "assess what is important." Therefore, assessment at Western is primarily guided by the principles of purpose set forth in the University's mission and goals statement.

The Western faculty, administration, and Board of Trustees have devoted considerable attention to the formation of these guiding principles, which appear, in part, in several places. These include the Role and Mission Statement adopted by the Board of Trustees in December, 1997; the 1997 Accreditation Self-Study Report, Volume I; and the Strategic Action Guidelines adopted in December, 1991. A summary statement of the common principles in these many versions of the mission statement could be stated as follows:

*The mission of Western Washington University is to provide Washington State students a high quality undergraduate education, which nurtures the intellectual, ethical, social, physical, and emotional development of each student, through:*

- 1. A common, broad-based mastery of the fundamental concepts, history, perspectives, and significance of the arts, sciences, social sciences, and humanities; and*
- 2. Baccalaureate and master's degree major programs of a practical and applied nature directed to the educational, economic, and cultural needs of Washington residents.*

In particular, the University strives to provide graduates who can critically analyze and use information; who can communicate effectively both orally and in writing; who have developed quantitative, analytical, and mathematical skills appropriate to their fields; who understand and appreciate creative and aesthetic expression; who understand and will help to resolve the complex social and environmental challenges of the modern world; and who are committed to serving their communities as principled and responsible citizens.

These goals are further elaborated in Western Washington University's Strategic Plan that emphasizes the three goals of educational quality, multicultural enrichment, and community service. The role of assessment therefore is to determine how well these goals are being achieved, and to apply that knowledge for the continual improvement of student learning.

## **Assessment, Accountability, and Student Learning**

### Introduction

Assessment activities at Western are driven by needs for both internal and external comments. Internal comments have generally come to be called "assessment," and external reporting has generally come to be called "accountability."

Assessment is sometimes called "assessment for excellence." As shown in Figure 1, assessment is an ongoing process of establishing goals and objectives, gathering information about whether and to what extent objectives have been met, evaluating the information against selected criteria, and applying what has been learned to improve programs. Assessment instruments are designed to answer a wide range of self-evaluative questions related to one larger question: how well are we accomplishing our mission?

## Assessment Learning Cycle

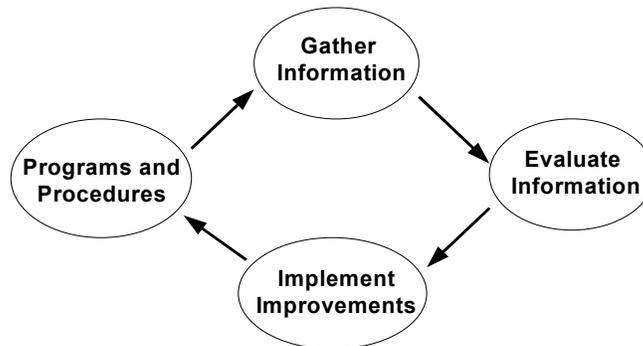


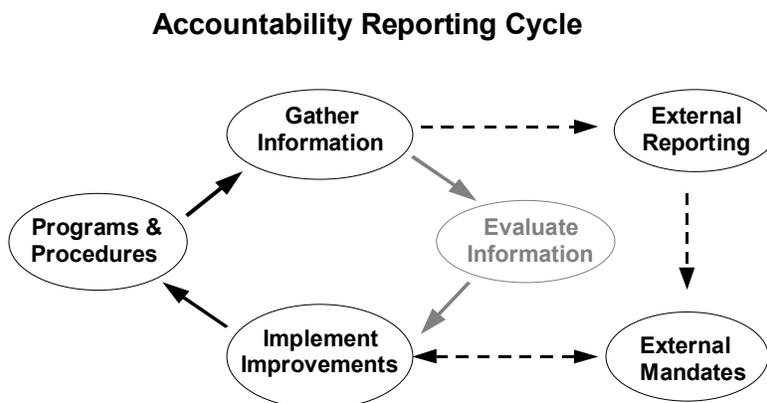
Figure 1.

Accountability reporting at the institutional level is essentially a regulatory process, designed to assure conformity to specified state norms, particularly concerning fiscal efficiency and resource productivity. As shown in Figure 2, the accountability cycle is a special case of the assessment feedback loop, in which collected information is reported to external regulatory authorities, who may respond with rewards or penalties depending on what these data say about institutional performance. Most often, there has been an ongoing dialogue between the Washington State's Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) and State institutions, which has shaped the evolution of accountability reporting requirements.

Washington state-mandated accountability activities initially focused entirely on efficiency but now have moved to a focus on student learning outcomes. The ongoing accountability reporting requirements since 1997 have had a direct impact on Western's programs and procedures. As suggested by the two-headed dotted arrow in Figure 2, linking "external mandates" with "implement improvements," accountability reporting requirements influenced assessment procedures and research topics. The converse is also true; Western and other institutions have been engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the HECB, so that accountability measures have evolved through an interactive process that has incorporated Western's research findings.

Similarly, as experience has been gained in the conduct of assessment activities, the focus of assessment research has shifted beyond the requirements of accountability reporting and toward answering the internally generated research questions of the OIAT Director and staff, and the University administration and faculty. These analyses have included alumni and student surveys, program reviews, employer satisfaction surveys, and other special studies. As discussed below,

several of these studies have evolved into cyclic research activities and reporting events, and have contributed to the formation of a longitudinal database.



**Figure 2.**

Therefore, because of the interactions between assessment and accountability, Western has developed and refined its capacity for assessment research; it has used assessment and accountability data as the basis for targeting performance areas that need improvement, and for identifying research areas for further study. As a result of its assessment process, Western has initiated significant changes in its curriculum, in academic advising and student services, and in the range of assessment research activities undertaken during this period, including the following most recent changes:

#### Curricular Improvements to Enhance Teaching and Learning

- Created a Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) to guide on- and off-campus course improvement efforts, in particular through application of information technologies.
- Launched a innovative program to increase freshman retention by enhancing the first year experience. The program, which included planning and preparing a Freshman Interest Group program, was conducted in Fall, 1999. It provided funds for faculty instructional development for large freshman lecture classes, increased access for students by reserving seats in appropriate courses during all quarters of the first year, and made increased use of undergraduate teaching assistants to provide small discussion sections in large lecture courses.
- Began on-going discussions with all chairs and deans from departments and colleges that grant Bachelor of Science degrees to identify ways to improve the Graduation Efficiency Index for transfer students seeking B.S. degrees. This group has been identified as having the lowest GEI of any group of Western graduates.
- Created the General Studies Degree, a major designed for students who want to focus their studies across departments in humanities or social sciences.
- Adopted requirements for students to declare their majors before earning 120 credits.
- Adopted policies restricting students' ability to drop courses late in the academic term.

- Installed full computer mediation in all of our largest lecture halls and in six to eight smaller classrooms each year.

#### Academic Advising and Student Services Enhancements

- Implemented an integrated student information system that enhances the registration system, improves ability to equitably award financial aid, and provides direct information to students and faculty about courses.
- Created two university-wide advising web pages that are proving extremely popular and useful to students: the Classfinder, which rapidly locates available course sections by course, type of course (e.g., GUR category), hour, etc., and the interactive advising web page, which provides a rapid response to relatively routine advising needs.
- Negotiated Associate of Science Degree agreements with Whatcom and Skagit Community Colleges, ensuring a seamless transition to Western. These new articulation agreements have become the model for statewide acceptance of the AS degree.
- Initiated a study group to systematize Western's Advanced Placement policies and to attune them to issues of student efficiency.
- Developed a "departmental advising model," aimed at ensuring improved advising for sophomore through senior levels with special emphasis on transfer advising, conducted discussions of the model across campus, and adopted all but one aspect of that model as a university goal and as a new accountability measure. The one remaining element requires formal action from faculty curricular review committees and the Faculty Senate, which will be sought this fall.
- Continued to enhance communications with community college students and advisors via increased direct communications and web-based advising capacities.
- Initiated planning for a series of improvements focused on enhancing the transfer process, including reserved seats in entry courses to majors, enhanced orientation activities, increased advising and information provided prior to arrival at Western, and closer integration of catalogue policies for Community College transfers.

#### Assessment Activities and Accomplishments

- Created an Office of Institutional Research and Resource Planning which included a new full-time position devoted to institutional research and accountability.
- Revised assessment tools, including forms used for students to evaluate faculty and questionnaires to better report faculty workload.
- Converted nearly all university data systems into one unified format under Banner software. This system will be accompanied by a data warehouse renewed daily from that database, which will allow more rapid and systematic analysis of student efficiency issues raised by the accountability mandate.
- Conducted studies of course access, especially for incoming transfers, and examined reasons students fail or withdraw during and after their first year at Western.
- Completed a study of Running Start students to assess their degree progress and needs. One result of that study is designation of a special Running Start advisor during and following summer student orientation.

- Conducted a study of incoming transfer students to assess readiness for a major and needs before the major.

## **What Drives Assessment at Western Washington University?**

### History

Assessment practices at Western Washington University have evolved and matured considerably since the first few intermittent student surveys and program reviews that were conducted in the early 1970's. Those early assessment attempts were generally *ad hoc* studies, some of which led to ongoing or cyclic assessment processes, discussed further below; assessment activities were not coordinated through a single office until 1988. For example, periodic surveys of entering freshmen using UCLA's CIRP survey were first conducted in 1971 by the Office of Student Affairs, and alumni surveys were conducted by Office of Survey Research beginning in 1987.

In 1989, assessment activities officially began with six categories mandated by the Washington State HECB to include: baseline student data, intermediate level assessment of quantitative and writing skills, end-of-program assessments, alumni satisfaction surveys (including 14 common statewide measures), employer satisfaction and needs surveys, and program reviews.

Also in 1989, assessment activities were centralized in the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing (OIAT), and the Faculty Assessment Committee was formed to advise the Director of OIAT about research priorities. Since then, assessment studies have included a wide range of surveys, program reviews, and special studies. Results of these studies have been published as technical reports or as "Focus" Reports (see Appendix A for a list of the reports).

A brief scan of the chronology of titles in this bibliography emphasizes how accountability-reporting requirements were the primary driver behind assessment research for only the first two or three years after such requirements were imposed. By 1993, research aimed at internal assessments quickly branched away in its own direction to include a wide range of data on student behaviors, perceptions, attitudes, values, and experiences; reviews of academic and service programs; surveys regarding potential changes in campus policies; and special studies for University client departments and agencies.

These studies have been driven by a number of factors, but mostly by a desire to know about the needs and quality of service to an evolving and changing student body, with skills, needs, and aspirations that change over time along with the regional and national economies, prevailing social values, and technology. Research questions can arise from the HECB, from faculty, from OIAT staff, from University committees, particularly the Assessment Committee, from academic departments or other campus offices, or from the Administration.

## Cyclic Studies

With increasing experience in assessment, Western has identified a number of ongoing, cyclic assessment research events which form the core of its database, and which provide valuable information for detailed assessment of student development. These cyclic events are shown on the timeline in Table 1.

**Table 1. Two-year Assessment Cycle**

<b>Cyclic Event</b>	<b>Fall</b>	<b>Win</b>	<b>Spr</b>	<b>Sum</b>		<b>Fall</b>	<b>Win</b>	<b>Spr</b>	<b>Sum</b>
CIRP Freshman Survey	✓					✓			
CSS Senior Survey	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Alumni Survey (even Years)			✓						
Lifestyle Survey (odd years)								✓	
Recent Grads Report	✓					✓			
Most Recent Frosh Report		✓					✓		

The Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP) Survey, developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, has been given to new freshmen with increasing regularity since 1971. Presently, it is given every year to entering freshmen, and therefore serves as a valuable database on attitudes, behaviors, goals, and values for entering students.

The College Student Survey (CSS) is now given every quarter to graduating seniors. The CSS is designed as a follow-up instrument to the CIRP, asking many of the same questions. It therefore not only provides information about the values, attitudes, goals, and behaviors of current graduates, but also, in conjunction with the CIRP, permits assessment of changes in these parameters associated with students' experiences as Western undergraduates.

In addition to the CSS, each year OIAT assembles demographic and academic information from the Registrar on graduating seniors. This annual activity illuminates changes in student demographics over time, linkages between Western and various high schools and community colleges, trends in student high school and college grades, admission test scores, and so forth. This information can be combined with data from other sources, such as student surveys, to correlate demographic information with other data on student behavior, values, or performance.

Western surveys its alumni on a regular basis, in order to track career outcomes and to gather information on alumni satisfaction with various aspects of their undergraduate experiences. Alumni who graduate in even-numbered years are surveyed between twelve and eighteen months after graduation. Periodic five-year and ten-year follow-up surveys have been done, but these are not currently conducted on a regular schedule.

## Accreditation Standards

Besides being accountable to its students and to the citizens of Washington State for both economy and quality, Western must also meet the accreditation standards of the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges. These standards for assessment are primarily concerned with how institutions assess student learning both inside and outside of the classroom, and how the results of assessment are actually put into use to foster improvements. It is an essential goal of this assessment plan to embrace and exceed these standards, as articulated in Western's recent accreditation review.

Just as accountability standards and requirements have tightened over time in the interests of economy and efficiency, peer review standards have tightened correspondingly to assure high standards of educational quality. Assessment of student learning outcomes has become an essential measure of institutional quality; accrediting agencies want to see linkages among college mission, the assessment of learning outcomes, the relationship between intended levels of student achievement and actual outcomes, and overall University effectiveness.

While accrediting agencies are not prescriptive about how institutions assess teaching and learning, they do want to see evidence of commitment to continued improvement of both teaching and learning. They are looking for a clearly articulated assessment plan that defines responsibilities, describes what data is gathered, how data is gathered, and how assessment data are used to make program improvements, from classroom level to the University as a whole.

These elements of an acceptable assessment plan include:

- ◆ Articulation of desired student outcomes;
- ◆ Definition of baselines;
- ◆ Description of methods, criteria, and schedule of assessment for each outcome;
- ◆ Description of the process of interpretation of assessment results;
- ◆ Explanation of how the interpretation of assessment results fosters innovation;
- ◆ Description of how resulting program changes will be assessed;
- ◆ Documentation of how well student programs and support services contribute to student development.

## Departmental and Program Mission Statements

Each academic department and support program has the responsibility to develop its own assessment program, including goals, objectives, measurement metrics, criteria, and procedures for evaluating assessment data, designing and implementing innovations, and assessing the revisions.

It is an essential feature of Western's Assessment Plan that these departments also have the autonomy to determine their own program objectives and assessment criteria and procedures, with the support and guidance of the Committee on the Assessment of Teaching and Learning, the Center for Instructional Innovation, and the staff of OIAT, as desired.

Therefore, assessment research is driven at the macro level by the measurement of overall institutional outcomes and by the micro level by the particular research questions, which arise in the assessment of individual classrooms and programs across campus. It is the goal of this Assessment Plan to provide some integrative guidelines that unify these different levels of assessment.

### The Increasing Importance of Student Learning

#### A Conventional Model of Excellence

The overlapping histories of assessment and accountability in the past decade have tended to focus attention on institution-level outcomes, with less attention given to more micro-level assessments in the classroom, in academic programs, and in student support services. Very recently, this has begun to shift, not just in a small way, but actually on the order of a paradigm shift, so that student learning and development are becoming the central criteria of institutional effectiveness. Other criteria derive their validity from their relationship with, and correlation to, various elements of student learning.

As shown in Figure 3, institutional excellence follows from adopting the best practices for faculty development and student learning, structuring curricula and services to promote high levels of student involvement, and using well-designed assessment criteria and procedures to ensure continual improvement in student learning.

### A Conventional Theory of Excellence

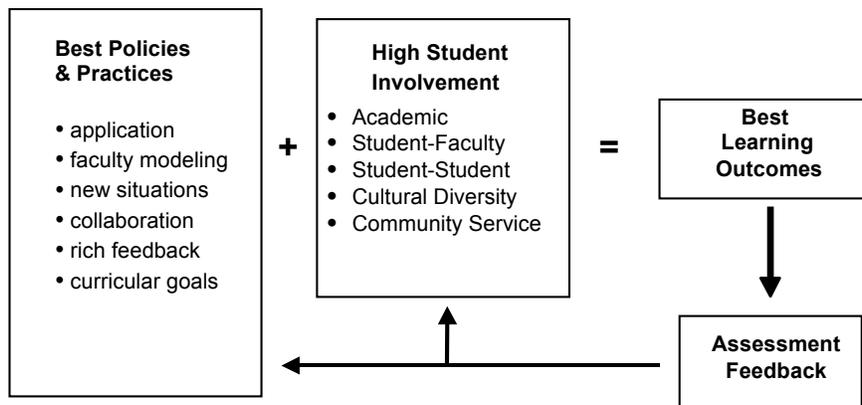


Figure 3

Best policies and practices are those which have been demonstrated to have a positive impact on student learning. They include, for example, the application of knowledge to relevant issues and to new situations; faculty modeling of appropriate professional attitudes, procedures, and behaviors; collaborative learning with other students; rich feedback from classroom assessment practices; and programs focused on clearly articulated curricular goals.

High levels of student involvement mean primarily academic involvement: attending classes, completing assignments on time and a commitment to study and learning. But student learning and personal development have also been shown to be positively affected by high levels of interaction with faculty members, such as collaborative research projects, and interactions with other students in projects, assignment, study, and discussions.

In addition, exposure to the richness of cultural diversity, through active involvement in a heterogeneous student body, study abroad, or through classes or internships, has been shown to have positive benefits for student development. Finally, community service experiences have proven effective for developing maturity, civic responsibility, and cultural understanding.

One goal of this assessment plan is that Western and its many programs discover and implement the best policies and practices for stimulating both student learning and student involvement. The role of assessment, then, is to establish and monitor appropriate measures of student learning and involvement to continually improve the quality of student experiences and learning.

Implicit in the mission and goals of the University and its academic programs is a commitment to provide students with an integrative education. It is therefore by no means enough that students pass their courses and are granted their degrees. These degrees must reflect levels of knowledge and abilities that have evolved from the raw to the polished, from the apprentice to the professional, from the specific to the general.

Capturing evidence of the development of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities in student learning is another essential goal of Western's Assessment Plan. It is desirable that department assessment plans incorporate elements that assess these kinds of abilities in their assessment procedures, in their course outlines, and in their course sequence and structures. That is, department assessment plans must incorporate elements that show not only mastery of individual courses but also levels of individual professional and personal development. Course and program goals and objectives must include elements which foster social interaction and maturation, such as volunteerism, internships, capstone experiences, related employment experiences, collaborative learning experiences, interaction with faculty, and so forth. Departments and programs are encouraged to develop methods to assess these integrative abilities in addition to assessing more narrowly defined cognitive gains which have generally been easier to assess and measure.

## Assessment Domains

The assessment process, including design, implementation, and analysis, is motivated and shaped by the goal of continual improvement of student learning, both academic and social, and student development, both cognitive and affective. Assessment is appropriately carried out at many organizational levels, to measure virtually any kind of institutional process or outcome that has likely impacts on student learning, performance, and development. Assessment domains therefore include both academic and nonacademic programs.

### Academic programs

Assessment of academic programs includes course-level assessments of students and faculty, departmental-level assessments of programs or parts of programs, University-level assessments of student learning outcomes, and a variety of University-wide assessments of targeted student abilities, such as writing, math, or critical thinking skills.

At the course level, assessment domains include course goals and objectives, course syllabi, technical support, faculty development and performance, student performance outcomes, and student and peer evaluations.

At the program or department level, assessment domains include course and prerequisite availability and sequencing, program goals and objectives, faculty performance and development, faculty support services, student learning and performance, graduation efficiency, and alumni satisfaction.

At the University level, assessment domains include any aspect of stated University mission and goals, as well as University-wide testing of particular student abilities, such as the math skills, writing skills, quantitative methods, or critical thinking.

### Non-academic Programs

Non-academic programs comprise an important component of a student's experience at Western. Student satisfaction with admissions, registration, advising, housing, bookstore, food service, extracurricular activities, athletic programs, health and wellness, and opportunities for social involvement has important implications for retention, graduation efficiency, the quality of student life, and the development of social maturity.

Assessment of non-academic programs has generally been to determine student satisfaction and levels of service, and to solicit suggestions for improvement. While the linkage between non-academic programs and student learning is generally indirect, nevertheless these elements of Western's student support services are recognized as essential environmental factors affecting student attitudes, behavior, and performance, including levels of involvement and retention. Therefore, non-academic programs with likely impacts on student attitudes and behavior must devise assessment plans for their areas of responsibility, including the establishment of goals and objectives, assessment criteria, and review processes.

## Institutional Effectiveness

Assessment at the institutional level crosses boundaries of accountability, assessment, and institutional research. At this level, assessment data may pertain to the effectiveness of individual departments or programs, overall University effectiveness, perceptions of students, staff, or faculty, alumni employer satisfaction, or any other domain of University outcomes.

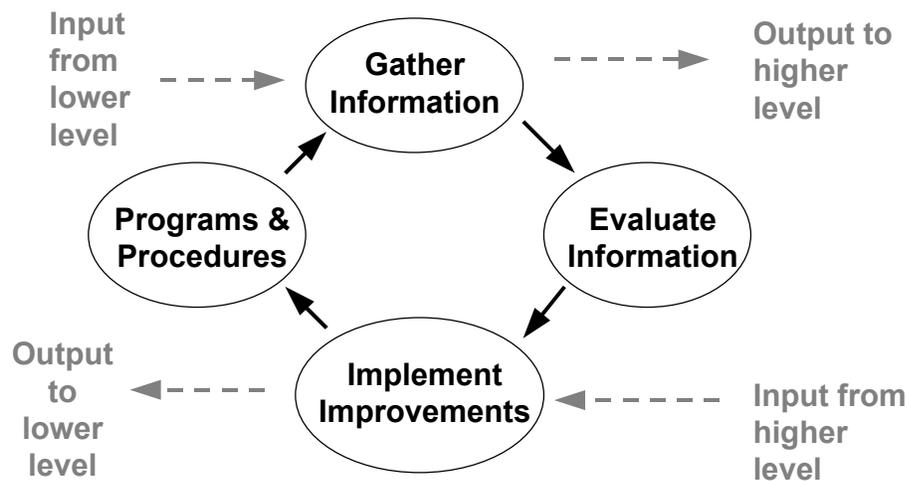
## Overall Assessment Plan at Western Washington University

### Overview

The fundamental purpose of Western's assessment plan is to establish guidelines and responsibilities for the practice of assessment and accountability activities at Western Washington University. A secondary and closely related goal is to have all of Western's departments and programs fully participating in an ongoing assessment of student learning outcomes. As discussed above, and as shown in Figure 1, assessment is an internal feedback process to improve performance. As shown in Figure 2, assessment often takes place in an environment in which external reporting of various performance measures is required. Figure 4 shows the most general linkages between assessment and accountability; assessment provides internal feedback, while at the same time, any given department may have subordinate departments reporting to it, and/or it in turn may report to a higher organizational level.

### Assessment Learning Cycle

*With Accountability Reporting Cycle*



**Figure 4**

Assessment and accountability information are fundamentally different, and must be treated differently. Assessment information is by nature an inquisitive kind of monitoring, within an organizational level, with an open sense of curiosity and a desire for continual improvement.

Accountability information, in contrast, is a management tool that crosses organizational levels. Because its ultimate interpretation and use may have unpleasant impacts, reporting departments have incentives to present the data in the most favorable light, possibly masking areas of possible improvement. By keeping assessment and accountability separate, Western strives to create and maintain the climate of safety and support for assessment practices at all levels which is essential for continual improvement.

From a practical standpoint, the actual practices of data collection, analysis, and reporting may be the same for many assessment and accountability reporting purposes. From a philosophical standpoint, however, it is useful to keep the two processes separate when organizing assessment procedures, in order to maximize the effectiveness of both.

### Responsibilities

Western's Assessment Plan requires the coordination of the academic departments, student service units, Faculty Senate, the Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment, the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing, the Center for Instructional Innovation, the Office of Survey Research, the Office of Institutional Research and Resource Planning, and the Provost/Vice President for Academic Affairs. Overall, responsibility for implementing the Assessment Plan lies with the Provost, with the advice of the Directors of OIAT, OIRRP, and CII, and the CTLA. Figure 5 shows the organizational arrangement for each of the elements involved in Western Assessment Plan. Departments and programs serve as the focus where each of the successive elements provide direction, support, resources. The role and responsibility of the key supporting elements are briefly described below.

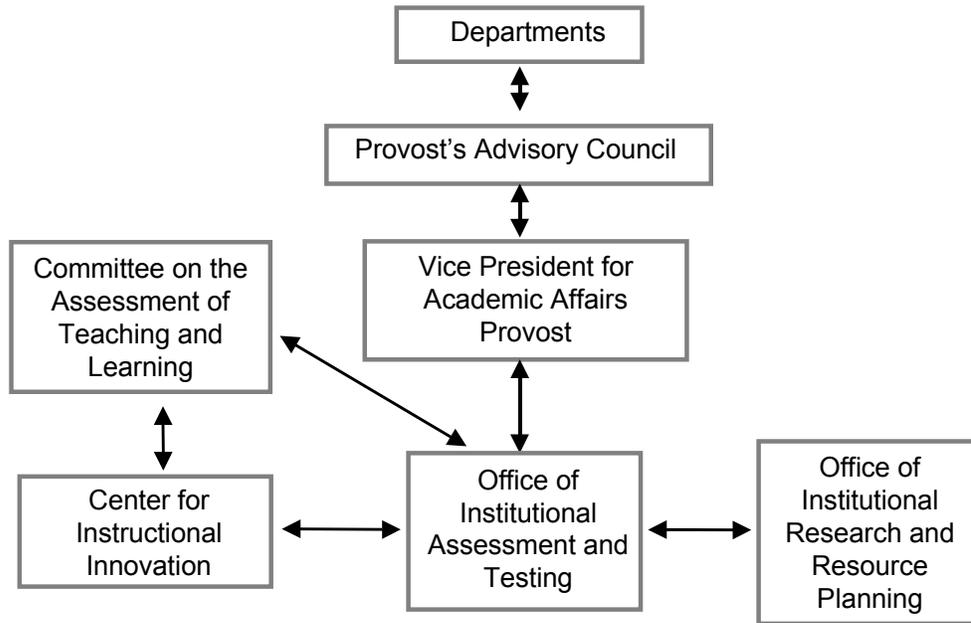
#### *Academic departments and programs*

Academic departments and programs are responsible for developing assessment plans that will include program goals and objectives, a process for assessing whether and to what extent program goals are met, and a process for using assessment information to improve teaching and learning. These activities at the course and program level are the root means by which assessment can improve learning outcomes.

#### *Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment*

The Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment (CTLA) will advise and assist the Directors of OIAT and CII, and will provide a liaison function among academic departments, ACC, the administration, regulatory agencies, and the two centers. CTLA will identify priorities for assessment studies, particularly in the contexts of instructional innovation and institutional planning, and will interpret assessment reports for implications for institutional policy and practice, and make recommendations as appropriate for both short-term and long-term assessment planning.

## Western Washington University Assessment Plan Organizational Arrangement



**Figure 5**

### *Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing*

The Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing (OIAT), in conjunction with the Office of Survey Research, bears the responsibility for gathering and analyzing data associated with institutional effectiveness, and for making the results of these analyses available as appropriate. Working closely with the Center for Instructional Innovation (CII), OIAT staff are available for consultation with academic departments and other offices on campus, to assist them in devising assessment plans and measures appropriate to their needs, and to provide them with available data from the assessment database.

As discussed above and shown in Table 1, OIAT conducts a series of surveys and reports over a two-year cycle. In addition, OIAT conducts numerous special studies at the request of the administration, academic departments, or other agencies.

With the adoption of this Assessment Plan, however, OIAT takes on an extended service responsibility, of providing support to academic departments as they form their own assessment plans. This support takes such forms as including questions relevant to academic departments in student and alumni surveys, providing departments with outcomes data on their students and alumni, or working with departments through CII and CTLA to establish departmental assessment plans.

### *Center for Instructional Innovation*

The Center for Instructional Innovation (CII) bears the responsibility for providing faculty with technical assistance and support services related to improving teaching and learning, through a wide range of instructional support services, including interactive website design, instructional software, faculty development and training, and other support services as appropriate. Activities and accomplishments of the CII are discussed later in this report.

CII will provide leadership in seeking out and evaluating available technologies for the improvement of teaching and learning. Working closely with OIAT and the CLTA, CII provides faculty with the current best available practices in instruction and assessment.

### *Office for Institutional Research and Resource Planning*

The Office of Institutional Research and Resource Planning (OIRRP) is responsible for ensuring the validity and consistency of institutional data, including Student Information Systems (SIS) data and space use data, and for performing the analyses of such data that the institution needs for planning purposes. OIRRP works closely with OIAT, often combining SIS data with survey data.

OIRRP is newly formed, and many of its eventual functions are now in planning stages. Among these is providing data to departments and others on student outcomes of various types--time to degree, academic performance, etc. Another is producing a series of downloads for departments and for administrative offices of relevant data from Western's new data warehouse. These data displays will be wide-ranging and tailored to the assessment needs of each department. They will also be coordinated with OIAT, to include alumni survey items.

Finally, the director of OIRRP is also Western's liaison to the state Higher Education Coordinating Board and legislature regarding state accountability measures. Among these are selected student learning outcomes measures. Here again, OIRRP coordinates closely with the OIAT.

### Assessment Components and Details

Four essential components comprise the data acquisition, analysis, and report circulation process of Western's student and institutional assessment activities:

#### 1. Establish and Maintain Database

The OIAT, in conjunction with the Office of Survey Research (OSR), has established and maintains a descriptive assessment database that provides both a current and historical statistical snapshot of Western. The database is designed to answer the questions:

- ◆ What do we look like as an institution?
- ◆ What kinds of programs and services do we offer?
- ◆ What kinds of students enroll here?

- ◆ Where do graduates go to work or graduate school?
- ◆ How satisfied are they with their educational experiences at Western?

The assessment database includes information from Western's Student Tracking System, maintained by the Registrar's Office, surveys of students and alumni, and records of accountability statistics reported to the Washington State HECB.

## 2. Gather and Analyze Information:

The ongoing assessment process documents student experiences at all levels. Assessment includes measures of academic, social, and professional development plus abilities, values, attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, interests, and plans and perceptions of learning. Information is obtained, for example, through student and alumni surveys, campus-wide testing of abilities like math, writing, critical thinking, or quantitative reasoning; departmental assessments of knowledge or skills (tests, writing samples, national exams, licensing exams, portfolios, research, capstone projects and performances, or internships).

Academic programs are responsible for gathering and analyzing information at the course and program level, and for submitting appropriate reports, as will be determined in the development of this assessment plan, to CTLA.

The OIAT in collaboration with the OIRRP is responsible for gathering and analyzing information at the institutional level. This responsibility includes the administration of campus-wide tests, administration and analysis of student surveys, and updating the assessment database, as new information becomes available. The OIAT is responsible for managing recurring assessment events, as described above in Table 1, and for the organization and implementation of a wide range of other program reviews, surveys, and special projects.

In organizing its research, program evaluation, and outcomes assessment activities, the OIAT strives to generate information relevant to the following fundamental questions:

- What statistics best characterize important aspects of our institution, and how can we improve the quality of the academic and sociocultural climate?
- What factors contribute to general and specific changes in Western students' attitudes, knowledge, and skills?
- How can we enrich classroom and instructional experiences in order to promote effective learning?
- How successful are curricular and program activity components and how do they benefit from changes suggested by assessment findings? and
- What are the effects of administrative decisions on faculty, students, alumni, parents, boards, agencies, and the community in which Western functions?

Additionally, as discussed above, Western's assessment activities are influenced and driven by: 1) strategic action plans contained in Western's Strategic Plan adopted in February, 1992; 2) general assessment categories identified by the Washington's Higher Education Coordinating Board; 3) recommendations forwarded by Western's academic and student services programs and committees; 4) findings generated from previous assessment studies; and 5) information and recommendations found in the institutional research and assessment literature in higher education. (See Appendix A).

CTLA, under the direction of the Faculty Senate through the Academic Coordinating Commission and the Provost, is responsible for managing and coordinating the overall assessment process, and for integrating the assessment process across the University community, from the classroom to the University as a whole. CTLA responsibility includes coordination of what data are generated, and at what levels; how data are generated; what research questions are to be answered; and by whom data are collected and used. The Committee works closely with the OIAT and to lesser extent with the CII on all assessment activities.

### 3. Evaluate Information:

Evaluation is the third cornerstone of the assessment process. Once data are gathered and analyzed, assessment evaluation begins, comparing assessment results with anticipated or desired goals and objectives. It is the relationship between these measured outcomes and desired goals which drives the assessment process toward continual improvement.

These relationships between outcomes and objectives determined in the evaluation stage answer the following kinds of questions:

- ◆ How effective, according to what criteria, is each academic program and student service, particularly at fostering student development and learning?
- ◆ How well do course syllabi reflect actual course content?
- ◆ How well do courses and programs achieve stated objectives?
- ◆ How well do program rationales and missions align with course and program objectives?
- ◆ Are observable outcomes indicative of student learning/development?
- ◆ Is there evidence of appropriate use of best practices and technologies?
- ◆ Have appropriate measures and indicators been developed?
- ◆ Have appropriate comparison criteria been established?
- ◆ Have reports of findings been distributed to appropriate agents?

### 4. Modify Actions, Plans, Strategies, Policies, and Procedures:

It is by no means enough to gather information about programs; each department assessment plan must delineate procedures for incorporating assessment information into program improvements. End user responsibilities include:

- ◆ Establishing a process for reviewing and incorporating assessment data into program improvements;

- ◆ Formulating and implementing improvements in both programs and student services through dialogue within departments (assessment) and across department boundaries (accountability).
- ◆ Formulating and implementing improvements in assessment procedures themselves through dialogue within and across department boundaries.

### **An Assessment Plan to Improve Student Learning**

In the shifting paradigm of higher education, the primary product of colleges and universities has moved away from what is taught to what is learned. Western's assessment plan is aimed at embracing this new paradigm, and fostering its adoption across the curriculum; assessment is particularly focused on assuring, maintaining, and improving student abilities.

Referring back to Figure 4, the assessment and accountability processes are sometimes parallel, and sometimes divergent. Western's Accountability Plan, released on August 15, 1999, describes in detail Western's current performance measures and targets. Similarly, the following section describes Western's plan for improving student learning through the application of assessment across the curriculum.

Student learning is Western's primary product; what students and graduates know and are actually able to do as a result of their Western Washington University education is the most important measure of success for Western as an institution. Therefore, another basic purpose of Western's Assessment Plan is to establish procedures and responsibilities for monitoring the quality of student learning across the campus environment, including both academic and non-academic programs, and for using assessment results as the basis for continual improvement in the quality and depth of student learning.

#### Improving Student Learning Through Assessment

Assessment is the process of gathering evidence of actual student learning and comparing it with the intended levels of achievement articulated as departmental or program goals. Therefore, the first necessary step in a department assessment plan is the articulation of goals and objectives, where goals are broad, general, guiding principles for student development which follow from the department's mission statement. Objectives are brief, clear, highly specific statements of intended outcomes that are consistent with articulated goals.

Objectives are generally either concerned with mastery of specific skills, or with broader personal or professional development. Mastery implies the existence of minimum performance thresholds which students must achieve, while developmental objectives are concerned with progress toward more complex integrative skills, abilities, or outcomes with graduated levels of accomplishment. Relatedly, outcomes are measurable that include observable behaviors that provide direct evidence of mastery, student development, or program effectiveness.

Good assessment practices make a distinction between entry skills and exit skills, so that learning associated with University programs can be distinguished from individual student

differences. Therefore, once goals and objectives have been established, it is highly desirable to establish some measure of baseline, or entry-level student abilities.

After establishing an entry-level baseline, departments must devise assessment methods, tools, and timetables appropriate to the department's goals and objectives. What measures of student performance will provide evidence of the extent to which programs have achieved their objectives? What assessment tools will be used to make actual measurements?

Finally, the assessment process requires procedures, criteria, and timelines for interpreting assessment results, incorporating them into a planning and decision process that will improve the quality of learning.

Assessment of non-academic programs that support students and which affect the environment of learning, such as student services, library, advising, information, tech support, health and wellness, residences, dining halls, athletic facilities, must also establish assessment plans where appropriate. Such plans must include measurable objectives that address the quality of the student experience, criteria for assessing outcomes, and procedures for program improvement.

An effective assessment plan for improving student learning also requires the provision of resources and programs for faculty development and training as teachers. Responsibility for organizing and operating this program could rest with the Center for Instructional Innovation (CII), in cooperation with appropriate faculty committees.

### A Vision for a Student-Centered Curriculum and Mission

Western Washington University, like most public comprehensive universities, is undergoing a paradigm shift. Providing a quality undergraduate education has always been the primary mission of Western, yet recent national attention on the ways in which institutions of higher education have failed to provide student-centered curricula has captured the attention of many state legislative bodies and public constituencies. In response to public pressure to be more accountable to the students we serve, some institutions have responded by moving toward competency-based assessment strategies and value-added learning outcomes.

In an effort to maintain a high quality undergraduate experience, coupled with the need to demonstrate student-centered programs and guaranteed outcomes, Western Washington University has embarked on outcomes assessment with the best interest of our students at the core of the assessment efforts in our programs and departments. For Western this shift has meant an emphasis on creating mechanisms by which faculty, administrators and student support staff can come together to share common learning goals. Work within and across departments is necessary as we outline the current program goals, objectives, and outcomes. And it has perhaps been the cross disciplinary collaboration that has proved the most useful as Western has attempted to disentangle the curricular structures of our general education program in an attempt to better understand the relationship between teaching and learning.

## The Carnegie Campus Conversation

Beginning in Fall 1998 Western entered Part I of the Carnegie Campus Conversation. This is a National dialogue spearheaded by the Carnegie Foundation to explore and define the "scholarship of teaching" in the context of higher education today. Premised on the notion that the academy of higher education has long emphasized research scholarship, often to the exclusion of teaching scholarship, the Carnegie Campus Conversation sought input from campuses across the country regarding how teaching might be better supported, recognized, and rewarded. Now completing Part II of the program, Western has come to understand the benefits of participating in this national dialogue.

Working closely with other institutions of higher education, Western has explored ways to document the relationship between teaching and learning. In Part II of the Campus Conversation, a core group of 25 faculty from all colleges at Western were invited to engage in focus group discussions centering on recognizing and rewarding the scholarship of teaching. Due to generous support from both the President and Provost, the Campus Conversation at Western provided a number of open forums for the campus community and hosted nationally known experts on teaching and learning. One of the most successful forums was conducted in March 2000. This forum provided a status report on student learning outcomes assessment from national, state and local perspectives. Many faculty members in attendance that day who had originally been skeptical about the merits of outcomes assessment found that those departments and programs that had taken the initiative to craft student learning outcomes for their curriculum benefited greatly from the process.

This forum, coupled with the ongoing Carnegie Campus Conversation that has taken place from 1998-2000, has helped create momentum among programs and departments for additional work in student outcomes assessment. At the forum, faculty from two departments and one college shared their experiences and insights regarding outcomes assessment. The departments represented were Engineering Technology and Physical Education/Health/Recreation, both from the College of Arts and Sciences. The College of Business and Economics also provided examples of their assessment efforts from their syllabus review project. The Provost has recently committed support for the 2000-01 academic year for a team of faculty consultants to work with departments and programs as they further develop and begin the assessment process.

### **A Framework for Assessing Student Learning Outcomes**

In this section, we will provide a snapshot of current activities across Western's campus that indicate that several departments/colleges are actively engaged in the assessment of student learning outcomes. Then we will illustrate how these unique examples include common themes that provide a framework for a campus model for assessment. A survey recently developed by the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing will provide campus-wide information on departmental plans to address student learning outcomes. A copy of the survey is included in Appendix B. Finally, we present guidelines for developing a process to address student learning

outcomes as well as how to use the data from this process to inform and improve program quality.

### Program and Department Examples

Various programs/departments on campus reflect a serious commitment to developing a long-term, iterative process for addressing and responding to data on student learning outcomes. In this section, we provide several examples of such plans. Although each example provides a unique perspective, there are common elements across these plans. Appendix B includes brief summaries or outlines of plans from several departments. Table 1 provides a brief summary of several of these plans. It is interesting to note that many of the student learning outcomes are remarkably similar across very diverse programs. Critical thinking and creative problem solving skills in students are common themes, as well as modeling life-long learning, developing competence in technology, and becoming self-reflective learners. Mechanisms for assessing these goals are included in departmental evaluations at both the program and the course level.

These examples provide a framework for developing assessment plan guidelines for other departments.

**Table 2: A Summary of Departmental Plans for Assessing Student Learning Outcomes**  
(See Appendix B)

<i>Department</i>	<i>Impetus for Change</i>	<i>Desired Learning Outcomes</i>	<i>Long Range Assessment Plan</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>
Engineering Technology	Accrediting agency, professional organizations, examples from other universities	Analytical skills, communication skills, teamwork skills, technology skills, creative problem solving, ethics and professionalism, self-learning skills, creative problem solving skills	Elements include: (1) self-assessment of course content, (2) exit, alumni, and employer surveys, (3) course evaluations based upon student learning outcomes, (4) student portfolio projects	Develop program plans for meeting goals (2000-01); refine survey instruments (2000-01); pilot course evaluation forms (2001-02); institute course evaluations department wide (2002-03)
<i>(continued)</i>				

<i>Department</i>	<i>Impetus for Change</i>	<i>Desired Learning Outcomes</i>	<i>Long Range Assessment Plan</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>
P.E. Health and Recreation	Accrediting agency, professional organizations	Skilled written and oral communication, informed and critical thinkers, collaborative workers, information seekers, effective users of technology; lifelong learners; mastery of content in physical education; awareness of the effects of diversity issues on human movement; contributors to the community and profession	Evaluation criteria by course; evaluation in the field; graduate survey and student success in professional certification exams and employment; student success in post-baccalaureate study	Based upon student learning outcome data gathered each year, the program will be revised and improved.
Elementary Education	Accrediting agency, State dept. of education, professional organizations	Effective teaching skills in all areas of curriculum, appropriate use of technology, sound theoretical knowledge, skills in behavior management, skills in addressing students with diverse learning needs, knowledge and skills in assessment, skills in self-reflection, Provide evidence that they are having a positive impact on children's learning	Through performance indicators included in course syllabi including: Lesson and unit plans; exams, evaluation of teaching, self-evaluations, assessment blueprints, accommodations for diverse learners, assessment plans including techniques to monitor progress in learning, skills in communicating with parents	To be defined. Will include state mandated teacher candidate tests: entrance and exit exams and a pedagogical assessment that will include a formative process of evaluation throughout the program. Follow-up surveys of graduates are conducted college-wide currently.
Physics/Astronomy	Need for recruitment of students, re-evaluate curriculum to meet the needs of students in a changing world	Students will acquire the following skills: technical depth, drive, and intellectual curiosity, the ability to think critically, to formulate and solve significant problems, good communication skills, intellectual flexibility, and the ability to work as part of a team.		The data will provide evidence reflecting attainment of goals. Interview and survey data will be used to improve curriculum and programs.
<i>(continued)</i>				
<i>Department</i>	<i>Impetus for Change</i>	<i>Desired Learning</i>	<i>Long Range</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>

		<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Assessment Plan</i>	
Prevention and Wellness Services	Based upon mission statement (see Appendix B)	Strategic Goals: a. promote a quality undergraduate education. b. enhance diversity in programs and personnel. c. build connections with external communities. d. continually assess our success and implement efficiency measures.	Ongoing evaluation of health outcomes of students. (see detailed summary of data collected in Appendix B) Examples: Biennial WWU Lifestyles Survey, Assessment of College Health Risk Behavior Survey, new instrument to assess the success of the “Culture Change” project	Sample of current evaluation -Examples from evaluation of Lifestyles Survey: Increase in accuracy of perception of alcohol norms at WWU; decrease in high-risk, high level consumption; decrease in negative health, social, and academic consequences associated with high-risk drinking (see Appendix B for detailed outcomes)
Psychology Department	Departmental decision to develop broad-based goals and objectives for undergraduates and graduate students. Defined in the 1999-2004 department plan.	Goals and objectives for undergraduates: to understand individual differences, to employ critical thinking, to understand and apply ethical principles, write effectively, to understand and apply psychological theories and principles in real world settings, to communicate effectively in formal and informal situations, to demonstrate effective interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, to use technology effectively.  Goals and objectives for the general psychology undergraduate program and the graduate program in counseling are in Appendix B.	Survey of the M.Ed. Graduate Program is currently being implemented to assess student outcomes. The department is developing its assessment plan.	Data will be available from the surveys and will be used to evaluate and improve the graduate program in counseling.
<i>(continued)</i>				
<i>Department</i>	<i>Impetus for Change</i>	<i>Desired Learning</i>	<i>Long Range</i>	<i>Evaluation</i>

		<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Assessment Plan</i>	
College of Business and Economics	AACSB Business Accreditation Peer Review Team Report (1998)	(note: focus is on course syllabi) all syllabi shall include expected learning outcomes. Examples include learned tasks and performance outcomes. All syllabi will describe how the attainment of learning outcomes is evaluated. The AACSB perspectives will be included in all syllabi. They can be included as references in course objectives or as expected learning outcomes.	Currently, a faculty committee reviews syllabi for required components and works with faculty to ensure that components are included.	Evaluation is currently being developed.
Library	Department decision based upon review of national practices and research	Goals address the following areas: social aspect of information, organization of information, and the research process. Student Learning Outcomes are addressed for both lower and upper division (graduate) students. Outcomes are specific and performance-based.	To use the Learning Outcomes to shape instruction and to assess student competency by using various methods including reflective essays, portfolios, and research logs.	A goal of the library is to develop program-wide assessment in order to plan the direction of the program and to identify areas that need improvement.

These examples reflect ongoing development and refinement at the both the departmental and college levels reflecting different stages of planning and implementation. Table 2 represents only a fraction of the departments at Western Washington University. Since departmental involvement in addressing student learning outcomes at Western Washington University ranges from nonexistent to detailed plans, any campus-wide plan to evaluate the assessment of student-learning outcomes must be implemented cautiously and in phases. A university-wide plan must be flexible and broad in concept to adequately address the varied needs of colleges and departments, and must be reasonable in scope and length of time for implementation since there is such wide variation among departments in their progress toward implementing plans to assess student learning outcomes.

## Recommended Guidelines for Developing Assessment Plans

The Committee on Teaching, Learning, and Assessment at Western Washington University has prepared guidelines to assist departments in the development of assessment plans. AAHE (the American Association of Higher Education) has defined assessment as follows:

*Assessment is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning and quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve student performance. When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education.*

### Assessment Plan Components

- A. Mission Statement
- B. Goals for each program (and each sub-program)
- C. Objectives that are concrete and specific enough to be measured and evaluated and that:
  - Relate directly back to each goal;
  - Lend themselves to the assessment of tangible student learning outcomes;
  - Are sufficient in scope to evaluate the entire program;
  - Include all subprogram elements (options, specializations, tracks, etc.);
  - Separately address graduate and undergraduate outcomes;
  - Reflect the unique characteristics/strengths of the program.
- D. Criteria: Each program identifies how they will know if students have met each objective and the level of achievement that defines the departmental standard.
- E. Methodology and timeline for carrying out the assessment activities
  - Assessment methods are adequate to measure student achievement;
  - Multiple methods are used rather than over reliance on only one type of measure;
  - Baseline data are collected;
  - Growth and improvement are expected;
  - It is clear who will do the assessments, collect and analyze the data.
- F. Procedures for reporting and using the findings
  - Specific procedures are in place for using the data to inform and improve programs/curricula;
  - There is a formal mechanism for reporting the results of assessment and for summarizing the results.

## Assessment Activities in the General Education Requirements

We are at a crossroads in our general education program, having developed and implemented a program over time that has become increasingly unwieldy and difficult to assess. Since no single college has direct oversight for the general education program, nor is there a Vice-Provost or Dean of Undergraduate Programs, the general education program spans a wide array of disciplines and coherence is currently lacking. Despite our stated goal that "the General University Requirements and other courses at Western are related parts of an educational whole, rather than competing parts" (p. 41 - University Bulletin 1999-2000), the relationship between the General University Requirements and the requirements of the majors have not been articulated. Students often perceive that the GURs are an impediment to progress toward a degree and detailed and coherent rationale for the required courses within areas of study have been lacking. Given these deficits, a number of strategic initiatives are currently underway to strengthen the overall General Education Program and bring outcomes assessment to the fore.

A. *The Freshman Interest Group Program.* In Fall 1999 the first coordinated general education course clusters were offered to first-year students at Western. The Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program sought to accomplish the following:

- ◆ Increase freshman retention rates
- ◆ Create learning communities that would help the transition to university life
- ◆ Provide cohesion between required course offerings that are part of our general education program
- ◆ Increase student-faculty interaction at the outset of a student's academic career
- ◆ Increase faculty development opportunities in large lecture sections, with emphasis on crafting student outcomes assessment in keeping with the goals of the General Education program

The FIGs program makes it possible to link two GUR large lecture sections with a smaller, integrative seminar of 25 freshmen. The students in the seminar are correspondingly enrolled in both GUR sections. For example, Sociology 260 - Family in Society is a large lecture course that is one of many possible social science requirements in the general university program. This course typically enrolls from 250-350 students, most in their first or second year at Western.

Art History 220- Survey of Western Art History is also a required course in the humanities area of the general education program. It usually enrolls 150-200 students in the fall term.

These two courses are linked through an integrative seminar. The seminar is a 2 credit elective, Communications 197/Library 197. Coordination between the Library faculty and the Department of Communication has made it possible to provide students with the opportunity to research a topic that draws from both sociology and art history. In this case, the linked seminar, called Images of the Family, examines the ways that contemporary depictions of family life are socially constructed and reinforced through popular print media. Student learning outcomes are written for both of the large lecture courses, as well as the Images of the Family seminar. The Center for Instructional Innovation, working collaboratively with the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing, organizes a series of summer workshops for faculty involved in the FIGs program. As part of these workshops, faculty are given background on the importance of

crafting measurable learning objectives, as well as hands-on opportunities to develop outcomes tailored to their discipline.

In Fall 2000, the FIGs program will expand to include 7 clusters of courses with linkages between general education requirements such as Introduction to Anthropology, General Geology, Introduction to Environmental Studies, and American History, to name a few. The integrative seminars will be coordinated under the direction of the Center for Instructional Innovation, with outcomes assessment a primary focus. The Library at Western Washington University has taken a leading role in this effort, and the outcomes that are currently in draft form are the direct result of the statewide assessment efforts in the areas of writing and information literacy.

In addition to crafting student learning outcomes in their seminars, faculty teaching the GUR lecture sections will receive summer training on course portfolio development. Again, the Center for Instructional Innovation will assist faculty in an interdisciplinary format as syllabi for the FIGs clusters are formulated. A course portfolio will be provided at the completion of fall term. Typically a course portfolio includes a course rationale, syllabus (with stated outcomes), assessment tools (i.e., exams, paper assignments, stated learning outcomes and evaluation rubrics), handouts that support the pedagogy employed in the course, and student evaluations. Faculty are encouraged to provide annotations that offer explanation or evaluation regarding any aspect of the portfolio. These portfolios will provide evidence regarding the various approaches taken in the 14 GUR courses that comprise the FIG clusters, as well as offer comparative data on assessment techniques and student perspectives. These portfolios will be used to refine and expand the Fall 2001 FIG offerings.

Not only is student assessment becoming a prominent feature in the FIGs program, but also many academic departments are taking a lead in developing outcomes and exploring ways to measure student performance in keeping with those outcomes. The course portfolios that are developed in the FIGs program will be used during the remainder of the 2000-01 academic year as Dr. Carmen Werder works under the auspices of the Center for Instructional Innovation and the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing to infuse outcomes assessment at the departmental level across the campus community. Drawing from the expertise of the faculty in the FIGs, and using the course portfolios as examples of outcomes assessment, she will schedule workshops with departments as they craft their discipline specific outcomes.

In summary, the Freshman Interest Group program has provided Western Washington University with a model that relies on summer faculty development opportunities to bring us further in identifying, compiling, measuring, and refining the outcomes we expect to be part of the general education program. Moving beyond the FIGs, by working with selected departments that offer significant numbers of GUR courses, will help instill an appreciation for the ways that well crafted student learning outcomes will lead to improved student learning at all levels of the curriculum.

B. *Writing Outcomes in the GURs.* One area of our general education curriculum that has received particular attention in terms of assessment over the course of the past two years has

been writing. In Spring Quarter 1998, after careful review, the Academic Coordinating Commission and the Faculty Senate unanimously approved a proposal calling for replacement of the Junior Writing Exam, which had served as a graduation requirement and as a prerequisite to enrolling in a writing proficiency course in the major. Because the test was found to be seriously flawed, especially in terms of contextual validity, and since it provided extremely limited assessment information, the replacement proposal called for a two-part action plan that emphasized more writing instruction and assessment in the context of courses: 1) adding a second writing course to the GUR in Communication, Block B and 2) infusing more writing instruction across the curriculum while distributing the writing proficiency requirement at the upper level.

Based on writing outcomes recently published by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the GER Committee drafted a set of writing outcomes, which are currently being used for reviewing all Block B writing courses. Since these writing outcomes also reference outcomes for both the first-year GUR writing course (English 101) and the upper-level Writing Proficiency course, they have provided more coherency across writing courses and can now serve as one model for the development of outcomes in other general education courses. (See Appendix D for "Learning Outcomes for Writing" or visit the Web site that was created by the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing, in collaboration with the CII, at [www.ac.wvu.edu/~dialogue](http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~dialogue))

Another initiative that has had significant implications for writing outcomes at Western is our participation in the Statewide Senior-Level Writing project. Seeking accountability measures that would be authentic indicators of how well a university was providing a quality undergraduate education, the assessment coordinators from Washington's six baccalaureate schools proposed scoring a sample of senior-level papers from a variety of disciplines. (For a more detailed description of the Senior-Level Writing Pilot, see Appendix for "Overview of the Statewide Senior-Level Writing Project.") While this sampling measure is still being piloted and has not yet been implemented as an accountability measure to gauge institutional effectiveness, it has generated a cross-disciplinary rubric that represents a powerful tool for use in Western's writing assessment efforts. (See Appendix D for "Discipline-Based Writing Rubric.")

Designed jointly by writing faculty, assessment coordinators, and discipline faculty as well as community representatives in the content areas from which the writing samples were drawn, this rubric provides an evaluation scheme in six broad categories. Although the sub-criteria in each category need to be interpreted in disciplinary terms, the rubric has great potential for faculty development because it provides a common language for assessing writing across the curriculum. The rubric was successfully used in pilot Block B writing sections in 1998-99. (See Appendix D for the "Assessment of Pilot Writing Program Report.") It has been published in various places such as on the CII's website and in *Word Matters*, a faculty newsletter on writing across the curriculum topics. Currently, various departments such as Mathematics and Elementary Education are tailoring it for their specific needs, and it shows great promise as the basis for continued faculty development in the area of writing assessment and for articulating learning outcomes such as the CII's Showcase Project.

C. *Showcase*. The Center for Instructional Innovation's primary mission is to assist faculty across the campus with classroom innovations. The lines of distinction between technological enhancements, pedagogical improvements, and assessment strategies are increasingly blurred as faculty endeavor to adapt to a rapidly changing classroom environment and student population. Thus, the CII has taken the leadership role on campus with regards to faculty development in teaching. Course innovations are approached from a holistic stance, with emphasis on program goals and student outcomes taking center stage as courses are redefined and enhanced through technology or pedagogy. At this time, most of the courses profiled in this electronic venue are part of our general university requirements. These electronic course portfolios are increasingly becoming a primary mechanism to disseminate information about best classroom practices and student outcomes assessment.

One such example is the recent effort of the Center for Instructional Innovation to create an online resource bank of best classroom practices. This Web-based forum illustrates the relationship between teaching and learning. Student learning outcomes have been written for each course that is profiled at this site, with specific course examples given regarding teaching method, assessment tools, and syllabi and supporting classroom materials.

For example, Political Science 101, a general education course offering, is profiled at <http://pandora.cci.wvu.edu/showcase/election2>. Similar to a course portfolio, but electronic in form and thus more interactive, the course outcomes are presented and project outcomes are provided to illustrate the learning that took place to meet those objectives. In this course the instructor has identified three primary outcome domains -- writing, critical thinking, and information seeking literacy. Adapted from the Washington State Writing Rubric, California Academic Press' Holistic Critical Thinking Scoring Rubric, and Association of College and Research Libraries Selected Information Literacy Outcomes student learning objectives were written to address the course objectives.

These electronic forums provide information not only about the pedagogy underlying the course, but give instructors the opportunity to infuse learning outcomes in the general education curriculum in keeping with the Washington State Student Learning Outcomes in Higher Education.

### Department Assessment Plan Survey

The survey can be found in Appendix C. The purpose of this survey is to gather information that will provide guidance in determining levels of support and technical assistance that will need to be in place in order to accomplish the goal of having assessment plans in place and being used effectively in every department. In addition, we expect to find unique and creative ideas from many departments as they share their processes toward developing their plans, and how they use or plan to use the information they gather. The survey also serves as baseline data, against which we will gauge our progress over time. Results will form the basis for revising and extending Western's Strategic Plan to focus on the assessment of student learning in more refined detail.

## University of Michigan Case Study of Student Assessment at Western

In December 1999, Western's President, Dr. Karen Morse, received an invitation from the University of Michigan's National Center for Postsecondary Improvement. Specifically, the invitation asked for Western to participate in an intensive case study examining the university's use of student assessment and the role of reform in improving undergraduate teaching and learning. Western was selected by the Michigan research team because of the university's extensive involvement with institutional and student assessment revealed in response to a national survey. A four person research team spent two days on Western's campus in early April 2000 and interviewed students, faculty, and administrators. In addition, the Michigan team distributed surveys to samples of faculty and students to obtain detailed information on the assessment of student learning.

When the study findings are analyzed, Western will receive a profile of our responses concerning the culture and climate for student assessment and for teaching and learning innovation. Results will serve as a valuable tool in determining and evaluating the progress the university has made in the field. In combination with the results from the Department Assessment Plan Survey, the Michigan results extend Western's efforts to critically evaluate and assess our progress in assessing student learning as well as identify areas that require more attention in the future.

## Measurement and Assessment of University-wide Student Learning Outcomes

While most student learning outcomes are appropriately tied directly to the departmental majors, Western is collaborating with other Washington State four-year institutions to measure four student learning outcomes so basic as to apply to all students: writing; information technology literacy; quantitative and symbolic reasoning; and critical thinking. Development on the writing measure began first. After two years of development, it will be field tested during Spring/Summer of 2000. Development of the information technology literacy measure has begun and will continue over the next two years. Development of the quantitative and symbolic reasoning measure will begin in the 2000-2001 academic year. A critical thinking measure is being developed for inclusion as an aspect of the scoring of both the writing and the information technology measures and perhaps also of the quantitative and symbolic reasoning measure.

For each of these measures, the Washington State institutions are emphasizing the measurement of extant student performances. That is, we are planning to score student performances that are embedded in the curriculum and assigned by professors as part of course performance rather than being created specially for the assessment effort - a modified portfolio approach. This approach avoids difficulties of student motivation to participate and also the extremely high cost of specially arranged assessment efforts that are complex enough to begin tapping the higher order thinking that should be learned at the university level. In addition, this approach allows us to tailor the specific performances to the course or major field in which they occur, while imposing universal standards for the evaluation (scoring) of the student's performance.

Institutions are collaborating on the development of these measures and as well as in the scoring of the measures (rubrics) developed. By using inter-institutional teams to score papers in each subject area, we avoid the possible bias inherent in scoring one's own students.

Plans call for each institution to measure student learning outcomes using work drawn from each major field, on a rotating basis. We anticipate assessing performances from 5-8 disciplines per year. At a minimum, each school will measure samples large enough for the institution to aggregate and to report as accountability measures to the state. Western's hope, pending sufficient resources and faculty support, is to further embed the measurement process in the curriculum, so that the departments and programs selected for inclusion each year will participate fully, with work from all majors scored, so that these student learning outcomes scores can also be fed back to departments as part of their internal self-assessment process.

### Implementing a Three-Phase Assessment Plan Process

Since departmental involvement in addressing student learning outcomes at Western Washington University currently encompasses a wide range of levels of interest, planning and implementation, any campus-wide plan to evaluate the assessment of student-learning outcomes must be implemented cautiously and in phases. We will follow the following timeline for introducing a campus-wide plan that commits all departments and programs to addressing student learning outcomes:

#### Phase I: (2000-02)

- 1) Guidelines for developing a plan to define and assess student learning outcomes will be provided to each department/college. Results of the survey will serve a dual role: current status of student learning outcomes and a needs assessment for providing support and resources.
- 2) A Student Learning Outcomes Assessment and Evaluation Resource Manual will be provided to each department.
- 3) A cadre of experts in assessing student learning outcomes will be available to provide technical assistance to each department.

#### Phase II: (2001-02)

- (1) Departments will submit a plan that addresses the essential components of an assessment plan to the Provost's office.
- (2) Annual review and evaluation of the plan will be submitted in the spring of each year. Any need for technical assistance will be evaluated at that time.
- (3) The Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing (OIAT) in conjunction with the Center for Innovative Instruction and the Committee on the Assessment of Teaching and Learning will provide oversight to this process.
- (4) Evaluation of the progress toward developing the assessment of student learning outcomes in all departments will be conducted through a follow-up survey distributed annually (2001-05).
- (5) Evaluation of the use of the data gathered from the departmental assessment plans to target areas for program improvement will be reviewed annually by the OIAT to determine need for technical assistance.

### Phase III: (2003-ongoing)

- (1) Campus-wide review of the status of the assessment of student learning outcomes coordinated by the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing. Campus-wide review will occur every two years on an ongoing basis.
- (2) Recommendations for improvement of the plan will be published in a report distributed to all departments.

### Resources for Developing Assessment Plans

Since all departments will be required to identify a process for assessing student learning outcomes, it is important that appropriate resources be harnessed to support these efforts. The following includes a list of resources currently being developed to support department efforts in completing their assessment plans:

- ◆ *Assessment Plan Resource Manual*: Members of the Western Washington University Faculty Senate expressed interest in reviewing plans that are currently in place in departments across the campus. At a recent Carnegie Conversation Forum, faculty from three departments presented departmental or college level assessment plan processes that they were actively involved in developing.
- ◆ *Cadre/Team of Experts*: Faculty who are currently involved in departmental efforts to assess student learning outcomes will be invited to provide support to departments who need guidance in beginning the process of considering the assessment of student learning outcomes. It is understood that there is a wide range of knowledge and skills in beginning the planning process and it is important that all departments are welcomed to join the effort without judgment.
- ◆ *Center for Instructional Innovation (CII)*: The CII will highlight exemplary models of plans to assess student learning outcomes on their website, which is easily accessible to all faculty.

The combination of (1) exemplary models currently being employed in departments across the campus, (2) an administrative commitment to providing support for developing assessment plans, and (3) guidelines and resources to departments/colleges for accomplishing this task, reflect the serious commitment of our university toward accomplishing the goal of having assessment plans in all departments.

However, the existence of plans alone cannot be assurance that they are being used effectively. Thus, Phase III of the implementation process addresses the evaluation of how the plans are being used to improve departmental programs. The iterative nature of the process is key to the success of our model. Ultimately, if the assessment process is not positively influencing student learning, then the plans cannot be judged successful. We believe that Western's 3-phase process of implementation addresses this important ultimate outcome and we anticipate that the results of these efforts will benefit all of the students attending Western Washington University. To assess the effectiveness of Western's Assessment Plan follow-up on-line surveys will be conducted in two years to determine the degree and level of progress of departments and programs.

## **The Future of Assessment at Western Washington University**

Institutional assessment activities at Western Washington University have achieved state, regional, and national recognition. Similarly, Western's highly praised DIALOGUE series posted on Western's institutional assessment web page has garnered considerable national attention. A few of Western's academic programs such as Fairhaven College and the Huxley College of Environmental Studies have received worldwide acclaim for the academic innovation and excellence. Fairhaven College faculty, for example, set high and demanding standards concerning the assessment of student learning through use of varied writing intensive activities across the curriculum and student maintenance of comprehensive and often lengthy portfolios. Narrative evaluations form the basis of Fairhaven's approach to assessment.

With the presence of a well-established institutional assessment program of activities, Western has a solid foundation for monitoring the efficaciousness of its student learning assessment and instructional effectiveness plan. Considerable progress has already been accomplished where three of Western's colleges have established student assessment activities firmly incorporated in their respective curricula. Another college, the College of Business and Economics, is progressing smoothly to a point where they will have a comprehensive student learning assessment process fully entrenched in the curriculum by December 2000. The 20 departments of Western's largest and most comprehensive college, the College of Arts and Sciences, are varied in their progress towards full implementation of student learning assessment activities; all have recently revised their mission statements to reflect a commitment to student learning assessment. Progress however has accelerated within the 1999-2000 academic year and it is expected that by the June 2002 all Arts and Sciences departments will have fully developed, comprehensive student learning assessment activities and procedures and integrated in their respective curricula.

Progress towards full implementation of Western's Assessment Plan at the department level is very encouraging. However, Western's progress towards developing student learning assessment activities for the General Education Requirement (GER) courses lags behind departmental level progress and activities. The FIGS Project and GER Communication Block C described above represent innovative and significant progress. However, GER progress largely depends on progress at the department level where most of the GER service courses are taught. Western will devote considerable attention and effort to reforming the GER in 2000 and 2001 to represent the university's commitment to the assessment of student learning and teaching effectiveness. Data from external and internal evaluations and surveys will assist in shaping the direction that the GERs as well as the overall university curriculum will take in the near future.