

## Assessment Glossary Wheaton College

The Assessment Glossary is a collection of frequently used terms that relate to the routine measurement and evaluation of student learning in an effort to understand how well our students are achieving our educational mission and what factors are influencing that achievement. Many of these terms are familiar from our work as higher education professionals but have particular meanings when associated with assessment of student learning. The goal of the Glossary is to establish a shared vocabulary and develop our common understanding for assessment work at Wheaton.

### *General Terms*

**Assessment:** Assessment is a cyclical process of ascertaining whether or not our students are learning what we intend for them to learn. The purpose is informed decision making that advances learning.

**Assessment Cycle:** The three main steps of the assessment cycle are: setting goals, collecting information, and taking actions to improve learning. Setting goals involves generating learning outcomes (see below) for students to meet upon completion of a course or program of study. Collecting information involves gathering data as evidence of the extent to which students achieve the stated outcomes. Taking actions involves leveraging the collected data in order to make informed changes to the curriculum, co-curricular offerings, pedagogical approaches, policies, support systems, budgets and/or anything else that is being shown to impact learning.

**Accreditation:** A quality assurance process conducted by an independent, third-party evaluator (e.g., Higher Learning Commission) to validate the integrity and effectiveness of higher education institutions. The evaluation and improvement of student learning is one of the criteria for accreditation, and assessment verifies the quality of an institution's academic programs. For accreditation purposes, the assessment cycle must be documented and reviewed regularly.

**Program:** A broad term that refers to varying levels of organization of content and/or experiences designed to support particular student learning outcomes. For the purposes of assessment, any curricular or co-curricular offering that has outcomes for student learning is considered a program and is encouraged to complete an annual assessment cycle. Some programs, such as all degree-granting programs (i.e., undergraduate majors and graduate degree programs) as well as significant Student Development initiatives, are required by the Higher Learning Commission to complete and document assessment activities annually. The Research and Evaluation of Student Learning Committee (RESL) will work with these programs to ensure compliance; other programs with optional assessment activity may choose to submit documentation to RESL for additional support and feedback.

**Program Review:** In-depth evaluation of a program that includes assessment of student learning but typically goes further to include analysis of supporting structures and departmental operations (e.g., budgets, enrollment, chair/office effectiveness, etc.). Program review is more extensive than assessment and occurs less frequently. Assessment more narrowly focuses on student achievement of learning outcomes and occurs annually.

**Student Learning/Student Achievement:** Student learning and achievement refer to the extent to which students have met the outcomes established for a course or program. Learning and/or achievement can be measured in many ways, including standardized tests, student work samples, student portfolios, presentations or performances, to name a few.

**Goals, Objectives, or Outcomes:** Over the years, these terms have been used interchangeably at Wheaton to refer to the desired results of a Wheaton education. However, in the context of assessment, particularly within the Higher Learning Commission, these terms have different but related meanings. ***“Outcome” is the preferred language for describing student learning aims at Wheaton College.***

**Goals:** A broad aim, possibly long-term, for a particular project, program, or task. Goals are often aspirational and used to cast vision. They may be centered on what the department or program hopes to do or to deliver for students, rather than on what students will learn or take away. In contrast to objectives and outcomes, goals are less specific, more aspirational, and broader. They can also be difficult to measure.

**Objectives:** A specific action or step that must be accomplished to achieve a goal. Objectives are narrowly defined and focus on what needs to happen or be provided.

**Outcomes:** A statement of the desired result of a learning activity or program. Outcomes, also called **Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)**, are learner-centered, specific, and measurable. They describe what students will know, be able to do, or value as a result of a learning activity. Standard formats for outcomes statements include “Students will be able to *<verb> <something>*,” and the slightly more complicated: “Students will be able to *<measurable verb><learning statement or object><context>*.”

Examples of Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes:

*Program Goal:* Upon completing our program, students will be prepared for graduate study.

*Program Objective:* All students will complete a research methods course.

*Program Outcome:* Students will be able to design novel experiments that utilize foundational laboratory techniques and procedures.

*For resources and/or assistance writing good outcomes, please contact RESL.*

Note that outcomes may be written with varying levels of generality for different learning contexts, such as the course, program, or institution.

Examples of varying levels of generality:

*Institution Level:* Students will be able to write effectively for a variety of audiences.

*Program Level:* Students will be able to write effectively for professional audiences using the common genres of <your favorite discipline>.

*Course Level:* Students will be able to write a research proposal that uses mass spectrometry as the primary method of investigation.

**Performance Indicators:** The behaviors or actions that demonstrate a student has met a learning outcome. For example, an outcome might be “students will be able to deliver an effective public speech,” and the performance indicators could include maintaining eye contact, speaking loudly enough to be heard, clearly organizing the content, and opening with an attention-getter. Performance indicators can become components of a rubric for evaluation.

**Curriculum Mapping:** Involves identifying where in the curriculum particular student learning outcomes are addressed in order to guide future actions for improvement. A helpful Curriculum Map is available in Appendix A of Walvoord’s *Assessment Clear and Simple*. In short, for each course, the instructor determines which program outcomes are being covered and/or assessed. Mapping can be helpful at both the program and institution levels.

### *Annual Assessment Activities*

**Data Collection:** The methods by which information and/or evidence is collected systematically and used for analysis and evaluation of student learning outcomes.

**Evidence:** The data identified, that when collected and reviewed, provides clear indication of whether and how well students are meeting the learning outcomes.

**Direct Measure:** Data collection method in which students *demonstrate* their achievement of learning outcomes through the creation of a product or artifact (e.g., exams, presentations, performances). Direct measures are needed for every student learning outcome.

**Indirect Measure:** Data collection method in which students *reflect* on their learning (e.g., surveys, focus groups). Indirect measures can be helpful and are optional for any student learning outcome.

**Interpretation of Data:** After the data have been analyzed and displayed in a readable format – descriptively, inferentially, and qualitatively, as appropriate – relevant stakeholders review the data to determine how well students are achieving the outcomes and what factors are influencing their learning.

**Use of Data:** Specifying and taking actions to strengthen student learning and improve achievement of the outcomes. Common actions include: curricular changes; updates to

program policies and procedures; faculty, staff, or student development; pedagogical innovations; realignment of budgets or other support structures. Actions should be specific and indicate who is the party responsible for carrying out the action.

**Annual Assessment Meeting:** On a yearly basis, program personnel are expected to meet together to review assessment data, discuss its interpretation, and plan its use to improve learning. As a team, relevant stakeholders will ask what the data say about strengths and weaknesses in student learning and plan for changes to address weaknesses or enhance strengths. The purpose is informed decision making that advances learning.

### *Reporting and Documentation*

**Assessment Plan:** An Assessment Plan describes a program's approach to completing the annual assessment cycle. At Wheaton, each Assessment Plan includes five sections: 1) a program mission statement that aligns with the College's mission; 2) statements of student learning outcomes for the program (3-5 learning outcomes are recommended for any single program); 3) a list of measurements and key performance indicators for each outcome; 4) plans for discussing and interpreting data and identifying informed actions to improve student learning; 5) plans to periodically review the outcomes and overall assessment plan. Each program at Wheaton should have a current Assessment Plan on file with the Research and Evaluation of Student Learning (RESL) Committee. RESL makes these available for review by the Higher Learning Commission and posts them to the internal College website.

**Assessment Report:** An Assessment Report documents the assessment activities undertaken by a program in a given year. Reports include outcomes, a summary of the data and its interpretations for each outcome, a summary of informed actions taken during the current academic year, and a list of informed actions planned for the coming year. At Wheaton, Assessment Reports are embedded within the Annual Report written by Department Chairs and Program Directors. The assessment portion of the Annual Report should be completed based on input from all relevant stakeholders in the department and not solely by the chair or director.

**Data Informed Summary:** As part of the Assessment Report, programs will summarize the assessment data and interpretations that informed the decisions the program is making or has made about actions to improve student achievement of the outcomes.

**Actions:** As part of the Assessment Report, programs will describe the steps they will take or have already taken to improve student achievement of their learning outcomes. Actions must be data-informed and emerge from interpretation of relevant assessment data. Common actions include: curricular changes; updates to program policies and procedures; faculty, staff, or student development; pedagogical innovations; realignment of budgets or other support structures. Actions should be specific and indicate who is the party responsible for carrying out the action.