QuickGuide: Graduate Program Assessment

The Basics: Outcomes Assessment for Graduate Programs

- Establish clear learning outcomes appropriate for the degree
- Identify where assessment will take place:

-Comprehensive Exams	-Dissertation
-Proposals	-Capstone project or experience
-Thesis	-Coursework (non-thesis tracks)

- Gather assessment data/evidence of learning outcomes achievement

Collecting Direct Evidence: Direct evidence is produced by evaluating student work or performance, and should be gathered for all learning outcomes on an ongoing basis. Gather evidence of learning that facilitates program *improvement* by identifying strengths and weaknesses (i.e., *not* just pass/fail).

Quantitative Direct Evidence:
- Use a **rubric** that scores each outcome individually (create a rubric that makes sense for your program)

Qualitative Direct Evidence:
- Collect faculty comments and observations about strengths and weaknesses of student performance for each outcome

Setting Benchmarks and Targets:
- Set an appropriate benchmark for the *minimum* acceptable (passing) score or result for each outcome being assessed throughout the course of study
- Set a **target** of the percent of students that should meet the *minimum* benchmarks at each point of assessment
- Set a **second** target of the percent of students you would like to see achieve the *highest* possible score or result

Creating Action Plans:
- Create an "action plan" to respond programmatically to any troubling patterns or shortfalls; action plans can include changes to curriculum, the course of study, policy, advising practices, pedagogy, professional development, or even changes to learning outcomes or the assessment plan.

Optional but *Recommended:* Also gathering *indirect* evidence, such as exit interviews, student surveys, alumni surveys, focus groups, etc.

Program Assessment	
Outcomes Assessment	Program Evaluation
• Assessment of student learning goals and outcomes • Required for accreditation • Focus on student learning: How well are students learning what is intended? • Continuous improvement of student learning • Requires **direct evidence** of student learning for each learning outcome • Uses indirect evidence of student learning to provide context and help interpret direct evidence	• **Incorporates outcomes assessment results,** and assessment of other, non-academic, program goals and outcomes • Required for program review • Focus on the program: goals, curriculum, policies, professional development, big picture outcomes (job placement, student satisfaction, etc.) • Continuous improvement of the program • Uses other **indirect** and **supporting** evidence to evaluate strategic goals and program efficacy, and to interpret the results of outcomes assessment

The Purpose of Assessment

The goal is to evaluate and respond to strengths and weaknesses of the *program* in light of program learning outcomes and strategic goals. Assessment is a process for program improvement.

Gathering Evidence

Some kind of *direct* evidence must be collected for learning outcomes. Direct evidence is frequently quantitative, but it can also be qualitative.

✓ A rubric is often the most convenient way to collect assessment data.

✓ The rubric can be used for student assessment as well, but it doesn't have to be. The goal is to collect program data.

✓ Qualitative evidence, such as faculty notes or observations (if clearly connected to learning outcomes) from a student performance (such as a thesis defense), does count. However, to use faculty comments as assessment data, someone must analyze them, note any patterns, and write a summary of findings.

Messy Measures

Many programs submit thesis or dissertation defense **pass/fail data**. Other measures, such as GPA data, course grades, the results of national or certifying exams, or publication and conference presentation data (obtained from student CVs), are frequently included in graduate program assessment data (and should be, if faculty value these things). These measures play a vital role in program evaluation, however they are **problematic** as outcomes assessment data because they represent combinations of learning outcomes and behaviors, and don't allow faculty to judge and document *specific* strengths and weaknesses in a systematic way. Include

these measures if they are useful to your program, but **you should *also* include some direct measure for each learning outcome.**

Assessing throughout the Course of Study
Assessment data gathered from the end of each student's course of study shows the programs overall successes or failures, but faculty may want to know more about how students got there. Formative assessment data can be gathered from coursework early on in order to track how students learn and acquire skills over the course of the program, and at what points (and how) they acquire the habits of mind and professional ways of being that the program values. Such data can help programs make systemic improvements and be more intentional about the learning and experiences they want for their graduate students. Coursework may also be the only convenient source of assessment data for non-thesis tracks.

Assessing Process with Direct Evidence
Gathering information about the path students took to the end of their degree can be just as important as how well they did at the end. Faculty comments and observations from throughout the course of study or dissertation process, recorded on a rubric or in some other way, can help pinpoint issues that may require program change to address. For example, if faculty are spending more time coaching dissertators on writing issues than they would like, a change to how the program addresses graduate-level writing during coursework may be needed.

Indirect Evidence
Direct evidence is greatly enhanced by "triangulating" with indirect evidence, such as exit interviews, alumni surveys, student surveys, focus groups, employer surveys, or student self-evaluations and reflections.

> *Indirect Evidence of Learning:* Students can also be asked to self-report what they believe they learned or what skills they developed through the program. Indirect evidence can help faculty to interpret and contextualize other assessment data (but doesn't take the place of direct evidence for learning outcomes).

> *Indirect Program Evidence:* Programs may wish to survey incoming graduate students to gather data about their career goals or expectations for the program, and exit surveys to gather data about student experiences with the program. Students and alumni can be asked to assess the quality of the program, or of the support and advising they received, as well as how the program contributed to accomplishing their career goals.

Action Plans
Action plans are *programmatic* responses to patterns or shortfalls revealed in assessment data. Action plans can include changes to curriculum, policy, advising practices, pedagogy, or professional development. Action plans include a statement of the intended changes, a timeline, and a plan for evaluating if the change was successful.

Ongoing Assessment

Outcomes assessment data should be gathered on an *ongoing* basis. At minimum, programs should gather data for at least one outcome per year on a rotating basis, with all program outcomes assessed within a five-year period.

Sample Rubric with Comments:

Criteria	3 (Outstanding)	2 (Satisfactory)	1 (Needs Work)	0 (Unacceptable)	Comments
Clearly describes a well-conceptualized research problem or question [PLO2]					
Integrates and critiques relevant literature [PLO1]					
Uses appropriate research approaches and methods [PLO3]					
Presents justified and defensible conclusions [PLO2]					
Demonstrates ability to present and defend research, objectives, approach, and conclusions [PLO4]					
Writing is clear, organized, and of professional quality [PLO4]					

Graduate rubric examples:

https://sph.umd.edu/sites/default/files//files/EPIB%20MPH%20Rubric%20comps%20prop%20def%20defense%208_18_14.pdf

https://assessment.wiscweb.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/92/2017/02/Example_Rubric_for_Masters_PhD.doc

http://ase.tufts.edu/biology/graduate/documents/NEASC-PhD.pdf

https://engineering.purdue.edu/ABE/academics/graduate/ABE-PhD-4-dissertation-and-defense-rubric.docx

Writing Learning Outcomes for Graduate Programs

To create graduate learning outcomes, first ask "What are characteristics of an ideal doctoral graduate in your field?" Graduate programs may want to establish outcomes aimed at things like:

- Depth and breadth of disciplinary knowledge
- Scholarly and research skills
- Oral and written communication skills
- Ability to teach effectively in the discipline
- Preparation for the breadth of available career opportunities
- Professional socialization, behaviors, and habits of mind
- Professional skills such as working collaboratively, grant writing, & publication

Example Program Learning Outcomes: Ph.D. in Folklore
Students in the Ph.D. program will:

PLO1: Demonstrate a critical understanding of the history, theory, concepts, and debates in at least two major areas of folkloristic research by summarizing, synthesizing, and critiquing relevant literature. [Disciplinary Knowledge, Critical Thinking]

PLO2: Develop and complete an original research project that pursues a significant research question in the field of Folklore Studies. [Research]

PLO3: Demonstrate the ability to ethically conduct ethnographic research, including methods, analysis, and writing. [Methods]

PLO4: Demonstrate oral and written communication skills suitable for professional conference presentation, academic publication (print or digital), applications for grants, awards, and fellowships, and other forms of professional discourse. [Communication]

PLO5: Demonstrate the necessary knowledge and skills for teaching undergraduate courses in the discipline, including the assessment of student learning, by successfully developing and teaching at least one course under the guidance of a faculty advisor. [Pedagogy]

PLO6: Demonstrate professionalization through familiarity with major professional institutions and organizations, publications, conferences, and compliance with professional expectations for ethics, collegiality, and service by attending and presenting at national conferences, engaging in collaborative projects, writing grant proposals, and other professional activity. [Professionalism]

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