

Teaching and Learning: Our Core Product

Criterion three speaks to arguably the most important function performed on university and college campuses—faculty teach and students learn. While student learning and effective teaching are obviously closely intertwined, the conversation nationally focuses on evaluation and assessment. Our own efforts in these areas continue to bear fruit. We are implementing best practices associated with evaluation and assessment by utilizing multiple measures of assessment. We are then actively closing the implementation loop by analyzing data, then making program changes.

Criterion three further emphasizes the fact that learning has become an ongoing process that

occurs in many different settings throughout a person's lifetime. Current trends indicate that non-traditional students are becoming more common, students are earning their undergraduate degrees over a longer time frame, and external organizations are taking a larger role in the learning process by forming closer partnerships with colleges and universities. Criterion three also explicitly recognizes that programs and processes related to student learning and effective teaching must demonstrate close alignment with an institution's mission and goals.



How is Your Program Assessment Plan Functioning?

Criterion three focuses on student learning and effective teaching. One cluster of evidence that will document our efforts in this area involves program assessment plans. We all wrote plans back in the 90's and have updated them since. These actions are critical components of the assessment cycle. In fact, assessment is not about amassing data, but rather, about analyzing and using information to make a difference in student learning. So, when you are following the data analysis portion of your assessment plan, continue to report your actions to the University Assessment Committee each year. This will help us document that we are in fact serious about improvement of student learning.

When you are assessing your program, consider the

following five questions about student learning:

1. How are your stated student learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs and degrees?
2. What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?
3. In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of student learning?
4. How do you ensure shared responsibility for assessment of student learning?
5. How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of assessment of student learning efforts?

Let's be sure we can answer these questions!

An in-depth look at Criterion Three: Student Learning and Effective Teaching

The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.

Core Component - 3a

The organization's goals for student learning outcomes are clearly stated for each educational program and make effective assessment possible.

Examples of Evidence

- The organization clearly differentiates its learning goals for undergraduate, graduate, and post-baccalaureate programs by identifying the expected learning outcomes for each.
- Assessment of student learning provides evidence at multiple levels: course, program, and institutional.
- Assessment of student learning includes multiple direct and indirect measures of student learning.
- Results obtained through assessment of student learning are available to appropriate constituencies, including students themselves.
- The organization integrates into its assessment of student learning the data reported for purposes of external accountability (e.g., graduation rates, passage rates on licensing exams, placement rates, transfer rates, etc.).
- The organization's assessment of student learning extends to all educational offerings, including credit and non-credit certificate programs.
- Faculty members are involved in defining expected student learning outcomes and creating the strategies to determine whether those outcomes are achieved.
- Faculty and administrators routinely review the effectiveness and uses of the organization's program to assess student learning.

Core Component - 3b

The organization values and supports effective teaching.

Examples of Evidence

- Qualified faculty members determine curricular content and strategies for instruction.
- The organization supports professional development designed to facilitate teaching suited to varied learning environments.
- The organization evaluates teaching and recognizes effective teaching.
- The organization provides services to support improved pedagogies.
- The organization demonstrates openness to innovative practices that enhance learning.

- The organization supports faculty in keeping abreast of the research on teaching and learning, and of technological advances that can positively affect student learning and the delivery of instruction.
- Faculty members actively participate in professional organizations relevant to the disciplines they teach.

Core Component - 3c

The organization creates effective learning environments.

Examples of Evidence

- Assessment results inform improvements in curriculum, pedagogy, instructional resources, and student services.
- The organization provides an environment that supports all learners and respects the diversity they bring.
- Advising systems focus on student learning, including the mastery of skills required for academic success.
- Student development programs support learning throughout the student's experience regardless of the location of the student.
- The organization employs, when appropriate, new technologies that enhance effective learning environments for students.
- The organization's systems of quality assurance include regular review of whether its educational strategies, activities, processes, and technologies enhance student learning.

Core Component - 3d

The organization's learning resources support student learning and effective teaching.

Examples of Evidence

- The organization ensures access to the resources (e.g., research laboratories, libraries, performance spaces, clinical practice sites) necessary to support learning and teaching.
- The organization evaluates the use of its learning resources to enhance student learning and effective teaching.
- The organization regularly assesses the effectiveness of its learning resources to support learning and teaching.
- The organization supports students, staff, and faculty in using technology effectively.
- The organization provides effective staffing and support for its learning resources.
- The organization's systems and structures enable partnerships and innovations that enhance student learning and strengthen teaching effectiveness.
- Budgeting priorities reflect that improvement in teaching and learning is a core value of the organization.

Learning by doing: the benefits of practical experience

Under the heading “The organization creates effective learning environments,” one of the examples of evidence states: “Student development programs support learning throughout the student’s experience regardless of the location of the student.”

There are a wide variety of programs on our campus that provide students with an opportunity to gain real life experiences that are related to particular fields of study. Within all four colleges at UWO, students can find programs structured to provide experiential, practical, and immersion opportunities that seek to combine knowledge gained in the classroom with practical application. While the various programs are different with regard to scope and intensity, most are based on concepts stemming from the problem based learning (PBL) technique. The main themes of PBL are discovery, analysis, and application of knowledge used to solve/answer real-world problems/questions. An assumption of PBL is that real-world problems, questions, and activities are typically not as well-defined or standardized as they tend to be presented in the classroom. The main goal of PBL is to encourage active learning among students. In other words, instead of working on a given set of information in an artificial environment, students have to make decisions on the appropriate courses of action as they address real-life situations. (See Birch, 1986; Boud and Feletti, 1997; McKeachie, 2003; Vernon & Blake, 1993 for more in-depth information about PBL).

Many of the practicum experiences provided to our students fit well with our mission as we seek to “...provide undergraduate course-work designed to develop learning proficiencies...,” “...challenge students to develop their talents, intellectual interests, and creative abilities...” and “...prepare [students] for critical evaluation and decision making.” In addition to for credit programs and courses that promote practical application of knowledge, several programs on our campus focus on placing students in internship positions throughout the Fox Valley and beyond. For example, within the College of Business Administration (COBA), professional experience is a prerequisite for graduation. Internships through the COBA must allow student to use and develop professional skills (i.e., are not simply clerical or manual labor part time jobs). In addition, COBA internships are typically paid positions and ideally account for 10 to 15 hours per week during the school year. Another example from COBA is a new undergraduate practicum course which positions students as business consultants for area businesses and not-for-profit organizations. Students are expected to closely observe the environments, practices, and challenges of actual managers

and document their findings for later analysis. Depending on the complexity of the project, students will conduct research, perform market studies, analyze financial data, and brainstorm as necessary to attack the problem successfully. As opposed to learning through a greater proportion of in-class work and case discussions, students learn through actual hands-on work experience.

Another UWO program designed to provide hands-on experience is the student teacher program. For example, the College of Education and Human Services facilitates urban or tribal student teaching opportunities in which student teachers are placed in Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha, Beloit, or one of the Wisconsin tribal schools. Not only do such appointments expose student teachers to diverse populations, challenges, and opportunities, but they may also lead to the development of new perspectives on how to effectively teach in different teaching environments. Students considering this program are required to complete applications and attend student teaching orientation sessions. It is also recommended that the student teachers spend at least one full day in an urban or tribal school before their actual official placement so that they can “solidify their commitment to the special environment.”

Several departments within the College of Letters and Science also provide students with the opportunity to combine classroom study with hands-on learning opportunities. Within the Math/Natural Science and Humanities Divisions, Anthropology and Geology both stress the importance of gaining practical field experience that supplements classroom lectures. The Geology Department in particular offers exciting field camp experience designed “to teach students vital field skills and mapping techniques in a wide variety of geological environments.” The Geology Department’s website provides a good illustration of how reading or hearing about geological formations and actually seeing them differs greatly. Likewise the Anthropology Department’s ongoing work at the Grand Village of the Meskwaki (occupied between 1680 and 1730) gives students a chance to dig into the past to see how people once lived right here in the Fox Valley.

Given the physical and emotional relationships associated with health care professionals, it is not surprising that the College of Nursing also provides ample opportunities for nursing students to bridge the gap between lessons learned from faculty members and actual patient care. For example, several nursing classes are designed to allow students to apply not only the knowledge gained in classrooms, but also practice and hone communication skills in different care setting.

Assessment of Learning: A Lifetime Journey

Recently, several members of the reaccreditation coordinating team attended the annual Higher Learning Commission conference in Chicago. One theme stood out in the discussions and presentations.

Whether colleges and universities are seeking accreditation for the first time or, as in our case, are seeking re-accreditation, the issue that has become a hot topic is that of assessment of student learning. According to Higher Learning Commission representatives, we should be well beyond talking about assessment of student learning and actually be collecting and utilizing assessment data to improve curricula on our campus. A quick perusal of self-study reports (and interim reports) at the Higher Learning Commission annual conference provides ample evidence that assessment has moved from a conceptual issue to an action item within the reaccreditation process.

We should be proud of the progress we've made to date. Not only are more and more faculty members embracing the value of assessment and are taking steps to capture and use student learning assessment data, actual program changes are beginning to reflect what is being learned from assessment activities. In short, we're well on our way to developing a continuous improvement learning model that will be driven by our goal to deliver a quality educational experience.

Students have also begun to notice changes resulting from assessment activities. Tom Shields, OSA vice president, suggests that "the university does a good job in accurately judging success in student learning." Tom not only thinks UWO provides a very good learning environment; he is also pleased with the variety of techniques used in the classroom. The availability of learning resources on campus also receives high marks from Tom.

Assessment of student learning and program effectiveness is an ongoing process. We must continue our current momentum while searching out new strategies. As the old saying goes...happiness is not found at the end of the journey, but along the way.

For a complete list of departmental assessment plans, the status of their progress, links to other universities' assessment sites, and reports and articles on assessment, see the website of the Committee on Assessment of Student Learning at <http://www.uwosh.edu/assessment/>

Why HLC not NCA?

Have you noticed the switch in names for the university accreditation process from NCA to HLC of NCA? Have you wondered what's going on? Well, here's the scoop.... The North Central Association is the accrediting body for most schools in the north and central portion of the US. This is a 19 state region stretching from West Virginia to Arizona including Wisconsin. There are two major groups in the association: those folks that accredit pk-12 schools and those who focus on colleges and universities. Needless to say, we are in the college and university group which is named appropriately, the Higher Learning Commission or HLC. Hence, HLC of NCA.

Changing Demographics: Non-Traditional Undergraduate Students on Campus

Typically, when one thinks of college students on a residential campus they think of people between the ages of 18 and 24. While this does remain the majority of our student body, it does not represent everyone. According to Marsha Rossiter, Interim Assistant Vice Chancellor of Continuous Learning, there are between 1,400 and 1,500 non-traditional undergraduate students on campus. These numbers are anticipated to increase by 50% under the Chancellor's new growth agenda.

Non-traditional undergraduates approach learning a bit differently than their 18-24 year old peers. Of primary importance, according to Rossiter, is the value they place on connecting to their professors. They want a person-to-person connection with their professors. They want to engage the professor and ask questions about the subject matter to gain an in-depth understanding of course content as well as mastery of critical skills. In fact, it is through the classroom that these students connect to the campus. Unlike their younger peers, they typically do not participate in extra-curricular activities nor do they live in the dorms. Therefore, their primary link to campus is through the classroom.

To meet non-traditional student needs the Office of Adult Student Access Services was opened in 2004 in Dempsey 328. Based on a campus-wide inventory of services available to non-traditional students as well as student feedback, the Office offers a student peer-mentoring program, educational planning services, and a one-stop-shop for information and referral. In other words, when non-traditional students have any questions about courses, careers, finances, or any aspect of campus, there will be someone there to begin answering their questions and then help them make connections to the experts on campus who can more fully answer their questions.