

UW-Madison College of Letters and Science
Assessment Plan
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Overview: An Introduction to Assessment of Student Learning in L&S

The College of Letters and Science (L&S) is UW-Madison's largest unit, consisting of 40 departments, 10 non-departmental instructional programs, 5 professional schools, and about 60 interdisciplinary research centers. The work of the college is essential to UW-Madison's instructional mission, with L&S conferring more than half (60%) of all UW-Madison undergraduate degrees, and 45% of graduate degrees. L&S contributes extensively to the instructional missions of other schools and colleges, teaching about 89% of all UW-Madison Freshman/Sophomore credits delivered across all units. Well over half of all living UW-Madison alumni hold L&S degrees. In order to help our students graduate and become alumni, the college operates the largest and most complex academic affairs unit in the university, providing services ranging from general academic advising, to policy analysis and implementation of the L&S baccalaureate degree requirements, to enrichment programs serving the range of students from "at-risk" to "honors". In short, the breadth of the university is reflected in the breadth of the College, which is "the heart of a great university".

Assessment of student learning is an important tool for informing the decisions we make. In L&S, this task is guided by the following principles:

- Many "ordinary" processes of academic life are evaluative. When approached systematically, from an analytical "big picture" perspective, these activities can serve as important ongoing forms of assessment.
- Academic assessment supplements but does not replace curricular, departmental, and other types of ongoing review for improvement.
- Our programs have a wide array of learning objectives; therefore, L&S does not have a "one-plan-fits-all" assessment approach.
- Departments and programs are central to academic assessment: faculty and staff develop and implement plans that align learning goals with their departmental missions, using tools appropriate to their available human, financial, and technical resources; and results are used to achieve or expand upon improvement.
- Non-academic and student service units play an important role in supporting student learning; they can also help us evaluate our students' integrative, practical, and other critical thinking skills.
- Faculty ownership and participation in assessment activities is essential.

Audiences Concerned With Student Learning. Assessment results are reported to various audiences and serve a variety of purposes.

Within the unit, assessment information is shared with program faculty and staff to inform decision-making. Academic units share results with the departmental curriculum and executive committees; student service units report results to directors, advisers, and others to improve services. Decisions influenced by assessment results may involve requests to change existing program requirements, development of proposals to create new programs, or preparation of communications with external audiences in alumni newsletters and community partners. The assessment of student learning is a form of action research that engages teachers interested in the scholarship of teaching and learning, and this work is frequently pursued as research in its own right, often the most immediate beneficiaries are students, colleagues, and departments.

When units want to implement program changes, the L&S Curriculum Committee reviews requests that arise from assessment activities, since careful study of whether the program is working – and if students are learning - will often identify problems that need to be addressed (and potential solutions). If departmental inquiries suggest that new programs could be developed, the L&S Academic Planning Council will review requests as part of that process, which requires submission of assessment results. New programs must include assessment plans before they are approved.

Units also compile assessment results when preparing department-wide self-studies for program and accreditation reviews. Taking a “long view” of assessment results offers insights into patterns of student interest, academic quality, resource allocation, student satisfaction, and the overall student experience.

Finally, students are an increasingly important audience for assessment information. They participate not only as subjects whose learning attainment is evaluated, but also as beneficiaries of efforts to improve the quality of education. They are subjects *and partners* in this effort.

At the college-level, assessment results are used for decision making (as noted above, when the Curriculum Committee and Academic Planning Council consider curricular changes). They are also included in reports of major committees and service units in periodic and annual reports to the dean, and these, in turn, serve as the foundation for the Dean’s annual reports to the Provost on assessment and program review. These reports include both academic and non-academic assessment activities conducted by departments and service units across the college, and they are shared with other units (e.g, Undergraduate Academic Services) and bodies (e.g. the Academic Planning Council, Department Chairs).

Student Learning in L&S

College-Wide

- 1. Learning Goals.** The College of Letters and Science promotes a liberal arts education via research, inquiry, and conscious integration of learning across the liberal arts and sciences; in L&S, “the Wisconsin Experience” is grounded in liberal education. At a minimum, we expect that L&S students will recognize and value the various “ways of knowing” the world through the arts and humanities, and the biological, physical and social sciences, as described in *Catalog* and other materials (see http://pubs.wisc.edu/ug/lis_ugstudy.htm#breadth). Beyond this minimum, we believe that, through in-class education and experiences beyond the walls of the traditional classroom students should:
 - Develop a level of proficiency in the different “ways of knowing” the world through the arts and humanities, and the biological, physical and social sciences, which will be reflected in an ability to communicate across the disciplinary boundaries, so as to interpret and investigate the complex world in which they live;
 - Integrate knowledge across disciplines in order to bring novel perspectives to challenging social and technological problems;
 - Communicate effectively, so they may share their knowledge, wisdom, and values with others across social and professional settings;
 - Understand their own learning processes and possess the capacity to intentionally a) seek and evaluate information, b) recognize and reduce bias in their thinking, and c) build new knowledge for application in their personal and professional lives.
 - Construct a worldview in which they accept the responsibility for civic engagement and appreciate the need to live lives of purpose and meaning.

2. **Plan for Assessing Student Learning.** An annual assessment project to evaluate student learning with respect to one or more of the learning goals stated above could be conducted. The tools used for this purpose will include a variety of activities, with projects dedicated to answering questions that have college-wide implications for students. For example, the committee may decide to:

- Periodically re-administer the survey on “breadth” that was developed while evaluating the 1971 curriculum;
- Evaluate samples of student projects from a range of interdisciplinary capstone courses;
- Monitor and assess L&S student participation in relevant “showcases” of student achievement, such as the Undergraduate Research Symposium;
- Monitor awards/honors relevant to these goals;
- Analyze student enrollment patterns, with particular attention to how undergraduates meet breadth requirements outside their major division;
- Investigate issues concerning students who do not satisfy requirements or meet performance expectations, with an eye toward addressing systemic issues in the curriculum;
- Obtain and analyze L&S student responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and graduating senior surveys;
- Organize focus group sessions with relevant students, faculty & advisors.

Detailed planning for assessment will be conducted by the L&S Curriculum Committee, which will develop multi-year project plan, to be implemented in Fall 2012. Projects will be designed to make effective use of limited resources, using pilot studies and sampling strategies to manage the large scale of studies required in L&S.

3. **Reporting.** The L&S Curriculum Committee could report results of assessment activities to the L&S Senate. That report could also be shared with the L&S Chairs and Directors, L&S Student Academic Affairs, and advisors in various units across the College. The Chair of the Curriculum Committee could share additional information with the L&S Academic Planning Council and others groups on an *ad hoc* basis. Recommendations arising from assessment results could be discussed by the L&S Curriculum Committee and presented to the bodies empowered to enact/approve the change (usually, the Dean, the L&S Senate, and/or the Academic Planning Council).

Unit-Level

Major-specific Learning Goals. As noted above, each department and program is responsible for assessing undergraduate and graduate education. Each is required to have a statement of educational objectives for each degree program it sponsors. Assessment plans are expected to include the following characteristics:

For undergraduate majors:

- Learning outcomes for the major, as they relate to the field as well and to the overall context of a liberal arts education.
- A plan whereby these outcomes are evaluated, using instruments appropriate to the stated objectives and departmental resources available.
- A process for reviewing results and recommending changes based on them, where appropriate.
- Periodic program reviews conducted by the College in which assessment results are used to examine and monitor program quality.

For graduate programs:

- Learning outcomes stated for the program, appropriate to graduate-level education.
- A plan for evaluating the extent to which these educational outcomes are achieved, often by leveraging the traditional mechanisms for evaluating graduate progress and mastery of the subject.
- Processes whereby department and program committees use these measures to monitor success and suggest changes in the graduate program.
- Periodic program reviews conducted by the College in collaboration with the Graduate school examine and monitor program quality.

Student Service and Academic Support Units. Assessment plans for these units should include the following characteristics:

- Defined, student-centered, outcomes for the program, as they relate to the impact the unit expects to have on student success.
- A plan whereby these outcomes are evaluated, using instruments appropriate to the stated objectives and resources available.
- A process for reviewing results and recommending changes based on them, where appropriate.
- Periodic reviews in which assessment results are used to examine and monitor program quality.

This document has been endorsed by the College of Letters and Science Curriculum Committee and the Letters and Science Academic Planning Council.

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