Chapter 3: Planning and Designing Assessment

This chapter supports academic departments in developing and refining program-level student learning outcomes and designing effective assessment strategies. It provides structured guidance and practical tools for planning outcomes, mapping curriculum, selecting appropriate methods, and using results to inform decisions and drive meaningful improvement. The resources in this chapter help ensure that assessment practices are intentional, measurable, and aligned with accreditation standards and institutional goals.

- Introduction to Program-Level Assessment
- Developing Learning Outcomes and Curriculum Maps
- Designing Assessment Methods
- Using Results for Improvement

Introduction to Program-Level Assessment

Program-level assessment is a structured process for evaluating how well students achieve the learning outcomes defined by their academic program. It plays a critical role in supporting continuous improvement and meeting accreditation standards by ensuring that programs are intentional, effective, and responsive to student needs.

At Arkansas State University, departments are expected to define clear, measurable learning outcomes for each academic program and to assess those outcomes regularly. This process helps faculty identify strengths and areas for improvement, align curriculum with desired competencies, and demonstrate accountability to stakeholders including students, accreditors, and the institution.

Why Program-Level Assessment Matters

- **Supports accreditation** by documenting student achievement and program effectiveness.
- **Improves curriculum** through evidence-based decisions.
- **Engages faculty** in meaningful reflection on teaching and learning.
- **Aligns with institutional goals** for student success and continuous improvement.

Assessment as a Cycle for Improvement

Assessment is most effective when it leads to **data-informed decisions**. Departments are encouraged to use results to plan **actions for continuous improvement**, documenting both short-term adjustments and long-term strategies. This cyclical process ensures that assessment is not just a reporting requirement, but a meaningful driver of change.

Glossary of Assessment Terms

Understanding key terminology is essential for effective communication and collaboration in assessment planning. The glossary below defines commonly used terms in program-level assessment at A-State.

▶ *See:* ***Glossary of Assessment Terms***

This resource includes definitions for:

- **Assessment**
- **Action Plan**
- **Closing the Loop**
- **Curriculum Map**
- **Direct Assessment**
- **Indirect Assessment**
- **And more**...

Departments are encouraged to refer to this glossary when developing outcomes, designing assessments, and preparing reports to ensure consistency and clarity across programs.

What This Chapter Covers

This chapter guides departments through the key steps of program-level assessment:

- Writing student learning outcomes
- Mapping outcomes to curriculum
- Designing assessment methods
- Using results to inform decisions
- Planning for short- and long-term improvement

Each section includes practical tools, templates, and examples to help departments build a sustainable and meaningful assessment process.

Developing Learning Outcomes and Curriculum Maps

Clear, measurable student learning outcomes are the foundation of effective program-level assessment. They define what students should know, be able to do, or value by the time they complete a program. Curriculum maps help departments align these outcomes with courses and learning experiences, ensuring that students have structured opportunities to achieve them.

Writing Student Learning Outcomes

Effective outcomes are:

- **Student-centered**: Focused on what students will achieve.
- **Measurable**: Use observable action verbs.
- **Aligned**: Reflect program goals and institutional priorities.

Tips for Writing Outcomes:

- Start with a verb from Bloom's Taxonomy (e.g., analyze, create, evaluate).
- Avoid vague terms like "understand" or "appreciate."
- Include context or conditions when appropriate.

*See: **Bloom's Taxonomy Action Verbs***

*See: **Revised Bloom's Taxonomy - All Domains***

Student Learning Outcomes Session

This session walks through the process of identifying and aligning program learning outcomes (PLOs), administrative outcomes, and course learning outcomes (CLOs). It also covers how to include outcomes on syllabi.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/mtiGeY10PXE?si=rEIsQGlDPCQAYqMp

*Download Slides: **Student Learning Outcomes Session (PowerPoint)***

Topics Covered:

- Identify Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs)
  - Writing your own vs. using prescribed standards
  - Aligning PLOs to University Learning Outcomes (ULOs)
- Identify Administrative Outcomes (e.g., retention, graduation)
- Understand how Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) fit with PLOs
  - Using PLOs as CLOs in capstone or culminating courses
  - Aligning CLOs to PLOs
- Include learning outcomes on syllabi

Curriculum Mapping

A curriculum map visually connects learning outcomes to the courses and experiences where they are taught and assessed. It helps departments:

- Identify gaps or redundancies in instruction.
- Ensure that each outcome is introduced, reinforced, and mastered.
- Clarify how assessment data will be collected.

Typical Curriculum Map Structure:

Outcome	Course A	Course B	Course C
Outcome 1	I (Introduce)	R (Reinforce)	M (Master)
Outcome 2	R	M	—

*See: **Curriculum Mapping Template***

*See: **Curriculum Audit Worksheet***

Curriculum Mapping Session

This session provides practical strategies for aligning required and elective courses to PLOs and documenting those connections in syllabi and appendices.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/gUynCgR3JBg?si=I1ZkIp_hON8Wfukt

*Download Slides: **Curriculum Mapping Session (PowerPoint)***

Topics Covered:

- Align required and elective courses to applicable PLOs
  - Excel worksheet for mapping
  - Choose a mapping scheme that fits your program:
    - “Touches” vs. Assessed
    - Contributes / Introduce–Reinforce–Master
- Include mapping in syllabi
- Create PDFs for syllabi appendices

Aligning Syllabi with Curriculum Maps

Syllabi serve as a key communication tool between faculty and students—and a critical point of alignment between course-level instruction and program-level assessment. Ensuring that syllabi reflect accurate learning outcomes and curriculum map connections strengthens both transparency and accreditation readiness.

Syllabi Creation Session

This session provides guidance on creating Syllabi with all applicable University, Program and Course information present.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/5GBr-eyz_Es?si=5OVIpWuU56EoLEC9

Download Slides: ***Syllabi Creation Presentation (PDF)***

Topics Covered:

- Create Syllabi with all applicable University, Program and Course information present, including answering the following questions:
  - Does the course description on the syllabus match the course description in the current bulletin?
  - Are there Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) listed on the syllabus?
  - Is this course a part of an academic program and if so, does the course appear on the program’s curriculum map in Taskstream?
  - Do the PLOs listed on the syllabus match the markings on the map in Taskstream?

See**: **Simple Syllabus

See: Nuventive

Syllabi Models

These examples show how to align syllabi with curriculum maps across different course types:

- **General Education Course Model**
- **Undergraduate Course Model**
- **Graduate Course Model**

Curriculum Map Alignment Examples

These examples show how to align syllabi with curriculum maps across different course types and programs:

- **Syllabus Aligned With Curriculum Map – General Education**
- **Syllabus Aligned With Curriculum Map – BS Program**
- **Syllabus Aligned With Curriculum Map – BA Program**

Designing Assessment Methods

Once learning outcomes are defined and mapped to the curriculum, the next step is to determine how those outcomes will be assessed. Effective assessment methods provide meaningful evidence of student learning and support continuous improvement. This page outlines strategies for selecting and designing assessment tools that align with program-level outcomes and accreditation expectations.

What Makes an Assessment Method Effective?

An effective assessment method is:

- **Aligned** with the learning outcome it measures
- **Appropriate** for the level and type of learning (e.g., knowledge, skills, attitudes)
- **Reliable and valid** across student populations
- **Actionable**—results can inform decisions and improvements

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Types of Assessment Methods

Direct Assessment

Measures actual student performance or work products that demonstrate learning.

Examples:

- Exams and quizzes
- Portfolios
- Capstone projects
- Presentations
- Performances
- Embedded assignments

Indirect Assessment

Gathers perceptions or reflections about learning rather than direct evidence.

Examples:

- Surveys and questionnaires
- Focus groups
- Exit interviews

- Reflective essays

Direct and Indirect Measures Session

To learn to identify properties of direct and indirect measures that are most valid and reliable for a course, program or administration outcome.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/o401OQ9Ndno?si=apBlXZDv6yH_8122

Download Slides: ***Direct and Indirect Measures Session (PowerPoint)***

Topics Covered:

- Align Required and Elective Courses to applicable PLOs
- Create SLOs that speak to PLOs where assignments/activities are measurable, valid and reliable.
  - Identify the properties of Direct and Indirect Measures
    - Direct Measures include exams, rubrics for written (including discussion boards, reflections, etc.) and oral communication (including speeches, 2nd language communication, evaluation forms for clinical or artistic measures, etc.
    - Indirect Measures include survey tools, advisory/focus groups, exit interviews, etc.
    - Other types of measures include Post Graduation Success, Conference Presentations, Certification Exam Pass Rates, Graduation/Retention Rates, etc.
  - Identify best practices regarding employing both Direct and Indirect Measures
- Identify the pros and cons of why to employ what type of measurement tool for an outcome

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Choosing the Right Tool

When selecting an assessment method:

- Match the tool to the **type of outcome** (e.g., cognitive, behavioral, affective)
- Consider whether the method is **formative** (ongoing) or **summative** (end-of-program)
- Use **rubrics** to ensure consistency and clarity in evaluation

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Embedded and Performance-Based Assessment

Embedded assessment uses assignments already part of a course to measure outcomes. **Performance-based assessment** requires students to demonstrate skills or competencies through tasks.

These methods are especially useful for capstone courses, clinical experiences, and project-based learning.

General Education Assessment Planning

Departments offering General Education (GE) courses participate in a quadrennial review (QR) process coordinated by the General Education Committee (GEC). This process requires departments to design and justify assessment instruments that align tightly with designated GE outcomes.

Download: ***Tips for General Education Quadrennial Review Reports (PDF)***

Key Planning Elements:

- Identify the GE outcome to be assessed
- Design an instrument that directly measures that outcome
- Justify the validity of the instrument
- Establish a benchmark for expected performance
- Outline a data collection procedure that ensures representative sampling
- Estimate the number of observations expected

Departments are encouraged to consult with the Office of Assessment for support in instrument design, data analysis, and using results to improve teaching and learning.

Documenting and Reporting Assessment Results

Assessment results should be:

- **Summarized** using descriptive statistics or qualitative analysis
- **Interpreted** in relation to expected performance levels
- **Used** to inform action plans and continuous improvement

Using Results for Improvement

Assessment is most valuable when it leads to action. Once data has been collected and analyzed, departments should use the results to inform decisions, plan improvements, and document changes. This page outlines how to interpret assessment findings, develop action plans, and close the loop in a way that supports continuous improvement and accreditation standards.

Data-Informed Decisions

Assessment findings—whether quantitative or qualitative—should guide meaningful decisions about curriculum, instruction, and program design. This session explores how to interpret results and use them to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for improvement.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/T8dcTU8w0AU?si=kEtdMECLsZoHlx0M

Download Slides: ***Data-Informed Decisions (PDF)***

Topics Covered:

- Reviewing direct and indirect assessment results
- Comparing performance to benchmarks
- Identifying trends across courses or cohorts
- Using data to support curricular changes

Planning Actions for Continuous Improvement

This session focuses on translating assessment findings into actionable steps. Departments are encouraged to develop targeted plans that address identified needs and support long-term program development.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/DgKSiQuN7qA?si=bWL9sS7_sPLH94g5

Download Slides: ***Planning Actions for Continuous Improvement (PDF)***

Topics Covered:

- Writing effective action plans
- Linking actions to specific outcomes and findings
- Setting measurable goals and timelines
- Assigning responsibility and tracking progress

*See: **Weigh the Pig, Feed the Pig Article***

> ? *Download: **Annual Status Report Template for Specially Accredited Programs (DOCX)***
> *Use this template to document assessment activities and outcomes for programs with specialized accreditation, including standards, measures, findings, and action plans.*

Short- and Long-Term Assessment Planning

Assessment should be integrated into both annual reporting and strategic planning. This session helps departments balance immediate improvements with long-term goals, ensuring that assessment remains sustainable and meaningful.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/zEXCvnCmLWA?si=7L7cx4-FYY62SxcL

*Download Slides: **Short- and Long-Term Planning (PowerPoint)***

Topics Covered:

- Setting priorities for short-term changes
- Aligning assessment with multi-year program goals
- Documenting progress across cycles
- Preparing for accreditation reviews

*See: **Example One Year Assessment Plan***

*See: **Blank One Year Assessment Plan***