University of Maryland
Best Practices for Successful Assessments

Learning Outcomes are clearly stated, student-focused, meaningful to the faculty and students in the program, and measurable.

**Exemplary** Example: At the completion of this program students will demonstrate the ability to use appropriate disciplinary methodology to analyze and interpret primary sources.

**Unsatisfactory** Example: At the completion of this program students will understand the research process. (This outcome is too general, and “understanding” is difficult to measure.)

Assessment is connected to learning outcomes
Assessment activities are clearly and directly aligned with specific learning outcomes.

**Exemplary** Example: Assessing student use of primary sources in a capstone thesis project. Several professors review student work looking for specific evidence of appropriate use of sources.

**Acceptable** Example: A committee analyzes teacher comments on completed papers or presentations. (This gives some insight into student learning, but without direct analysis of student use of sources, conclusions about learning would be limited.)

**Unsatisfactory** Example: Student attendance at a research conference. (Attendance at a research conference has no direct relationship to student use of sources; therefore no conclusions about learning could be made.)

Appropriate measures are used to collect evidence of student learning
Assessment measure (the tool used for analysis of student work) will reveal evidence of learning described in the outcome. Assessment measure is specifically aligned to a particular learning outcome being assessed. Rubrics are useful tools in that they serve as a way of communicating expectations to students as well as a way to evaluate strengths and weaknesses in routine assignments.

**Direct evidence** provides explicit, clear and convincing support of student learning. Examples of direct evidence of what students have learned or are able to do include:

- Student performance on a specific test question that is aligned with a learning outcome;
- Student performance on a pre-test as compared to student performance on a post-test.
- Student performance on a course project, paper, report, work of art, etc., is assessed according to specific criteria (for example as outlined in a rubric);
- Portfolios of student work assessed according to specific criteria (rubric);
- Student performance on identified portions of certification or licensure exams that are aligned with a particular learning outcome; and,
- Student performance on a particular task (for example within a field experience context) assessed according to specific criteria (for example as outlined in a rubric).

See “Materials for UMD Undergraduate Programs” at www.umd.edu/LearningOutcomes
Indirect evidence is often useful in interpreting findings of direct assessments, but is insufficient by itself as substantiation for student learning. Indirect evidence includes:

- Job placement rates & salaries;
- Retention & graduation rates;
- Course grades & pass rates;
- Transfer rates;
- Surveys of students & alumni; and,
- Documentation that content was covered in a course or a curriculum.

Exemplary Example: Review of capstone thesis against several criteria within a rubric that describes levels of success in the analysis of primary sources.

Acceptable Example: Review of capstone thesis against several criteria using a three point scale: Exemplary, acceptable, unacceptable. (Such an analysis begins to reveal characteristics of student learning but does not provide detail for targeted discussion.)

Unsatisfactory Example: Analysis of final grades in a capstone course. (Grades do not provide opportunities to discern students’ ability to analyze primary sources.)

Results are discussed and used to improve programs

Presentation of results provides clarity and detail to allow targeted analysis of student learning and factors that may impact learning.

Faculty review results in context of learning outcomes. Analysis of results occurs with appropriate rigor and with input from relevant faculty to move the program forward, reveal areas for improvement and opportunities for development. Evidence and insights from analysis of results are used to implement specific changes in a program or curriculum.

Questions guide discussion of results. Examples of questions for guiding discussions:

- Are you satisfied with the assessment approach? Did the approach provide useful data for analysis of learning outcomes? Does the assessment provide information related to program goals?
- Are you satisfied with the student learning achieved? Why or why not?
  Do your results suggest areas of student weakness that could be improved?
  Do your results indicate opportunities for program or course development?
- What are your standards for success? Are the standards appropriately rigorous?
  Are your results of sufficient quality that you can answer this?
  Is your analysis systematic?
- How will you revise the program, course, curriculum to address specific findings?
- If the current program reveals that all standards are being met, how will you revise standards to promote program development and improve student learning?