

FACILITATING ASSESSMENT

Assessment is a reality of institutional life that can get overly complicated, confused, and counterproductive when it is not clearly defined or effectively carried out.

This document provides points of clarification and strategies for “continuous improvement” that can aid our ongoing assessment efforts.

Assessment directives need to be clearly articulated in terms of intended audience and function.

Assessment can be driven by external mandates ([SACSCOC accreditation standards](#), rules or guidelines set by the CPE, etc.), internal regulations (PACs, UARs, FEPs, etc.), or institutional goals (such as those outlined in our strategic plan, [SOAR](#)).

Because different drivers set their own parameters for evidence, potential methods of measurement, and documentation in general (including format requirements), assessment efforts need to be properly categorized before they are initiated to ensure a productive result (i.e., a final product that offers precisely what the initial driver requests, without unnecessary duplication or added work).

Directives or efforts that overlap can and should be done in tandem, with the directive or effort with the most constraints, rules, or regulations (or the highest institutional priority) taking precedence.

Example: SACSCOC standard 8.2.a (“The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results for student learning outcomes for each of its educational programs”), our internal regulations regarding WEAVE, and our strategic plan (SOAR—Academic Excellence, goal 2, strategy 4) all require the evaluation of academic programs in what is commonly known as a “continuous cycle of improvement.” SACSCOC assumes such evaluation can and will occur, and grants institutions latitude in the demonstration of this assumed occurrence. Our SOAR document merely lists on-going program evaluation as part of a strategy that will aid academic excellence overall. WEAVE, the internal mechanism MSU has chosen to use as for the evaluation of academic programs, imposes the most particulars, guidelines, and requirements. This internal regulation necessarily takes precedence in the evaluation of academic programs, as it is (a) what generates a good deal of the evidence and documentation that will be supplied to SACSCOC to demonstrate our compliance with standard 8.2.a and (b) proves that what is outlined in strategy 4 of goal 2 in the Academic Excellence portion of the strategic plan is occurring (evaluation).

Any discussion of the institutional assessment of academic programs will necessarily begin with WEAVE because WEAVE is at the core of what we do.

Because WEAVE is an internal regulation, not an external mandate, we can make changes to it as we see fit, up to and including adopting another mechanism for evaluation that would allow us to meet SACSCOC's broad guidelines.

One institutional goal should be the reduction of assessment burdens.

Assessment in higher education is not fixed, and there is every indication that institutions like Morehead will be subject to increasing *and evolving* assessment burdens as legislators and various academic and educational governing bodies embrace a culture of "accountability."

Given this, the institution should monitor external assessment demands, make a habit of widely circulating information from bodies (such as SACSCOC and CPE) in a position to shift or augment assessment requirements, and prioritize the reduction of assessment burdens.

There are a number of people on campus whose experience, training, disciplinary expertise, or research interest renders them capable of providing guidance in streamlining and reducing assessment burdens while still ensuring full compliance. Assessment processes should be "open," with multidirectional paths for information sharing and decision-making. Substantive work to tackle the "problem" of assessment should be incentivized and rewarded in annual reviews.

Grading should always be carefully differentiated from assessment.

Grades are an individual instructor's evaluation of an individual student's performance in a given course. Assessment is the evaluation of performance outside of the confines of a particular class. Individual assignments completed in specific classes can be used for assessment purposes, but assessment necessarily extracts the work from the immediate context of the specific course and reviews it in light of other contexts and data points. (Example: the common final in ENG 100 is graded in every course then "scored" later for General Education assessment purposes.)

This important distinction is often reflected in the wording of outcomes. Both courses and programs have student learning outcomes (SLOs), but these outcomes do not have to be articulated in the same way because the final "measure" of any course-level SLOs is necessarily a grade.

Assessment driven by accreditation does not involve course-level evaluation.

One of the many resources [The Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#) makes available on its website is the presentation: “Accreditation and Recognition in the United States.” The answer to the common question, “What is accredited?” is “Institutions and Programs. Not courses or individuals” (slide 13).

SACSCOC is interested in the assessment of the expected outcomes of *programs* (see standards 8.2.a and 8.2.b), not *courses*. SACSCOC only expects course-level SLOs to be *documented*. Standard 6.2.a, a standard relating to the qualifications of faculty members, assumes that qualified faculty will include SLOs in their syllabi: “An institution is responsible for identifying the instructor of record; that is, the person qualified to teach the course and who has overall responsibility for the development/ implementation of the syllabus, the *achievement of student learning outcomes included as part of the syllabus*, and for issuing grades” (emphasis added). Standard 10.8, about the awarding of credit, assumes that institutions will ensure that transfer courses have analogous outcomes to the institutional coursework for which they will receive credit.

Internally generated assessment information needs to be centrally stored and properly maintained.

Any assessment information required for initiatives beyond program-level review initiated by faculty for their own purposes must be centrally stored and properly updated and maintained.

The units/offices wherein this information will be centrally located may retain paper copies of files, but all information should be electronically filed and stored, ideally in more than one location. Obvious loci for storage of academic assessment files are the offices of the Associate Provost, the Provost, and Institutional Research.

As institutional assessment, by its very nature, occurs in clearly documented cycles, and most, if not all, external assessment drivers are on set schedules, persons in these offices should be tasked with soliciting and compiling the most recent data required in a timely fashion. This central filing approach could itself be cited as evidence of a “continuous cycle of improvement” in our SACSCOC bids for reaccreditation.

Every effort should be made to make this institutional information widely available and easily searchable. One of the ways the institution can reduce assessment burdens is to determine how work already submitted or compiled can be used to address new or upcoming assessment needs.

Both internal and external assessment guidelines should be posted in a central location on the MSU website that is available to all faculty and academic administrators.

Assessment parameters, guidelines, and regulations should be available for all to review so that every member of the campus community can confidently and knowledgeably aid compliance efforts.

CODA:

Academic freedom and assessment can and should comfortably coexist.

Regional accrediting bodies affirm academic freedom. Our own accrediting body, SACSCOC, enshrines the importance of academic freedom in standard 6.4 (“The institution publishes and implements appropriate policies and procedures for preserving and protecting academic freedom”). The explanatory information under the standard outlines the importance of this foundational right:

The essential role of institutions of higher education is the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge. Academic freedom respects the dignity and rights of others while fostering intellectual freedom of faculty to teach, research, and publish. Responsible academic freedom enriches the contributions of higher education to society.

The individual freedom afforded faculty, as the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) affirms, is a freedom born of faculty members’ disciplinary expertise and knowledge. This freedom is necessarily more limited in the classroom than it is in the area of research.

In [“The 1940 Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure”](#) (the core statement co-drafted by the AAUP and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, printed with interpretive comments adopted by the Council of the American Association of University Professors in April 1970, in the AAUP Red Book) asserts that faculty members are free to research and publish what they see fit (no limitations) and to have “freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject.” This classroom freedom, though, does not extend to the introduction of “matter which has no relation to their [academic] subject,” and it may be limited due to “religion or other aims of the institution” if such limitations are “clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment.”

Both SACSCOC standards and the AAUP’s statement on academic freedom affirm that faculty have the right to teach what and how they see fit as long as that teaching meets disciplinary (or subject matter level) standards.