OUTCOMES-BASED ASSESSMENT
An Introduction and Guide

Assessment is a process that asks and answers important questions: To what degree are students learning? Are courses effective? Do programs fulfill their missions? Is the university in accord with objectives set by its accrediting body?

While many of us have long asked these questions about our teaching, the goal of "outcomes-based assessment" is to formalize the ways we answer them, in harmony with each program's goals.

The first step is for the faculty in a given department or other program to formulate the criteria by which they intend to consider student outcomes. They should then decide what variety of quantitative and qualitative information they will use to determine the extent to which these criteria are being met, carefully gauged to the needs and goals of their program.

The department or program not only gathers its own varieties of information, but it also presents these in a form – the matrix being a common one – so that relevant faculty may analyze and draw conclusions about opportunities for improvement.

The goal of formalizing this feedback loop, over time, is to enhance quality at all levels. As the cycle is repeated, outcomes-based assessment assists faculty, administration, and staff in making informed decisions about their respective areas.

Assessment is not the same as evaluation. Assessment seeks to improve the quality of performance regardless of its current level, whereas evaluation measures performance by judging quality against a standard.

Stony Brook University expects that outcomes-based assessment routinely will take place in every program and course. The university is committed to helping faculty reach that goal.

Assessment is not necessarily simple or intuitive. It is complicated by a dense thicket of literature that attempts to describe goals and process. And it depends in large part on mutual understanding and the desire on the part of the faculty, departments, programs, and the university to make each piece happen.

To be successful, we must acknowledge what we do well and agree that the university community can approach assessment in diverse ways and with different measures and identify achievable goals that improve student learning.

***

The three most relevant questions in creating an assessment plan are *what*, *who*, and *when*.
What is to be assessed?

Undergraduate majors, minors, graduate degree programs, and certificates all need to develop outcomes-based assessment plans. These should answer the following basic questions: (1) What knowledge or skills should students who complete this program have? (2) How can we know whether students have the expected knowledge or skills? (3) How can we improve programs to bring students closer to expectations?
Who will do the assessing?

The faculty in each academic program will develop a plan to assess their program. An assessment coordinator will be identified to lead this process. Help and support will be provided through peer groups, workshops, web materials, and a central assessment office. But faculty within academic programs will be in control of the assessment of their own programs
When will this happen?

The development of assessment plans must start now and make real progress through the fall 2013 semester. Learning outcomes for each program – the knowledge and/or skills students should gain – are to

be submitted by October 15, 2013. Programs should identify evidence they will use to assess these learning outcomes by January 15, 2014. By spring 2014, programs will submit a plan to use this evidence for program improvement, where needed.

***

Once you know where you are headed, it is a lot easier to get there. Examples may be more useful than description. We will provide two examples of program assessment plans, chosen to demonstrate the diversity and flexibility of approaches to assessment in areas that do not normally have accreditation-driven assessment plans. Other examples are available on the Faculty Center website at http://facultycenter.stonybrook.edu/assessment.

Example 1
The first example comes from the Sociology Department at Boise State University (http://academics.boisestate.edu/provost/files/2009/01/ba-social-science.pdf).

Sample Program Assessment Plan

Department Name: __Sociology_____

Degree Program or Major: ___BA Social Science_____

Program Educational Objectives (or Student Learning Outcomes):

1.	Critical thinking/problem solving skills – learning to exercise a social scientific perspective.
2.	Mastery of key social scientific concepts: culture, social structure, inequality, diversity.
3.	Ability to describe and value diversity in a variety of contexts.
4.	Ability to describe and explain continuing sources of inequality nationally and internationally.
5.	Mastery of the central theories in at least two of the social sciences.
6.	Mastery of the methodological and statistical techniques employed in the social sciences.
7.	Ability to communicate effectively in written and oral form.
8.	Applying social science to the analysis and evaluation of public affairs.
9.	Public social science– the ability to apply the discipline to the betterment of communities both globally and locally.
10.	Basic communication skills in a foreign language.

Assessment Plan:

Assessment Method	Objectives/ Outcomes Addressed	How will this information be used?
Sociology Capstone Course Project	2, 3, 4, 5, 6	Senior projects will be reviewed by Departmental subcommittee. Subcommittee will report findings to Department as a whole annually. Findings will be discussed in a departmental meeting devoted to assessment outcomes, and used to determine any needed revision in major curriculum.
ETS Major Field Test in Sociology	2, 3, 4, 5, 6	The results are shared in the department and discussed in department meeting. Changes in curriculum and specializations of new faculty hires

		have been influenced by this data. Results will be maintained by the department and charted over time.
Annual Data Collection: Number of Student Awards, community service projects, Service Learning participation, Internships, Paper presentations, student organizational involvement, and community volunteerism	8, 9	Data can be used to evaluate Department's ability to open community involvement opportunities for students. Results will be maintained by the department and charted over time.
Senior Outcomes Assessment Survey	1, 7, 8, 9	First assessment survey will provide benchmark for how well the department is meeting goals for the major. After this, department will annually compare results to the benchmark to assess progress. Results will be maintained by the department and charted over time.
Student Focus Groups (conducted every 2 years)	1, 7, 8, 9	First focus group will provide benchmark for how well the department is meeting goals and needs for the major. After this, department will compare results to the benchmark to assess progress.
Alumni Survey (conducted every 3 years)	1, 7, 8, 9	First alumni survey will provide benchmark for how well the department is meeting goals for the major, and preparing students for post-college success. After this, department will compare results to the benchmark to assess progress. Results will be maintained by the department and charted over time.
Senior Essay Competition	1, 6	Departmental subcommittee will evaluate essays annually. Aggregate strengths and weaknesses will be identified, and sample essays (exemplary, average weak) will be saved. Every three years this information will be compared and discussed through department meeting, to identify patterns. Changes in curriculum or instruction may be indicated.

Example 2

Next, we have an in-progress example from the undergraduate program in History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (http://cte.illinois.edu/outcomes/unit_assess.html).

History Undergraduate Assessment Plan

A. PROCESS: Brief description of the process followed to develop or revise this assessment plan
The process of developing this assessment plan found its source in the department-wide discussions that surrounded the year-long process of Self Study (2005-2006) and the preparations for and discussions of the External Review (fall 2006). The specifics of this plan are the product of meetings by the department's Undergraduate Studies Committee which includes the DUS, faculty members, and the academic advisor along with undergraduate and graduate student representation. This report was presented to faculty for consultation on May 8, 2008. A wider discussion will follow in fall of 2008. Meetings will also be held with Phi Alpha Theta, the history honors society in order to get undergraduate perspectives, input, and suggestions. The discussion of the department's goals will culminate in a faculty retreat planned for fall 2009.

B. STUDENT OUTCOMES: List Unit's student learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, and attitudes)
Outcome 1: Acquiring historical knowledge; replacing students' misunderstanding of history as a discipline in which experts assemble uncontested facts into an objective story. Suggesting instead the diverse methods of research and means of interpretation that historians invoke.
Outcome 2: Improving students' ability to write and speak clearly and effectively; empowering them to criticize, explore, and develop their own perspectives and interpretations, and to research and support their own logical arguments.
Outcome 3: Discriminating between a primary and a secondary source and their uses in research.
Outcome 4: Obtaining tools to decode, contextualize, interrogate, and derive meaning from primary sources; recognize the variety of primary sources, and the importance of better drawing inferences by locating them in historical context (how, when, and for whom they were produced; human agency behind their production).
Outcome 5: Learning how to identify and assess central arguments, themes, perspectives, and theoretical frameworks of secondary sources.
Outcome 6: Appreciating the complexity of historical causation.
Outcome 7: Learning to think historically and to carry out historical research: planning and carrying out a historical research project; formulating historical questions and arguments, while locating and deploying historical data to answer or support them; comparing, contrasting, and exploring relationships among multiple primary and secondary sources; improving ability to comprehend historical narratives; improving ability to think analytically and logically while applying historical perspectives.
Outcome 8: Grasping both the foreignness of the past and the ways that the past shapes and gives meaning to their own lives and to society at large.
Outcome 9: Broadening a capacity for empathy through an appreciation of shared humanity and the diversity of the human experience, as influenced by culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and class in a matrix of time and place.

C. MEASURES AND METHODS USED TO ASSESS OUTCOMES
100-level courses: comprehend/recognize: telling a primary from a secondary source; recognizing the variety of useful primary sources and learning how to analyze them; recreating a historical context and connecting it to a document; beginning to empathize with people from another place and time
200-level courses: interpret and apply. Many of the same skills are emphasized in the 200-level courses as in the 100-level, but in more depth. History 200, "Introduction to Historical Interpretation," which serves as the gateway to the major, introduces students to specific problems that allow them to isolate historical questions, identify methodological problems and evaluate primary sources against secondary accounts. This experience offers students a series of problems provoked by specific questions and provides students with hands-on experience with the analytical and argumentative practices of history.
300- and 400-level courses: explain and evaluate: dealing with ambiguity and contradiction in historical sources; comparing and contrasting diverse and potentially conflicting primary sources for a single historical problem; weighing trustworthiness and value of different sources; recognizing major arguments, themes, and theoretical frameworks in primary and secondary sources.
History 498, the "Research and Writing seminar," our capstone course: create: producing one's own historical work by connecting, building upon, evaluating, developing relationships among, and synthesizing multiple primary and secondary sources.

In order to assess the efficacy of our program we will take the following measures:
For Students:
1. To ensure that we are meeting outcomes 1-4, the Undergraduate Studies Committee will consider establishing a writing assessment for a sample of students in our 100- and 200-level courses. The assignment

will consist of the analysis of a primary source evaluated with a grading guide produced by the Undergraduate Studies Committee.

2. Survey majors about the gateway course (200) and the capstone (498). Questionnaire to address student satisfaction with academic requirements of program, especially outcomes 5-9.

3. Conduct focus groups among majors to discuss the effectiveness of the undergraduate history major. These would be held with selected groups of undergraduates once each year, probably early in the spring semester.

For Faculty:

1. Faculty self-assessment based on questionnaires produced by the Undergraduate and Graduate Studies committees.

2. Evaluation of syllabi and papers in 200 and 498.

3. Workshops for faculty to identify weaknesses and strengths in the curriculum.

Steps of Assessment

Step 1: **Identify Learning Outcomes**

These are the important knowledge, skills, modes of thinking, or values that you expect graduates of your program to possess. This process may entail a review of your program mission and goals, disciplinary norms, or employment criteria. In some cases, you may survey or consult students or graduates of your program. Some professional associations provide guidance on standard learning outcomes within a given discipline, but the most important source of learning outcomes must be the faculty within that program.

It will usually be useful to consider how these learning outcomes relate to the courses in your program, which is often done by creating a matrix listing learning outcomes in columns and courses in rows. The cells can contain information about how each course should relate to each learning outcome.

Step 2: **Identify Evidence**

What information can you gather to determine whether your students are learning what you want them to? There are many forms of evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, and approaches to evidence vary by discipline. The two examples of assessment plans above and many more linked from the Faculty Center website (http://web.virginia.edu/iaas/assess/resources/assessplans.shtm) provide guidance on metrics or other forms of information you may gather for different purposes.

This information may also be displayed for convenience and simplicity in a matrix form.

Step 3: **Assess the Evidence**

How well are your students mastering the important outcomes for your program? Once types of evidence are identified and collected for each learning outcome, you must be use this evidence to uncover strengths or weaknesses in your program.

Step 4: **Make Changes if Needed**

The whole point of this exercise is to improve, so we must learn from the evidence we gather and change our programs where necessary. Most program modifications will be curricular in nature, involving changes to the courses or structures of academic programs.