

Common Questions about the Academic Assessment at Ursinus

Core Assessment FAQs

Why are we assessing the core curriculum when we are implementing a new core?

Although we are doing good work to revise the core curriculum, we still need to know if our current students are achieving the learning goals of the current core. The current core is still in place until the revised core can be implemented. Ursinus has not assessed the current core curriculum in its entirety and is implementing a one-time all inclusive process to establish as baseline for moving forward.

What is the process?

This initiative to assess the learning goals of the current core curriculum asks for faculty to share student essay or paper assignments from course sections that are typically used by students to fulfill one or more core requirements. The student assignments will be reviewed by a group of faculty using a rubric created to assess the level of achievement of the core learning goal. The core curriculum goals listed underneath each core requirement on the Direct Assessment of the Core Curriculum checklist reflect the main concepts that would be explored in core courses based on previous language in the catalog. Note that these goals are not intended to account for everything that could be included in the course. Please see the instructions for more specific detail.

Should the papers that are turned in be marked or unmarked?

Unmarked papers are preferable, but either is acceptable. Faculty may submit papers as they are or anonymize them prior to submission. Either way, the committee will make them anonymous by removing student names, faculty names, and grades PRIOR to any assessment action.

What will happen with the information gathered from these documents?

For each learning goal, the results from the rubric assessments will be collected and aggregated into an overall summary. The summary results will be shared with faculty and the Core Curriculum Task Force and discussed in formal group settings and meetings. Discussions will focus around consideration of specific changes that could be made to the existing core as well as informing the formation of the new core.

Who will be reading the papers?

Student assignments will be read and assessed by volunteer faculty during ½ day sessions in the summer. These sessions will include calibration of the rubrics and assessment of the student assignments.

Assessment FAQs

What is Assessment?

Assessment is the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decision that affect student learning (Walvoord, 2010).

What do we gain by doing assessment?

Assessment leads to numerous benefits to improve, inform, and support the academic program at the college. Assessment can help review the effectiveness and alignment of curricula; improve program outcomes; inform planning and decision-making; understand impact of program changes; highlight program successes; provide evidence when requesting resources; inform students of the intended learning outcomes. The purpose of assessment is to inform institutional, curricular, and pedagogical changes across the college

Why do I have to do this?

Assessment of student learning is one of the best ways for colleges and/or academic departments to find out the current state of student learning. Assessment of student learning, both direct and indirect, has been a commonplace process at colleges and universities across the country. Direct assessment of student learning is an essential component of determining the impact of our core curriculum and program goals. Assessment is also fundamental to achieving the Strategic Plan goals and fulfilling the mission of the college. In addition, assessment plays an integral role in Middle States accreditation which is a prerequisite for access to federal or state funds for research, programs, and facilities, as well as government sources of financial support for students.

What is the difference between direct and indirect methods of assessment as evidence of student learning?

Direct methods of evaluating student learning demonstrate that actual learning has occurred relating to a specific content or skill. Direct evidence is clear, tangible evidence that students have or have not learned. Students can directly demonstrate their achievement in a variety of ways. Examples include: student writing samples/presentations scored by rubrics; embedded course assignments that can be assessed for achievement of both course and program goals; capstone experiences; senior theses; exhibits; and portfolios.

Indirect methods reveal characteristics associated with learning, but they only imply that learning has occurred. Indirect evidence provides signs that students are likely learning, but the proof that they are learning is not as clear or convincing. Indirect methods of assessment are techniques that ask students to reflect on what they have learned and experienced and provide proxy information about student learning. Some examples include: senior exit interviews; student engagement and satisfaction surveys; graduate school admission and employment rates; alumni outcomes surveys; and course evaluations.*

*Course evaluations can be useful for indirect assessment, provided they address learning outcomes.

Most course evaluations focus on instruction (course organization, content, instructor attributes, etc) and not on the specific learning goals.

What is the difference between Assessment and Grading?

The main difference is that grades focus on individual students, while assessment focuses on entire cohorts of students and how effectively everyone, not an individual faculty member, is helping them learn. While grades certainly are important, they are usually not sufficient for answering questions about whether specific learning goals have been achieved.

Some reasons that grades are not appropriate for overall assessment:

- Course grades reflect what students have achieved in a single course.
- Grades usually are a composite of a student's achievement of course outcomes and do not differentiate achievement by learning objective.
- Grades reflect the evaluation practices, policies, and criteria of individual instructors.
- Faculty teaching the same course may teach different material or emphasize different course objectives.

What is the difference between assessment and evaluation?

"Evaluation is the analysis and use of data by faculty to make judgments about student performance. Evaluation includes the determination of a grade or a decision regarding pass/fail for an individual assignment or a course. Assessment, on the other hand, is the analysis and use of data by students, faculty, and/or departments to make decisions about improvements in teaching and learning" (Goldman & Zakel, 2009). The main goal of assessment is to improve the collective student learning. Evaluation is using assessment information to reach this goal.

Will assessment results be used for individual faculty evaluation?

Assessment of student learning is not about the evaluation of a single student or faculty member. It is conducted in order to determine what faculty as a whole can do to improve learning of students. It should not and will not be used as an evaluation of an individual faculty member. It is completely untethered from decisions about promotion and tenure. The purpose is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the college as an aggregate, in order to inform institutional, curricular, and pedagogical changes. When there is evidence of inadequate student learning, faculty members and the department should collectively take appropriate action to address the issues and make improvement.

What if my students' work does not reach the expected standards?

All assessments show areas of strength and weakness within an aggregate group of student work. Knowing those strengths and weaknesses can help the college make decisions about resource allocation, curriculum, and budgeting, and it should inform our pedagogy as professors. Your students' work will not be tied to you as an instructor. For the core curriculum assessment all student work will be made anonymous prior to its being assessed.

What is Middle States? What is accreditation?

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) is a voluntary, non-governmental, membership association dedicated to quality assurance and improvement through accreditation via peer evaluation. Middle States examines each institution as a whole, rather than specific programs within institutions. The accreditation process is an opportunity to demonstrate an institution's accountability and improvement, both internally and externally.

What is Ursinus' accreditation status?

In November 2014, the Middle States Commission accepted our Periodic Review Report and our accreditation was reaffirmed. A monitoring report was requested "documenting the further implementation of an organized and sustained process for the assessment of institutional effectiveness and the achievement of institutional and program level student learning outcomes in all academic programs with evidence that assessment results are used to inform decision making and to improve teaching and learning (Standards 7 and 14)." An explanation of Standards 7 and 14 may be found at the link below:

http://www.msche.org/publications/Assessment_Expectations051222081842.pdf

Assessment References

Goldman, G. & Zakel, L. (2009) *Assessment Update*, May–June 2009, Volume 21, Number 3, San Francisco, CA: Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education. (2007). *Student Learning Assessment Options and Resources*. Philadelphia, PA: Middle States Commission on Higher Education. (2nd Edition)

Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company Inc. (2nd Edition)

Walvoord, B. E. (2010). *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass

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