

Graduate Program Assessments: A Guide for Deans, Graduate Coordinators and Department Heads

The primary goal of student learning assessments should be the continual improvement of existing programs in response to students' needs and achievements. The Graduate School is committed to assisting the units of the University in using the data obtained through student learning assessment to achieve this goal.

Context (why is graduate program assessment needed?)

SACS (the organization that accredits UGA, independent of entities that accredit specific academic fields) requires, among other actions, a formal process for assessing graduate student learning. In 1999, when it was determined that such a process was lacking at UGA, then-Dean of the Graduate School, Gordhan Patel, appointed a Graduate Education Assessment Committee to develop a policy on student learning outcomes. In addition to meeting SACS requirements, implementing student learning assessment plans is essential to ensure a quality education at UGA, provides a crucial element to program review, and is needed to address changes that improve instructional programs and learning outcomes for your students. Dr. Patel required all graduate programs to have an assessment plan submitted in 1999 (see Appendix A). Current reviews are simply an extension of those plans. In short, it is the responsibility of the Graduate School, and of each graduate program at the University, to develop and use graduate student learning assessment procedures that are consistent with the goals and requirements of both the Board of Regents and SACS.

Is the assessment the same as program review?

No. This is not a full program review. This assessment focuses strictly on learning outcomes. However, your assessment would likely be a component of your program review.

Content (what is graduate program assessment?)

Based on the BOR publication, *Good Practice Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes*, assessment is defined as “the degree to which expected results have been achieved, attained or manifested.” The typical sources of data utilized in assessment of student learning outcomes are threefold: students, employers, and alumni. There are, however, many variations and exceptions. At least one graduate program at UGA, for example, surveys the major professors of students who have gone on to doctoral programs after completion of a master's degree at UGA. Student data sources are often further subdivided into students who are exiting the program, surveyed or otherwise questioned at or near their graduation, and students at other (earlier) points in their graduate careers. In fact, the assessment process begins in some programs at the entry level, where students complete pretests, so that their knowledge as expressed in initial assessments can be compared to their knowledge as expressed in later assessments, in order to gauge the amount of learning that has taken place. Within the guideline that multiple data sources are required, all of these variations are appropriate and acceptable.

The number and the variety of data collection techniques utilized may be substantial and may include exit interviews, pencil and paper surveys, focus group discussions, telephone surveys,

observations of professional tasks or assignments, assessment of creative portfolios and collection of state or national licensure or certification examination results, among other methods. Data may be collected from entire populations (i.e., all graduating students, or all current graduate students, in a given department) or from sub-samples selected by random, stratified random (e.g., equal random sampling of females and males from among current students), or other sampling procedures (e.g., surveying employers every 3-5 years instead of every year). Some programs use formal instrumentation, with written surveys scanned for scoring and comparison with other graduate programs. Other programs use minimally structured interviews where only a few questions or probes are used to solicit narrative student feedback.

An aspect you should consider is professional development opportunities for your graduate students. Clearly, mastering one's academic discipline is the foundation of graduate education, but this often tends to be insufficient preparation for a successful career. Voices calling for greater career preparation - or professional development - of graduate students can be heard both inside and outside of the academy. These voices include academic researchers, faculty and staff in graduate education, as well as professional organizations such as the Council of Graduate Schools, the National Science Foundation, the American Mathematical Society, the Modern Language Association, and the Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy, to name just a few. There are a variety of benefits that emanate from professional development activities. Such benefits include positive impacts on retention, career preparation, and the quality of graduate education. Examples of professional development activities include, but are not limited to, workshops on developing vitas, preparing for conference presentations, process for submitting manuscripts for publication, etc.

Helpful Hint: Each department has previously developed student learning outcome procedures for their *undergraduate* programs. These learning assessment plans may be modified for assessing graduate student learning. For more information on assessment of undergraduate programs, please visit http://www.uga.edu/ovpi/program_review/assessment/index.htm

Guidelines (what should be included in our assessment?)

Your assessment plans should include three sections. Please note that these assessments need not be lengthy. Somewhere between three to five pages is typical.

1. Statement of student learning outcomes. You should already have this information when you responded to Dr. Patel's 1999 memo requiring graduate program assessments. **In short, it should include goals of graduate education in your program and list measurable objectives (including professional development activities). Traditionally, 3-10 objectives are appropriate.**
2. Learning assessment procedures. This should describe your methodology, sources of data, and findings.
3. Use of assessment results for improvement. Based on the data you may find areas in need of improvement. This section should describe your plans for responding to these needs.

Who reviews the graduate program assessments?

The Program Committee of the Graduate Council reviews graduate program assessments. The chair of the Program Committee of the Graduate Council initially reviews graduate program

assessments. The Chair of the Program Committee coordinates the actual review, and each assessment is reviewed by no fewer than two members of the Program Committee. If a member of the Program Committee has questions about your assessment, he/she may contact the department head or graduate coordinator directly. Upon completion of the review, the Chair of the Program Committee makes a report to the Dean of the Graduate School, who in turn submits confirmation of completion of the reviews to the Associate Provost for Institutional Effectiveness.

To whom should I submit the graduate program assessment?

Your assessment should be submitted to the Michael Pooock, Associate Dean of the Graduate School, who serves as ex-officio on the Program Committee. Please submit one paper copy and one email copy (libjohn@uga.edu).

Review cycle (how often do I need to submit our assessment?)

Graduate program reviews are currently conducted on a three-year cycle.

What should the academic unit do once the assessment is submitted and reviewed?

Assessments will be returned to departments upon completion of the review by the Program Committee. Because the primary goal of this assessment is the continual improvement of your program, it is recommended that you address the needs identified in your study for self-improvement regarding student learning outcomes. This assessment will also be an integral component of future program reviews for your academic unit.

It is expected that each unit will continue to evaluate graduate student learning outcomes on an ongoing basis.

Is there an example of an effective assessment that might be used as a model to follow?

Yes. The Program Committee of the Graduate Council has identified a model assessment and, with the permission of the academic unit, this is included in Appendix B.

Questions (whom should I contact with questions?)

The best person to contact with questions is the chair of the Program Committee of the Graduate Council. However, because the chair is a rotating position, you may also contact Michael Pooock, Associate Dean of the Graduate School.

Appendices

- A. Memo from Gordhan Patel (1999)
- B. Example Graduate Program Assessment (Ecology).

Michael Pooock
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