Purpose of this Handbook

Thank you for your interest in assessment and planning in the Division of Student Affairs at North Dakota State University. This handbook is not intended to be a comprehensive resource for assessment. Rather, its focus is on the critical information you need as an assessment coordinator or staff member otherwise involved in assessment to successfully engage in assessment, reporting, and planning. If you have questions that are not answered by this handbook, please do not hesitate to contact the director of Student Affairs Assessment at jeremy.penn@ndsu.edu.

Table of Contents

Why Do Assessment? NDSU’s Commitment to Actionable Assessment ................................................................. 2
   Figure 1. Assessment as a cycle of inquiry ........................................................................................................... 3
   Identifying Desired Outcomes and Asking a Question ......................................................................................... 3
   Gathering Evidence to Answer that Question ..................................................................................................... 4
   Reflecting on the Evidence and Drawing Conclusions ......................................................................................... 4
   Celebrating Successes and Using Results to Make Improvements ..................................................................... 4
   Reflecting on the Assessment Process and Identifying New Questions ............................................................. 5
Assessment Planning ................................................................................................................................................. 6
   Philosophy ............................................................................................................................................................ 6
   Short-term Planning ........................................................................................................................................ 6
   Long-term Planning ......................................................................................................................................... 6
   External Departmental Review ............................................................................................................................ 7
   Summary ............................................................................................................................................................. 7
Assessment Reporting ................................................................................................................................................ 8
   Timeline .............................................................................................................................................................. 8
   What to Report ............................................................................................................................................... 8
   Feedback on Assessment .................................................................................................................................... 8
Assessment Resources ............................................................................................................................................. 10
   Office of Student Affairs Assessment .................................................................................................................. 10
   Staff Development ........................................................................................................................................... 10
   On Campus ....................................................................................................................................................... 10
   Online .............................................................................................................................................................. 10
Glossary: Key Assessment Terms Defined ................................................................................................................ 11

---

1 Many excellent resources already exist, including numerous opportunities and resources on the NDSU Student Affairs Assessment website: www.ndsu.edu/vpsa/assessment.
Why Do Assessment? NDSU’s Commitment to Actionable Assessment

Many sources suggest early usages of the word “assess” focused on estimating the value of property for the purpose of taxing it. In the early 15th century, an “assesser” was the person who would “sit by” a judge and assist in determining the amount of a fine or a tax. Perhaps this explains why many people, even today, have a negative reaction when they hear the word “assessment!”

The word “assessment” is now used in a wide variety of ways and in many different contexts, even in higher education. For example, in the most familiar usage, an instructor in a classroom setting assesses the learning of his or her students to determine what the students know and are able to do. In other common usages, policymakers could be said to assess the performance of an institution, staff members might assess the effectiveness of a program or service, and a supervisor may assess the achievements of an employee over the past year. The widely varying usage of the word “assessment” may cause confusion and uncertainty when a Division of Student Affairs staff member is charged with doing assessment for his or her department. Hopefully the next few paragraphs and pages will make the task more clear and manageable.

In the Division of Student Affairs, we approach assessment as a cycle of inquiry with a focus on taking action. As shown in Figure 1, steps in assessment typically include:

- identifying desired outcomes and asking a question,
- gathering evidence to answer that question,
- reflecting on the evidence and drawing conclusions,
- celebrating successes and using results to make improvements, and
- reflecting on the process and identifying new questions.

Each of these steps is summarized in more detail below.

---

2 There’s also a long history of debate over whether or not assessment is “evaluation” and / or “research.” But I won’t get into that here.

3 Many people, when I tell them I am the Director of Assessment for the Division of Student Affairs, have no idea what that means until I clarify this role involves “surveys and stuff.”
Identifying Desired Outcomes and Asking a Question

Assessment begins by identifying desired learning and development and asking a question. For example, “Do students who become involved in roommate disputes learn healthy ways to resolve conflict through the conflict resolution process?” This question includes both a learning outcome (students learn to resolve conflict) and a question that can be answered by collecting assessment evidence.

In some instances assessment can begin with only a question. For example, “Why do we see a low retention rate for students from a particular group?” Assessment, as a cycle of inquiry, is still a good choice to use in these situations. However, without clearly identified learning outcomes the assessment process will be more open-ended and may include the use of qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and observations.

The Division of Student Affairs has developed a list of desired student learning outcomes and a list of desired service outcomes (what students know or are able to do after interacting with our services). The learning and service outcomes can be viewed on the Vice President for Student Affairs’ website at: [http://www.ndsu.edu/vpsa/about_student_affairs/learning_agenda/](http://www.ndsu.edu/vpsa/about_student_affairs/learning_agenda/). Individual departments may use these outcomes directly, may choose to adapt them to fit the department’s programs and services, or may show how they align with the department’s outcomes. In addition, some departments may have national outcomes or standards that they wish to use.
Gathering Evidence to Answer that Question
The next step is to gather assessment evidence to attempt to answer the question. There is no one best way to gather assessment evidence. Across the Division of Student Affairs many different methods are used, including direct assessment methods, such as rubrics and performance assessment, and indirect assessment methods such as surveys and focus groups. It is also common to see quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods assessment projects, utilizing a range of various methods to answer the assessment question. Many assessment projects, as recommended by the assessment literature, utilize multiple assessment methods to answer an assessment question.

When considering the level of rigor needed for an assessment method, it is important to consider the consequences resulting from the use of the assessment evidence. The higher the consequences for the use of the assessment evidence, the higher the need for exceedingly rigorous assessment methods containing multiple sources of evidence.

Reflecting on the Evidence and Drawing Conclusions
Once assessment evidence has been gathered, it is important to set aside time to analyze the data and reflect on how it answers the question. Analysis of results should proceed depending on the type of evidence gathered. Analysis of quantitative data usually involves use of a software program such as Excel or SPSS to perform statistical analyses. Analysis of qualitative data typically focuses on sifting through text to identify themes.

During the reflection process it is helpful to share results and initial findings with others to see if they interpret the results in the same way. Sharing results may be done through a traditional written report, informal email messages, or an oral presentation. It is important to engage key stakeholders at this stage as the assessment project shifts to focusing on using results to make improvements.

Celebrating Successes and Using Results to Make Improvements
Although the primary purpose of assessment is to improve our programs and services, it is also important to use assessment to identify and celebrate those things that are going well. We do many things very well in the Division and it is important to recognize them and congratulate staff members for those successes.

Some assessment leaders suggest using an equal amount of resources for collecting assessment evidence and for using assessment results. While the dollar figure itself is not important, such thinking highlights the importance of using assessment to make improvements and inform action. Too often assessment projects end at the writing of a report, but really that’s only half of the work!
There are many ways assessment results have been used in the Division. For example, a student employee training program was modified to better address needed knowledge and skills. Another department changed its website to help students more easily understand an important procedure. Another department developed a new program that encouraged participation from a group of students who participated in lower numbers in the previous year.

Reflecting on the Assessment Process and Identifying New Questions
A final and critical step is to reflect on the assessment process and identify new questions for the next assessment cycle. Often, assessment leaders discover the planned assessment project does not unfold the way it was planned or issues came up during the assessment process that led to less satisfactory results. But even if everything goes well, it is important to reflect on the assessment process itself and consider what went well and what could be improved if a similar approach is to be used in a future year.

Identification of new questions provides direction for the next year’s assessment cycle. While strategic planning will also inform decisions about what to assess in the next year, identifying areas of uncertainty or new questions that arise during assessment are helpful steps for continuing assessment year-to-year.

This cycle of inquiry, as described here, is very familiar. What makes assessment in the Division of Student Affairs important to us is the focus on using assessment to take action to be better for our students.
Assessment Planning

Philosophy
Assessment has the most value for departments and programs when it is directly linked to planning and setting strategic priorities. Many accreditors, including NDSU’s regional accreditor, expect assessment to be integrated with planning and budgeting processes and look for assessment to inform decision-making.

Beginning in 2015-2016, assessment will be a central element of the Division’s strategic planning and, as a result, should be a central element of departments’ strategic plans. Assessment serves strategic planning by identifying issues and clarifying goals, and by showing progress toward the achievement of those goals. Assessment can also be a strategy by which goals are pursued if it is used to inform ongoing improvement to existing programs and services.

Assessment planning therefore requires strong understanding of the department’s strategic plans as well as the ability to identify questions or issues that can best inform the department’s work. Assessment planning should not be done in isolation, rather it should be connected to strategic plans in the department and to those who are involved in planning.

Assessment planning should include short-term flexibility to address strategic plans and emergent issues and questions, and long-term structure to ensure all relevant goals are captured in the long-term and to reflect the long-term mission of the department.

Short-term Planning
Beginning in 2015-2016 strategic planning will operate on an annual cycle. Division goals will be identified or updated in early summer, then in mid- to late-summer departments will be asked to identify strategic goals for the coming year and to plan how progress toward achieving those goals will be assessed. Assessment planning in the short-term therefore involves identifying assessment methods to address the department’s annual strategic plan. Not all strategic plans and not all assessment methods need to change every year. However, the benefit of short-term planning is its ability to quickly respond as needed.

Long-term Planning
Long-term planning provides an opportunity to see assessment from a broad perspective and is particularly useful when working with national surveys or collaborations that may require a substantial investment of time or money. Many departments will, for example, plan a 3-year cycle for participation in a national survey or will rotate between two different survey benchmarks.
Having a long-term plan of this sort provides some structure for assessment over the long-term and ensures all important learning outcomes are assessed regularly but still allows for the year-to-year flexibility required for strategic planning.

Long-term thinking is also important when considering the Division’s new department review cycle. Approximately every six years departments will participate in an external department review process.

**External Departmental Review**
External departmental review will take place approximately every six years on a rotating schedule with one or two departments being reviewed each semester. External departmental reviews include the following key elements:

- Development of a comprehensive self-study document that describes strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for the department.
- Review by a review committee including local stakeholders and two external experts.
- Interaction between the review committee and key stakeholders.
- Use of findings to inform action planning.

**Summary**
Assessment planning should be directly linked to planning and setting strategic priorities. Assessment plans should incorporate achievement of short-term goals as well as a long-term perspective for major assessment projects. Long-term, assessment will serve as an important element of external departmental reviews and is an important tool in the work of departments to improve over time.
Assessment Reporting

Timeline
Beginning in 2015-2016, assessment reports will be due at the same time strategic plan reports are due, which right now is planned for mid- to late-May.

Of course, assessment results may be released and publicized at any time. Please contact the Office of Student Affairs Assessment so we can assist your efforts to publicize your results.

What to Report
In his 2007 article, *Counting and Recounting: Assessment and the Question for Accountability*, Lee Shulman talks about assessment as storytelling. He describes one of his daughter’s instructors as telling her, in an accounting class, how accounting is a form of storytelling. “Your task” the instructor says, “is to render an account: to tell the facts of the case, the story of the condition of the company in an accurate and yet ultimately persuasive way.” According to this accounting instructor, accounting is not about presenting reams of data and piles of reports. Rather, it is about making a case, drawing conclusions, and bringing the reader along for the ride.

In the same way, given the large amount of data that are collected for assessment projects, it would be easy to overwhelm readers with tables, charts, graphs, and text, but to ultimately end up with nothing to show for it. Instead, assessment reports should focus on results that are relevant to the department, program, or question and hand, seeking to highlight successes and identifying opportunities for improvement – telling the story, if you will, of the program being assessed.

Each year, as part of the strategic planning process, a reporting template will be developed based on the Division’s strategic plan and will be made available to departments. Reports using the template will have page limits and should focus on supporting the strategic goals. Portions of these reports will be shared publicly to show the Division’s commitment to improvement and its contributions to the University’s strategic plan.

Departments may also wish to share assessment reports for initiatives that were not based on the strategic plan. These reports can be of any length and may use any format, although, in general longer reports are less likely to be read. If you have an assessment report you would like
Feedback on Assessment
The Office of Student Affairs Assessment is happy to provide feedback on your assessment project at any stage of development – from identifying assessment questions, to analyzing data, to sharing and using results. The Office of Student Affairs Assessment also supports proposals to one or two conferences each year and may, depending on availability, be able to collaborate with you to submit your project to a conference.

The Student Affairs Assessment Committee will provide feedback on annual strategic plan reports. While the final details of the feedback process are yet to be finalized, it likely will involve reading by a member of the committee and the Director who will then jointly prepare feedback to the department. The goal of this feedback is to improve the practice of assessment in the coming year by providing suggestions and ideas for improving assessment in the department.
Assessment Resources

Office of Student Affairs Assessment

The Office of Student Affairs Assessment:

- promotes student learning and development through a systematic process of gathering and using assessment evidence to improve programs and services, and
- communicates evidence of student learning and development to a variety of stakeholders, building recognition for the work of the Division and supporting accountability and accreditation.

Services available through the Office of Assessment include one-on-one consulting from beginning to end for assessment projects, division-wide projects such as the Bison Voice Mattering Scale, and support for assessment tools such as Campus Labs’ Baseline survey tool. The Office of Student Affairs Assessment supports staff development and makes available a range of online tools and videos. The Office of Student Affairs Assessment has 4 iPad Minis and 6 iPod touches available for check-out for use with assessment projects. All 10 devices can be used offline to collect survey data using the Campus Labs Baseline tool.

Staff Development

The primary staff development program available through the Office of Student Affairs Assessment is the Student Affairs Assessment Academy (SA³). SA³ is a team-based, project-focused workshop series that runs across three semesters. Participants work in small groups on an assessment project and have just-in-time lectures on assessment. More information on SA³ is available at: https://www.ndsu.edu/vpsa/assessment/resources_for_assessment/student_affairs_assessment_academy/

The Office of Student Affairs Assessment also prepares individualized workshops for small groups or departments on request (based on availability).

On Campus

ITS offers a range of free workshops throughout the year on using software and also has an OMR scanner that can be used to read bubble sheets or specially-designed paper surveys.

Online

Additional resources are available on the Student Affairs Assessment Resources page: https://www.ndsu.edu/vpsa/assessment/resources_for_assessment/

If you have any other assessment needs, please do not hesitate to ask! The Office of Student Affairs Assessment will do whatever it takes to see that your assessment project is manageable, meaningful, and effective. Happy assessing!
Glossary: Key Assessment Terms Defined

**Assessment:** Efforts to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence with the intent of using that evidence to celebrate successes, answer questions, and make improvements.

**Direct Assessment:** Category of assessment methods where the student demonstrates or performs the desired learning or development. Examples include written assignments, presentations, projects, direct observations, and portfolios. In contrast to indirect assessment, which gathers students’ perceptions or feelings about their learning. *The direct assessment approach developed by the program provided good evidence that students were able to give a clear, reasoned argument on the topic.*

**Indirect Assessment:** Category of assessment methods where the student describes perceptions or feelings about learning and the learning environment. Examples include self-report surveys, self-reflections, and opinion surveys. In contrast to direct assessment, which asks students to demonstrate or perform the desired learning or development. *Although it didn’t provide complete evidence that students had achieved the learning outcome, the program coordinator was pleased to see the indirect assessment showed students felt like the program had improved their skills.*

**Operational Effectiveness:** Aspects of the performance of a department, program, or unit that are not related to student learning and development and instead focus on the operations of that unit. May include facility usage, customer or student satisfaction, cost efficiencies, level of participation, and so on. Service outcomes (defined below) are achieved through effective operations. *Assessment of the operational effectiveness of the department showed a large number of visits to the facility in the last year and high customer satisfaction with the programs available.*

**Service Outcomes:** Describe the desired result or impact on students as a result of services received. In contrast to student learning outcomes, which emphasize knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions developed by students, service outcomes focus on supporting students’ educational pursuits by removing barriers, navigating the university environment, and meeting essential needs. *The department director reviewed the tutoring assessment results for first generation students to determine whether or not students were making full use of the available learning support services and whether or not tutoring services appeared to be effective.*

**Student Learning Outcomes:** Describe desired knowledge, skills, abilities, or dispositions for students to learn or develop. Are often used to guide program planning and development. Can be written at various levels, such as the institution level, division level, department level, program level, or event level. Are written using action verbs, such as “students will be able to deliver formal and informal oral presentations to a variety of audiences in multiple contexts.” *The program coordinator carefully selected program elements that were likely to result in participants achieving the student learning outcomes selected for the program.*