

**A Guide**  
to  
**Assessment of Student Learning**  
in  
**Journalism and Mass Communications**

## Assessment of student learning

The Council seeks to promote student learning and encourages experimentation and innovation.

The Council recognizes that students have gifts of character and skill beyond the influence of formal instruction and assessment. Instructors may not be able to teach and assess curiosity, creativity, courage, tenacity, and sheer talent.

Nevertheless, the Council believes that accredited programs should systematically assess whether students have acquired the knowledge, values and competencies schools and departments of journalism and mass communications seek to teach. In evaluating curricula and instruction, the Council requires evidence that programs seeking accreditation assess students' attainment of professional values and competencies.

Assessment is a system of evaluation of student learning at the course, sequence, department or unit level (as opposed to grading at the individual level). Three criteria should guide assessment of student learning:

- Awareness: familiarity with specific information, including facts, concepts, theories, laws and regulations, processes and effects.
- Understanding: assimilation and comprehension of information, concepts, theories and ideas.
- Application: competence in relating and applying skills, information, concepts, theories and ideas to the accomplishment of tasks.

Student learning is evaluated to:

- develop curriculum, improve teaching, and enhance student learning;
- document what students have learned; and
- provide accountability.

### Multiple measures

*The Accrediting Council does not define specific curricula, courses or methods of instruction. It recognizes that each institution has its unique situation, mission, and resources, and this uniqueness is an asset to be safeguarded.*

In spite of this statement in ACEJMC's "Principles of Accreditation," some people worry that the Council's commitment to assessment of student learning will inhibit experiment and innovation. They worry that instructors will develop curricula and organize instruction mainly to meet the measures of student learning that departments, schools, universities or regional accrediting organizations and ACEJMC prescribe.

In its "Principles of Accreditation," the Council does set forth certain professional values and competencies that it expects the graduates of accredited programs to have learned. Nevertheless, the Council does not prescribe specific quantitative and qualitative measures or standardized tests of student learning. It endorses the wisdom of experts

that no single measure is sufficient. It encourages programs to develop and apply multiple measures, indirect and direct, that reflect the mission and objectives of the unit as well as those of ACEJMC. It understands that no one measure is likely to fit all departments or sequences within an accredited program; each department or sequence may require its own measures.

The Council encourages programs to consider a balance between quantitative and qualitative measures, including measures that involve representatives of the professions that programs serve in the assessment of student learning (e.g., supervisors of interns and employees, contest judges).

The Council seeks evidence that:

- students are learning the knowledge, values and competencies that individual units and ACEJMC in its “Principles” define; and
- units and instructors are using the information from their assessment measures to improve curriculum, instruction and student learning.

## An assessment plan

The Council requires that units seeking accreditation develop a plan for the assessment of student learning. At the heart of the plan should be ongoing and systematic collection, comparison and analysis, and application of information over time. Typically a plan will describe the unit's:

- mission and objectives for student learning;
- several assessment measures, indirect and direct;
- process for analyzing and applying the results of its measures to improve curriculum, instruction and student learning.

This process can occur at the level of the sequence or department, or the unit as a whole. The Council will normally expect evidence of assessment, discussion and action at the unit level in addition to any assessment at the sequence or department level.

To help units develop and apply assessment of student learning, the Council offers a range of possible measures. The Council does not intend this list to be prescriptive. It seeks only to help units think about ways to assess student learning and improve curriculum and instruction. The Council is especially eager that units provide it with suggestions and examples of ways to assess student learning that can be shared with all schools and departments.

### Indirect measures

Most schools and departments of journalism and mass communications already compile much of the information listed below. Indeed ACEJMC requires the collection and presentation of such information. This information does not measure the nature and amount of student learning so much as indicate that learning has occurred. Nevertheless, the Council recommends that units consider this information as an important form of assessment and analyze and use it, perhaps more systematically than in the past, to improve curriculum, instruction and student learning.

### *Grade distribution*

The regular compilation, comparison and analysis over time of the distribution of grades at entry to the major and at graduation.

Comparison over time of grade distribution at these two points may indicate fluctuations in students' preparation for and progress and success in the major that could guide programs in review of curriculum and instruction.

### *Student retention and graduation*

The regular compilation, comparison and analysis over time of information about student retention and graduation rates, including evidence of the unit's actions to investigate and improve these rates.

Comparison of the unit's with the university's record over time can provide helpful context for evaluating the meaning and significance of the unit's retention and graduation rates.

### *Probation and dismissal*

The regular compilation, comparison and analysis over time of information about student probation and dismissal.

This information and analysis can show how the unit monitors standards of student performance. Analysis may also reveal areas within the curriculum that seem particularly to challenge students or skills that are consistently weak. The unit may be able to show how it has sought to address these areas and skills in order to improve student learning.

### *Internships and placement*

The regular compilation, comparison and analysis over time of information about the numbers and proportions of students who seek and find internships and jobs.

Seeking out and systematically analyzing the evaluations of supervisors of interns and new employees and using that analysis to improve curriculum and instruction can show how a program applies the experience of its interns and new graduates to improve student learning.

### *Student performance in local, regional and national contests*

The regular compilation, comparison and analysis over time of students' entry and performance in local, regional and national contests within their jmc discipline.

As with teaching to the test, so performing to win contests may not be a reliable indicator of student learning. Nevertheless, a unit's record over time of student entry and performance in contests may provide insight into student competence and into the effectiveness of curriculum, instruction and student learning. Contests can show competence at the student, team or unit level (e.g., contests for student newspapers and yearbooks, broadcast news programs, advertising or public relations campaigns).

### *Student surveys and exit interviews, and alumni surveys*

The regular compilation, comparison and analysis of student and alumni responses to surveys and interviews that focus on the effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction and on the quality and applicability of student learning.

Comparison of such surveys and interviews over time can show patterns of student and alumni judgment of the strengths and weaknesses in curriculum, instruction and student learning and of the short- and long-term usefulness or relevance of what students learned.

### **Direct measures**

Direct measures normally involve pre- and post-testing, assessing students' knowledge and skills before and after instruction. Such measures can occur at the course, sequence, or unit level and at the beginning, middle and end of students' experience in the major.

#### *Entry-level testing*

Some schools and departments have developed tests, usually of grammar and basic writing, as part of the admission requirements to assess students' competence as they begin the major in journalism and mass communications. Administering comparable tests at the midpoint of the major and at graduation would help units assess student progress and success in learning the knowledge, values and skills that the unit and AEJMC prescribe.

#### *Sectional and departmental exams*

Some schools and departments have developed testing procedures in multi-section courses to ensure consistency in evaluation of student performance and in student learning of the key objectives of these courses.

Keeping records of student performance on such tests over time for comparison and analysis would help units assess student learning.

#### *Capstone courses*

The requirement of a final course that synthesizes the knowledge, values, and skills of a sequence, department or core curriculum.

While grades in a capstone course for a sequence, department, or the unit as a whole may not necessarily certify that students have mastered all the objectives of a curriculum, programs can analyze student performance in capstone courses over time for insight into the effectiveness of curriculum, instruction and students' learning as they are about to graduate.

### *Portfolio assessment*

In hiring interns and full-time employees, the professions that units serve typically require students to present examples of their work and tend to place greater importance on this evidence of student learning and competence than on academic transcripts.

Some schools include review of such student work as part of their assessment of student learning. This work may include examples of in-class work as well as of work on campus media and professional internships, with an emphasis usually on students' later rather than earlier work. Some schools invite professionals to participate with faculty in assessing student portfolios. Typically portfolio assessment requires defining consistent criteria over time for assessing these portfolios, criteria derived from the unit's objectives for student learning and from the professional values and competencies that ACEJMC defines in its Principles.

Each sequence or department might take a sample of its graduating class and assess the portfolios of this sample. Recording, comparing and analyzing the results of portfolio assessment over time will enable units to assess student learning.

### *Use of assessment to improve curriculum, instruction and student learning*

The Council will seek in units' assessment plans evidence of a process for applying the results of assessment to improving curriculum, instruction and student learning. In addition to analyzing and applying the results of the several measures already suggested, units might consider:

#### *Course syllabi over time*

Syllabi that define objectives for student learning, design assignments and teaching methods that enable students to meet those objectives, and use grading and other measures to convey to students whether and how they are meeting those objectives.

Analysis of syllabi and other class materials over time can show how instructors are developing and strengthening curriculum and teaching methods to improve student learning.

#### *Course evaluations over time*

Evaluations that focus on students' judgments of the effectiveness of courses and instruction and on whether and what they have learned.

Analysis of student evaluations over time can show how instructors' changes and experiments with content and methods to improve instruction and student learning have affected students' perceptions of their learning.

## Appendix

In September 1999, ACEJMC surveyed schools and departments about their assessment practices. Thirty-four responded. Their assessment methods fell into four broad categories:

**1. Course/Instruction-Related Evaluations**

- Pre- and post-tests of competencies
- Portfolio assessment
- Capstone courses
- Final Exam or Essay

**2. Interviews and Surveys**

- Senior exit interviews
- Senior surveys
- Advisory Board interviews
- Alumni surveys

**3. External Work-Related Evaluations**

- Internship evaluations
- Employer evaluations

**4. Student Competitions**

- Unit awards
- Regional and national competitions

The survey did not probe into how systematic and ongoing these assessment methods were. Nor does the summary (next page) suggest that the schools who responded do not engage in assessment methods other than those they reported. Had the survey listed all the methods that emerged and asked schools to indicate which ones they used, the results might have been quite different. The survey merely suggests the range of methods schools have used.

