

Unit Assessment: a handbook to institutional effectiveness

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Introduction

Over the past decade postsecondary institutional effectiveness and accountability have received increasing attention. Higher education’s rising costs, college debt, employer jeremiads about graduates’ workforce preparedness, and the role and value of higher education to contemporary society has engendered a debate about what universities and colleges do, and their effectiveness. In response, the U.S. Department of Education, regional accreditors, and

specialized accrediting bodies have placed increasing emphasis upon outcomes rather than inputs and how those outcomes are developed, assessed, and linked to resource allocation. These pressures require leaders and administrators to enhance the quality, effectiveness, and competitiveness of their institutions in a way that accommodates accountability.

The Middle States Commission on Higher Education standards promote institutional and unit objectives that are discernible, assessed appropriately, linked to institution mission and goals, reflect assessment conclusions, and inform planning and resource allocation. This should include constituent participation in evidence collection/provision, assessment of evidence, and the application of assessment results to enhance outcomes' achievement.

Unit assessment at Towson University should reflect the following:

1. Unit outcomes aligned to and supporting the achievement of Divisional objectives.
2. Achievement benchmarks that appropriately reflect success and what a unit is seeking to achieve.
3. Analysis and discussion of assessment results.
4. Use of results, where appropriate, to inform and/or identify where change will enhance outcomes' achievement.

Fig: 1: key terms

Divisions represent the university's primary administrative areas.

Measurable reflects the quality of being observable and verifiable; it includes more than that which a unit can count.

Mission expresses a unit's *raison d'être* and its primary role or function that it fulfils.

Objective indicates the division's priorities and role in fulfilling the institution's mission and goals. Divisional objectives are a broad statement of what a division seeks to achieve, represent its priorities, and reflect its role in the realization of the institution's mission and goals; they are neither necessarily assessed nor evaluated. However, they will inform units' outcomes and those outcomes should align with one or more divisional objective.

Outcomes are statements of units' expected results and service provision. A unit outcome is a brief, clear, specific statement that describes a desired result in relation to a broader objective. A well-written outcome will include or imply an appropriate measure/success benchmark. Outcomes are a declaration of what you are seeking to achieve.

Units are the specific offices and service providers in each division.

Figure 2 below, represents the assessment life-cycle and illustrates assessment's continuous nature. Assessment is a systemic process of gathering evidence and information to answer the question 'are we achieving our outcomes and what changes will address challenges, exploit opportunities, or enhance our achievements?'

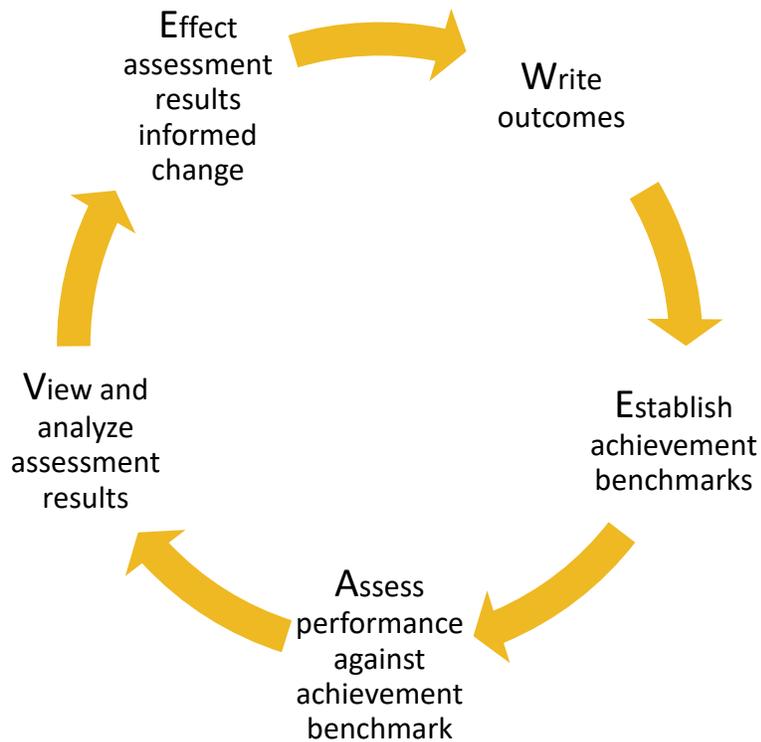


Fig. 2: WEAVE assessment life cycle

Benefits of assessment

Assessment allows a university to curate an organizational architecture that encourages individual units to identify and articulate their role in fulfilling the institution's mission and goals. It also helps to ensure that units develop and achieve outcomes that align with those mission and goals via the larger units (divisions) within which they operate and to which they report.

The development of appropriate unit outcomes aligned in this manner helps to engender explicitly the unit's *raison d'être* or mission and to define its relationship to divisional and institutional objectives, encouraging an understanding of its importance and relevance to the university's successful prosecution of goals and mission.

Assessment of outcomes at the unit level is fundamental to demonstrating how successfully those outcomes are contributing to the larger objectives; identifying opportunities for enhancement or challenges that require amelioration; and informed evidence based change to units' operations, resource allocation, and/or assessment practice.

Writing unit outcomes

Unit outcomes are fundamental to any successful assessment plan. Well-written outcomes do not guarantee a plan's success but poorly written or inappropriate outcomes will render success impossible. Outcomes are declaratory statements of what a unit will achieve; avoid outcomes that reflect 'the means to the end', focus efforts on ends not means. Many deploy the SMART methodology to compose outcomes and to communicate the characteristics of effective and appropriate outcomes. This acronym represents 'specific', 'measurable', 'achievable', 'relevant', and 'timely'. The table below provides a juxtaposition of an appropriate and inappropriate example of each. To ensure a sustainable and meaningful assessment plan units should not exceed three to five unit outcomes.

Relationship between objectives and outcomes

While objectives represent the division's priorities, outcomes reflect the expected results that support those objectives. It is unnecessary for units to have outcomes that align to every objective, but all outcomes should support one or more objectives.

Table 1: SMART outcomes
SMART outcomes

	Inappropriate	Appropriate
	<i>Attain year on year improvement in dining customer satisfaction</i>	<i>Dining services will provide quality food, excellent service, and value.</i>
Specific <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The objective is clear and unambiguous. • State what is expected, who is involved, and how it is going to happen. 	<p>This outcome fails to identify specifically what Dining Services seeks to achieve. Customer satisfaction reflects how well its constituents feel about a service, it does not represent what it is that the unit is seeking to achieve.</p>	<p>This outcome is specific, outlining what it seeks to achieve, and some of its expected characteristics-quality, service, and value.</p>
Measurable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measurable outcomes allow units to identify appropriate success benchmarks and permit collection of evidence to demonstrate achievement and/or effect change. 	<p>Without a specific indicator of what represents success, it is impossible to measure, and any ‘improvement’ is relative. Infinite improvements in customer satisfaction is impossible.</p>	<p>The terms value, service, and quality, suggest what an assessment tool will evaluate and upon which it might collect data. A measure could be the following: <i>At least 80% of survey respondents will indicate a positive or very positive disposition to dining services’ offerings based on quality, service, and value.</i></p>
Achievable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsustainable outcomes, or those that a unit cannot effect change upon are unhelpful and likely inappropriate. 	<p>Without a definition of success, it is impossible to declare whether or not a unit has achieved the outcome.</p>	<p>The outcome and associated measure establishes a definitive and achievable success benchmark.</p>
Relevant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcomes should support and contribute to the realization of objectives. 	<p>Its preceding deficiencies render redundant its relevance.</p>	<p>Any outcome must axiomatically contribute to the unit’s mission.</p>
Timely <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Periodic assessment of outcomes should occur. • Assessment results should have the opportunity to effect change. 		<p>The outcomes language includes an indicator of how frequently data collection will occur and can inform when action might occur.</p>

Establishing measures of achievement

Measures represent a benchmark or criterion a unit uses to determine expected outcome achievement. To increase the likelihood of valid results, you should strive to use **more than one** measure for each outcome/objective if possible. Measures help us to answer two questions:

1. How will we know if we are accomplishing our outcomes?
2. What information will provide us with that knowledge?

It is important not to conflate outcomes with measures.

Table 2: measures versus outcomes

Measure confused as an outcome	Suggested outcome
<p><i>'Reduction of non-compliance/increasing use of standards'.</i> This is a good nascent measure but a poor outcome. An outcome should be declarative and specific.</p>	<p><i>'Ensure that the university community appropriately applies the current university brand'.</i> A declarative statement that represents the ends, rather than the means.</p>

It is also important to ensure that a measure aids identification of outcome achievement and/or how to enhance outcome achievement. Table 3 addresses measures conflated with tasks that neither demonstrate outcomes' achievement nor provide evidence upon which the unit can effect change.

Table 3: task confused with measures

Task confused as a measure	Suggested measure
<i>Counting the number of brand workshops and brand mark downloads.</i>	<i>Identifying the frequency of off-brand occurrence and developing a target for frequency of off-brand occurrences.</i>
This is an important and appropriate task, but it is not an effective measure. It neither demonstrate performance in outcome achievement nor provide evidence or information that will inform or suggest change/ameliorative action.	Additionally, this evidence will inform follow-up and seek from users the reasons for the off-brand occurrence, perhaps through dialogue and/or soliciting their completion of a survey to indicate or select the reason for the off-brand occurrence. This might inform changes in workshop (task) content and identify groups or individuals that would most benefit from workshop participation.

Apply measures over which the unit has responsibility

It is important that measures can identify success and reflect tasks or outcomes over which the unit can effect change. For example, a career center uses the number of students who engage in some form of non-classroom learning experience to assess its outcome to promote experiential learning but academic departments’ decision to discontinue associated programs results in a precipitous decline in student participation. It is better to use a measure over which the unit has control, this could include events designed to increase students’ awareness of how and where to pursue such opportunities, rather than the availability of such opportunities, over which the unit has no control or authority.

Sustainable measures

Avoid measures that are unsustainable and/or relative. For example, ‘college football games’ attendance will increase by 10% annually.’ Increases are finite, capped by stadium capacity, while the

measure implies infinite increases in attendance. A more appropriate measure might be ‘attendance will exceed 70% of venue capacity, excepting inclement weather circumstances.’ Where this benchmark is a long-term goal it is entirely legitimate to acknowledge this and include incremental milestones toward its achievement.

Direct assessment vs indirect assessment

Direct assessment involves actual results. Indirect assessment examines perceptions of an outcome’s achievement. Survey results, focus groups, and other methods to gather anecdotal indicators of outcome. Direct and indirect assessment, dependent on its design, can be either quantitative or qualitative.

Table 4: direct and indirect assessment.

Outcome: the Office of the Registrar will maintain accurate student records		
	Direct	Indirect
Quantitative	Compile and count the number of errors on transcripts reported by students.	Survey students on their perceptions of record accuracy.
Qualitative	Review the policies used to maintain and update student records.	Conduct a focus group of Registrar office staff on accuracy issues.

Units are encouraged to use the form of assessment that best elicits information and evidence that will inform change. This will usually involve direct assessment; where units elect not to apply direct forms of assessment they should indicate how the indirect measures would engender evidence upon which the unit can act and make changes.

Assess performance against achievement benchmark

Collecting evidence via the measure and comparing it with the benchmark achievement is not merely a binary audit of whether a unit has achieved an outcome; units should engage in analysis to inform and effect change that identifies and/or ameliorates a challenge or exploits a strength or opportunity. Outcomes and/or measures that rely upon an auditing ‘tick box’ approach that fail to interrogate operations are limited and do not provide meaningful or useful opportunity for action. For example, declaring ‘the establishment of a standardized payment solution across campus’ with a benchmark of ‘yes/no’ in response to the task’s completion is merely a task’s completion, however important, toward the achievement of an amorphous outcome. This approach does not permit meaningful insight that might inform change; in this instance, abolishing the outcome would better serve the unit.

View and analyze assessment results

Assessment results and concomitant action should have a logical relationship. Avoid idiopathic solutions to challenges where the assessment evidence does not support the action. For example, an athletics program engages in a billboard and social media promotion campaign to increase awareness of program’s fixture list when assessment has identified via a survey that the program’s game day attendance has declined due to poor stadium parking access. While the promotion campaign might provide a temporary respite to lower attendances, the erection of billboards and social media promotion will not alleviate the parking challenge.

Effect improvement through action

Assessment’s fundamental role is to investigate the achievement of outcomes and objectives, how to enhance those outcomes where the unit is achieving them, and/or to ameliorate identified challenges. This represents evidence-based action and meaningful and effective assessment should elicit complementary action.

Assessment without action is an indicator of a less than meaningful process and primarily motivated by an obligation to comply with institutional or accreditor expectations rather than an earnest effort to use assessment to enhance operations and inform change. Assessment without change should prompt consideration of outcomes' relevance and appropriateness. It could also suggest a need to revise measures and benchmarks used to assess the outcome to engender evidence upon which a unit can act. Finally, assessment without change could represent success and the need to develop a new outcome where the current outcome is either redundant because it represented a challenge that the unit resolved, or reflects a change in the unit's mission.

Assessment of assessment

Assessment methods that represent units' outcomes and that will inform and guide definitive action are those that units should deploy. While there are inappropriate approaches to assessment, there is no definitively appropriate approach; units should ensure that the methods they use inform tangible and meaningful actions.

Ideally, units should use more than one measure to assess outcomes with one of those representing direct assessment, especially where a unit relies upon one measure to inform assessment.

Table 5 below, provides additional guidance on issue to consider when developing and prosecuting assessment plan and complement that Campus Labs Unit Assessment plan and Unit Assess Report.

Table 5: developing assessment plans: administrative and student support services units

	Mission Statement	Responsibility and Implementation	Expected Outcomes	Assessment Methods	Success Criterion/Benchmark	Assessment Results	Action/Results use
Questions to consider	<p>What is our program or unit trying to do?</p> <p>What do we intend to provide for students/faculty/staff?</p>	<p>Who should be responsible for and involved in the assessment process?</p>	<p>What do we intend to achieve?</p> <p>What result does our program intend to produce?</p> <p>How does our program contribute to the development of students and/or the institution?</p>	<p>What specifically will we measure?</p> <p>How do we want to collect the data?</p>	<p>What level is acceptable as evidence of success?</p> <p>What is the minimum standard performance?</p>	<p>What are the results?</p> <p>Are we meeting the desired performance level?</p>	<p>What decisions, changes, or improvements have we identified based on our results?</p> <p>How have we identified 'what's next for our program'?</p>
Definitions			<p>Outcomes describe the results or affect that your efforts will produce.</p>	<p>Methods describe the evidence used to evaluate your program.</p>	<p>Criteria state the minimum acceptable standard.</p>	<p>Results describe findings, including strengths and weaknesses, and whether the program is achieving the intended results.</p>	<p>Actions reflect the decisions, changes, or improvements made to program, processes, operations, or assessment plan.</p>

	Mission Statement	Responsibility and Implementation	Expected Outcomes	Assessment Methods	Success Criterion/Benchmark	Assessment Results	Action/Results use
Expectations & guidelines	Identify clear and descriptive unit or program purpose aligned with department and institutional missions. The mission describes why the program or unit exists.	Identify, by title, who: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •crafts objectives and methods •collects and analyzes data •enters results in Campus Labs •reports results •makes decisions Based on evidence •ensures decisions' implementation 	Identify at least two outcomes that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •are discernable and measurable •describe the results that students and/or staff will accomplish •align with and support unit goals. 	Each outcome includes at least one method that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •ideally at least one from a direct evidence source •describe student and/or unit activity •identify instrument used for evaluating, scoring, or measuring the activity. 	Each method includes a criterion that identifies target or minimum Performance standard for each unit and/or student activity.	Each method has a result and analysis, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •qualitative or quantitative data in a narrative summary or table •a well reasoned description of conclusions, significance, and impact 	Each action one for each method and result identifies decisions, changes, or improvements.

Source: adapted from University of St. Thomas *Institutional effectiveness handbook 2018-19*, retrieved on December 12, 2019 from

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