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Accrediting Council on Education
in Journalism and Mass Communications

Guide to Assessment of Learning Outcomes for ACEJMC Accreditation

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This guide explains ACEJMC's expectations of an assessment plan and offers suggestions for assessing student learning. The suggestions are not meant to be prescriptive, but to offer examples of tools that could be part of a comprehensive, multi-year assessment plan. This guide will introduce assessment as a principle of accreditation, describe the components of an assessment plan, provide examples of direct and indirect measures, and discuss the timeline for assessment as it relates to the unit's self-study.

Assessment as a Principle of Accreditation

Assessment is a valuable process to help units develop and improve curriculum, improve teaching, document what students have learned, and enhance student learning.

ACEJMC lists 10 professional **values and competencies** that must be part of the education of all journalism and mass communications students. Students should:

- apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press, in a global context, and for the country in which the institution that invites ACEJMC is located;
- demonstrate an understanding of the multicultural history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications;
- demonstrate culturally proficient communication that empowers those traditionally disenfranchised in society, especially as grounded in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and ability, domestically and globally, across communication and media contexts;
- present images and information effectively and creatively, using appropriate tools and technologies;
- write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;
- demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;
- apply critical thinking skills in conducting research and evaluating information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work;
- effectively and correctly apply basic numerical and statistical concepts;
- critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;
- apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.

Units requesting evaluation of a professional master's degree program also must demonstrate how their graduates attain this additional core competency:

- contribute to knowledge appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.

The Accrediting Council invites units to adopt, revise or expand this list as they choose. Many units adopt ACEJMC's list of professional values and competencies with no change, and others have added one or more statements to the list or have condensed the list by grouping items by topic. Whatever a unit decides, it must ensure that its curriculum and instruction are designed in such a way that all ten ACEJMC values and competencies are covered for all students.

The Accrediting Council's curriculum and assessment standards are closely connected. Standard 2, Curriculum and Instruction, states:

The unit provides a curriculum and instruction, whether onsite or online, that enable students to learn the knowledge, competencies and values the Council defines for preparing students to work in a diverse global and domestic society.

Standard 3, Assessment of Learning Outcomes, states:

The unit regularly assesses student learning using direct and indirect measures that engage communication professionals and annually "closes the loop" to make tangible improvements to curriculum and instruction.

A unit's curriculum and instruction may evolve for a number of reasons. For instance, changes in professional practice, changes in audiences' information-seeking behavior, and changes in communications technology can all drive gradual, incremental changes to curricula and instruction. Assessment of student learning is different from these evolutionary changes. Assessment is a focused and deliberate process designed to determine whether students are learning what a unit expects them to learn and to improve the quality of the program overall.

Assessment evaluates student learning at the course, sequence, department or unit level and mainly wants to know whether graduates have mastered the professional values and competencies. (In contrast, grades evaluate individual student performance in a course and may consider issues such as attendance, participation and improvement.) If assessment reveals weaknesses in the mastery of any of the values or competencies, the unit should decide how to address those weaknesses, take action to do so, and assess the result.

An Assessment Plan

Schools seeking accreditation are required to have a written assessment plan that reflects ACEJMC's values and competencies. Because units also may be required to conduct assessment for institutional purposes or regional accrediting bodies, units may want to develop an assessment plan that serves multiple purposes.

Generally, program outcomes should be framed as student learning outcomes (what a student should know

or be able to do) rather than as teaching objectives (what the course or teacher will seek to do).

An assessment plan typically includes the following components:

Goals of the Unit – Describe what the unit intends to accomplish, how the unit's goals relate to the institution's mission, and the purposes of assessment.
Student Learning Outcomes – Describe what the unit expects students to be able to know, do and value, reflecting ACEJMC values and competencies.
Curriculum Map – Indicate where the values and competencies are addressed in core and required courses.
Direct and Indirect Measures – Indicate what measures the unit will use to determine whether learning outcomes are being met.
Timeline – Indicate when assessment measures will be implemented and results reported.
Oversight – Indicate who has responsibility for seeing the plan is implemented.
Use of Information – Describe provisions for sharing information with internal and external audiences and for making recommendations and decisions.

To lay a foundation for assessment, a review of syllabi for core and required courses is a good starting point. A unit should ensure that these courses cover ACEJMC's professional values and competencies, that the syllabi contain appropriate student learning outcomes, and that instruction is demanding and current. *

Each value and competency does not need its own course, and, typically, courses address multiple learning outcomes. Units should not rely on elective courses to cover learning outcomes because electives are avoidable. For example, although a unit may offer "Race, Gender and the Media" as an elective course, the unit must show that an understanding of diversity is one of the learning outcomes in appropriate core or required courses.

Identifying student learning outcomes in course syllabi provides important evidence for ACEJMC site teams. During a site visit, some faculty members and students will assert a specific course addresses this or that value or competency and others will say that it does not. Evidence that a course is intended to address a particular value or competency is clear to the site team when the syllabus addresses the topic in the learning outcomes, the course outline, or in specific readings and assignments.

* ACEJMC's values and competencies anticipate and allow for change, and the curriculum standard requires accredited units to keep up with change. Standard 2, Indicator (c), states that instruction must be "demanding and current." The Council, Committee and site teams interpret "current" to mean that all graduates, regardless of specialization, should be prepared to communicate to diverse audiences through multiple, up-to-date information delivery platforms.

Measures of Assessment

Standard 3, Assessment of Learning Outcomes, requires that an assessment plan use "multiple direct and indirect measures to assess student learning." This suggests at least two direct measures and at least two indirect measures.

Direct measures require students to demonstrate their learning. These measures examine actual student work to determine whether students demonstrate the knowledge, values and competencies required to achieve program goals. Examples of direct measures include exams, capstone projects, student portfolios, aggregate internship evaluations, and course-embedded assessment.

Indirect measures capture perceptions, attitudes and outcomes of the learning experience. These include self-reports of student learning, or data and outcomes that indicate program goals have been achieved. Examples of indirect measures include student surveys, alumni surveys, employer surveys, exit interviews, focus groups, student awards, and graduation and employment data.

ACEJMC does not prescribe specific measures of assessment. It endorses the wisdom of experts that no single measure is sufficient. It encourages units to develop and apply measures that reflect the mission and goals of the unit as well as those of ACEJMC. In fact, no one measure may fit all departments or sequences; thus, each department or sequence may adopt its own measures of assessing student learning.

The selection of assessment measures may depend on whether the learning outcome involves mastery of information or mastery of a skill. For example, examinations better enable assessment of knowledge and values, whereas capstone projects and portfolios better enable assessment of student skills.

Direct Measures

Here are examples of direct measures that look at how well students demonstrate their learning:

Examinations. Some units administer pre- and post-tests as evidence of student learning. For example, the pre-test might show modest knowledge of the five freedoms contained in the First Amendment at the point of entry to the major, while the post-test reveals keen knowledge of the First Amendment at graduation.

Exams can explore other areas of knowledge, values and competencies expected of all students. Sometimes, units administer only a comprehensive exam at the end, with results benchmarked against expectations (e.g., the unit expects xx percentage of seniors to know y). By producing cumulative feedback on what students know and can do and what they don't know and can't do, exams provide the faculty with insight into where curriculum and instruction can be improved.

Some units also have entrance exams related to grammar and writing skills. Entrance exams alone are not a direct measure of student learning, but an exam at the senior level would be a comparative tool to measure student growth, improvement and competence.

Capstone Projects. Typically, a capstone course synthesizes the knowledge, values and competencies acquired by graduating seniors of a sequence or department. The instructor could assign and grade a research or skills-based project as the culminating work of the curriculum, which the student might include in a portfolio used for job applications. For purposes of program assessment (different from the course grade), a unit could collect an ungraded copy of each senior's project and ask a panel of JMC faculty or professionals to evaluate the projects (or a sample of them) using a specified rubric to assess the collective level of student accomplishment.

Student Portfolios. A portfolio commonly includes examples of advanced in-class work and a student's best campus media and professional internship work. A portfolio might also include the student's resume and some self-reflection on the incorporated work. A unit could define appropriate learning outcomes using ACEJMC's list of values and competencies and have a panel of faculty, alumni or professionals evaluate the portfolios (or a sample of them) using a rubric similar to the one recommended for assessing capstone projects.

Aggregate Internship Evaluations. Units regularly gather feedback from professionals who supervise student interns. Such feedback informs decisions regarding course credit and students' final grades. For assessment purposes, units could analyze internship evaluations in the aggregate, looking for trend lines that may suggest ways to improve curriculum and instruction. For this to be possible, the internship evaluation form needs to go beyond behavioral measures (dependability, punctuality, ability to work independently) and seek to evaluate whether a student demonstrated ACEJMC's professional values and competencies (e.g., ability to write clearly and accurately, strong grasp of relevant technology, ability to apply numerical concepts, ability to think critically and creatively, etc.).

Course-Embedded Assessment. The purpose of course-embedded assessment is to assess the learning outcomes of the course, not to determine individual student grades. For example, course-embedded assessment could involve using common exam questions across all sections of a course. This requires faculty willingness to engage in a shared process. Course-embedded assessment also could involve reviewers taking a second look at materials generated by students in a course to see what evidence exists that students have met specified learning outcomes. The assessment instrument may be separate from individual graded assignments for the explicit purpose of providing group-level information on the achievement of student learning outcomes.

The value of using multiple measures is that any single measure has limitations and, thus, should be combined with others to help paint a more complete picture. In addition, the strength of assessment results can depend on the breadth or representativeness of the cohort. For example, aggregate internship evaluations carry more weight when all students are required to do an internship, compared to internship evaluations of a self-selected portion of students. Similarly, the evaluation of a random sample of portfolios would be more representative of the student body than an evaluation of portfolios of only top students. A unit should address the breadth and representativeness of its direct measures.

Indirect Measures

Here are examples of indirect measures that capture perceptions, attitudes and outcomes of the learning experience:

Surveys and interviews. Many possibilities of indirect measures exist including student surveys, exit interviews of seniors, focus groups, alumni surveys and employer surveys. All involve self-reporting and really only capture people's perceptions of the quality of student learning. Survey questions ideally reflect the unit's goals for student attainment of knowledge, values and competencies, such as asking respondents to evaluate their mastery of each of ACEJMC's values and competencies.

Regarding alumni surveys, Standard 3 requires units to maintain contact with alumni "to assess their experiences in the professions and to gain feedback for improving curriculum and instruction." This requirement makes an alumni survey (or other mechanism for alumni feedback) an obvious candidate as an indirect measure.

Student awards. A unit's record of student performance in competitions over time may provide insight into the effectiveness of curriculum, instruction and student learning. Awards received by individual students or student teams (such as student newspapers, broadcast news programs, and advertising or public relations campaigns) are outcomes that cumulatively point to the quality of the learning experience, at least for some students.

Graduation and employment data. Retention and graduation rates can be valuable indicators of the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction. Employment records of graduates over time, such as the proportion of students employed in JMC-related careers six months after graduation, can also serve as a valuable tool for assessing the quality of an accredited program. Units may need to benchmark student employment against broader employment data, since the state of the economy is beyond a unit's control.

All measures used to assess the quality of student learning, whether direct or indirect, should be considered carefully. Trustworthy learning assessment depends on the quality, accuracy and relevance of the underlying data.

Establishing Levels of Achievement

ACEJMC does not prescribe assessment measures, nor does it prescribe required levels of achievement. It is the responsibility of the unit to establish benchmarks, mechanisms for comparison, and to find appropriate ways of interpreting the results of assessment measures.

Despite this absence of prescriptive language or specific outcomes requirements, the ACEJMC mission statement does reflect a clear expectation of high quality. Moreover, under "Assessment of Student Learning" in Part II of the Journalism and Mass Communications Accreditation handbook, unit heads and faculty are asked to use the following

three general learning outcomes to guide them in developing desired achievement levels:

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 academic and professional tasks.

Other Considerations

Professionals. Standard 3 also specifies that the unit include members of JMC professions in its assessment process. This clearly could occur through the student internship program, if the evaluation instrument is linked to ACEJMC's professional values and competencies.

Professionals also could be involved in the evaluation of student portfolios or capstone projects, or through employer surveys about the readiness of recent graduates of the unit. Some units ask members of their professional advisory boards to conduct mock interviews of seniors, offering advice to students about their portfolios and interview style as well as using a rubric that incorporates some of the values and competencies to inform the unit about the students' collective level of career readiness.

Graduate programs. For units that submit a professional master's degree program for review, ACEJMC requires that the program have its own assessment plan. Many of the same direct and indirect measures can apply but may need to be constructed differently for the graduate level. In addition, ACEJMC says graduate programs must distinguish themselves from undergraduate programs by offering advanced, rigorous courses. Standard 3 lists outcomes appropriate to a professional graduate program as "a professional project, thesis or comprehensive exam that demonstrates that graduate students have developed analytical and critical thinking abilities appropriate to the profession."

Assessment Plan Timeline

A unit should develop an assessment program consistent with its resources and administer it with sufficient regularity to allow time to analyze the results and decide on actions to improve student learning.

While some universities require assessment of student learning at the course level every semester, experience suggests that this frequency and the accumulation of data can subvert meaningful analysis and sensible action. Units may choose to stagger the implementation of assessment measures. For instance, some units will conduct portfolio evaluations each

fall, review capstone projects every other year, and evaluate alumni surveys every third year.

Alternatively, a reasonable assessment cycle might involve a cohort analysis. The unit could administer a few direct and indirect measures as a cohort enters the major, administer most measures as that cohort prepares to graduate, devote an academic year to analyze the findings, and decide where and how to make improvements in curriculum and instruction. The unit then would introduce the changes for the cohort entering after the year of analysis and resume its assessment program.

Use of Information (Closing the Loop)

A common phrase in assessment is "closing the loop." It means studying assessment results to see what improvements might be needed and then taking steps to make those improvements happen. There's little value in developing an assessment program if findings are not discussed and strategies to improve curriculum and instruction are not developed and implemented.

Once improvements are made, units then should monitor assessment findings over time to see if the desired outcomes have been attained.

The Self-Study and Site Visit

To achieve compliance with Standard 3, a unit must present in the self-study a written assessment plan and a report on the measures used, the findings and analysis, and the actions taken to improve student learning. ACEJMC's self-study template for this standard frames questions and directions to guide the unit in providing the needed content.

Site teams expect to review the written plan and the process and results of its execution. This ranges from a description of the process, findings, analysis and actions to how the data were collected (in the body of the report or in appendices).

Generalizations and/or assertions without evidence are not satisfactory. Site reviewers are looking for timely analysis and evidence that improvements have been implemented during each assessment cycle.

No program is perfect, which is why assessment is so important. A thorough, thoughtful and robust assessment program helps unit administrators and faculty gain a better understanding of their own program, which ultimately should lead to clear improvements in student learning and outcomes.