CREATING A PLAN TO ASSESS YOUR PROGRAM

QUICK START GUIDE

This guide is designed to support faculty who are developing an assessment plan for their new program. Faculty should use this guide along with the Assessment Plan Template provided. This process aligns with SACSCOC expectations for ongoing, systematic assessment of student learning for continuous improvement. This guide is not designed to be a comprehensive guide for higher education assessment, but rather a starting point. If you need additional support please don't hesitate to reach out to OSPIE at ospie@uky.edu.



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“The greatest thing in the world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving” -Oliver Wendell Holmes

PURPOSEFUL PROGRAMS, MEANINGFUL LEARNING

Developing a clear, meaningful plan to assess Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLOs) is one of the most important things faculty can do to support student success. A strong assessment plan helps ensure that every graduate, regardless of course section, instructor, or pathway through the curriculum, acquires the essential knowledge, skills, and habits needed to thrive in their careers, contribute to their communities, and advance in further study.

When there is a clear plan of what we want our students to achieve (PSLOs) and a well-written, aligned, and intentionally scaffolded curriculum (Curriculum Mapping), we are doing more than just satisfying an accreditation requirement. The plan:

- *Provides students with a clear roadmap*

Students understand what they are expected to learn, how their coursework builds over time, and how each class contributes to their long-term goals.

- *Supports student success by making expectations transparent*

Using principles from TILT (Transparency in Learning & Teaching), clearly articulated outcomes clarify purpose, expectations, and assessment criteria, leading to stronger student performance.

- *Strengthens curriculum coherence and reduces redundancy*

A clear curriculum map allows faculty to see where skills are introduced, reinforced, or mastered, ensuring students develop increasing complexity rather than repeating content or missing key competencies.

- *Aligns academic programs with workforce and societal needs*

PSLOs grounded in employer expectations or students' career and academic goals by soliciting external stakeholder feedback and reviewing professional standards, prepare students for real-world challenges and workforce readiness.

- *Supports continuous improvement*

With strong assessment measures, programs can meaningfully evaluate how well students are learning and use evidence to strengthen teaching, curriculum design, and student support.

- *Increase student confidence and engagement*

When students can articulate what they are learning and why, they feel more ownership over their education and are more motivated to persist and succeed.





Ultimately, this guide is designed to support and complement the strong work already happening across our programs by helping faculty articulate and document how:

- Learning is intentional
- Assessment is meaningful
- Students understand their path
- Graduates are prepared for what comes next

WHAT ARE PROGRAM STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES?

PSLOs describe the knowledge, skills, and abilities students will be able to demonstrate by the time they complete a program.

PSLOs should be:

- Measurable (observable actions, not internal states): Written in observable actions that clearly describe what students will do to demonstrate their learning.
- Student-friendly: Communicated in clear, accessible language that helps students understand the purpose and expectations of the program.
- Grounded in disciplinary and post-graduation expectations: Informed by the knowledge, skills, and habits of mind valued in the field, including academic, professional, civic, and community.
- Appropriate to degree level: Reflect increasing sophistication, independence, and rigor from bachelor's to master's to doctoral work.
- Assessable: Able to be demonstrated through authentic student work (e.g., projects, performances, research, portfolios, clinicals, exams).

Writing a Student Learning Outcome, whether for a course or a program, is about starting at the end. At the end of a course or at the end of a program, what do you want your students to be able to do?

Students will ....

EASY AS ABC

AUDIENCE: Who is the target of the learning?
BEHAVIOR: What are you hoping students can do?
CONDITION: Under what circumstances?

Audience — Behavior

Students will be able to identify the genre and style when listening to new representative music.

Condition

Audience — Behavior

Graduating students will be able to apply major theories of human development to clinical case studies.

Condition

TIPS

DO make outcomes student focused.
DO use clear and specific language that students can understand.
DO use Action Verbs. "observable behavior"
DO separate double-barreled statements (And or Or) into two outcomes.
AVOID language that is difficult to measure (e.g., know, learn, understand).

OUTCOMES SEE ALSO BLOOM'S TAXONOMY OF LEARNING

Foundational Knowledge
Understanding and remembering
Verbs: Remember, Understand, Identify

Application
Learning a new action, skill, way of thinking or how to manage projects
Verbs: Judge, Calculate, Create, Do, Create, Manage, Imagine, Coordinate, Solve, Analyze

Integration
Making connections between ideas, learning experiences, or subject areas.
Verbs: Connect, Relate, Integrate, Compare

Human Dimension
Learning about yourself and others. How things applies to students and those around them
Verbs: Interact, Decide to become..., Relate

Caring
Developing new feelings, interests, and values
Verbs: Judge, Assess, Explore, Promote, Cultivate, Interpret, Value, Share

Learning How to Learn
Becoming a better student and self-directed learner
Verbs: Plan, Reflect, Predict, Self-Assess, Self-regulate, Monitor

Try-It-Yourself:

Example:

Graduates of the program (A) will be able to interpret texts, artifacts, or cultural practices (B) using disciplinary theories or frameworks to support evidence-based arguments (C).

Now you try:

_____(A) will be able to _____ (B) using _____ (C).

- Who is the audience? (Graduates of the program) (A)
- What is a core skill you want them to demonstrate (B)
- What is the condition/tools/context under which your audience can perform that skill (primary source material, within a team, in a clinical setting, using visualization software, through a capstone project). (C)

Consider the following...

When developing your program student learning outcomes consider the following for reflection:

DOUBLE-BARRELED OUTCOMES

When writing PSLOs it is best practice to include one skill per PSLO and avoid double-barreled outcomes. For example:

"*Students will be able to apply basic research methods to analyze problems in the field and summarize their findings."*

This contains at least *two* skills:

1. Applying research methods
2. Summarizing findings (communication)

To resolve this:

Option 1:

Split into two PSLOs

- Students will be able to apply basic research methods to analyze problems in the field
- Students will be able to summarize their research findings clearly

Option 2:

- Ensure the assessment is developed to capture both the research approach and the clarity of communication so each skill can be scored separately.

ONE VERB RULE:

If you see multiple verbs, ask whether these are actually two outcomes disguised as one

- " Analyze information and make recommendations"
- "explain in oral, written, and visual formats"

STAKEHOLDER ALIGNMENT

When drafting PSLOs, use input from:

- Advisory boards
- Students
- Employers who hire your graduates
- Internship/practicum supervisors
- Professional associations or accreditation bodies
- Labor market data (Lightcast, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Kentucky workforce projections)

Questions to ask external partners:

- "What should a new graduate be able to do on day one?"
- "What technical and professional competencies are essential for success?"
- "Where do current graduates struggle?"

WILDCAT WORKFORCE

Undergraduate programs should also use CPE's 10 Essential Skills (also known as Graduate Profile and Wildcat Workforce) when they are developing their PSLOs (See guidance document for new programs). These skills were developed through extensive stakeholder engagement, including:

- Employers and workforce leaders, who highlighted the skills graduates need to succeed on day one.
- Faculty and academic leaders, who identified how skills could be embedded in curricula.
- Community and civic partners, who emphasized abilities like critical thinking, communication, and ethical reasoning.

By incorporating diverse perspectives, the 10 Essential Skills reflect both academic and real-world applicability, providing a framework that balances disciplinary knowledge with professional and civic competence.

Each of your PSLOs should align to at least one of the 10 Essential Skills, but no more than two. Focus on identifying the primary skill each PSLO supports, rather than trying to map every possible skill to a PSLO. If a PSLO appears to align with many skills, that usually means it contains too many ideas and may need to be simplified or separated. Overly complex PSLOs are harder to assess and make it more difficult to identify meaningful actions for improvement.



SCALING LEARNING: UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE OUTCOMES

You will want to think about what skill achievement looks like within your discipline as well as how learning outcomes of a bachelor's program look different from learning outcomes of a master's program, specifically in complexity, independence, and expectation. See examples below:

Research Skills

Bachelor's PSLO:

- Apply foundational research methods to analyze disciplinary problems

Master's PSLO:

- Design independent research using advanced methodologies appropriate to the discipline

Data Analysis

Bachelor's PSLO:

- Interpret results using foundational analytical or statistical tools

Master's PSLO:

- Perform complex analyses and justify methodological choices using scholarly evidence

Communication

Bachelor's PSLO:

- Communicate disciplinary concepts and findings in formats commonly used in the field

Master's PSLO:

- Produce publication-ready written communication appropriate for the professional and scholarly audience

WHAT IS A CURRICULUM MAP?

A curriculum map is a visual representation that shows how courses in a program align with Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLOs). It identifies where each outcome is introduced, reinforced, and mastered across the curriculum. Where are students supposed to learn these PSLOs?

Think of it as a roadmap for both faculty and students: it ensures learning is intentional, coherent, and progressively builds the skills students need to succeed.

HOW CURRICULUM MAPS BENEFIT STUDENTS

- Students see how each course contributes to their overall learning.
- They understand how knowledge and skills build over time and students can recognize opportunities to practice and improve.
- Students understand the connection between classroom learning, professional expectations, and real-world applications.

PROGRAM EXAMPLE: BIOMEDICAL RESEARCH, MS

PSLOs for this program:

1. Students will design independent research using advanced methodologies and justify methodological choices (Research Design).
2. Students will conduct independent research using appropriate tools and protocols (Research Implementation).
3. Students will perform complex analyses and justify statistical methods (Data Analysis).
4. Students will produce publication-ready written and oral communication (Communication).
5. Students will apply ethical principles to research planning and dissemination (Ethical Principles).

COURSE	PSLO1	PSLO2	PSLO3	PSLO4	PSLO5
BIO 601-Research Foundations	I	I	I	I	I
BIO 602-Introduction to Statistical Methods			I		
BIO 620-Advanced Methods	R	R		R	R
BIO 650-Biostatistics & Modeling			R		R
BIO 660-Scientific Writing				R	
BIO 695-Laboratory Rotation	R	R	R	R	R
BIO 699-Thesis Research	M	M	M	M	M

I - introduced
R - reinforced
M - mastered

Notes:

- Mastery (M) typically occurs in capstone, internships, rotation, dissertations, or thesis research.
- A strong map shows a logical progression (I --> R --> M) across the curriculum

Question to Ask During Curriculum Mapping

- Are all PSLOs adequately covered and sequenced throughout the program?
- Are skills being repeated unnecessarily or missing entirely in key courses?
- Which courses provide opportunities for mastery vs. introduction or reinforcement?
- Are assessments occuring at appropriate spots in the currculum?
- Do students have clear opportunities to practice and apply each skill at increasing levels of complexity?

Quick Check

- Is every PSLO mapped to at least one required course?
- If every required course mapped to at least one PSLO?

Designing Assessments

Once programs have developed their PSLOs and determined how the curriculum intentionally builds students' skills over time, the next step is to design assessments that can actually show whether students are achieving those outcomes. This is where programs obtain valuable information that can be used to make strengthen the curriculum, refine teaching practices, and enhance student support.

There are some key considerations when developmenting an assessment and ensuring that the data collected is actionable. High-quality assessments share several key characteristics:

- They directly assess student performance of the stated skill
- They use a rubric with clear, observable criteria
  - Transparent criteria help faculty pinpoint where students excel and where they struggle, making it easier to identify patterns, target improvements, and ensure scoring consistency across instructors and sections.
- They reflect authentic professional or scholarly tasks
  - When assessments mirror the kinds of activities students will encounter in their discipline or careers, students perceive the work as meaningful and relevant. which increases engagement and deepens learning.

Direct Assessments: involve the actual demonstration of student knowledge or skills. They are based on observable evidence of what students can do or produce in relation to measurable learning outcomes. Examples include exams, quizzes, research papers, demonstration performances, and performances, and presentations. These methods provide the strongest evidence of student learning because they show student's ability directly.

Indirect Assessments: capture perceptions, opinions, or reflections about learning. They do not measure performance itself but instead offer insight into how students or others perceive their learning experiences. Examples include surveys, focus groups, exit interviews, or alumni reflections. While these methods provide useful information about attitudes, values, and experiences, they are not as strong as direct measures because they rely on self-report and interpretation.

DIRECT VS INDIRECT

You may have heard people talking about direct vs indirect assessments. While we encourage the use of direct assessments because they actually demonstrate a student's knowledge or skills, both direct and indirect assessments play an important role in understanding student learning, and a strong assessment plan can include both.

Assessment methods	Direct	Indirect
Behavioral observations of students behavior or ratings of student skills by supervisor	▼	
Summaries and assessments of electronic class discussion threads	▼	
Exit and other interviews or focus groups		▼
Faculty developed exams or assignments	▼	
student, alumni, and employer satisfactions		▼
Oral exams	▼	
Student reflections on their values, attitudes, and beliefs if developing those are intended	▼	
Portfolio	▼	
Simulations or think-aloud tasks	▼	
Standardized exams or scores and pass rates on appropriate licensure or certifcation exams	▼	
Surveys and questionnaires		▼
Course grades and grade distributions		▼

What about grades?

Grades can be a valuable source of information for evaluating a program, particularly during comprehensive program reviews, because they can reveal meaningful patterns in student progression and success. For example, examining DFW rates across required courses can help faculty identify points in the curriculum where students are more likely to withdraw from the program, repeat courses, or fall behind, all of which carry real costs in terms of time, money, and retention. In one program, an analysis of DFW data showed that students who succeeded tended to have stronger math preparation, while those who struggled often lacked foundational skills. Based on this insight, the program advised students to complete an introductory math course prior to enrolling in the gateway class. After making this change, DFW rates decreased in subsequent years demonstrating how grade-based data can support thoughtful, evidence-informed adjustments to curriculum design and student support.

However, while grades can be highly useful for understanding program-level trends, they are not ideal for assessing Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLOs). Course grades typically combine many different elements such as tests, homework, participation, attendance, group projects, extra credit, and sometimes behavioral or effort-based factors into one composite score. Because this single grade combines multiple components, they do not isolate performance on specific skills or outcomes. As a result, grades can obscure rather than clarify whether students have met particular PSLOs. For PSLO assessment, programs should rely on direct evidence aligned to clearly defined criteria (e.g., rubric assignments, embedded exam questions). This approach allows for more accurate interpretation of student learning and more actionable insight.

Point to Remember:

Although grades are useful for monitoring student progress and certifying completion, they cannot reliably show whether students achieve a specific Program Student Learning Outcome because:

- Grades bundle many skills and behaviors together
- Two faculty teaching the same course may grade differently
- A higher grade may reflect effort, attendance, or compliance and not mastery
- A low grade may reflect missing work, not lack of skill
- Grades rarely map cleanly to individual learning outcomes.

“It is important to remember that the focus is not a score or grade, but the student knowledge or skill that is represented by that score or grade.” (Rogers, 2003, p4)

TILT & Assignment Design Resources

UK’s Center for Teaching and Learning (CELT) provides a number of resources and workshops on assignment design. These concepts also apply to program assessments. For example, TILT (Transparency in Learning and Teaching), is one framework for designing assignments and in turn assessments. It is grounded in research that shows that students’ performance is improved when assignments are clear and transparent. Since program assessments are often embedded within individual courses, meaning that a single assignment or project is used both for grading and for evaluating student mastery of PSLOs, the TILT framework strengthens program-level assessments by ensuring assignments clearly articulate three elements:

- Purpose: students understand why they are completing the assignment and how these can align with broader program competencies or professional expectations.
- Task: student know exactly what they are expected to do so program assessments more accurately capture whether students have mastered the intended outcomes.
- Criteria: students know how the work will be evaluated and what excellence looks like. This also improves assessment data because it minimizes the influence of hidden expectations, implicit norms, or instructor-specific practices.

Integrating these elements into the design of assignments used for program assessment improves student performance for all students and produces cleaner, more meaningful data for continuous improvement. In the appendices we have included a rubric for assessing assignments on the TILT framework.

Rubric Design

Not all assessment require a rubric, however, rubrics can help ensure consistency, clarity, and fairness in evaluating students' work. The literature identifies two primary types of rubrics: analytic and holistic. Below is a brief overview of their differences, followed by an example of an analytic rubric with a brief explanation of why this type of rubric is particularly useful for program assessment .

Analytic	Holistic
• You have multiple assessable criteria • You need detailed feedback (Strengths and Weaknesses) • Criterion could be weighted • Program Assessment	• You need to make an overall (holistic) judgment • Performance is best evaluated as a whole • Low-stakes/time-sensitive

The American Association for Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) provides 16 open source rubrics that were designed by teams of faculty experts across the United States and are available for download and use. Their rubrics are examples of analytic rubrics because they are divided by multiple criteria. One benefit of using this type of rubric is that a program can aggregate scores across students to identify strengths and opportunities within the curriculum.

For example, the result below show the percentage of students scoring within each category. We can see that students are performing well in "Innovative Thinking" and "Taking Risks", while scoring lower on "Solving Problems" and "Acquiring Competencies". These are actionable data points that can support faculty decision-making within the program. For instance, faculty might add more case studies or invite an expert to present their work and walk students through how they solved a complex problem, providing a model for evaluating and revising one's own work.

value RUBRICS

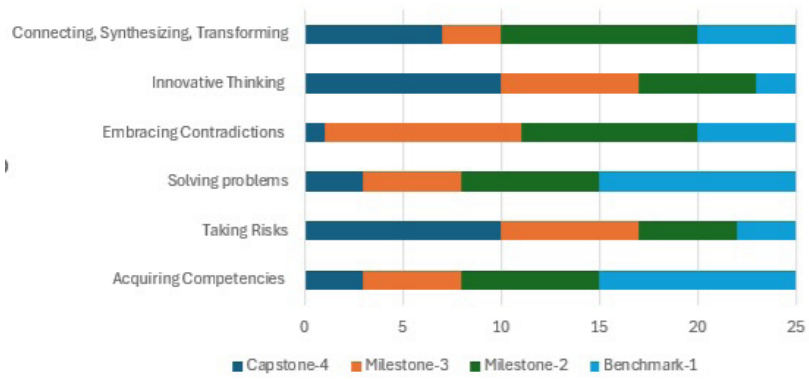
CREATIVE THINKING VALUE RUBRIC

For more information, please contact value@aacu.org

AAC&U

Evaluators are encouraged to assign a zero to any work sample or collection of work that does not meet benchmark (cell one) level performance.

	Capstone 4	Milestones 3	Milestones 2	Benchmark 1
Acquiring Competencies *This step refers to acquiring strategies and skills within a particular domain.*	Reflect: Evaluates creative process and product using domain-appropriate criteria.	Create: Creates an entirely new object, solution, or idea that is appropriate to the domain.	Adapt: Successfully adapts an appropriate exemplar to his/her own specifications.	Model: Successfully reproduces an appropriate exemplar.
Taking Risks *May include personal risk (fear of embarrassment or rejection) or risk of failure in successfully completing assignment (i.e., going beyond original parameters of assignment, introducing new materials and forms, tackling controversial topics, advocating unpopular ideas or solutions).*	Actively seeks out and follows through on untested and potentially risky directions or approaches to the assignment in the final product.	Incorporates new directions or approaches to the assignment in the final product.	Considers new directions or approaches without going beyond the guidelines of the assignment.	Stays strictly within the guidelines of the assignment.
Solving Problems	Not only develops a logical, consistent plan to solve problem, but recognizes consequences of solution and can articulate reason for choosing solution.	Having selected from among alternatives, develops a logical, consistent plan to solve the problem.	Considers and rejects less acceptable approaches to solving problem.	Only a single approach is considered and is used to solve the problem.
Embracing Contradictions	Integrates alternate, divergent, or contradictory perspectives or ideas fully.	Incorporates alternate, divergent, or contradictory perspectives or ideas in an exploratory way.	Includes (recognizes the value of) alternate, divergent, or contradictory perspectives or ideas in a small way.	Acknowledges (mentions in passing) alternate, divergent, or contradictory perspectives or ideas.
Innovative Thinking *Novelty or uniqueness (of idea, claim, question, form, etc.)*	Extends a novel or unique idea, question, format, or product to create new knowledge or knowledge that crosses boundaries.	Creates a novel or unique idea, question, format, or product.	Experiments with creating a novel or unique idea, question, format, or product.	Reformulates a collection of available ideas.
Connecting, Synthesizing, Transforming	Transforms ideas or solutions into entirely new forms.	Synthesizes ideas or solutions into a coherent whole.	Connects ideas or solutions in novel ways.	Recognizes existing connections among ideas or solutions.



Tips for Rubric Development:

- Avoid too many criteria
- Avoid vague descriptors
- Avoid misaligned expectations

IMPLEMENTATION FIDELTY

In closing, an assessment plan is only useful if it is implemented as intended. When courses, assignments, and rubrics are applied consistently, assessment evidence reflects student learning rather than differences in instructional practice. Also, if assessments plans are changed too frequently, it can be difficult to interpret and may point to problems that are not actually about student learning.

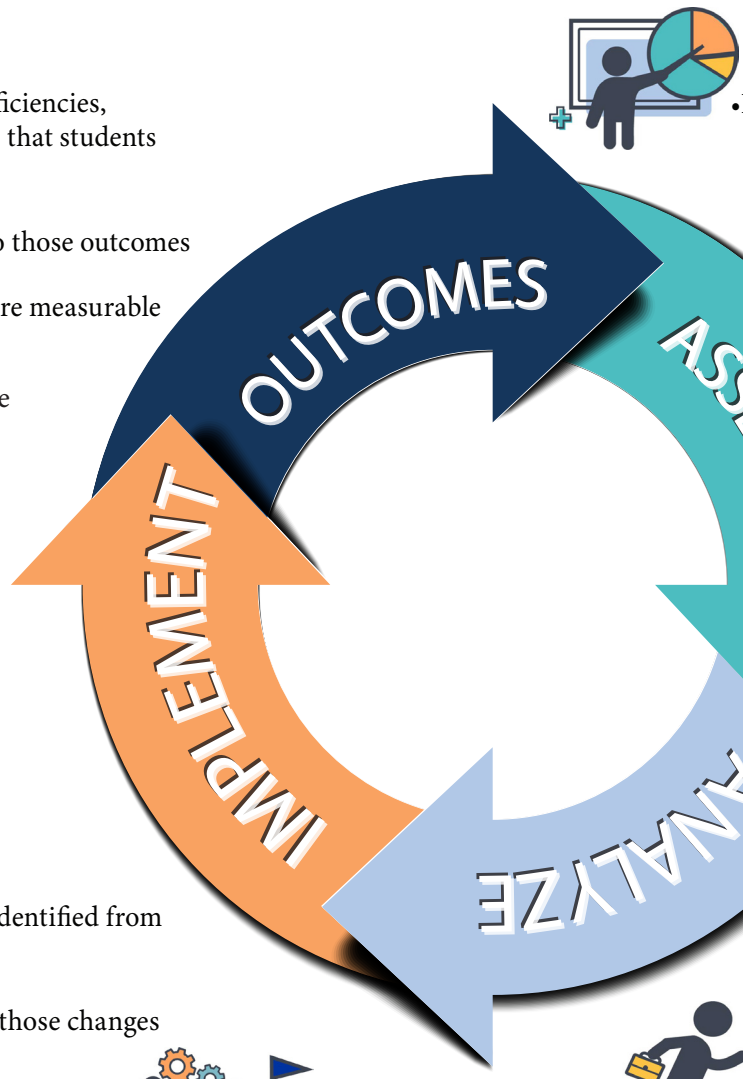
For example, students in different sections of the same course may experience the curriculum differently if assignments, expectations, or levels of feedback vary. Similarly, when faculty use a shared rubric without common understanding or calibration, differences in scoring often reflect rater interpretation rather than student performance.

Consistent implementation, using agreed-upon curriculum, assignments, common criteria, and occasional calibration, supports higher-quality evidence. This allows faculty to confidently use assessment results to identify strengths, pinpoint gaps, and make informed decisions about curriculum and instruction, which is the central purpose of assessment.

ANNUAL STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Assessment is an ongoing process used to strengthen programs. By taking an inquiry-based approach to understanding how and what students learn, we can identify areas for improvement, sustain effective practices, and ensure that our educational experiences are equitable.

Once a new program is implemented, it will be expected to participate fully in this process by submitting annual assessment reports. These reports help us document student learning, monitor progress over time, and make informed decisions that enhance program quality and student success



OUTCOMES

•Identify outcomes (proficiencies, knowledge, experiences) that students should achieve.

•Align the curriculum to those outcomes

•Ensure that outcomes are measurable

QUICK TIPS

•Degree programs should have 4-10 outcomes

•Certificate programs should have 2-4 outcomes

ASSESS

•Provide students with opportunities to learn

•Measure students achievement on program learning outcomes

QUICK TIPS

•At least one outcome should be measured each year

•All outcomes should be assessed at least once over a three year period

Implement

•Implement changes identified from your analyses

•Assess the impact of those changes

•Celebrate success!

QUICK TIPS

•Each year, provide at least one update on a previous action

Analyze

•Reflect on data and feedback from faculty, staff, and students

•Identify opportunities to improve students' learning

QUICK TIPS

•At least one action item should be identified each year

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