

Southern Oregon University

**Ad Hoc Report
March, 2021**



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Introduction

This report responds to NWCCU's assessment and record of action following Southern Oregon University's Fall 2019 Mid-Cycle Evaluation Report, in which the Commission recommended that SOU "Continue to expand the use of assessment data and document the assessment processes and results to inform academic and learning support planning and practices that lead to enhancement in student learning achievements (i.e. 'closing the loop'). Furthermore, the evaluators recommend that all graduate programs be included in the assessment processes. (2020 Standards: 1.C.7)." (Appendix AH15)

1. **Recommendation 1: "Closing the Loop" (1.C.7)**

As noted by the peer evaluation team that conducted the 2019 site visit, SOU has implemented a number of practices and systems that ensure that programs engage in systematic, cyclical, and iterative assessment work. Among these are:

- Annual assessment reporting and review procedures that are standard and widely adopted across the institution;
- Continued review and adaptation of rubrics and assessment reporting and tracking resources for programs;
- Regular training and support for programs, including assessment workshops and individual training opportunities and resources;
- Campus-wide use of Nuventive Improve assessment software, which enables individual programs to document and continually update assessment data, including program-level outcomes, means of assessment, targets, results, and actions taken;
- Ongoing assessment of core competencies of written and oral communication, critical thinking and quantitative reasoning.

As documented in our 2019 Mid-Cycle Evaluation, SOU has made considerable progress in using our assessment reporting and documentation system to enable program-level outcomes to map to core themes, the [institutional mission](#) and [strategic planning](#) goals. We have developed customized analytics to generate real-time reports that demonstrate mission fulfillment, intentional planning and institutional effectiveness.

Despite our strengths in assessment planning, documentation of outcomes, and intentional integration with other institutional processes, the impact of assessment work as measured in continuous improvement of student learning outcomes is an ongoing challenge. Some programs *are* intentionally implementing changes based on their assessment activities (revising curriculum and/or student achievement targets on an annual basis, for example), but fail to document them. The Improve system enables programs to document "closing of the loop" using the "Actions Taken" function, which is associated with all means of assessment entered into the program. In some cases, programs may not make full use of this functionality and lose the opportunity to demonstrate continuous improvement. In other cases, programs gather considerable data, but struggle to find means or capacity to apply these data to programmatic improvements in student learning outcomes.

We have made significant progress over the last academic year in documenting and identifying ways to address these challenges, primarily by focusing the efforts of the University Assessment Committee, and

SOU's Director of Assessment. Advances made toward expanding the use of assessment data and its effect on student learning in the 18 months since the Mid-Cycle Evaluation report are outlined below.

It should be noted that, like many institutions, SOU has also had to rapidly and extensively adapt to the demands and opportunities associated with the remote instruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are seeking ways to identify impacts of this shift on student learning and ways to assess these. With the onset of the pandemic and the need to adjust our learning environments, significant additional support has been made available to all of our academic faculty, primarily via professional development opportunities identified and administered by SOU's Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL), and supported by the Provost's Office. These are documented on the CATL [website](#).

a. Training and resources on “closing the loop” for academic program faculty

SOU's University Assessment Committee (UAC) meets bi-weekly throughout the academic year. Its membership consists of teaching faculty, a student member, and several ex officio members (the Director of Assessment, the Associate Provost, the Director of Undergraduate Studies, and an Instructional Designer from the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning). Enhancing and documenting continuous improvement are the primary objectives of the UAC's charge. Its primary tasks include annual assessment of student writing and other artifacts (for example, analysis of first-year and senior writing), developing and revising assessment rubrics and templates for academic programs, making resources and training available to faculty, and reviewing annual assessment reports. With respect to the latter, each academic year, all academic program assessment reports are reviewed by the UAC, after which the Director of Assessment meets with each program individually to present and discuss results of these reviews, and to identify priorities and next steps.

In AY 19-20, the academic program assessment cycle was revised, moving the deadline for annual assessment reports from spring to fall in order to accommodate spring deadlines for Academic Program Review reporting, which was reimplemented after several years of hiatus and revision. This was an intentional decision made previously to accommodate chair and faculty workload and schedules, but it also turned out to be serendipitous. As the spring deadline would have coincided with the initial onset and response to COVID-19, it is likely that programs would have struggled to complete and submit reports in the Spring. Our fall submission rate was relatively strong (25 out of 33 programs submitted).

The UAC also designs and presents several Assessment Workshops each academic year. In AY 19-20, the Winter Assessment workshop focused specifically on Senior Capstones and utilized both indirect (NSSE) and direct (senior writing), assessment of student learning to better understand programmatic approaches to Capstone assignments, assessment, and use of data. Following receipt of NWCCU's recommendation, we were fortunate to be able to use data gathered on Capstones to develop manageable, supportable and relevant ways to encourage better and more extensive use of assessment data and to emphasize actions taken and results achieved.

The Winter 20 workshop presented results of annual assessment of senior writing from the previous year and NSSE data reporting seniors' perceptions of gains made in outcomes that connect to Capstone outcomes. Program faculty, Capstone instructors, and chairs were queried about their Capstone courses and assessment through a survey distributed prior to the workshop. During the workshop, faculty worked in small groups to address several topics: best practices for Capstone classes (“Description”), developing realistic and measurable Capstone learning outcomes (“Purpose”), assignment design

(“Task”), and developing assessment criteria (Appendix AH1). We learned that most academic programs assess and retain Capstone data, but not all are applying these data to intended outcomes or targets.

The Spring 20 workshop presented revisions to the assessment report template and invited programs to reflect on and share how they approached assessment during the pandemic. Not surprisingly, faculty noted concerns about workload and increased demands on their time, difficulties adjusting to the remote environment, and changes to teaching practices and student artifacts as concerns impacting their assessment (and other) activities in Spring 20. (Appendices AH2; AH3; AH4)

In Fall 20, assessment “Help Sessions” were held via Zoom for chairs and assessment personnel in order to assist them with assessment reports and inputting information into the software program, Improve. These sessions and additional resources were intended to support programs’ use of assessment data (primarily gathering and analyzing results), and guide them on how to close the loop by identifying and demonstrating discrete steps (i.e. completing the “actions taken” section of assessment reporting in Improve) prior to submission of AY 19-20 annual reports.

Results of the UAC’s review of the Fall 20 program reports are found in Appendix AH5. Areas in which programs scored the highest (on a 4-point scale, where 1 represents “beginning” and 4 represents “robust”), were:

- alignment of program outcomes to core themes;
- alignment of program outcomes to strategic plan directions;
- extent to which faculty are engaged in assessment activities;
- provision of appropriate means of assessment provided for program learning outcomes.

Lowest scores were recorded for:

- extent which program data analysis is conducted and applied to continued improvement;
- demonstrable evidence that assessment activities lead to changes designed to improve student learning;
- integration of assessment activities into program mission and operations.

These results were consistent with the feedback on the Mid-Cycle Evaluation and NWCCU’s recommendation. Accordingly, UAC’s efforts in AY 20-21, and specifically, in training provided at the Winter 21 Workshop, focus on “Closing the Loop” (Appendix AH6). Prior to this workshop, a [survey](#) was administered to faculty and chairs, asking programs to identify:

- Practices used to close the assessment loop
- Practices or aspects of closing the loop that were most challenging to them
- Areas of support or resources that would be most helpful to them.

Survey responses indicated that programs were most commonly engaged in the practices of:

- reviewing assessment results with their faculty colleagues;
- revising pedagogy;
- revising assessment tools, such as rubrics;

- adjusting pedagogy or course content to improve learning outcomes;
- revising data collection and analysis to improve alignment with learning outcomes.

When surveyed about challenges to “closing the assessment loop”, programs most frequently identified:

- intentional and efficacious review of assessment results in order to measure impact and achieve targets;
- using data to allocate faculty time and instructional resources;
- revising curriculum, pedagogy or data collection and analysis to improve student achievement or alignment with learning outcomes
- aligning assessment with program mission and operations.

The resources most frequently identified as either currently or potentially beneficial to programs were: time and faculty resources, better processes (technical and human) to support assessment, and more buy-in or support from faculty colleagues. Notably, the factor most commonly identified “the most desirable potential resource” was baseline data on incoming students from which to assess improvement (Appendix AH7).

The Winter workshop was designed around how to use results from assessment activities and student data to effect achievement of student learning outcomes, and on tools and resources to help streamline assessment processes. Resources distributed to faculty included a sample template to enhance assessment planning, materials from NWCCU training on data collection and continuous quality improvement, and breakout room discussions focusing on different elements of the assessment cycle.

Three exemplar programs (Education, Business and English) were invited to present “Things That Work”, highlighting effective practices and demonstrating results achieved through the use of data to effect planning and improvement. Evidence of these programs’ achievements in these areas is demonstrated in their “Four Column Report” which compiles a real-time summary of the status of Program Outcomes, Means of Assessment, Results and Actions Taken (Appendices AH8; AH9; AH10) and detailed below.

The workshop provided a much better understanding of the challenges identified by programs seeking to close the loop and provided resources that we anticipate will help them address those challenges. To follow up on this, we intend to provide additional training in the spring, focusing particularly on those programs whose “Actions Taken” are absent or under-developed, and on those for whom improvements in student learning and targets are concerns.

b. Exemplar Programs

English: SOU’s English program has demonstrated a successful effort to “close the loop” by examining its skill, dispositional and capacity outcomes. In previous years, direct assessment of “skills” assessing student accomplishment in writing (based on their intermediate intensive writing course and their Capstone course) indicated that students were not achieving target goals, nor were program-level improvements successful. One cause for this was that all faculty were not involved in assessment of all student artifacts, nor were they using the same assessment instruments. Starting in AY 17-18, the program revised the process to involve all faculty in assessment of the same papers, using the same common rubric, in order to norm and standardize their assessment. After focusing assessment to two skill outcomes (Critical Analysis and Writing Effectiveness), they initiated a process of collectively scoring papers and determining areas in which improvement were needed and subsequently made several changes, including:

- Adjusting curriculum to focus on skills on which students were performing poorly
- Distribution of the program rubrics to students with their assignments
- Adjustment of targets based on findings and setting aspirational goals connected directly to previous years' data
- Plans to develop a matched pairs analysis, comparing student achievement in their 300-level and 400-level writing to identify gains achieved.

Education: Describing their approach as “using rubrics to better capture the nuances of student success and struggle,” Education has focused on its foundational course in Multicultural Education, a required course for all students taken in their junior year. Assessment is undertaken by a research paper, for which the program had generated a rubric and an assessment target of 100% of students achieving a score of 3 (or “proficient”) on a 4-point scale.

After failing to meet that target for several years (with approximately 47% of students achieving proficiency), the program analyzed their data, their rubric and their assessment process. They refined both the assignment and its intended outcomes to better address program-level outcomes, and the rubric, with clearly-defined criteria and weighted point ranges. In addition, the program has also adopted a “wraparound” supportive approach to students identified as at-risk in the area of writing, by providing 1-credit writing courses that target students who score poorly on their program assessments, including one-on-one writing mentorship provided by program faculty and library support specialists, and augmenting these opportunities with consultative support on time management, executive function and organizational skills.

Business: Business collects and assesses a significant amount of data in order to maintain ACBSP accreditation and described its main assessment challenge as “how to eat an elephant.” The program’s “one bite a time” approach to organizing, maintaining and reporting assessment data was presented to participants in the Winter workshop in order to provide practical tips and approaches to maintaining a constant cycle of gathering, applying, and assessing data. The program has created several templates and planning resources to facilitate the year-round collection and analysis of data, which was adapted and shared a resource for all programs. It clearly demonstrates year-to-year plans and completion of means of assessment, outcomes, analysis and improvement plans. While the Improve system offers much the same data for programs, it does not integrate a discrete planning tool or faculty assignment tracker, which the Business Program’s bespoke planner does. As planning and allocation of resources have been identified as barriers to closing the assessment loop by multiple programs on campus, this was a useful and well-received resource (see Appendix Business Assessment Handbook)

2. Graduate Programs

Beginning in AY 18-19, each of SOU’s graduate programs completed an assessment report following guidelines which closely parallel undergraduate program assessment. Graduate program reports are reviewed by the university’s Graduate Council, a faculty committee comprised of graduate faculty and coordinators, which reports to Faculty Senate. Program faculty also received training and guidance on conducting program-level assessment, as did Graduate Council members, on reviewing assessment reports. By the end of AY 18-19, all graduate programs’ Improve sites were fully populated, with program outcomes, means of assessment, targets and initial results and intended plans.

As of AY 20-21, all graduate programs have completed two full cycles of report submission, review, feedback and recommendations for next steps. The assessment report template used the previous academic year with graduate programs has been revised to incorporate feedback from the graduate programs and the Graduate Council (Appendices AH11; AH12). Reports were received from 9 of the 10 graduate programs for AY 19-20. The reports have been reviewed by the Graduate Council and the Director of Assessment has met with each program to provide feedback. We anticipate all programs will submit their AY 20-21 reports on time in April.

3. Support Program Assessment

In addition to academic program assessment detailed above, all non-academic or “support” programs at SOU complete and submit annual assessment reports, as well. Using a rubric and template designed for non-academic outcomes and learning support, review of Support Program Assessment reports is undertaken by a 10-member Support Programs Assessment Review Committee (SPARC) representing each functional division on campus. Parallel to the academic programs, reports are reviewed, and results are communicated by the Director of Assessment to programs.

Since the submission of the Mid-Cycle report, work on academic support program assessment has continued, but we noted a precipitous drop in report submission in AY 19-20, due largely to staff furloughs and demands on time and effort associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The support programs assessment report template and rubric were revised extensively in Spring 20 using feedback from programs and SPARC, and were distributed to support program assessment personnel early in spring quarter of 2020 (Appendix AH13; AH14). During spring quarter, two online assessment help sessions were held in order to provide answer to questions, as well as to demonstrate how to enter materials into Improve. Also, in Spring 20, the Director of Assessment created online instructional materials on the Improve software. This video, as well as all assessment report templates and rubrics, are available on the [Program Assessment page](#) of the Institutional Research area on the SOU website. At the time of writing, the Support Programs Assessment Review Committee is preparing to enter the Spring reporting cycle, and are reviewing the goals, processes and schedules of Academic Support Program assessment.

Conclusion

Despite significant challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on virtually every aspect of the institution, some notable gains have been made specific to the institutional goal of addressing the “closing the loop.” These are:

- Continued focus on gathering and using data to document student and learning and improvement;
- Professional development on effective of assessment data provided by both Director of Assessment and UAC, as well as via peer training through use of exemplars in workshops;
- Data gathered from programs that provides us a much more detailed view of what they need to support our goal of “closing the loop”;
- Better rubrics that are continually revised to provide more specific and actionable data in academic and non-academic program assessment activities and that facilitate reporting of actions taken.

List of Ad Hoc Report Appendices

Appendix AH1:	Winter 20 Capstone Workshop Slides
Appendix AH2:	Spring 20 Assessment Workshop Notes
Appendix AH3:	AY 20-21 Academic Program Assessment Report Evaluation Rubric
Appendix AH4:	AY 20-21 Academic Program Assessment Report Guidelines
Appendix AH5:	Winter 21 University Assessment Committee Update
Appendix AH6:	Winter 21 University Assessment Committee Closing the Loop Workshop Agenda
Appendix AH7:	Winter 21 University Assessment Committee Closing the Loop Workshop Slides
Appendix AH8:	Business Administration Program 4-Column Report
Appendix AH9:	English Program 4-Column Report
Appendix AH10:	Education Studies Program 4-Column Report
Appendix AH 11:	AY 20-21 Graduate Program Assessment Report Guidelines
Appendix AH 12:	AY 20-21 Graduate Program Assessment Report Evaluation Rubric
Appendix AH 13:	AY 19-20 Academic Support Program Report Guidelines
Appendix AH 14:	AY 19-20 Academic Support Program Report Evaluation Rubric
Appendix AH 15:	SOU Mid-Cycle Report 2019