

# ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

## HANDBOOK



# ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING AT JACKSON COLLEGE

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JC was an early pioneer in the effort to assess student learning in ways that shaped continuous improvement. Guided first by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) guidelines during the 1970s and 1980s, and more recently by the requirements of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), our college has created and revised its formal plan for assessment of student learning several times. Our current efforts address the need to systematically measure student achievement at three levels: course, program or discipline, and college-wide general education. At each level, the strategy for measurement is appropriately adapted to the conceptual complexity of the learning environment and the expectations held for student performance. Concurrently, the level and extent of data sharing and reporting also vary systematically. In all circumstances, and at all levels, the purpose of assessment remains the strategic improvement of student learning. This common end may take the form of content change, improved delivery of content, improved methods of measurement, improved scheduling or sequencing of instructional effort, improved level of student engagement, and more.

At all levels, our efforts are guided by a coherent strategy, which we publish for students:

## **STUDENT ASSESSMENT AT JC**

Assessment is a vital part of the academic life at JC. The purpose of assessment is to measure student progress in the knowledge, skills and attitudes they exhibit from their studies. Assessment is conducted during class time, at the conclusion of programs of study, and at important stages of the academic cycle on a year by year basis. Students are expected to complete a variety of assessments during their college career. These include course examinations, portfolios, attitude surveys, journals and demonstrations of skills used in occupational fields. A standardized test is administered in selected classes to measure overall student success in the achievement of basic foundational skills. Other assessments are made after students leave JC that help faculty know the long-range effects of their teaching on student employment and the success of students who transfer to other colleges and universities. Teachers identify course learning objectives and communicate them to students in their course syllabi, in classroom materials, or in teacher led discussions about course goals. Learning objectives are closely aligned with the Associate Degree Outcomes. Feedback from student performance on the learning objectives provides faculty with an assessment of the teaching and learning that occurs.

## Assessment at the course level

### **To what extent do students learn what they are supposed to learn in this course? How do we know?**

Within the structure of each course, student learning is frequently measured. The measures vary (tests, exams, homework, research papers, laboratory evaluations, performance measures) based on the nature of the course and the specific course objectives for student learning. Typically, faculty assess more than once for each learning objective identified in the official course outline, which also by design assures equivalence across sections of a course, and provides guidance to faculty on the distribution of time and effort devoted to the identified course outcomes. Just as our classroom examples, demonstrations, and metaphors are adapted to each student and group of students, so too our means of assessment of student learning at the course level are adapted to the outcomes we expect and the goals we define for successful student performance. The aggregate of these individual measures of student learning forms the basis for assigning grades at the end of the course. While the final grade distribution reveals clearly the rate of student success, both faculty and students need more frequent and specific information if the process of learning is to succeed. Ideally, we measure learning often and provide quick, definitive and discrete feedback to students, so they can improve the efficiency of their efforts. At the same time, we realize nearly effortless improvements in delivery; as we get to know our students and their abilities better, we provide better instruction. On some occasions, we craft major changes in a course, and then evaluate how those changes impact subsequent student learning. Ultimately, the common goal of improved student learning and efficient teaching is realized. This cycle of continuous measurement, evaluation, and improvement guides our efforts.

As faculty, we report our course level assessment experiences in our APRP each Winter semester. We may also find common ground and common goals by sharing our experiences with colleagues, particularly colleagues who teach the same course or courses. Because we measure student learning in consistent ways, we can track improvement over time. We may also use this information to assist new faculty as they acculturate to JC, and to document the need for additional funding for course level improvements in equipment, materials, or scheduling formats. As both teachers and learners, we may also choose to share our experiences with colleagues across disciplines or departments, learning from each other and adopting each other's practices when advantageous to do so. Indeed, sharing our experiences with helping students learn often leads to cross-discipline classroom visits and improved collegial relationships.

## Classroom Assessment Techniques

### **How successful was this class session? How do we know?**

Within courses, but not part of course assessment strategies, is a special role for classroom assessment techniques, a procedure made popular by Angelo and Cross (19xx). Procedures such as the One Minute Paper, the Muddiest Point, or the Critical Incident Assessment Questionnaire, help us to know what students learned or failed to learn during a specific class session. These assessments, usually anonymous, help us to fine-tune our instruction, but are patently insufficient as direct measures of student achievement of the learning outcomes for the course. Nonetheless, they are often very informative and helpful, and are to be encouraged. Moreover, their use conveys to students our tactical commitment to improvement of student learning, and signifies that we are a learning organization.

## Assessment at the program or discipline level

### How well does this program prepare students for work or transfer? How do we know?

While some students enroll in one or a few courses to satisfy their goals, many students pursue programs of study designed to provide employable skills or to facilitate transfer to a university. Each type of program has unique expectations of student achievement in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities, and each program measures them in highly articulated fashion. Where appropriate, such strategies as capstone courses, portfolios, summative performance measures, and external validation measures such as licensure exams and transfer experiences, may all play a role. In addition, across all types of programs, faculty are sensitive to issues of student persistence and retention, rates of successful completion of courses within the program, and the extent to which students in later courses are integrating content and concepts across courses within the program. In some cases, measures of student achievement at the program or discipline level are based on direct demonstration of achievement in specific courses focused on capstone or integrative skills. In other cases, measures are more difficult to craft, and assignments are designed to elicit evidence of successful attainment. In many occupational programs, faculty confer with each other as a result of their supervision of students in performance environments. In transfer-oriented or pre-baccalaureate programs, faculty within the core discipline(s) identify integrative abilities expected of students who have successfully completed a significant course sequence, and create means to assess those outcomes. At the program or discipline level, assessment is focused on the core competencies integral to the program, and the abilities of students at program completion, whether their goals are employment, transfer, or both.

Assessment outcomes at the program or discipline level are reported as part of the program/discipline review process, which occurs on a five-year basis. Generally, the review of these data stimulates discussion among program or discipline faculty, which often leads to plans for improvement of student learning. Additionally, the reporting of these data at Academic Council often stimulates further discussion and may lead to innovative action plans, the outcomes of which are similarly focused on improvement of student learning and performance.

## Assessment of General Education at the Degree Level

Each college or university defines general education in a way consistent with their mission and student population. At Jackson College, our definition is reflected in both our published philosophy of general education, and in our assessment strategies.

### General Education Philosophy

*A message to students from JC faculty:*

General education facilitates the development of an informed and educated person who recognizes and respects the diversity of communities, thinks critically and is proficient at fundamental skills. General education engages students in active learning by providing opportunities to observe, analyze and evaluate, and to apply these skills critically to problems. General education fosters the development of

responsible, ethical human beings dedicated to improving their own lives and the lives of others through work, family life, social and political action, cultural awareness and service to others.

Because JC's vision includes a variety of educational, cultural and economic goals, the general education requirements involve both traditional intellectual pursuits and practical skill development. As the general education requirements are designed to ensure breadth and depth of knowledge, they are met through carefully designed programs of study. Programs of study help students meet these goals by addressing each of the skill areas identified in the **Associate Degree Outcomes**. These are skills which the JC Board of Trustees has determined students should develop or enhance while enrolled in the college.

### **Associate Degree Outcomes**

1. Write clearly, concisely and intelligibly
2. Speak clearly, concisely and intelligibly
3. Demonstrate computational skills and mathematical reasoning
4. Demonstrate scientific reasoning
5. Understand human behavior and social systems, the principles which govern them, and their implications for the present and future
6. Understand and appreciate aesthetic experience and artistic creativity
7. Think critically
8. Make responsible decisions in personal and professional contexts
9. Work productively with others, recognizing individual contributions to group success
10. Understand and respect the diversity and interdependence of peoples and cultures

## **Assessment of General Education Outcomes**

**At graduation, to what extent have students achieved the transcendent abilities defined by the college? How do we know?**

Students are certified eligible for graduation only on the professional judgment of the faculty. Only faculty members can recommend a student for the award of college credit, and for an associate degree or certificate of program completion. As a faculty, we have collectively identified ten major outcomes we expect students to achieve prior to the awarding of the associate degree. Not coincidentally, we refer to these competencies or abilities as Associate Degree Outcomes (ADOs). While each graduating student will achieve each outcome, each will, depending on program of study, achieve these outcomes in various ways, just as Rome can be reached via various roads. Similarly, virtually all faculty members in all courses contribute some effort to the development of these outcomes.

Just as the pathways to the achievement of the ADOs vary, so too do the strategies faculty members employ to develop these abilities in their students, and the methods faculty use to assess student achievement of these outcomes. To make the assessment of student achievement at the degree level both possible and meaningful, faculty have selected specific ADOs to assess in each course. Working cooperatively with the General Education Committee, the Assessment Committee drafted templates of rubrics for the specification of learning outcomes and their assessment, for each ADO at both the developing and proficient level. While the specifications of student competencies (leftmost two columns in each rubric) are fixed or consistent, the strategies for assessment and success criteria are adapted for each course. Every course in the JC taxonomy is committed to helping students achieve some improvement in one or more of these degree-level competencies. For each course, responsible (lead)

faculty members edit the rubric to adapt the ADO expectations to the specific discipline and course level. At least once each year, faculty members report their assessment of student progress toward their degree outcomes, at either the developing or proficient level, for each course. In this effort, lead faculty have a special role in aggregating data across sections of a course. The assessment committee provides forms for individual faculty, both full-time and adjunct, to easily report their individual course section data to the lead faculty member, who then forwards the aggregated data electronically to the committee.

In some years, JC has also employed the CAAP test as a means of tracking student progress in a number of nationally-normed skill areas as they pursue the associate degree. In addition, the college has used other indirect measures of student engagement and progress. We collectively use this information to improve recruitment, retention, and program design. As a college, we share aggregated data with our Board of Trustees, who have included this requirement in one of their annual “Ends” reports, congruent with their policy governance model. In all cases, the data are used to improve student learning and experience at the college and beyond.

## Roles of the Assessment Committee

From time to time, faculty members are selected to serve on the assessment committee. During their tenure on this committee, they work toward four ends:

First, committee members serve to **coach** other faculty, particularly those new to the college or to assessment of student learning. While almost all faculty members arrive prepared to assess student performance at the course level, additional skills and conceptual effort are needed for program and degree level (general education ADO) assessment efforts. Committee members are happy to meet, individually or collectively, with faculty who have questions or would like to collaborate in their assessment efforts.

Second, members of the assessment committee work to **coordinate** the collection and reporting of those data elements integral to our assessment plan, particularly at the degree level. We also stand ready to assist faculty in completing assessment features of program and discipline reviews, where information sharing across disciplines or departments might benefit from our efforts.

Third, it is the responsibility of the assessment committee to **communicate** the status of and any changes in the assessment plan or practices at JC. Our primary audience is, of course, our faculty colleagues; we also provide aggregate data and information to the college President and Board of Trustees as part of the annual Ends report on Assessment of Student Learning.

Finally, it is the responsibility of the assessment committee to periodically **celebrate** successful efforts to use assessment results to improve student learning. This may occur in any of a number of forums, settings, or collectives, and is a vital component of academic life, just as assessment of student learning is a vital component of the professional responsibility of faculty.

## **The future of assessment at JC**

Like most colleges in the region, JC is making good progress in its effort to assess and improve student learning. Since improvement is the goal, no real end of assessment can be envisioned; perfection in learning and teaching are not in sight. However, as we evaluate our efforts, individually and collectively, progress can be observed. Current efforts to define and detail assessment at each of the three levels, and to improve faculty participation in the assessment of student learning at the program and degree (general education) levels, will continue to focus the efforts of the committee for the immediate future.

It is the essence of assessment, as stated so forcefully by the HLC, that the assessment effort is owned, governed, and exercised by the faculty. As faculty representatives, the assessment committee invites comments, suggestions for improvement, and collegial support. Thank you for all you do to improve student learning at JC.