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**MASTER SYLLABI:**

**The First Step Toward Assessing Learning Outcomes**

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**ABSTRACT**

**To construct a systematic, assessment of student-learning outcomes for each academic program, current and well-articulated master syllabi must be used by faculty. Every course syllabus should identify specific learning outcomes, methods by-which the learning will occur, and appropriate assessment techniques or tools. From all of the relevant course syllabi, each program can be evaluated for student-learning outcomes accomplishment.**

***Objectives:***

- 1. To illustrate a faculty approach to student-learning outcomes.**
- 2. To demonstrate that master syllabi are key elements in successful academic programs.**
- 3. To impress upon participants that planning and evaluation through master syllabi are necessary ingredients to achieve course and program objectives.**
- 4. To provide attendees with an opportunity to practice what they learn.**
- 5. To provide tools related to conducting assessment.**

# **MASTER SYLLABI: The First Step Toward Assessing Learning Outcomes**

- I. Institutional Effectiveness**
- II. Faculty Involvement**
- III. Educational Outcomes**
- IV. Embedded Assessment**
- v. Critical Ingredients of Master Syllabi**

## I. **Institutional Effectiveness**

Whenever I have asked others to explain to me their understanding of the meaning of institutional effectiveness, the one I remember most is: institutional effectiveness is a four-letter word! Intense interest in measuring the outcomes of higher education especially comprehensive program assessment of student learning is now beginning its third decade. The available evidence suggests that this intense interest will continue and that the performance bar will be raised. Although institutional effectiveness is a university-wide task, renewed focus is on the primary mission of all institutions of higher education which is student learning. Margaret Sullivan, director of the College Consulting Network of the Commission on Colleges at the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and Peggy Wilds, member of the College Consulting Network, SACS, make this point very clear in their recent article, "Institutional Effectiveness: More than Measuring Objectives, More than Student Assessment":

“. . . the most important purpose of an institution of higher education is to educate students. Thus the most important element of institutional effectiveness is the impact the institution has on the knowledge base of students.”

Similarly, the new essential requirements for candidacy and membership by SACS state that “The institution demonstrates that each academic program has stated learning outcomes and ensures appropriate levels of student achievement.”

Related to this threshold requirement are indicators of quality:

1. There are appropriate levels of student achievement and equivalent quality of all programs regardless of method of instruction or location of program.
2. The administration and faculty are responsible for the development of programs.
3. The institution has a defined process for establishing curriculum.
4. The institution has clear and accurate descriptions of curricular offerings.
5. The institution has a variety of means for evaluating student performance, properly discerning levels of student performance.
6. The institution supports a learning environment for creative and scholarly achievement.
7. An effective relationship exists between curricular content and practices in the field.
8. The institution has a systematic and effective instructional process.
9. The institution maintains an environment that supports and encourages scholarly interaction and accessibility among faculty and students.

While these indicators are likely to satisfy other external constituents as well, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in its monograph, Different Perspectives on Information about Educational Quality: Implications for the Role of Accreditation, reminds us that:

“The various constituents of higher education—the academy itself, the federal government, state government, employees, professionals and students and parents—vary in their expectations of quality based on two elements:

Unit of Analysis: What is the object of assuring quality? Is it the institution, a program within the institution, or the student?

Focus of Quality Determination: What types of information are needed to provide reliable information about quality? Is it information about institutional or programmatic resources, processes, or structure? Is it information about learning outcomes?”

Satisfying the diverse external constituents’ needs for different information about university performance challenges the institution to create an adequate data-base of information about numerous outcomes. Nonetheless, the focus of university-wide use of master syllabi is twofold:

- 1) Faculty involvement, and
- 2) Student learning outcomes.

## **II. Faculty Involvement**

Both accreditation agencies and universities have struggled with the task of engaging the faculty concerning institutional effectiveness. Yet both types of institutions need the faculty’s affirmative cooperation in order that educational outcomes be as effective as intended. The use of master syllabi should be a major instrument to engage the faculty in the area of student-learning outcomes.

Kurt Landgraf, president and CEO of Educational Testing Service, made this point when he spoke before the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce. At this committee hearing, he said:

“Teachers need to link instructional material to their curriculum.”

In their article, “Don’t Bring Faculty to Assessment, Bring Assessment to Faculty,” Professors Jonson and Calhoun made the following significant point:

“Assessment coordinators frequently are asked by faculty, ‘Why should we spend our valuable time assessing student learning outcomes?’

If we reply, ‘Because our regional (or our professional) accreditor mandates it’ or ‘so we can be accountable to our constituents,’ they are not convinced. Instead, we might offer, ‘because this information can give you previously untapped insights into your educational programs that will help your unit determine how to use its resources and improve its educational programs.’ The italicized words emphasize that the primary purpose of outcomes assessment is to serve the needs and interests of faculty and enhance their contributions to educational programs.”

The master syllabi approach is a way of assisting faculty with this institutional requirement while emphasizing their needs instead of the university’s.

### **III. Educational Outcomes**

To provide institutional context when developing master syllabi the following questions should be considered when reviewing faculty and department effectiveness plans:

1. Was support of the institution’s statement of purpose explicitly established by the unit?
2. Were the goal statements limited in number to three to five?
3. In the case of instructional units, were the goal statements all formulated in terms of what the graduates or program completers as a group would be able to think, know, or do?
4. Do the means of assessment referenced measure the accomplishment of the intended outcomes described?
5. Do the means of assessment seem feasible and appropriate given the time and resources available?
6. Are multiple means of assessment utilized in most cases?
7. Is a “Criteria for Program Success” established for each means of assessment?
8. Is sufficient data provided in the summary of assessment results to convince the reader that the assessment described actually took place?
9. Are the assessment results analyzed in such a way as to focus on the accomplishment of the intended educational outcomes cited?
10. Is there evidence of broad scale faculty involvement in the determination of the use of results with intended and actual educational outcomes?
11. Does the proposed use of results relate to the intended and actual outcome and does the use described seem reasonable?

Finally, using the learning outcomes articulated in the master syllabi, the academic department head should summarize the results per semester that results in an educational program assessment work sheet. Typical items to be included on this worksheet are:

1. time period,
2. expected outcomes,

3. link to university purpose,
4. means of assessment,
5. assessment results, and
6. use of results.

If desired, the items being evaluated can be assigned a weighted scale to achieve a maximum program score of 5. For example, expected outcomes could receive a 1 and use of results a 1.5. The number scale can be enlarged, but remember one assessment goal is to minimize complication whenever possible.

#### IV. **Embedded Assessment in Master Syllabi**

Today, if master syllabi do not identify criterion measures by which to judge the level of student success in achieving learning objectives, they are inadequate and incomplete. Assessment of course goals must be embedded in the syllabus used and evaluated throughout the learning period. If in addition to content learning, general goals such as learning to learn independently, encouraging reflection, learning by doing, etc. must also have a means of assessment. Consequently, strategies and criteria measures must be predetermined in the master syllabi. The course-embedded assessment process should include the following activities:

- Specify intended outcomes.
- Identify related courses.
- Select measures and techniques.
- Assign techniques to courses and embedded measures.
- Specify assessment criteria.
- Evaluate student performance on exams, etc., for course grades.
- Evaluate student performance on course embedded measures.

Examples of course embedded assessments and student assessment sheets are illustrated below.

#### **COURSE EMBEDDED ASSESSMENT PLAN**

##### **Example 1**

- **Intended Outcome.** Students taking freshman level English coursework will demonstrate expertise in using simple research techniques.
- **Related Course(s).** ENGL 102
- **Assessment Measure(s) and Technique(s).** As a course requirement, ENGL 102 students will complete a research project. At least two faculty members will evaluate randomly selected projects using a checklist for determining the appropriate use of simple research techniques.
- **Assessment Criteria.** Evaluators will cite appropriate use of simple research techniques in over 75% of selected student projects.

## COURSE EMBEDDED ASSESSMENT PLAN

### Example 2

- **Intended Outcome.** Graduating seniors in computer information systems will demonstrate expertise in interpersonal and teamwork skills.
- **Related Course(s).** CIS 430
- **Assessment Measure(s) and Technique(s).** Students will develop, write, and present group projects in CIS 430. Each student will be evaluated by other members of his/her group on leadership, responsibility, dependability, respectfulness of others' opinions, and contributions.
- **Assessment Criteria.** At least 70% of students completing the CIS 430 group project will receive ratings of average or higher on evaluations.

Source: Dr. Larry H. Kelley, Course Embedded Assessment Workshop. Texas Christian University. October 23, 2002. Kelley Planning and Educational Services.

**EXAMPLE 1**

**Problem Solving Skills Assessment Sheet**

**Student** \_\_\_\_\_ **Course** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Intended Outcome: the student will use inquiry and quantitative and analytical reasoning to solve problems.**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Rating = 4</b>	<b>Rating = 3</b>	<b>Rating = 2</b>	<b>Rating = 1</b>	<b>Score</b>
Defining the Problem	Student states the problem clearly and identifies underlying issues.	Student adequately defines the problem.	Student fails to define the problem adequately.	Student does not identify the problem	
Developing a Plan to Solve the Problem	Student develops a clear and concise plan to solve the problem, with alternative strategies, and follows the plan to conclusion.	Student develops an adequate plan and follows it to conclusion.	Student develops a marginal plan, and does not follow it to conclusion.	Student does not develop a coherent plan to solve the problem.	
Collecting and Analyzing Information	Student collects information from multiple sources and analyzes the information in-depth.	Student collects adequate information and performs basic analyses.	Student collects inadequate information to perform meaningful analyses.	Student collects no viable information.	
Interpreting Findings and Solving the Problem	Student provides a logical interpretation of the findings and clearly solves the problem, offering alternative solutions.	Student provides an adequate interpretation of the findings and solves the problem, but fails to provide alternatives.	Student provides an inadequate interpretation of the findings and does not derive a logical solution to the problem.	Student does not interpret the findings/reach a conclusion.	
<b>Total</b>					
<b>Overall Score = Total/4</b>					

Source: Dr. Larry H. Kelley, Kelley Planning and Educational Services, LLC

**EXAMPLE 2**  
**Basic Information Technology Skills Assessment Sheet**

Student \_\_\_\_\_ Course \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Intended Outcome: the student will use information technology to prepare written documents, communicate with others, and locate and retrieve information.**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Rating = 3</b>	<b>Rating = 2</b>	<b>Rating = 1</b>	<b>Score</b>
Word Processing	The student's performance of basic word processing tasks (typing the assigned essay, research paper, etc., checking spelling and grammar, and editing/revising the document) was exemplary.	Although the student adequately performed basic word-processing tasks overall, he/she needs to improve in one or more skills areas.	The student exhibited limited word processing skills, and requires remediation to perform basic tasks.	
Internet Use	The student's performance of basic Web search engine tasks (exploring Internet resources, conducting a detailed search for information on the assigned topic, and downloading necessary files) was exemplary.	Although the student adequately performed basic Web search engine tasks overall, he/she needs to improve in one or more skills areas.	The student exhibited limited Web search engine skills, and requires remediation to perform basic tasks.	
Use of E-mail	The student's performance of basic e-mail tasks (communicating with the professor, accessing information from outside sources, and/or transmitting information via e-mail attachment to the professor and/or other e-mail addresses) was exemplary.	Although the student adequately performed basic e-mail tasks overall, he/she needs to improve in one or more skills areas.	The student exhibited limited e-mail skills, and requires remediation to perform basic tasks.	
<b>Total</b>				
<b>Overall Score = Total/3</b>				

Source: Dr. Larry H. Kelley, Kelley Planning and Educational Services, LLC

Much more can be said about the course embedded assessment technique, but the important point here is that master syllabi cannot be used as instruments of institutional effectiveness and faculty involvement without it.

**V. Critical Ingredients of Master Syllabi**

All master syllabi should address the following matters to serve as guidelines for faculty and as a foundational outcomes assessment instrument:

- Department
- Course Number
- Course Title
- Prerequisites
- Well-articulated catalog description
- Intended Learning Outcomes
  - Knowledge
  - Skills
  - Appreciation
  - Understanding
- Criteria measures of intended learning outcomes
- Suggested homework design

Although institutional effectiveness is a university-wide effort, the primary focus of any university's performance is the quantity and quality of student learning while attending the college. A satisfactory and successful learning outcomes cannot be accomplished without well-designed master syllabi and faculty involvement.

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