



New Mexico Highlands University

**Outcomes Assessment Handbook
2021-2023**

**Prepared by the Outcomes Assessment Committee
and
The Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research**

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Overview of Outcomes Assessment

Assessment of student learning outcomes at NMHU involves four distinct but interrelated tasks, each with different timelines and different entities responsible for oversight. Those four processes are assessment of our common core (General Education Assessment), assessment of academic programs (Annual Outcomes Assessment, Program Review, and Program-Specific Accreditation), assessment of educational efforts of the university as a whole (University-Wide Assessment), and Co-Curricular Program Assessment. Support for all assessment activities is provided by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research (OIER).

Assessment Task		Timeline	Overseeing Entity
General Education Assessment		Two-year cycle	Academic Program Faculty
Academic Program Assessment	Outcomes Assessment	Two-year cycle	Academic Program Faculty
	Program Review	Varies (every 5 years)	Academic Program Faculty; Academic Affairs Committee
	Program-Specific Accreditation	Varies by program	Academic Program Faculty
University Wide-Assessment		Two-year cycle	Outcomes Assessment Committee
Co-Curricular Assessment		Two-year cycle	Co-Curricular Program Coordinators; Co-Curricular Outcomes Assessment Committee

There are three basic steps that underlie each aspect of assessment:

1. **Defining** student learning objectives (outcomes)
2. **Evaluating** student success in achieving those objectives (assessment)
3. **Using** the results to implement improvements in programs (closing the loop)

A well-designed outcomes assessment program is based upon assessment activities at the course level, supplemented by program-level data. These data can then be aggregated to provide information regarding specific courses, major programs, the core curriculum, or the university as a whole.

All instructors are expected to have clear learning objectives for their classes, which are assessed at the assignment and course levels. These course-level learning objectives should be aligned with the objectives of the major program. Each program has an outcomes assessment plan in place that

specifies how this process is accomplished. In addition, instructors of core curriculum courses are expected to align their learning objectives with both the university-wide traits for our common core, and with the New Mexico state-mandated essential skills for the relevant content area. Finally, all programs should have learning objectives that are aligned with clear, university-wide expectations regarding outcomes for university graduates.

Assessment procedures at NMHU are based upon the following assumptions:

- All levels of assessment should inform and build upon the others.
- All faculty should be actively involved.
- Assessment should be embedded within regular course or program activities whenever possible.
- Assessment is an ongoing process.
- Assessment is concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of programs, courses, and services, not individuals.
- The specifics of outcomes assessment procedures should be flexible to accommodate the varied needs of the academic programs.
- The results of assessment activities should be clearly linked to program improvements.
- The results of assessment activities should be publicly available.

University-Wide Assessment

The goal of university-wide assessment is to determine whether we, as a university, are imparting to all of our baccalaureate and graduate students the knowledge, traits, and skills we value.

After a survey of faculty and staff, the following four traits were adopted as our expectations for our graduates:

1. Mastery of content knowledge and skills
2. Effective communication skills
3. Critical and reflective thinking skills
4. Effective use of technology

These traits are reflected, as appropriate, on course syllabi and in the outcomes assessment plans of the academic programs. All general education and academic program outcomes assessment data and reports are provided to OIER by faculty assessment coordinators. Data analyses may then be generated by OIER for such uses as:

- Assessment of NMHU students' achievement of the university-wide traits
- Assessment of the core curriculum
- Academic program outcomes assessment
- Accreditation reports
- Data regarding the equivalency of online and face-to-face courses and programs
- Data regarding the equivalency of main campus and center programs
- Data regarding the difference between underclassmen and upperclassmen on achievement of learning outcomes and university-wide traits
- Longitudinal data regarding student achievement of learning outcomes and university-wide traits over time

General Education Assessment

As a public comprehensive university that values liberal arts, assessment of our core curriculum is essential to the NMHU mission. Responsibility for oversight of the assessment of the general education program at NMHU resides with the OIER. Faculty who oversee core courses are responsible for reporting data to OIER. The Outcomes Assessment Committee and OIER will initiate, monitor, and assist faculty with the assessment process. Currently this process serves two distinct purposes: 1) to assess the extent to which our students demonstrate the traits identified by the NMHU faculty as defining an NMHU graduate; and 2) to assess the extent to which our students have attained the learning objectives identified by the State Higher Education Department (HED). These are a series of five “essential skills” taught in the common core: critical thinking; communication; information and digital literacy; quantitative reasoning; and personal and social responsibility.

All instructors teaching courses currently being used as part of the General Education assessment are asked to submit assessment data according to the timeline for academic assessment. The data-collection system is analogous to the system for entering data for academic program assessment. Instructors are asked to indicate which of the four NMHU traits are addressed in their classes and to identify an assignment, exam, or some combination of those that they would use to assess each student’s mastery of those traits. In addition, they are asked to identify assessments that they could use to rate each student’s mastery of each state essential skill. The instructors then rate each student as having achieved or not achieved mastery of the trait or competency. For more information on the state essential skills, see Appendix A: Relationship between HED Essential Skills and NMHU Traits.

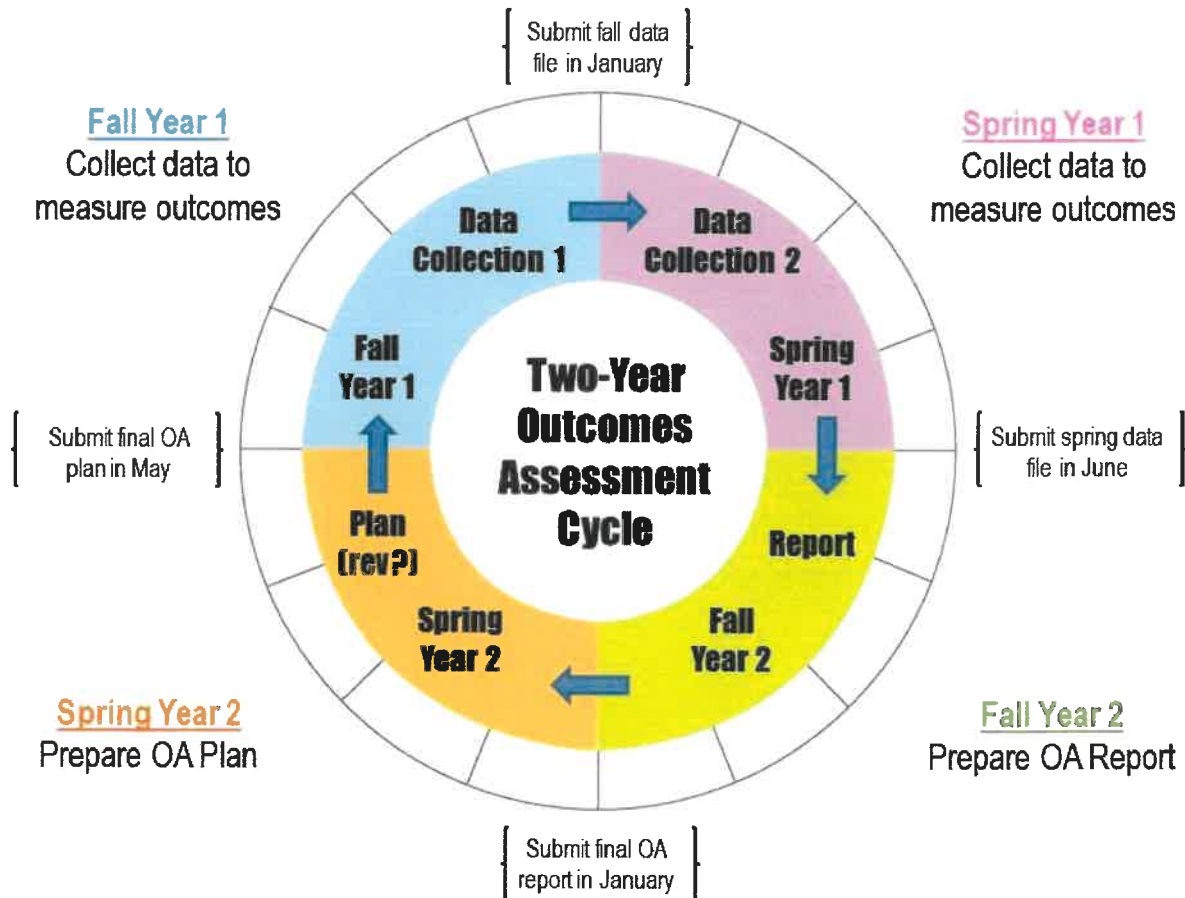
Data are entered via a form provided by the OIER. An example of the form and instructions for collecting the data are included in Appendix B. Detailed guidelines for general education assessment are located in the document titled “NMHU General Education Assessment Guidelines,” available on the OIER website.

Academic Program Outcomes Assessment

Every major program must conduct academic program outcomes assessment on a two-year cycle. The immediate goal of this assessment is to gather specific data regarding how effectively the program is meeting its program-specific student learning objectives. This information can then be used to design improvements to the major curriculum.

Outcomes Assessment Process and Data Collection

Outcomes assessment for academic programs operates on a two-year cycle, as shown in the diagram on the next page.



Academic program outcomes assessment begins with the development of the assessment plan. A well-developed plan is the key to collecting useful and valid data. Specifics on what should be included in the plans and guidelines for developing them are discussed in the next section. Once the program faculty have developed the plans, they are sent to the OIER, where they are archived on the OIER website.

Outcomes assessment data are entered into a form by the faculty assessment coordinator for each academic program. Data for each means of assessment are recorded, with each student coded as a 1 (indicating that student met the criterion for that assessment) or a 0 (indicating that the student did not meet the criterion). The template and instructions are available in Appendix B.

Currently Highlands utilizes a system of peer review to provide feedback to programs regarding their outcomes assessment reports. After reports are completed according to the two-year cycle above, faculty members are asked to review the report of at least one other discipline. The review is guided by the feedback form in Appendix C. After discussion of the feedback with the members of their discipline, each program's OA coordinator submits a new, possibly revised plan to the OIER.

The Outcomes Assessment Plan

In accordance with the NMHU philosophy of keeping outcomes assessment activities flexible, there is

no specific format for the outcomes assessment plan. However, there are general requirements. Each plan must include the following elements:

- 1) The mission statement of the academic program.
- 2) A clear description of three to five student learning outcomes that clearly relate to the mission of the program. Programs may include other outcomes (involving, for example, faculty service or research), but there should be at least three to five student learning outcomes. Each outcome should be linked to one or more of the four university-wide traits.
- 3) A description of the data to be collected to demonstrate each outcome. Programs are encouraged to have more than one measure for each outcome, but care should be taken not to make data collection too cumbersome. A significant portion of the data should be reasonably objective in nature, and specific to the learning outcome, not just whether students passed a particular class. Programs should consider whether it is appropriate to use standardized test scores of some kind. In particular, if the program's alumni regularly take some sort of professional exam after graduating from the program, those test scores should definitely be included as part of outcomes assessment.
- 4) Clear criteria for judging whether each outcome has been met. If the data show that an outcome has not been met, that might indicate the need for revisions to some aspect of the program.

The next page provides an outline of an outcomes assessment plan and instructions for constructing the plan.

Program Outcomes Assessment Plan Template

Degree Program

Degree Program Level (e.g., B.A., B.S., M.A., M.S.)

Program Mission

[Insert your program mission here]

Student Learning Outcome 1

[Describe your first student learning outcome here. You should have between 3 and 5 student learning outcomes]

NMHU Traits Specifically Linked to Student Learning Outcome 1

[Identify the NMHU traits that link to this student learning outcome]

First Means of Assessment for Student Learning Outcome 1

[Describe how the first student learning outcome will be assessed]

Second Means of Assessment for Student Learning Outcome 1

[If you have more than one means of assessing the first student learning outcome, describe the second means here. We do not recommend having more than 3 means of assessment for each learning outcome]

Student Learning Outcome 2

NMHU Traits Specifically Linked to Student Learning Outcome 2

First Means of Assessment for Student Learning Outcome 2

Second Means of Assessment for Student Learning Outcome 2

[Repeat the headings as appropriate for your plan]

Instructions for Preparing an Outcomes Assessment Plan

Student Learning Outcomes

Identify three to five student learning outcomes that students in the academic program are expected to attain. These should be measurable and should directly relate to the knowledge, skills, and abilities students are expected to demonstrate.

If the program has accreditation from an outside agency, faculty should consider designing the assessment to ensure the assessment of learning outcomes and collection of data that will address the requirements of the accrediting agency.

Student learning outcomes and thresholds for meeting them should remain the same across all teaching modalities of a course (e.g., in-person, online synchronous, online asynchronous).

NMHU Traits Specifically Linked to Student Learning Outcomes

Indicate how the student learning outcome links to one or more of the NMHU traits.

The traits are:

1. Mastery of Content Knowledge and Skills
2. Effective Communication Skills
3. Critical and Reflective Thinking Skills
4. Effective Use of Technology

Means of Assessment for Student Learning Outcomes

Under this heading you describe how each outcome will be measured. Only one means of assessment is required, but more than one may be included (we do not recommend more than three means of assessment for each outcome).

Descriptions of the means of assessment should include the criterion for success, for example “80% of students will score 85% or better on the final paper.” Whenever possible, base the criterion on the percentage of students the program expects to meet a specific threshold (as in the example just given). This will allow the use of the outcomes assessment data collection spreadsheet, which requires that students be given either a 1 (to indicate that they met the threshold on the measure) or a 0 (to indicate that they did not meet the threshold).

Deciding how to assess student learning outcomes is the most difficult part of designing an assessment plan. Here are some things to consider while designing assessment methods.

Embedded or Add-on Assessments

Assessments can already be *embedded* in courses or other program activities, or they can be *add-on assessments* that are specifically conducted for the outcomes assessment process. Assessments that are already embedded in courses or programs (e.g., assignment grades, practicum evaluations) can provide

excellent assessment data because these types of assessments are likely to be direct rather than indirect measures of student learning. Embedded assessments can possess excellent validity since they are designed directly by faculty to assess students. In addition, since faculty members are collecting these data anyway, outcomes assessment data can be collected without creating additional work for faculty members.

Direct or Indirect Assessments

Measures should be as closely linked to the student learning outcome as possible. Whenever possible they should be *direct measures* of student learning. Examples of direct measures of student learning include:

- Writing samples
- Comparisons between pre- and post-test scores (this does not have to be the exact same test as long as you are testing the same area of knowledge or skills)
- Class assignments or tests
- Capstone projects, including theses, field studies, and papers
- Case studies
- Team/group projects and presentations
- Field supervisor evaluations from internships and field experience
- Service-learning projects
- Ratings by employers of the level of skills and knowledge possessed by our graduates
- Student performance on standardized tests such as licensure exams or the Educational Testing Service content tests

Indirect measures may be important information, but they are not directly linked to student learning. For example, course grades are an indirect measure because they are assessment of a student's performance in the class as a whole, including such things as attendance and class participation, rather than assessment of the student's learning of some particular knowledge or skill. While programs may choose to include some of these forms of indirect measures in their assessment, program faculty should also work to ensure the inclusion of direct measures of student learning for each outcome. Examples of indirect measures of student learning include:

- Course grades
- Number of alumni admitted to graduate school
- Employment rates of alumni
- Number of students presenting or publishing research

Use of specific assignments and student grades

While course assignments can be excellent direct measures of student learning, there are potential problems with using student assignment grades, including their global nature (they are often not clearly related to a specific skill or knowledge set), their perceived subjectivity, and the fact that grading standards for the same assignment can vary widely between instructors. Grades work best as an assessment measure when the assignment is a direct and specific measure of the learning outcome.

Example, Environmental Geology: The first student learning outcome identified by the Environmental Geology faculty is "classify and identify geologic materials, including soils, minerals, and rocks." Their

measurement of this learning outcome is student performance on the lab midterm in Geology 1110, “emphasizing hand specimen description and identification.” Successful attainment of this outcome is indicated by a grade of 70% or greater on this exam.

Use of scoring rubrics

Often the most important student learning outcomes are the ones most difficult to assess with any recognized level of objectivity. These outcomes include things like writing ability and critical thinking skills. Programs often have little choice but to use course assignments as a means of assessing these outcomes. In these cases, the use of a scoring rubric can bring clarity and a measure of objectivity to the assessment process. Rubrics specify exactly how an assignment is graded, tying the grade to evidence of specific skills or information and ensuring that grading is at least somewhat uniform across instructors.

While several programs utilize scoring rubrics as part of their assessment systems, those rubrics tend to be extremely basic. Good rubrics should link aspects of the assignment to specific course objectives, and give detailed explanations of each point in the rating system. An example of a scoring rubric from English is included in Appendix D. Other examples of scoring rubrics can be found on the web, from OIER, or from other departments.

Measuring outcomes throughout your program and use of matrices

It is not necessary to include assignments from every course in the outcomes assessment plan. This would result in an extremely cumbersome process and an overwhelming amount of data to collect. But faculty should think about where in the program data are collected. For example, if data are collected only from graduates (capstone projects, exit exams, etc.) then the program will not be collecting any data that might help identify problem areas in your program, or to help assess student gains from their point of entry to the program to graduation. One method for helping to clarify the points at which it might be useful to assess students is a matrix.

Curriculum-mapping matrices can be an extremely useful way to link specific courses and course assignments with program learning objectives. They give a clear rationale for use of specific assignments and grades as an assessment tool for specific objectives, and they provide a logical relationship for aggregating data from the course level to student learning outcomes and university traits. A template for such a curriculum-mapping tool is included as Appendix E. In this template, “I” indicates the course in which the objective is introduced, “R” indicates the courses in which the objective is reinforced, and “M” indicates the courses in which the objective is mastered. (Source: NMHU Biology Department)

One benefit of developing such a matrix is that it allows faculty to identify objectives that may be introduced but never reinforced, or reinforced but never targeted for mastery at the exit level. Another benefit is that it can help identify where and when an academic program would benefit from collecting assessment data.

Additional Material for the Outcomes Assessment Report

After designing the plan, collecting the data, and entering it into the template, program faculty will then need to discuss the results, come to an interpretation of what the results mean, and explain how the results to improve will be used to improve program. This information will be summarized in an outcomes assessment report provided biennially to OIER.

Utilizing the assessment results

The documentation that assessment results have been used to design and implement program improvements is often referred to as “closing the loop.” This step may seem daunting to faculty, but in some respects it is actually the most important aspect of assessment. As long as the program faculty members look at and discuss the outcomes assessment data, it is almost guaranteed that they will change something about their teaching or program in response to those data. These changes then need to be documented in the biennial report.

Example, Forestry: Forestry faculty determined through outcomes assessment that shorter but more frequent writing assignments were needed in their courses to allow for more feedback from course instructors. In addition, forestry faculty found that “in some of the upper level courses students are given assignments of critiquing journal articles and requiring them to provide feedback not only on content but also structure and organization. Faculty are also allowing students to participate in the review process of manuscripts that have been submitted to professional journals so they get a better perspective of the nuts and bolts of constructing technical review documents.”

Using outcomes assessment data to answer specific questions

Please remember that programs can always design their outcomes assessment plan to answer specific questions about the program, and that plans can be modified as those questions change. For example, program faculty may be implementing some changes in the program to improve the quality of students’ writing. Outcomes assessment data can be collected specifically to assess whether those changes were successful.

Example, Psychology: Psychology faculty reported that “...psychology paper(s) improved from this year to last year, in part due to changes made by the instructor to increase feedback, encourage greater participation in the online class, and deal early with emergent plagiarism issues.”

Academic Program Review

Formal academic program review occurs according to an established schedule in which programs are reviewed once every five years. Program review is overseen by the Academic Affairs Committee of the Faculty Senate and the Office of Academic Affairs. For those programs that are accredited by outside professional organizations, academic program reviews are timed to coincide with accreditation reviews. Information from outcomes assessment should form a major piece of both program reviews and reports for accrediting agencies.

References and Resources

Allen, Mary; Noel, Richard, C.; Rienzi, Beth, M.; and McMillin, Daniel, J. (2002). *Outcomes Assessment Handbook*. California State University, Institute for Teaching and Learning, Long Beach, CA.

Appendix A: Relationship between HED Essential Skills and NMHU Traits

Relationship between HED Essential Skills and NMHU traits				
Essential Skill	Trait 1: Mastery of content knowledge and skills*	Trait 2: Effective communication skills	Trait 3: Critical and reflective thinking skills	Trait 4: Effective use of technology
Critical Thinking	Indirect		Direct	
Communication	Indirect	Direct		Indirect
Information & Digital Literacy		Indirect		Direct
Quantitative Reasoning	Indirect		Indirect	Indirect
Personal & Social Responsibility		Indirect	Indirect	

Instructions for Using the Outcomes Assessment Excel Sheet

Instructions for Data Sheet Preparation

Yellow highlighted areas will be unique for every program. Ensure that the Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) are consistent with the Assessment Plan.

In Columns C (and greater), the individual Means of Assessment should be listed. For example, if there is only one mean of assessment for SLO 1, the column should indicate "SLO 1". However, if there are three means of assessment for SLO 1, there should be three columns that indicate "SLO 1.A", "SLO 1.B", and "SLO 1.C".

Instructions for Faculty

NMHU Traits - Under each SLO, there is a Drop Down menu that indicates either "Yes" or "No". If the given trait is assessed in that SLO, select "Yes". If not, select "No".

Scoring - The full NMHU ID number for every student assessed in the program is entered in Column B. As you work across the scoring table, a score should be entered. A "1" will indicate that the student met the criterion, a "0" will indicate that the student did NOT meet the criterion, and "N/A" will indicate that the student is not assessed for that particular SLO.

Assessment Material - Please select what material was used to assess the student. A Drop Down menu is provided to select from the seven most common themes. If there is not an appropriate option for the SLO, select "Other".

Criterion for Success - Please select the method used to determine the success of the student. A Drop Down menu is provided with the five most common thresholds. If there is not an appropriate option for the SLO, select "Other".

Adding Rows - If the given template does not have enough rows to accommodate the number of students assessed, simply follow the instructions at the following link by copying and pasting the address into your web browser:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NyHw561Qv8>

Appendix C: Feedback Form for Outcomes Assessment Reports

NEW MEXICO HIGHLANDS UNIVERSITY
Office of Institutional Research & Effectiveness



PROGRAM: _____
FEEDBACK FORM FOR OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PLANS AND REPORTS

<i>Please rate the Level of Performance for each measure as "Exceeds" "Meets" or "Needs Improvement".</i>	<i>Level of Performance</i>	<i>Comments</i>
MISSION: (Assessment Plan) Department mission is identified	Level of Performance	Comments
Department mission statement is student-focused		
LEARNING OUTCOMES: (Assessment Plan) Learning outcomes are identified for the department (not for individual class or course)	Level of Performance	Comments
Learning outcomes are clear		
Learning outcomes are measurable		
Learning outcomes span multiple learning domains (i.e., cognitive, behavioral, psychomotor)		
Learning outcomes are student-focused		
Learning outcomes clearly link to the department's mission statement		
ASSESSMENT METHODS: (Assessment Plan) Multiple assessment measures are identified	Level of Performance	Comments
Assessment measures are aligned to learning outcomes		
Direct measures of student learning are emphasized		
Assessment measures allow student performance to be gauged over time		
Assessment design includes a timeline for implementation and administration		
If the program is present at the Centers, are they included in the data collection and report?		

REPORTING AND USE OF RESULTS: (Assessment Report)	Level of	Comments
Assessment results are reported		
Assessment results are clear		
Information from the assessment results is shared with multiple constituents		
The assessment results are reviewed and discussed by department faculty		
Assessment results indicate the extent to which priority learning outcome(s) have been achieved		
Assessment results are used to improve student learning (e.g., change/revise learning outcomes, change/revise courses or curriculum)		
Assessment results are used to identify how the assessment process should be modified		
Is this report ready to be posted publicly on the web?		

Appendix D: Rubric for English Composition Course Essays

WHAT GRADES ON ESSAYS MEAN

The meaning of grades according to the First-Year Composition Program is defined below:

Distinctive = A

Skillful = B

Competent / Credible / Complete = C

Ineffective = D

Extremely Ineffective = F

A Distinctive

- **Purpose/Focus:** Clearly addresses the question or assignment, and a single controlling idea creates coherent and interesting focus throughout; writer addresses applications, implications, or consequences of ideas
- **Depth/Complexity:** Writing is clear, critical and reflective; shows awareness of assumptions, inferences, and subtle distinctions between ideas
- **Organization:** Exceptionally effective structure and sophisticated transitions create logical flow for the reader
- **Development:** All ideas, claims, and sub-claims are fully supported with detail, examples and evidence
- **Audience Awareness:** Tone and content demonstrate the skillful use of rhetorical strategies to connect with intended audience
- **Grammar/mechanics:** Shows superior control of sentence-level language: diction, syntax, variety, and transitions. May have a few minor errors.

B Skillful

- **Purpose/Focus:** Clearly addresses the question or assignment, and a single controlling idea runs throughout
- **Depth/Complexity:** Shows clarity of thought; demonstrates adequate critical and reflective thinking
- **Organization:** Essay flows logically from one paragraph to the next
- **Development:** Issues and ideas are supported with detail, examples and evidence
- **Audience Awareness:** Tone and content are consistently appropriate for intended audience
- **Grammar/mechanics:** Shows control of sentence-level language: diction, syntax, variety, and transitions. May have a few errors.

C Competent / Credible / Complete

- Purpose/Focus: Adequately addresses the question or assignment, but may be inconsistent in focus
- Depth/Complexity: Shows clarity, but demonstrates limited critical thinking and/or reflection
- Organization: demonstrates structure, but reorganization may be required in places for the reader to consistently and easily follow the essay
- Development: Claims and ideas may be inconsistently supported with detail, example, and evidence; connection between claims and evidence may be weak or inappropriate
- Audience Awareness: Tone and/or content are intended for the audience, but may not be consistently appropriate
- Grammar/mechanics: Shows competent writing, but may have some errors that interrupt the flow of reading

D Ineffective

- Purpose/Focus: May neglect parts of the question or assignment
- Depth/Complexity: May be superficial or stereotyped in thought; no evidence of critical thinking or reflection
- Organization: Organization may be confusing, requiring multiple readings in order to comprehend the essay
- Development: May have claims without evidence or with inappropriate evidence, or may have evidence unconnected to claims
- Audience Awareness: Tone and content may be inappropriate for intended audience
- Grammar/mechanics: Sentence-level errors impede the reader's understanding

F Extremely Ineffective

- Fails to adequately address the question or assignment
- Fails to adequately explore the issues and ideas
- Lack of organization restricts reader's comprehension
- Fails to support claims
- Is not written with an intended audience in mind
- Sentence-level errors impede the reader's understanding

Appendix E: Sample Curriculum-Mapping Tool

Program SLOs	Detailed objectives	I= Introduced, R=Reinforced, M=Mastery at exit level	Courses				
SLO 1:		Insert "I", "R", or "M"					
		Assessment					
		Insert "I", "R", or "M"					
		Assessment					
		Insert "I", "R", or "M"					
		Assessment					
		Insert "I", "R", or "M"					
		Assessment					
		Insert "I", "R", or "M"					
		Assessment					
	Program SLOs	Detailed objectives	I= Introduced, R=Reinforced, M=Mastery at exit level	Courses			
	SLO 2:		Insert "I", "R", or "M"				
			Assessment				
			Insert "I", "R", or "M"				
Assessment							
		Insert "I", "R", or "M"					
		Assessment					
		Insert "I", "R", or "M"					
		Assessment					