

Introduction to Learning Assessment at Wade College

This handbook is designed to help the academic departments and the administration of Wade College understand the process of learning assessment and the planning and implementation that must occur during this process.

Ongoing institution-wide learning assessment allows Wade College to document effectiveness and show commitment to ongoing improvement, but more importantly, this process ensures that student learning is measured and enhanced on a regular and continuous basis.

The purpose of this handbook is not to serve merely as a checklist for assessment procedures, but to lead to reflection on Wade College's programs and student learning objectives—and the students' ability to achieve those learning goals.

Specifically, this handbook has the following aims:

- To foster among the college's constituents a clear understanding of the broad context in which learning assessment occurs and the roles each play as participants and practitioners of assessment;
- To establish a coordinated set of centralized and decentralized activities that allow assessment to be conducted consistently in a systematic, on-going, and sustainable fashion;
- To furnish practical guidance on the creation and implementation of plans to assess student learning;
- To formulate assessment strategies for those goals for which evidence of achievement does not already exist; and
- To make certain that assessment results are disseminated and used effectively and appropriately to improve teaching and learning.

What is Assessment?

According to Peggy L. Maki in *Assessing for Learning*, assessment "...is a systematic and systemic process of inquiry into what and how well students learn over the progression of their studies and is driven by intellectual curiosity about the efficacy of collective educational practices."

T.A. Angelo in "Reassessing (and Defining) Assessment" calls assessment "...an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education."

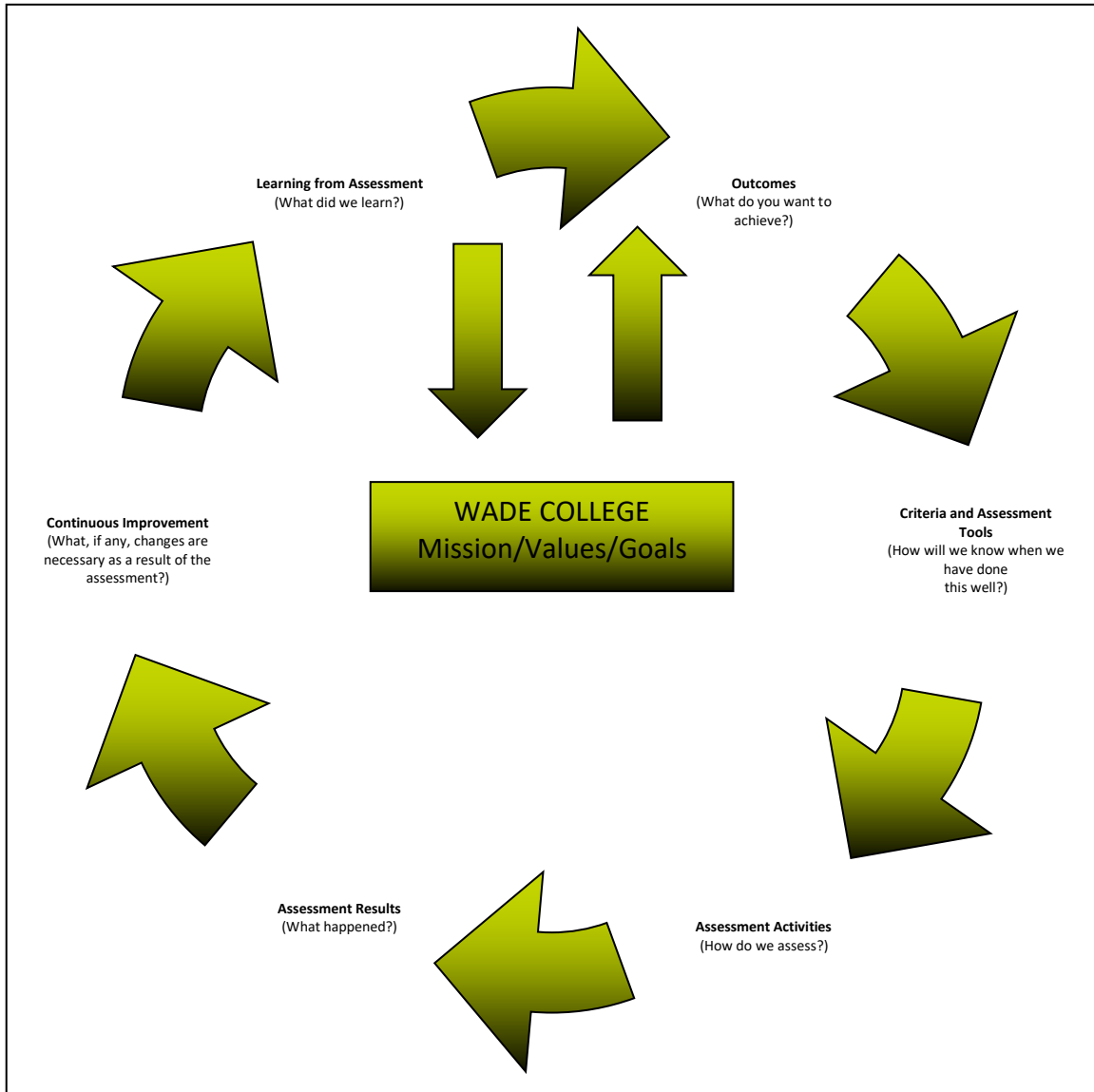
Authors Palomba and Banta write in *Assessment Essentials: Putting Principles to Work on College Campuses* that assessment is "the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development."

By these definitions, we see that academic assessment is an **ongoing** process used to measure the extent to which an academic program has achieved its objectives regarding the knowledge, skills, and abilities of program graduates and to identify changes that will help the program to better achieve those objectives. Ideally, this process will permeate the institution at all levels. Another important distinction is that the process involves both gathering information **and** using that information as feedback to modify and improve student outcomes.

These are the basic actions of an assessment cycle:

1. Plan and define the outcomes or expectations (objectives) and make them public.
 - a. The outcomes must be attainable and measurable.
 - b. Expectations are communicated to those participants involved in accomplishing the tasks. In the classroom, this means making expectations clear and focused to students. At the institutional level, this means making expectations clear and focused to the Wade College community.
2. Implement the objectives.
3. Gather data to measure the students' accomplishment of the outcomes and expectations (objectives).
4. Assess the success of the expected outcomes (objectives).
5. Share the outcomes with parties involved in the process.
6. Strategize a response or design modifications to improve the outcomes in the next cycle.
7. Implement the new strategies. This may be done at the beginning of a cycle, during the current cycle, or both. Assessment is not limited to the end of a cycle; rather it is a continuing process, using multiple approaches at multiple levels.
8. Repeat gathering data, focusing on changes in outcomes based on the new strategy and repeat the analysis for continued improvement in outcomes and expectations.

If viewed as a graphic, this process would also resemble a cycle:



Learning Assessment in Practice at Wade College

Student learning and development is central to Wade College's purpose as an institution of higher education. Over the years, the college has engaged in evaluative processes at every level to ensure that its students attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for a successful realization of their academic, personal, and career goals. The plan for the assessment of student learning presented in this handbook allows the institution a formalized process to evaluate and document the effectiveness of the college's educational programs, regularly review and measure student learning, and utilize results for continued development and improvement.

Wade College Mission Statement

The mission of an organization should always be the starting point for developing assessment outcomes and objectives.

The following is the proposed mission statement of Wade College:

"Wade College is a privately sponsored college offering associate and baccalaureate degree programs in the areas of design, business, and technology. The college is a teaching institution that emphasizes specialized professional study and the liberal arts.

Wade College exists and operates to provide its diverse student population with the skills and knowledge to be a productive part of American society. It further seeks to provide them with an enriching cultural, moral, economic, and social experience. The college is committed to serving the changing requirements of the design, business, and technology fields and preparing its students for excellence in their career fields by providing knowledgeable faculty, continually updated curriculum, and modern facilities.

The purpose of Wade College is to offer programs of instruction that are designed to allow students to:

1. Develop the competencies necessary for immediate employment and career advancement in their chosen fields.
2. Continue and complete a formal education in graduate colleges and universities, if so desired.
3. Develop intellectual, humanitarian, and leadership skills that will advance their potential for success.
4. Engage in continual self-improvement."

The educational programs at Wade College emphasize the importance of both general education and specialized study. The values of the former are deemed important to the development of responsible citizens in a free society; the experiences of the latter are regarded as indispensable to students preparing for active careers. General education is versatile and helps students better adapt to change so that they may advance in their careers. Specialized study helps them develop the professional skills required in their career field.

Wade College selects a faculty with academic credentials and work-related experience to assure quality education. They represent the college's sincere commitment to student success. The curriculum is constantly re-examined and revised to assure the student current and meaningful instruction.

One of the key objectives of the college is to render the graduate credentials suitable for immediate employment with opportunities for rapid promotion. The success of the college's graduates is the best indication of its institutional effectiveness. Their proven ability to cope with the challenges of the real business world and to function in a complex society will confirm that Wade College is achieving its goals.

The college is committed to providing educational programs, educational support services, financial and physical resources, and administrative processes which are adequate and appropriate to ensure the college meets and continues to achieve its stated mission.

This statement provides the foundation for the creation of Wade College's academic programs.

Assessment Mission

Assessment at Wade College is an institutional process that takes place on many levels and in many areas. However, this handbook is concerned only with those assessments that directly impact student learning—the curriculum and the student learning outcomes themselves.

The Assessment Mission at Wade College is to continuously assess student academic achievement at all levels in order to support and improve student learning. The assessment goals include:

1. Fostering an institution-wide view of assessment as a necessary response to a demand for accountability and to provide a continuous source of information for instructional improvement;
2. Responding to accreditation demands;
3. Training faculty and staff in assessment procedures and processes;
4. Facilitating the feedback of assessment results into institutional, program, course, and classroom planning; and
5. Developing, implementing, and improving the assessment process.

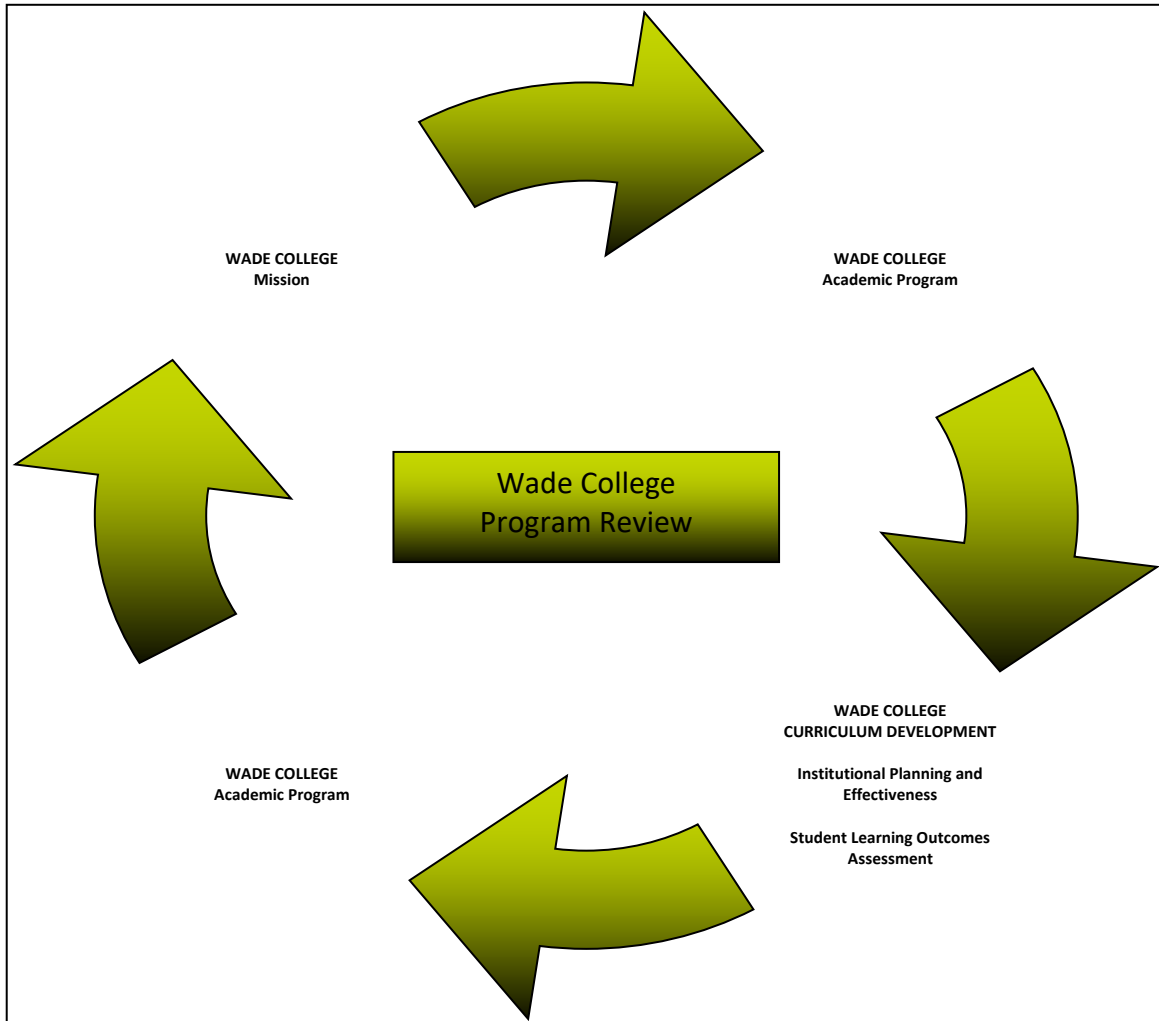
Assessment Components

At Wade College, the following components are a part of the overall educational assessment plan:

- Wade College Mission Statement and purpose
- Institutional strategic plan goals
- Individual course outlines and syllabi
- Trimester Assessment Reports produced by the Curriculum Development Committee
 - Program purpose(s) and relationship to mission
 - Program relationship to strategic goals
 - Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes
 - Program objectives
 - Student learning outcomes
 - Assessment criteria and evaluation methods
 - Assessment results
 - Use of results
 - Program evaluation
- External program/outcomes review
- Faculty Senate Committee review, amending, and approval
- Review of Faculty Senate Committee report

These components make up parts in an internal process designed to safeguard course coherence, ensure appropriate course content and complexity, and highlight linkages between multiple program components. Because Wade College is a small institution, these reviews are accomplished without the difficulty of maneuvering through numerous levels of institutional hierarchy. The reviews culminate in the provision of recommendations to the college that are used in short-range and/or long-range planning as indicated by the nature of the recommendations. Program reviews are internally monitored and are completed at the end of each term.

If viewed as a graphic, this process would also resemble a cycle:



The **mission statement** and **purpose** of the college provide the basis from which all academic programs must flow. These statements outline what the faculty, administration, and staff of Wade College seeks to provide to students via the educational program in its broadest sense.

The **institutional strategic plan goals** are derived from the Wade College Institutional Plan that is completed for each department of the college on a yearly basis. Goals are developed for each department, along with the methods of assessment and use of data. In the Trimester Assessment Reports (discussed below), these goals are linked to each program that the college offers.

Each course within each program is developed with the use of the **course outlines (or competencies)**. These documents outline individual course outcomes and methods of assessing student learning that, when completed, will lead to the achievement of program, division, and, ultimately, institutional outcomes.

From the course outlines, individual **course syllabi** are developed. These syllabi provide the blueprint from which each class is taught. The syllabi utilize the learning outcomes enumerated in the outlines to develop the plan for the class and for individual learning experiences. Professors are free to develop their individual methods, as long as the student learning outcomes are achieved.

The **Trimester Assessment Reports** are the heart of the learning assessment methodology. These reports include an explanation of each program's purpose and its relationship to the mission of the college. The program's relationship with the strategic goals of the college is also included. All strategic goals are included in the reports and then the program's relationship to certain goals is discussed.

The second part of the Trimester Assessment Reports is the **Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes**. This section of the reports includes the **program objectives, the student learning outcomes, the assessment criteria and evaluation methods, the assessment results, and the use of those results**. This information is gathered from all professors and is created via the Curriculum Development Committee.

The final part of the Trimester Assessment Reports is a **program evaluation** that may include a review of the following data: program purpose, core curriculum/general education curriculum, library resources, faculty credentials, professional development activities, adequacy of the faculty, equipment and facilities, adequacy of the budget, capstone course, external feedback, relevance of the textbook and course supplies, course descriptions, syllabi, competencies, lesson and degree plans, and course sequencing, credit hours, enrollment, retention rates, course completion, and program completion. This evaluation is also completed by the Curriculum Development Committee, with input and data from the administration.

The **external program/outcomes review** is achieved through capstone courses in which candidates for graduation present the culmination of their developed skills and competencies to a panel composed of industry professionals. The resulting feedback from the external industry panel is evaluated by the Curriculum Development Committee and applied to program development and improvement efforts.

The **Faculty Senate Committee** is responsible for reviewing, amending, and approving requests stemming from the Curriculum Development Committee meetings. While all faculty members participate in the Curriculum Development Committee meetings, only the Division Directors, the Vice-President of Academic and Student Affairs, and the college President (all of whom are teaching faculty members) are members of the Faculty Senate Committee. This Faculty Senate Committee provides administrative review and approval of changes to the college's curriculum and student learning outcomes.

The Vice-President of Academic and Student Affairs prepares the report of the Faculty Senate Committee and forwards the report to the college President. The President is responsible for presenting changes requiring governing board approval to the Wade College Board of Trustees during their periodic meetings.

Assessment Responsibilities and Organizational Structure

Wade College offers eight degree programs. From these, four divisions are derived: Marketing Management, Design, Technology, and General Education. All courses offered fall into one of these four categorical divisions. Each division is headed by a Division Director who is responsible for overseeing the management, direction, and outcomes of their division.

The responsibility for completing assessment activities at Wade College is outlined below:

Document	Major Responsibility	Ancillary Responsibility
Mission Statement	Board of Trustees	President, Administration, Faculty
Institutional Strategic Plan Goals	President, Department Heads	Faculty
Course Competencies	Division Directors, Faculty	Vice-President of Academic and Student Affairs
Course Syllabi	Faculty	Vice-President of Academic and Student Affairs, Division Directors
Trimester Assessment Reports	Curriculum Development Committee	Board of Trustees, President
External Program/Outcomes Review	Industry Members	Vice-President of Academic and Student Affairs, Division Directors, Faculty
Faculty Senate Committee Report	Faculty Senate Committee	None

Use of Results

Because the assessment process is not an end to itself, the completed assessments must be used to improve the curriculum and further student learning in order to prove useful and relevant. The data gathered from assessing programs and student learning outcomes is a valuable commodity for professors to communicate among themselves for the purpose of improving student learning and enhancing curriculum. Communication should also occur at the program, division, and college levels for purposes of reviews in the larger sense. It is integral to the process for professors to meet to discuss results and decide what measure will be taken to use the results to improve student learning. To make the program’s efforts meaningful and sustainable it is necessary to link results with action.

At Wade College, this is done via the Curriculum Development Committee meetings and meetings of the individual Divisions that make up the college. During the meetings, discussion may encompass, but is not limited to, the following:

- Learning goals—Are there too many? Too few? Do they need clarification? Are the goals appropriate?
- Curriculum—Does it address the learning goals? How can it be modified, if it doesn’t?
- Teaching methods—Do the teaching methods used further the students’ learning of the stated learning outcomes?
- Results – Are proposed use of results valuable and applicable with a likelihood of efficacy? Are any courses/programs consistently resulting in “no changes necessary,” and is this appropriate?
- Evaluating assessment methods—Were the assessment methods used appropriately?

Once this information is gathered, it is incorporated into the Trimester Assessment Reports which are forwarded to the Faculty Senate Committee, which has the responsibility of reviewing, amending, and approving all suggestions. The final report of the Faculty Senate Committee is prepared by the Vice-President of Academic and Student Affairs and forwarded to the college President for review, and then to the Wade College Board of Trustees, if necessary, for final approval.

Resources

Angelo, T.A. "Reassessing (and Defining) Assessment." AAHE Bulletin. November 1995

Maki, Peggy L. Assessing for Learning: Building a Sustainable Commitment Across the Institution. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2004

Palomba, C.A. & Banta, T.W. Assessment Essentials: Putting Principles to Work on College Campuses. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999