

Introduction to Outcomes Assessment of Graduate Programs at NC State University

The Graduate School

NC State has been engaged in outcomes assessment of graduate programs for many years. If you are new to outcomes assessment, such as a new DGP, or would like to refresh your understanding of it, this document is intended for you.

What is Outcomes Assessment?

In the context of academic program assessment, *outcomes* are the knowledge, skills, and other attributes students are expected to come out with as a result of the educational experience of the program. The goal of outcomes assessment is to enable program faculty to make evidence-based decisions to improve their programs.

Traditionally, we have taken an inputs-based approach to academic decisions. That is, we decide what courses and other experiences students in our programs should have and simply assume that the outcomes of those experiences are what we expect. An outcomes-based approach begins with faculty defining program outcomes. Then faculty gather evidence that demonstrates the extent to which the program has enabled students to achieve the outcomes and, where students fall short of those expectations, determine how the program could be improved to better enable students to meet the outcomes.

Three Questions that Drive Outcomes Assessment

1. *What are the program values of the faculty, that is, the knowledge, skills, and other attributes faculty expect graduates to have attained in the program?*

In response to this question, faculty identify broad goals, or objectives, and define for each objective the outcomes by which students demonstrate the extent to which the program has enabled them to meet the objective. The outcomes describe what students should be able to do that demonstrates their learning. Outcomes assessment plans may also contain program outcomes, which describe other qualities of a successful program beyond student learning, such as admitting high-quality students, encouraging faculty productivity, graduating students in a timely manner, and attaining enrollment targets. [Example objectives and outcomes.](#)

2. *How well is the program achieving faculty expectations?*

In response to this question, faculty create a plan for assessing outcomes. An assessment plan includes evidence to be gathered for each outcome that will allow faculty to determine how effective the program is in terms of enabling students to achieve outcomes at the level faculty expect of them. In addition, an assessment plan provides the source of the evidence and the frequency at which the evidence will be collected. Outcomes assessment plans are stored in the Graduate Program Evaluation Management system in InfoWeb (see [directions for accessing assessment plans.](#)) [Example assessment plan.](#)

3. *How can outcomes assessment be used to improve graduate programs?*

In response to this question, faculty implement their assessment plans. To begin with, they initiate the ongoing process of collecting and storing evidence according to the frequency of collection in the assessment plan. Then, someone in the program, usually the DGP, will analyze the evidence and present it to the faculty for evaluation, that is, determining strengths of the program in enabling students to achieve the outcomes and areas for improvement, where the evidence suggests students are not meeting faculty expectations. Finally, faculty consider the areas for improvement and identify strategies to be put in place to improve the program. Every two years, the DGP will submit an assessment report summarizing the findings, evaluation of the findings, and decisions made based on the evaluation (see [directions for accessing archived outcomes assessment reports](#)).

How to Submit Outcomes Assessment Reports

Reports are to be submitted every two years. You will be sent a reminder of when your report is due. A report summarizes outcomes assessment findings, evaluation of findings, and decisions made to improve the program over the previous two years. The master assessment plan in the Graduate Program Evaluation Management system in InfoWeb lists the outcomes to be reported on for each two-year period.

To submit a new report, follow the [directions for submitting a new assessment report](#). Click on “Create New Outcomes Assessment Report.” On the Outcomes Assessment Report page, select the appropriate semester/year for the report. Then, in the list of all program objectives and outcomes, click the checkboxes for the outcomes you will report on for the previous two years and click on “Submit.”

On the Assessment Report Builder page, you will find a reporting table with the outcomes you have selected loaded in column 1 and the data to be collected for that outcome loaded from your assessment plan in column 2. To enter your assessment report for each outcome, click on “Edit” in the last column. You may change the description of data collected if necessary to reflect any differences between data you were scheduled to collect and data you actually collected. Then for each outcome enter a summary of your findings in column 2, evaluation in column 3, and decisions resulting from the evaluation in column 4.

Enter the assessment information for all outcomes on the Assessment Report Builder page. Click “Save.” If you return to the Outcomes Assessment Report page later to complete your report, you will need to click the checkboxes again for the outcomes you did not enter information for during the previous session.