



# Eye on Assessment

## Special SACS Preview: Student Learning Outcomes

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### Contact OIA

Have questions you need answered or ideas for future content?

We'd love to hear from you!

Please submit feedback to Erin McSherry,  
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SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) is the regional accrediting agency for George Mason University. SACS is a private, non-profit, voluntary organization founded in 1895 to set standards and improve education in the colleges and schools of the South. Five other private regional accrediting associations conduct similar work in other regions of the U.S.

#### What is on the horizon?

Mason must prepare a self-assessment **due in fall 2010** that addresses:

1. Core Requirements—basic, broad-based, foundational requirements that must be met to be accredited.
2. Comprehensive Standards in four areas:
  - a. Institutional mission, governance and effectiveness
  - b. Programs
  - c. Resources
  - d. Institutional responsibility for SACS' policies
3. Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)—The QEP describes a carefully designed and focused course of action that addresses a well-defined topic or issue(s) directly related to enhancing student learning.

Future issues of *Eye on Assessment* will highlight important aspects of the review process. This issue focuses on the "student learning outcomes" of the Institutional Effectiveness requirement (3.3.1).

#### What are student learning outcomes (also referred to as learning goals)?

Ask the question, "What do we want students to know and be able to do when they complete this program?" Then state these expectations with enough precision to assist in selecting appropriate assessment instruments.

#### How does a learning outcome differ from other expected student outcomes?

Think about the fields in which you might want your graduates to be employed. Do you expect them to work in discipline-related areas? Is it important that a certain percentage of your baccalaureate recipients go on to graduate school or pass a licensure exam? These are examples of outcomes that are not learning outcomes.

#### Why doesn't a grade suffice for a learning outcome?

In assessing learning outcomes, we are not concerned with the test score or a course grade for any given individual. We are instead looking at a broader picture, usually a program or a course. The distribution of grades isn't sufficient to assess learning outcomes because grades alone don't give us enough information on exactly what students have learned. For example, a student earning a B in statistics probably has learned a good deal about statistics, but we can't tell from the grade if the student did well in estimation but

poorly in testing hypotheses. We simply don't have enough information.

#### How do I write a learning outcome?

If you're not familiar with Bloom's Taxonomy, go to <http://assessment.gmu.edu/AssessmentLinks/Guide.html> and see the references at the bottom of the page. Bloom provides a useful guide to thinking about our expectations for students. For example, verbs like "list" or "identify" suggest fairly basic goal levels, but verbs like "analyze," "design," and "critique" suggest a more sophisticated expectation of student performance. Begin with the verbs that are appropriate for your program and are consistent with your expectations of what students will know and be able to do when they complete the program.

Keep in mind that language such as, "Students will demonstrate information literacy skills" is much more difficult to interpret than, "Students will locate information and evaluate it critically for its validity and appropriateness." When writing learning outcomes, focus on the most important goals and work with colleagues.

#### Where can I get ideas and assistance?

Watch for future workshops co-sponsored by OIA and the Center for Teaching Excellence. We offer general workshops and can also tailor workshops for departments and programs. As always, feel free to contact us with your questions!

## Faculty-Student Interaction Increases for Freshmen & Seniors

Mason freshmen and seniors reported greater faculty-student interaction on the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) compared to 2003. More students spoke with faculty about career plans and worked on activities other than coursework, including participation on committees and student life events.



### Hot off the Press!

Compared to reports from 2003, 2006 Mason freshmen and seniors also engaged in more active and collaborative learning. They reported making more class presentations and worked more frequently with classmates on assignments outside of class.

Want to know more about Mason students' level of engagement and how they compare to peers?

The full NSSE report, including self-comparison reports with 2003 and peer comparison reports for our aspirational and Carnegie peers, is available online in our "Results and Reports" page:

<http://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/NSSE/NSSE.html>

Send requests for paper copies to: 993-8834 or [assessmt@gmu.edu](mailto:assessmt@gmu.edu).

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## Stay In Focus...

### What's New on our Site

We've recently published two *In Focus* reports, highlighting data from the 2005-06 Graduating Senior Survey and results from the first cycle of assessments on SCHEV required competencies. Check out our Results and Reports section for more details:

<http://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/InFocus/infocus.html>

## Data Quote of the Month

Graduating Senior Survey data on the educational experiences of native and transfer students\* in Mason's 2005-06 class revealed:

**56%** of native students and **57%** of transfer students said Mason contributed "very much" to their growth in critical thinking



**43%** of native students changed their major at least once while at Mason, compared to **24%** of transfer students

**Over 80%** of both student groups are "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with how well their education at Mason has prepared them for work

\*Native students are those who began at Mason as first-time freshmen and transfer students are those who started college at another post-secondary institution as first-time freshmen and transferred into Mason.

Interested in more data? Visit our website for reports on graduating students, incoming students, levels of student engagement, and more: <http://assessment.gmu.edu/Results/index.html>