George Mason University
Mason Core Assessment Plan
Academic Years 2017-2020

Purpose

Assessment is the systematic process of collecting, evaluating, and using information to determine if and how well performance matches learning or service expectations. The purpose of assessment is to use the results to inform meaningful dialogue and decision-making about how the university can improve its programs and services to support student success and institutional effectiveness.

At Mason, assessment of academic programs is the responsibility of faculty, and is administered by professional staff in the Provost's office. Mason's assessment efforts are guided by the belief that student learning is enhanced in classrooms in which instructors use best practices for collegiate teaching and learning. As such, a partnership with Mason's Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning facilitates faculty development activities to encourage best practices in curriculum development, student learning outcomes, assignment design, and learning assessment.

The Mason Core comprises the general education courses and experiences for degree-seeking undergraduate students at George Mason University. The academic program is a distributed menu model that categorizes courses of study into three main areas. **Foundation** courses build knowledge and skills to promote success in the major and in future pursuits; **exploration** courses introduce students to a breadth of subject matter and intellectual traditions; and **integration** courses encourage the integration of past learning and experiences, develop critical thinking skills, and prepare students for lifelong learning. Student learning outcomes for the Mason Core areas are created and assessed by faculty representatives of the University Mason Core Committee (see Appendix A).

This document outlines the plan for assessment of student achievement of the Mason Core learning outcomes for the period of Spring 2017 through Summer 2020. Results will be used internally to inform curriculum innovation initiatives and faculty development efforts for the improvement of student learning. Results will also be reported to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), specialized accrediting agencies, and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) to meet external reporting requirements (see Appendix B). The assessment plan and timeline are intended to complete an assessment cycle to meet external reporting deadlines (see Reporting section below).

Previous Assessment of the Mason Core

Between 2008 and 2016, the Mason Core program was assessed using faculty-prepared course portfolios. During each assessment period, a list of courses and faculty were randomly selected from all of the Mason Core courses in the designated category. Faculty participated in a pre-semester workshop to learn about student learning outcomes, assignment design, and expectations for the portfolio. Faculty were provided with online resources and one-on-one assistance as requested. At the end of the semester, each participating faculty member submitted a course portfolio that included: course syllabus, course map with assignments mapped to learning outcomes, selected assignment instructions or exams, samples of student work from a randomly selected list of students, and a narrative responding to prepared prompts.

The course portfolio review has been conducted by members of the Mason Core Committee, and by peer faculty reviewers who have been paid a small stipend. The review focused on how well each course addressed the Mason Core student learning outcomes through instruction, assignments/activities, and samples of student work. Portfolios have been assessed on how well the instructors articulated the learning outcomes, the congruence of the learning outcomes with the course content, the appropriateness of the course material for the Mason Core curriculum, and the appropriateness of the assignments or forms of assessment in relation to the learning outcomes. Results were shared with course faculty, department chairs, and the Mason Core Committee. Results are available at http://masoncore.gmu.edu/assessment/.

Exploration and Foundation courses have been assessed on a six-year cycle, and each area has been assessed at least once since 2008. Mason Core courses at Mason's Korea campus were assessed during three semesters: spring 2014, fall 2014, and spring 2015. Results are available at http://masoncore.gmu.edu/assessment/.

Assessment Plan and Timeline

Between fall 2017 and fall 2019, a complete assessment cycle will be conducted for all of the Mason Core categories. The assessment will include all Mason Core courses taught on all of Mason's campuses (Fairfax, Arlington, Mason Korea, and Science and Technology), and Mason Core courses taught both face-to-face and online. Two categories, Written Communication and Oral Communication, completed large-scale, comprehensive learning outcomes assessments during AYs 2016-2017; these results will be shared using the new reporting template. Two or three Mason Core categories will participate each semester (see Schedule).

Course Portfolios

This assessment cycle will have three main emphases: assistance to faculty with assignment design to support Mason Core student learning outcomes, direct assessment of student work, and use of results for improvement. To accomplish these aims, Mason Core faculty will be expected to:
1. participate in a pre-assessment workshop in the week preceding, or just after the start of the assessment semester, to focus on
    a. student learning outcomes and syllabus messaging,
    b. assignment design, and
    c. student learning assessment;
2. prepare a course portfolio due at the end of the assessment semester, to include
    a. course syllabus that messages to students how the course assignments align to the learning outcomes,
    b. one assignment that clearly demonstrates at least one of the Mason Core learning outcomes, and
    c. randomly selected student work using the identified assignment;
3. participate in a post-assessment meeting in the following semester that will focus on individual and aggregate results of the assessment, and use of results to promote improvement.

All Mason Core faculty in the targeted assessment semester will submit a course portfolio at the end of the semester, as defined above. Faculty who participate in all three activities listed above will be eligible to receive professional development funds from the Provost's office following completion of the post-assessment meeting.

Student Survey

In addition to the course portfolio, all students enrolled in the Mason Core category being assessed will receive a brief survey at the end of the semester to rate their own learning on the student learning outcomes. This indirect measure will serve as triangulation for the direct measures, and provide important information to course faculty.

Faculty Survey

Mason Core faculty will be surveyed two semesters following their assessment semester. The purpose of the survey will be to learn how faculty have used the assessment results to improve course design, assignment design, or student learning assessment in their courses. The two-semester period is necessary to provide enough time between the experience and feedback from reviewers to be able to implement changes in their Mason Core courses. The faculty survey results will be used in the overall program assessment.

Peer Review of Course Portfolios

Course portfolios will be reviewed by peers, to include Mason Core committee faculty, and faculty who teach Mason Core courses. Reviewers will use one rubric to evaluate the course syllabus for demonstration of student learning outcomes, the appropriateness of the course material for the Mason Core curriculum, and the appropriateness of the assignments or forms of assessment in relation to the learning outcomes. Reviewers will use a second rubric to assess student learning on the identified outcome(s). Reviews will take place in January and June 2018, and January and June 2019 (see Schedule).

Timeline

Planning	Spring and Summer 2017
• Communication plan	
• Meet with key faculty, course coordinators, and department chairs	
• Develop pre-assessment workshop	
• Develop rubrics and reporting template	
• Develop faculty resources and materials	
• Create system for submitting portfolios	
• SCHEV Assessment Plan	Due TBD
Assessment Period (see Schedule)	Fall 2017-Fall 2019
Analysis and Reporting	Fall 2019-Spring 2020
• Prepare Mason Core program assessment report to include	
o Course portfolio results	
o Mason Core student survey results	
o Graduating Senior Survey results (plus comments analysis)	
o Relevant NSSE results	
o Mason Core faculty survey results	
o Course-specific data: Grades, DFW rates, enrollment, faculty	
o Student assessment data disaggregated by group (see SCHEV)	
• Prepare SCHEV reports as required (SCHEV reporting template)	
• Prepare SACSCOC report (Principle 3.3.1.x)	Due September 2020
Reflection and Re-Development	Spring and Summer 2020
• Series of meetings with faculty and Mason Core committee	
• Map curricular changes	
• New/revised assessment plan developed around new needs and priorities	
Pilot/Launch New/Revised Assessment Plan	Fall 2020

Reporting

Internal Reporting Schedule and Use of Results

A reporting template will be developed for sharing aggregated assessment results with the university community (to be posted at http://masoncore.gmu.edu/assessment/). Faculty will receive individualized results for their own courses at a post-assessment meeting in mid-semester following the peer review (noted in blue on the Schedule). The meeting will focus on areas for improvement that were identified in the peer review, and provide resources for faculty to address critical areas. Faculty will be encouraged to participate in faculty development activities through the Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning.

External Reporting Schedule

- September 2020: SACSCOC Compliance Certification Report for reaffirmation of accreditation due to SACSCOC
- TBD (tentatively, December 2017): SCHEV Assessment Plan due
- TBD (every three years, possibly Fall 2020, Fall 2023): SCHEV Assessment Reports due
- Varies: Specialized accreditation organizations

People

The Associate Director for Undergraduate Education will implement the assessment plan, in partnership with the Stearns Center, the Mason Core committee, and Mason Core teaching faculty. *The Stearns Center* will share in the planning and implementation of the faculty pre-assessment workshops, and will promote its faculty development activities for interested Mason Core faculty. *Mason Core committee members* will participate in the pre-assessment workshops, peer review of portfolios, and post-assessment meetings with faculty. *Faculty teaching Mason Core courses* will prepare course portfolios, and will be invited to serve as peer reviewers.

A *planning committee* for each of the cohorts will be convened in the planning semesters. Each committee will be composed of course coordinators and key faculty who regularly teach or plan for the Mason Core courses in their area, and a representative from the Mason Core Committee. The committee will assist with the planning in their areas, select and develop rubrics, and provide important disciplinary guidance for the assessment.

Schedule

	Summer 2017	Fall 2017	Spring 2018	Summer 2018	Fall 2018	Spring 2019	Summer 2019	Fall 2019
Written Communication*	(blue)							
Oral Communication*	(blue)							
Global Understanding	(yellow)	(green)	(blue)					
Western Civilization/World History	(yellow)	(green)	(blue)					
Writing Intensive		(yellow)	(green)	(dotted)	(blue)			
Synthesis/Capstone (Critical Thinking)		(yellow)	(green)	(dotted)	(blue)			
Arts			(yellow)	(yellow)	(green)	(blue)		
Literature			(yellow)	(yellow)	(green)	(blue)		
Social and Behavioral Science			(yellow)	(yellow)	(green)	(blue)		
Quantitative Reasoning					(yellow)	(green)	(dotted)	(blue)
Information Technology					(yellow)	(green)	(dotted)	(blue)
Natural Sciences					(yellow)	(green)	(dotted)	(blue)
Civic Engagement	(orange)	(orange)	(orange)	(orange)	(orange)	(orange)	(orange)	(orange)

*Recent assessment completed

Color	Meaning
(yellow)	Planning semester: planning committees, faculty pre-assessment workshops
(green)	Faculty prepare portfolios
(blue)	Peer review, post-assessment report, faculty post-assessment meeting
(dotted)	Peer review, post-assessment report (summer)
(orange)	To be developed

Communication Plan

- Letter from the Provost's office to all units that offer Mason Core courses
- Public announcements on Mason News, etc.
- Presentations each semester to: Assessment Council, Undergraduate Council, CUE
- Mason Core Website
    - Assessment Plan
    - Schedule and course lists
    - Resources
    - FAQ
    - Assessment results (when available)
- Direct letters to Mason Core teaching faculty in semester preceding assessment

Mason Core Learning Outcomes
2016-17 Catalog

FOUNDATION COURSES

Written Communication (6 credits: 3 lower, 3 upper)

Students develop the ability to use written communication as a means of discovering and expressing ideas and meanings: in short, employing writing as a way of thinking. Students begin this process at the fundamental level in English 101 (100 for ESL students) and build higher-level skills in English 302. Writing will be emphasized in many courses throughout a student's career, and at least one course in every student's major is designated "writing intensive."

Oral Communication (3 credits)

1. Students will demonstrate understanding of and proficiency in constructing and delivering multiple message types.
2. Students will understand and practice effective elements of ethical verbal and nonverbal communication.
3. Students will develop analytical skills and critical listening skills.
4. Students will understand the influence of culture in communication and will know how to cope with cultural differences when presenting information to an audience. Students develop the ability to use oral communication as a way of thinking and learning, as well as sharing ideas.

Quantitative Reasoning (3 credits)

1. Students are able to interpret quantitative information (i.e., formulas, graphs, tables, models, and schematics) and draw inferences from them.
2. Given a quantitative problem, students are able to formulate the problem quantitatively and use appropriate arithmetical, algebraic, and/or statistical methods to solve the problem.
3. Students are able to evaluate logical arguments using quantitative reasoning.
4. Students are able to communicate and present quantitative results effectively.

Information Technology (minimum 3 credits)

Almost no area of academic, professional, or personal life is untouched by the information technology revolution. Success in college and beyond requires computer and information literacies that are flexible enough to change with a changing IT environment and adaptable to new problems and tasks.

The purpose of the information technology requirement is to ensure that students achieve an essential understanding of information technology infrastructure encompassing systems and devices; learn to make the most of the Web and other network resources; protect their digital data and devices; take advantage of latest technologies; and become more sophisticated technology users and consumers.

Courses meeting the "IT only" requirement must address learning outcomes 1 and 2, and one additional outcome. Courses meeting "IT with Ethics component" must address outcomes 1, 2, 3, and 5. Courses meeting the only IT Ethics component must address outcomes 3 and 5.

1. Students will be able to use technology to locate, access, evaluate, and use information, and appropriately cite resources from digital/electronic media.
2. Students will understand the core IT concepts in a range of current and emerging technologies and learn to apply appropriate technologies to a range of tasks.
3. Students will understand many of the key ethical, legal and social issues related to information technology and how to interpret and comply with ethical principles, laws, regulations, and institutional policies.
4. Students will demonstrate the ability to communicate, create, and collaborate effectively using state-of-the-art information technologies in multiple modalities.
5. Students will understand the essential issues related to information security, how to take precautions and use techniques and tools to defend against computer crimes.

EXPLORATION COURSES

Arts (3 credits)

Mason courses in the film making, visual and performing arts stress generative, inquiry based learning through direct aesthetic and creative experience in the studio environment. Art history courses address the intrinsic relationship of personal and cultural creativity, and the manifestation of aesthetics, visual culture and visual narrative within historical contexts.

Students who successfully complete a course in the Arts category must meet the first learning outcome and a minimum of two of the remaining four learning outcomes:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between artistic process, and a work's underlying concept, and where appropriate, contexts associated with the work.
2. Identify and analyze the formal elements of a particular art form using vocabulary and critique appropriate to that form.
3. Analyze cultural productions using standards appropriate to the form, as well as the works cultural significance and context.
4. Analyze and interpret the content of material or performance culture through its social, historical, and personal contexts.
5. Engage in generative artistic processes, including conception, creation, and ongoing critical analysis.

Global Understanding (3 credits)

The goal of the global understanding category is to help students see the world from multiple perspectives, reflect upon their positions in a global society, and be prepared for future engagement as global citizens. While it may include a historical perspective, global understanding courses focus primarily on a contemporary understanding of one's place in a global society.

The goals of Global Understanding are accomplished through disciplinary or inter-disciplinary study with the following three learning outcomes:

1. Demonstrate understanding of global patterns and processes;
2. Demonstrate understanding of the interconnectedness, difference, and diversity of a global society;
3. Explore individual and collective responsibilities within a global society through analytical, practical, or creative responses to problems or issues, using resources appropriate to the field.

Literature (3 credits)

1. Students will be able to read for comprehension, detail, and nuance.
2. Identify the specific literary qualities of language as employed in the texts they read.
3. Analyze the ways specific literary devices contribute to the meaning of a text.
4. Identify and evaluate the contribution of the social, political, historical, and cultural contexts in which a literary text is produced.
5. Evaluate a critical argument in others' writing as well as one's own.

Natural Science (7 credits total)

The Mason Core natural sciences courses engage students in scientific exploration; foster their curiosity; enhance their enthusiasm for science; and enable them to apply scientific knowledge and reasoning to personal, professional and public decision-making. Lab courses must meet all five learning outcomes. Non-lab courses must meet learning outcomes 1 through 4.

1. Understand how scientific inquiry is based on investigation of evidence from the natural world, and that scientific knowledge and understanding: a) evolves based on new evidence, and b) differs from personal and cultural beliefs.
2. Recognize the scope and limits of science.
3. Recognize and articulate the relationship between the natural sciences and society and the application of science to societal challenges (e.g., health, conservation, sustainability, energy, natural disasters, etc.).
4. Evaluate scientific information (e.g., distinguish primary and secondary sources, assess credibility and validity of information).
5. Participate in scientific inquiry and communicate the elements of the process, including: a) making careful and systematic observations, b) developing and testing a hypothesis, c) analyzing evidence, and d) Interpreting results.

Social and Behavioral Science (3 credits)

The following three learning outcomes are required goals of disciplinary or interdisciplinary courses:

1. Explain how individuals, groups or institutions are influenced by contextual factors;
2. Demonstrate awareness of changes in social and cultural constructs;
3. Use appropriate methods and resources to apply social and behavioral science concepts, terminology, principles and theories in the analysis of significant human issues, past or present.

Western Civilization/World History (3 credits)

Courses must meet at least three of the five learning outcomes.

1. Demonstrate familiarity with the major chronology of Western civilization or world history.
2. Demonstrate the ability to narrate and explain long-term changes and continuities in Western civilization or world history.
3. Identify, evaluate, and appropriately cite online and print resources.
4. Develop multiple historical literacies by analyzing primary sources of various kinds (texts, images, music) and using these sources as evidence to support interpretation of historical events.
5. Communicate effectively— through speech, writing, and use of digital media—their understanding of patterns, process, and themes in the history of Western civilization or the world.

INTEGRATION COURSES

Synthesis or Capstone Experience Requirement (minimum 3 credits)

The purpose of the synthesis course is to provide students with the opportunity to synthesize the knowledge, skills and values gained from the Mason Core curriculum. Synthesis courses strive to expand students' ability to master new content, think critically, and develop life-long learning skills across the disciplines. While it is not feasible to design courses that cover "all" areas of general education, synthesis courses should function as a careful alignment of disciplinary goals with a range of Mason Core learning outcomes.

The Mason Core synthesis course must address outcomes 1 and 2, and at least one outcome under 3. Upon completing a synthesis course, students will be able to:

1. Communicate effectively in both oral and written forms, applying appropriate rhetorical standards (e.g., audience adaptation, language, argument, organization, evidence, etc.)
2. Using perspectives from two or more disciplines, connect issues in a given field to wider intellectual, community or societal concerns
3. Apply critical thinking skills to:

    a. Evaluate the quality, credibility and limitations of an argument or a solution using appropriate evidence or resources, OR,
    b. Judge the quality or value of an idea, work, or principle based on appropriate analytics and standards

Writing-Intensive Course Requirement

As part of the university's commitment to student writers in all undergraduate programs, at least one upper-division course in each major has been designated as fulfilling the "writing intensive" (WI) requirement. While other courses in the major may require written projects, teachers of the designated WI courses will devote class time to instruction on how to complete assignments successfully, assign and grade a minimum of 3500 words, provide constructive feedback on drafts, and allow revision of at least

one graded assignment. Writing intensive course requirements in the major are overseen by the Writing Across the Curriculum committee, a standing committee of the Faculty Senate (http://wac.gmu.edu/masons-wac-committee/).

APPENDIX B

External Reporting Agencies and Requirements

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)

As the institution's accreditor, SACSCOC requires "the institution identifies college-level general education competencies and the extent to which students have attained them" (Principle 3.5.1).[1] This principle requires the institution to define competencies for its general education program and identify measures used to determine student achievement of those competencies. SACSCOC instructs institutions of higher education to use assessment results to guide decision-making about programs and services, and to demonstrate evidence-based improvement.

It should be noted that SACSCOC is currently proposing a revised document for the *Principles of Accreditation*, and the requirement for assessment of general education competencies may be clarified or expanded for the next reaffirmation cycle. Changes will be approved during the SACSCOC Annual Meeting in December 2017.

State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV)

The Code of Virginia § 23.1-203 requires SCHEV to work with higher education institutions in the state to develop guidelines and strategies for assessment of student achievement, and to publicly report the results for use in state-level strategic planning. SCHEV has recently adopted an assessment policy that will be implemented in fall 2017[2]. The policy requires the assessment of six competencies, defined by SCHEV, to include:

1. Critical thinking
2. Written communication
3. Quantitative reasoning
4. Civic engagement
5. Competency area to be selected in accordance with institutional priorities for student learning and development
6. Competency area to be selected in accordance with institutional priorities for student learning and development

The policy requires the development and application of at least one learning outcome per area, to be assessed using direct measures (i.e. the review of student work or performance). In this regard, the policy states:

> *Assessment of the six competencies may be done at the level of general education, disciplinary and interdisciplinary majors, curricular and co-curricular programs, or a combination of these, depending on the needs and priorities of the institution and the particular outcome being assessed. Assessment strategies may include methods that generate quantitative data, qualitative data, or both. Indirect methods (such as surveys and student self-reports of*

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[1] SACSCOC. (2012). *Principles of Accreditation: Foundation for Quality Enhancement.* Retrieved from http://www.sacscoc.org/principles.asp
[2] SCHEV Policy on Student Learning Assessment and Quality in Undergraduate Education, Approved July 18, 2017

achievement) and logical inferences may be used as a complement to the direct assessments
described above (page 6).

The policy provides a reporting template that outlines required achievement data to be disaggregated by student "characteristics used to define underrepresented populations" (page 6).

Specialized Accrediting Agencies

Many of Mason's degree programs have earned accreditation through specialized or professional accrediting agencies (e.g. ABET, AACSB, NCATE). The responsibility for assessment and reporting of student achievement for specialized accreditation lies with the program or college maintaining accreditation. Assessment for Mason Core can be used to support specialized accreditations, and relevant data and results generated by this assessment process will be shared with programs for their use in reporting to their accreditors.