

SECTION 8: Student Achievement

8.1 The institution identifies, evaluates, and publishes goals and outcomes for student achievement appropriate to the institution’s mission, the nature of the students it serves, and the kinds of programs offered. The institution uses multiple measures to document student success.

(Student achievement) [CR]

Rationale and Notes

Student learning and student success are at the core of the mission of all institutions of higher learning. Effective institutions focus on the design and improvement of educational experiences to enhance student learning and support student learning outcomes for its educational programs. To meet the goals of educational programs, an institution provides appropriate academic and student services to support student success.

An institution needs to be able to document its success with respect to student achievement. In doing so, it may use a broad range of criteria to include, as appropriate: enrollment data; retention, graduation, or course completion; job placement rates; state licensing examinations; student portfolios; or other means of demonstrating achievement of goals.

Note the three related obligations of the institution in order to meet this standard: student achievement goals (target levels of performance) must be identified; data for student achievement must be presented and evaluated (outcomes); and both the goals and the outcomes must be published. For purposes of this standard, “multiple measures” refers to several distinct outcomes, not multiple ways of measuring the same outcome. Being published means in a way accessible to the public—not published only behind an internal firewall.

The standard recognizes that not every institution will utilize the same goals or establish the same targets. For example, an open-admissions institution would generally have a lower target for undergraduate graduation rates than a highly selective institution. An institution that prepares students for transfer to other institutions may use National Student Clearinghouse data for graduation rates while an institution that has little transfer activity might prefer to use IPEDS data. A seminary and an institute of technology may well define job placement “in the field of study” in very different ways. In some cases, institutions may use local data that can only be benchmarked against itself, such as a locally created alumni survey. Nonetheless, every institution has an obligation to establish goals, collect data, and publish this information.

NOTES

Member institutions are expected to demonstrate their success with respect to student achievement and indicate the criteria and thresholds of acceptability used to determine that success. The criteria are the items to be measured (and published); the thresholds of acceptability are the minimal expectations set by the institution to define its own acceptable level of achievement (i.e., a minimum target). The institution is responsible for justifying both the criteria it utilizes and the thresholds of acceptability it sets. The items measured and the

thresholds of acceptability should be consistent with the institution's mission and the students it serves.

In their reviews, SACSCOC committees will examine and analyze (1) documentation demonstrating success with respect to student achievement, (2) the appropriateness of criteria and thresholds of acceptability used to determine student achievement, and (3) whether the data and other information to document student achievement is appropriately published.

While this standard does not ask what the institution does when it finds it falls short of its own expectations, institutions not meeting their self-identified thresholds of performance would be expected to document efforts to meet expectations. (See especially Standard 7.1 [Institutional planning], as well as Standard 7.2 [Quality Enhancement Plan], Standard 8.2.a [Student outcomes: educational programs], Standard 8.2.b [Student outcomes: general education], and Standard 8.2.c [Student outcomes: academic and student services].)

The [Interpretation of Core Requirement 8.1 \(Student achievement\)](#) also requires member institutions to identify a graduation rate metric with SACSCOC; institutions may not designate a new indicator until their subsequent reaffirmation cycle. Institutions which are preparing a compliance certification for review during the reaffirmation process or review by a Fifth-Year Interim Committee to address graduation rates – using that chosen indicator – when providing a narrative and supporting documentation for this standard. Institutions whose graduation rates fall below appropriate and acceptable institutional targets should also discuss ongoing institutional strategies to seek improvement. Institutions which only serve graduate and professional students were not asked to select an indicator for SACSCOC; they are, however, expected to address graduation rate as part of their discussion of student achievement.

In order to maximize institutional effectiveness in the area of student achievement, member institutions should also disaggregate graduation rate data by appropriate gender, ethnic, socioeconomic, and/or other student population characteristics. Institutions should, as a result of the analysis of such disaggregated data, discuss any ongoing institutional strategies to seek improvement in the achievement of at-risk student populations when addressing compliance with this standard. The institution will also be expected to provide a rationale for the way(s) in which it disaggregates graduation rate data.

Questions to Consider

- How does the institution determine appropriate measurable goals and outcomes for student achievement consistent with its mission?
- Does a state board or specialized accreditor expect certain student achievement rates that would be relevant for this standard?
- Are data sources for this information clearly identified?
- If the institution does not use examples of criteria mentioned above, what are the criteria used and why are they appropriate?
- Are both criteria and thresholds of acceptability clearly identified?

- Can the institution justify both criteria and thresholds of acceptability that would be found acceptable by a reasonable external party?
- How does the institution publish this information for the public?

Sample Documentation

- Published evidence containing tables, charts, and/or narrative that include criteria, thresholds of acceptability, and findings related to student achievement.
- Discussion of the underlying rationale for the chosen criteria and thresholds in relation to the institution’s mission.
- Data underlying the findings.

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

SACSCOC policy: [*Institutional Obligations for Public Disclosure*](#)

SACSCOC interpretation: [*Interpretation of Core Requirement 8.1 \(Student achievement\)*](#)

Cross-References to Other Related Standards/Requirements, If Applicable

CR 7.1 *(Institutional planning)*

Standard 7.2 *(Quality Enhancement Plan)*

Standard 8.2.a *(Student outcomes: educational programs)*

Standard 8.2.b *(Student outcomes: general education)*

Standard 8.2.c *(Student outcomes: academic and student services)*

8.2 **The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results in the areas below:**

- Student learning outcomes for each of its educational programs.**
(Student outcomes: educational programs)
- Student learning outcomes for collegiate-level general education competencies of its undergraduate degree programs.**
(Student outcomes: general education)
- Academic and student services that support student success.**
(Student outcomes: academic and student services)

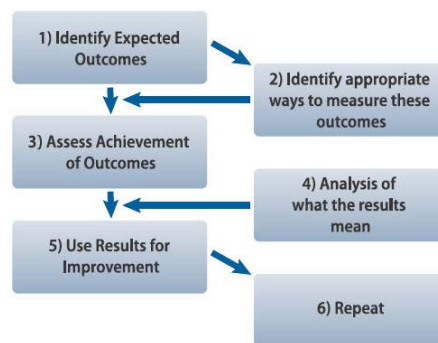
Rationale and Notes

Student outcomes—both within the classroom and outside of the classroom—are the heart of the higher education experience. Effective institutions focus on the design and improvement of

educational experiences to enhance student learning and support appropriate student outcomes for its educational programs and related academic and student services that support student success. To meet the goals of educational programs, an institution is always asking itself whether it has met those goals and how it can become even better.

Even though the concept of institutional effectiveness may not be explicitly referenced in all of the standards, the accreditation process assumes that all programs and services, wherever offered within the context of the institution’s mission and activity, are reviewed as part of the institutional effectiveness process.

When reviewing this standard, peer evaluators will look for evidence of each of the three key elements of the standard, but do so as an integrated activity where the parts are linked. When reporting about the process, it might be useful to consider the process in this fashion:



While the standard emphasizes the three points on the left of the graphic, a thorough explanation of the process will also describe the processes on the right side of the graphic. The institution will not be able to show effective assessment of its outcomes if its means of assessment do not measure what it has set forth as its expected outcomes. Likewise, if the assessment findings are not somehow analyzed or evaluated, it will be hard to show the linkage between undertaking assessments and the continuous improvement of programs and services. Finally, this is a process, and the underlying expectation is that it is ongoing.

NOTES

If there are commonalities in the process by which institutions use student outcomes assessment for institutional improvement across the three elements of this standard, the institution may want to prepare a single preface that could be referenced or hyperlinked from each substandard that outlines the process (organizational structure, timetables, local resources, internal review, etc.). However, review committees will make a separate determination of compliance on each substandard. Because components of the process may differ for each part of the standard, additional content in this Manual will be presented separately for each substandard.

Effective outcomes assessment can be achieved in a variety of ways, and the mentality that “one size fits all” is inappropriate and diminishes the individual missions of institutions. This is especially true regarding the use of language to describe processes; for example, “assessment,” “evaluation,” “goals,” “outcomes,” and “objectives” may have precise

meaning to a reviewer, but the institution may have a meaningful effectiveness system even if it is not as precise with its language as the reviewer would like. The institution should develop and/or use methods and instruments that are uniquely suited to its circumstances, and are supported by its faculty and its academic and student support professionals.

At the time of its review, the institution is responsible for demonstrating that the full cycle outlined above has taken place, and that the current process is being used to promote continuous improvement. For institutions that do not use annual reporting, sufficient cycles of reporting should be provided to establish that the process is applied to all educational programs.

At the time of its review, the institution is responsible for providing evidence of “seeking improvement.” The institution should be using the data to inform changes based on evaluation of its findings. Plans to make improvements do not qualify as seeking improvement, but efforts to improve a program that may not have been entirely successful certainly do.

NOTE ON SAMPLING

There is an expectation that an institution is able to demonstrate institutional effectiveness for all its educational programs and related academic and student services. The volume of material represented by this activity can be quite large, especially at larger institutions. To this end, an institution may provide a sampling of the effectiveness of its programs at the time of its comprehensive review. Sampling, for the purpose of accreditation, includes the following three elements:

- (1) A representation that is mindful of the institution’s mission.*
- (2) A valid cross-section of programs from every school or division (and across all levels), with every major division and level of program represented. Sampling should be inclusive of off-campus sites and distance or correspondence education offerings, as applicable; at a minimum, the institution should clarify that assessment activities are inclusive of these modes of delivery and explain that process.*
- (3) A compelling case – presented in the institution’s narrative – as to why the sampling and assessment findings are an appropriate representation of the institution’s educational programs and its academic and student support services. Sampling does not preclude the institution from having effectiveness data/analysis available on all programs and units. It is the prerogative of a SACSCOC committee to conduct a more in-depth review of an institution’s data/findings/analysis on the effectiveness of all its educational programs and its academic and student support services.*

8.2.a

The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results for student learning outcomes for each of its educational programs. (*Student outcomes: educational programs*)

Rationale and Notes

For purposes of this standard, an academic program is a credential as defined by the institution. A degree with a defined major is clearly a program. On the other hand, programs in the same field but taught at different levels (e.g., a BBA and an MBA) are typically viewed as distinct programs. The [Institutional Summary Form Prepared for SACSCOC Reviews](#) should be a useful guide as to how programs are defined within this standard.

The expectation is that the institution will engage in ongoing planning and assessment to ensure that for each academic program, the institution develops and assesses expected student learning outcomes. Expected student learning outcomes specify the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes students are expected to attain in courses or in a program. Methods for assessing the extent to which students achieve these outcomes are appropriate to the nature of the discipline and consistent over time to enable the institution to evaluate cohorts of students who complete courses or a program.

Shared widely within and across programs, the results of this assessment can affirm the institution's success at achieving its mission and can be used to inform decisions about curricular and programmatic revisions. At appropriate intervals, program and learning outcomes and assessment methods are evaluated and revised.

NOTE

See the Standard 8.2 discussion as well as this substandard for full coverage of this standard within the Resource Manual.

Questions to Consider

- Is there a common process across programs at the institution, or is the means of establishing outcomes assessment processes widely dispersed? If the latter, how is information collected and evaluated?
- What is the role of faculty, chairs, deans, oversight committees and others in the process?
- Is the process systematic and ongoing?
- Are expected student learning outcomes clearly defined in measurable terms for each educational program?
- What types of assessment activities occur to determine whether learning outcomes are met?
- How are results from periodic assessment activities analyzed?
- How does the institution seek improvements in educational programs after conducting these analyses?

- If programs consistently report “no improvements needed,” what happens?
- If the institution used sampling to present its process and to establish compliance with the standard, why were the sampled programs an appropriate representation of all the institution’s programs?
- Were multiple assessment methods used? If so, describe.
- How has the institution’s use of assessment results improved educational programs?

Sample Documentation

- Lists of program-specific expected student learning outcomes for educational programs (usually embedded into individual program or unit reports).
- Descriptions of the assessment measures used to collect information on student learning.
- Details on the assessment and analysis of results from these assessments.
- Specific examples where the findings from analysis of results have led to efforts to make program improvements.
- If sampling is used, (1) how the sampling is representative of the institution’s mission, (2) documentation of a valid cross-section of programs, and (3) make a case as to why sampling and assessment findings are an appropriate representation of the institution’s programs.

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

SACSCOC policy: [*Distance and Correspondence Education*](#)

SACSCOC interpretation: [*Interpretation on Sampling*](#)
[*Interpretation of Standard 8.2.a*](#)

Cross-References to Other Related Standards/Requirements, If Applicable

CR 7.1 (*Institutional planning*)
Standard 7.2 (*Quality Enhancement Plan*)
CR 8.1 (*Student achievement*)