

Appendix A
Plan for Assessing Student Academic Achievement
Denison University

Granville, Ohio

(Created 2001, Revised 2005, 2008)



➤ **Institutional Structure for Assessment**

The *Assessment Committee* is appointed by the Academic Affairs Council and reports to the Council and to the Provost. Members include the Associate Provost and five members of the Teaching Faculty appointed by the Academic Affairs Council and representing interdisciplinary programs and each of the academic divisions of the college. The Assessment Committee is charged with the following:

- Devising and executing a plan for the assessment of student learning; evaluating the results of that assessment and making recommendations for program improvement to the Academic Affairs Council and the Provost.
- Drawing up and continually revising an instruction manual (“Assessment Toolkit”) to guide departments in implementing their plans and in generating their annual reports.
- Regularly communicating with departments and academic programs to ensure that their assessment programs are on track.
- Reviewing departmental and program assessment plans and providing annual written feedback.
- Evaluating departmental and program assessment reports on an *annual basis*, providing written feedback to departments, and making recommendations to the Academic Affairs Council and the Provost.
- Providing an annual written report on the assessment program to the Academic Affairs Council and the Provost. A summary of departmental and program assessments will be presented annually while a summary of the all college assessment will be done biannually.
- Regularly assessing the college’s assessment program.

Each department and academic program appoints an *Assessment Coordinator* to catalyze and manage its assessment program, and to ensure that the annual reports are submitted in a timely fashion. Some departments form internal assessment committees made up of several members of the department.

The college provides an *operational budget line* for assessment to cover the expenses associated with carrying out assessment.

➤ **Mission**

The mission of Denison's educational program is set forth in the mission statement of the course *Catalog*: "Our purpose is to inspire and educate our students to become autonomous thinkers, discerning moral agents and active citizens of a democratic society. Through an emphasis on active learning, we seek to engage students in a liberal arts education that fosters self-determination and demonstrates the transformative power of education."

"Our faculty is committed to undergraduate education. As teacher-scholar-advisors, their principal responsibility is effective teaching informed by the best scholarship. Faculty members place a priority on close interaction with students, interactive learning, and partnerships with students in original research. Our low student/faculty ratio allows for close supervision of independent research and collaborative work in small groups and classes."

➤ **Goals**

Denison views a strong education firmly anchored in the liberal arts as the key to the realization of our mission objectives. A liberal education provides foundation and practice in varied disciplines and in the intellectual processes necessary to function as a free-thinking human being facing the challenges of the 21st century. We provide *breadth* by exposing students to a broad range of modes of inquiry in our general education program. We cultivate *depth* in all parts of the curriculum, but particularly in the major, through the intensive study of a particular discipline. Our overarching goal is to provide students with a set of experiences that leverage independent thinking and the creation of new ideas and meanings, and the ability to communicate them to others. In addition, we provide a set of co-curricular experiences that aim to foster self-determination and active social engagement. Specifically we pursue the following goals in our educational program:

- 1) A Denison education cultivates the ability for *creative/critical thinking*, e.g., students leave Denison with an intellectual appreciation of the multiplicity of meanings and perspectives in the realm of knowledge and experience.
- 2) A Denison education furthers development of a set of *competencies* in reading, writing, quantitative reasoning, and oral communication.
- 3) The development of creative/critical thinking and/or core competencies occurs best in an environment that builds an intellectual and experiential community of learning, consisting of working, learning, and supportive relationships with peers and professors. This environment forms and sustains such relationships and inculcates the norms critical not only to self-development, but also for democratic participation. Through such networks, students are encouraged to reflect on deeply held values and develop new skills, but also learn the meaning of “self-interest, rightly understood.”

➤ Achievement of Goals

Creative/Critical Thinking Since the development of creative/critical thinking is the north star of our educational program, the context for meeting that goal is our entire curriculum. In other words, this goal is a widely-recognized communal goal about which there is singular unanimity at Denison, and around which every course in the college is constructed – *both* in the major courses and in the general education courses. Programs that supplement this goal include the Honors Program, the Senior Research Program, and the Summer Scholars Program.

Reading, Writing, Quantitative Reasoning and Oral Expression The focused context for the development of reading and writing skills is the First-Year Seminar program. Every first-year student must take two seminars before the end of the first year. The purpose of the seminars is the development of the ability to communicate effectively through the written word. As for oral expression, every student is required to fulfill the oral communication general education requirement. As with creative/critical thinking, these competencies are developed across the curriculum and throughout a student’s college career. The jump-start they receive through required courses is just the beginning of that process. Finally, all of our students are required to fulfill a quantitative reasoning requirement by the time they graduate. Many of these students will also take additional quantitative courses connected to their majors.

Community of Learning Consonant with our mission of educating students to be thinkers, discerning moral agents, and active citizens of a democratic society, we cultivate the contexts in which these goals are more richly achieved. In practice this means that students engage each other and faculty in ways consequential to their education. The structural features encouraging learning communities to form are small class sizes, a tight student-faculty ratio, reduced faculty teaching load, and numerous opportunities to work closely with faculty in academic and co-curricular modes. Opportunities are just that and their existence does not mean that students take advantage of them. Only by capturing student behaviors in relation to these opportunities do we have valid measures of a true community of learning at Denison.

➤ Contexts for Assessment of Goals

Our primary location for the assessment of student learning is at the departmental level. We believe that the departmental level is the optimal one in which to anchor our assessment program for the following reasons. First, “Students typically do their best and most advanced work in their major fields of specialization. . . .” (AAC&U). We therefore focus our program on the major because it is a concentrated intellectual challenge presented to our students, the test of all they have learned before – including the competencies they have honed in general education courses. Second, we believe with Ernest Boyer that it is a mistake to view general education and the major in competition; rather, “these two essential parts of the baccalaureate program should be intertwined,” not only in their execution, but in the assessment of their learning outcomes. Liberal education outcomes are best measured “in context,” and we chose the major as our primary context because “liberal education outcomes . . . reach their highest level of cultivation in the context of the student’s area of specialization or major field(s).” (AAC&U). Our understanding is that the major and general education are the warp and woof of a single fabric, which is the liberal arts enterprise, as is characterized by this statement from the 2006 Task Force on the Major at Denison *While the General Education program provides breadth in a variety of disciplines, a major provides depth in a particular discipline. The major introduces students to the methodologies of the field and gives them experience in applying those methodologies toward the discovery of knowledge and understanding in this area of study. The major also explores the discoveries of the chosen field in the context of the General Education background. Conversely, the intellectual competencies learned in General Education courses flower in the rich context of the major.*

The best assessment programs provide multiple measures to assure accuracy of results. While our primary focus of assessment is on the major, as described above, we use one direct and several indirect assessment measures to confirm

what we learn in the departmental reports. These measures focus on the attitudes and behaviors that comprise the environment in which learning takes place. They are described later in this plan.

➤ **Curricular Assessment of Student Learning**

Every department and academic program has appointed an Assessment Coordinator to catalyze and manage the departmental assessment program, and to ensure that reporting is done on an annual basis.

Assessment Plans: Departments and programs have submitted assessment plans to the Assessment Committee. Any revisions of the plans will be submitted with the annual reports. All plans must minimally include the following:

1. A statement of departmental mission statement and goals of the program.
2. A description of the contexts in which assessment takes place (e.g., capstone seminars, comprehensive exams, portfolios).
3. A description of the instruments that will be used to measure outcomes.
4. A description of the context(s) for discussion and analysis of the information obtained from the measures (e.g., departmental retreats or meetings, outside consultants).
5. An account of the mechanism(s) for factoring the information back into program improvement.

Assessment Measures: Departments and programs are asked to tailor their selection of assessment measures to their particular major or curricular program. The Assessment Committee does not select measures for them, although the Committee offers to meet with departments in their discussions of appropriate and reliable measures. In the “Assessment Toolkit” the Committee has included a section that discusses appropriate measures, distinguishing direct measures, indirect measures, and non-measures, and including many examples of each. The Toolkit also includes commentary on what sorts of measures are strongest and weakest.

On the basis of the first few iterations of the assessment program, the Committee learned what it expected would be the case – many different measures are used by different departments and programs. For example, the department of sociology/anthropology relies solely on its comprehensive year-long senior research project. The department of mathematics & computer science includes major field tests (ETS) and sequential skill development. Several of the languages use a combination of language portfolios and scores from the ACTFL external review process. The department of education relies on a battery of direct measures that includes a teaching portfolio, comprehensive examination, and evaluation by outside educators and college faculty. The department of dance’s

instruments include a video diary and portfolio analysis. The department of psychology uses a graduate level ETS exam, given at several points in the students' academic careers (thus providing valuable longitudinal results), and an assessment of the students' ability to orally communicate their original research projects. .

In its responses to annual departmental reports, the Assessment Committee points out deficiencies in measures, whenever they exist, and makes recommendations for substitutes. Likewise, it has affirmed the efforts of departments that have constructed appropriate and reliable measures.

Annual Reports: Every departments and program provides the Assessment Committee an annual assessment report by September 15. The format for the annual report is a response to seven specific questions:

1. What is the mission of your department in terms of student learning?
2. What are the goals of your curriculum and other components of the major in terms of student learning?
3. What measures did you use for assessing student academic outcomes in the major?
4. What methods did you use to analyze the data you gained? In what setting or settings did this analysis and subsequent reflection on the information you received take place?
5. What results did your analysis yield? What did you learn?
6. In what ways do your students demonstrate in their culminating experiences the broad reach of a liberal arts education, keeping in mind that Denison's goals are to
 - a) cultivate autonomous thinkers with the ability for creative/critical thinking;
 - b) further development of a set of competencies in writing, quantitative reasoning, and oral communication;
 - and c) develop an intellectual community, consisting of working, learning and supportive relationships with peers and professors.
7. How have you factored what your learned back into the curriculum? That is, what have been your feedback mechanisms?

Evaluation of Reports: The Assessment Committee provides annual written responses to departmental reports, with advice and recommendations on the plan, the measures, the analyses of the data gathered, and the feedback process for program improvement. The Committee responds to the following set of specific questions in its responses to departments and programs:

1. Are the department's goals clearly articulated?
2. Are the goals operationalized in a clear fashion?

3. What measures has the department employed? Are they direct, indirect, or non-measures?
4. Are the measures of the goals (methods of assessment) clearly defined?
5. Are there procedures in place to implement the measures on a continuing basis?
6. Are the measures appropriate and reliable?
7. Are the measures sufficient?
8. Are the methods of analysis of the data appropriate?
9. Is the analysis of appropriate depth and breadth?
10. What feedback mechanisms has the department employed?
11. Are the feedback mechanisms appropriate and reliable?
12. Was the feedback sufficient?

When indicated, the committee makes recommendations about the particular departmental assessment program to the Academic Affairs Council and the Provost. The committee keeps the Academic Affairs Council and the Provost apprised of the program for assessment of majors in an annual report to that Council and the Senior Staff.

Additional Measures

Direct Measures

In 2003 the Assessment Committee selected a direct measure that specifically proposed to measure most of the goals enumerated in our “statement of goals,” namely the Academic Profile test administered by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton. In 2005, ETS abandoned the Academic Profile test and implemented the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) test. The goals of the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress test are described in the following description of the test by ETS:

- As the only integrated test of general education skills, the *Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress* (MAPP) test assesses 4 core skill areas — critical thinking, reading, writing and mathematics — in a single test that the [Voluntary System of Accountability \(VSA\)](#) has selected as a gauge of general education outcomes....The MAPP test is statistically equated to the former Academic Profile assessment, allowing former Academic Profile customers to conduct longitudinal or cross-sectional studies.

- The accent on critical thinking in this description resonates well with goal 1.
- The tests of skills in reading, writing and mathematics likewise fit well with two of the three objectives stated in goal 2.
- Finally, the MAPP’s aim to test reading and critical thinking in the context of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences probes outcomes in our liberal arts design of cultivating the awareness of different perspectives in the realms of knowledge and inquiry.

By giving the test both to first-year students and seniors, we are able to assess the “value added” dimensions of a Denison education in several skill and inquiry areas. Because the instrument is nationally normed, we are also able to compare the gains of our students with those of other colleges over the span of their college education.

Indirect Measures

The Committee has employed a battery of indirect measures for assessing student outcomes. The primary component of these measures is a survey plan that contains longitudinal components and carries national benchmarks for every survey instrument. Our aim is to track a single class for 24 years to learn as much as possible about what factors in a Denison education enhanced or detracted from their development as students, life-long learners, and “autonomous thinkers, discerning moral agents and active citizens of a democratic society” (Denison Mission Statement). Since 2000, the following survey instruments have been given to selected Denison classes:

Survey Plan

- 1) CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program -- American Council on Education). Demographic and attitudinal survey given every other year to **first-year students** at orientation. National norms provided. (typically given every other year)
- 2) BCSSE (Beginning College Student Survey of Engagement)—Given to **first-year students** at orientation on an occasional basis. Measures academic and learning behaviors. Results compared with NSSE in spring of first-year and NSSE senior year. National norms provided. (Given in 2005)
- 3) Your First Year College (similar to CIRP), given to students at the end of their **first year**. Results compared to the CIRP given at orientation. (typically given every other year.)
- 4) NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement). Assessment survey given to **first-year students** and seniors in the early spring. Measures academic and learning

behaviors. National norms provided. (Initially given every year; now given in alternate years)

- 5) HEDS (Higher Education Data Sharing) **Alumni** Survey.
 - Given to every class one year out. Norms provided in a group of 138 colleges.
 - Given every other year to classes five years out.
 - Given every other year to classes 20 years out.
- 6) FSSE (Faculty Survey of Student Engagement). While this survey is given to faculty rather than students, it complements the NSSE by giving us information about faculty views about “the extent to which students . . .engage in educational practices empirically linked to high levels of learning and development.” In its posing of similar questions, it is the mirror image of the NSSE. (given 2004, 2008)

As an example, the entering class of 2007-2008 is on the following schedule:

2007	▪CIRP at First-Year Orientation
2008	▪NSSE as First-Year Students (spring)
2012	▪NSSE as Seniors
2013	▪HEDS 1 Year Out
2017	▪HEDS 5 Years Out
2032	▪HEDS 20 Years Out

Other Indirect Measures

- Retention and transfer studies
- First- to second-year retention rates, graduation rates, length of time to degree
- Job placement data, graduate and professional school data.

Annual Reports: The Assessment Committee is to file an annual report to the Academic Affairs Council and the Provost by June 30. The report describes what measures were used for assessing student academic outcomes in general education, what methods were used to analyze the data that were collected, the results yielded by the analysis, and recommendations for factoring the results back into program improvement. The report is also reviewed by the Senior Staff of the college.

Evaluation of Reports: The annual reports from the Assessment Committee are reviewed by the Academic Affairs Council and by the Provost, acting in their respective capacities as the college’s academic policy committee and chief academic officer. The Council and the Provost will work in concert to make recommendations for program improvement based on the Assessment Committee’s report.

In its deliberations the Committee has been aided by the following sources:

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Tocqueville, Alexis de, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2000)

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Ernest Boyer, *College, the Undergraduate Experience in America*, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

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