

**Policy on Student Learning Assessment and Quality in Undergraduate Education  
(Approved by Council action July 18, 2017)**

The Code of Virginia § 23.1-203 defines the duty of Council with regard to assessment as follows:

*“[The Council shall...] in cooperation with public institutions of higher education, develop guidelines for the assessment of student achievement. Each such institution shall use an approved program that complies with the guidelines of the Council and is consistent with the institution’s mission and educational objectives in the development of such assessment. The Council shall report each institution’s assessment of student achievement in the revisions to the Commonwealth’s statewide strategic plan for higher education.”*

Goal #2 of the *Virginia Plan for Higher Education* directs SCHEV to “optimize student success for work and life,” and, specifically, to “strengthen curricular options to ensure that graduates are prepared with the competencies necessary for employment and civic engagement.” Priority Initiative #4 for 2016 includes a commitment to “collaborate with institutions to measure the quality of undergraduate education, including civic engagement of graduates and relevance to demand occupations across regions of the state.”

This policy identifies critical competencies for student success and establishes guidelines for the assessment of student achievement in accordance with Goal #2 and Initiative #4 of the *Virginia Plan* and in fulfillment of Council’s statutory duty as cited above. The policy is grounded in the belief that good assessment is a valuable tool that, properly wielded, helps to improve and enhance teaching and facilitate greater levels of student learning.

**Glossary**

“Assessment” refers to a systematic effort to gather and analyze information in order to make broader judgments about quality or level of performance. For the purposes of this policy, assessment will focus primarily on student learning and development.

“Competency” is used primarily as a general term for an area of knowledge or skill.

“Outcomes” are specific and measurable expectations for performance. “Learning outcomes” refer to expectations about what students will know or be able to do after participating in a given educational experience.

## I. Aspirational Statement on Quality

A high-quality college education must promote students' intellectual and personal growth in ways that equip them to succeed in work and life. Higher education seeks to impart learning that is broadly relevant, intellectual skills that are rigorous and widely adaptable, and dispositions and knowledge that contribute to a productive role in one's personal and social relations. To that end, a college education in Virginia—regardless of major or specialized field of study—ideally should emphasize

- **Broad learning** about science, society, technology, arts and humanities, human diversity, and global cultures and interdependence;
- **Intellectual and practical skills** that support evidence-based reasoning and innovation—including analysis, communication, critical and creative thinking, quantitative fluency, information literacy, and collaborative problem solving;
- **Integrative and adaptive learning**, including the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to complex problems and new settings;
- **Personal and social responsibility**, including ethical reasoning, civic and democratic knowledge and engagement, global acumen, and the capacity to work productively with diverse people and perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Principles Guiding Assessment and Quality Assurance

In fulfilling Council's statutory duty and advancing toward the goals of the *Virginia Plan for Higher Education*, Council and Virginia institutions jointly affirm and are guided by the following principles:

- Student learning is the core mission of higher education.
- A high-quality education is about more than access, completion, and post-college wages. Consistent with the "Aspirational Statement on Quality" above, undergraduate education must equip students with the tools and skills they need to succeed in their chosen professions and to lead lives of meaning and purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> These four hallmarks of a quality education and their descriptions were taken—and slightly modified—from the *LEAP Employer-Educator Compact*, published in 2013 by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U).  
<http://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/compact.pdf>

- Students attending Virginia institutions may have different needs based on their personal histories, identities, and life circumstances. It is essential that institutions pay attention to educational quality as it pertains to various subgroups to ensure all students—regardless of their background, identities, or circumstances—receive a high-quality education.
- The skills and preparation of incoming students vary greatly, as do institutional missions. Consequently, assessment should focus on outcomes, student learning, and program improvement rather than on single or common standards for all students and/or institutions.
- Quality assessment helps institutions communicate their value. By appropriately sharing information about assessment findings and plans for improvement, institutions contribute to building public trust in higher education.
- High-quality learning is facilitated by high-quality teaching. To that end, institutions should make deliberate efforts to support faculty and other teaching staff in deepening their understanding of effective teaching, learning, and assessment.
- Quality enhancement is a shared responsibility, involving institutional leaders, faculty and staff, students, families, governmental and non-governmental entities, and the public. True improvement can occur only when all parties look beyond mere compliance to engage in a collaborative process of genuine quality enhancement.
- Good assessment is a tool, not an end in itself, and it can take many forms. Regardless of the specific approach adopted, assessment should provide meaningful information that can be used to validate effective practices, identify areas where change is needed, and verify whether improvement has occurred.
- Institutional assessment processes benefit from periodic review. By reviewing the assessment process itself (rather than simply assessment results), institutions can be confident that their assessment strategies in fact provide the information faculty and institutional leaders need, or they can adjust those processes as necessary to improve their effectiveness.

### **III. Parameters for Assessment**

This policy focuses on core competencies that are critical to the success of all

Virginia undergraduates, regardless of their field of study or which institution they attend. The Council recognizes that all Virginia public institutions are required to conduct comprehensive assessments of their educational programs in order to maintain their accreditation with regional and specialized accrediting agencies. As accrediting agencies and Council share a goal to ensure the quality and effectiveness of postsecondary education, institutions are encouraged to optimize their assessment efforts by integrating assessment activities being done in fulfillment of each agency's requirements.

## 1. Expectations for Student Learning and Development

### A. Competencies

Each institution will assess student achievement in at least **six** competency areas, representing several different types of knowledge and/or skills.

**Four** core competencies will be assessed by all institutions:

- 1) **Critical thinking** – the ability to subject one's own and others' ideas, arguments, assumptions, and evidence to careful and logical scrutiny in order to make an informed judgment, draw a sound conclusion, or solve a problem.
- 2) **Written communication** – the ability to develop and communicate ideas effectively in writing as appropriate to a given context, purpose, and audience. It includes a variety of styles, genres, and media, including computer-mediated communications.
- 3) **Quantitative reasoning** – the ability to manipulate, analyze, and/or evaluate numbers and numerical data. It may involve calculation and/or analysis and interpretation of quantitative information derived from existing databases or systematic observations, and may be based in a variety of disciplines, not limited to mathematics and the natural and physical sciences.
- 4) **Civic engagement** – an array of knowledge, abilities, values, attitudes, and behaviors that in combination allow individuals to contribute to the civic life of their communities. It may include, among other things, exploration of one's role and responsibilities in society; knowledge of and ability to engage with political systems and processes; and/or course-based or extra-curricular efforts to identify and address issues of public or community concern.

**Two** competencies will be selected by the institutions themselves. These competencies shall reflect ongoing institutional priorities for student learning and development, and shall be broadly applicable across an institution's student population. Each 4-year institution and Richard Bland College shall select its own

two competencies. The State Board for Community Colleges will determine how these two competencies will be identified for Virginia Community College System (VCCS) institutions. Institutions may change their selected competencies if their educational priorities shift, but otherwise, it is expected that the same two competencies will be assessed over multiple assessment cycles.

## B. Outcomes

Each institution shall articulate one or more student-focused outcomes—i.e., what students are expected to know or be able to do—within each of its chosen competencies and within each of the core competencies of critical thinking, written communication, and quantitative reasoning. Institutions may tailor the descriptions of the core competencies provided above to align more closely with their mission and curriculum, if necessary.

Outcomes for civic engagement may address dimensions other than student learning (e.g., student attitudes, voting behavior, participation in civic engagement activities). However, when institutions provide learning experiences specifically designed to enhance students' capacity for civic engagement, the assessment of this competency should address the quality of student learning. As with the other competency areas, institutions may tailor the description of civic engagement provided above to align more closely with the mission and curriculum of the institution.

Expectations for achievement in all six competencies shall be articulated as institution-level outcomes (for competencies developed through general education or across departments) or as program-level outcomes (for competencies developed primarily through students' majors or other defined curricular and co-curricular programs).

## 2. Assessment Strategies and Methods

In assessing critical thinking, written communication, quantitative reasoning, and the two additional chosen competencies, institutions shall employ rigorous strategies that rely primarily on direct measures (i.e., using actual student work or student performance) and that allow for inferences about the abilities of the general student population. (It is not appropriate, for example, to limit the assessment of quantitative reasoning to students who are majoring in mathematics.) Indirect measures and logical inferences may be used to complement direct assessments.

Similarly rigorous assessment strategies should be used for civic engagement to the extent that those strategies are appropriate for the outcome(s) being assessed. Proxy indicators (e.g., participation rates) and indirect measures (e.g., student self-reports) are acceptable for this competency, particularly for the assessment of non-cognitive

outcomes. Assessments of student learning and development in civic engagement may focus on the students who participate in relevant learning experiences, even if those students represent a self-selected group.

Assessment strategies for all six competencies must produce information that can be used to (1) substantiate judgments about the degree to which the stated outcomes have been achieved, and (2) guide changes to enhance teaching and learning.

Identifying and attending to possible disparities in student achievement is critical to ensuring a high-quality education for all students. To that end, assessment data should be disaggregated where possible and to the extent that comparisons among student groups would be meaningful. Disaggregated data ideally should address characteristics used to define underrepresented populations in the *Virginia Plan's* Measures and Targets (non-white; Pell grant recipient; age 25 or older; or from a Virginia locality with low undergraduate attainment rates), in addition to any other characteristics of particular interest to the institution.

Assessment of the six competencies may be done at the level of general education, disciplinary and interdisciplinary degree programs, 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.

Institutions may collaborate in their assessments if doing so offers mutual benefit and is appropriate for the outcome(s) being assessed. However, each institution—including each VCCS institution—is required to report its assessment plans and activities separately, as described below.

#### **IV. Schedule of Reporting and Review**

##### **1. Assessment Plans**

Each 4-year and 2-year institution shall submit a plan to SCHEV articulating the following:

- The specific outcome(s) it intends to assess within each competency;
- The assessment strategies and methods to be used for each competency, including plans for the disaggregation of data;
- The schedule for assessing each outcome and reporting the results. Institutions may use their discretion as to the schedule and length of the assessment cycle for each individual outcome. However, all outcomes must be assessed at least once in a given 6-year period.

Plans will be reviewed and approved by SCHEV to ensure appropriate scope and rigor.

## 2. Assessment Reports

Assessment offers a means for communicating with the public about the quality of Virginia institutions. Assessment reports, therefore, must be accessible to the public and must clearly answer the following questions:

- What does an institution expect students to learn or do?
- What courses, experiences, or activities allow students to develop their knowledge and/or abilities in these areas?
- How do faculty and staff know whether—and how well—students have learned?
- Are the institution's expectations in these areas being met?
- How does/will the institution use this information to improve students' educational experience and enhance future achievement?<sup>2</sup>
- Have changes made on the basis of previous assessment findings had the desired effect?

Institutions shall generate and maintain a publicly available document and/or website providing answers to these questions in language that can be understood by a general audience. This document/website may also include other performance metrics or information that addresses the quality of students' educational experience (e.g., standardized exam scores, rates of participation in high-impact practices). The document/website shall be updated annually to reflect new findings as institutions cycle through their assessments of the six competencies.

SCHEV will provide guidance regarding the content and structure of the public assessment report. Assessment plans and reports will be reviewed by SCHEV as they are submitted/posted, and feedback will be provided. Institutions will be advised of any identified deficiencies and may be required to make revisions or develop a corrective plan of action.

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<sup>2</sup> This may be more relevant for some competencies than others, depending on the assessment findings and institutional priorities.