

# Continuous Improvement Guidelines: Academic Programs

## Overview

The annual assessment process at Meredith is focused on continuous improvement/program enhancement. The Continuous Improvement Reports should document how assessment findings are being used for improvement/program enhancement across campus. Reports of the previous academic year along with the plans for the current academic year are **due each year on October 1<sup>st</sup>**.

Reports will be brief—**usually less than 5 pages each**- but must focus on use of results for improvement/program enhancement. There are two templates for reports- [a CIR outline format](#) and [a CIR table format](#). All reports will be done in Word and **submitted electronically**.

Assessment plans for the upcoming year will include the outcomes, methods and method implementation portions only and also come with two templates- [an assessment plan outline format](#) and [an assessment plan table format](#).

The guidelines below are not intended to function as a straightjacket (i.e., there are no assessment police) but rather to help guide a meaningful assessment process. Programs have ownership of the process, can expect useful supports from RPA and can openly discuss any issues that come up with the Director of RPA, Pam Steinke ([steinkep@meredith.edu](mailto:steinkep@meredith.edu)). Supervisors will read and give feedback on all Continuous Improvement Reports.

## Outcomes

Annual departmental assessment begins with a small set of outcomes that together define the most essential impacts of the program. These may be [layered](#) with program goals or types of outcomes, and are aligned with the department mission and, when possible, the Meredith College [Mission](#), [Core Values](#) and/or [Vision](#). The process of assessment involves getting useful feedback on progress toward these outcomes and **the purpose of assessment is continuous improvement/program enhancement**. Student Learning Outcomes represent *the most important impacts* of a program on students (i.e., not *all* impacts) and together paint a clear picture of what a program is doing for students. [Outcomes are impact oriented rather than process oriented](#).

Once departmental faculty discuss and agree upon the most meaningful outcomes of the program, **these outcomes are the same outcomes that appear in Meredith communications about the program, such as the catalogue and web site**; are shared with students in the program; are included every year in the Continuous Improvement Report; and are reviewed during Comprehensive Program Assessment. At least some Student Learning Outcomes for each major and concentration will be unique to that student program.

## Curriculum Mapping

Academic departments will map their outcomes to their curriculum. [Curriculum Mapping](#) is a way of specifying how outcomes are being met through the curriculum and relevant co-curricular programs. Curriculum Maps can simply specify whether each course addresses each outcome or the degree to which each course addresses each outcome.

Even though Curriculum Mapping is about processes, not impacts, it can still lead directly to program improvement. For example, if an important outcome is only addressed in a senior capstone course, it may need to be introduced earlier in the curriculum. When Curriculum Mapping

results in changes, these changes will be reported in the Program Enhancement section of the Continuous Improvement Report. Curriculum Maps only need to be updated when changes are made to the curriculum or outcomes.

## Methods and Implementation

All outcomes do not need to be assessed each year, but all outcomes will be assessed **at least once, using more than one method, [within a 3-year period](#)**. In addition, when major changes are made to the program based on assessment findings, the relevant outcomes will be **reassessed once the changes are completely implemented** to see whether there was improvement.

Measures may be quantitative and/or qualitative as long as data are gathered in a systematic way. Students' beliefs about whether they have learned (e.g., through surveys, exit interviews) can provide useful information but need to be supplemented with more direct evidence of student learning (e.g., scoring of student work, portfolios). Grades are never an acceptable form of assessment because they are individual to each instructor and they go beyond representing how well students are meeting an individual outcome; however, [the same criteria may be used in course grading as in assessment](#).

The implementation of methods will be included in both the assessment plan and the Continuous Improvement Report. Implementation includes how and when data will be collected and who will be sampled. Measurement instruments including rubrics and surveys can be attached to the Continuous Improvement Report as appendices.

## Results and Interpretation

Results are summarized in a way that communicates the main findings and demonstrates a clear connection to both the specified methods and program enhancements; **raw data do not need to be included**. Results are discussed in terms of what the data suggest about how well an outcome is being met, but **performance criteria are not required**.

Interpretation focuses on relative strengths and weaknesses in order to be most useful for improvement. Results are interpreted in context of other relevant information (e.g., other past and current assessment data, professional experience, theory or research in the field, benchmark institutions), are critically examined, and discussed with all relevant faculty. This process can be specified in the report (e.g., reference to ongoing departmental meetings, assessment committee meetings, faculty retreats). **If faculty don't care about the results or don't see how they can be used for improvement, there is a problem with the assessment process.**

## Program Enhancements

Program enhancements specify how to change curriculum, pedagogy, infrastructure or other aspects of the teaching and learning process to better meet Student Learning Outcomes. Improvements are in the form of [specific decisions made or actions taken](#), rather than vague futuristic possible uses (e.g., not "we will continue to discuss how we might make changes in the future" or "we will continue to monitor"). Improvements also include decisions made about changes to the assessment process itself when results are not meaningful; however, some decisions will go beyond the assessment process to actual program enhancements. While many changes will not have resource implications, **when improvements do have resource implications, these will follow directly from the results and interpretation and will be noted in the Continuous Improvement Report.**