

Standard 5 Matching Operations with the Mission: Student Learning

GETTING STARTED

It is often helpful to review and complete as much of Standard 1 as possible before the program begins to document its compliance with Standard 5 because Standard 1 will help the program see how its definitions of learning competencies and assessment of student learning align with program mission, goals, and public service values. For example, many programs specify a programmatic goal that refers in some way to preparing outstanding public leaders. In Standard 1, the program will discuss the ways in which its curricular and (perhaps) co-curricular structure is designed to accomplish this goal. This discussion can help the program prepare for the steps taken below to address the requirements of Standard 5. As discussed in more detail below, in order to demonstrate compliance with Standard 5, programs will operationalize the five Universal Required Student Learning Competencies as well as any relevant mission-specific and/or elective competencies; develop a written assessment plan; collect data on student learning; and analyze the data and use it to inform programmatic changes to improve the program.

- **Standard 5 essentially asks programs to answer three broad questions:** What do you expect your students to know and be able to do? How do you assess how well students are meeting these student learning expectations? How do you use assessment results for continuous program improvement? An important consideration as you answer these questions is how your answers align with your program’s mission, goals, and values. Looking at examples from other sources, as discussed below, can be very useful, but ultimately your compliance with Standard 5 will be driven by your program’s unique purpose.
- **The five Universal Required Student Learning Competencies are at the foundation of Standard 5, and operationalizing the competencies is the first major task needed for Standard 5 compliance.** While there are many ways to define these competencies, the program will want to take care to align competency definitions with program-specific missions, goals, and public service values. Programs may want to review sample Self Study Reports from other institutions, available on the NASPAA website, as well as the examples of competency statements in Appendix B of the Self Study Instructions, to see how other programs have operationalized the required competencies. Programs will operationalize each required competency in ways that are consistent with the program’s mission. For example, programs that have a national or international focus will probably define “To Lead and Manage in Public Governance” differently than programs that primarily serve a local or regional audience, because they will generally expect that their graduates will be working in different environments than students in a program with a more locally-focused mission.
- **As programs define the required competencies it is useful to engage in a faculty-wide discussion about the learning objectives and content coverage of required and elective courses in the curriculum.** It is likely that some of the learning objectives of individual courses will link to – and in some cases they may mirror – the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities the program is using to define the required universal competencies. In Standard 5, programs will be asked to map the curriculum to the five required competencies so a discussion about what programs expect to be addressed in each course will assist in the mapping process.

- **At this point, it's time to think about how you will assess student learning.** Programs will need to determine what evidence it will collect, who will collect and analyze the data, and in what format the data analysis will be communicated to faculty and other stakeholders and used to improve the program. Here are some basic points to consider when selecting the data.
 - **Direct and indirect measures:** Programs will want a mix of data to assess how well students are mastering learning competencies as defined by their faculty. Direct measures involve specific student work such as Capstone projects, class papers or other assignments. Indirect measures include graduating student surveys, Internship supervisor evaluations, alumni surveys and the like. Indirect measures ask for perceptions about learning. Direct measures evaluate student work – usually against a rubric that outlines clear criteria for level of mastery. More information about selecting measures to assess student learning is available on the NASPAA website.
 - **External validity:** When programs use student work to assess learning, a good practice is to consider having faculty other than the person who taught the classes do the assessment.
 - **More is probably not better:** Programs often struggle with determining the appropriate magnitude of student learning assessment. How many competencies to assess and how often to assess them, and how much evidence to collect are important considerations. Above all, programs will want to implement an assessment plan that is sustainable. Even if a program were able to assess all five required competencies in the self study year, it is unlikely that going forward it could continue to assess each competency every year. And while programs will want to consider assessing any given competency with more than one measure, too many measures can result in confusing and conflicting results that make it difficult to act on the information obtained. Regarding how much evidence to collect, think strategically: of all the elements in the program's definition of a competency, which are the most critical for students to be able to demonstrate, and which blend of direct and indirect measures best assesses mastery?

Regarding how often to assess a required competency, note that in it's the 2014 Self-Study Instructions, Standard 5.1 Basis of Judgment, COPRA says "An accredited program need not assess all competencies every year or cohort, but rather at a frequency appropriate for its mission and goals. However, assessing each competency only once during a seven-year accreditation cycle would not likely be sufficient for conformance in most programs." Regarding expectations for how many of the required competencies programs should demonstrate a full assessment cycle, a COPRA policy statement based on decisions made in October 2013, available on the NASPAA website, which outlines expectations. It notes the following: "Programs in the 2014-15 cohort, whose Self-Study Reports are due August 15, 2014, should have completed one full cycle of assessment for student learning outcomes in at least three of the universal competency domains. Consistent with previous statements, programs should provide a detailed assessment plan, which includes direct measures as well a timeline for sustainable assessment of all universal competencies moving forward. This expectation replaces the more optimistic implementation timeline suggested in COPRA's 2012 policy statement". It is logical to assume that programs in cohorts that are in later cohorts should have completed the full cycle for more than three competencies.

- **An assessment plan will help programs determine and maintain a viable assessment program.** COPRA expects to see that programs have developed a sustainable assessment plan that articulates which competencies will be assessed and when, and what data will be collected. Thus, as the program works on Standard 5 compliance, it should document its assessment strategies in a formal assessment plan. In *the Detailed Summary of Changes in the 2013 NASPAA Self-Study Instructions* referenced above, COPRA requested “that programs submit, within their Self-Studies as a PDF attachment, a written, sustainable, and mission-driven plan or planning template that addresses how they plan to assess each competency, and what measures will be used to assess each competency.”
- **Assessment rubrics help the program determine the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities it believes are required to demonstrate mastery of required competencies.** Programs may want to look at sample rubrics, available on the NASPAA website, as well as general information on how to construct rubrics.
- **How to use the data you’ve collected?** The final element of student learning assessment is the use of assessment data for continuous program improvement. This requirement of Standard 5 demonstrates a direct linkage to Standard 1, because Standard 1.3 requires programs to “collect, apply, and report information about its performance and its operations to guide the evolution of the Program’s mission and the Program’s design and continuous improvement with respect to standards two through seven.” Standard 1.3.4 asks programs to describe its ongoing assessment processes and how the results of the assessments are incorporated into program operations to improve student learning, faculty productivity, and graduates’ careers. Finally, Standard 1.3.4a requests examples of how programs use assessments to improve the program. Thus, while Standard 1 asks the program to think broadly about how it evaluates its program, clearly student learning assessment is integral to this discussion. Standard 5 asks programs for specific information on the evidence of learning that was gathered, how the evidence of learning was analyzed, and how the evidence was used for programmatic changes, or the basis for determining that no change was needed. Therefore, programs will use this information in both standards. The sample self studies on NASPAA’s website can assist programs in seeing how others have discussed the use of data. One of the things that COPRA looks for is a direct link between actions the program says it has taken in response to assessment and the actual assessment data the program reports it has collected. Sometimes programs indicate they’ve made changes based on assessments but there is no corresponding evidence that relates to these changes. Thus, programs will want to be as specific as possible about what it has learned, based on the assessment data, and how it has used that information.
- **Mission-specific and elective student learning competencies.** Programs are not required to specify mission-specific competencies but a number of programs have chosen to do so. If your program has a strong mission-based focus on a particular area of public policy or administration that is not easily captured within the five required competencies or that the program believes merits special attention, it may make sense to define and assess a competency or competencies specifically related to this area. In addition to using the assessment data to improve the program’s implementation of mission-specific competencies, programs often use this information as a way to inform prospective faculty and students about the program’s strengths and unique offerings. Programs that offer specialized tracks or concentrations are expected to

define and assess mission-specific elective competencies for these areas. Common elective tracks or concentrations generally include curricular areas such as municipal government, nonprofit administration, budget and fiscal policy and analysis, and the like.

In its policy statement based on COPRA decisions made October 2013, referenced above and available on the NASPAA website, COPRA outlined its expectations regarding the assessment of mission-specific required competencies and mission-specific elective competencies. In essence, programs are expected to have demonstrated “progress” with regard to defining and assessing its unique mission-specific competencies. With regard to mission-specific elective competencies (for tracks or concentrations), COPRA stated: “Programs in the 2014-15 cohort will not be required to demonstrate a full cycle of assessment on their specialization competencies in order to achieve accreditation status. COPRA will look for some progress in efforts to define specialization competencies and a commitment to assessment of the specializations moving forward, as articulated by the program’s assessment plan. The Commission will continue to address truth-in-advertising and other aspects of specialization quality (e.g. adequacy of course offerings, quality of faculty) in the interim period.”

- **Final thoughts on assessing student learning.** As programs develop assessment plans, define competencies, select data, develop a workable and sustainable data analysis plan and determine how to use the results, it is possible to lose sight of the big picture. The primary reason to engage in this process is to articulate the knowledge, skills, and abilities you expect of your students, to assess their level of mastery of these KSAs, and to make appropriate changes based on areas of weakness as evidenced by the data. This generally means that all program faculty understand and contribute to the processes required in Standard 5. Unless this process results in information that is useful to the program, the exercise will be frustrating and ultimately will not improve program performance. It may be helpful for programs to consider the multiple demands made upon it for assessment data – regional accrediting bodies are increasingly requiring departments and programs to assess student learning, and many schools and colleges within institutions make similar requests – and look for ways to minimize duplication.