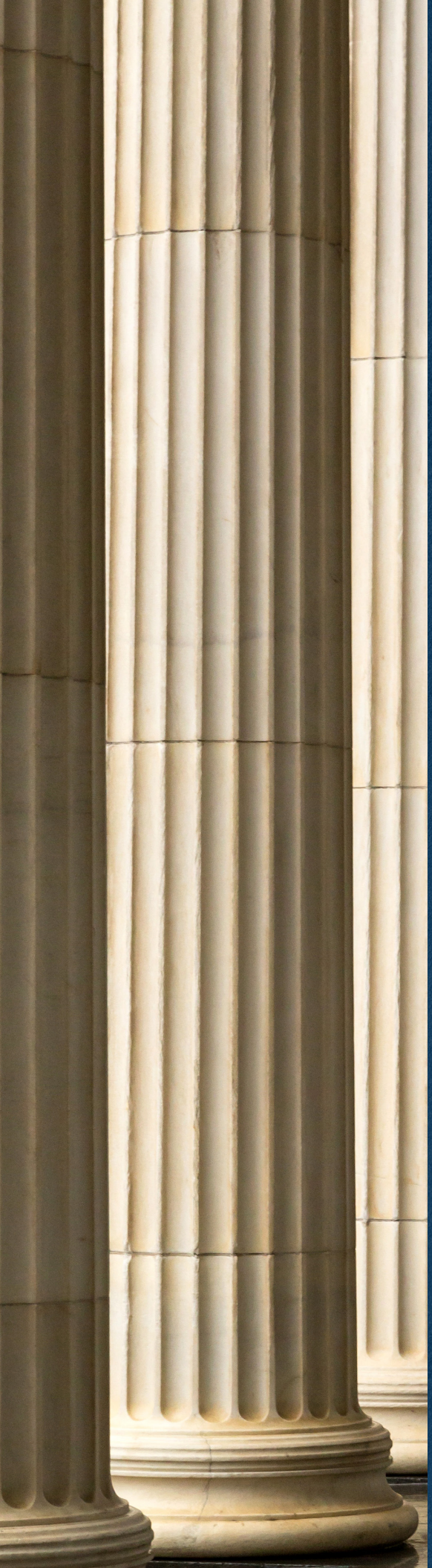


RESOURCE MANUAL

for The Principles of Accreditation:

Foundations for Quality Enhancement

SACSCOC™

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Colleges

Third Edition: 2018, First Printing

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

In accord with federal regulations, it is expected that the institution will demonstrate its 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).]

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 policies: Institutional Obligations for Public Disclosure

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:**

a. Student learning outcomes for each of its educational programs.
(Student outcomes: educational programs)

b. Student learning outcomes for collegiate-level general education competencies of its undergraduate degree programs.
(Student outcomes: general education)

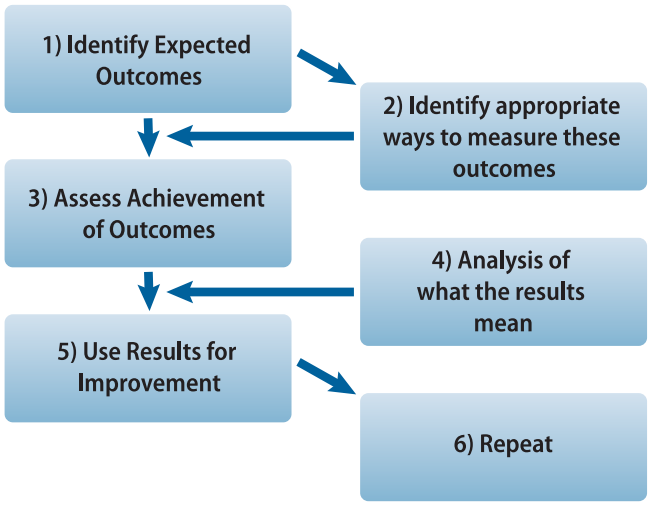
c. Academic and student services that support student success.
(Student outcomes: academic and student services)

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 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 Commission 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

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)*

8.2.b 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 collegiate-level general education competencies of its undergraduate degree programs. *(Student outcomes: general education)*

Rationale and Notes

General education is a critical element of undergraduate degree programs, yet the delivery of courses related to general education is often dispersed across multiple academic departments. As a result, there is a tendency for this extremely important part of the undergraduate degree experience to be assessed, revised, and discussed in a haphazard fashion. This standard ensures that general education competencies are specifically addressed by establishing expected learning outcomes, assessing these outcomes, and providing evidence of seeking improvements based on the findings.

The standard does not mandate a specific approach to this outcomes assessment process. The approach is up to the institution, consistent with principles of good practice, the role general education plays in that institution's curricula, and the organizational structure of the institution.

The institution is responsible for identifying measures of expected student learning outcomes to determine the extent to which students have attained appropriate college-level competencies.

NOTES

See the Standard 8.2 discussion as well as this substandard for full coverage of this standard within the Resource Manual. ***Note that "Sampling" does not apply to general education assessment due to the limited number of competencies involved.***

This standard only applies to undergraduate degree programs. The term "collegiate-level" implies that assessment of general education competencies within developmental courses generally is not appropriate. This standard does not apply to noncredit programs.

It is acceptable to implement a schedule of assessment in which only a subset of competencies are evaluated in a given year. It is expected, however, that all competencies would be evaluated within the multiple-year cycle, and that the institution provides evidence of assessment findings and of actions seeking improvement across the full cycle. It is unusual for a multiple-year cycle to exceed three years.

Different institutions use widely different approaches to determine expected general education outcomes for their students, and they may also use very different means to deliver general education. Some institutions have a very prescriptive set of courses, while others offer a smorgasbord of courses. Some institutions augment basic core courses with additional general education outcomes within the major (e.g., writing across the curriculum or discipline-specific critical learning skills). Some institutions collect the bulk of their assessment data regarding general education early in the student's studies, while others rely on assessments closer to the time of graduation. Larger institutions may have multiple approaches across different colleges and schools. Community colleges may have different general education expectations for students earning technical degrees than for those seeking transfer degrees. Some institutions will utilize embedded assignments within broad general education core courses as part of its set of assessments, others will utilize upper-level courses or external evaluations to capture these outcomes, and still others will turn to their alumni for some of their assessments. Because of these variations, reviewers must be even more mindful of the dangers of a "one size fits all" approach for general education than for student learning outcomes within defined majors. Conversely, due to the variability in the ways that institutions establish, teach toward, and assess general education competencies, it is essential that institutions carefully describe their concepts and results for this integral component of undergraduate programs.

As an institutional improvement standard, the expectation is not that the institution be required to certify the competency of each student. The institution undertakes that process when it issues a diploma. The intent of the standard is for the institution to make continuous improvements by assessing itself through its assessment of students.

Questions to Consider

- What is the organizational structure that allows the institution to gain a sense of consistency in its expectations regarding general education outcomes?
- What expected learning outcomes capture the intended college-level general education competencies the institution envisions for its undergraduate students?
- Where and when are these expected learning outcomes best assessed? Within the course where they are taught? Within other courses that utilize the material taught earlier in the college experience? By external instruments that can be benchmarked to peers?
- How will the institution maintain consistency in its measurements across different programs of study?
- How (and by whom) are the findings analyzed in order to take possible action on the findings?
- If weaknesses are found, what process is there to seek improvements in the delivery of general education learning experiences?
- How does this standard relate to the rationale underlying the general education component of the curriculum? [See Standard 9.2 *(General education requirements)*.]
- How are off-campus, distance education, and transfer students included in this process?

Sample Documentation

- Identification of student learning outcomes from the institution's expected competencies of graduates.
- If different units of the institution use different approaches, a discussion and rationale for each.
- Justification that all measures are intended to capture college-level learning.
- 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 improve the general education component of undergraduate degree programs.
- Specific attention to the way off-campus, distance education, and transfer students are part of this process.

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

SACSCOC policy: Distance and Correspondence Education

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)*
Standard 9.3 *(General education requirements)*

8.2.c **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 academic and student services that support student success.** *(Student outcomes: academic and student services)*

Rationale and Notes

Academic and student support services that support student success normally include such activities as library and learning/information resources, faculty resource centers, tutoring, writing centers, academic computer centers, student disability support centers, financial aid, residence life, student activities, dean of students' office, and so on. Most institutions would also include admissions offices within this category. These units provide direct support to faculty and students as related to their educational programs, indirect support for student learning, or a specific co-curricular mission that supports the college experience.

It would be common to find that some of these units have expected student outcomes very similar to those of educational programs. Examples might be a library unit tasked with providing information literacy instruction to students, or wellness programming aimed at influencing student behaviors. Regarding library and other learning/information resources, see Standard 11.3 *(Library and learning/information access)*, which specifically addresses instruction in the use of the library. In other cases, expected outcomes might not be related to a directly measurable student learning outcome but instead related to quality of service. An example might be a maximum percentage "downtime" target for levels of academic computing network availability.

As discussed in the "Rationale and Notes" for Standard 7.3 *(Administrative effectiveness)*, it is sometimes difficult to separate assessment of outcomes of administrative goals from assessment of outcomes related to academic and student support services. Generally, these "dual function" units would be addressed in this part of the *Principles*. If those units are instead addressed in Standard 7.3, it is incumbent on the institution to explain how this determination follows from its mission and organizational structure; it is strongly suggested that this explanation appear in both standards of the Compliance Certification. While institutions may organize functions differently, it is expected that all services, whether administrative or academic student support services, engage in institutional effectiveness processes.

NOTES

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

Often, the nature of academic and student support services differs between services for graduate students and those for undergraduate students. Similarly, some services are geared

toward commuter students and others primarily target residential students. While institutions have moved more services online, making them available to residential, online, and off-campus students, this is not always the case. Institutions should take care to explicitly address how outcomes assessment activities take these (and other) student populations into effect.

Questions to Consider

- Has each unit developed expected outcomes in clearly defined and measurable terms?
- For units that have direct instructional responsibilities, or that provide specific co-curricular activities, are there measurable expected student learning outcomes for these functions?
- What types of assessment activities are undertaken by each unit?
- How (and by whom) are the findings analyzed in order to take possible action on the findings?
- If weaknesses are found, what is the process for seeking improvements in the delivery of academic and student support services? What are some of the efforts made to improve services?
- If the institution used sampling, why were the sampling and findings an appropriate representation of the institution's academic and student support units?

Sample Documentation

- Information as to how the institution's academic and student support services units are structured for reporting purposes.
- Specific expected outcomes for academic and student support services units, to include expected student learning outcomes as appropriate.
- Specific evidence of the assessment of outcomes.
- Information as to how findings are analyzed.
- Examples of units seeking improvements based on this analysis.
- If sampling is used, (1) how the sampling is representative of the institution's mission, (2) documentation of a valid cross-section of units, and (3) make a case as to why sampling and assessment findings are an appropriate representation of the institution's units.
- Discussion of how assessments address different types of student populations.

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

SACSCOC policy: Distance and Correspondence Education

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)*

CR 11.1 *(Library and learning/information resources)*
Standard 11.3 *(Library and learning/information access)*
CR 12.1 *(Student support services)*