



Program Assessment Series: Assessing Graduate Programs

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As you get your lunch...

- Introduce yourself to others at your table
- Discuss: What is the GREATEST assessment challenge for your graduate program?

Goals for this Session

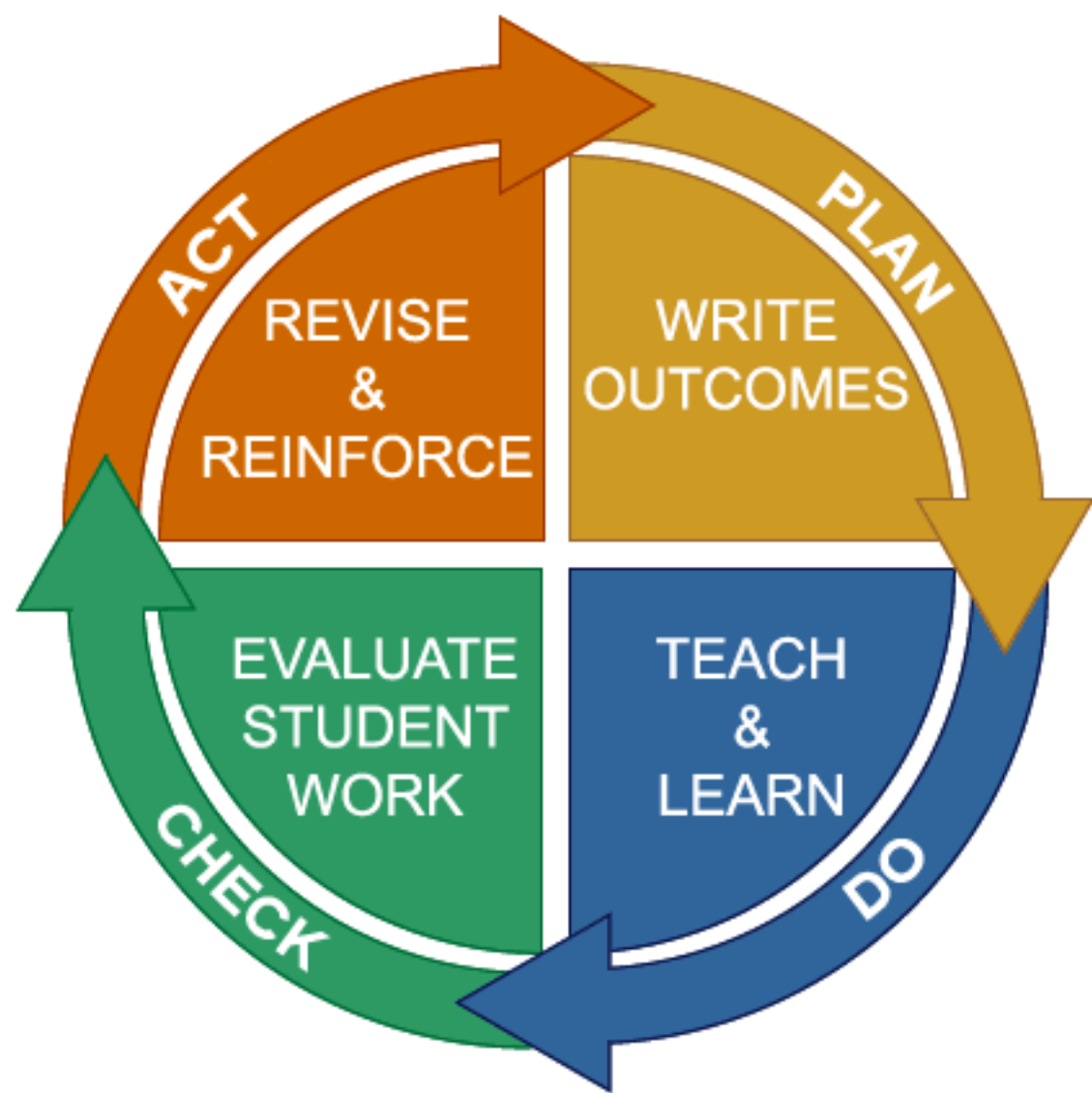
- Outline key steps in developing a program assessment plan
- Challenges specific to graduate program assessment
- Brainstorm approaches appropriate to your program
- Troubleshoot and answer questions

What is assessment?

- Assessment of student learning outcomes involves gathering useful information on students' performance and using it to inform curricular and pedagogical revision
- Assessment should be:
 - a collaborative effort
 - led by program faculty
 - implemented by program faculty who review student performance and determine steps to improve the curriculum/program

Goals of assessment

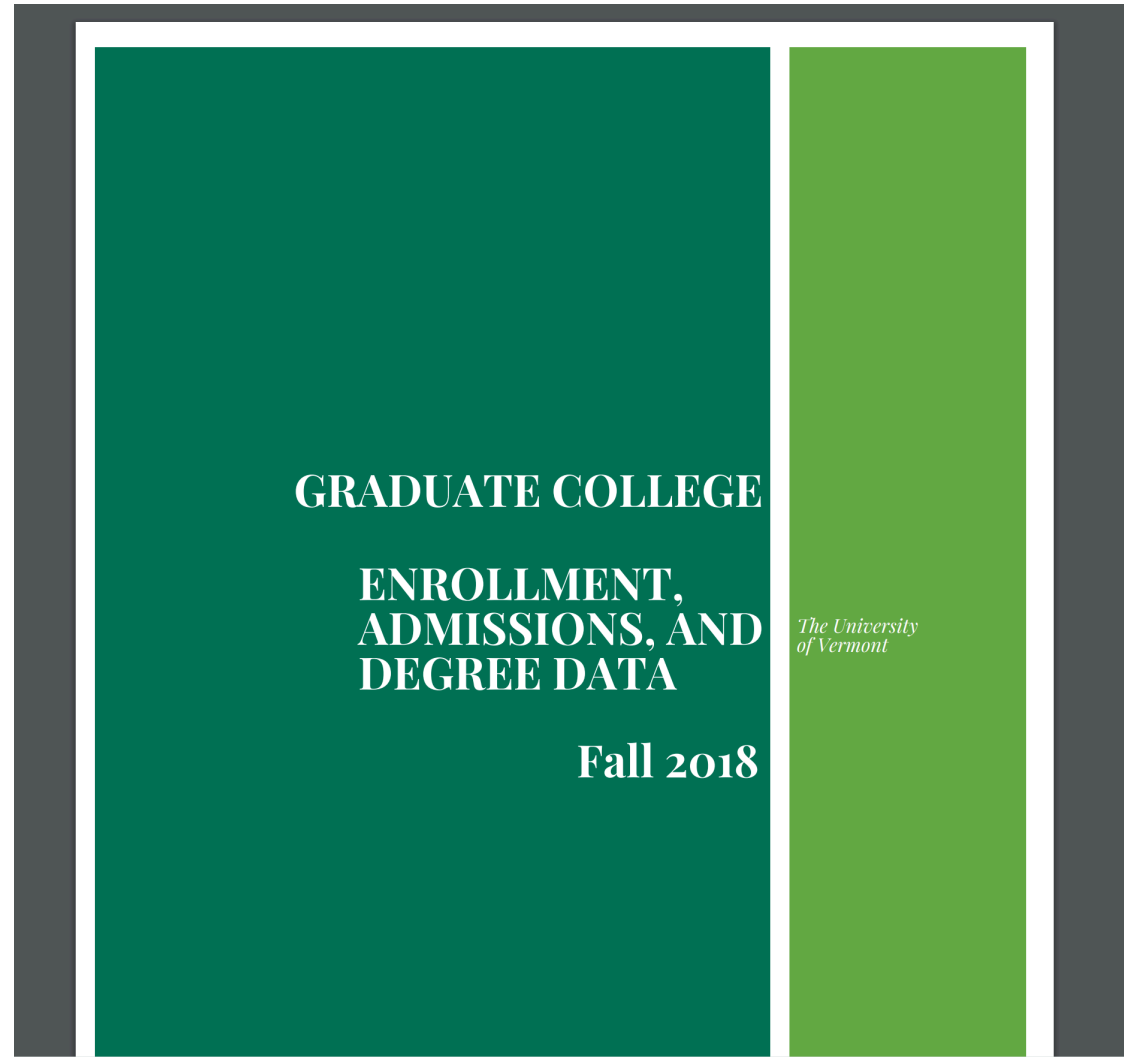
- Clear identification/description of program characteristics and expectations for student achievement
- Systematic collection of different kinds of (helpful) data to evaluate student progress towards/achievement of those expectations
- Use of analyzed data to inform curricular or program revision
- Repetition of the cycle to check on results of implementation



What do we expect of graduate programs?

1. **Program-level learning outcomes** for each program. Keep in mind that for graduate programs, this may focus on professional training and skills, or ability to design and conduct research in a field of study
2. **An assessment plan.** Some graduate programs may need to rely primarily on indirect evidence of student achievement of program outcomes
3. An **up-to-date E1A form**
4. **Planning** for regular faculty discussions to evaluate assessment data and make needed revisions in response to them
5. A **brief annual report** sent to the Grad College Dean and, if appropriate, your college/school assessment coordinator

How OIR can help



Creating an assessment plan

Steps in (graduate) Program Assessment Planning

1. Develop program-level outcomes with input/drafts by faculty
2. Identify places where students learn, practice and demonstrate their mastery of the outcomes
 - What are some key data points/locations for YOUR program?
3. Gather indirect evidence of graduate outcomes
4. Use the results of steps 2 and 3 to develop a plan for assessment of student learning outcomes
5. Progress through the plan, making sure to regularly review information and "feed it back" into planning and assessment

The importance of a shared vision

- Useful assessment should be a collaborative effort that reflects a departmental SHARED VISION for what students will know and be able to do when they complete your program
- A shared vision:
 - Motivates assessment activities (makes them worthwhile)
 - Helps with prioritizing – what do you want to assess first/most often?
 - Guides how the program uses information from assessment to revise the curriculum or make changes to advising or other program features

Recommendations:

- Create time for assessment discussions.
- Emphasize assessment as part of “curricular hygiene”
 - A healthy program is always engaged in evaluating student progress
 - A healthy program has faculty who negotiate a shared vision of student success within their program and strive to achieve that vision
- Consider this: If core courses or other experiences are not helping student reach desired program outcomes, then what you are offering students is a series of courses, not a degree program.

Few programs start at zero

Even if they do not have clearly stated/updated outcomes, most programs have been gathering and, to some degree, reviewing some data on student success in their program all along:

- Faculty impressions/frustrations
- Student satisfaction/dissatisfaction/pain points
- Grades or other course-level assessments that indicate student skill levels
- Anecdotal evidence about student success after graduation

Recognizing Graduate Program Challenges

What challenges does your program face?

- Were there common issues covered at your table?
- Were there any issues that seem unique to your program?

Challenges faced by graduate programs

- Small cohorts/numbers of graduates
- Individualized programs that offer few curricular locations for assessing student outcomes

Both of these features of many UVM graduate programs make it difficult to separate individual student performance from program-level features contributing to student outcomes.

Other challenges:

- Interdisciplinary programs may not have core faculty who meet on a regular basis
- In PhD programs, much of the evaluation work may be done by a small dissertation committee working largely independently
- The large number of factors contributing to individual student success can be difficult to generalize or respond to, particularly in small programs

How to approach graduate program assessment

Establish program-level outcomes

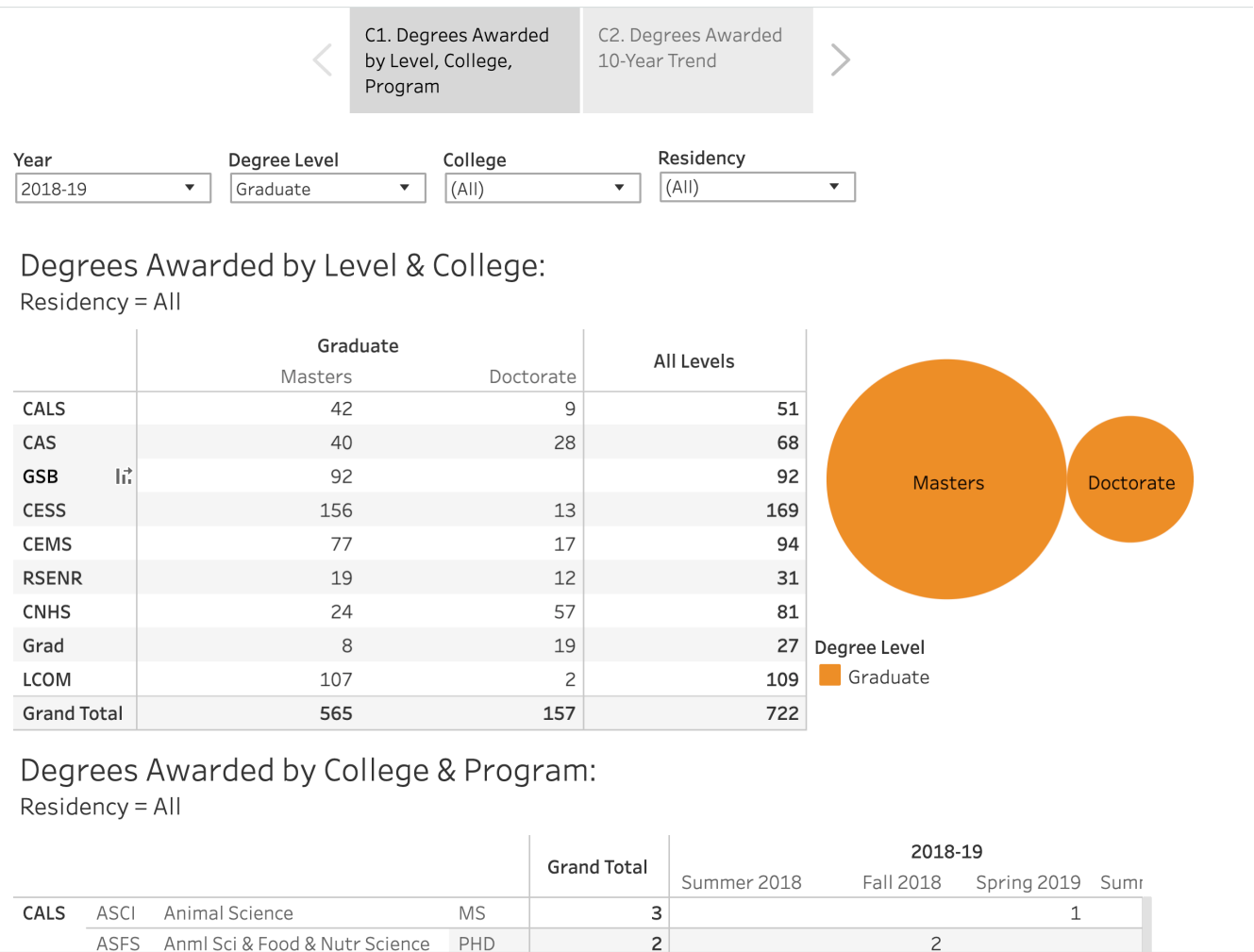
- Most programs should have these but...
- Are they current? Do they reflect innovations in the field that have driven recent curricular change?
- Are faculty familiar with them? Do they discuss them with students?
- Do the outcomes motivate discussions of student success?
- Are the outcomes incorporated into the program webpage/materials for prospective and current students?

Where do students demonstrate outcomes?

Consider your program – do students pass through any of the following?

- Core course sequence
- Comprehensive examinations
- Proposal process/defense
- Thesis or project defense or other capstone evaluation or...
- Other common experiences/opportunities to demonstrate key knowledge and skills?

Using Catamount Data effectively



What indirect data do you already have?

Examples of helpful data can include information from the following:

- Tracking of national awards for graduate study or competitive research grants (internal and external)
- Employment outcomes for alumni/recent graduates
- Publication record of students and alumni
- Passage rates of licensure exams or other tests related to program outcomes
- Surveys of alumni and current students that ask about the value of the program, skills gained, etc.
- Exit interviews with students completing or leaving the program
- Statistics on entering student qualifications and evaluation of predictors of success

Take a moment...

Write down an answer to this question:

What evidence can you cite right now that students are meeting each of (or any of...) your program outcomes?

Closing assessment gaps

What kinds of evidence would help you assess (or better assess) whether students are progressing towards and meeting all of your program-level outcomes?

Use your evidence:

- Of your outcomes, are there any that students or faculty have raised concerns about? What has the response to these concerns been?
- Are there issues/problems that faculty or students discuss on a regular/cyclical basis? Are there curricular or other possible solutions to these, or do you need to gather more evidence before you take action?
- What do alumni/exiting graduates say about the value of the program? Do they have suggestions for changes? Are your program outcomes well-aligned with the career trajectories of your alums?

Assessment planning:

- Not all graduate programs will need to create a multi-year assessment cycle, although larger, cohort-based programs should strongly consider taking this approach
- If your program is relatively small (a few student a year) and focuses largely on independent research and evaluation by small dissertation committees, you may want to rely on indirect measures PLUS regular (annual) faculty meetings that review how well students are meeting the outcomes

Making use of the process

Graduate education often involves progression through a series of steps/benchmarks, developing knowledge and abilities as a trained researcher and scholar

- Identify skills needed to meet these benchmarks (such as publishing an article in a refereed journal) and consider whether they are sufficiently scaffolded in your program
- Consider: Do students receive substantive, formative feedback at points in the program where they practice and demonstrate key skills? If not, how can your program build more of these opportunities in?

A key takeaways from other programs:

- Regularizing assessment strengthens programs and creates more consistent oversight, communication and student experiences
- Graduate program assessment can reveal gaps or strengths in both advising/mentoring and in student training. Pay attention to what the data are telling you in both of these areas
- Alumni are a key resource – is your program preparing graduate students for the jobs they are likely to move into?

Questions?

- Contact me at jadickin@uvm.edu
- Visit the Assessment Website: www.uvm.edu/assessment
- Other workshops in this series include Curriculum Mapping and Direct Assessment Techniques