HOWARD ANNUAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

MANUAL

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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

The aim of this manual is to clearly articulate the steps involved in the Howard Annual Assessment Process (HAAP). This document should be used as a resource. While first time administrators, chairs, or unit leads may find it useful to read the manual in its entirety, others can use the Table of Contents to navigate the manual for specific questions.

The manual is periodically updated as changes are made to the HAAP.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This manual is maintained by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment under the guidance of the Director of Assessment. The document is submitted annually for feedback and revision by the Howard Assessment Committee for clarity and content accuracy.

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A NOTE ON ASSESSMENT

Assessment, at its most elementary level is measurement. In the context of higher education assessment takes on an evaluative flavor. Here, assessment usually means measuring an outcome and comparing it against an established benchmark of excellence. Academic programs have expectations for their students, faculty, and programs. Administrative units have expectations for efficiency, effectiveness, and client satisfaction. Throughout this document, assessment refers not just to measurement, but measurement with the intent of improvement.

ASSESSMENT AT HOWARD UNIVERSITY

At Howard University, all administrative and academic programs must engage in periodic assessment through the Howard Annual Assessment Process (HAAP). This yearly cycle asks units (administrative and academic) to state their mission, list their operational or student learning outcomes, and identify measures that appropriately assess the degree to which the units meet their outcomes. At the end of the annual cycle, units are expected to submit results for their measures, offer improvements, and reflect on the assessment process itself.

While the HAAP is the signature assessment process for the university, all units, particularly those with discipline-specific accreditation, engage in multiple forms of assessment throughout the year. The HAAP is a curated snapshot of assessment activity and is not intended to bear the full weight of assessment for the university.

HAAP reports (plans and results) are expected annually from colleges and schools, academic departments, academic programs, and administrative units.

HAAP SCHEDULE

Academic program plans (for degrees, certificates, and some minors) are due by mid-October each year. The results for these plans are due just after the close of the Spring semester in mid-May.

Administrative plans and non-instructional plans for academic departments and colleges/schools are also due mid-October, but their results are not due until mid-August. Many of these units have measures that depend on the fiscal year or include the summer in their range of measurable activity.

TECHNOLOGY

The HAAP is managed through a Watermark product called Taskstream. The online tool allows easy access and year-to-year transition of plans for unit leads. While some faculty and staff have requested to learn Taskstream in order to make their own edits, as a service, the Office of

Institutional Research and Assessment regularly offers to enter data into the Taskstream system on behalf of departments and programs.

HAAP ANATOMY

Each assessment report has two larger sections—the plan, written at the beginning of an assessment cycle, and the findings and improvements, written at the end of the assessment cycle. The general layout of the plan section includes mission, outcomes, and measures. Each measure requires a description, an acceptable target and aspirational target, an implementation plan, and a responsible person. Academic program measures also require that authors clarify whether the measure is direct or indirect. Findings require results, recommendations or proposed improvements, and reflections or notes about the assessment activity. Findings also allow leadership to clarify if the targets were unmet, met or exceeded.

INSTRUCTIONAL UNITS (ACADEMIC)

Mission

All academic programs (instructional units) require a mission. The mission can be connected to the larger mission of the department, but if the department hosts multiple programs (BS, MS, and PhD), the mission for the assessment plan should be specific to the program. Ideally, the mission of an undergraduate degree would differ significantly from that of the graduate degree. Missions should align with departmental missions, college or school missions, and institutional missions as applicable.

Student Learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes are a list of things that graduates of a particular program should be able to know or do. These outcomes should be general as multiple measures will satisfy them. For example, a graduate program may have a student learning outcome related to research. This general outcome could capture more specific outcomes like methodology, ethics, and alignment with discipline standards. Most programs will have between two and five student learning outcomes, but programs are free to have as many as they choose. Programs with discipline-specific accreditation can also use their accreditors list of competencies as a list of student learning outcomes. This may make accreditation self-studies easier.

Curriculum Map

A curriculum map is a simple tool that helps to clarify how and in what classes students are being prepared to master each student learning outcome. Most curriculum maps (including IRA’s suggested format) list a degree’s scheme (list of required courses) on the left (rows) and the student learning outcomes across the top (columns). At the intersection of columns and rows, if a particular student learning outcome is addressed in a particular class, faculty can add a check mark or (more useful) a designation of whether the student learning outcome is introduced (I), developed (D), or mastered (M) in the aligned class. The curriculum map is a useful tool for chairs, faculty, and students as they navigate their academic experience.

Measures

For academic programs (degrees), plan authors should choose at least three measures. While there is no upper limit to the number of measures which can be entered, it is important to remember that these plans should operate as a sample of a program's assessment activity and need not include all assessment activities. Measures should be targeted ways to assess whether students are meeting specific student learning outcomes. Course grades rarely offer the kind of granular understanding of student success that characterizes good assessment. Therefore, measures should focus on signature assignments, exams, quizzes, projects, presentations and capstone experiences. It is appropriate for undergraduate programs to use comprehensive exams and for graduate programs to use comprehensive or qualifying exams, but these measures are most useful when the exams are broken into conceptual sections. As an example, a comprehensive exam in physics could give one grade or could separate the grade into three (mechanics, optics, and electricity). The second option will give faculty a better understanding of where their program could benefit from targeted improvements.

Measures should be described in the plan so that those unfamiliar with the plan would be able to report on the measures as necessary. Good measures include what class or point in the program the assessment occurs, a brief description of the assessment's requirements (10-page paper, 15-minute presentation, 50 questions multiple choice test. etc.), and a description of how the assignment will be graded (on a 100-point scale, using a 4-dimensional rubric, pass/fail, etc.).

Finally, plan authors are free to use direct or indirect measures though most measures should be direct. IRA defines direct measures as measures whose assessment comes from the expert (in this case the faculty). An instructor grading a paper for content, organization, and mechanics would be an example of a direct measure. An indirect measure is a measure assessed by a non-expert on the degree to which a student has met a competency. A faculty member asking students to rate their confidence in meeting certain outcomes would be an indirect measure. Good assessment often uses both as instructor-driven assessment should align with feelings of student efficacy.

Targets

Plans should include acceptable targets and aspirational targets. Targets should identify what the target outcome should be and what percentage of students should meet that target. For example, a plan may set an acceptable target that 70% of students receive a 70% or higher on an exam. Additionally, plan authors could set a target that 80% of students earn a 4 or 5 on a 5-point Likert scale for a particular dimension. If an assignment is judged as poor, needs work, acceptable, or exceptional, the target may be "70% of students are marked as acceptable or exceptional" on an assignment or a part of an assignment.

Aspirational targets should be "reach" targets that challenge a program to seek new areas for improvement. Aspirational targets will often mirror acceptable targets but change the targeted percentage of students meeting a particular outcome or the outcome to be met. In some cases, an aspirational target will change both.

Implementation Plan

The implementation plan is a simple statement about how students will be prepared to meet the target. Course-based assessments may reflect on the learning modules, readings, or activities that prepared students to succeed on the outcome. Capstone measures may reflect on the curriculum map to determine where a particular outcome was introduced or developed. The most reductive language that can be sued to fulfill this section is “Students will be prepared through coursework to meet this outcome.” More evolved plans may suggest what coursework or what activities within the coursework prepare students to meet the selected outcome.

Findings

Findings for each measure should include the semester(s) in which the measure was taken, the number of students assessed, and a distribution of student outcomes. Findings can also include additional context which may help the reader to make better sense of the data. For example, if the measure is one dimension of a larger project or exam, findings should also include the overall success of the students on the exam or project. If a course is taught in multiple sections or in multiple modalities (online, blended, traditional, etc.), the findings should provide findings for each modality or section. In this way, proposed improvements can be more targeted. A special note for graduate programs, those programs who choose to assess student artifacts in mixed (master’s and doctoral students) courses should report on the success of all students but also drill down to report only the student aligned with the degree. As an example, if a graduate course on Early Modern literature is taken by students seeking an MA and a PhD, findings on the MA plan should clarify what percentage of the course (as a whole) met the standard or target and what percentage of the MA students met the standard or target.

Recommendations or Proposed Improvements

Recommendations or proposed improvements are optional if both the aspirational and acceptable targets have been met. However, even when experiencing success, proposed improvements help to target new ways to improve curriculum or pedagogy. Proposed improvements should be specific to a course or a requirement in a student’s matriculation. Proposed improvement can be internal to a class (add readings, modify a module, split one test into two, etc.) or can be an action of the department (start tutoring sessions, begin a mentoring program, offer pretests for large standardized exams, etc.).

Reflections/Notes or Assessment Activity Improvements

The reflections section is a place where plan authors can track how they want to modify their assessment plans moving forward. Appropriate reflections include whether or not to continue a particular measure or to change the targets. If the measure were useful but a more granular look at the data could be more useful, an author may make note that the grading or assessment of the artifact could be reexamined. Additionally, if both targets (acceptable and aspirational) were met successfully, it may be wise to adjust the targets appropriately, and this section provides a space to suggest new targets.

NON-INSTRUCTIONAL UNITS (ADMINSTRATIVE)

Mission

Administrative missions should capture the purpose of each unit. Units that are part of a larger unit (umbrella unit) should have a unique mission. The mission should naturally align with the mission of umbrella units and the mission of the institution.

Operational Outcomes

Operational outcomes are short phrases that capture the meaningful and measurable activities of a unit. Operational outcomes should flow naturally from the mission and should be broad enough that they can be measured in a variety of ways but specific enough that it is clear how to measure them. Most units will have between two and five operational outcomes. Units with only one should consider reframing their outcome as two or more. Units with more than five outcomes should consider ways that their outcomes may be grouped together. Outcomes should also clearly align with a unit's strategic plan.

Measures

Units should identify three to five measures that assess their efficiency or effectiveness. These measures should measurable and meaningful as results must be reported for each and the results should lead to potential improvements in efficiency or effectiveness. While units should engage in both quantitative and qualitative assessment, many units will find quantified measures easier to report on. Thoughtful consideration of what data is normally gathered by a unit will usually reveal natural things to assess. Annual or monthly dashboards will also provide targets on which units may choose to focus. Measures can be linked to daily data collection or planned engagements (surveys, questionnaires, etc.). Measures should be completed in the cycle they appear; for example, suggesting a migration to a new software over the next three years may be a good goal, but it cannot be reported on in a one-year plan unless it is broken into smaller goals with shorter timelines. Additionally, completion goals that do not reflect efficiency or effectiveness are not as compelling as measured goals. For example, a goal of hiring two new staff members is a poor goal as it may be out of the unit's control. In this same vein, units should not set measures for which they do not have control. For example, it would be inappropriate for IRA to set a goal that a certain number of units meet their aspirational targets.

Finally measures should include descriptions about how data is gathered. These descriptions should be clear enough that a person outside of the unit could understand how the data is gathered and reported.

Targets

Units should identify an acceptable and aspirational target. Each target should be measurable in that the data is gathered and can be reported on at the end of a cycle. Acceptable targets should be reasonable in the context of best practices. Aspirational targets should be purposefully out of reach to challenge the unit and help the unit identify areas for improvement.

Implementation Plan

The implementation plan includes the steps a unit will take to meet a particular measure. This can include policies, practices, or processes already in place. If a new method of reaching a goal is introduced, this should be explained in the implementation plan.

Findings

Findings should clearly reflect the data suggested by the measure. The timeline (year, semester, month, etc.) should be clearly stated, and the exact numbers associated with the targets' language should be included. Additional contextual information which may help a reader better understand the findings should be added.

Recommendations or Proposed Improvements
Based on the results, units should identify a recommendation or proposed improvement to ensure that the acceptable target or aspirational target is met or exceeded in future assessments. Even if both targets are exceeded, unit leads may have identified something that contributed to the unit's success that should be continued or amplified. Proposed improvements should be clear and contain a detailed account of personnel, resources, and time which should be devoted to the improvement's success.

Reflections/Notes or Assessment Activity Improvements
Units should add reflections or notes about the assessment measure. These notes can include suggested changes in targets or commentary about the usefulness of a particular measure.

REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT OF ASSESSMENT

All assessment plans will be reviewed by IRA for completion. As IRA staff are not subject matter experts in all aspects of the university, the meaningfulness of a particular measure or appropriateness of a target will rest with unit leads. IRA will immediately focus on measurability of measures, granularity of measures, and completion of findings.

Academic assessment plans will be assessed by faculty each summer during the Annual Assessment Academy. Using IRA rubrics, faculty will review program plans, rate the different sections and offer suggestions for improvement. The assessment process is based on the quality of the plan and not the degree to which the plan met the suggested targets. This iterative process will help refine the quality of assessment plans across the university.

Administrative plans will be reviewed for completion and quality by IRA.