University of Massachusetts Boston

Campus Procedures for Academic Quality Assessment and Development (AQUAD)

Incorporating the Board of Trustees’ Revised AQUAD Guidelines
(Trustees Document T98-033)
Office of the Provost
2019
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I. Introduction

The Academic Quality Assessment and Development (AQUAD) process is the UMass system’s primary mechanism for academic department/program (hereafter referred to “department”) review. Overseen by the UMass Board of Trustees, the AQUAD dictates an academic unit’s self-assessment, external peer assessment, and internal administrative assessment processes. Occurring on a regular seven-year cycle, the AQUAD is a well-known fact of departmental life at UMass Boston.

However, “well-known” does not necessarily mean “well-defined.” The UMass Boston documents offering guidance concerning the implementation of the AQUAD on our campus date from 1999. This guidebook results from a growing sense that we need to clarify the goals, structures and procedures of the AQUAD for our campus. More importantly, we need to revitalize the AQUAD as a meaningful form of department self-evaluation and improvement. An effort to improve the guidance provided for UMass Boston’s implementation of the AQUAD process, this document aims to:

- Provide guidance on UMass Boston’s implementation of the Board of Trustees’ definition of the AQUAD process;
- Explain the goals, processes, and timeline of the AQUAD;
- Simplify the AQUAD by providing clear directions and formats for the department Self-Study document;
- Shorten the AQUAD Self-Study document;
- Encourage the collection of materials in the AQUAD Self-Study Appendices as a means of shortening the Self-Study narrative and providing better evidence of departmental accomplishments;
- Refocus the AQUAD on continuous department improvement featuring curricular innovation and faculty development, connecting it to on-going self-evaluation across the seven-year cycle;
- Position the AQUAD as a forward-looking process focused on program improvement rather than a backward-looking process focused on program definition;
- Clarify the review team’s role in the AQUAD by providing guidance and a checklist of elements to consider;
- Provide a timeline for the AQUAD process.

II. The AQUAD Process

As defined by the UMass Board of Trustees, the AQUAD process is an ongoing multi-level review for assessing the core academic functions of each department at the university, including teaching and learning; research, professional, and creative activity; and public service and academic outreach. The UMass Board of Trustees Document T98-033 that explains the AQUAD process and criteria is provided in Appendix 1. The AQUAD review provides rigorous academic program assessment by identifying strengths and targeting areas for growth and development. A faculty-driven process occurring every seven years, the
AQUAD review features a Self-Study that becomes the basis of an external peer review. Variances in the review schedules of a specific department may occur in order to align AQUAD with accreditation and licensure reviews.

What is the focus—and not the focus—of an AQUAD?
The AQUAD focuses on the five core evaluation criteria emphasized by the Board of Trustees: mission and goals, curriculum quality, faculty quality, student success, and resource use. This implementation guidebook clarifies these criteria by recommending the department Self-Study use a four-part report structure that addresses these concerns, along with a final conclusion that includes the action plan. This four-part structure which is discussed in Section III simplifies and consolidates the Trustees’ requirements.

The AQUAD is not primarily an argument for resources. Such requests are more properly part of the annual budget process. However, as a summative review, AQUAD may lead to some re-allocation of department funds in support of actions for improving department and student success.

How can the AQUAD 7-year cycle be useful to a department?
The AQUAD process can help a department to:

- Highlight and/or align its mission with campus priorities;
- Highlight and/or align faculty potential with department goals;
- Reflect critically on the extent to which curriculum, pedagogies, and student learning outcomes are aligned with the best practices and values of the field as espoused by the department;
- Reflect critically on the extent to which faculty have experienced success in research and service, explaining processes of faculty mentoring and development;
- Broaden the focus of faculty members beyond individual success to program success;
- Address burning or simmering issues in the curriculum that are broadly recognized but have not been tackled;
- Develop program-specific learning goals for students at various stages, e.g. introductory level, capstone;
- Conduct modest, evidence-based assessments of student learning with respect to learning goals;
- Create routines for on-going curricular inquiry during the seven-year cycle in order to build a culture of continuous reflection with an emphasis on action to improve student learning and student success;
- Create an action plan that emphasizes future department priorities.
What are the Steps for Completing the AQUAD Review?

The AQUAD review involves 3 steps:
  1. Department Self-Study
  2. Review Team report
  3. Dean’s written response to the Self-Study and review team’s report; Department’s optional written response to the reviewers’ report and Dean’s response, and Provost’s meeting to discuss the reports and responses

1. Department Self-Study:
   See Section III below for a detailed outline of the Self-Study.

2. Review Team Report: A team of two internal and two external reviewers from beyond the campus will be selected through a process that includes consultation among the department chair, faculty, and Dean. One external reviewer may be from another campus within the UMass system. The review process addresses department strengths and weaknesses; it should include attention to the questions outlined by the Board of Trustees. See Section V for a checklist of elements, drawn from the Trustees’ Core Criteria, to be considered by the review team.

3. Dean’s Response to Self-Study and Review Team’s Report; Provost’s Meeting to Discuss Reports and Responses: The Dean(s) – undergraduate and graduate, if applicable – will distribute their comments to the department, which then has the right to submit a written reply. The Dean(s) forward these documents to the Provost, who meets with the Chair and Dean(s) to discuss the review team’s report, the Dean’s response, the department’s response, and the department’s plans for the future, as articulated in the Self-Study’s plan and evaluated throughout the AQUAD process.

III. AQUAD Self-Study Outline and Guidance

How should a department organize its Self-Study?
Departments should organize the Self-Study to address the five Core Criteria defined by the Board of Trustees in Document T98-033 (see Appendix 1). This guidebook recommends that the Self-Study document use the following four-part report structure that connects these criteria:
  1. mission/resources;
  2. faculty research/service;
  3. students/curriculum;
  4. conclusion with an action plan
These guidelines encourage the collection of materials in the AQUAD Self-Study Appendices as a means of shortening the Self-Study narrative and providing better evidence of departmental accomplishments. The Self-Study can be considered a portfolio of department work, collected over several years. For each Self-Study part, a list of sample materials that can be included in the Appendices is provided below; of course, additional forms of documentation of departmental work may be included in the Self-Study.

**Department Self-Study: Recommended Structure**

*Self-Study Part #1: Mission and Resources (Trustees’ Criteria #1 and #5)*

- Programs shall ensure that their goals and objectives are linked to the campus mission and strategic priorities.
- Programs shall ensure that resources are used wisely.

The department should evaluate its purpose and planning in light of the campus mission and strategic priorities. It should provide a brief self-portrait, referring and responding to demographic information provided by the Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, & Planning (OIRAP), such as number of faculty, majors and minors, and enrollments. This section can also evaluate how available resources are used effectively to meet department goals and objectives, and as appropriate, explore how the department uses innovation to enhance resources and use them efficiently. Part #1 should explain the following:

- Department mission;
- Department support of UMass Boston campus mission through its priorities and strategic planning;
- Basic department structure;
- Department’s effective allocation of resources to meet program goals;
- Department innovations that enhance the effective use of human and material resources.

The department can demonstrate its work in this area by including:

- A brief narrative statement of department mission and its connection to UMass Boston mission/priorities; the narrative can emphasize continued and emerging areas of strength and areas of future development (*Suggested 2-3 single-spaced pages, max 1500 words*)
- A brief explanation of resource allocation, emphasizing how resources have been used to support department mission and priorities (*Suggested 2-3 pages, max 1500 words*)
- A departmental data sheet created by OIRAP, that contains information such as:
number of majors, minors
- number of faculty
- course enrollments, class size
- additional information available from OIRAP.

**Self-Study Part #2: Faculty (Trustees’ Criterion #3)**

- Programs shall ensure faculty quality and productivity.

The need to provide a high-quality professional environment that is conducive to meeting department goals should be the primary consideration when evaluating faculty quality and productivity. The Self-Study’s evaluation of faculty quality and productivity should exhibit awareness of trends in the discipline and the professional field as appropriate. Collectively, faculty should be involved in teaching, research, and professional activity including internal service to the college and university and public service or academic outreach as appropriate to the mission and context of the campus. The review should explain the ways and extent to which:

- Department faculty members, as a whole, possess the appropriate background, experience, and credentials to assure effective curricular development, instructional design and delivery, and evaluation of outcomes. (Faculty CVs, provided in the Self-Study Appendices, can be referenced as evidence);
- Faculty involvement in teaching, research, professional/creative activity, internal service, and public service or academic outreach is consistent with program and college policies;
- Teaching assignments, service assignments, course release and merit allocations, and other aspects of faculty roles and rewards are consistent with program and college policies;
- Professional development and growth of faculty are supported through a faculty mentoring plan or similar approach;
- Professional expertise of faculty is expressed to off-campus constituencies through teaching and research, scholarly, and creative activity.

Departments can demonstrate their work in these areas by submitting:

- A narrative statement that explains faculty accomplishments, connecting those accomplishments to department structures of support for faculty *(Suggested 8-10 pages, max 5000 words)*;
- Narrative can reference faculty accomplishments that are evidenced in materials provided in Appendix;
- Narrative can evaluate the success of the department’s faculty mentoring plan; the plan can be provided in Appendix;
• A general, bulleted list that overviews major faculty publications, faculty awards, or faculty community activities (in Appendix);
• A spreadsheet of faculty grants (in Appendix);
• Faculty CVs (in Appendix).

**Self-Study Part #3: Curriculum and Students (Trustees’ Criteria #2 and #4)**

➢ Programs shall ensure that curriculum is relevant, rigorous, current and coherent.
➢ Programs shall ensure teaching/learning environments that facilitate student success.

The need to provide a high-quality education for students should be the primary consideration when evaluating the relevancy, currency, and coherence of curricula. Evaluation of the curriculum should reflect an awareness of changing knowledge, trends in the discipline, and the professional context for course and program design. Through its curricular offerings, co-curricular programs, advising and mentoring, departments should provide learning environments that promote student success. The review should explain how the department is working to meet the following expectations:

• Clear student learning outcomes regarding both content and skills appropriate to the discipline; these student learning outcomes are readily available and published online (an accreditation requirement);
• Logical, sequential curricular structure that offers both depth and breadth; alignment of student learning outcomes with curricular design and instruction;
• Internal or external measures for ensuring that the curriculum is relevant and up-to-date;
• Inclusive teaching/learning environment that employs a variety of instructional methodologies and timely feedback to students;
• Guidance, support, and mentoring beyond the classroom by faculty to ensure students’ timely process toward degree completion and students’ understanding of how the program prepares them for further study and employment;
• Description of the role of the core faculty in teaching lower division, upper division, and graduate courses;
• Evidence-based procedures for assessing students’ achievement of the department’s stated learning outcomes (course grades may not be the sole or main measure); evidence-based procedures for improving the quality of the student experience and student learning;
• Description of measures used to evaluate student success following graduation;
• Explanation of multi-year plan to engage in continual curricular assessment; explanation of measures taken since last AQUAD review to evaluate and act on student outcomes.

Departments can demonstrate their work in these areas by submitting:

• A narrative statement that explains the department’s curricular accomplishments, incorporating an evaluation of curricular structure and any changes made to it, student learning outcomes, student learning assessment, and plans for continued curricular revision. (*Suggested 15-20 pages, max 10,000 words)*
• Statement of learning outcomes, including link to learning outcomes posted on UMass Boston website (accreditation requirement)
• Assessment report(s) or finding(s) emphasizing a process of measuring student learning outcomes; the report(s) can cover several years and encompass the assessment of different elements of the curriculum; the report(s) can explain the goals and findings of the assessment process and any actions being taken based on these results (the reports proper can be included in the Appendix)
• Curriculum map (in Appendix)
• Student survey results (in Appendix)
• Alumni survey results (in Appendix)
• Bullet list of sample co-curricular initiatives and events (in Appendix)
• Sample syllabi from each level of curriculum (in Appendix)

**Self-Study Part #4: Conclusion/Action Plan (referenced in Trustees’ explanation of AQUAD process)**

The conclusion and action plan spell out how the department plans to address issues outlined in the Self-Study and how it will continue to work on initiatives and goals in progress. The suggested action plan format, provided below, emphasizes the creation of a clear chart of initiatives that can be modified and updated over time. The action plan provides a framework for evidence-based inquiry for curriculum change and program improvement. Rather than assessment existing as an *ad hoc* part of AQUAD every seven years, the action plan enables an enduring and deliberate diachronic self-assessment process. The action plan should align with the Trustees’ AQUAD criteria and offer direction for the next seven-year cycle.
Developing an Action Plan

Based on the findings of the Self-Study, the action plan should consider: What is the most important area of attention? What is central to the department’s sense of continuous engagement, improvement, and innovation? Which areas show the greatest strengths and greatest problems? What is feasible?

The next step is to propose actions that seem likely to enhance the department, faculty careers, the curriculum, and student learning and that are feasible given the department’s resources.

Table 1 offers a sample template for a basic action plan. Having a robust and flexible plan will enable the department to build a culture of continuous reflection, action, and revision.

**Action Plan elements:**

- **Timeline:** actions should expand across the seven-year AQUAD period, with no more than 1-3 actions to be addressed each year.
- **Action:** specific task related to a need for improvement or opportunity to enhance quality.
- **Core Criteria:** what area(s) from the Trustees’ Guidelines does the action address?
- **Person responsible:** who is assigned to lead this action and report on its success?
- **Success indicator:** how will the program know that it is being successful?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Action/Task</th>
<th>Core Criteria Addressed</th>
<th>Person Responsible</th>
<th>Success Indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>1.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>1.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Year 3 (on to Year 6)</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The review team may make recommendations to add/modify the actions listed in the action plan. The action plan may be revised by the Chair prior to the meeting with the Provost and Dean.

The bulk of your supporting materials (CVs, Assessment reports, etc.) should be included in the Appendices rather than in the body of the report. The body of the report should be concise and direct.
IV. AQUAD Timeline

The AQUAD review takes place on a seven-year cycle, with the review being performed during the seventh year, typically in the spring semester. Fall semester of the seventh year of the cycle is used by the department to complete the Self-Study. Spring semester of the seventh year is devoted to the site visit by the review team, followed by a meeting of the Department Chair with the Dean and Provost.

General Timeline

March: Dean(s) inform unit of AQUAD review scheduled for the coming academic year.

September 1: Department initiates a request for a standard packet of official data and anything else it needs to assist in the preparation of the self-study. The official data OIRAP supplies must be included in the Appendices and addressed in detail in the Self-Study.

October 1: Department Chair submits names of possible internal and external reviewers, with justification of each, to the Dean(s)’ office(s).

October 15: Reviewers selected by Dean(s).

January 1: Self-study completed and submitted to the Dean(s).

January 30: Self-study sent to reviewers.

February-March: Site visit takes place.

April 15: Department receives report from Review Team

May 1: Response of department to Review Team report submitted to the Dean(s).

May 15: Dean(s) prepare(s) comments on the review.

May-June: Dean(s) and Department Chair meet with the Provost regarding recommendations and action plan.

Additional details concerning the implementation of this AQUAD process and timeline include:

- The Department Chair, in consultation with the department faculty, should provide the Dean with a list of approximately six possible candidates for the two external reviewers. These should be senior scholars able to cover the range of disciplines in the department. Preference should also be given to reviewers with some experience of how a department is run, e.g. experience as chair or director of a program or in other administrative roles. The department recommends a list of reviewers; the Dean(s) then research(es) the choices and
select(s) from the list. In addition, the Department Chair can suggest a list of possible internal reviewers to make up the two internal reviewers from inside UMB.

- The department writes its Self-Study, due at the end of January. The Self-Study is sent to the Review Team at least two weeks, preferably a month, before the site visit.
- Site visits typically occur between mid-February and the end of March and on a Thursday/Friday. A routine site visit is as follows: it is scheduled from 9:00 Thursday morning to approximately 1:00 on Friday. It begins with the Review Team meeting with the Dean, the Dean of Graduate Studies (if the department has a graduate program), and an Associate Dean. The Department arranges a one-day (Thursday) itinerary of meetings for the Review Team that focuses on meetings with faculty, including a separate meeting with junior faculty and a separate meeting with students. (For large departments with multiple programs, Friday morning can include an additional departmental meeting if needed.) The departmental meetings often conclude with a meeting with the Chair, allowing for remaining questions to be answered. Thursday evening, the Review Team goes out to dinner with some members of the department. Friday morning there is a 2½- to 3-hour time block for the Review Team to meet among themselves and draft a report or bullet points for the discussion they will have with the Dean and the Provost, in anticipation of their final report. The AQUAD site visit ends with a meeting that includes the Review Team, the Dean(s), and the Provost (usually from 12:00-1:00 on Friday).
- A few weeks after the site visit, the Review Team sends its report. The report is written by the two external reviewers with input from the two internal reviewers. The department writes a response to the team’s recommendations that then goes to the Dean. The Dean(s) then review(s) both the Review Team report and the department’s response and write(s) a response.
- The AQUAD process concludes with a meeting of the Department Chair, Dean, Dean of Graduate Studies (if applicable) and Provost to discuss the Review Team report, the department response, and the Dean’s response.

V. Review Team Guidance

The Dean, in consultation with the Department Chair and faculty, will identify a team of at least two external reviewers, one of whom can be from another campus in the UMass system. Ideally, reviewers will come from public R1 or R2 universities and will have administrative experience at the level of a Department Chair, Graduate Program Director, Program Director, or higher. The Dean, Department Chair, and faculty will work together to determine the emphasis of the review team’s work.

Guidelines for selection and compensation of the review team members are below;
these capture the precedents of practice at UMass Boston.

1. AQUAD reviews of all programs with a graduate component are the mutual responsibility of the collegiate dean and the Dean of Graduate Studies.
2. Selection of reviewers is the joint responsibility of the deans. These reviewers are selected in consultation with the program/department, but the deans make the final choice. When a graduate program is involved, formal communication with the reviewers should go out over both deans’ signatures.
3. Internal reviewers receive no compensation for participation. Their participation is a service contribution to the university.
4. The dean(s) will determine compensation for the two external reviewers. It is suggested that $1,000 be the total for both reviewers, but this amount depends on the prevailing practice in the academic discipline under review and will increase over time as deemed necessary. The dean(s) should plan for stipend, hotel and travel costs in their budgets.
5. The graduate dean and collegiate dean share equally in the review costs for graduate programs. When a department under review has both an undergraduate and a graduate program, the graduate dean is responsible for one-third of the costs of the review.

The review team is charged with providing a written report based on the Self-Study, the questions posed by the Dean, and their experience on campus. The review team typically:
• addresses program strengths and weaknesses;
• positions the program within the larger context of the field/discipline of study;
• suggests areas for continued development or improvement;
• suggests opportunities for new thinking;
• provides a sense of different constituents’—students, grad students, faculty—satisfaction with the program;
• examines the action plan as a viable blueprint for future initiatives.

The review team should consider the following program elements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Study Part A: Mission and Resources</th>
<th>Rate 1-5 (1 = low, 5 = high)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5 The Program’s mission is clearly aligned with the campus mission</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5 The Program’s mission is aligned with campus strategic priorities</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5 The Program contributes to general education outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5 The Program contributes to the discipline with respect to research and graduate education</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5 The Program has a strategy for promoting diversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5 The Program maximizes the use of its human resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5 The Program maximizes the use of material resources, such as space, equipment, or operating funds</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>There is an internal process for reallocating underutilized space to more productive purposes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Program has a strategy to develop alternate sources of revenue (private giving, grants, contracts, etc.)</td>
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**Self-Study Part B: Faculty**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Faculty possess appropriate background, experience, and credentials</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Faculty members remain current in relation to the knowledge base and content of the discipline and curricular offerings</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Program sets expectations for and tracks faculty involvement in teaching, research/professional/creative activity, and public service/academic outreach activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Program expectations are consistent with program policies regarding teaching assignments, merit allocations, and other aspects of faculty roles and rewards</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Program fosters professional development and growth of faculty</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Program faculty lends its professional expertise - as expressed through teaching and research, scholarly and creative activity - to off-campus constituencies</td>
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**Self-Study Part C: Curriculum and Students**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>A process exists for determining curricular content</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The curriculum relates to current existing standards, if any, in the discipline</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Internal measures of curriculum review are employed to ensure that the curriculum is relevant and up-to-date</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>External measures of curriculum review are employed to ensure that the curriculum is relevant and up-to-date</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Guidance and support is provided to students to ensure time process toward degree completion</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Curricular offerings are structured in a logical, sequential, and coherent manner</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Curricular offerings have appropriate balance between breadth and depth</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The curriculum adequately prepares students for further study or employment</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The curriculum contributes to general education outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The student learning outcomes set clear expectations for learning both content and skills appropriate to the discipline</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Student learning outcomes are articulated at both undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as by sub-plans, when relevant</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Program defines “quality” in terms of admission to the program</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Student learning outcomes are measured</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Student learning outcomes are achieved by a majority of the students</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Program collects and uses evidence to inform and improve the quality of the student experience and student learning</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Program has a process to identify lines of inquiry, draw from existing evidence and collect additional evidence, and develop a collective understanding of findings and priorities for improvement</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Students are kept informed of their progress in meeting intended program outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Assessment of student learning outcomes used in reviewing and modifying program curriculum, advising, and other program elements</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Program sets expectations for faculty participation in program-level student learning assessment and other inquiry into program effectiveness</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>When appropriate, the Program provides co-curricular, internship, research, and</td>
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<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>career development opportunities outside the required curriculum for students</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>The Program evaluates student success following graduation and the program’s contribution to that success</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Core faculty teach in lower division courses</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Core faculty teach in upper division courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Core faculty teach in graduate courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 5</td>
<td>Metrics are provided for retention and graduation rates for period since previous AQUAD review</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

VI. AQUAD Website and Resources

AQUAD Guidelines can be found at the following link:
https://www.umb.edu/academics/provost/academic_quality_assessment_and_development_aquad

The following article offers guidance for designing an assessment plan.

The Useful, Sensible, No-Frills Departmental Assessment Plan

Barbara E. Walvoord, University of Notre Dame


Academic departments from physics to philosophy to physical therapy face new demands for “assessment of student learning.” It’s hard to argue against the basic idea of assessment: when a department invests time and resources trying to nurture student learning, it should ask itself: Are they learning? Yet departments may also fear that assessment will require them to dumb-down their teaching; use standardized tests; teach alike; or compromise academic freedom. Every department wonders how it will find the time and resources for one more thing.

This essay suggests a simple, sustainable, and useful departmental assessment plan that capitalizes on what departments are already doing or should be doing, that can help improve student learning, and that can meet the requirements of accreditors. The basic plan includes three elements that are common to the requirements of virtually all accreditors, both regional and disciplinary:

1. Written learning goals (sometimes called objectives or outcomes) phrased: “When students complete this program of study, we want them to be able to...”
2. Measures that indicate how well the learning goals are being met (These measures need not dumb-down learning or use standardized tests. They can be based on classroom assignments and exams. They can seek indications about students’ achievement of ineffable goals like creativity, ethical sensibility, or ability to work well in diverse groups.)

3. Ways of using the information for improvement (“closing the feedback loop”)

First, the department should construct written learning goals for each of its distinct courses of study, e.g., certificate program, major, master’s, and doctorate. Different tracks (e.g., music history and music performance) may require somewhat different goals. It is important that these goals include the department’s highest aspirations. For example, a swine management department listed a number of very practical learning goals such as identifying and treating common swine diseases, developing a financial plan for a swine operation, and so on. But its ultimate goal was “appreciate the pig!” Departments in a religiously-affiliated institution wanted students to develop “sensitivity to injustice.” You can’t “prove” learning in these areas, but you can get indications about whether students are developing in the ways you wish, and if you don’t articulate and share your highest goals, you risk undermining your most important mission.

Next, the department should institute an annual meeting of at least two hours, in which it reviews one of its programs (for example, the undergraduate major). Hold the meeting even if you think you have no measurements or evidence, and even if you have only a partial or imperfect list of learning goals.

The purposes of the meeting are (1) to consider whatever evidence you have about how well students are meeting the learning goals; and (2) to generate one action item, for which you assign responsibility and a timeline. You should allow no other concerns on the agenda. This is the time when the department sets aside all the other concerns that crowd its time, and steps back from the daily race to ask, “How well are we doing?” and “Within our limits of time and resources, is there one action we could take that might improve student learning?”

Once the meeting is established, what are the minimum types of evidence that might be most helpful in defining an action item? The basic no-frills plan might have two types of evidence:

1. An evaluation of the quality of student work as students complete the program. This can be a sample of student classroom work in course(s) taken by students at their end of their course of study; an evaluation of an ultimate clinical or internship experience; a standardized exam if relevant; a licensure exam; or a
qualifying exam and theses for graduate degrees. In programs with many students, a sample of student work can be used.

2. Response from students about what they thought they learned and about their perception of the program’s effectiveness for their learning.

Additional types of evidence might include alumni surveys, employer/industry feedback, students’ job or graduate school placement rates, or, especially in graduate programs, awards and/or publications by students. But in most cases, it is better to have the first two types of evidence working well than to proliferate assessment measures beyond what the department can fund, sustain, or effectively use.

The most basic assessment plan can be illustrated by a political science department that was highly successful: it was rapidly increasing its number of majors; it was known throughout the university for the high quality of its teaching; and it maintained a high rate of publication and professional activity. The smart, effective faculty members of this department hated “assessment.” They viewed it as an attempt to diminish the high goals they held for their students, as an attack upon their autonomy, and as a foolish waste of time. They did agree, however, that despite demanding schedules, it would be helpful to sit down for two hours once a year and examine evidence of student learning in one of their programs.

For the first year, they chose the undergraduate major. During the meeting, they brought no rubric scores (most of them hated rubrics) and no written preparation. Instead, each faculty member who taught a senior capstone course briefly spoke about two strengths and two weaknesses that she or he had observed in senior student research projects. These were listed on the board. One weakness that a number of faculty mentioned was that as students began their senior research projects, they did not know well enough how to frame a question for inquiry in the discipline. The department decided to work on that item. They discussed where in the curriculum students were taught to frame research questions and given practice and feedback in doing so. A committee was designated to suggest where and how this aspect could be strengthened in the curriculum. Changes to the earlier courses then provided more instruction and practice in constructing research questions. Now the department waits to see whether future cohorts of students seem to be better prepared.

At the end of the annual meeting, the department should ask itself what additional or better information it might want to collect in future years. The political science faculty noted the lack of student input for their data, and they wanted to know whether students experienced disjuncture between their earlier training and their
senior research and if so, what students might suggest as remedies. It was proposed that each teacher of a capstone course, during the first week in May, would administer a 3-question survey to seniors enrolled in the course. The survey would ask students: (1) what aspects of the senior research project they had found most difficult; (2) what earlier training in the department had best prepared them for these difficult areas; and (3) what their suggestions were about how earlier work might better have prepared them. Several faculty were concerned that the survey would take more time and effort than it was worth, so it was decided to administer the survey only in the classes of a few volunteer faculty, as a pilot, to determine whether reliable and useful information could be gathered. The department assigned responsibility for constructing, administering, and analyzing results of this pilot survey.

As this story suggests, an action item chosen in one year may take more than a year to fully implement. In that case, the annual meeting is devoted to tracking progress and planning further steps on a continuing action item. As it feels ready, the department may also begin work on another program. For example, the political science department might gather its graduate faculty for a review of its Ph.D. program. Some departments may prefer to do part of their review of learning through a committee structure and bring reports and recommendations to the department as a whole.

At the assessment meetings, the department should take written minutes, which can serve as a reference for their own future actions, and which, as needed, can be the basis of reports to the university’s assessment committee and accrediting bodies. The minutes provide the data to demonstrate that effective assessment is taking place.

The key is to institute the annual assessment meeting immediately, no matter how incomplete or inadequate the assessment data are. Use the data available to generate an action item, and also discuss how you want to improve the quality of the data. The annual meeting provides an ongoing structure that most departments can manage, and that helps the department step back, consider the big picture, bring in evidence of student learning, and make good decisions about how to help their students learn more effectively. Assessment Clear and Simple (Walvoord, 2004) gives more detail and shows how to write up such plans for accreditation.

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Resources

Banta, T. W., ed. Assessment Update Collections. Series of booklets containing articles
compiled from the journal *Assessment Update*. Jossey-Bass, various dates. Practical, short, on-the-ground descriptions of assessment practices and principles.


VII. Appendices

Appendix I: Board of Trustees Definition of AQUAD Process and Core Criteria

In Document T98-033, the Board of Trustees provides guidelines for the AQUAD process. This Document outlines five "core criteria" that are further defined by related questions.

Board of Trustees Document T98-033

Academic Quality Assessment and Development Guidelines

Academic Quality Assessment and Development is a component of the University Performance Measurement System. The primary purpose of this component is to assess and improve the core academic functions of teaching and learning, research/professional/creative activity, and public service/academic outreach through an ongoing system of quality control/program assessment at the unit level (i.e., department or program).

Each campus will establish, in consultation with the President's office and in accordance with these guidelines, procedures for implementing the Academic Quality Assessment and Development. These procedures will include a list of units (programs/departments), hereinafter called "Programs", to be reviewed; the cycle of reviews; and a list of core data to be used in Program reviews on that campus. The "Program Chair" shall be defined as the person with administrative oversight of the Program. Campus procedures shall be approved by the President.

All Programs will address the same core evaluation criteria, although these criteria will have varying degrees of relevance and applicability across the campus. Programs undergoing reviews for other purposes (e.g., accreditation) may submit these reviews in lieu of the Academic Quality Assessment and Development review, provided the review addresses the core criteria. If not, the Program shall prepare and submit a supplemental document addressing the core criteria.

Process

1. Each Program shall be reviewed on a regular cycle. Ordinarily, the length of time between reviews may be no more than five to seven years, but campus procedures may establish the circumstances under which exceptions to this time frame may be granted.

2. Each Program review shall be conducted with the participation of Program faculty members.

3. Each Program review shall consist, minimally, of the following written documents: a Program self-assessment, the external reviewers' report, a Program response to the reviewers' report, and an action plan based on the review. These written documents will be submitted to the Dean. Faculty within the Program will receive copies of all documents.

4. Each Program shall be reviewed by a team of no fewer than two external reviewers from outside the campus (one reviewer may be from another campus within the University system). The Dean, in consultation with the Program chair and faculty members, will choose the external reviewers. The campus procedures shall stipulate the questions to be addressed by the external reviewers.
5. The Dean will review and comment on the written reports. The Dean's comments will be distributed to all Program faculty, who may prepare a written response to his/her comments.

6. The Dean will forward the Program self-assessment, external reviewers' report, Program response to the reviewers' report, and his/her comments with faculty responses, if any, to the Provost. Prior to accepting the review, the Provost will meet with the Program chair and the Dean to discuss the review and action plan.

7. The Provost of each campus shall forward to the President's office annually an executive summary of the Program reviews conducted. The summaries shall be submitted no later than June 30th. The documents comprising a review shall not, as a general matter, be circulated beyond the campus.

Core criteria and related questions

1. Programs shall ensure that their goals and objectives are linked to the campus mission and strategic priorities.

The Program should evaluate its purpose and planning in light of the campus mission and strategic priorities. The review should answer the following questions:

- What is the Program's mission and is it clearly aligned with the campus mission and direction?
- How does the Program's mission relate to curriculum; enrollments; faculty teaching, research/professional/creative activity, and outreach? Is it aligned with the campus strategic priorities?

2. Programs shall ensure that curriculum is relevant, rigorous, current and coherent.

The need to provide a high quality education for students should be the primary consideration when evaluating the relevancy, currency, and coherence of curricula. Evaluation of the curriculum should reflect an awareness of changing knowledge, trends in the discipline, and the professional context for curriculum. The review should answer the following questions:

- How does the Program determine curricular content? How does the curriculum relate to current existing standards, if any, of the discipline?
- What internal or external measures of review are employed to ensure that the curriculum is relevant and up-to-date?
- Are the curricular offerings structured in a logical, sequential and coherent manner? Is there an appropriate balance between breadth and depth?
- If consistent with the Program mission, does the curriculum adequately prepare students for further study or employment?
- In what way does the Program contribute to the education of students in terms of general knowledge, critical thinking capacity and other essential cognitive skills?

3. Programs shall ensure faculty quality and productivity.

Programs shall ensure that faculty possess the expertise to assure effective curriculum development, instructional design and delivery, and evaluation of outcomes. Faculty should exhibit awareness of trends in the discipline and the professional field as appropriate. Collectively, faculty should be involved in teaching, research/professional/creative activity, and public service/academic outreach as appropriate to the mission and regional context of the
campus. The review should answer the following questions:

- Do faculty possess the appropriate background, experience and credentials?
- Are faculty current in relation to the knowledge base and content of the discipline and curricular offerings?
- Are the Program expectations for faculty involvement in teaching, research/professional/creative activity, and public service/academic outreach activities appropriate; and how are these expectations met? Are these expectations consistent with program policies regarding teaching assignments, merit allocations, and other aspects of faculty roles and rewards?
- In what ways does the Program foster professional development and growth of faculty?
- In what ways does the Program faculty lend its professional expertise--as expressed through teaching and research, scholarly and creative activity--to off-campus constituencies?

4. Programs shall ensure teaching/learning environments that facilitate student success.

Programs shall provide learning environments that promote student success. Students are expected to learn both content and skills appropriate to the discipline. The program should indicate clear expectations for student learning outcomes. The teaching/learning environment should be accessible to all students, should include a variety of instructional methodologies, and should provide timely feedback to students. The review should answer the following questions:

- To what extent does the Program have articulated learning outcomes (content and skills) for students? By what means are these outcomes measured? Are they achieved by most students?
- How is assessment of student learning outcomes used in reviewing or evaluating Program curriculum and faculty?
- In what ways does the Program evaluate student success following graduation and the Program's contribution to that success?
- What is the role of the core faculty in teaching lower division, upper division and graduate courses? What is the rationale for these assignments?

5. Programs shall ensure that resources are used wisely.

Programs shall ensure that the resources available are used to meet Program goals and objectives, and as appropriate, engage in use of innovation to enhance resources; should engage in both intra- and inter-campus collaboration; and should demonstrate a commitment to effective and efficient use of resources. The review should answer the following questions:

- What process does the Program use to allocate resources?
- In what ways does the Program maximize the use of its human resources?
- In what ways does the Program maximize the use of material resources such as space, equipment, operating funds, etc.?