

**The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston**

**Assessment Handbook**

**FY 2017-2019**



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## **Introduction**

Assessment of academic and administrative units is becoming much more prevalent at colleges and universities, in part due to accreditation requirements. Additionally, the desire to know how well departments are doing and to improve in strategic planning efforts, decision support, resource allocation, and operational excellence are all motivators for conducting assessment.

The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) engages all of its academic programs and administrative units in the assessment process. This document is meant to provide background information about assessment as a whole at UTHealth and guidance as administrative departments create assessment plans for their areas. The purpose of this handbook is provide a high-level look at assessment across campus along with details about administrative assessment to assist in preparing administrative assessment plans.

## **What is Assessment?**

Assessment is the ongoing and systematic process of identifying objectives and means to measure them, setting targets and then gathering measurements of the objectives (results), using the information to make decisions about improvement, and implementing improvements based on the data gathered. The most important aspect of this definition, if emphasis could be drawn to one item, is the *using* of information.

Assessment at UTHealth is intended to help all students, faculty, staff, and administrators by providing information that guides decisions and leads to improvement in learning, teaching, and services.

At UTHealth, assessment consists of an assessment plan (objectives, measures, and targets), and an assessment report (results and action/follow up). Assessment plans are created at the start of the academic/fiscal year (September).

Departments collect data identified in the measures throughout the year then compose an assessment report. The report asks units to analyze the data and draw conclusions from it. Strengths, weaknesses, and highlights are described. Then, the entities develop action plans, which should be reflected directly or indirectly in the objectives, measures, and targets of the assessment plan for the next administrative year.

## Purposes of Assessment

### The four main purposes of assessment should be:

1. **To improve** – The assessment process should provide feedback to determine how the administrative unit can be improved.
1. **To inform** – The assessment process should inform department heads and other decision-makers of the contributions and impact of the administrative unit to the development and growth of students.
2. **To document or provide evidence** – The assessment process should encapsulate and demonstrate what the administrative entity is accomplishing to students, faculty, staff, and outsiders.
3. **To support** – The assessment process should provide support for campus decision-making activities such as unit review and strategic planning, as well as external accountability activities such as accreditation.

Additionally, assessment is most effective when:

1. It reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time;
2. The programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated objectives;
3. It is ongoing, not episodic;
4. The process involves representatives from across the university community;
5. It is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change; and
6. Educators and administrators can document that they effectively meet their responsibilities to students and to the public.

Assessment is best prepared and supported when department staff participate in creating objectives and measures. It is highly recommended, and emphasized by our accrediting body, that assessment plans be developed by a committee within the entity. It is thought to be unwise to put the responsibility for developing an assessment plan in the hands of a single person. Instead, this should be a group effort to ensure understanding, participation, and success in achieving goals.

As departments develop plans and reports, they should keep these principles in mind. They provide sound guidance which should make assessment easier, primarily by pointing out that the institution guides objectives through its mission and values.

## **Developing the Assessment Plan**

A crucial part of developing an assessment plan is to clarify the focus and content of your plan, which should be based on departmental needs in support of the university's mission.

Assessment should be ongoing, with data being collected throughout the year. If the assessment data reveals a problem, and the entity can identify actions to remedy it immediately, they should fix the problem.

Assessment should improve department operations, not hinder them. Annual assessments should provide evidence of continuous improvement.

Using a systematic approach will help you in devising an effective assessment plan that matches departmental needs. The following is a six step approach to aid in developing an effective plan.

### **Assessment Cycle and Flowchart**

Assessment should be understood as a cycle. UTHHealth's administrative assessment calendar is synced to the academic and fiscal year calendar (September 1 to August 31). We prepare our assessment plans at the start of the administrative year, and we report our findings and analysis at the conclusion of the year.

***FLOWCHART COMING SOON***

## **Preplan and Organize for Assessment**

Before assessment can begin, key staff, committees and structures must be identified. One or more persons may lead the unit assessment process, but it is crucial for all staff to assume the responsibility for designing, implementing, and carrying out the assessment process.

### **Step 1: Define the Objectives**

Administrative objectives should reflect what the department's decision makers have identified as the important initiatives or improvements for the administrative year. Departments should use their normal operations as part of their initiatives, but should focus on improvements and special projects that will enhance the department.

The intent of assessment is to keep units moving toward improvement in their operations. Objectives (outcomes) are goals for a department's performance that describe a task to accomplish or a goal to meet. They are specific, measureable, and quantifiable statements that can be used to determine progress towards the overall mission of the entity. Objectives can be reasonably achieved within an expected timeframe and with available resources. Objectives must be tied to the overarching university strategic plan, so these must be considered when creating an assessment plan.

### **Formula**

A general formula for writing an objective can be employed, although following this formula is not required:

**Objective = verb/action + object + subject + modifiers**

Increase research skills of UTHHealth young investigators by developing and conducting workshops and seminars on analyzing research.

## **Step 2: Identify Measures for Each Objective (Means of Assessment) and a Target for Each Measure**

A measure identifies evidence and methods you will use to determine whether you are achieving expected results and provide evidence that the entity is accomplishing its objectives. Measures should be both quantitative and qualitative and show performance compared to criteria for success in relation to expected objectives.

In collecting this evidence, the entity should learn two things: (1) whether the objective is being met, (2) where there is room for improvement toward the objective. For each objective, at least 1- 2 measures must be identified to gather this needed information, ideally one direct and one indirect. Each objective must have at least one direct measure.

### **Direct vs. Indirect**

There are two types of measures, direct and indirect.

***Direct measures*** are more powerful because they provide data that correlate exactly with the objective. Direct measure results show the extent to which an objective has been accomplished and provide information that may be used to make decisions for improvements in following years.

**Direct Measure Example:** Count the number of flyers sent to prospective students. (To fit the objective “increase number of prospective students sent flyers.”) Each objective must have at least one direct measure associated with it, but multiple direct measures are often used to validate evidence. For example, an office might identify “Replace trips to the Coast for meetings with conference calls” as an objective. They could use “Compare number of trips to the coast,” and “Compare number of meetings held via teleconference” as measures.

***Indirect measures*** are valid if paired with a direct measure, but they are weak in terms of evidence. Indirect measures ask for opinion or perception about an outcome that is otherwise measurable. Student surveys, alumni surveys, and focus groups are examples of indirect measures.

**Indirect Measure Example:** Survey customers about their satisfaction with the number of parking spaces available for visitors. (To fit the objective “increase the number of parking spaces available for visitors.”)

### **Final thoughts on measures**

Measures may not tell you why objectives are or are not being met. However, they should be specific enough to answer *whether or not* the objective is being met. When the expected levels of achievement are not met, the measures should help lead the entity to identify problem areas and decide on actions to improve the results.



## **Creating a Target**

Targets should flow easily from the measures that are set. Targets have a single purpose, which is to communicate clearly the level accomplishment for the particular measure. Targets must always indicate what is expected to be achieved in a single fiscal year.

## **Specific Numbers**

Targets must have specific numbers in them which indicate the level of accomplishment for the measure. Targets can indicate a number or percentage of items, people, or activities, or they can indicate a designated level of proficiency, or both.

**Target example #1**, the target is the percentage of employees who donate to the capital campaign.

**Target example #2**, the desired financial margin at the end of each fiscal year

**Target example #3**, the time it takes for 100 percent of employees to complete annual compliance training within the stated window.

There is no easy rule for determining what the targets should be for any objective. Generally, a department either has an idea of the current level of achievement and defines a new target from that, or they have a desired level of achievement and work toward that.

## **Targets Formula:**

**Target = Subject + action + object + modifiers**

**Target Example:** 25% of UHealth faculty and staff will donate funds to the portion of the capital campaign dedicated to student scholarships.

### **Step 3: Conduct Assessments and Record Findings**

At the end of each fiscal year, each department must write an assessment report which consists of the results, action plan(s), and follow up/analysis. The first step is to collect the findings (or results) associated with each measure. Findings are merely the quantifiable data, without any analysis, that result when the measures listed in the assessment plan are completed.

The data entered as Results should indicate the results as they are phrased in the measure description.

**Results Example 1:** Student satisfaction survey showed an increase of 5% in overall satisfaction between FY 2016 and FY 2017. (FY 2016: n=25; mean = 3.82) (FY 2017: n=27; mean = 4.01)

**Results Example 2:** Random analysis revealed 70% of payments were issued prior to purchase order due date. As with the targets, specific numbers are essential for findings. The actual percentage or numbers that resulted from the measures are the focus of findings. If there is a small sample or number, that number (the “n”) should be reported as well, since it provides context for the results.

**Step 4: Analyze findings and Identify Action Plans for the Next Academic Year** Analyze the data to identify what it means for the department: (1) Could the results be improved? (2) Is the objective and/or measure useful? (3) What are the next efforts that will best contribute to growing the unit?

At this point, the assessment team who defined the objectives and measures for the assessment plan should reconvene to look at the data. The team should determine by the raw data if the objective’s target level was met, partially met, or not met. You will also need to determine what further action is needed. This is the actual “assessment” part of the assessment process.

Action plans cannot be written unless the team who was involved in creating the assessment plan has analyzed and discussed the findings. Analysis should involve asking a few questions about the results of each measure. What specifically did your assessments show regarding proven strengths or progress you made on outcomes/objectives? What specifically did your assessments show regarding any outcomes/objectives that will require continued attention?

There are other questions you should consider in reflecting on the results and thinking about your next steps. What do you now know about the stated objective and target, in terms of how they will contribute to your unit? Who/what was positively impacted and how? What part of the objective was not met? Why was the target, or why wasn’t the target achieved? The most important question: how will you use this information to improve your

unit? If you can answer that last question, you are ready to proceed in creating your action plan.

An action plan is the follow-up to the assessment just conducted. Actions must be identified for each objective, even if that action is to replace the objective with another one. Actions should also be as specific as possible, and should show that the team has thought through the results. If you found that conducting a satisfaction survey every 6 months delivered good information and want to do more of them, identify a number or range (2-3, for example) instead of just saying “more”. If you found that surveying students did not reveal useful information, but asking faculty did, indicate that surveys will be conducted with faculty only.

Action plans also require identifying the team or person who will be responsible for the action, so take the time to think through who the appropriate person is to carry out that step. Since assessment is cyclical, you are getting close to closing the loop. In identifying your next actions, you are essentially designing your next assessment plan.

DEPARTMENT NAME Assessment Planning

FY 20xx

Objective 1	Means of Assessment & Criteria (Targets)/Tasks	Results	Action & Follow Up
Objective 2	Means of Assessment & Criteria (Targets)/Tasks	Results	Action & Follow Up
Objective 3	Means of Assessment & Criteria (Targets)/Tasks	Results	Action & Follow Up