

# Case Study: Implementing a Sustainable, Long-Term Student Learning Assessment Program

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**Brief Abstract:** This case study offers a model and set of practical approaches to implementing a sustainable, long-term student learning assessment program. While many academic libraries assess student learning outcomes, and the literature offers a variety of techniques and models for doing so, librarians can still struggle to build this activity into an ongoing practice. The Campus Library at the University of Washington Bothell developed a multiyear program that aimed to make assessment routine, predictable, and manageable. Strategies for developing a flexible assessment plan, managing the process of creating student learning outcomes, writing rubrics, assessing outcomes collaboratively with librarians and faculty, and using assessment results to make changes to the information literacy curriculum are discussed.

## INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

The Campus Library is located at the University of Washington Bothell campus about 20 miles northwest of Seattle, Washington. The campus was established in 1990 and offers 40 undergraduate and graduate degree programs, 33 of which were added within the last five years alone. It is also the fastest growing public university in the state, with 66 percent enrollment growth since 2010. With 4,588 full-time students, further growth in both the student body and number of degree programs is anticipated.

The UW Bothell is committed to providing access, opportunity, and innovation, and its student body is one of the most diverse among Washington's public universities. Nearly 46 percent of students are students of color or the first in their families to attend college, and 71 percent of the student body is of traditional college age (17-25 years old).

The Campus Library is a part of the tri-campus University of Washington Libraries system and maintains an interdisciplinary, curriculum-focused collection of over 110,000 volumes and a multitude of electronic resources. The library has a robust information literacy instruction program that is highly valued and supported by faculty and library administration. Librarians from all subject areas partner with faculty to strategically integrate hands-on and online instruction into targeted courses within the undergraduate and graduate curricula.

## DESCRIPTION OF PROGRAM, PROJECT, OR SPACE

In 2012, the Campus Library's head of teaching and learning and the assessment coordinator took steps to develop a formal student learning outcomes assessment program. While the library's instruction program was well established at this time, and individual librarians assessed classroom instruction at the course section level, a broader and more systemic assessment program had not been created. The need for this program was driven by a number of factors. The rapid growth in the number of new programs, courses, and students at the UW Bothell meant librarians needed to be able to look across multiple sections of core courses (often taught by different faculty/librarian teams) in order to assess whether students were reaching the same learning outcomes. This institutional growth was also accompanied by a campus-wide emphasis on accountability and the assessment of student learning.

In order to respond to these developments, the library began by establishing information literacy student learning outcomes and a formal plan for assessing them. The outcomes offer a broad vision for information literacy and research-related student learning at UW Bothell and describe what we hope our

students will have learned and what they will be able to do at various stages of their academic careers. Finalized in 2012, the outcomes formed the basis for conducting the library's annual assessment of student learning process. Between 2012 and 2015, the library's assessment program became a key component of the overall information literacy program.

### **TACKLING THE LENS**

The key priorities for the assessment program involve sustainability, collaboration, and a commitment to improving student learning. A challenge faced in establishing the program was how to build this activity into an ongoing, sustained practice. In response, the library's head of teaching and learning and the assessment coordinator developed a multiyear program that aimed to make assessment routine, predictable, and manageable for all librarians. Each year, the head of teaching and learning and the assessment librarian, in coordination with colleagues, select one degree program and focus assessment on the core course targeted for information literacy instruction within that area. The information literacy student learning outcomes most appropriate for the course are identified, and instruction and assignments are closely aligned with these outcomes. In collaboration with faculty, librarians then collect existing assignments or create new ones that provide evidence of student learning for the defined outcomes. At the end of the year, a rubric is created from the outcomes and student work is assessed by librarians, faculty, and other campus partners. The results of the assessment process are reported to faculty and librarians, and any changes to instruction or course assignments are tracked. Although there are multiple components to this approach, the predictable structure and manageable scope has enabled librarians to embrace this work enthusiastically.

Collaboration between faculty, librarians, and others (such as writing center staff) is key to this process. Faculty who teach the core courses for our selected focus area are approached early in the process to gain permission to use student work and create buy-in for the activity. Faculty are then invited to participate in the annual rubric assessment "retreat" day in which we assess student work. This creates both opportunities and challenges: while this approach facilitates rich discussions between librarians and faculty about student learning, differing expectations about student performance also often emerge during these discussions. These perspectives have to be reconciled during a rubric norming process to ensure all participants score student work in similar ways. In addition, student assignments often vary across different sections of the same course. Using the same outcomes and rubric for different assignments can be challenging, as the same criteria may often not apply. However, this has led to fruitful conversations among faculty and librarians about the possible need to ensure that the same outcomes are being addressed in all sections of a course.

Assessing just one curricular area per year is the key to sustaining the program and securing librarian buy-in. However, this can be a time-intensive process for the head of teaching and learning, the assessment coordinator, and the subject librarian whose curricular area is involved. While this is currently manageable, continued institutional growth and the need to manage librarian workloads may mean that we need to look more closely at how we can do this work in more effective ways.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

On the whole, the student learning outcomes assessment program has been a success. We have gained significant insight into information literacy student learning in a number of our core programs, made numerous improvements to our instruction and assignment design, and strengthened collaborative relationships within and beyond the Campus Library. However, each year we learn more about the assessment process and make changes accordingly. In 2013-2014, for example, we experimented with assessing student work from two very different programs: Business and Environmental Sciences. This approach necessitated two different rubrics, two different sets of faculty participants, and two different rubric norming sessions on the same day. Librarians and others involved in assessing student work found it challenging to come to grips with the different assignments in a short period of time. In 2014-2015, we returned to the practice of focusing on just one core course in one curricular area.

Having a single day-long “retreat” model in which all librarians (regardless of subject area) come together to assess student work has reduced the overall time commitment for librarians. It has helped gain buy-in from colleagues, as they know that they will only be committed to a single day out of the year. However, condensing the tasks of norming the rubric and scoring 50 samples of student work into a single day can be challenging (and sometimes exhausting). Based on librarians’ feedback, in 2015 we reduced the amount of time spent on the day itself and instead gave librarians the option to finish assessing work over the course of the following week. Analysis of rubric results should reveal if this longer period has led to wider variations in scores.

The development and norming of the rubric is a time-intensive process, and most of the rubrics are not continuing to be used after the assessment process. Going forward, it will be worth considering how we can encourage our colleagues to continue using the rubrics for their assessment activities. While most of the librarians anecdotally report increased attention to assessment as a result of participating in the program, incorporating rubric assessment into their ongoing work remains a challenge. If we could go back and do things differently, we would build this into the process from the start by emphasizing that the rubrics are designed for long-term, ongoing use by individual librarians.

**Table 2.1**  
**Links to University of Washington Outcomes and Assessment Pages**

Title of Document/Material	Description	
Campus Library Teaching and Learning program	Campus program information	<a href="http://libguides.uwb.edu/teaching">http://libguides.uwb.edu/teaching</a>
Campus Library Student Learning Assessment program	Campus assessment information	<a href="http://libguides.uwb.edu/assessment">http://libguides.uwb.edu/assessment</a>
Campus Library Information Literacy Student Learning Outcomes	Campus information literacy information	<a href="http://libguides.uwb.edu/learningoutcomes">http://libguides.uwb.edu/learningoutcomes</a>