

# Quick Guide to Setting Meaningful Performance Expectations for Undergraduate Program Assessment

This quick guide was prepared by the WSU Office of Assessment for Curricular Effectiveness (ACE) and is intended to help WSU programs and faculty consider good practices for setting meaningful performance expectations for students nearing the end of the curriculum as part of program assessment. ACE is also available to collaborate with WSU undergraduate degree programs to facilitate faculty discussions around setting meaningful performance expectations and to design rubrics or other tools to measure program learning outcomes. Contact us at [ace.office@wsu.edu](mailto:ace.office@wsu.edu) for more information.

## Introduction

An effective system of undergraduate program assessment includes measures collected near the end of the degree program/curriculum, providing information about program-level student learning outcomes (SLOs) achievement. In this context, setting meaningful performance expectations helps programs determine the level of performance that is expected of seniors (and/or juniors, as best fits the program context) and to what extent students completing the program are achieving the learning outcomes of the degree program/curriculum. To decide if assessment results demonstrate student competency, **program faculty must determine what constitutes acceptable levels of performance.**

*Note:* At WSU, academic programs are expected to regularly assess student learning and use results to inform decision-making to support effective teaching, learning, and curricula. While all program learning outcomes do not need to be measured annually, achievement of program learning outcomes near the end of the curriculum should be measured/reviewed within a reasonable cycle, using direct measures that best fit each program's context. In this way, learning outcomes achievement results help programs demonstrate academic strengths and set priorities for improvement.

## Key Terms

The terms *benchmark*, *standard*, *target*, etc. may be used in a variety of contexts and there is no popular consensus on which term is most appropriate.<sup>1</sup> In this resource,

- a **cut point** is the minimum acceptable level of individual student performance, and
- a **target** is the proportion of the group of students that should achieve at least that minimum level.

For example:

Program-level SLO (abbreviated)	Evidence of Student Learning	Performance Expectations	
		<u>Cut Point</u> <i>(minimum acceptable level of individual student performance)</i>	<u>Target</u> <i>(proportion of a group of students that should achieve cut point)</i>
Information Literacy (IL)	Scores from a rubric used to assess this skill in written capstone papers	Majors in the capstone score at least 3 on each criterion for IL on a 5-point rubric	At least 80% of work sampled from majors in the capstone meets this level
Quantitative Reasoning (QR)	Scores from exam questions focused on this skill in 400-level courses	Graduating senior majors answer at least 80% of the QR items correctly	At least 75% of graduating senior majors meet this level

<sup>1</sup> In higher education, different disciplines and accrediting bodies define and use these terms differently.

## Approaches to Interpreting Evidence of Student Learning with and without Performance Expectations

Programs can use different approaches for interpreting evidence of student learning, with and without established performance expectations, to answer different types of assessment questions, including “Where is our curriculum stronger and where is it weaker?”

While WSU recognizes the value of varied approaches,<sup>2</sup> setting meaningful performance expectations helps programs answer the questions “What performance is good enough?” and “To what extent are our majors achieving the learning outcomes of our degree program/curriculum?”

Perspectives for Interpreting Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Evidence	Questions Perspective Can Answer	Established Performance Expectations (Hypothetical Examples)	Interpretation of Performance Results (Hypothetical Examples)
<b>Without Established Performance Expectations</b>			
<b>Strengths and Weaknesses</b> – <i>Compares scores on multiple learning outcomes / elements, one against the other</i>	What are our students’ areas of relative strength and weakness, as they complete our curriculum?	N/A	Majors in the capstone are stronger in writing than in oral communication (e.g., using results from rubric-based assessment of papers and presentations).
<b>Historical Trends</b> – <i>Compares scores against peers in prior classes (i.e., successive groups of students over three or more years)</i>	Is student performance improving? (or maintaining, or declining?)	N/A	Senior majors this year scored higher on written communication than senior majors did in the previous two years.
<b>With Established Performance Expectations</b>			
<b>Local Performance Expectations</b> – <i>Compares student learning outcomes scores against expectations established by faculty teaching in program</i>	Are our students meeting our own expectations?	<b>Cut Point:</b> Students will earn at least a 3 on each criterion of the program’s rubric with a 4-point scale. <b>Target:</b> At least 90% of students will meet or exceed the cut point.	85% of senior majors met or exceeded the cut point this year, which is below our established performance expectation.
<b>External Standards</b> – <i>Compares scores against an externally established standard or national average</i>	Are our students meeting standards set by someone else?	<b>Cut Point:</b> Students will earn a passing score of at least 150 on the state exam. <b>Target:</b> At least 85% of students will earn a passing score on their first attempt.	90% of students earned a passing score on their first attempt, which is above our established performance expectation.
	How do our students compare to peers at other universities?	<b>Cut Point:</b> Students will score above the national average on the XYZ Test. <b>Target:</b> At least 70% of students will score above national average.	65% of students scored above the national average, which is below our established performance expectation.

*Note:* Programs may employ multiple approaches when interpreting evidence of student learning, to provide a more complete picture of student performance. For example, programs may find it useful to examine assessment results alongside local performance expectations, as well as historical trends.

<sup>2</sup> See WSU’s Educational Policies and Procedures Manual ([EPPM](#)), section 11 on assessment.

## Value of Setting Performance Expectations

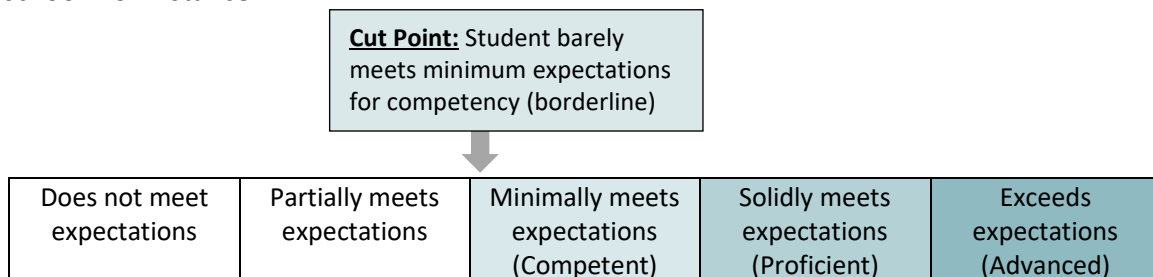
Setting meaningful performance expectations and determining to what extent program graduates are achieving the learning outcomes of the degree program/curriculum can:

- help communicate program expectations for student performance
- help faculty to gauge the effectiveness of the curriculum, and prioritize adjustments to courses, curriculum, and instruction
- provide a catalyst for faculty discussions about student performance and effective teaching, learning, and curricula

## Steps and Considerations for Setting Meaningful Performance Expectations

### Step 1: Establish Meaningful Cut Points

Have the minimally competent (or *borderline*) student in mind when setting cut points – the student who just barely meets expectations for the degree, rather than a solid student or the ‘star’ student who may go on to graduate school. For instance:



*Note:* This illustration shows conceptual levels/categories; similar categories may be aligned with a variety of rubrics or scoring tools, providing a level of granularity that meets the program needs

### Guiding Questions

- What is “good enough” in the view of faculty? What’s the lowest level of acceptable performance that would “nonetheless adequately prepare students for success in what comes next in their lives” or “that would not embarrass you” if people learned a student had graduated from your program?
- What is the potential harm in setting the bar either too high or too low? (Generally speaking, if the bar is set too high, you may identify too many problems and spread yourselves too thin trying to address them all. If the bar is set too low, you increase the risk of graduating students who are not competent.)
- As applicable: Are there minimum levels of competency established by external sources, such as disciplinary professional associations or accreditors, to include?

### Three Approaches for Defining a Cut Point for a Specific SLO<sup>3</sup>

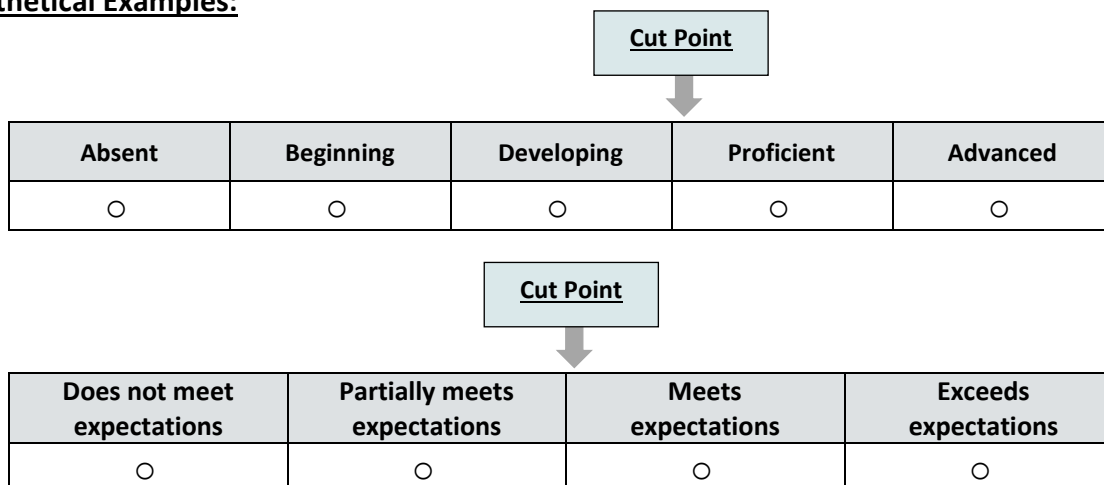
- All: Minimum score that a student must demonstrate on every element (e.g., on a rubric, a minimum of 3 on 4-point scale on all component skills & knowledge assessed for that SLO).
- Essential: A minimum score for some elements, those component skills or knowledge deemed most essential (e.g., on a rubric, different minimum scores for different specific elements)
- Average: Minimum score for the sum or average of all element scores, so that a strong score on one element may offset poor performance in another (e.g., on a rubric, averaging all elements)

<sup>3</sup> While examples are given in the context of rubrics (with multiple elements scored for a particular SLO), these approaches can also apply to other types of assessment, such as exam question scores and other tools.

## Considerations

- Setting expectations is inherently a value judgment, so a group of faculty who teach in the program and are familiar with the curriculum (including courses near the end of the degree program/ curriculum) should be involved.
- Expectations vary depending on circumstances and context (e.g., engineers and nurses may have some firm minimum expectations tied to professional requirements).
- Not all student learning outcomes will necessarily have the same minimum expectation.
- Review the structure of your program rubric's scale. The number of categories, headings, and descriptors on a program rubric will vary and should be determined based on program context, including what faculty want to learn and how the data will be used. See our [Quick Guide to Types of Rubrics for Program Assessment](#) for more information.

### Hypothetical Examples:



- Ground your cut points with assessment data. Look at the past/recent results your program has collected. Consider the extent to which all majors/options follow a shared curriculum and whether to look at achievement data disaggregated by major/options when setting a cut point.
- It's often helpful to consider samples of work by majors near the end of the degree program/ curriculum. Where possible, identify samples that represent different levels of achievement (e.g., does not meet, partially meets, minimally competent, proficient, and advanced).
- You may also wish to look at assignment prompts, as part of context for specific assessments. For example, organization and grammar will likely be weaker on essay exams completed in a class period than on a research paper subject to multiple revisions.

## Step 2: Establish Meaningful Targets

A group of faculty who teach in the program and are familiar with the curriculum should consider the performance of students as a group, to establish meaningful targets for each SLO.

## Considerations

- As with establishing cut points, ground your targets with assessment data, looking at past/recent results for your students.
  - Consider the extent to which all majors/options follow a shared curriculum and whether the program should look at achievement data disaggregated by major/options when setting targets for a specific learning outcome.

- Express targets as percentages, not means (e.g., xx% of senior majors will score at least ‘minimally meets’ or above, or xx% of majors in the capstone will get at least a 65%)
- Generally avoid a 100% target for minimum competency, recognizing that:
  - Every assessment is an imperfect representation of what students know; any student can have a situation (e.g., illness) where they perform poorly, below their actual level.
  - Ideally, programs would examine results from several assessments before determining a student doesn’t meet minimum competency.
  - Despite our best efforts, it isn’t realistic to expect that every student meets the minimum competency on all learning outcomes. (A graduate in accounting or biology needs to have strong quantitative skills and may have a satisfying career with weaker presentation skills.)
- Consider multiple targets for a given SLO, such as: *90% will meet or exceed minimum expectations for competency (cut point) and 80% will solidly meet or exceed expectations for proficiency.*
  - It’s often helpful to have samples available of work by majors near the end of the degree program/curriculum that represent different levels of achievement, as faculty discuss and determine targets.

## Follow Up Steps

- Use performance expectations to reflect on assessment data and inform program decision-making, including decisions about curriculum and instruction. Faculty with local expertise should regularly look at and discuss assessment results, considering the performance expectations of the program.
- Develop an internal process for sharing performance expectations with faculty who teach.
- Use performance expectations to guide decisions about class activities, assignments, and exams.
- Use performance expectations to shape assessment efforts and faculty conversations surrounding student learning.
- Periodically revisit cut points and targets – looking at recent and historical assessment results – and update them as needed and appropriate to the program. Consider ways to bring in external perspectives and information, such as from your disciplinary association, faculty colleagues at peer institutions, or employers.

*Note:* When the curriculum, options, or programs of study are revised, faculty should review and, if necessary, update cut points and targets. In other words, faculty should ensure that the curriculum affords all majors sufficient opportunity to meet or exceed minimum performance expectations on program learning outcomes.

## Additional Resources and References

- Suskie, L. (2018). *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. pp. 287-304. (*Note: Please contact ACE to borrow this book*)
- University of Hawaii, Manoa’s Assessment and Curriculum Support Center Website: What’s Good Enough? Setting Standards. <https://manoa.hawaii.edu/assessment/workshops-events/setting-standards-2/>.
- University of California, Davis’s Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Website: Establish Standards and Targets. <https://assessment.ucdavis.edu/get-curious/standards-and-targets>.