Core Competency FAQs

Overview & Purpose

In the *2013 Handbook of Accreditation*, Criteria for Review 2.2a states:

> Baccalaureate programs engage students in an integrated course of study of sufficient breadth and depth to prepare them for work, citizenship, and life-long learning. These programs ensure the development of core competencies including, but not limited to, **written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, information literacy, and critical thinking.**

Component 4 (Educational Quality) of the Institutional Review Process asks for institutions "to describe how the curriculum addresses each of the five core competencies, explain their learning outcomes in relation to those core competencies, and demonstrate, through evidence of student performance, the extent to which those outcomes are achieved."

The purpose of these FAQs is to provide additional information to institutions regarding the five core competencies.

1. How did WSCUC come up with these five competencies? Why were writing (W), oral communication (OC), quantitative reasoning (QR), information literacy (IL), and critical thinking (CT) singled out for such focused treatment in the institutional report?

These competencies have been part of Standard 2 for undergraduate degrees (criterion for review 2.2a) since 2001. The language of CFR 2.2 states that "all degrees . . . awarded by the institution are clearly defined in terms of . . . levels of student achievement necessary for graduation that represent more than simply an accumulation of courses or credits." Now, at a time when there is widespread concern about the quality of graduates' learning, and when assessment practices have emerged that are able to address these outcomes in nuanced ways, the Commission is asking for documentation of actual achievement.

While CFR 2.2a mentions additional outcomes beyond the five core competencies – e.g., creativity, appreciation for diversity, and civic engagement – the five that are the focus of component 4 were deemed generic, fundamental to students' future success, and assessable. The focus on these five does not in any way limit institutions that wish to address additional competencies.

2. What are the definitions of these five core competencies? Who gets to define them?

Institutions are free to define each core competency in a way that makes sense for the institution, its mission, its values, and the needs of its student body. The assumption, however, is that these are generic competencies – that is, applicable across multiple programs – that will be approached in an interdisciplinary, integrative way. Institutions have a lot of latitude in deciding how they will do that.

3. Are these core competencies supposed to be institutional learning outcomes (ILOs)?

That's one way to approach them. For many institutions, there's a lot of overlap between their ILOs and the five core competencies. For very large, complex institutions, it may be more appropriate – and manageable – to approach them at the college, division, or department level.

4. Can institutions assess the core competencies in the major?

Because most students take major courses right to the end of their studies, there are advantages in embedding core competencies into the assessment of the major or professional field. Many majors use capstones, senior projects, e-portfolios, or other methods of collecting student work for assessment, and these can provide evidence of students' mastery of the competencies. Assessing core competencies at the degree level allows expectations and types of evidence to be adapted to the degree. For example, depending on the field, oral communication skills might be demonstrated through debating, interviewing, negotiating, counseling, or presenting ideas.

In some cases, assessing students' level of achievement in a particular competency through the major assessment might not seem appropriate (e.g., quantitative reasoning in an English or dance major) or feasible, where faculty are reluctant to integrate them into their assessment of the major. In that case, the institution can look at other options such as upper-division GE; signature assignments across a range of upper-division courses that students may be taking as electives; or a core competency portfolio that students assemble with artifacts that illustrate each of the core competencies. The benefit of this last approach is that it can also include items from the co-curriculum or internships.

So the answer to the question about "having" to assess core competencies in the major is no. The major is probably the easiest place to do it, but not the only place, and it's definitely not required.

5. Do institutions need to assess and support transfer students' development of the CCs?

Yes. The diploma that students receive, whether they're native students or transfers, will look the same. It's the institution's responsibility – as well as in the student's interest – to ensure that the degree represents high-quality learning for every graduate.

6. Academic programs are all so different. Does this mean there are different definitions of the core competencies and different assessment processes for each program?

Program-level learning and assessment results are very important; they're a key part of program review, which also has a place in the 2013 institutional review process, or IRP (see Component #6: Quality Assurance and Improvement). But with the core competencies, the goal is a higher level of aggregation: the institution level, or at very large and complex universities, the school or college or division level. Institutions should develop processes that allow for differences while at the same time focusing on commonalities across disciplines.

7. Is it necessary to document how much students learned and developed from entry to exit? Should there be pre- and post-testing?

No. While it can be useful to know the trajectory of students' learning over time, so faculty can see where they improved or plateaued or even became less proficient, the focus is on their level of

proficiency at graduation. Think of assessment that measures growth as a tool for enhancing the final result. Pre- and post-testing is one approach to assessment, and it may be useful. But it can also be costly, it is methodologically challenging, and the results can be difficult to interpret. In some contexts, it can be inauthentic and self-serving.

8. What about institutions that award A.A. or A.S. degrees? Should core competencies be assessed for students as they leave with an associate's degree? What if they transfer to a baccalaureate program?

Yes, the Commission cares about students' mastery of competencies in all degree programs, from associate to graduate levels. Institutions that award A.A. or A.S. degrees should also set standards, report results, and document plans for improvement when necessary at those levels.

9. Does this core competency requirement mean that institutions have to show 100% of students meeting the standard? Or that a student who doesn't meet the standard gets a failing grade – for example on their capstone – or doesn't graduate?

No. What is important—to the institution as well as the Commission—is the distribution: what proportion of your students is meeting the standard or even exceeding it? What proportion is below the standard, and how far below? And what do you plan to do to raise overall performance and shift the distribution upward, if you are dissatisfied with the results?

10. How can such extensive and complex findings be documented for the institutional review process, particularly at large institutions with hundreds of programs, multiple divisions, and several degree levels?

As an element of their institutional reports, institutions are asked to describe and provide evidence of how they assess students' achievement of core competencies. Institutions are free to decide how best to organize the setting of proficiency standards, assessment, documentation, and reporting of results, but it must be clear that this work is documented as it occurs throughout the institution. For large, complex institutions a narrative summary might be provided to include where responsibility for this work lies; general information on the definition of these proficiencies and how they were developed; general information on cycles and timelines for reviews across the institution; systems or processes for reviewing data/information obtained through reviews; and locus of authority for taking action based on results. A matrix providing specifics could be created to demonstrate the pervasiveness and effectiveness of this work throughout the institution. Depending on the size and structure of the institution, this might be done through a selection of examples that represent all of the institution's programs, divisions, and degree levels.

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