The Basics: Assessment of Student Learning

- *Learning* is a key priority in the University’s vision and mission statements and strategic plan. It is essential in Student Affairs’ statements of vision (“Together, we transform students’ lives”) and purpose (“We support and inspire the highest standards of student learning and success, community engagement and staff development”).

- *Assessment* is a process of determining the degree to which the work we do and the learning experiences we provide for students meet the goals we have established.

- Three major types of assessment in post-secondary education are (1) student academic performance [the subject of the assessment is the student], (2) operational effectiveness [the subject is a process or service delivered by the institution, or a part of the institution], and (3) student learning [the subject is a learning experience].

- Both operational effectiveness and student learning are important, but they have very different methods of assessment.

- Assessments of operational effectiveness measure parameters like utilization, efficiency, productivity, student satisfaction, and outputs (such as the number of counselling visits, community service experiences, or stress management programs completed).

- Assessments of student learning measure what students learned—how they changed—because of their participation in learning experiences. These assessments use *student learning outcomes* to define (1) what group of students participated in the learning experience, (2) what the learning experience was, (3) what the intended result of the learning experience was—what students become able to do because of their participation in the experience, and (4) what evidence would be required to show that the intended result had been achieved. The more specifically stated the learning outcome is, the better; it is easier to assess very specific outcomes associated with
very specific learning experiences for very specific groups of students (what students, what will be done, how that will happen, when it will occur, etc.).

- **Learning outcomes** are categorized in various ways by professional organizations and universities, but there are fundamental common themes across the various ways of categorizing them: (1) knowledge acquisition and application; (2) cognitive skills, such as critical thinking; (3) preparation for work and life; (4) personal and inter-personal (social) development; and (5) civic engagement and participation—often called social responsibility.

- The Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) offers 44 standards for functional areas in student academic and personal support services and has listed 6 student learning outcomes: (1) knowledge, (2) cognitive complexity, (3) intrapersonal development, (4) interpersonal competence, (5) humanitarianism and civic engagement, and (6) practical competence. Student Affairs has chosen to use the CAS Standards as guides for assessing and improving programs and services and to use the CAS learning outcomes as the Division’s learning outcomes.

- The CAS learning outcomes are aligned with the University’s institution-wide learning outcomes, which fall into two broad groups: (1) intellectual, academic, and practical skills, and (2) personal and social responsibility.

- Assessment of students’ achievement of desired learning outcomes is intended to provide essential data with which to improve learning experiences. Assessment of learning outcomes is not testing or grading students. Finding out what they did, and did not, learn from learning experiences makes it possible to improve those experiences—but the purpose is not to evaluate the students.

- Learning outcomes can be assessed by qualitative (observation, students’ writing or performances, journals) or quantitative (surveys) methods. Qualitative assessments often require rubrics to ensure consistency.

- Assessment data are used to “close the loop”: the results suggest action steps to be taken to improve learning experiences or programs. An action step is an activity undertaken to make the results better.