The Mason Core (formerly general education) program at George Mason University organizes courses of study into three main areas. Foundation courses build knowledge and skills to promote success in the major and in future pursuits; core courses introduce students to a breadth of subject matter and intellectual traditions; and synthesis courses encourage the integration of past learning and experiences, develop critical thinking skills, and prepare students for lifelong learning. Student learning outcomes for the Mason Core areas are created and assessed by faculty, primarily through the University Mason Core Committee.¹ Results of assessment activities are reported to the faculty, the Mason community, and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) by the Office of Institutional Assessment.

Mason’s culture of learning outcomes assessment is characterized as course-embedded, faculty-led, and improvement-focused. As with other program-level assessment activities (e.g., writing, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, etc.), Mason Core assessment focuses on the overall effectiveness of the Mason Core program, and is not an evaluation of individual students or faculty members.

Assessment Process

The assessment process follows four major steps:

**Step 1: Defining Common Learning Outcomes**

The first step in conducting learning outcomes assessment is to specify expectations for student learning. Learning outcomes are broad goals that reflect the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits of mind that students take with them from a learning experience. Interdisciplinary faculty groups identify common learning outcomes for each targeted category across courses and disciplines. Once these learning outcomes are approved by the Mason Core Committee, they become the basis for learning outcomes assessment.

Faculty members who teach Mason Core courses are expected to incorporate most of these learning outcomes in their courses, in addition to course- or discipline-specific learning outcomes. The assessment process focuses on demonstrating how students achieve the learning outcomes in each course.

For each Mason Core category, there is a set of common learning outcomes. These outcomes apply to all courses regardless of the discipline. The assessment focuses on two questions: To what extent do faculty address these learning outcomes in their courses; and how well do students achieve these outcomes?

**Step 2: Assessing Learning Outcomes and Collecting Data**

Assessment is the systematic collection and analysis of information to improve student learning. Assessment links student performance to specific learning outcomes in order to provide useful feedback to the instructor and to the students themselves about how successfully they are meeting these outcomes. Course-based assessment focuses on student learning in the classroom environment, using course goals,

¹ More information on Mason Core requirements and approved courses can be found at http://provost.gmu.edu/gened/general-education-requirements/
objectives and content to gauge the extent of the learning that is taking place. Course faculty (or course coordinators, as appropriate) provide evidence of course content and pedagogy, and collect and submit samples of student work.

**Step 3: Analyzing and Reporting Assessment Data**

Faculty teams develop review criteria and standards, and conduct course reviews. The Office of Institutional Assessment provides assistance with data analysis and reporting. The results are shared with the Mason Core Committee, department chairs, and the faculty who participate in the assessment. The aggregated results are also reported to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (if required), and are used for institutional accreditation. No individual instructor or student results are made public.

**Step 4: Improving the Course and/or Curriculum**

Assessment has the potential to improve learning by systematically linking assignments, course structure and grading practices to intended learning goals; it can help instructors become better teachers by offering specific feedback on what is working or not working in their classrooms; and provides systematic feedback to students about their own progress. Data are used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the degree program, and plan for curricular improvement. Faculty may discover ways to modify existing course content, tests, or assignments to better align the outcomes of these activities with learning outcomes.

**Course Portfolio Assessment**

Mason’s assessment approach is adapted from a successful course portfolio system developed by the College of William and Mary. Course portfolios serve three purposes:

1. **Mason Core program assessment.** Taken together across courses and categories, the portfolios provide a clear picture of the overall effectiveness of the Mason Core program at Mason.
2. **Learning outcomes assessment.** The portfolios provide direct evidence of student achievement in Mason Core learning outcomes through samples of student work.
3. **Course review.** The portfolios provide the most updated information about what is being taught in the course, what kind of learning experiences are offered to students, and what assessment strategies faculty use.

Course portfolio assessment at Mason began in 2008-09 and has been implemented as an ongoing review of Mason Core courses across the categories. Courses in the respective categories are assessed on a six-year cycle, with adjustments in this schedule made as needed. (See the OIA website for the current schedule.)

**Who will Submit a Course Portfolio?**

When a Mason Core category is under review, all faculty, regardless of appointment status, who teach an approved course or section during fall and spring semesters may be required to submit a course portfolio. For courses with multiple sections, the Office of Institutional Assessment selects a random sample of those sections. For faculty who teach the same course in both fall and spring semesters, or who teach
multiple sections of a course, only one course portfolio is required. Faculty on 9-month term, adjunct, teaching assistant, and post-doc appointments are eligible for a modest honorarium for completing a portfolio.

**Major Components of a Course Portfolio**

An electronic course portfolio has the following components:

1. **Course/Section Syllabus.** The syllabus must include learning outcomes from the Mason Core category in addition to course-specific learning outcomes. Reviewers also look for the following information in the syllabus:
   - Instructor and contact
   - Course goals/learning outcomes, including Mason Core outcomes
   - Textbook/Readings
   - Technology requirements
   - Major assignments
   - Grading policy
   - Academic integrity
   - Weekly schedule, including topics, readings, assignments, due dates, etc.

2. **Course Assignments/Projects.** Provide the instructions for the assignments/projects that address or assess the Mason Core learning outcomes. The assignments/projects may take different forms, e.g., individual/group papers, lab reports, websites developed by students, presentations, performances, videos, essay/short answer exams, multiple-choice exams, etc. Along with these, faculty are also required to submit: grading guides, checklists or rubrics, if available (not answer keys for the exams).

3. **Course Map.** The course map identifies the activities and assignments that are being used to address the learning outcomes, as well as the activities or strategies that are used to assess learning. The map also asks how well students demonstrated achievement of the learning outcomes based on the following levels of competence: highly competent, competent, marginally competent, and less than competent. A template is available in an Excel spreadsheet.

4. **Samples of Student Work.** From among the assignments/projects, select one assignment and provide actual examples of student work. Typically, this is a final project in which students demonstrate their achievement of one or more primary learning outcomes.
   - The Office of Institutional Assessment will provide faculty with a randomly selected list (usually 4-10, depending on enrollment) of students in mid-semester.
   - For each work sample, please specify the level of achievement: highly competent, competent, marginally competent, or less than competent. Faculty are encouraged to provide a self-selected exemplar.
   - For student presentations or performance: Faculty can provide samples from various media. Technical assistance with editing and uploading media is available upon request.
   - If multiple-choice tests are the only method used in class, faculty should identify the items that address the Mason Core learning outcomes and provide a grade distribution of the test based on the entire class, not just the randomly selected students.
5. **Faculty Narrative.** A 1-2 page narrative, focused on the following questions:
   a. Discuss your experience using and assessing student achievement of the Mason Core learning outcomes. What worked, and what did not?
   b. What activities or strategies were used to assess the learning outcomes?
   c. Think about the student work samples. What did you know about their knowledge and abilities when they started the course? How do you rate their developmental progress over the semester? In what ways did your experiences with these students shape your expectations for student learning in the course?
   d. Based on what you learned this semester, what changes do you plan to make for the next time you teach this course?
   e. Additional information that will help reviewers understand your course, such as the course context, challenges or issues and how you addressed these, experimentation or changes that you implemented and how they worked or did not work.

**Who will Review Course Portfolios?**

A review team composed of members of the Mason Core Committee and appointed faculty will review each course portfolio using a common review rubric. At the end, the review team assigns a single rating for each course/section. The rating reflects the extent to which the course provides the learning experiences that result in specified student learning outcomes. Again, this review is not an evaluation of the instructor, but of the course’s demonstrated alignment with the respective Mason Core category. Review results are sent to the Mason Core Committee, individual faculty, and the appropriate department chairs.

**What Happens after the Portfolio Review?**

The reviewers’ ratings are used in the following ways:

- The Mason Core Committee monitors the effectiveness of the Mason Core program
- The SACS compliance team uses the data as evidence for reaffirmation of accreditation
- Department chairs focus on improvement of Mason Core and faculty development in their departments
- The Mason Core Committee, the Office of Institutional Assessment, and the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education develops recommendations for the Mason Core program as a whole

The ratings are not meant be used by chairs, deans, or the Provost as elements in merit pay or reappointment, or in promotion and tenure dossiers. Course portfolios focus on the alignment of a course with the institution-wide Mason Core outcomes and goals. In some cases, a faculty member may receive recommendations from the department chair regarding course improvement. In a very few cases, and only after consultation with the relevant department, it is possible that the Mason Core Committee may remove a course from the approved Mason Core inventory. Departments may also initiate the withdrawal of a course from the inventory. Such actions are not intended as evaluation of, or commentary on the value and effectiveness of a particular course or instructor; many outstanding courses meet learning outcomes for a specific discipline, but may not be suitable for inclusion in the university’s Mason Core program.
Technology Support for Electronic Course Portfolios

All course portfolios are stored in Blackboard, protected by password. Faculty members have access to their own portfolio only. The review team members, Mason Core Committee members, and staff from the Office of Institutional Assessment have access to all portfolios. An outstanding portfolio may be made available to the university community with the faculty member’s consent.

A “course” (with a generic name such as “Mason Core – Arts,” “Mason Core – Literature,” etc.) is automatically assigned to the faculty members who are required to submit a portfolio. Faculty are, in Blackboard terminology, “students” in that course. They are instructed to upload portfolio items under the designated “assignments” of that “course.” Instructions for using Blackboard and uploading documents are available on the Mason Core assessment website. The Office of Institutional Assessment provides technical support for creating electronic course portfolios.

Reasons for Conducting Direct Assessment of Student Learning

George Mason University is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Every ten years, the university performs a self-study, the goal of which is to reaffirm that the university meets the standards of accreditation set by SACS. Since 2001, SACS has put increasing emphasis on student learning outcomes. For Mason Core, institutions are required to “identify college-level Mason Core competencies and the extent to which graduates have attained them” (Principles of accreditation: Foundations for quality enhancement, 3.5.1, p. 15).

In addition to the SACS requirements, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) also requires state institutions to assess six areas of competency: written communication, quantitative reasoning, scientific reasoning, critical thinking, oral communication, and information technology. In spring 2010, SCHEV changed the requirement for a “value-added” approach to assessment (essentially a pre- and post-test) to a locally defined method. Going forward, a competency based approach using course portfolios will be the standard for all Mason Mason Core categories as well as all SCHEV competencies.

The most important audience for this assessment activity is the Mason community. One of the hallmarks of assessment activities at Mason is the extent to which we use the data to implement improvements in the form and content of academic programs (the nationally-ranked Writing Across the Curriculum program being perhaps the most visible example). Since Mason Core constitutes such a major and important portion of a student’s educational career, and therefore commands a large commitment of resources—financial, physical, and intellectual—we need good data to assess the effectiveness of this enormous effort. What we learn as an institution from these assessment activities may have profound benefits for the improvement of undergraduate teaching and learning.

Indirect Assessment of Mason Core

OIA engages in a range of indirect assessments of Mason Core. The results are used as supporting evidence for the effectiveness of the program. The instruments and results of these assessments are available on the OIA website (https://assessment.gmu.edu/).

1. Graduating Senior Surveys. Graduating seniors are asked to rate Mason’s contribution to their growth or their competence in each of the Mason Core categories.
2. **Student Focus Groups.** Focus groups are conducted periodically to understand students’ experiences in Mason Core courses.

3. **National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).** The NSSE collects information at hundreds of four-year colleges and universities about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. Mason participates in the NSSE every 3 years.