

## **DMACC Assessment FAQ**

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### **SECTION 1: What is Assessment?**

#### **1. What is assessment?**

Assessment means “evaluating performance.” As educators, we assess our students all the time. We find out what students know at the start of a course (diagnostic assessment); we provide ongoing feedback during lessons and assignments (formative assessment); we measure student learning at the end of a unit, course, or degree (summative assessment). Assessment can be something as subtle as a thumb’s up during a discussion, or as complex as an electronic portfolio comprised of four years of student work. For teachers, assessment is as essential as breathing.

“Assessment” also refers to the process of reporting evidence of student learning outcomes to the college and to accrediting bodies, a definition that will be the primary focus of this FAQ. However, this second definition of assessment is merely an extension of the first.

#### **2. What is the purpose of assessment?**

Assessment is for measuring progress, achieving goals, and making improvements. Consider the U.S. healthcare system. The goal is to improve the overall health of the population. First, we must measure longevity and mortality rates; analyze the overall health of the population, including rates of disease; and evaluate access to insurance. This data can be used to implement changes in the public and private sector.

At DMACC, we have clear goals for student learning, including course, program, and college level outcomes. Without assessment to measure student progress, we cannot judge the success of these goals. Even worse, without assessment, we might be putting our students’ futures at risk. Today’s employers demand a range of complex abilities, including problem solving, teamwork, and communication skills. (More on this later. See “What are DMACC’s Essential Learning Outcomes?”). Assessment is one tool that can determine whether or not DMACC students are learning these skills.

In short, assessment is for our students.

### **3. We already assess our students in a variety of ways, including grades; isn't reporting assessment data to the college and to accrediting agencies redundant?**

Points, percentages, and letter grades are the most common markers of assessment. The same is true for rubrics, comments scribbled on papers, and narrative summaries of student performance. Educators have no shortage of methods for reporting assessment results to students. We are the experts at this.

For now, it should be noted that letter grades, especially those assigned at the end of a course, are imperfect indicators of student learning. Concerns of grade inflation aside, a letter grade can only serve as a weak correlation to specific learning outcomes, especially if multi-section courses are not standardized and the content of course assessments are not known. Ideally, assessment should provide evidence that students are meeting learning objectives. This evidence should tell us what knowledge, skills, and abilities students have acquired, not simply what grade or score was earned. We are asked to provide this type of evidence to outside accrediting agencies.

### **4. Who are these accrediting agencies requiring us to submit assessment data?**

They are not to be trifled with. (Just kidding.)

Institutions of higher learning, such as DMACC, submit to quality assurance reviews and receive feedback on institutional processes from independent regional and national education associations. These organizations provide judgments on the quality, culture, and practices of the institution. In order for students to receive financial aid, the Higher Education Act requires us to be accredited by a nationally recognized accreditor.

Kind of a big deal.

DMACC is accredited by The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. In order to avoid duplication with the HLC, the Iowa Department of Education reviews the HLC's reporting, addresses any follow-up concerns, and then focuses on state compliance issues. DMACC's Career Advantage program is accredited by the National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP). All three of these groups are assessing DMACC. Also, all three ask DMACC to maintain certain standards related to assessment of student learning.

### **5. What do the HLC, Iowa Department of Education, and NACEP require us to do with assessment?**

All three accrediting bodies encourage DMACC to adhere to the following criteria, which I have adapted from the HLC's Criterion 4B (available online):

1. DMACC should write clear goals for student learning.
2. DMACC should use best practices to assess these goals.
3. DMACC should use its assessment information to improve student learning.
4. DMACC assessment should include substantial participation from faculty.

Institutions, programs, and disciplines are allowed different approaches to assessment, and DMACC is ultimately responsible for how it meets these goals.

## **6. So we're just doing assessment to satisfy the accrediting agencies?**

Not a chance. (See “What is the purpose of assessment?”)

Assessment is the kind of work we should be doing, regardless of external accreditation. Any organization worthy of its mission is interested in continuous improvement and answering the question, “Are we a successful organization?” In our case, the assessment process can help answer the questions, “What do students need to learn?” and “Are students learning the essential skills?” More importantly, assessment asks faculty members to take control of curriculum and instruction and to make improvements that benefit students.

## **7. What is the difference between assessment and evaluation?**

It is confusing, especially because assessment is defined as “evaluating performance.” However, at DMACC, we officially use “evaluation” to mean at least three things:

1. Student evaluations that occur at the end of a term.
2. Employee/Faculty evaluations conducted by supervisors.
3. Five-Year Program Evaluations (i.e. evaluations of degree-granting programs).

While Five-year program evaluations include assessment data related to course and program competencies, they are much wider in scope, including evaluation of facilities, job placement statistics, and a range of criteria the Department of Education deems necessary for a successful program.

Furthermore, DMACC’s Testing Center uses the term “assessment” to refer to refer to tests, such as ALEKS and ACCUPLACER, that are part of the admissions and placement process for few students.

However, in this FAQ, we will refer to “assessment” as the process of reporting evidence of student learning to the college and to accrediting bodies. (See “What is Assessment?”)

## **8. How is assessment connected to faculty evaluations?**

It is not. Assessment Commission policy states, “Assessment results will not be used for evaluation of faculty.” At DMACC, assessment results are reported without instructor

names. Administration does not have access to individual faculty results. Results are only reported in the aggregate (i.e. multiple sections combined). The “high-stakes” approach to assessment where performance is used for accountability purposes is not productive. At DMACC, assessment results are used by the college and individual disciplines to make improvements to curriculum and instruction, not to punish anyone.

## **9. What exactly is DMACC supposed to assess?**

We must assess our student learning goals. (See “What do the HLC, Iowa Department of Education, and NACEP require us to do with assessment?”) At DMACC, we have three general sets of learning goals: college level, program level, and course level.

### **College Level**

Our five college level goals, finalized in Summer 2018 and called DMACC Essential Learning Outcomes, include Discipline Knowledge, Critical Thinking, Communication Skills, Problem Solving, and Collaboration. Each degree and program should think of these five outcomes as a curricular umbrella. Any assignment or project operating at the course level could, in theory, ask students to meet at least one of these outcomes.

### **Program Level**

Program competencies are often written in collaboration with faculty and advisory boards external to DMACC. These competencies address the knowledge, skills, and abilities students should acquire by the completion of their degrees.

### **Course Level**

All DMACC courses have a set of course competencies detailing the curriculum and scope of the course. Course-level assessments can be designed to address individual competencies or the entire set. Course competencies answer the question, “What should the student know or be able to do by the end of this course?” Since students should already be completing assignments meant to address this question, the easiest approach to reporting assessment data is to use a pre-existing assignment. (See “What is embedded assessment?”)

## **10. What is embedded assessment?**

You are already assessing in your classroom. Embedded assessment is the idea of using pre-existing classroom assignments for reporting purposes. It’s basically the opposite of a standardized test that arrives in the mail from an external group. The DMACC Assessment Commission believes that your existing efforts do not need duplication. Embedded assessment will be our preferred method for doing this. Disciplines in the process of developing assessment tools should look for strong, existing assignments that ask students to meet identifiable learning goals. Large departments should engage in best practices discussions and identify at least one assignment that can be adopted by every section from a particular course.

## **SECTION 2: What are DMACC's Assessment Goals?**

### **11. What are DMACC's assessment goals?**

While the overall goal is to improve curriculum, instruction, and learning, each department and discipline is likely to have its own set goals. English instructors might set a goal for improving thesis statements on Composition papers. Culinary instructors might design an assessment focuses solely on sauces. The accounting department might want to improve student performance on licensure exams. Assessment could be used to learn more about study habits or focus the department's attention on a topic that is difficult to teach. These types of decisions must be made at the department and discipline level by faculty. In this section of the FAQ, we will focus on goals that have been set at the college level and beyond. This will be discussed in three categories: **Accreditation Goals, DMACC Strategic Plan Goals, and DMACC Assessment Commission Goals.**

### **12. What are DMACC's assessment goals for accreditation purposes?**

Accreditors do not require us to measure assessment results using specific metrics. Instead, our accreditors expect us to have a clear, effective, faculty-driven process for assessment that leads to improvements in curriculum and instruction. (See "What do the HLC, Iowa Department of Education, and NACEP require us to do with assessment?") Later, we will address data-based goals created by DMACC in order to support an effective assessment process. It should also be noted that NACEP requires DMACC to provide assessment-related communication and support to high school programs. Additionally, NACEP asks DMACC to measure Career Advantage (i.e. high school) students' progress on learning outcomes using standards comparable to campus sections.

### **13. What are DMACC's assessment goals for its strategic plan?**

DMACC's Strategic Plan is a comprehensive, goal-driven road map for continuous improvement across the district. The plan includes two metrics for assessment: the percentages of courses and disciplines actively being assessed. For the former, the goal is for 20% of courses to be involved each semester. For the latter, the goal is 50%. These metrics speak directly to the Higher Learning Commission's call for the "substantial participation" of faculty. Additionally, these strategic plan goals encourage departments and disciplines to assess a wide range of courses.

### **14. What are DMACC's Assessment Commission goals?**

DMACC's Assessment Commission (See "What is the Assessment Commission?") has established four goals and a total of fourteen different metrics to measure the progress of assessment across the district. The first two goals are repeated from DMACC's Strategic Plan: the percentages of courses and disciplines actively being assessed (see "What are DMACC's assessment goals for its strategic plan?"). Here is the complete list of goals and metrics:

### **Goal 1: Increase Participation in Assessment**

1A: DMACC will assess 20% of all courses each academic year

1B: DMACC will assess 50% of all disciplines each academic year

1C: DMACC will assess 20% of all course sections each academic year

1D: Each semester, DMACC will collect data on 90% of courses scheduled for assessment

1E: Each semester, DMACC will collect data on 90% of disciplines scheduled for assessment

1F: Each semester, DMACC will collect data on 90% of course sections scheduled for assessment

### **Goal 2: Assess Collegewide Outcomes**

2A: Report data on DMACC's Essential Learning Outcomes

2B: Report program competency assessment on five-year program evaluations

### **Goal 3: Focus on Improvement (i.e. Closing the Loop)**

3A: Annual report emphasizes improvements to curriculum and instruction

3B: Facilitate on-going training related to assessment

3C: Share best practices on Assessment Commission webpage

### **Goal 4: Maintain Faculty-Driven Assessment**

4A: Commission follows a continuous improvement, team-based model

4B: Assessment Commission webpage used to communicate policies, procedures, and planning

4C: Districtwide use of Scantron for assessment is coordinate by district and program chairs

## **15. What are DMACC's Essential Learning Outcomes?**

In 2014, DMACC began the process of replacing its General Education Competencies with collegewide outcomes connected to all degrees, programs, and certificates. A team of faculty representing Arts and Sciences and Career and Technical Education developed eighteen outcomes, which were approved by the Vice President of Academic Affairs in the Fall of 2015.

Starting in the Fall of 2017, the DMACC Assessment Commission began exploring options for collecting evidence of student learning related to the new Essential Learning Outcomes. All faculty chairs and full-time faculty were asked to participate in an alignment process to determine which outcomes were currently being assessed in DMACC classrooms.

After the two-month process concluded in March of 2018, the Commission determined that five of the original eighteen outcomes were pervasive enough to be considered college-wide goals and generally applicable to all DMCC students. These outcomes were Discipline Knowledge, Critical Thinking, Communication Skills, Problem-Solving, and Collaboration.

For definitions and further descriptions of the Essential Learning Outcomes, see The Assessment Commission webpage, found under the Faculty Tab/Faculty Resources of MyDMACC.

## **16. What is “Closing the Loop?”**

The purpose of assessment is to measure student performance and make improvements to instruction and curriculum. (See “What is the purpose of assessment?”) This last part is generally referred to as “closing the loop.” In short, it means to complete the cycle of assessment by applying what was learned to make positive changes. If assessment does not lead to improvements, it may be perceived as an empty exercise and a “numbers game.”

## **SECTION 3: What are the Roles and Responsibilities of DMACC Faculty, Program and District Chairs, and the Assessment Commission?**

### **17. What are the assessment-related roles and responsibilities of program and district chairs?**

The following roles and responsibilities are referenced in the “District Chair/Group Leader/Program Chair Expectations” in the DMACC Faculty Handbook and in the Assessment Commission policies. District and program chairs will:

- Coordinate assessment and program evaluation activities for discipline and program
- Communicate with all districtwide faculty (full-time and adjunct) about course assessments, proficiency standards, and collecting assessment results
- Notify participating faculty of scheduled assessments prior to the beginning of the semester.
- Ensure all faculty in their area receive the assessment instructions, exams, rubrics, and/or any necessary materials they will need to administer the assessment.
- Maintain an updated email distribution list, including faculty from all campuses, centers, and high schools
- Submit a Narrative Report for each course that is assessed.
- Cooperate with Program Development and work with high schools and teachers who teach DMACC courses as part of the Career Advantage program
- Participate in the development and implementation of goals, procedures, and long range plans within discipline/department
- Adhere to the 5-year assessment plan.
- Consider assessment results while making changes to the program and curriculum.

## **18. What are the assessment-related roles and responsibilities of DMACC faculty?**

All faculty, including adjunct and concurrent enrollment, are expected to:

- Follow the assessment schedule for program area
- Use common assessment as determined by their program
- Communicate any concerns regarding the assessment in a timely manner to district/program chair
- Submit data in accordance with established timelines
- Submit all required documents, assessment instruments, and testing materials by deadlines
- Assist district/program chair in assessment narrative as requested
- Participate in artifact scoring as requested

## **19. What are the assessment-related roles and responsibilities of DMACC's Career Advantage Department?**

NACEP's Accreditation Guide specifies that "regular college faculty bear primary responsibility for ensuring that concurrent enrollment course content, assessments and expectations are of comparable quality, and that institutions must provide adequate resources to support faculty in fulfilling this responsibility." Additionally, the NACEP guidelines stress that faculty liaisons provide all new concurrent enrollment instructors with course-specific training in assessment prior to the instructor teaching the course, and that the college/university ensures concurrent enrollment students' proficiency of learning outcomes is measured using comparable grading standards and assessment methods to on campus sections.

Career Advantage advisors will notify instructors of upcoming assessments, deliver assessment tools (including exams, assignments, instructions, and answer keys) to DMACC's concurrent enrollment campuses, and collect assessment results when applicable.

## **20. What is the Assessment Commission?**

Formed in 2017, the Assessment Commission is a faculty-led group that serves DMACC students, faculty, staff, and administration through support of college, department, program and course-level assessments. With the goal of continuous improvement, the Assessment Commission will focus on research-based approaches to pedagogy and standardized practices for administering assessment and reporting results.

### **DMACC Assessment: Guiding Principles (found in the Assessment Commission Charter)**

1. The primary purpose of assessment is to support teaching and learning.

2. Assessment is learner-centered and faculty-driven.
3. Each department and program will engage in district-wide collaboration and communication regarding assessment procedures.
4. Assessment reporting will be meaningful and consistent.
5. The assessment process will respect student and faculty privacy and will not be used for faculty evaluation or comparative judgments of departments or programs.
6. DMACC will support assessment with up-to-date technology.

Specifically, the Commission addresses the following concerns:

- Course, program, and college-level assessment design
- Analysis of evidence-based initiatives and results
- Ongoing development of best practices based on current research
- Alignment of assessment with college curriculum standards and outcomes
- standardized procedures and deadlines for assessment cycles and reporting
- Use of up-to-date technology to support assessment
- Design of assessment policy, including, but not limited to, communication, faculty participation, reporting, and faculty and student privacy
- Annual DMACC assessment reporting

## **SECTION 4: How does DMACC Collect and Report Assessment Data?**

### **21. How does DMACC collect and report assessment data?**

District and program chairs are responsible for coordinating assessment in their discipline areas. Chairs must notify participating faculty of scheduled assessment prior to the beginning of the semester. Chairs serve as the point of contact for all faculty who teach in their areas and should communicate assessment-related information to all participating district-wide faculty (full-time, adjunct, and concurrent enrollment).

For reporting purposes, district and program chairs will be the primary contacts for the submission of course-level data and will coordinate with faculty and the assessment coordinator. Data reporting may vary depending on the assessment tool. If applicable, course-level data can be submitted via a Microsoft Forms report sent out to faculty in the final two weeks of the semester and due on the final day of grade reporting. Other departments may wish to collect and send Scantron exams into the assessment coordinator for scoring. Once results are processed, each program and district chair will receive the aggregate results of their discipline areas. Finally, each chair will complete a narrative report discussing results.

**22. Is faculty participation in assessment required?**

Yes.

The Assessment Commission will work with deans, provosts, and directors to encourage and support full participation in assessment-related activities.

**23. How are assessment results used?**

Assessment data is intended to be used for the facilitation of student, curricular, and college development. Individual student data should not be identifiable by name, DMACC ID, or other means. Assessment results will not be used for evaluation of individual faculty. Aggregate assessment results will be made available to all faculty and supervisors within that department and related entities, when relevant.