

## Student Grading Versus Program Assessment

At Marshall University, it is our practice to use student performance on classroom projects and other assignments to assess student learning in our degree and certificate programs. Because of this, we are often asked if it is appropriate to use student grades on these projects for program assessment reporting. To answer this question, it is important to differentiate between the purpose of assessment of student learning in degree/certificate programs and the assessment of the learning of each student in specific courses.

Each degree program has specified a set of learning outcomes. These outcomes should articulate the knowledge and skills that students should achieve by the end of their programs of study. To achieve these outcomes, students complete a prescribed curriculum, consisting of a sequence of academic coursework (and perhaps co-curricular experiences as well). Courses should be designed intentionally so that each learning outcome the program's faculty feel is important for students to achieve is initially *introduced* in lower-division courses, progressively *practiced* or *applied* in succeeding coursework, and finally *achieved* by the final coursework or capstone experience.

Students receive grades from their instructors for each course in the sequence. The first thing to keep in mind is that most courses have more than one learning outcome and so the course grade is a holistic assessment of student performance on all course outcomes plus other factors such as attendance and participation. However, if we want to isolate a single outcome within a course (that perhaps aligns to an embedded program assessment), also keep in mind that the level of performance an instructor expects correlates with the level of the course. In lower division courses, where an outcome is simply introduced, an instructor would likely not assign the same complexity of assignment that s/he would assign in a mid-level or in the capstone course. Therefore, while a student in an introductory course may earn a grade of "A" on a project, that project should not reflect the complexity of the final outcome faculty wish to see in students during the program's capstone experience. Assessment rubrics should show that progression of complexity with each level (Introductory, Milestone, Capstone, and Advanced). Currently, we expect *milestone* level performance for artifacts from mid-level courses, where outcomes are *applied* or *practiced*. We expect *capstone* level performance for artifacts from capstone-level courses, where outcomes are *achieved*. And, on your assessment rubrics *capstone* level performance descriptions should describe what you think students pursuing baccalaureate degrees should *achieve* by graduation.

The next important question for program assessment purposes, even for a capstone project is, "What shows that a student has achieved *capstone* level performance?" Is it only the student who achieves a grade of "A" on the capstone project? If we say that we want all students who receive degrees from Marshall University to achieve its outcomes, then the benchmark of *capstone* at the end of the program must apply to students who receive a grade of "C" or better. If it is important for us to differentiate between performance that just barely meets the expected level "C" and performance that goes beyond this, we need additional levels of our rubric.

Also, please note students in graduate programs should be expected to achieve higher level outcomes than students in baccalaureate programs.