

Public Information Criterion (1F in 2017 Standards) Guide for Student Achievement as Determined by the Program - *Revised 11/28/17*

PAB-accreditation standards require planning programs to publish public information on *student achievement as determined by the program*.¹ This report summarizes different approaches programs have taken to comply with the standards, and offers advice about which approaches are more or less useful from PAB's point of view.

What Does Student Achievement Mean?

The term, Student Achievement, is widely used by higher education quality assurance organizations worldwide. In the U.S., Federal Requirement 4.1, specifies:

The institution evaluates success with respect to student achievement consistent with its mission. Criteria may include: enrollment data; retention, graduation, course completion, and job placement rates; state licensing examinations; student portfolios; or other means of demonstrating achievement of goals. (34 CFR §602.16 (a)(1)(i))

Approaches to interpreting this requirement range from the broad, "achievement is the result the successfulness, the extent or ability, the progress in learning educational experiences that the individual indicate in relation with his/her educational learning,"² to the narrow, "the knowledge, skills and abilities that a student has attained as a result of engagement in a particular set of higher education experiences."³ So there is great latitude in interpretation of the amorphous concept of Student Achievement. At the same time, there is preference for direct measures involving assessments of student learning in comparison to indirect measures involving student success as a result of learning or opinions about student learning. There is also preference for measures tied to specific learning objectives rather than those resulting from global or integrative assessments such as course grades.

What Have Planning Programs Done in Response to the Public Information Requirement?

Information provided to meet this criterion has included:

1. Reports of student course grades, program grade point averages, and/ or performance on comprehensive exams;
2. De novo assessments of student learning performed in conjunction with studio presentations, capstone projects, or final term course assignments;
3. Summaries of the learning activities that students must complete while enrolled in the program (internships, portfolios, capstone projects, theses, etc.);
4. Lists of student community activities;
5. Results of student surveys gauging satisfaction and/or mastery;
6. Biographical sketches of selected program graduates as their careers have progressed;
7. Counts of graduates admitted to doctoral programs;
8. Counts of alumni elected or appointed to positions;
9. Results of alumni surveys of knowledge and skills;
10. Results of alumni surveys of satisfaction with the program/program quality; and
11. Results of employer surveys of graduates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

These various forms of information may be categorized as:

Direct: measurements of student knowledge or performance, or

Indirect: assessments of student learning made by third parties, or inferred from student success in the workplace or other professional accomplishments.

Specific: assessments tied to individual learning objectives, or

Integrative or global: assessments pertaining to a wide range of objectives with no clear relation to any specific objective.

¹ Planning Accreditation Board. Standards and Criteria. <https://www.planningaccreditationboard.org/pab-accreditation-standards-and-criteria/>

² Isnian, H.M. Sofyan. Definition of Achievement. <http://hmsofyanisnianspd.blogspot.com/2009/08/definition-of-achievement.html> (accessed February 27, 2015).

³ Eaton, Judith S. 2011. "U.S. Accreditation: Meeting the Challenges of Accountability and Student Achievement," *Evaluation in Higher Education* 5:1 (June): 1-20

Student data that report characteristics of students or graduates, or
Program data that report characteristics of planning education programs.

Information provided also may be standardized against the population size (*e.g.* percentages) or it may be expressed as raw numbers without reference to incidence within the population. Finally, information may be tied to specific graduation class years, may range over a number of years, or may be given without indication of how many years of graduates are involved.

PAB Summary Findings on Reported Measures

While the vast majority of the information provided by schools under the heading of Student Achievement is, in fact, outcomes associated with students in the program, many of the measures provided are weakly tied to student learning outcomes as stated by the Program or suffer from statistical or methodological weaknesses. As a result, for many of the schools, few users can draw meaningful conclusions about education effectiveness from the data given.

Indirect measures are much more commonly used than direct measures. Surveys of satisfaction are common; test results of learning are rare. Some surveys are subject to responder bias. Alumni surveys may address knowledge, skills, and values of graduates, but these are self-assessments and subject to bias.

Employer surveys that focus on graduates' knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to planning practice can be useful in describing student learning and achievement. This is especially true when employers are asked to compare graduates to employer expectations of professional planners at similar points in their careers. These survey questions can be biased by employer expectations being inconsistent with the program's standards, but they do indeed assess graduates knowledge, skills, and dispositions upon completion of the degree program. Unfortunately, the early experience suggests that high response rates in employer surveys are difficult to achieve.

Integrative or global measures are often used rather than specific measures tied to individual learning outcomes. Professional recognition of students or reputation of alumni (*e.g.*, students winning awards, student publications, successful alumni, etc.), do not directly measure students' success in achieving stated learning outcomes associated with professional skills, knowledge, and values. Student awards and publications represent recognition of accomplishment, but the criteria used for giving these awards or publishing work are often unknown, multiple, and not specific enough to demonstrate learning of particular knowledge, skills, or values. Biographical sketches of successful program graduates provide anecdotal descriptions of the accomplishments of a few graduates and their career trajectories, but do not provide robust and comprehensive reviews of all graduates' learning and its impact on their career success.

Program measures are sometimes provided rather than student data. Identifying the types of required theses, portfolios, and capstone experiences in which students are challenged to learn, describes the opportunity provided to students to learn, but does not assess the specific learning and level of achievement of that learning.

Data may often be presented in raw numbers that do not suggest how frequently students or graduates manifest the characteristics. Stating that ten students made presentations to conferences is only meaningful if we know how many students were in the cohort. More troubling perhaps is that such lists often include entries from multiple cohorts, sometimes spanning a decade or more.

PAB Recommendations for Measures of Student Achievement

When direct, specific, student data are provided, they often result from the student learning outcomes assessment plan prepared in order to provide data for student achievement as determined by the program. The Board has been surprised how few schools use data collected for their own assessments of student learning in what they post as public information. A few examples include: rubrics on specific topical areas applied to student portfolios; performance on program comprehensive exams in particular topical areas; assessments of capstone project characteristics prepared by supervisory committee members, or scores on particular exam questions related to specific learning outcomes in a course. These assessments provide important information to the public (and accrediting bodies) and help the program in its quest to continuously improve its educational programs.

In sum, PAB applauds those programs that have developed direct, learning outcome-specific, student performance measures for use as public information. We encourage programs to examine each other's postings in order to find ideas that will lead them to better measures of their own. Finally, we encourage programs to review their own student learning assessment plans in order to find measures that would be appropriate for posting under Public Information.