

Continuous Improvement in Assessment

Illinois State University | University Assessment Services

Purpose

Illinois State University's assessment work uses two complementary processes to support continuous improvement of student learning and academic programs:

- 1. Process for the Review of Academic Assessment Plans (PRAAP)**
- 2. Annual Assessment Update**

Together, these processes connect planning, evidence collection, faculty reflection, action, and follow-up. They help programs document how assessment information is used to strengthen student learning and program effectiveness.

The Shared Continuous Improvement Cycle

Both processes follow the same improvement logic, but they operate at different points in the eight-year assessment and program review cycle. PRAAP focuses on the quality of the assessment plan before program review, while Annual Updates document the ongoing use of assessment evidence in the years between review cycles.

Continuous improvement does not require a change every year. When evidence indicates that current approaches are effective, programs should document what they will continue to monitor and why. Over the full cycle, Annual Updates provide a record of implementation and learning, while the PRAAP and program review years create a two-year window for deeper plan review, reflection, and program-level evaluation.

Guiding Principles and Philosophy

Illinois State University's assessment processes are designed to support meaningful, sustainable improvement. The goal is not to judge programs from the outside or rank the quality of their results. Instead, PRAAP and the Annual Assessment Update help confirm that each program has a thoughtful process for asking good questions about student learning, reviewing appropriate evidence, engaging the people who know the program best, and using what is learned to guide decisions over time.

This philosophy rests on several shared values: program ownership, improvement over compliance, process over judgment, transparency, sustainability, simplicity, and useful documentation. These values are reinforced not only through the language of the forms and review processes, but also through the design of the assessment management system being built in SharePoint.

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Principle	What it means	In action
Program ownership	Programs are responsible for interpreting their own assessment information because faculty and program experts understand the program context best.	PRAAP and Annual Updates ask programs to explain their processes rather than asking external reviewers to judge whether results are good or bad.
Improvement	Assessment should help programs learn and improve, not simply complete a reporting requirement.	The forms emphasize what was learned, what was discussed, what decisions followed, and what will be monitored next, keeping attention on use of evidence rather than completion alone.
Process over external judgment	The central question is whether a meaningful assessment process is in place and being used. Judgment about quality and learning is made by appropriate program people.	Programs are not required to submit results. The process asks whether the program has clear outcomes, appropriate evidence, faculty review, decision-making structures, and a realistic timeline for ongoing improvement.
Simplicity & reducing cognitive load	Assessment processes should be clear, manageable, and easy for programs to understand and complete. The goal is to reduce cognitive load so programs can focus on meaningful assessment work rather than navigating unnecessary complexity.	The system uses shared forms, centralized program and cycle data, consistent due-date logic, and automated workflow tracking so programs receive clearer expectations and fewer separate requests. Annual Updates are also paused during the PRAAP and program review years to avoid duplicative reporting.
Sustainability	Assessment should be manageable enough to continue across years and leadership changes.	The SharePoint system supports a single structure for program inventory, due-date logic, submissions, workflow status, reviewer assignments, reminders, and reporting so the work is easier to maintain over time.
Consistency	Programs should understand when they are expected to submit, what is being asked, and why.	The system distinguishes annual update years, PRAAP years, and program review years, helping UAS communicate expectations consistently and avoid asking for Annual Updates during the two-year review window.
Useful documentation	Documentation should create a helpful record of improvement and decision making.	Annual Updates create a year-to-year record of evidence, discussion, action, and monitoring, while PRAAP creates a periodic checkpoint on the design and usefulness of the assessment plan. The entire history is stored in sharepoint documents.

Process 1: PRAAP

Purpose

PRAAP reviews the quality and usefulness of an academic program's assessment plan as part of the eight-year program review cycle. Assessment plans are submitted through PRAAP once every eight years, typically in the year before formal program review. ISU

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does not ask programs to submit assessment results for PRAAP (although programs are free to do so). Instead, the process focuses on whether the program has a credible, sustainable process for assessing student learning, reviewing evidence, making decisions, and improving over time.

Questions

- ☐ Are student learning outcomes specific, measurable, discipline-appropriate, and aligned with the curriculum and program goals?
- ☐ Does the plan use appropriate direct evidence of student learning, such as exams, projects, performances, clinical evaluations, portfolios, or capstone work?
- ☐ Does the plan include relevant indirect evidence and stakeholder perspectives, such as surveys, alumni, employers, supervisors, advisory boards, or professional standards?
- ☐ Are measures aligned to outcomes and collected at meaningful points across the curriculum?
- ☐ Are faculty and appropriate leaders involved in reviewing and interpreting evidence?
- ☐ Does the plan specify how results inform decisions, implementation, and future monitoring?
- ☐ Does the plan include a realistic timeline for gathering evidence, reviewing results, and making improvements?

Typical PRAAP outputs

- ☐ Feedback on the strengths and areas for development in the assessment plan
- ☐ Recommendations for refining outcomes, measures, stakeholder involvement, responsibilities, timelines, or use-of-results processes
- ☐ A clearer roadmap for the program's continuing assessment work
- ☐ Documentation for program review

PRAAP's contribution to improvement

PRAAP strengthens the **design and use of the assessment process**. It is not intended to judge whether a program's results are good or bad. That judgment rests with the academic program, especially the faculty and program experts who understand the curriculum, students, disciplinary expectations, and professional context best. PRAAP is intended to confirm that a meaningful process is in place and that programs are using that process to support ongoing improvement.

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Process 2: Annual Assessment Update

Purpose

The Annual Assessment Update documents the assessment work completed during the year. Programs submit updates annually except during the two-year program review window: the PRAAP year, when the assessment plan is submitted and reviewed, and the formal program review year. The update focuses on what information was gathered, how it was reviewed, what was learned, and what actions or monitoring will follow.

Elements

Student learning information gathered

- ☐ Types of direct and indirect evidence collected
- ☐ Outcomes, courses, assignments, experiences, or indicators examined
- ☐ Stakeholders who contributed information

Review and discussion

- ☐ Who participated, including faculty, program coordinators, chairs, staff, students, or external stakeholders
- ☐ Where the discussion occurred, such as committee meetings, faculty meetings, retreats, or advisory-board meetings
- ☐ Tools used to guide review, such as rubrics, content analyses, dashboards, reports, course recommendation forms, or other structured processes

Use of results

- ☐ Revisions considered, developed, or implemented
- ☐ Changes to curriculum, teaching, assignments, rubrics, data collection, support systems, or assessment processes
- ☐ Monitoring plans when changes are not needed or are still being implemented

Annual Update's contribution to improvement

The Annual Assessment Update demonstrates **implementation and learning from practice**. Like PRAAP, it is intended to support improvement rather than judgment. That interpretation rests with the academic program, especially the faculty and program experts who understand the curriculum, students, disciplinary expectations, and professional context best. The purpose is to document that assessment work is happening, that evidence is being reviewed by the appropriate people, and that the program is using what it learns to make decisions or continue monitoring over time.

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How the Processes Work Together

PRAAP	Annual Assessment Update
Reviews the quality of the assessment plan and process design.	Documents assessment activity, findings, actions, and monitoring during the year.
Primarily asks, “Do we have an appropriate plan for assessing and improving student learning?”	Primarily asks, “What did we learn and what will we monitor?”
Assessment plans are submitted through PRAAP once every eight years, typically in the year before formal program review.	Annual Updates are submitted every year except during the PRAAP year and the formal program review year.
Helps programs establish or refine outcomes, measures, responsibilities, and timelines.	Helps programs demonstrate that the plan is being enacted and used.

The processes should inform one another. Annual Update findings may reveal that a program needs to revise its assessment plan, measures, or timeline. PRAAP feedback may identify improvements that a program then implements and documents through later Annual Updates.

Sample Eight-Year Cycle for a Program

The example below shows how the cycle would work for a sample academic program. The specific years would vary by program, but the pattern remains the same: Annual Updates are submitted in regular assessment years, PRAAP occurs in the year before program review, and Annual Updates pause during the PRAAP and program review years.

Cycle year	Example academic year	Expected submission or activity	Purpose
Year 1	2026–2027	Annual Assessment Update	Document evidence collected, faculty review, actions, and monitoring from regular assessment activity.
Year 2	2027–2028		
Year 3	2028–2029		
Year 4	2029–2030		
Year 5	2030–2031		

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Year 6	2031-2032		
Year 7	2032–2033	PRAAP assessment plan submission	Review and refine the program's assessment plan in the year before formal program review.
Year 8	2033–2034	Program review year; no Annual Assessment Update	Use the broader program review process for reflection, evaluation, and planning.
Next cycle Year 1	2034–2035	Annual Assessment Update resumes	Document evidence collected, faculty review, actions, and monitoring from regular assessment activity

Assessment Eco-System

The submission, review, workflow, communication, and reporting processes are supported by an assessment management system being built in the University Assessment Services SharePoint site. This system is designed to provide a single operational structure for program inventory data, submission tracking, reviewer assignments, workflow status, due-date logic, reminders, review records, and reporting.

The system supports the cycle rules described above by distinguishing between annual update years, PRAAP years, and program review years. This helps University Assessment Services manage which programs are expected to submit an Annual Assessment Update, which programs are expected to submit an assessment plan through PRAAP, and which programs are temporarily excluded from annual update collection because they are in the two-year program review window.

Roles and Responsibilities

Programs

Programs lead the work by:

- ☐ Maintaining a current assessment plan
- ☐ Collecting meaningful evidence of student learning
- ☐ Engaging faculty and relevant stakeholders in interpretation
- ☐ Making evidence-informed decisions

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- ☐ Documenting implemented changes, planned actions, or continued monitoring

Assessment Leadership Team and reviewers

Assessment leaders and reviewers support quality and consistency by:

- ☐ Providing feedback on assessment plans and annual updates
- ☐ Identifying strengths, improvement opportunities, and good practices
- ☐ Helping programs connect evidence, interpretation, action, and follow-up
- ☐ Supporting alignment across program review, annual reporting, accreditation, and institutional learning

University Assessment Services

University Assessment Services provides infrastructure, guidance, communication, review support, documentation, and reporting tools that make assessment work easier to sustain and use.

Good Practices for Both Processes

- ☐ Use multiple, relevant sources of evidence rather than relying on a single measure.
- ☐ Include direct evidence of student learning and appropriate indirect evidence.
- ☐ Engage faculty in regular discussion of results.
- ☐ Involve stakeholders when their perspectives can clarify student learning, post-graduation outcomes, or program relevance.
- ☐ Explain how evidence is connected to stated learning outcomes.
- ☐ Describe the reasoning that led from findings to action or monitoring.
- ☐ Track whether implemented changes have their intended effects.
- ☐ Keep assessment manageable, meaningful, and integrated with existing program work.

Conclusion

PRAAP and the Annual Assessment Update are the two primary continuous-improvement processes for assessment. PRAAP ensures that programs have strong plans; the Annual Assessment Update demonstrates that programs are using those plans to learn from evidence and improve. Together, they create a documented, sustainable cycle of assessment and continuous improvement.