

Introduction

Because we believe that students must ultimately activate their own inherent capacities for gaining knowledge and understanding, we entrust students with much of the responsibility for their own learning. Small, seminar-style classes provide ample opportunities for every student to participate in discussion and give professors many opportunities to observe and interact with students. Professors also have regular meetings and many other occasions for informal discussions with other professors about instruction matters and student progress. Professors use this feedback to inform their teaching and to modify instruction as needed throughout the year.

In addition, each student's professors get together with the student once a semester for a student conference, at which each professor discusses with the student his or her progress in learning. The professor highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the student's intellectual skills, and invites the student to reflect and respond. A summary report of each student conference is kept with the student's academic file.

Finally, each year, at least one monthly faculty meeting is devoted to a discussion of proposals for revising and improving the academic programs. This discussion is based on experience gained and evidence gathered throughout the year, including professors' close knowledge of student progress, examples of student work, reports from student conferences, and ideas from numerous informal and formal discussions held throughout the year.

Therefore, assessment is an ongoing process at DRBU and embedded in many of DRBU's core instructional activities as described above. This document describes the assessment processes at DRBU.

Student Learning Outcomes

Tracing the Learning Outcomes to the Mission

The University's Mission states that:

Dharma Realm Buddhist University is a community dedicated to liberal education in the broad Buddhist tradition—a tradition characterized by knowledge in the arts and sciences, self-cultivation, and the pursuit of wisdom. Its pedagogical aim is thus twofold: to convey knowledge and to activate an intrinsic wisdom possessed by all individuals. Developing this inherent capacity requires an orientation toward learning that is dialogical, interactive, probing, and deeply self-reflective. Such education makes one free in the deepest sense and opens the opportunity to pursue the highest goals of human existence.

Accordingly, conveying knowledge and activating an intrinsic capacity are the primary educational aims of the University. "Inherent capacity" includes various skills for lifelong learning and the ability to communicate candidly and skillfully, and "knowledge" refers to methods for and insights into addressing abiding questions in the areas of human nature, the workings of causality, and the complex interconnections between the personal, the social, and the natural worlds. Therefore, DRBU's three institutional learning outcomes (ILOs) are:

- ILO 1: A liberally educated person will develop and practice skills for lifelong learning, which encompass sound judgment; the flexibility to constantly assess evolving internal and external conditions; and accordingly, the ability to reconsider, adjust, alter, or even abandon his or her course or stance.
- ILO 2: A liberally educated person will appreciate the methods of inquiry and insights suggested by the primary texts, particularly in the study of human nature, the workings of causality, and the complex interconnections between the personal, the social, and the natural world.
- ILO 3: A liberally educated person will communicate in a clear, nuanced, candid, and skillful manner.

Each of DRBU's programs has developed program-level student learning outcomes appropriate for its respective degree level. These program learning outcomes (PLOs) and their associated rubrics provide markers for DRBU's assessment activities. They are listed in Table 1 below. Professors are responsible for setting the "standards of performance" required for graduation from both the MA and the BA programs. For the MA program, a student's work from the time period close to graduation should provide sufficient evidence to score mostly "threes" ("Meets Expectations") across all four PLOs' rubrics. For the BA program, all outcomes are assessed as degree outcomes. In spring 2020, the committee of senior essay advisors agreed on a holistic approach to the standards of performance required for graduation in the BA program. Sampling students' work from the time period close to graduation should provide sufficient evidence to score at least "twos" out of four across all nine PLOs' rubrics—meeting the minimum requirements to graduate. Ideally, they should score mostly "threes" ("Meets Expectations") at the point close to graduation.

Curriculum Maps

The programs' curricular strands should be seen not as stand-alone modules each advancing a compartmentalized area of outcomes, but as intertwined threads (or "strands") of a tightly woven fabric that results in a well-rounded and requisite set of intellectual skills. Therefore, each of DRBU's programs has a mandatory curriculum. The exercise of plotting a curriculum map for each of DRBU's programs, then, is not about dividing up the outcomes and assigning ownership to specialized academic domains, but rather a best attempt by professors to identify areas suitable for sampling student work to reveal progress and potential issues in learning and instruction.

As a whole, the curriculum map promotes a collaborative effort that is aligned with the integrated nature of the programs. To illustrate the intertwined nature of strands, the curriculum map is created in a heat map fashion. In principle, all strands work in concert to promote all student learning outcomes. In practice, the heat maps of the two degree program represent the teaching faculty's best understanding on where the outcomes are most manifest. The curriculum maps for the BA and MA programs are shown below in tables 2 and 3.

Table 1. DRBU Student Learning Outcomes

| DRBU Institutional Goal | BA in Liberal Arts Program Learning Outcomes | MA in Buddhist Classics Program Learning Outcomes |
|--|--|--|
| <p>1. A liberally educated person will develop and practice skills for lifelong learning, which encompass sound judgment; the flexibility to constantly assess evolving internal and external conditions; and, accordingly, the ability to reconsider, adjust, alter, or even abandon his or her course or stance.</p> | <p>1. Demonstrate ethical awareness. 2. Cultivate a flexibility of mind to adapt to evolving conditions. 3. Demonstrate critical thinking skills. 4. Exercise quantitative reasoning skills.</p> | <p>1. Exercise ethical sensibility.</p> |
| <p>2. A liberally educated person will appreciate the methods of inquiry and insights suggested by the primary texts, particularly in the study of human nature, the workings of causality, and the complex interconnections between the personal, the social, and the natural world.</p> | <p>5. Appreciate and defend different systems of thought as conveyed within the primary texts in the curriculum 6. Demonstrate fluency in the use of tools and methods of inquiry from different traditions and disciplines presented in the curriculum.</p> | <p>2. Assess and articulate major Buddhist methods and practices. 3. Explain insights gained from close reading of texts and their implications for the personal, the social, and the natural worlds.</p> |
| <p>3. A liberally educated person will communicate in a clear, nuanced, candid, and skillful manner.</p> | <p>7. Practice thoughtful and probing dialogue combined with close listening, to assess the context and the character of the audience. 8. Compose coherent arguments and narrative. 9. Evaluate and responsibly use and share information resources.</p> | <p>4. Create sustained, coherent expositions and reflections for both general and specialized audiences.</p> |

Table 2. Curriculum Map for BA in Liberal Arts

| Strand | PLO 1 | PLO 2 | PLO 3 | PLO 4 | PLO 5 | PLO 6 | PLO 7 | PLO 8 | PLO 9 |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Buddhist | | | | | | | | | |
| Indian | | | | | | | | | |
| Chinese | | | | | | | | | |
| Western | | | | | | | | | |
| Rhetoric | | | | | | | | | |
| Language | | | | | | | | | |
| Math | | | | | | | | | |
| Science | | | | | | | | | |
| Music | | | | | | | | | |
| Capstone | | | | | | | | | |

Table 3. Curriculum Map for MA in Buddhist Classics

| Course | Semester | PLO 1 | PLO 2 | PLO 3 | PLO 4 |
|---|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Buddhist Classics 1: The Platform Sūtra | 1st | | | | |
| Buddhist Classics 2: Pāli/Theravāda Texts | 1st | | | | |
| Buddhist Classics 3: Śāstra 1 | 2nd | | | | |
| Buddhist Classics 4: Śāstra 2 | 3rd | | | | |
| Buddhist Classics 5: Śūraṅgama Sūtra | 3rd | | | | |
| Buddhist Classics 6: Lotus Sūtra | 4th | | | | |
| Buddhist Classics 7: Avataṃsaka Sūtra | 4th | | | | |
| Buddhist Hermeneutics 1 | 2nd | | | | |
| Buddhist Hermeneutics 2 | 3rd | | | | |
| Buddhist Hermeneutics 3 | 4th | | | | |
| Comparative Hermeneutics 1 | 1st | | | | |
| Comparative Hermeneutics 2 | 2nd | | | | |
| Language 1 | 1st | | | | |
| Language 2 | 2nd | | | | |

Assessment Cycles

Formal assessment activities happen regularly every year. Every semester, the teaching faculty gather for at least one assessment workshop to look at sample papers from either the BA or MA program. In addition, the senior essays and oral examinations of all seniors are assessed every spring. Other formats of assessment such as class observations also happen periodically. Table 4 below shows what a sample annual assessment cycle looks like. Assessment is inextricably linked to academic program review at DRBU, and therefore it shares the same five-year cycle as the program review. The Dean of Academics and the Instruction Committee delegate the responsibility of coordinating the academic program review and outcome assessment to the Program Review Committee. The aims are that all student learning outcomes are assessed and all curricular strands reviewed over the five-year cycle. Table 5 below shows a sample assessment cycle for reviewing outcomes and curricular strands within the five-year assessment and program review cycle.

Table 4. Sample Annual Assessment Cycle

| Frequency | Program | Student work | PLOs (examples) | Students to assess | Evaluator |
|--|----------------|--|--|--|---|
| Once every fall | MA | Buddhist Hermeneutics III and/or Buddhist Classics III/IV/VI | BH III: PLOs 1-4 | A sample from the most recent graduating class | A group of teaching faculty members |
| Once every spring | BA | Buddhist Classics IV & Indian Classics III | BC IV: PLOs 1, 5, 6, 8 IC III: PLOs 1, 2, 5 | A sample from the most recent graduating class | A group of teaching faculty members |
| Once every spring | BA | Senior Essay & Oral Examination | PLOs 3, 7, 8, 9 | All students of the current senior class | Thesis advisor and second reader |
| Once every fall/spring when Math III is offered | BA | Math III class observation | PLO 4 & PLO 7 – shared inquiry | All students | Course instructor(s) and an external observer |

Table 5. Sample Five-year Strand Assessment Cycle

| Year | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| BA Strands | Rhetoric & Writing; Capstone | Western Classics | Natural Science | Language; Music | Chinese Classics |
| MA Strands | | Comparative Hermeneutics | | Language | |

Assessment Process and Methodology

DRBU's assessment process is designed to dovetail with and provide additional support to ongoing instructional activities that already emphasize student engagement, providing regular feedback to students and opportunities for collaboration among professors to make adjustments in our programs. The Program Review Committee is delegated the oversight of the outcome assessment process by the Dean of Academics and the Instruction Committee. All professors are required to participate in regular assessment activities.

DRBU's assessment activities include 1) planning and preparation, 2) gathering and compiling evidence of learning, 3) analyzing and evaluating progress in advancing student learning outcomes based on evidence gathered, 4) proposing and implementing adjustments to programs based on results of analyses and evaluation, and 5) closing the loop.

1. **Planning and preparation** takes place at various times during the school year and includes activities such as reviewing changes to the program, if any, from the previous school year; preparing professors for assessment activities for the year; developing and revising rubrics for learning outcomes; and scheduling assessment-related meetings, including assessment-related discussions during monthly faculty meetings.
2. **Gathering and compiling evidence of learning** starts with identifying the type of evidence to be gathered for the year. DRBU employs both direct and indirect methods of assessment. Types of evidence include:
 - a. **Student conference (indirect):** The student conference is a comprehensive assessment that takes place every semester in both the MA and the BA programs. The student and all of his or her professors for the year have a dialogue to discuss the student's progress and the strengths and weaknesses of his or her intellectual skills as they relate to the program learning outcomes. Organized as a conversation, in the first conferences it is inevitable that assessment will be more driven by the professors. Over time, however, students will be expected to take more initiative in presenting assessment of their own progress in learning.

Notes from each student conference are compiled and organized into a summary report to become part of the student's file. The Office of Academic Affairs aggregates these summary reports for assessment purposes.

This form of evidence has been found to be most useful to students and professors. A form of qualitative data, conference session reports provide strong evidence of student achievement of program learning outcomes, primarily verbal testimonies from students and professors.

- b. **Student work (direct):** In addition to exploring classical primary texts through close reading and in-depth discussions in class, students further engage with the texts through completing assignments and exams in written and oral forms. The IR Office coordinates the collection of student work for assessment purposes. Student work can include papers, oral exams, class observations, and laboratory reports. While this document does not enumerate and describe all possible types of student work at DRBU, it will highlight several significant works that DRBU's assessment process draws heavily upon:
 - i. **Focus strand essays:** Both MA and BA students tackle four focus strand essays during their study at DRBU. A focus strand essay is intended to be a serious and thoughtful examination of a particular question and its significance to the study of classical primary texts. Based on class readings, each student chooses a topic, reflects upon its wider implications, and explores its deeper meaning in relation to the text. The essay is not intended to be a work of specialized research, but rather an exercise in critical thinking and careful observation based on a close reading of the texts. The four focus strands that students write these essays for are Western Classics, Indian Classics, Chinese Classics, and Buddhist Classics for the BA program; and Buddhist Classics (two), Comparative Hermeneutics, and Buddhist Hermeneutics for the MA program.

Table 6

| Sample Strand Paper Assignments Across Classic Strands. | |
|--|--------------------|
| Year | BA Strand |
| Fall 1 st Year | Rhetoric & Writing |
| Spring 1 st Year | Rhetoric & Writing |
| Fall 2 nd Year | Indian |
| Spring 2 nd Year | Indian/ Western |
| Fall 3 rd Year | Buddhist |
| Spring 3 rd Year | Chinese |
| Senior | Senior Essay |

| Year | MA Strand |
|---------------------------|-------------------|
| Fall 1 st Year | Buddhist Classics |

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Spring 1 st Year | Comparative Hermeneutics |
| Fall 2 nd Year | Buddhist Hermeneutics |
| Spring 2 nd Year | Buddhist Classics |

- ii. **Senior essays and oral examinations:** Seniors in the BA program are required to present a final essay in the spring semester of their fourth year. This essay is a substantial and sustained intellectual endeavor that epitomizes the culmination of a student’s education at DRBU. The process of writing the senior essay begins in the fall of senior year, when a student submits a senior essay proposal describing the topic and the organization of the essay, as well as the primary text(s) to be used. Students are then assigned a senior essay advisor with whom they are encouraged to meet frequently to review their progress. Students must also prepare for an oral examination focusing on their senior essay. Both the senior essay and the oral examination must be successfully completed before graduation.
 - iii. **Class observations:** Besides student papers and oral exams, class observations have been proven to be another useful tool of assessment, particularly for some strands such as Math and Music, and some PLOs such as Oral Communication-Shared Inquiry. When using class observation as an assessment tool, an “external” evaluator, usually someone from the IR Office or the teaching faculty would observe a class, take notes, and score the rubrics after the class. The same rubrics are also given to the course instructor(s) to score based on student performance during this entire semester. Afterwards, the external evaluator would have a debrief and calibration meeting with the instructors, in which they exchange their observations and scoring. In addition, instructors would share more information and reflections on student performance, instruction, and the rubrics.
3. **Analyzing evidence** of student learning and evaluating the effectiveness of instruction are integral parts of DRBU’s core instructional activities. This takes place during regular faculty meetings as well as during informal conversations among professors. In addition, professors systematically analyze each student’s body of work over the course of that semester, during the individual student conferences.

At the beginning of each semester, a majority group of teaching faculty members gathers for an assessment workshop to analyze the evidence gathered by the IR Office. They read the sample papers assigned to them and score them on rubrics ahead of time. Tasks carried out during these assessment workshops may include calibration between readers who read the same paper, faculty sharing feedback and comments on student performance, the rubrics, and instructions and how to continue improving them. IR staff take notes and draft an assessment report summarizing the proceedings, including key

findings and recommendations. This report is circulated among the teaching faculty and is a key document for formal aspects of the final type of assessment activities—**proposing and implementing adjustments to programs**.

4. Informally, professors make minor adjustments to their teaching throughout the school year, in response to student needs observed in their dynamic interactions with students. Formally, the semesterly assessment workshop provides a forum for professors to deliberate on issues discovered through the assessment process and to propose changes and initiatives so as to address these issues. Professors are solely responsible for revision of the programs, and particularly those of the curriculum. DRBU's Faculty Governance Manual outlines the process by which professors work together to revise the curriculum.

During the assessment workshops, professors discuss the findings from the report and adopt proposals on action items. The Program Review Committee documents these action items and works with the Dean of Academics and the Instruction Committee to determine priorities and resource planning and allocation. A key criterion for prioritizing action items is whether a proposal can improve the effectiveness of instruction in an area highlighted by the assessment process. The findings, recommendations, and action plans are also documented for the purpose of academic program review.

5. **Closing the loop.** The Dean of Academics, through the Office of Academic Affairs, is in charge of implementing program changes and initiatives. The Program Review Committee documents findings, recommendations, and action items and monitors the progress of implementation and study of the actions' effects. The committee reports progress on implementation at assessment workshops and during program review self-study. Another important aspect of closing the loop is DRBU's dedication to continuously refining assessment methodology based on the observations and feedback from every assessment activity.

Current Assessment Practices (2019-2022)

This section describes current assessment practices. The IR Office will keep this section updated as DRBU implements new practices or makes adjustments to current practices.

Sampling

For the September 2022 assessment on MA PLOs, the IR Office selected a sample of student work from two graduated MA cohorts (classes of 2019 and 2022). A stratified sample of three students displaying varying writing abilities in their first semester was chosen to make sure the sample covers a full range of ability levels. For each student, the strand paper of their last semester was chosen, close to their point of graduation.

Readers and Calibration

In 2017, the Program Review Committee instituted a practice wherein a group of professors read and score rubrics on student work. Different professors rotated to serve on this assessment committee voluntarily. Each reader was assigned to read three to six student

papers. Starting from 2019, instead of using an assessment committee composed of volunteers, the IR Office refined the assessment design so that the workload can be evenly distributed among 12 members from the teaching faculty and each only needs to read one student paper. This change has greatly reduced individual workload compared to the Assessment Committee model, which leads to a wider and more enthusiastic participation. After individual reading and rubrics scoring, all the readers gather at an assessment workshop to share their findings and feedback on instruction and instruments. The IR Office documents all the feedback and comments and drafts an assessment report including a list of suggestions from the readers. The report is then shared with the teaching faculty, who discuss and make decisions on adoption of the findings and suggestions. After the meeting, the IR Office finalizes the assessment report.

Rubrics for Program Learning Outcomes

In response to the feedback from the last program review, the IR Office worked with members of the teaching faculty to revise all the existing rubrics for the BA PLOs and MA PLOs. During the revision process, the working group consulted the university’s mission and vision, the institutional learning outcomes, and the VALUE rubrics (AAC&U). Since completing these major revisions, the IR Office has also been refining the rubrics continuously by incorporating feedback from assessment activities.

Indirect Assessment Methods

The main indirect assessment method that DRBU has used thus far is the student conference, which has provided invaluable feedback with regard to student learning. Since 2016, DRBU also began to systematically use student and teaching faculty surveys as indirect assessment methods. This table shows the list of surveys conducted regularly. DRBU will work to improve its ability to incorporate both direct and indirect assessment methods in informing decisions on changes related to instruction and learning.

Table 7. List of Surveys

| Category | Assessment activity | Frequency/ Year completed |
|-----------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| Student surveys | Annual Student Survey (including the dorm living experience, graduate exit survey, questions on student services) | Every spring semester |
| | Contemplative Exercise Immersion Feedback Survey | Every semester |
| | Course Evaluations | Every semester |
| Other | Teaching Faculty Survey | 2017; 2022 |

| | | |
|--|--|------|
| | Strategic Planning Community Feedback Survey | 2022 |
|--|--|------|