Operational Assessment Plan

EXCELSIOR COLLEGE®

WRITTEN BY THE OPERATIONAL ASSESSMENT TASKFORCE

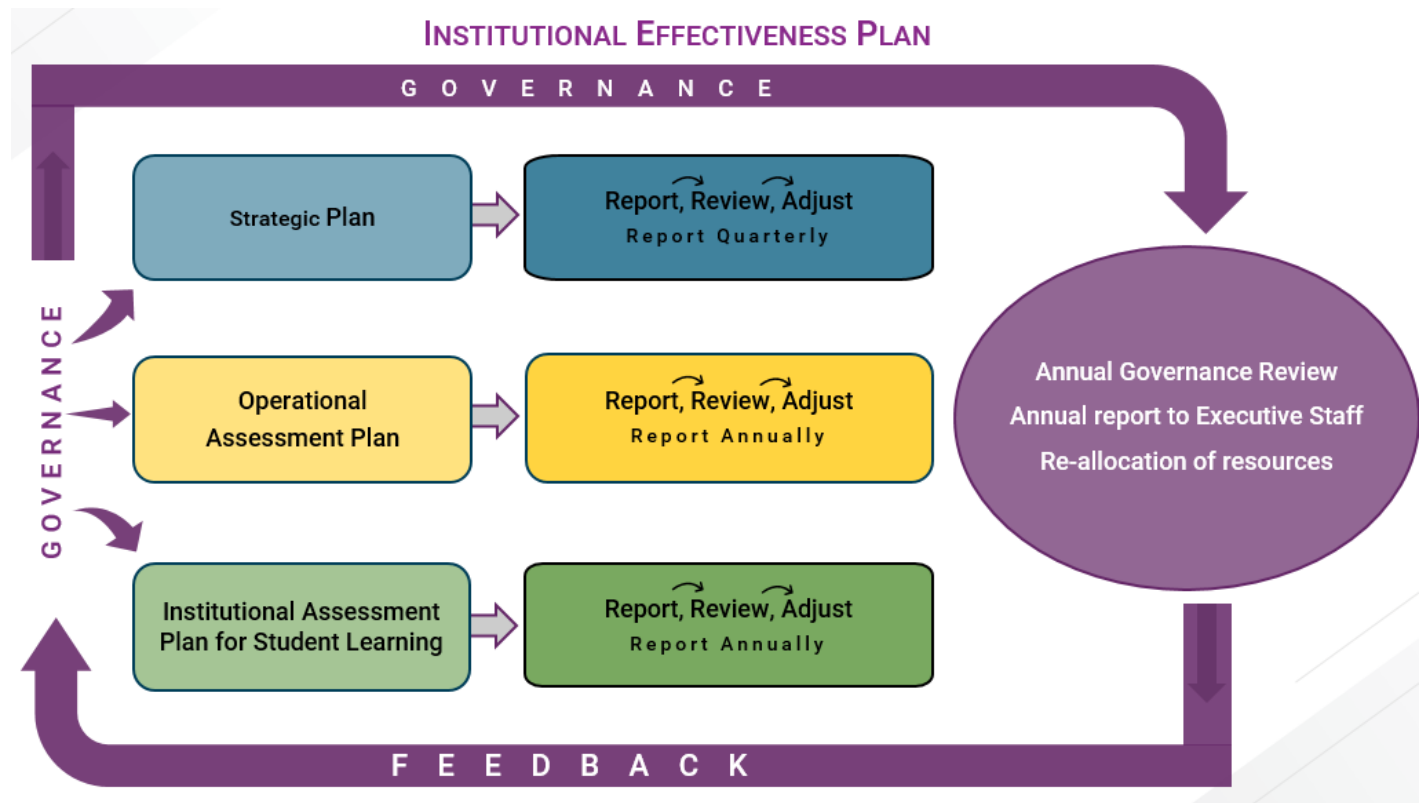Andre Foisy, Executive Director, Institutional Outcomes Assessment

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BACKGROUND

A set of guiding principles, Excelsior CARES, sets the standard by which college employees hold themselves accountable and provides a framework for the delivery of student services. To ensure that resources, programs, and services are invested in ways that help students receive a high-quality education and excellent service, the College created the Institutional Effectiveness Plan (IEP), a college-wide framework for effectiveness (see figure below). Three key plans fall under the umbrella of the IEP: 1) the Strategic Plan; 2) the Operational Assessment Plan (OAP); and 3) the Institutional Assessment Plan for Student Learning (IAPSL). The Strategic Plan charts a broad course for the future success of the institution, while the OAP articulates a process for improving the effectiveness of student services, academic, and operational units and the IAPSL describes a systematic process for improving academic programs and student learning.

Operational Assessment Plan

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide the academic, administrative, and academic support units with a framework for developing a continuous improvement process for operations within each unit. This plan includes tools, information, and practical examples to assist unit members in engaging in an assessment process.

Operational Effectiveness and Assessment—Defined

Operational effectiveness addresses how well the institution is utilizing its resources to achieve its mission. Operational assessment planning asks the basic question, "How effectively are our operational services functioning?"

Units can become more effective through engaging in assessment, an ongoing and systematic process of gathering, analyzing, and using information about the core functions of a unit to continually improve processes and performance. Operational assessment is an outcomes-oriented process that is supported by data-informed decision-making. Institutions of higher education are increasingly engaging in assessment processes within operational, administrative, and student support units (Guinn, 2018; Nichols & Nichols, 2000). James Nichols (2008) posits four main purposes for operational units to engage in assessment:

1. **To improve:** The assessment process provides feedback to determine how the operational unit can be improved.
2. **To inform:** The assessment process informs department heads and other decision-makers of the unit's contributions to the College's mission.
3. **To prove:** The assessment process encapsulates and demonstrate what the operational unit is accomplishing to students, faculty, staff and other stakeholders.
4. **To support:** The assessment process provides support for campus decision-making activities such as unit review, strategic planning, budgeting as well as external accountability activities such as accreditation.

Conducted effectively, this process can inform strategic decision-making, assist in resource allocation, and provide stakeholders with a sense of what is done well, and what can be improved. Assessment also provides evidence to stakeholders that units are systematically working to improve their quality.

In 2015, Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) accreditation standards were revised to emphasize assessment of College operations, student learning, and the student experience to facilitate demonstration of continuous improvement in each area. The new standards emphasize the importance of assessment processes in every standard. The MSCHE standard most closely aligned with operational assessment is Standard VI (Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement), which states:

> The institution's planning processes, resources, and structures are aligned with each other and are sufficient to fulfill its mission and goals, to continuously assess and improve its programs and services, and to respond effectively to opportunities and challenges.

To facilitate continuous improvement in operations and the student experience, Excelsior College participates in operational assessment for all units.

Operational Assessment at Excelsior

Excelsior College is committed to fostering an environment which supports student learning and high-quality support. To provide excellence, our operational, administrative, and academic support units work to refine functions through a continuous improvement process. Excelsior College leaders support and encourage all operational units to participate in the assessment process. By participating in this process, information about unit outcomes can be used to improve services.

To be successful, the process must be owned by staff members. Each person should understand how the outcomes of their unit relate to their unit's mission, to the College's mission, and to the goals of the College's strategic plan.

This process is not tied to performance evaluation. For more information on the differences between operational assessment, risk assessment, strategic planning, and performance evaluation, see Appendix A.

Operational assessment is conducted each year with help from the Outcomes Assessment unit.

Timeline

The operational unit calendar is synced with the fiscal year calendar (July 1-June 30). Assessment plans are prepared at the start of the fiscal year and findings and analysis are reported at the conclusion of the year. See Appendix C for the implementation timeline by unit.

Institutional Support for Assessment

The Outcomes Assessment (OA) unit provides guidance, consultation, training, and support to operational units in conducting meaningful assessment.

Steps in the Operational Assessment Process

At Excelsior, there are five steps in the operational assessment cycle: 1) defining the unit mission and vision; 2) developing and/or revising outcomes; 3) identifying measures and targets; 4) collecting and analyzing data; and 5) reporting findings (see figure below).

Steps in the systematic process are described in detail below.

Preplanning: Organize for Assessment

Operational unit leaders should identify at least one key staff member to help facilitate the assessment process. It is critical that staff members throughout a unit assume some responsibility for engaging in the process.

Step 1: Defining the Unit Mission

Operational assessment begins with the definition of a mission statement, a concise description of the purpose of the unit that is aligned with the institutional mission. Once created, mission statements typically only change when a unit experiences a significant change in focus.

Example 1: Office of Admissions
The Office of Admissions recruits, admits, and encourages the enrollment of adult students by providing accurate, courteous, professional, and personalized service to potential students.

Example 2: Office of Analytics and Decision Support
The office of Analytics and Decision Support provides information to support compliance, decision making, planning, assessment, and continuous quality improvement for Excelsior College.

Example 3: Office of the Registrar
The Office of the Registrar supports instructional and student progress across the College by providing quality services to students, faculty program directors, academic and operational units, alumni, and the public.

Example 4: Fiscal Office
The mission of the Fiscal Office is to maintain financial integrity, transparency, and operational efficiency of the College by providing timely and accurate accounting, budgeting, procurement, treasury management, and reporting to assist staff, leadership and trustees in making data-driven decisions and meeting their fiduciary responsibilities.

Step 2: Developing and/or Revising Outcomes

Outcomes are specific, measurable, statements that can be used to gauge progress towards the overall mission of the unit. Outcomes are related to the "big picture" and are focused on mission-critical work; between 3-5 outcomes per unit are ideal.

When creating and reviewing outcomes, consider the following:

- Is it aligned with the unit's mission statement?
- Will achieving the outcome help you accomplish your mission?
- Is it important to management?
- Does it reflect key results of the unit's work?
- Is it possible to collect accurate and reliable data for the outcome, given existing resources?
- Can it be used to identify areas to improve?
- Can it be measured in more than one way?

A general formula can be used when writing operational outcomes.

Outcome = Target/subject + verb/action

The target/subject is typically the beneficiary or "customer" of the service a unit provides.

Example 1: Outcomes Assessment, Analytics and Decision Support Office

➢ Faculty program directors use assessment processes to continuously improve academic programs.

Example 2: Admissions Office

➢ Prospective students will receive accurate, courteous, professional, and personalized service.

Example 3: Office of the Registrar

➢ Students and alumni will receive timely and accurate service in the areas of graduation processing, transcript evaluation, academic record maintenance and transcript production.

Example 4: Career Services, Advocacy & Engagement

➢ Students create a plan to achieve career growth, career change, and further education.

Example 5: Finance
➢ Provide the College with financial strategy, policy, and planning for its strategic objectives.

Example 6: Student Accessibility and Title IX Office

➢ Provide ongoing training and support to faculty, staff, students regarding accessibility services and Title IX practices/issues of compliance.

Step 3: Identifying Assessment Measures and Targets

Unit assessment leaders should select at least one measure for each outcome. Measures should be compatible with each outcome and provide information about the extent to which an outcome is being achieved and where improvements can be made.

There are two types of measures, direct and indirect.

Direct Measures

Direct measures are observable behaviors that align with the outcome. For operational units, direct measures might include quantitative reports on accuracy and timeliness of certain functions, stakeholder participation numbers and percentages, completion of service, or productivity of service.

Example outcomes and direct measures:

Example 1: Admissions Office

Outcome: Prospective students will receive accurate, courteous, professional, and personalized service.

Direct Measure: Track the number of outreach activities during the fiscal year, categorizing outreach activities into three categories: Educational Partners Outreach, Corporate/Community Outreach, On-Campus Outreach.

Example 2: Office of the Registrar

Outcome: Students and alumni will receive timely and accurate service in the areas of course registration, graduation processing, transcript evaluation, academic record maintenance and transcript production.

Direct Measure: Track the time to issuance of transcripts during the fiscal year.

Indirect Measures

Indirect measures examine stakeholder perception of performance of an outcome. These measures generally include surveys, interviews, focus groups concerning customer satisfaction, impact of a program or service, value of programs or service, etc.

Example outcomes and indirect measures:

Example 1: Office of Career Services

Outcome: Students are prepared to achieve their professional goals as a result of their education, tools and resources offered.

Indirect Measure: The percent of students who agree/strongly agree with items related to the outcome on a survey.

Example 2: Office of Human Resources

Outcome: Provide professional development to support the college's strategic and operational initiatives.

Indirect Measure: The average rating of overall satisfaction on trainings.

Many units are already using tools to measure their service. When deciding on a measure for each outcome, it may be useful to first conduct an inventory of the types of tools a unit is already using. Measures should help the unit identify strengths and areas for improvement and help inform discussions on how to improve results.

Identify Performance Targets

Performance targets are identified to indicate the target that units are trying to reach for each measure. Targets are intended to be challenging, but attainable. When creating a target for a measure, consider what indicator will show that the outcome is being met or not met.

Example 1: Outcomes Assessment Unit

The Outcomes Assessment Unit will receive an evaluation of satisfactory or above for 85% or more of the faculty program directors who completed the assessment process.

Example 2: Transcript Analysis Center

The Transfer Evaluation Unit will complete initial student status reports in less than six days on average for the year.

Example 3: Human Resources

The Office of Human Resources will receive an evaluation of satisfactory or above for 80% or more from the participants in professional development offerings.

When establishing a target, members of a unit's assessment team may use the current level of achievement for an outcome as a starting point or decide on a desired level of achievement for an outcome.

Step 4: Collecting and Analyzing Data

Data collection should be based on the work the unit does throughout the course of a fiscal year. Data can be collected once a year or at intervals throughout the year, depending on what works best for the outcomes and each unit. Units will determine how frequently outcomes are assessed (e.g., each fiscal year, every two years, etc.).

Data collection is summarized and interpreted by the units, or the subgroup of the unit responsible for the OAP (i.e., the unit assessment coordinator or team).

> *Example 1: Transcript Analysis Center*
>
> The Evaluation Turnaround Report showed that the mean initial student status reports were completed on average in less than five days for the year.
>
> *Example 2: Human Resources*
>
> The human resources professional development satisfaction survey showed an increase of 5% in overall satisfaction with development opportunities between fiscal year 2016-2017 and 2017-2018.

During this step, unit assessment team members should first convene to look at the data, discuss findings, and make recommendations for improvements. Team members should determine if the measure is being met, partially met, or not met. Using this data, team members should determine if the unit should take any actions to improve performance. Unit assessment team members will meet and disseminate data and findings to the rest of the unit, or the unit can decide to complete this step as a whole group.

Step 5: Reporting Findings

At the end of the fiscal year, operational units will use Nuventive Improve to document their results/findings and improvement plans. The intent at this step is for unit staff members to reflect on and use the assessment results based on the documentation of the data in the last step. Strengths and areas for improvement related to the performance targets, overall outcomes, and measures should be noted in the improvement plan section in the unit's Nuventive site (see Appendix D). What did the unit learn through the assessment findings? How did the unit discuss these findings? What actions will the unit take based on these findings? What aspects of the assessment process worked well? What changes might make it more effective? What were the most effective measures? What changes might make outcomes or measures more effective? Could the results be improved? Is the outcome and/or measure useful? Finally, how will the unit plan assess the outcomes in the next fiscal year? These questions can be used by the unit assessment team to begin developing an action plan based on the findings.

Effective action plans may: describe the changes a unit intends to implement to address any areas of improvement identified as a result of the assessment; indicate timelines for specific changes to unit processes or activities; describe how results were discussed by staff members and how staff members were involved in the improvement process; articulate changes to processes, policies, procedures, and the assessment process/measure.

Assessment is a cyclical process and the action items on a report can typically be used to outline an assessment plan for the next year. To close the loop on the cycle, keep track of planned changes in the assessment plan, as well as changes that have already been carried out.

Example 1:

Finding: Data were collected, results show that the target was achieved; **Improvement Plan***:* the office plans to continue to measure the outcomes in future assessment cycles.

Example 2:

Finding: Data were collected, results show the target was not achieved; **Improvement Plan***:* the unit developed an action plan to improve performance; the unit will re-measure the outcome through the same measure in the upcoming fiscal year.

Example 3:

Finding: Data were collected and outcome was not achieved; **Improvement Plan***:* the program determined that the plan was not accurately measuring the outcome or that the outcome needed revision; the unit documented changes to be made to the plan for the next reporting cycle.

Tracking and reflection on changes that were made based on previous data are also reported in Nuventive. OA will review updates in Nuventive and provide feedback for the units. See Appendix E for a rubric used to provide feedback to units.

OA will develop an overall summary report on key findings related to all reporting unit assessment reports and plans. The report will be presented annually at the College Management Council and will be provided to the College Chief Operating Officer.

Appendix A: What's the Difference?

Operational Assessment versus Risk Assessment: What is the difference?

Risk assessment and operational assessment play a major role in helping the College achieve its mission. While operational assessment is a continuous improvement process intended to improve institutional effectiveness, risk assessment is focused exclusively on mitigating threats to college operations.

When developing an annual audit plan, the Internal Audit may consider the operational assessment reports in the decision-making process.[1] Similarly, when operational outcomes are developed or reviewed for a unit, results from an internal audit may be used as a resource to help define an outcome.

Operational Assessment versus Strategic Planning: What is the difference?

Operational assessment is conducted to help achieve a unit's mission. Strategic planning, on the other hand, is created to help achieve the unit's vision. A strategic plan is based on where a unit wants to be in 3-5 years and an operational assessment plan is more like the action plan for the unit. Operational assessment plans cover the day-to-day functions and processes of the unit. If a strategic plan exists, operational assessment planning should align with the strategic plan.

Operational Assessment versus Performance Review: What is the difference?

Performance review and evaluation is generally based on a single employee and the achievement of outcomes or goals set for the employee; operational assessment is based on an overall unit and the achievement of outcomes designed to meet the mission of the unit. Operational assessment outcomes might be closely aligned with the occasional performance

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[1] The Office of Risk Management assists the College in performing risk assessments in which objectives, associated risks, and control activities are identified. The objectives describe the goals and intentions of the units and the College (objectives may reflect more discriminate elements of the outcomes identified in operational assessment plans and may not even be part of any unit outcomes), and risks are events that could preclude the unit or College from achieving their objectives. The control activities are meant as mitigation strategies to decrease the likelihood, impact, and/or velocity of the risks. Risk management is meant to provide a structured, consistent, and continuous process of identifying, assessing, and responding to opportunities and threats that affect the achievement of objectives across the entire organization. Once the risk assessments are finalized for a specific point in time, Internal Audit considers the risks when developing their audit plan for the year.

review goal of staff, particularly if the unit is small. When operational outcomes are developed or reviewed for a unit, it may be helpful to consider performance review goals and determine if there should be overlap or if they might be used as a resource to help define a more global outcome for unit operations. However, the operational assessment plan should not be used as performance evaluation.

Appendix B: Glossary

Analytics and Decision Support (ADS)—The Office of Analytics and Decision Support provides information to support decision making, planning, assessment, and continuous quality improvement.

Assessment – A process of systematically collecting, reviewing and using information about operational units, academic support programs, or academic programs undertaken for the purpose of improving the quality of the services, activities, or experiences it offers.

Assessment Plan—A document that outlines the unit's plan for assessing performance. It includes a mission statement, unit outcomes, an explanation of who's responsible for assessment within the unit, a description of the unit's assessment methods and procedures, and a clear articulation of the assessment cycle.

Direct Measure—Observable measures which are directly tied to performance.

Indirect Measure—Measures which are not directly tied to performance and often require inferences to be made about performance. Indirect measures often relate to perceptions about an outcome. Examples of indirect measures include exit surveys, alumni surveys, student opinion surveys, and focus groups.

Institutional Assessment Plan for Student Learning—A systematic plan for assessing, improving, and documenting student learning at the college.

Institutional Effectiveness— The extent to which an institution has a defined mission and institutional outcomes, measures progress toward achieving those outcomes, and engages in continuous efforts to improve programs and services.

Internal Audit—An independent, objective assurance, and consulting activity designed to add value and improve an organization's operations. Internal auditing helps an organization accomplish its objectives by bringing a systematic, disciplined approach to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of risk management, control, and governance processes.

Measure—A way to determine whether a unit has achieved their outcomes.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)—Excelsior College's regional accrediting agency. MSCHE's Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation have specific standards aligned with the assessment of student learning and operations.

Mission—A concise statement about the values and purposes of a unit.

Objectives—The tasks to be completed in order to reach an outcome.

Office of Risk Management—The Office of risk management works to protect Excelsior's human, physical, and financial assets through preventing adverse incidents, purchasing insurance policies and bonds, and advising senior management on how to best provide future protection against key risks.

Operational Assessment Plan (OAP)—A systematic plan for assessing, improving, and documenting operational improvement processes.

Operational Effectiveness – Any practice which allows an institution to better utilize its resources and effectively achieve its objectives.

Operational Unit – Units within Excelsior college which are not directly involved with educational delivery. Operational units include academic support, technology, and facilities services.

Outcome / Operational Outcome— Specific statements of the intention of the unit. Outcomes are tied to the mission. Outcomes should be specific, measurable, use action verbs, and focus on the ends rather than the means.

Outcomes Assessment Unit (OA)—The OA unit is part of the Office of Analytics and Decision Support and provides leadership and expertise in assessment and evaluation practices to improve student learning and operational effectiveness throughout the institution.

Risk Management—The structured, consistent, and continuous process across the whole organization of identifying, assessing, and responding to opportunities and threats that affect the achievement of objectives.

Rubric—A criteria-based scoring guideline that can be used to evaluate performance.

Target—A goal for achievement. Targets can be internally or externally set and should be difficult to obtain, but achievable.

Appendix C: Implementation Timeline

During fiscal year 2019-2020 the following units will begin engaging in a systematic assessment process. All units are expected to have assessment plans and outcomes by fiscal year 2020-2021.

- Admissions
- Analytics and Decision Support (ADS)
- Center for Educational Measurement and Prior Learning Assessment
- Enterprise Operations
- Fiscal Services
- Human Resources
- Marketing and Business Development
- Registrar
- Student Advocacy and Engagement
  - Accessibility Services and Title IX
  - Career Services
  - Center for Writing Excellence
  - Curriculum and Faculty Development
  - Learning Services
  - Ombudsperson's office
- School of Undergraduate Studies
- School of Graduate Studies
- Technology and Facilities Services (TFS)

During fiscal year 2020-2021, the following units will begin engaging in a systematic assessment process. All units are expected to have assessment plans and outcomes by fiscal year 2021-2022.

- Student Experience and Success Services
  - Advising
  - Bursar
  - Financial Aid and Registration
  - Transcript Analysis Center

- School of Nursing

Appendix D. Operational Unit Outcome Assessment Report

Note: Units document data in Nuventive. The following is a downloadable report in Nuventive.

Operational Assessment Report-Narrative Format

Admission's Office

Mission: The Admissions Office serves as the primary point of contact for individuals who are interested in learning about Excelsior College's academic programs and services. Staff within the Admissions Office work with prospective students via telephone calls, emails, and messages providing an experience that is personalized to the student's needs. Prospective students are treated with care as they progress from the first inquiry throughout the application and enrollment processes.

Vision: A seamless and effortless admissions process is provided to all Excelsior College students. Counselors build meaningful relationships with prospective students to help in the pursuit of life goals.

3-5 outcomes are ideal

Operational Unit Outcomes	Assessment Measures	Annual Report	Improvement Plans
Outcome 1: Student Satisfaction - Prospective students will receive timely, accurate, professional and courteous service. **Outcome Status:** Active **Outcome Year(s):** 2019 - 2020 **Start Date:** 07/01/2019 **End Date:** 06/30/2020	**Internal Report -** Admissions established KPI's supported and proven by: ADS Survey and Monthly reports (ICBM & Salesforce) **Target:** **Notes:**		
Outcome 2: Staff Development - Development of student facing staff **Outcome Status:** Active **Outcome Year(s):** 2019 - 2020 **Start Date:** 07/01/2019 **End Date:** 06/30/2020	**Internal Report -** Ultipro training, continuous staff updates/meetings, call reviews via quality development, monthly reporting, documented and developed training programs, peer to peer review **Target:** **Notes:**		

How will you/did you measure your success at reaching your outcome?

What were your results? What did you learn?

Comment on the assessment findings; how these will impact the assessment process in the future; and on any improvements made as a result of the assessment process.

Appendix E: Operational Assessment Plan Rubric

	Developing	Meets Standard	Exemplary	Recommendations
Mission	Statement is either missing or does not clearly describe the area's purpose.		Statement clearly describes what the unit does, why the unit does it, and how it does it.	
Outcomes	There are either too few or too many outcomes; outcomes are either misaligned with mission, too specific, unclear, or not measurable and/or do not focus on the recipient of the service; outcomes are written as objectives rather than end results.	At least three and no more than five outcomes are stated; outcomes articulate desired end results for the unit, rather than actions; some outcomes could align more directly to the mission or be written in more measurable terms.	The appropriate number of outcomes are stated; outcomes articulate the desired end results for the unit, rather than actions; and each outcome aligns to the unit's mission and is measurable.	
Measures	Insufficient information is provided on measures, or measures are identified for some, but not all outcomes; or the measures do not align with the outcome being measured or do not yield clear and accurate information.	At least one measure is stated for each outcome; measures align with the outcome being assessed, and provide clear, accurate information.	Multiple measures are used for each outcome, including direct and indirect measures. Measures clearly match the outcome being assessed and provide clear, accurate information about whether or not an outcome is being achieved.	
Analysis	The report lacks the findings from the year or analysis of the data.	The report either presents the findings for the appropriate measure or analyzes the data, but not both.	The report presents the findings for the appropriate measure and analyzes the data.	
Improvement Plans	There is no evidence that assessment results are shared or discussed or used to improve operational units. Improvement plans on the findings are either missing or do not describe intended improvements, changes or provide evidence that results are shared and discussed.	Improvement plans are developed; improvements and changes have been made based on assessment data; but evidence that results are shared and discussed is not provided.	Improvement plans on findings are developed and describe intended improvements, changes, and provide evidence that results are shared and discussed.	