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## Using Course Grades as a Key Assessment: Proposed Guidelines

### Background:

In the new program review system, programs are required to have at least two program assessments that focus on content: state licensure test data (Assessment #1) and a faculty-developed content assessment (Assessment #2). An evaluation of candidate content knowledge that is available for most candidates is course grades. In some cases, especially in post-baccalaureate or Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) programs, candidates enter the program having previously earned degrees or majors in specific content areas. For these programs, candidates' grades are one of the few readily attainable measures of candidate content knowledge.

All but two SPAs (ELCC and ACTFL) will accept course grades as one of the programs' key assessments. This is one of the few policies that is not consistent across all SPAs. In addition, SPAs that will accept grades have begun to provide specific guidance to programs on how to document grades as an assessment. Unfortunately, this guidance is becoming less and less consistent across SPAs. These inconsistencies are becoming problematic to programs and to the NCATE program review system.

Using the work that has already been done by these SPAs, NCATE needs to standardize guidance for programs who intend to use grades as one of their content assessments. This would improve consistency in decision-making for reviewers and decrease the complexity of the process for programs.

Several SPAs have provided expanded information in their training materials for programs. NCATE staff reviewed documentation from the following SPAs: NCTE, NCTM, NCSS, and NSTA. Each of these has provided some explanation of how to document grades as an assessment--for example, whether or not course descriptions are required, etc. NSTA provided the most extensive discussion of criteria for documentation. NCTM has a unique requirement for the scoring guide. NCTM requires that the program have content-specific criteria for each letter grade in order for grades to be used.

As is demonstrated by the individual SPA comments related to grade-based assessments in Appendix A, it must be noted that course-based assessments are not "one size fits all." The substantial academic content background required by the secondary SPAs suggest that a course-based assessment will include longer lists of courses, but perhaps not need as much in the way of course descriptions. For SPAs such as NAEYC and IRA, courses selected for this assessment are likely to be fewer in number, but also require the program to provide detailed information on each course's coverage of applicable standards.

The essential question that programs must answer in their documentation is how does a program make a connection between course grades and specific SPA standards? The following guidance provides a relatively simple and standard mechanism for making this connection.

## **Proposed Guidelines for Using and Documenting Course Grades as a Key Program Assessment**

Most SPAs accept grades in SPA-specific content courses as an assessment in the program review system. For these SPAs (see Attachment A) grades can be used for Assessment #1 (if there is no state licensure test), Assessment #2, or one of the optional assessments.

Minimum acceptable documentation required for programs using course grades is as follows:

1. Only courses that explicitly address content required by the SPA standards can be used in a course grades-based assessment. Courses must directly address required SPA content in one or more standards. (For example, an educational technology course will not likely cover the concepts of the NCSS standard on Science, Technology, and Society.)
2. Courses must be required for all candidates in the program; elective courses may not be used as evidence.
3. The documentation of a course grades-based assessment must include curriculum requirements, including the course numbers of required courses. (Documentation should be consistent with course listings provided in the Program of Study submitted in Section I of the program report.) If course grades are used as an assessment for a graduate level program that relies on coursework that may have been taken at another institution, the assessment must include the advising sheet that is used by the program to determine the sufficiency of courses taken by a candidate at another institution. The advising sheet should include specific information on required coursework and remediation required for deficiencies in the content acquirement of admitted candidates.
4. Grade data should be reported by course (although sequentially linked courses may be grouped for this purpose, e.g. Physics I and II). Data should reflect, at minimum, the distribution and mean of grades earned. The course passing grade should be stated and should be synchronous with GPA requirements listed in Section I.3 of the program report.
5. The assessment should be accompanied by, at minimum, the institution's grade policy or definitions of grades. Preferably, the program will have content-specific criteria for the awarding of grades, but this is not required unless specified by the SPA.
6. Grade data should be disaggregated by program level (e.g. baccalaureate and post baccalaureate), grade level (e.g. middle grade and secondary), licensure category (e.g. history or social studies), and program site.
7. Syllabi cannot be submitted.
8. Only one course grade-based assessment can be used in a program report. Assessments based on course grades can only be used to support candidate content knowledge.

## **Suggested Format for Submission of Course-Based Content Assessment**

The following format is required for submission of a course grade-based assessment under Section IV of the program report:

**Part 1.** *Description of the assessment.* Relevant information would include the role of the courses selected for this assessment in the overall program, and the rationale for the selection of those courses. If the assessment is reliant on courses that may have been taken at another institution, the description should include the process by which transcripts are analyzed and how the program assures that any course-based content deficiencies are remediated as a condition of program completion. The description should also include any significant changes in course requirements or course content, within the time period in question, that might impact either the results or the presentation of the data.

**Part 2.** *Alignment with SPA standards.* This part should include a matrix that shows alignment of courses with specific SPA standards (see example below). Depending on the SPA and the type of courses being reported, Part 2 may require more specific narrative discussion of the relationship of individual courses to specific standards, particularly if the course descriptions in Part 5a do not fully convey the role of a course in addressing the content of a standard. NOTE: Be sure that information in Part 2 is consistent with the Program of Study attachment to Section I of the report. This matrix will also include the information required in Part 5a.

**Part 3.** *Brief analysis of data findings.* In this section, the program should include an analysis of grade data included in Part 5c of the assessment. For example, are grades consistently higher in some courses than others? Higher for some candidate groups (e.g. baccalaureate vs. post baccalaureate) than others? Any correlation between course grades and licensure test results? The program should use this section to highlight data-based findings that it wishes to bring to the attention of the reviewers.

**Part 4.** *Interpretation of how data provide evidence of meeting standards.* The program should describe how grades, despite any areas of concern or unevenness that may be noted in Part 3, provide evidence that all candidates in the data tables (Part 5c) have passed the courses in question. If data tables include evidence that one or more candidate has not passed a course, the program must explain (either in this section and/or in Part 5c) the remediative steps taken for those candidates.

### **Part 5 – Assessment documentation**

**Part 5a.** *Assessment tool or description of the assessment.* This part should consist of a matrix that identifies the course name and title in column 1, and a brief description of the course in column 2. The description of the course must come from an *authentic source* (institution catalog or course syllabus would be the most likely sources). See example matrix format below. NOTE: Be sure that information provided in the matrix is consistent with the alignment information in Part 2.

**Part 5b.** *Scoring guide.* Unless requested otherwise by the SPA in the “General Instructions” section of the program report template, the program should submit the

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policy and/or rubrics that are used by institution or program faculty for grading decisions. Part 5b should provide reasonable assurance to reviewers that grades are equitably weighted across programs and faculty.

**Part 5c. Data table(s).** Data tables must provide, at minimum, the grade distributions and mean GPAs for candidates and program completers in each course. Data should not be inclusive of other students who may have taken the course at the same time. NOTE: The “n” in the data table/s for each year or semester should be relatively consistent with the numbers of candidates and completers reported in Attachment A to Section I. Large inconsistencies between the two data sets should be explained in a note included with the data table/s. The data section of the report should also reference the minimum passing grade or required GPA that are applicable to the data. If data do not reflect that all candidates have achieved the minimum passing grade, the follow-up for those candidates should be reported here or in Part 4. See example data table format below.

### Format Examples

Tables below are adapted from the Columbia College SC NCTM report, which is reproduced on NCATE’s website at <http://www.ncate.org/documents/programReports/programReportSamples/ColumbiaCollege2.pdf>.

### Part 2 and Part 5a. Alignment Matrix and Course Description

Course Name & No.	SPA Standard/s Addressed by Course	Brief Description of Course (from an authentic source)
MATH 150: Discrete Mathematics	9.5, 9.7, 13.1, 13.2, 13.3	An introduction to discrete structures, algorithms and proof with an emphasis on problem solving. Formal mathematics is introduced through logic, sets, and elementary number theory. Tools for mathematics and computer studies are given in the form of basic combinations and graph theory.

(Note: Columbia College broke each course down further, based on objectives outlined in course syllabi, to show specific alignment to each of the NCTM indicators.)

**Part 5c. Sample Data Tables**

<b>Table 1. Grade Distribution and GPA                      Required Mathematics Courses                      Secondary Math Education Candidates                      Baccalaureate Program 2005-06</b>							
<b>N = 12*</b> <b>Candidate GPA range:</b> <b>3.0-4.0</b>	F	D	C	C+	B	B+	A
MATH 150 Discrete Mathematics	# %	# %	# %	# %	# %	# %	# %
MATH 161 Calculus I	# %	# %	# %	# %	# %	# %	# %
MATH 162 Calculus II	# %	# %	# %	# %	# %	# %	# %

The College of Education requires that candidates maintain a GPA of 2.75, and receive no grade lower than a C+ for required courses. The one candidate who received a D in Math 162 has been conditionally admitted to the program, and has been informed that s/he must retake the course prior to admission to the Student Teaching semester.

\* N=12 except for Math 150, in which N=10. Two candidates in the program took an equivalent Honors course.

## **Attachment A**

### **Information from Program Report Templates on Whether or Not SPA will Accept Grades:**

**Will AAHE accept grades GPA as one of the assessments?**

Yes, along with a scoring guide/criteria

**Will ACEI accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes. If grades are used as the assessment or included in the assessment, provide information on the criteria for those grades and describe how they align with the specialty standards. This description is not necessary for general education courses.

**Will ACTFL accept grades as one of the assessments?**

No

**Will AECT accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes. If grades are used as the assessment or included in the assessment, provide information on the criteria for those grades and describe how they align with the AECT standards.

**Will ALA/AASL accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes. If grades are used as the assessment or included in the assessment, provide information on the criteria for those grades and describe how they align with the specialty standards. However, AASL does not believe that grades are the best measure of candidate performance.

**Will CEC accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes. If grades are used as the assessment or included in the assessment, provide information on the criteria for those grades and describe how they align with the CEC standards.

**Will ELCC accept grades as one of the assessments?**

No

**Will IRA accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Grades should not be used as an assessment unless it can be clearly demonstrated how the grades are directly based on the IRA Standards.

**Will ISTE accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes

**Will ITEA accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes. However if grades are used as the assessment or included in the assessment, you must provide information on the specific criteria for those grades and describe specifically/CTTE how they align with the ITEA standards

**Will NAEYC accept grades as one of the assessments?**

NAEYC will accept the use of grades or GPA as an assessment of content knowledge, but NAEYC advises being very selective about which grades are included. NAEYC suggests that if GPA is used, programs do not use an overall GPA, but rather include grades from a few carefully chosen courses. The report should state clearly what components comprise the grades selected. Reviewers will find grades most meaningful as a measure of content knowledge when they minimize background "noise," such as attendance and neatness in presentation. As with other assessments, it is best to disaggregate the data. For example, a data table might present evidence of candidates' knowledge of content in such areas as child development, literacy, mathematics, and so forth. In general, programs should make a strong case that the combination of selected course grades does indeed represent mastery of content knowledge."

**Will NASPE accept grades as one of the assessments?**

If grades are used as the assessment or included in the assessment, provide information on the criteria for those grades and describe how they align with the specialty standards

**Will NCSS accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes, grades may be used as internal assessment evidence in Assessment 2, especially when a whole course is appropriate to a given standard. Grades or other assessments for a given unit or segment of a course also may be used when only a unit or segment of a course is appropriate to a given standard (for example, a unit on the "Industrial Revolution in U.S. or World History to meet the expectations of Standard 1.8).

**Will NCTE accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes, however, if grades are used as the assessment or included in the assessment, provide information on the criteria for those grades and describe how they align with the specialty standards

**Will NCTM accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes, but if grades are used as an assessment or included in an assessment, the program report must provide information on the content-specific criteria for those grades and provide a clear rationale for how these grades align with specific NCTM standards and indicators.

**Will NMSA accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes, however if grades are used as the assessment or included in the assessment, you must provide information on the criteria for those grades and describe how they align with the specialty standards

**Will NSTA accept grades as one of the assessments?**

Yes. Grades and GPA's must include a description of how the course requirements relate to recommendations of the NSTA (in standards) or the National Science Education Standards.

**Will TESOL accept grades as one of the assessments?**

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Yes, however, if grades are used as the assessment or included in the assessment, provide information on the criteria for those grades and describe how they align with the specialty standards