
WESTERN INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

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GRADING AND AWARDING ACADEMIC CREDIT, AND ACADEMIC POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

WISR's Methods for Evaluating Student Achievement

WISR faculty evaluate each student's learning using the criteria articulated in the course learning outcomes and the degree program outcomes. The degree program outcomes are organized in large part, according to learning outcomes specific to each degree program's subject matter area, and also by the meta-competencies important to the learning of all WISR students, outlined in separate sections under each degree program. Faculty use these outcomes, along with the stated outcomes for each course, and the processes and evidence discussed below, to provide constructive feedback to the student, and to determine when to award a student credit for having completed a course.

Grading and Evaluations of Student Learning by Faculty at WISR

Student work at WISR is graded Credit/No Credit.

Evaluations of student work are made by a graduate faculty person, who is expert in the area of study for the course that the student is pursuing. Sometimes, this is also the student's major faculty advisor. Each student meets frequently with one or more faculty for individual, faculty-student consultations, and the faculty member who is supervising the student in a particular course reviews the student's written papers for the various assignments in that course. A strong effort is also made to engage each student in habitually evaluating her or his own efforts, especially in the two written self-assessments for each course. Open, candid discussions of a student's strengths, progress, and areas needing attention are part of many faculty-student consultations. At the same time, students are encouraged to do repeated revisions and rewrites of their papers and self-assessments, until they have been brought to a level of quality acceptable to both the student and the teacher. WISR faculty members try to separate the process of evaluating students' work from the penalties and insults to students' pride that are considered necessary parts of traditional, summary grading systems.

WISR relies not on graded, written, question-answer examinations, but on students' abilities to write clearly about subjects that they develop, and to respond articulately to questions about what and how they have learned. Qualitative written and verbal evaluations are used, along with numeric ratings in a number of specific areas of performance for each assignment in each course. This detailed feedback is superior to the single-letter or number grades used in many other colleges and universities. Further, faculty members making assessments are expected to know how any individual student's work-product is related to: course and degree program learning outcomes, WISR's meta-competencies, and the student's previous efforts and professional and personal educational objectives. Over time, each student's learning portfolio develops a very substantial body of evidence about the student's learning and progress, including for each course: a number of papers written by the student, including the student's self-assessments, and the faculty assessment of the student's learning.

WISR applies two defined thresholds in its numeric course ratings. A rating of 83 percent — equivalent to a low "B" — is the minimum standard to pass a course; a student whose performance falls below 83 percent has not failed but has not yet passed, and faculty work directly with the student, through revision and resubmission of coursework, until the work meets the required standard. A rating below 88 percent, though passing, serves as a precautionary threshold: it signals WISR to give added attention going forward to both the

student's progress and the course itself, since early performance in that range may indicate that the learner needs additional support, that the course needs review, or neither — the threshold exists so that possible difficulties receive attention before they become actual ones.

Rubrics Used by WISR Faculty

WISR implements a standardized process for the evaluation of student assignments through the use of assessment rubrics. These rubrics are designed to ensure student learning, provide consistency and fairness in grading, and continually evaluate and improve the curriculum and instruction at WISR. WISR uses rubrics and assessment methods that align with WISR's academic values, standards, and learning criteria.

WISR's rubrics comprise a network of documents. These documents provide the conceptual rationale, as well as the specific procedures, rubrics and program learning outcomes used by faculty at WISR to assess and guide student learning. The primary form used to grade students includes a variety of rubrics used for evaluating different assignments. The primary instrument is the WISR Course Grading Form (also known as the End of Course Grading Form), available from WISR upon request.

If a student disagrees with the faculty member's assessment, they have the right to ask that another WISR faculty member, who is qualified in their area of study, review their work. There are also procedures whereby a student may file a grievance (see WISR's Complaint and Grievance Procedure in this catalog). These instances are extremely rare at WISR over more than 50 years, because students and faculty are able to work out any differences by involving another faculty member to bring their perspective to the evaluation process.

Faculty Feedback on Drafts of Student Papers and Theses

Faculty make every effort to give students rapid feedback on drafts of papers and theses. Typically, the faculty gives students feedback on papers that are 20 pages or less, within 7 days. Faculty may need as much as two weeks to read and give feedback on longer papers, and especially on drafts of theses and dissertations. Faculty are available to set up hour-long conferences with students by phone twice a month, or more often, when requested by students. Generally, it is best to set up appointments a week to 10 days in advance, so students can coordinate their own schedules of availability with the openings in the faculty member's schedule. Faculty comment on the substance and content of the student's paper, on the clarity and organization of the paper, and on grammar, spelling and mechanics. Faculty encourage students to write in their own voice, and they encourage the use of concrete examples and illustrations of general points and concepts. Critical analysis and an awareness of "bigger picture" issues and ideas are also encouraged. Students are not expected to address every single faculty criticism and suggestion in re-writing their draft, but rather to consider thoughtfully and carefully the faculty's suggestions, and then to make sufficient revisions to show a substantial and worthwhile improvement in the paper.

Awarding and Assigning Credit for Courses at WISR

Credit is awarded based on the extent to which a student is expected to demonstrate a substantial level of learning and accomplishment, in a course, thesis or independent study project or practicum, in two broad realms—1) The quantity and quality of the student's engagement in learning at WISR, and 2) the learning outcomes and competencies demonstrated by the student, based on faculty assessment of student learning-through mentoring discussions, small group seminars, papers and projects completed, and self-assessments written by the student pertaining to the evidence of their learning process and outcomes.

Learning outcomes used in the granting of credit are specific to each course, and also, during a course, the student may in some cases demonstrate that they have achieved one or more of the learning outcomes for the student's particular degree program.

WISR's expectations for the quantity and quality of student engagement in learning at WISR approximate that of the traditional "Carnegie unit" which grants one semester unit for each 15 hours of "academic engagement" that is equivalent to in 15 hours of class time, and 30 hours of study time, in a more conventional program, or 45 hours of out of class participation in learning (studying, writing term papers, participating in an action-research lab or project, or a supervised practicum, for example). So, 45 hours of "academic engagement" counts as one semester unit.

In addition to this substantial, high-quality engagement in learning at WISR—similar to the well-known Oxford model of education—WISR faculty only award our graduate study credit if the student's work indicates learning and competency accomplishments comparable to what students would typically receive for that number of semester credit hours in an accredited program performing at a grade of "B" or higher.

In assessing student work, and granting credit, WISR faculty use the above stated degree program learning outcomes, as well as the stated learning outcomes for each particular course, to evaluate student progress as demonstrated by evidence from mentoring discussions, small group seminars, papers and projects completed, and self-assessments written by the student pertaining to the evidence of their learning process and outcomes.

Evidence Used in Awarding Academic Credit

Academic papers, professional work and community work, multimedia products (including audios, videos, photos and web pages), creative/artistic works, faculty and professional observations of student learning, participation in WISR projects and seminars, and written, reflective analyses of prior experiences. However, WISR does not grant credit for prior experiential learning alone, only for current learning that may involve current writing and analysis that draws on prior experiences.

Academic Papers

Most evidence of student academic work takes this form, in part, at least. Papers may be analyses of intellectual or professional issues of interest to the student, critiques of readings they have done, critical analyses of community projects, detailed plans for educational or community projects, reports of research on community problems or issues, records of research interviews by the student about issues in professional or personal development, combinations of these types, or other serious efforts negotiated by the student and her or his faculty adviser.

Professional Work and Community Work

WISR grants credit based on evidence of students' educational thought and growth that emerges in the student's community and professional work, oftentimes in the context of their major course project and action-research lab activities. For example, documents acceptable as bases for academic credit include evaluations of the student's community and professional work by a co-worker, especially when that work was specifically discussed with the faculty adviser as a part of the student's learning program.

End-Of-Course Self Assessments Written and Submitted by Students

As discussed above, student self-assessments at the end of the course provide a further presentation and analysis of the evidence of the student's learning in the course. These self-assessments themselves further contribute to student learning, and they provide a valuable perspective that highlights and summarizes some of the most student's most important activities during the course, their main areas of learning, and significant accomplishments.

Multimedia Products

Evidence of students' learning may also include audio or video recordings of workshops given by students at their workplaces, of focused discussions on issues relevant to their WISR learning goals, and of seminars led at WISR. Students may use photographs to document their work, or in producing a photographic essay on a topic of importance. Some students have produced documentary videos and films that communicate the results and insights of their research. And, in many cases, students will combine the use of two or more of the following: audio recordings, videos or films, photographs and website development. These multimedia products are in addition to, not instead of submitting written work.

Creative, Artistic Works

Evidence of students' learning may also include reproductions or descriptions of creative and artistic products such as videotapes, films, paintings or drawings, murals, sculptures, poems, and other imaginative literary pieces, where those products help to show the student's thought and imagination in some coherent relation to learning goals. Again, such works are submitted along with, not instead of, written work.

Participation In WISR Projects And Seminars

In each course, students must document having participated in ten hours of collaboration with other students, from among the following activities: a structured series of collaborative and group learning activities, as well as active engagement in online forums, and informal collaborations with other students—as well as more formal collaborative activities include WISR's seminars, workshops, and community projects.

Faculty Observation of Student Performance in Doing Required and Recommended Course Assignments

Through the kinds of evidence listed above, and also in discussions with students in one-on-one mentoring and seminars, as well as by student submission of course assignments, faculty observations provide a very important form of evidence. WISR faculty are in an excellent position to evaluate the quality and quantity of student work, and the extent to which the student is meeting course learning outcomes, progressing toward degree program outcomes, and further developing themselves in one or more of WISR's meta-competencies or areas of learning. In addition, at the end of each course, faculty give the student an oral review covering the many things that they have studied and done in the course.

Student's End of Course Self-Assessment

The student's studies in the course will be further guided by being aware of the self-assessment questions below. Then, at the end of the course, the student will do a written self-assessment of what they did, learned and accomplished in the course by answering a set of questions that are designed to benefit the student in at least the following several ways:

They will become more conscious about what they learned, and about what did and didn't work well in their learning process;

In collaboration with an Academic Administrator, the student will help to add personalized details to their transcript e.g., details about their practicum and their thesis, as well as their main areas of specialization.

They will keep track of how their learning is contributing to their degree requirements and learning outcomes, and WISR's expectations of students for learning in the degree program.

These student self-assessments at the end of the course provide a further presentation and analysis of the evidence of the student's learning in the course. These self-assessments themselves further contribute to student learning, and they provide a valuable perspective

that highlights and summarizes some of the most student's most important activities during the course, their main areas of learning, and significant accomplishments.

Early in their studies, students will often have to re-write their self-assessment drafts, but it is expected that with some practice after completing several courses, only one draft will be necessary. Students should plan to spend about two hours in drafting each end of course self-assessment. Faculty sign the student's "end of course self-assessment" and attest to the accuracy of the descriptive parts of the self-assessment.

INSTRUCTIONS TO STUDENTS FOR ANSWERING THE SELF-ASSESSMENT FORM

"Enter your responses to each question using as much space after each question as is needed to adequately answer the question. You are also encouraged to seek assistance from WISR faculty—to help them in responding thoughtfully and sufficiently to each question. Also, you may find it helpful to enter "tentative" responses to many of the questions as your study in each course unfolds. In this way, this form may help you to assess, during the course, what you've accomplished thus far and what they may wish to consider doing next.

Use of Self-Assessment Form:

These questions provide a framework to help you to self-assess your learning methods and outcomes for each course of study. Your responses also provide evidence for faculty to consider in evaluating whether or not, and how well, and in what ways, you have met the learning objectives for the course.

Name of Student: _____

Name of Course: _____

1) What was (were) your main purpose(s) for this course of study? What, in particular, did you hope to learn and accomplish during the course?

2) What were the most valuable activities you pursued during this course of study—that is, describe (those that are applicable): the areas in which you read; paper you wrote, work done in a practicum, internship, action-research lab, or additional work you did on the job, beyond your regular job duties; community-based or self-directed research (e.g., interviews conducted and with whom, networking pursued, observations made, etc.); personal reflection and note-taking; multimedia production; workshops taken; seminars participated in and collaborations with others, etc. This can usually be done in three to six sentences.

3) Who were the WISR faculty with whom you consulted in this course? With each faculty member, write two to four sentences on how they assisted you or contributed to your learning in these studies. If you have suggestions for how faculty could, in the future, better assist your learning, please add those comments as well.

4) Among those with whom you consulted or collaborated from outside WISR faculty, which people contributed the most to your studies in this course. This may include community residents and leaders, coworkers, agency staff, professional/experts in the field, other academicians, fellow students or WISR alumni. Write a couple sentences about the contributions of the two or three people who helped you the most, from among those outside of WISR faculty.

5) If you participated in workshops, conferences or community events outside of WISR that contributed to these studies in this course, please indicate and list those events/activities, and write a couple sentences about the one or two that were most significant and important.

6) Describe your participation in WISR seminars, and/or formal or informal collaboration with other students, and discuss how they were important to your learning in this area and write a couple of sentences about their contributions to your learning in this course.

7) Write a one paragraph (three to five sentences) abstract of the paper you wrote for the course.

8) Write the month you began these studies, the month completed, and write a rough draft of the personalized description of your studies in this course, beyond the general WISR course description. That is, in three to five sentences, write what you would add to the standard WISR course description—in order to give a more detailed and accurate summary of what you did in this course. This can then later be refined to help write your narrative transcript prior to receiving your degree.

9) Thinking back on the process of your learning during this course of study, please write two or three sentences about each of the following: a) how did your plans or ideas about what you wanted to do change over time and why? b) what were the positive things, if any, that came out of these changes in plans or intentions about what you wanted to do or learn? c) if you were going to do this course again, what would you do differently given what you now know?

10) Write five to seven sentences on the main things that you learned and accomplished in this course and add two or three sentences that highlight the main evidence you would point to that demonstrates your learning and/or accomplishments in this course."