



Academic Affairs Program Optimization Process Overview, Efficiency Indicators, and Next Steps

September 2025

OVERVIEW

The Academic Affairs Program Optimization (AAPO) process at Washington State University (WSU) was initiated by the Provost's Office during the 2024–2025 academic year to identify opportunities for evolution and to align academic operations with our mission as a land-grant, R1 research institution.

Through data-informed decision-making, WSU will use the established measurable outcomes and efficiency indicators within the AAPO to support high-quality educational and research programs, improve WSU's overall financial health by stabilizing the operating budget, and ensure that WSU continues to fulfill its institutional mission. The agreed-upon indicators will ensure that departments, schools, and colleges reporting to the Provost and Executive Vice President have identified college and unit priorities that can be evaluated annually. Indicators will be reviewed regularly by the Provost's Office to ensure continued alignment with and support of WSU's strategic pillars and President Cantwell's key performance indicators.

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES AND EFFICIENCY INDICATORS

Academic Achievement and Student Success

These indicators focus on measuring student success through progression, retention, credit hour efficiency, and post-graduation outcomes. By disaggregating data across key demographics and instructional types, they provide a nuanced understanding of academic achievement and institutional effectiveness.

- Student progression through their major
 - Undergraduate data, including grades, number of repeats, etc., to compare performance in foundational courses and subsequent courses relying on them as prerequisites (e.g., CHEM 105 and CHEM 106)
 - Time to degree (all student levels, including transfer students) disaggregated by first-generation, gender, race/ethnicity, and Pell eligibility
 - Time to graduation
- Student credit hours
 - Ratio of student credit hours (SCH) completed/total SCH offered per unit/program disaggregated by type of instruction (undergraduate and graduate/professional) and by instructor type/rank
 - Ratio of credits earned/credits attempted; disaggregated by first-generation, gender, race/ethnicity, and income
- Student retention
 - Undergraduate retention by year at WSU (first two years), disaggregated by initial program of study, first-generation status, gender, race/ethnicity, and income
 - Graduate/Professional retention by program and cohort
- Post-graduation placement
 - Percentage of WSU graduates with employment or continuing educational placement within one-year post-graduation
 - Graduate/Professional placement data, including department/program placement data, professional program tracking (match data for MD, etc.)

Instruction

These indicators assess the quality and innovation of teaching by examining faculty engagement in reflective practices and dissemination of scholarly instructional work. They also highlight student participation in high-impact learning experiences, which are shown to enhance academic engagement and long-term success.

- Scholarly and reflective approach to teaching
 - Percentage of faculty utilizing/reflecting on data to revise instruction or create new and/or innovative practices or materials in the classroom
 - Data from Activity Insight (or similar annual review system), annual program review materials, documentation/scholarship on pedagogical innovations implemented, materials developed or published, etc.
 - Percentage of faculty disseminating scholarly teaching activities (e.g., presentations locally/regionally, nationally, publication of educational materials or active research projects, peer-reviewed publications of instructional innovations, etc.), including proportion of faculty with the dissemination of scholarly activities in their duties
 - Data from Activity Insight (or similar annual review system), scholarship on pedagogical innovations implemented, peer-reviewed materials developed or published, etc.
- Participation in high-impact learning experiences
 - Percentage of students who participate in a high-impact learning experience (e.g., service learning, internship, course-based undergraduate research, community-engaged scholarship, simulation-based instruction, and study abroad). (See <https://www.aacu.org/trending-topics/high-impact> for information on high-impact practices and what they mean for students.)
 - Biennial NSSE data (High Impact Practices, Engagement Indicators, Senior Transitions), data collected by individual units/programs, study abroad program data, SURCA records, etc.

Outreach

These indicators evaluate the depth and impact of faculty engagement with communities through extension, research collaboration, and disciplinary expertise. Emphasis is placed on sustained partnerships that lead to measurable changes in conditions or policies, highlighting the university's role in fostering meaningful societal outcomes.

- Number of quantitative condition/policy changes reported per faculty with extension appointment
 - Repeated and sustained engagement with a target audience (key clientele group or partner) with the intent of affecting a change in condition (impact). In most cases, the events or programs conducted to achieve the intended outcome are co-created with the partner/audience. Goals, too, are identified in partnership.
 - Outcomes. Quantitative change in conditions, often estimated using secondary data. Interim steps might include measured change in behavior, and as a very preliminary measure, knowledge change. "Reach data," such as contacts, is an outdated measure.
- Number of non-academic communities as research collaborators reported per faculty member
 - Research conducted with a community with the intent to create new knowledge that advances the likelihood and opportunity for positive condition/policy change. The engagement is often project-based, which can reflect long-term engagement with a given community.
 - Outputs. Accomplishments can reflect traditional research outputs (publications), but often are community-oriented, such as local policy, launch of a local program, clinic, support mechanism, tool, or center.

- Significant community engagements as defined below with respect to the faculty number
 - Contribution of disciplinary expertise to the broader community of those outside one's own discipline or network of colleagues. Often, this could be through Extension programming by working with others in Extension or through community organizations.
 - Activity. Datasets might include number of meaningful engagements, number of events, or hours contributed.

Research

These indicators assess the scope, sustainability, and impact of research and creative activities through external funding, scholarly output, and collaborative partnerships. They also emphasize the importance of disciplinary benchmarks and societal contributions, ensuring that research excellence is measured both quantitatively and qualitatively across diverse academic fields.

Sustained and Significant Funding through External Grants and Investments

Sustained and significant external grant funding and other investments in support of research and creative activities reflect recognition of the value of the work by entities outside the institution.

Evidence of sustained and significant external funding can be measured by grants, fellowships, and other financial investments supporting research and creative endeavors. This includes funds from outside sources (e.g., foundations, industry partners, external university-based support) that facilitate the use of spaces (labs, studios, etc.), research-related travel, and infrastructure (specialized equipment, etc.).

Tracking external funding over time, including follow-up grants and renewals, is vital to assess the long-term sustainability of research endeavors. Additionally, ongoing support, such as continued partnerships or additional phases of projects, should be included to capture the success and continuity of funded research. To ensure equity in evaluation across programs of varying sizes and disciplines, these data should be analyzed both in aggregate and on a per capita basis.

Collaborations across institutions, disciplines, and industries enhance the value of external funding. This includes joint research initiatives, corporate partnerships, and cross-institutional grants. Measuring the extent and quality of such collaborations helps highlight the broader networks in which research is situated and its relevance to real-world challenges.

Examples of data to be collected include:

- Number of funded grants, fellowships, and other financial investments
 - Counts on a per year basis
 - Sponsored research across disciplines, fellowships
 - In-kind costs from industry or other partners (national labs, other universities, etc.)
 - Aggregate data per unit (college, department, program) and per capita
- Total dollars secured through grants, fellowships, and other investments
 - Total amount of funded research each year (aggregate per unit and per capita)
 - Data available from the Office of Research (OR) and WSU Foundation tracking
 - Data in the MyResearch database provides an annual total of sponsored research (i.e., if a PI has a five-year grant the revenue from each year is added to the total by year)
- Number of collaborative projects and types of support
 - Industry partnerships (in kind or financial support)
 - National lab partnerships (joint appointments, shared resources/technologies)
 - University partnerships

- Infrastructure and research support
 - Disciplinary-responsive data on financial investments for infrastructure, space, and travel support (e.g., exhibition spaces, travel for research collaborations funded by external associations or agencies)

Disciplinary-Responsive Peer Benchmarks for Per Capita Research Intensity

Disciplinary-responsive peer benchmarks for per capita research intensity provide a tailored system for assessing and comparing the research productivity that accounts for disciplinary differences, adjusted for the unique characteristics of each field. Research intensity benchmarks should account for quantitative measures, such as publications, and qualitative factors like professional recognition and peer evaluations. Given the diversity of disciplines, metrics should be customized based on the norms of each field (e.g., emphasis on publishing journal articles vs. books in specific disciplines). The gathered data establishes benchmarks or reference points that reflect average or high-performing research intensity levels within each discipline.

Examples of data to be collected include:

- Publications
 - Books and book chapters
 - Peer-reviewed journal articles
 - Conference proceedings
 - Collections/edited volumes
 - Citations
- Other research/creative activities
 - Clinical trials
 - Exhibitions and performances
 - Artistic installations
 - Media productions
 - Published data sets
- Additional qualitative measures:
 - Peer evaluations and professional recognition
 - Expert narratives and media coverage

Societal and Community Impact

The impact of research and creative activities extends beyond academic communities and can be measured by the benefits to various stakeholders, as well as changes in practice or policy. It is crucial to track these impacts as an aggregate (per unit and per capita) to ensure an equitable evaluation across all programs. It is also important to include measures of the long-term societal or environmental effects, such as improvements in local communities, the scaling of research outcomes to larger populations, or contributions to national or international policy shifts over extended periods.

Examples of data to be collected include:

- Quantitative measures
 - Patents, intellectual property disclosures, and technology transfers
 - Media coverage (articles, interviews, news reports, press releases)
 - Changes in public policy or community practices informed by research
 - Economic impacts of research-related events, such as lectures, exhibitions, and performances, which can be assessed through attendance data and subsequent economic activity (e.g., dining, hotel stays, parking)
 - Disciplinary-responsive impact measures (e.g., organizational-level data such as performance records or event attendance)
- Qualitative measures
 - Peer accounts (unsolicited letters, external evaluations) and narratives regarding the outward-facing impacts of research and creative activities
 - Community and stakeholder narratives of positive changes, such as shifts in public attitudes or behaviors

- Evidence of tangible societal changes, such as increased vaccination rates or improved local policies
- Policy documents documenting pre- and post-impacts on policy or practice

Service

These indicators measure faculty contributions to institutional and disciplinary service through governance roles, student engagement, and leadership in professional organizations. By recognizing both internal and external service activities, they highlight the broader impact of faculty work on university operations and academic communities.

Internal service

- Ratio of departmental faculty who serve on governance committees and task forces at and beyond the college level
 - This measure is meant as a proxy for the overall institutional service involvement of unit-level faculty
- Service related to student activities outside direct instruction
 - This measure might be adapted by individual units
 - Examples: Advising Registered Student Organizations (RSOs), or student groups that are not RSOs. Planning and holding events that enrich student learning, such as exhibits, performances, lectures, and off-campus learning opportunities
 - Percent of unit faculty who receive an “especially meritorious performance” annual review rating for service
 - This measure is meant to recognize the quality of service and will be based on the upcoming Workload Policy and its associated changes to annual review forms

External service

- Ratio of journal editors (or other similar disciplinary discourse makers) to the number of departmental faculty who have such service in their position description
 - This measure is meant as a proxy for WSU faculty’s influence in shaping disciplinary discourse through scholarly outputs
 - Other examples of disciplinary discourse makers: juried art reviews chairs, national grant panel chairs, federal agency program officers, program committee chairs for disciplinary conferences
- Ratio of departmental faculty who are officers of national-level professional organizations
 - This measure is meant as a proxy for WSU faculty’s influence in shaping disciplinary structure (such as accreditation standards, curricular expectations, disciplinary mores, etc.)
 - Examples: school board members, national board officers, disciplinary association officers (MLA, AHA, etc.)

NEXT STEPS

Following President Cantwell’s review and approval of the efficiency indicators, the Provost’s Office will develop an annual departmental evaluation process during the 2025-2026 academic year. The annual unit-level evaluation will be operationalized to ensure WSU remains a forward-looking land-grant research university.

Additionally, in partnership with Institutional Research, the Provost’s Office will establish a university dashboard to identify trends and understand patterns that will be critically important to aid system strategic planning, annual financial planning and allocations, federal and state governmental processes, and other critical institutional planning activities to increase comprehensive integrated planning system-wide. The dashboard will be produced in multiple phases and is anticipated to be an estimation model and will assume inaccuracies and use approximations.

At the college and unit level, the evaluation stemming from the AAPO will be used by the Provost’s Office to carefully evaluate the unit’s alignment with the determined priorities and efficiencies of outcome indicators, determine modifications or closures, and support institutional funding decisions to ensure informed growth

and stability. For units observing abnormalities within the dashboard, the Provost's Office and/or respective Dean will discuss the variances during the unit's annual evaluation.

Finally, after the annual evaluation and dashboard is finalized, the Provost's Office will partner with Marketing and Communications to develop a system-wide internal and external communication strategy to highlight the academic and faculty affairs expertise and successes.

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- Kristina Peterson-Wilson, Vice Provost for Academic Administration & Chief of Staff (Committee Chair)
- Trevor Bond, Interim Dean, Libraries
- Douglas Call, Senior Vice Provost (Ex-officio)
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