Sam Houston State University's Path to the Excellence in Assessment Designation

Jeff Roberts and Brandi M. Jones

P**RIOR TO 2013, ASSESSMENT EFFORTS AT SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY WERE** not ideal. A "check-the-boxes" mentality was pervasive for many programs across the campus, and assessment was widely viewed as a compliance activity for accreditation—not for meaningful improvement of student learning. With a Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) Fifth-Year Interim Report due in 2015, institutional leaders, recognizing the need to reinvigorate the university's assessment efforts, hired a new director of assessment in January 2013 to begin the difficult task of overhauling the assessment process. Over time, programs at SHSU have shifted away from "check-the-boxes" practices and have embraced significant assessment efforts leading to meaningful improvement of student learning and institutional effectiveness. At the institutional level, SHSU has implemented a robust general education assessment process using multiple authentic measures of student learning. Efforts to improve assessment practices at SHSU are still ongoing; however, SHSU's successes in building a culture of authentic, meaningful assessment have ultimately led to the university earning the 2019 Excellence in Assessment (EIA) designation.

Institutional Context

Located in Huntsville, Texas, SHSU enrolls approximately 21,000 students (18,500+ undergraduate and 2,500+ graduate students) across a wide range of undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs. As an institution within the SACSCOC accreditation region, approximately 180 academic programs and 100 educational, administrative, and student support units engage in an extensive, annual programmatic assessment process. Oversight of this annual assessment process is carried out by the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA), under the leadership of the director of assessment, Dr. Jeff Roberts, and his staff, Brandi Jones and Tama Hamrick.

OAPA staff also facilitate the university's extensive general education assessment efforts. In fall 2014, all public institutions in Texas implemented redesigned core curriculum programs. At the center of these revisions were six general education outcomes, which all public institutions in Texas are expected to promote within their student bodies and assess for student attainment: (1) critical thinking, (2) communication, (3) empirical and

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quantitative reasoning, (4) teamwork, (5) personal responsibility, and (6) social responsibility. SHSU regularly conducts assessments of these general education outcomes using measures of student learning from multiple points throughout the curriculum. OAPA staff regularly analyze these data for use in driving student learning improvement across the institution and generating reports that are published on the OAPA website.

Strategies for Promoting a Positive Culture of Assessment at SHSU

A key to the transition from a culture focused on minimal compliance to one embracing meaningful assessment for program and institutional improvement has been embracing the value of assessment as an action research activity and promoting the scholarship of teaching, learning, and assessment. While the total number of activities SHSU uses to promote a positive assessment culture are too long to list, some examples of major efforts are highlighted here.

Regular training, workshops, and other events each year by OAPA staff to the campus community have played a major role in promoting assessment messages. Additionally, the director of assessment has implemented an internal consultant model to increase the impact of outreach efforts. Using this model, departments and programs can request that OAPA staff provide individual and small-group training and assistance with assessment plan design and implementation.

Under OAPA's direction, each academic college at SHSU conducts an annual review of the assessment plans within their college using a locally developed rubric. This process provides much-needed college- and university-level oversight and provides valuable feedback and guidance to the academic programs regarding the quality of their assessment efforts, which can be used for future improvement.

SHSU has also implemented an Assessment Mini-Grant program to help support and reward the scholarship of teaching, learning, and assessment. This program provides 15 $1,000 grants per year to faculty and staff engaging in assessment-related projects or making assessment-related presentations at professional conferences. Since 2015, more than 50 Assessment Mini-Grants, totaling more than $50,000, have been awarded.

Finally, the university's general education outcomes have provided a powerful vehicle for fostering a culture of sustained, meaningful assessment at SHSU. OAPA staff, in conjunction with the academic colleges, regularly facilitate a mixture of end-of-experience and course-embedded assessments designed to evaluate authentic student work. As part

Call for Contributions

The editor welcomes short articles and news items for *Assessment Update*. Guidelines follow for those who would like to contribute articles on outcomes assessment in higher education.

- *Content:* Please send an account of your experience with assessment in higher education. Include concrete examples of practice and results.
- *Audience: Assessment Update* readers are academic administrators, campus assessment practitioners, institutional researchers, and faculty from a variety of fields. All types of institutions are represented in the readership.
- *Style:* A report, essay, news story, or letter to the editor is welcome. Limited references can be printed; however, extensive tables cannot be included.
- *Format:* Articles may be sent to aupdate@iupui.edu as a Microsoft Word attachment. Please include your complete postal mailing address.
- *Length:* 1,000–2,000 words.
- *Copyright:* Articles shall not have been registered for copyright or published elsewhere prior to publication in *Assessment Update*.
- *Deadlines:* Each issue is typically planned four months before its publication.

Please address mailed contributions and comments to Stephen P. Hundley, Executive Editor, *Assessment Update*, Suite 4049 University Hall, 301 University Blvd., Indianapolis, IN 46202. ■

Key Success Factors in Strengthening and Supporting Institutionwide Goals for Learning: An Overview

Stephen P. Hundley

CONTINUING A TRADITION WE began in 2017, this special issue of *Assessment Update* profiles select recipients of the 2019 Excellence in Assessment (EIA) designation. Each of these institutions successfully integrates assessment practices across campus, provides evidence of student learning outcomes, and uses assessment results to guide institutional decision-making and improve student performance. Learn more about the EIA designation at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) website (learningoutcomesassessment.org/eia/). Additionally, Natasha Jankowski's NILOA Perspectives column on page 12 describes how the EIA process has the potential to contribute to evidence-based storytelling.

The theme of my Editor's Notes throughout 2020 will focus on *Key Success Factors in Strengthening and Supporting Institutionwide Goals for Learning*. Complementing the learning outcomes at course and program levels and in other settings, institutionwide goals for learning describe what students should know and be able to do as graduates of *any* program across the college or university. These goals reinforce the aims and values an institution places on a collegiate education, and signal to students, parents, employers, and other influencers the broad outcomes graduates should be able to demonstrate by attaining a degree from the institution.

Many campuses have adapted a framework developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) known as Essential Learning Outcomes to guide their thinking about specific institutionwide learning goals. As described extensively on the AAC&U's website (aacu.org/leap/essential-learning-outcomes), Essential Learning Outcomes—and the related VALUE rubrics designed to articulate characteristics and criteria of these outcomes—prepare students for twenty-first-century challenges in several domains. These include:

- *Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World*, through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts;
- *Intellectual and Practical Skills*, including inquiry and analysis, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, and teamwork and problem-solving;
- *Personal and Social Responsibility*, including civic knowledge and engagement—local and global, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning; and
- *Integrative and Applied Learning*, including synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies.

Institutionwide goals for learning have the potential to provide meaningful, coherent, and interconnected learning experiences for students. By serving as an overarching framework for student learning, they provide an opportunity for individual programs, courses, and learning experiences in co-curricular, experiential, community, and international settings to align their specific learning goals to broader institutional learning goals. Doing so presents several venues and possibilities to introduce, reinforce, and assess both types of learning goals.

There are several challenges faced by faculty, staff, and administrators in advancing institutionwide goals for learning. First, some colleagues may not fully appreciate the significance of having institutionwide goals for learning and their intended purpose in developing holistic graduates. Second, because such institutionwide learning goals are broad in nature, it may be difficult for individual faculty or staff members to see how these goals connect to specific goals for learning in individual programs, courses, or learning experiences. Third, implementation and assessment of institutionwide goals for learning is typically distributed throughout the campus; thus, there may be a sense of diffusion of responsibility for accomplishing the outcomes of these goals. Finally, colleagues may lack an understanding of how to use credible evidence from various sources to determine the extent to which institutionwide goals for learning are being achieved.

To address these challenges, several key success factors are necessary to strengthen and support institutionwide goals for

Auburn University: Positioning Assessment as an Educational Development Resource

Megan Rodgers Good and Kathleen Benton-Snead Boyd

Institutional Context

AUBURN UNIVERSITY IS A LAND-grant institution in Auburn, Alabama, serving 30,440 students (81% of which are undergraduate students). Auburn has an R1 Carnegie classification; thus, many faculty members expend significant energy on their research activities. Prior to 2015, assessment at Auburn University was often met with resistance. Faculty were largely unsure of what quality assessment meant and experienced a heavy workload associated with assessment (i.e., some programs were submitting three separate assessment reports to different offices). Following administrative reflection, in 2015 Auburn University created the Office of Academic Assessment (OAA). Reporting to the provost, this new unit was charged with fostering a positive culture of assessment at Auburn University where learning data could inform decisions impacting student success.

Given the aforementioned situational factors, the OAA personnel decided to approach their assessment work as a *faculty support* unit focused on *improvement*. In order to support faculty, an initial "meet them where they are" effort was made to identify and minimize barriers to assessment so faculty could focus on the most meaningful parts of assessment (e.g., programmatic conversations about learning). If faculty candidly explained that the material in past assessment reports was not meaningful to them, we encouraged them to approach assessment at a slow pace, making incremental improvements to the quality of assessment over time. Further, we included faculty in all major decisions so that we could benefit from diverse perspectives that increased the quality of our decisions. This collab-orative approach earned faculty buy-in and helped foster goodwill toward assessment.

Assessment Strategies

Responsible for both program and general education assessment, the OAA first focused on developing a supportive infrastructure for the approximately 300 academic degree programs on campus. Specifically, the OAA changed the reporting deadline from mid-fall semester to July 1 (providing time for faculty to adjust to assessment changes), eliminated a contract with an Assessment Management System that faculty complained about (reports are now submitted via Word documents, allowing for flexibility in report structure), and notably worked with 10 faculty members to create Auburn's Quality of Assessment Rubric.

The Quality of Assessment Rubric allows us to engage in meta-assessment; that is, we provide formative feedback to all academic degree programs. This process also provides a rich professional development opportunity for faculty and staff that serve as peer reviewers. Beyond providing formative feedback, we offer a variety of engagement opportunities, including an Assessment 101 workshop series, one-on-one consultations, customized program workshops, and student focus groups to capture student responses to meaningful curricular questions. This initial effort on program assessment allowed us to build many productive relationships with faculty across campus and laid a foundation for our approach to transforming general education assessment.

Specifically, we facilitated a "Year of Reflection" with the Core Curriculum and General Education Committee (CCGEC) to begin a conversation about changing our general education assessment strategy. During this time, a number of barriers related to the previously used course-embedded assessment approach were unearthed: Not all faculty were using the common rubrics recommended by the CCGEC, and results across course sections were aggregated by

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department heads/chairs who approached aggregation in a variety of ways. Ultimately, the process was incredibly time-intensive, and the CCGEC members could not make judgments about student learning from the departmental reports they received.

Given this reflection, the CCGEC made two critical decisions: (1) to centralize assessment and (2) to focus assessment on graduating seniors. The centralized assessment approach was in direct reaction to the many barriers identified through our Year of Reflection. Our second decision was informed by Huber and Kuncel's (2016) meta-analysis on critical thinking that suggested that the longer students were engaged in college coursework, the larger their gains in critical thinking. The CCGEC rationalized that our prior course-embedded approach captured student learning at (mostly) the freshman or sophomore levels; however, the CCGEC recognized that the student learning outcomes (SLOs) for the core curriculum were *foundational* and re-

inforced throughout the Auburn experience in curricular and co-curricular settings. From these decisions, the OAA, in close coordination with the CCGEC, facilitated the work of nine faculty working groups to redefine our core curriculum SLOs and identify or create assessments for each outcome. These new outcomes were approved by the Faculty Senate in October 2017. Following, the OAA conducted two years of centralized pilots until ultimately arriving at the SCORE (Student Core Outcomes and Readiness Evaluation) infrastructure. While the SCORE was initially derived as a way to measure learning relative to our core curriculum SLOs, it presents an opportunity for Auburn to understand and improve the student experience, both academically and through co-curricular experiences.

Institutional Assessment—The SCORE

The SCORE uses a mix of purchased measures (e.g., the ETS HEIghten) and faculty-created assessments affirmed by Auburn faculty. Graduating seniors are expected to register for a one-hour testing session at Testing Services (on campus) and are randomly assigned to take an assessment aligned with one of the core curriculum SLOs. If students do not take the SCORE, they are permitted to graduate, but they will not receive their physical diploma. Our compliance rate for this infrastructure is high, ranging from 96–99%. Beginning in spring 2019, students are also expected to complete a First Destination Survey (i.e., inquiring about postgraduation plans) and a survey about high-impact practice engagement.

We believe assessment is conducted to facilitate improvement in learning. As opposed to hoping to improve upon each outcome incrementally, our strategy is to focus on disaggregating the data related to each SLO and identifying learning discrepancies. In this way, we can focus on closing equity gaps in learning. We have acquired data from multiple partners across campuses to allow us to investigate learning research questions such as:

- *Curricular:* Do a student's *scientific reasoning* skills differ by the core curriculum science sequence chosen (e.g., geology, biology, physics)?
- *Demographic:* Do first-generation college students have differential *written communication* skills compared to other college students?
- *Co-Curricular:* Do students in executive positions in student organizations demonstrate different *critical thinking* skills?
- *High-Impact Practice:* Do students that participate in at least one high-impact practice (HIP; such as study abroad) have stronger *cultural competency* skills than those that didn't have the opportunity to participate in a HIP?
- *Relational:* Do students who are going to graduate school after graduation have differential learning outcomes compared to those of similar capabilities that chose not to attend graduate school?
- *Unit-Specific-Focused:* Do students whose parents are actively involved in their education (as measured by their engagement with Parent Services' Parent Portal) exhibit differential learning outcomes at graduation than similar students whose parents were not engaged?

These sample research questions were co-created by many stakeholders from across the institution.

Lessons Learned/Future Directions

We included 77 faculty members in the creation and implementation of our program assessment infrastructure and approximately 130 faculty members and administrators in the creation of our general education assessment process, and at least 60 administrators and faculty members have provided feedback related to the creation and implementation of the SCORE. We learned that an inclusive approach to assessment results in slow change, but that the change has deeper roots.

Our current challenge is finding the capacity to answer our learning research questions. As we slowly make progress in generating assessment reports from the SCORE, we are also brainstorming ways to build an infrastructure to socialize results and work with stakeholders across campus to improve the student experience.

Recommendations

If an institution has created a robust assessment culture, we strongly encourage applying for the EIA designation. The process of creating our narrative was a healthy endeavor—it provided an opportunity for us to reflect on our work and weave together our narrative in an integrated way. We were thrilled to earn the designation and have received countless emails from faculty across campus congratulating us. We have responded to these messages with gratitude, noting, however, that they are in fact the reason our culture has positively changed. If an institution is considering changing its assessment approach, we recommend taking a moment to identify where bureaucratic barriers can be removed. Our early decision to change our reporting deadline and move to Word documents created ample goodwill across campus (though it did result in more work for us).

Auburn University has laid a strong foundation for campuswide improvement initiatives. Recently, a faculty collaborator commented, "I think our Office of Academic Assessment has recognized that, like a fine wine, implementing an assessment process that produces meaningful results takes proper ingredients, careful nurturing, and time to achieve its full potential. Their deliberately collaborative and patient approach seems slow on a short timeframe, but over a period of several years has produced a significant change in attitude toward assessment across campus." With the support of Auburn faculty and administrators, we still have a journey ahead of us to improve student learning, and we are excited to continue this work.. ∎

Reference

Huber, C. R., and N. R. Kuncel. 2016. "Does College Teach Critical Thinking? A Meta-analysis." *Review of Educational Research*, 86(2), 431–468.

Megan Rodgers Good is the director and Kathleen Benton-Snead Boyd is the associate director of the Office of Academic Assessment at Auburn University in Alabama.

Valuing Assessment: One College's Journey to Meaningful College Reform

Jacob Amidon and Debora Ortloff

Finger Lakes Community College

FINGER LAKES COMMUNITY COL-
lege, located midway between Syra-
cuse and Rochester in the heart of
upstate New York, serves approximately
5,900 students annually. FLCC has a four-
county service area that is mostly rural but
includes two small urban centers. We are
one of 31 community colleges in the State
University of New York (SUNY) system.

Our Reform Initiative

For the past six years, FLCC faculty
and staff have been engaged in a gover-
nance-led comprehensive reform initia-
tive that we call the Learning Framework.
The framework moves our curriculum to
a wholly outcomes-based set of local re-
quirements that privileges our own insti-
tutional learning outcomes, which we call
the FLCC values, and also includes our
state and regional accreditation require-
ments for general education—forming,
in essence, a second level of institutional-
level outcomes (ILOs).

The Learning Framework initiative
continues to be a large project that has
fundamentally changed our curricular
development and assessment practices
at the course, program, and institutional
levels. There has been particular impact
at the institutional level, as the language
and practices of assessment, through our
ILOs, have permeated beyond academics
and formed a basis for a shared culture,
both around the student experience and in
our business practices.

While the vehicle for reform and the
continued stewardship of the framework
and academic assessment lies with shared
governance, the initial impetus came from
outside, based on new curricular mandates
from SUNY, our system office, and rec-
ommendations from Middle States, our
regional accrediting body. In addition,
Middle States released new requirements
for general education that we needed to
incorporate into our curriculum. We were
left to ask: Where, in this sea of SUNY
and Middle States, do we still see FLCC?

Adopting the framework helped us
reclaim and narrate what is unique about
an FLCC education. Further, this "unique
FLCC" approach quickly allowed us to
broaden the conversation quite dramati-

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cally to include the whole campus com-
munity. Governance representatives from
the registrar's office, advising, student af-
fairs, the library, and others were able to
take part immediately in the conversation.
Service departments like marketing and
human resources could access the higher-
level discussion of our values and consider
them in their work. The values are now a
highly visible part of our everyday world
at FLCC. Yes, our ILOs are operational-
ized, mapped, and measurable, and we are
beginning to measure them, but the story
we are able to tell about FLCC through
them transcends these concepts, and they
emerge truly as college values. This has
become a much more powerful way to
talk about what we try to do each day in
our teaching and in our students' learning.
(For more detail on the framework and our
Excellence in Assessment (EIA) applica-
tion, visit https://sites.google.com/view/
flcc-may-2019).

Assessment Strategies

The adoption and ongoing assessment
of our ILOs rely on three core philoso-
phies that serve to define our assessment
practice at FLCC.

Assessment as Peer Review

Our movement to an outcomes-based
approach to curricula, including the adop-
tion and assessment of new institutional
learning outcomes (our values), has been,
from decision to adopt to writing of each
policy to the alignment of programs and
courses to now the review of assessment
results, firmly rooted in the shared gover-
nance process. While curriculum approval
has a long history in shared governance,
the assessment process does not. The as-
sessment committee's formal role in ap-
proving outcomes and plans and review-
ing results moves assessment from a bu-
reaucratic action tasked to one professor
(usually the lowest-ranked if the program
has multiple faculty) to a peer activity, led
by educators for the improvement of edu-
cational outcomes.

Faculty Coaching to Support Faculty Assessment Practice

To realize the new outcomes-based
model aligned to nontraditional ILOs re-
quired a different approach to curriculum
and assessment than previously existed at
FLCC. Acknowledging this newness, we
deliberately designed a highly collabora-
tive and supportive implementation process

that mirrored the peer review we were using to decide on the outcomes. This process was meant to reflect the shared nature of the framework and to encourage faculty to think more deeply about the outcomes they were ascribing to their programs, courses, and FLCC itself. At the heart of this model is the use of assessment coaches in an inquiry-based approach. Coaches ask questions that help faculty develop a narrative of their program, such as: "What are the pieces of your program that are most critical to you?" From that narrative, program- and course-level outcomes are created. In relationship to the institutional learning outcomes, faculty coaches ask their fellow faculty members to brainstorm what each value means to them personally in their work and in their discipline. This inquiry builds the bases for the narratives and mapping they will complete with their coach, supports the underlying philosophy of assessment as an act of peer review, and helps ensure the process supports systematic dialogue about teaching and learning.

Telling the Story of the Values: Narrative-Based Documentation

Early in our realignment process, as coaches were developing the questions that probed thinking about teaching, learning, and students' "walk-out-the-door knowledge," we realized we needed a way to capture these narratives, because they were becoming a backbone way of talking about learning at FLCC. We build assessment documentation that uses mapping (checking boxes) as an exercise to help faculty consider the relationship their course and program outcomes have to our institutional learning outcomes. However, the real thrust of each assessment plan is the series of values narratives that enable the faculty to explain in the words of their discipline how they are fulfilling the promise of the FLCC values in their course or program.

Supporting Teaching and Learning Dialogue

The last piece of the puzzle is the extension of the coaching model to use assessment practices to facilitate outcomes improvement through systematic conversations about teaching and learning. As we have been working on realignment to the new ILOs, we have focused these efforts first on the overarching outcome of written communication as a means of developing the model that we will apply to all of our institutional learning outcomes based on a cycle passed in governance. Our institutional learning outcomes coordinator provides coaching throughout the process, from artifact selection to norming to assessing, and, most importantly, to providing discipline-specific support in using the results to improve teaching and learning. Coaching allows us to create high-quality materials that can be accessed by everyone, but also provides individualized support to each discipline. In addition, in accordance with the faculty union contract, we have instituted two noninstructional days a year dedicated to structured teaching and learning dialogue, which allows for the work of assessment to be done with more focus. A collaboration between academic affairs and assessment allows these days to be well-planned, funded, and a part of the academic calendar in ways that will support a more sustainable model.

Lessons Learned

The most critical lesson we can share is that leadership matters. Assessment for transformation—which is the promise that real assessment brings—requires the wherewithal to lead with intentionality. For us, this intentionality manifests in several key strategies:

1. Assessment for the sake of assessment is never worthwhile. Set, explain, and visually communicate the college vision over and over, adapting and changing with the feedback that comes from honest and steady conversations about the higher ideals assessment aims to serve.

2. Use the context of your college to make decisions. The vision-driven conversations we mentioned earlier still need structure. Creating assessment as a peer review activity makes it the work of the academy, and situating it in governance makes it a part of shared decision-making. This structure allows the process to move forward with purpose that can still transcend bureaucracy.

3. Develop and invest in faculty leaders. This does not happen by accident. Invest in their professional development, provide them with support, and listen to their ideas. Their expertise is valuable, and beyond this they can represent the work in places and ways only faculty can.

4. Always have a group of early adopters working three steps ahead. We have five consistent years of institution-level data in written communication that have been used by the whole campus even while most of the campus was involved in aligning to the new ILOs. This helps everyone know what the next steps are, because we have in fact already taken them.

5. Set goals and celebrate them. The EIA designation was a specific outcome we set early in this journey. Our early adopters, faculty coaches, and co-leaders saw achieving this as a motivating goal and as verification that what we were working toward was as worthwhile as we believed it to be.

We recognize that we still have much to accomplish, and that this work will continue to be challenging and full of unexpected turns, especially now as we move more fully into including co-curricular outcomes and to the more broad-based assessment work of our outcomes. However, in reflecting on where we were six years ago, our motivation to highlight what is unique about FLCC learning and to move away from the bureaucratic and insulated way we were conducting assessment toward educator-wide conversations has been realized and sets us up for continued success. ∎

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Using Assessment to Further Academic Excellence and Student Success at the University of Northern Iowa

John Ophus, Deirdre Bucher Heistad, and Kristin Moser

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA was honored to earn a 2019 Excellence in Assessment (EIA) designation. Ranked second in the "Best Regional Universities (Midwest)" category for public universities (U.S. News & World Report's 2019 "America's Best Colleges" guidebook), UNI is a regional comprehensive university that offers more than 90 majors across four academic colleges (business administration; education; humanities, arts, and sciences; and social and behavioral sciences) and the graduate college. The University of Northern Iowa, with a fall 2019 enrollment of 10,497, was founded on a strong liberal arts curriculum and is dedicated to providing a world-class university education for students in a personalized learning environment.

In recent years, UNI's assessment practices have changed dramatically at all levels of the institution, having moved away from a compliance-driven assessment culture that involved a lot of planning for assessment toward one of actually doing it. Today, UNI's assessment efforts focus on continuous improvement, where assessment expectations are woven into the fabric of our operations. The institution has built a faculty-driven, administratively supported, and student-learning-focused culture of assessment, the essence of which is communicated to the public via the UNI Academic Catalog that highlights the fact that UNI "is committed to the assessment of student learning for the ongoing improvement of curriculum, programs, and services offered by the university and for accreditation processes. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators all play a role in student learning and all benefit from the creation of useful and meaningful assessment strategies and information."

UNI's assessment strategies are intentional, integrated, and transparent. We have established a culture of assessment founded upon a shared set of guiding principles and underlying assumptions and recognize that the "process of assessment begins with the establishment of measurable student learning outcomes (SLOs)," with the primary goal of assessment being to "improve student learning." Student learning outcomes exist at the university, program, and course levels. When crafting student learning outcomes, faculty focus on describing what their graduates know, can do, and value as a result of their UNI education. Faculty are encouraged to consider using the Association of American Colleges and Universities VALUE rubrics to guide their work, initially in terms of thinking about their SLOs and then to craft the rubrics they will use when evaluating authentic student work. As such, we have been able to establish a comprehensive set of student learning outcomes that are fully integrated and vertically linked from the course-, through the program-, and up to the university-level SLOs. The institution-level assessment plan mandates that all SLOs be assessed within an academic program review seven-year cycle. As such, the university's SLO assessment processes

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are integrated into the Board of Regents, State of Iowa program review mandate, which includes both internal and external review processes. In sum, faculty engage in ongoing annual assessment while also having the opportunity to periodically synthesize a comprehensive set of data to improve student learning.

Annual assessment information is collected and disseminated throughout the institution on an annual basis to improve student learning. The process of data collection begins by pulling artifacts from individual classes for assessment, discussion, and review by the faculty in individual programs and departments. All academic programs are asked to engage in the direct assessment of student learning and report their findings via the Annual Assessment Report. In this report, programs: (1) provide a comprehensive list of program SLOs and assessment plan, (2) identify which SLOs were measured during the annual assessment cycle, (3) provide a description of the artifacts assessed and the instruments/rubrics used for assessment, (4) describe the data set (i.e., number of students, percent of class, program-level demographics), (5) provide a data analysis of the direct (required) and indirect (optional) assessment results, and (6) include departmental meeting minutes where an action plan describing how assessment results will be used for continuous improvement was discussed.

Results from the annual assessment are then communicated through the organization, flowing from faculty through department heads, deans, associate deans, the Assessment Council, and the provost, with each offering feedback. Feedback is then transmitted back through deans, associate deans, and department heads to the individual programs, where it is incorporated to strengthen student learning and the assessment process. To implement this process, assessment reports are analyzed annually at an Assessment Council retreat. During the retreat, each assessment report is reviewed and scored by at least three evaluators using a common rubric. Each evaluator is asked to examine the breadth and depth of the assessment activities, including the clarity and measurability of SLOs, the program's commitment to direct assessment of student learning, its use of meaningful data, and the student learning improvement action plan. The deans and associate deans communicate the assessment feedback back to the departments. Evidence of the process is captured within assessment reports, feedback given to the programs by the deans as noted during the Assessment Council annual retreat, Assestivus, and via the program meeting minutes, where the assessment results are discussed among program faculty and used to create an action plan.

To enhance UNI's direct assessment of student work, an annual set of data-based metrics is produced to complement the information collected via the annual assessment process. These metrics, which are common indicators of program vitality, add additional quantitative data points to assist departments in interpretation of assessment data. The metrics are clustered into categories of student indicators, faculty/staff indicators, and scholarship indicators and are available on a continuous improvement website that is designed to equip faculty and staff with explicit knowledge of data on which strategic decisions can be made. In this way, faculty can analyze and synthesize student learning outcomes assessment data alongside enrollment counts, degrees granted, program-completion rates, and program faculty counts. This initiative transparently shares data to grow the culture of continuous self-reflection and innovation for departments.

Universitywide commitment has been crucial for the successes at UNI. While the Office of Undergraduate Studies provides leadership in the area of assessment and faculty development, support for academic assessment activities and the collection of data related to student learning outcomes are managed through the resources and leadership of the Office of Institutional Research & Effectiveness, Deans' Council, Assessment Council, and Office of the Executive Vice-President and Provost.

To educate and inform stakeholders, an assessment website was created using the Excellence in Assessment transparency framework. Here, the institution communicates the university's assessment policies, procedures, and select results. Whereas course-level outcomes are communicated to students via syllabi, university and program SLOs are communicated via UNI's assessment website and UNI's Academic Catalog. The Office of Institutional Research & Effectiveness also communicates a wide variety of assessment data concerning the institution at large. Alongside assessment data, university stakeholders can find UNI data essentials, UNI facts, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data, and continuous improvement data.

While UNI is proud of the work done that earned us this national recognition, the institution recognizes that assessment is a continuous process, and new challenges will present themselves at every turn. We are, however, optimistic that the culture established will support the institution as a whole as it rises up to meet these challenges.

In spring 2018, UNI began redesigning the general education curriculum, a process that should be complete by fall 2021. In spring 2019, the UNI Faculty Senate approved a new set of student learning outcomes proposed by the General Education Review Steering Committee. Before launching this outcomes-based general education program, a new assessment plan will be created. Since the new general education curriculum is being designed around a carefully crafted set of measurable student learning outcomes, the assessment plan should be easily articulated and implemented within our larger culture of academic assessment.

Like many institutions, UNI is also working to enhance its co-curricular assessment. The Co-Curricular Student Learning Assessment Committee (CC-SLAC) was established in 2018 and is working to build an overarching assessment system of policies, procedures, and expectations while simultaneously engaging in assessment-related professional development opportunities, including several workshop retreats. This approach to co-curricular assessment, of doing assessment while simultaneously planning next steps, has helped the institution to avoid one of the greatest assessment pitfalls, which is planning for assessment, rather than just doing it. It only takes one measurable outcome to engage in the act of assessment, and doing small-scale assessment provides the foundational understanding needed for faculty and staff to then engage in the process of comprehensive assessment planning.

UNI faculty and staff are constantly looking for ways to improve student learning. Therefore, as part of UNI's commitment to academic excellence and student success, UNI has built a strong culture of assessment that recognizes the importance of providing faculty and staff the opportunity to reflect upon student learning within courses, majors, and co-curricular activities. UNI is proud of this recognition. This award not only confirms that UNI's continuous and transparent assessment processes reflect best practice, but also recognizes UNI as a national leader in student outcomes assessment. ◼

John Ophus is an associate professor and the associate director and Deirdre Bucher Heistad is a professor and the executive director of the Office of Undergraduate Studies and Kristin Moser is the director of the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls.

Building a Culture of Assessment at Bucknell University

Kevork Horissian

Introduction

BUCKNELL UNIVERSITY IS A UNIQUE institution that offers high-quality academic programs that span the arts and sciences, engineering, and management, complemented by vibrant co-curricular and residential programs. With 3,583 undergraduate students enrolled in the 2019–20 academic year, Bucknell is also a rare "small big" institution that offers its students the personal attention of a small liberal arts college in combination with the resources and programs of the caliber of a much larger research university. While we are ranked among the among the top national liberal arts colleges, our mission and offerings are broader than most other institutions on that list.

The title of our last decennial self-study accreditation narrative is "Delivering on Our Promise of a Transformative, Student-Centered Education." This topic is very much on our minds as Bucknell enters a period of intense strategic planning in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive higher education landscape. For Bucknell to overcome the challenges that lie ahead, and to continue to thrive and grow, it will be imperative that we as an institution are forward-looking, highly intentional, data-driven, prudently bold, and student-centered. Transparency and accountability with respect to our educational effectiveness and the "return on investment" for our students will become increasingly critical as well. Given our priorities, the first step will always be thoughtful, systematic, and collaborative assessment of what our students are learning; how they grow as thinkers, citizens, and future leaders in their chosen fields;

and how we can improve as an institution to help them learn and achieve even more and make the most of their time at Bucknell. Thus, the goal for our new strategic plan is to help us take stock of our strengths and achievements, as well as the challenges ahead and the work still to be done.

Assessment at Bucknell

We started our journey toward building a culture of assessment and receiving this recognition 14 years ago. In the last five years, we have made significant progress toward this goal. While assessment is mandated by our accreditors, our

> While assessment is mandated by our accreditors, our approach to assessment has always been more pragmatic: First and foremost, assessment should be useful and sustainable.

approach to assessment has always been more pragmatic: First and foremost, assessment should be useful and sustainable. Another key principle in our approach was to encourage academic and administrative offices in charge of students' experiences to create and execute assessments.

Building an Infrastructure

We started by building an institutional infrastructure. Key components of this infrastructure included:

- Centralizing the support service for assessment of curricular, extracurricular, and co-curricular activities under the Office of Institutional Research and Planning (OIRP). By doing so, we wanted to take advantage of the expertise in analytics, survey research, and

using data to make informed decisions that already existed in this office.
- Hiring an assessment coordinator with a broader scope of job responsibilities, so that person is viewed as a resource for various other activities, not just the annual assessment reports.
- Reinvigorating and redefining the role of the assessment committee. At some point, the committee was reviewing reports, providing feedback to departments, and performing other functions that were very operational in nature. The new charge asked the committee to become a catalyst for assessment ideas, determine the needs for educational programs related to assessment, and review the applications for the assessment grants.
- Receiving support from senior administrators. One of the first steps was to make sure our office and the faculty and staff involved in assessment had the support of Bucknell's senior management. In their interactions with faculty and staff, they have communicated the importance of assessment to Bucknell's long-term viability and thriving.

Our Approach—Providing Resources

Consistent with the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's Transparency Framework, Bucknell's educational goals are at the top of a vertically integrated pyramid. At the bottom

are the most concrete course-level learning outcomes, which map onto more general departmental learning goals, which then map onto college-level learning goals and up onto Bucknell's educational goals. This vertical integration also allows scaffolding of assessment of student learning from course-level assessment to department-, college-, and institutionwide levels.

Bucknell faculty and staff have access to multiple types of campuswide resources to help them in all stages of their assessment work, including the collection, analysis, sharing, and use of assessment data.

Establishing the Office of Institutional Research and Planning as a Key Partner. We established our office as a service center, not simply a place that helps with mandated reports. We help faculty and staff create, distribute, and analyze surveys; assist with qualitative research; and provide support for grant applications. So, our colleagues started viewing us as a trusted partner, and assessment was only one area of collaboration. Members of the OIRP staff often present results from surveys or studies to departments, committees, and trustees, or at colleague gatherings.

Engaging Internal and External Stakeholders via Interactive Assessment Dashboards. One approach we have adopted to help meet this growing demand for decision support is to create interactive data dashboards that our colleagues can use to obtain the data they need in a short span of time and without a need for a tailored report. We have created several such dashboards. Some of the more popular among faculty are Course Enrollment and the dashboard on how students fulfill general education requirements. In recent years, to meet the needs of a variety of internal and external stakeholders, in addition to traditional presentations and reports, Bucknell started to share assessment evidence of student learning, together with information about assessment processes, via online, interactive student learning outcomes dashboards, including:

- Evidence of Student Learning dashboard: Contains evidence of students' mastery of departmental goals, as well as Bucknell's educational goals, and includes direct assessment measures (compiled from the departmental assessment reports), as well as indirect assessment measures (e.g., relevant results from campuswide student surveys).
- Improving Student Learning dashboard: The first section lists both direct and indirect assessment measures used by departments. The second section provides examples of uses of assessment results for continued improvement of student learning.
- Statistics on Our Assessment Practices dashboard: Provides a summary of key metrics used to evaluate departmental assessment practices, based on our evaluation rubric.
- External Comparisons dashboard: Summarizes data on Bucknell student learning as compared to employer priorities and student engagement in high-impact learning practices, as well as benchmark data on key competencies such as critical thinking, quantitative literacy, effective writing, effective speaking, problem-solving, and teamwork.

In-Person Consultation With Assessment Coordinator. Most academic and nonacademic departments under the provost schedule a consultation with the assessment coordinator at least once per year, to receive feedback and guidance on their assessment work. The topic and scope of the consultation is up to the department, but the goal is always to make assessment as useful and meaningful to the department as possible; assessment reporting and gathering evidence for accreditation review come second.

Assessment Lunches and Training Events on Campus. Several times a year, faculty and staff interested in assessment gather at Assessment Lunches to discuss specific aspects of assessment, and to share knowledge, experiences, and resources in a friendly and informal setting.

More focused training workshops are also offered each semester and are usually well-attended. Examples of recent topics include: assessment of student ePortfolios, assessment of writing, assessment in the arts, entrance and exit surveys in Qualtrics, rubric development, and focus groups. The events are organized by the assessment coordinator in collaboration with faculty and staff colleagues.

Assessment Grant for Faculty and Staff. Thanks to the support of the provost's office, Bucknell faculty and staff conducting assessment in their department, or seeking to develop assessment expertise in their discipline, can apply for an assessment grant. The proposals are reviewed and awarded by the assessment committee. In addition to enhancing the assessment processes and knowledge base in the recipient's department, the grant strengthens the culture of assessment across campus, because all grant recipients present to the broader Bucknell community at the end of the grant period. We share the descriptions of awarded assessment grants online.

Assessment Resources Moodle Site. To facilitate an exchange of assessment knowledge, Bucknell faculty and staff can utilize a Moodle site with assessment resources, organized by topic, assessment approach and instrument, and discipline, as well as guidelines and templates for annual assessment reports.

Lessons Learned

Despite the progress made, several challenges remain and present opportunities for continued improvement. With the establishment of the Freeman College of Management in 2017, Bucknell University now consists of three distinct colleges, which combine liberal arts education in arts and the humanities, natural sciences and mathematics, and social sciences, with professional programs in engineering and management. In addition to disciplinary differences, both the pedagogical and assessment approaches are shaped by different accreditation require-
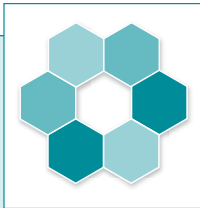
NILOA Perspectives

Excellence in Assessment as Evidence-Based Storytelling

Natasha A. Jankowski

The Excellence in Assessment (EIA) designation recognizes institutions that integrate assessment practices, provide evidence of student learning outcomes to stakeholders, and utilize assessment results to guide institutional decision-making and improve student performance. The EIA designation focuses upon institutionwide processes and uses of assessment results rather than on student performance or accomplishment through an evaluation process directly linked to the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) Transparency Framework (2011), which provides a structure to make evidence of assessment processes accessible, useful, and meaningful to audiences both internal and external to the institution. There are two tiers of designees, those that receive *Excellence* and those that have sustained their assessment efforts over the past five years that receive a *Sustained Excellence* designation. Through the application process for the EIA designation, institutions identify the strengths of institution-level assessment activities as well as areas for growth and improvement. Applications are evaluated by faculty and assessment experts on eight domains regarding institution-level assessment processes. We are currently entering the fifth year of the designation, which is co-sponsored by VSA Analytics, NILOA, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and endorsed by the Council of Independent Colleges.

Assessment of student learning in higher education is not overly thought of as useful, worthy of faculty time, and meaningful to actually improve student learning. However, despite all the rhetoric and negative press, institutions are successfully designing, leading, and implementing institutionwide assessment efforts that provide evidence of learning, building from the foundation of learning experiences in and out of the classroom. The Excellence in Assessment designation is valuable as a narrative device because it allows us to lift up examples of various models for institutions to consider and explore—since there is not one right way to implement assessment—and we can celebrate the work done at institutions that contribute to student success, connecting similarly situated institutions to learn from one another. In essence, we can hold up examples of the good work around assessment unfolding within our institutions. As the 2020 EIA application packet states:

> We are continually questioned about the value of higher education for our students, but lack a nationally recognized and respected means to rebut the claims that we are disorganized and muddled. While still respecting the diversity of what good assessment looks like in practice, the EIA designations provide a signal for external audiences to look to.

Yet, even with institutions who engage in meaningful, integrated assessment of student learning, telling a compelling assessment story to internal and external stakeholders remains a struggle. While institutions are sharing their learning outcome statements and related information on student learning on their institutional website, rarely is it the case that the rationale of undertaking assessment is shared with students, alumni, or even faculty and staff. When we talk about assessment, we talk about it to ourselves. Further, the EIA focus on institution-level assessment allows us to shine a light on the areas of greatest disconnect and discontent—institution-level assessment processes and practices and improving student learning. Instead of having two competing tiers of assessment approaches (that of institution-level and program-level), we can have one that builds upon the work unfolding at other levels throughout an institution.

Evidence-Based Storytelling

Most narratives around assessment focus on indicating that it simply is happening—that there are processes and practices in place to set learning outcomes and gather information on student attainment of said learning outcomes, and then mechanisms by which results are used to improve programs and practices in order to enhance student learning. The majority of narrative time is spent convincing people that assessment processes are unfolding regularly, that reports are gathered that provide evidence of the ongoing nature of the process, and that mechanisms are in place for use of

results to occur. We want to indicate the practice, but not the why. Further, we do not unpack questions of practice, such as how often and who is involved in setting learning outcomes? What does it mean to use results? Did changes actually lead to improvements in learning? How do we know those improvements were a direct result of assessment and changes made based upon results?

Overall, what is glaringly lacking in our current narratives around assessment is why we are doing assessment in the first place. In essence, we don't clearly state the value and worth of engaging in assessment. We want faculty to engage in assessing student learning, but we don't tell them why. We usually tell a story about how we have to do assessment, for purposes of regional accreditation, and when faculty and staff ask about why, we point to peer reviewers and our

assessment. The list below includes a quick snapshot of the various pieces, while the toolkit itself includes a variety of points to consider related to each one:

1. *Audience:* Who is the target audience of the narrative—not the ones who may read it, but who will take action?

2. *Argument:* What argument do you want to make to your target audience(s)? What are the goals for the story? What do you want the audience(s) to take away from this story?

3. *Evidence:* What evidence do you have to assert your claims (e.g., data sources, indirect/direct evidence of learning)?

4. *Story and Language:* What kind of story are you telling (e.g., compliance, improvement, loss, struggle, quest, tragedy, fantasy,

which to share it? How will you make your audiences aware of it and how will they find it?

9. *Organizational Narrative:* Are there competing narratives throughout the institution?

The toolkit can serve as a tool to assist institutions in writing their narratives, whether it be for the designation or for general communication with internal and external audiences. To learn more, please visit learningoutcomesassessment.org/evidence-based-storytelling/. ∎

References

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> The Excellence in Assessment designation is valuable as a narrative device because it allows us to lift up examples of various models for institutions to consider and explore—since there is not one right way to implement assessment—and we can celebrate the work done at institutions that contribute to student success, connecting similarly situated institutions to learn from one another.

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practice-driven literature as an answer. Our stories support the attitude of "Tell me how to do it so I can move on with my day."

What the EIA designation does is ask people to share the narrative around why they undertake assessment in the way that they do—why that and not something else? How does our approach align with the stated value and worth? One tool that was released by NILOA in 2019 (Jankowski and Baker) is the evidence-based storytelling toolkit, which pulls together concepts and tools from storytelling and narrative development and applies them to

etc.)?

5. *Characters:* Who are the character(s) in your story? What preconceived notions about the characters need to be addressed?

6. *Plot:* What is the plot? (The plot is the causal sequence of events and includes setting and conflict.)

7. *Data Visualizations:* If you are using visuals in your narrative, are they appropriate? Do they support the story you are trying to share or detract from it?

8. *Awareness and Discoverability:* Based on the story you crafted, what is the best medium through

About NILOA

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), established in 2008, is a research and resource-development organization, dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning.

To learn more about NILOA's work, including accessing publications and resources, please visit: learningoutcomesassessment.org

2020 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis
Call for Proposals

We would like to extend to you and your colleagues an invitation to join us for the 2020 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, October 25–27, 2020, at the Indianapolis Marriott Downtown Hotel. The Assessment Institute, hosted by IUPUI, is the nation's oldest and largest higher education event of its type, offering more than 200 educational sessions! Typically, the Institute attracts more than 1,000 participants from all 50 states and several other countries, with over 400 colleges, universities, and organizations represented.

Please consider submitting a proposal on or before the priority deadline of March 20, 2020. We would be particularly pleased to receive proposals addressing any of the topics listed in the bullet points below.

To submit a proposal, go to: http://assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu/program/proposals.html

For more information, please consult our website: http://www.assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu or contact us at: Phone: (317) 274-4111 or Email: planning@iupui.edu

The Institute will feature **special track keynote presentations, sessions, and workshops** emphasizing assessment in:

- Community Engagement
- Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion
- Faculty Development
- Global Learning
- Graduate/Graduate Professional Education
- HIPs in the States (High Impact Practices, including ePortfolios)
- Learning Improvement
- National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)
- STEM Education
- Student Affairs Programs and Services

In addition, we will present sessions with national assessment leaders, a poster session, Rise-and-Shine 20-minute sessions, and additional learning and networking opportunities emphasizing:

- Accreditation
- Assessment in General Education
- Assessment in All Major Fields
- Assessment Methods
- Assessment in Community Colleges
- Assessment in Online Courses and Programs
- Competency-Based Education and Assessment
- Emerging Trends in Assessment
- Institution-Wide Data Collection/Use
- Leadership for Assessment
- Use of Technologies in Assessment

Please also save-the-date for future Assessment Institutes to be held at the Indianapolis Marriott Downtown:
October 24–26, 2021 | October 9–11, 2022 | October 29–31, 2023

We look forward to receiving your proposal, and encourage you to share this announcement with other colleagues you know who may be interested in the Assessment Institute. Exhibition and sponsorship opportunities are also available; email us (planning@iupui.edu) for more information. Thank you.

Stephen P. Hundley, Ph.D
Senior Advisor to the Chancellor for Planning and Institutional Improvement
Professor of Organizational Leadership
Executive Editor, Assessment Update
Chair, Assessment Institute in Indianapolis
IUPUI

Angela M. Bergman
Accounts Coordinator for Planning and Institutional Improvement
Manager of Assessment Institute Operations
IUPUI

IUPUI is honored to be an inaugural recipient of the Sustained Excellence in Assessment designation

Building a Culture of Assessment at Bucknell University

ments. Therefore, we face both a challenge and an opportunity to work toward a fuller, more effective integration across the three colleges, which would further enhance the breadth and depth of education for our students.

Similarly, intense efforts are underway to more fully integrate the academics, co-curricular experiences, and residential education at Bucknell. A number of initiatives that would facilitate such integration are in development, including a campus-wide student ePortfolio system, which would both enhance student learning and provide authentic evidence of such learning, across the student's major and general education, and across academic, co-curricular, and residential learning. The work of the Diversity Council, Sustainability Council, and Civic Engagement Task Force also aims at strengthening such integration, and presents considerable assessment challenges.

Recommendations to Other Institutions

We encourage institutions applying for the Excellence in Assessment designation to carefully consider the requirements, but also to tell their story, the things that make them proud as well as the ones that need improvement. We suggest institutions utilize the use of web resources to tell their stories.

Begin drafting the application 12 months before the due date. The collaborative nature of this application requires planning and time.

Kevork Horissian is the assistant provost for institutional research and planning at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.

Key Success Factors in Strengthening and Supporting Institutionwide Goals for Learning: An Overview

learning. Below I provide an overview of each key success factor; I will spend the remaining issues throughout 2020 delving deeper into each topic:

- **Key Success Factor #1, *Communication*.** This Editor's Notes will encourage readers to develop effective *communication* plans and approaches to (re)introduce, promote, and ensure widespread understanding of institutionwide goals for learning to various stakeholders, including students and prospective students, parents/influencers, faculty, staff, employers, community partners, and institutional governance leaders/policymakers. This key success factor will be discussed in Volume 32, Issue 2.
- **Key Success Factor #2, *Professional Development*.** This Editor's Notes will encourage readers to launch a series of *professional development* opportunities to equip faculty, staff, and other learning partners with the competence, confidence, and capabilities to introduce, reinforce, and assess institutionwide goals for learning in various contexts. This key success factor will be discussed in Volume 32, Issue 3.
- **Key Success Factor #3, *Implementation*.** This Editor's Notes will encourage readers to identify specific touchpoints throughout the student degree pathway for *implementation* of institutionwide goals for learning, including first-year experiences, general education courses, discipline-specific courses within academic programs, capstone experiences, and in co-curricular and experiential learning settings. This key success factor will be discussed in Volume 32, Issue 4.
- **Key Success Factor #4, *Assessment and Improvement*.** This Editor's Notes will encourage readers to develop or enhance specific strategies for *assessment* of student achievement of institutionwide goals for learning and link to ongoing *improvement* efforts in various contexts, using campus structures and processes to support the scalability and sustainability of institutionwide goals for learning. This key success factor will be discussed in Volume 32, Issue 5.
- **Key Success Factor #5, *Documentation*.** This Editor's Notes will encourage readers to provide multiple opportunities for *documentation* of the achievement of institutionwide goals for learning through various tools such as student ePortfolios, comprehensive learner records, and assessment management systems, including using examples of learning outcomes in ongoing communication plans about institutionwide goals for learning (thereby connecting this work back to Key Success Factor #1, *Communication*). This key success factor will be discussed in Volume 32, Issue 6.

I look forward to focusing more fully on each of these five topics in Editor's Notes throughout the remainder of 2020. I also invite you to share with me specific examples of how you are using these key success factors to strengthen and support institutionwide goals for learning in your own context. Please send your ideas and feedback to shundley@iupui.edu. As always, thank you for reading *Assessment Update*. ■

Sam Houston State University's Path to the Excellence in Assessment Designation

of these efforts, OAPA facilitates large-scale scoring sessions, bringing together approximately 60 faculty members a year, to evaluate both student written communication and critical thinking skills. These scoring sessions provide faculty with a unique opportunity to see strengths and weaknesses in students' written communication and critical thinking skills firsthand, and helps faculty design better assignments and interventions for improving student learning.

Lessons Learned in SHSU's Assessment Journey

SHSU has made remarkable progress in the quality of its program and institutional assessment efforts since 2013. By shifting the mindset of assessment away from one of compliance and toward one of meaningful improvement of student

with our institutional community and beyond. By being transparent with these processes, the university helps increase faculty buy-in and provides models for other institutions seeking to conduct similar assessments. However, a more fundamental argument for institutional transparency also exists: Student learning data cannot be used if they are hidden away. Ignoring your assessment results not only does a disservice to students, but it also devalues the work of the faculty and staff who conducted those assessments and gathered the data. As an institution, we want to highlight the strengths we find within our student learning data. Simultaneously, we want to make sure that when we do identify weaknesses in student performance, the information is acknowledged and appropriate actions can be taken.

in compliance and is instead a meaningful tool for driving institutional effectiveness and improving student learning, the department chairs, faculty, and staff will follow.

Additionally, while good assessment practices should not be driven by compliance or accreditation needs, institutions should not be afraid of letting their compliance and accreditation efforts support their quality assessment practices. Regular self-studies, like those completed through accreditation reports or program reviews, can be useful tools to help institutions gather multiple years of assessment data, identify long-term trends, and determine what actions need to be taken for student improvement. SHSU's EIA application was strengthened greatly by the university's recent completion of self-study reports for both SACSCOC and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, as information gathered for those reports was used to help document and highlight the quality of SHSU's program- and intuitional-level assessment processes.

Institutions seeking to develop and implement good assessment practices need to understand this process is a journey without a definite end.

learning, the university has managed not only to improve the quality of institutional assessment efforts, but also has increased buy-in and support from faculty, staff, and administrators. SHSU's processes are not perfect; however, as they are rooted in authentic, meaningful practices, the university has demonstrated success in satisfying the assessment and accountability demands of institutional accreditors and state agencies. As an example, SHSU successfully submitted both its 2015 SACSCOC Fifth-Year Interim Report and its 2019 SACSCOC Reaffirmation of Accreditation Report with no recommendations related to program or general education assessment.

Another key lesson learned was the value of transparency in assessment, particularly at the institution level. SHSU readily shares the processes and results from our general education assessments

Recommendations to Future EIA Applicants

Institutions seeking to develop and implement good assessment practices need to understand this process is a journey without a definite end. Assessment processes can always be improved, but assessment leaders should not let this discourage them. For those assessment leaders looking to improve the assessment practices at their institutions, grassroots approaches can work to build a positive culture of assessment; however, be warned that such approaches will require an immense investment in time and effort to slowly build support across a campus. Fortunately, these efforts can be accelerated if assessment leaders can gain the buy-in and support of their institutional leadership. If provosts, vice presidents, and deans can be persuaded to see that assessment is more than a process

Finally, institutions uncertain about applying for the EIA designation should not be afraid to just go for it. When SHSU applied for the EIA designation, we did not expect to win. Instead, we expected to receive some valuable feedback on ways to improve our assessment efforts and to be told we were not quite there yet. Needless to say, we were very pleasantly surprised when we received our results. Good assessment practices do not have to be perfect, so if you are waiting for your assessment processes to be perfect, then you will be waiting forever. Even if your institution does not win, the act of completing the EIA self-study alone will help you further improve your institutional assessment practices, and your institution will be better for the journey. ∎

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