

When the Call Comes, Keep Calm and Assess On: Using the EIA Designation Rubric as a Self-study for Improvement

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions face pressure from internal and external stakeholders to demonstrate that they are positively influencing student learning in appropriate and efficient ways. Strong assessment practices of student learning outcomes can help address these stakeholders' concerns. Here, we present a case study of how one University used the Excellence in Assessment Designation rubric, which "focuses on campus processes and uses of assessment outcomes rather than on student performance or accomplishment," to conduct a gap analysis between the standards of excellence and the current assessment practices. Results were used to align student learning outcomes both vertically and horizontally and to engage co-curriculum and external partners in the assessment and review processes. We discuss how our actions have benefited our campus assessment culture and our next steps in continuing to improve our campus assessment efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities are faced with increased calls for accountability and transparency in student learning outcomes. These issues came to the forefront of the national conversation when The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education released, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education; A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (2006)*. Among other issues, this report focused on the need for public higher education institutions to be accessible, affordable, and accountable. More recently, Senators Elizabeth Warren, Dick Durbin and Brian Schatz introduced federal legislation to strengthen institution's accountability to taxpayers and students

(Senate Bill 3380, 2016). These calls impact regional accreditation bodies, state education departments, and public colleges and universities.

Within the context of these calls for greater accountability and transparency, the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) was started in 2007 as a vehicle for participating higher education institutions to determine the elements of accountability and transparency that they believed should be communicated to the public at large. As part of the VSA, the College Portrait website (<http://www.voluntarysystem.org>) was created to provide “a tool for public institutions to demonstrate accountability and transparency, particularly in the areas of access, cost, student progress, and student outcomes” (APLU). Currently, 275 institutions participate in the College Portrait. While the VSA was created for public institutions, both private and public institutions use the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) Transparency Framework (2011), a tool to showcase students’ attainment of learning outcomes in a publicly accessible format.

Based on a recommendation from NILOA (Jankowski et al., 2012) to the VSA to create a “College Portrait template that could be adapted and used by all postsecondary institutions, public and private, community colleges and others;” the VSA has adopted the Transparency Framework as a guide for how their participating institutions should publicly publish evidence of student learning. As an extension beyond the partnership, the Excellence in Assessment (EIA) program was created to acknowledge higher education institutions who have achieved a high standard of intentional integration of institutional-level learning outcomes assessment. Co-sponsored by the VSA, NILOA, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), this program awarded the EIA designation to 10 institutions in its inaugural year of 2016 (<http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/eiadesignation.html>).

As a participating institution in both the VSA and the NILOA Transparency Framework, the senior leadership and the Office of Assessment and Accreditation at University of North Carolina at Charlotte recognized an opportunity to conduct a self-study to identify strengths and weaknesses in its campus assessment efforts. Using the EIA criteria, UNC Charlotte conducted a gap analysis and used the results of the analysis as a topic of discussion for the academic affairs assessment retreat. These discussions and subsequent efforts helped to set priorities for closing the gaps, engage the university in establishing campus-level student learning outcomes, and align outcomes vertically and horizontally. This paper presents the methodology used for this case study, as well as the findings and lessons we have learned as a result of this self-study process. Other institutions may be able to adapt these methods to suit the needs of their own campus assessment structures and to engage the members of their institutional communities.

METHODOLOGY

Using the EIA rubric, UNC Charlotte conducted a gap analysis to determine whether or not the University met each criterion of the rubric. This allowed us to evaluate our current state as an

institution and to identify where there remained distance between our current assessment practices and criteria on best practices and excellence outlined in the EIA rubric.

GAP ANALYSIS

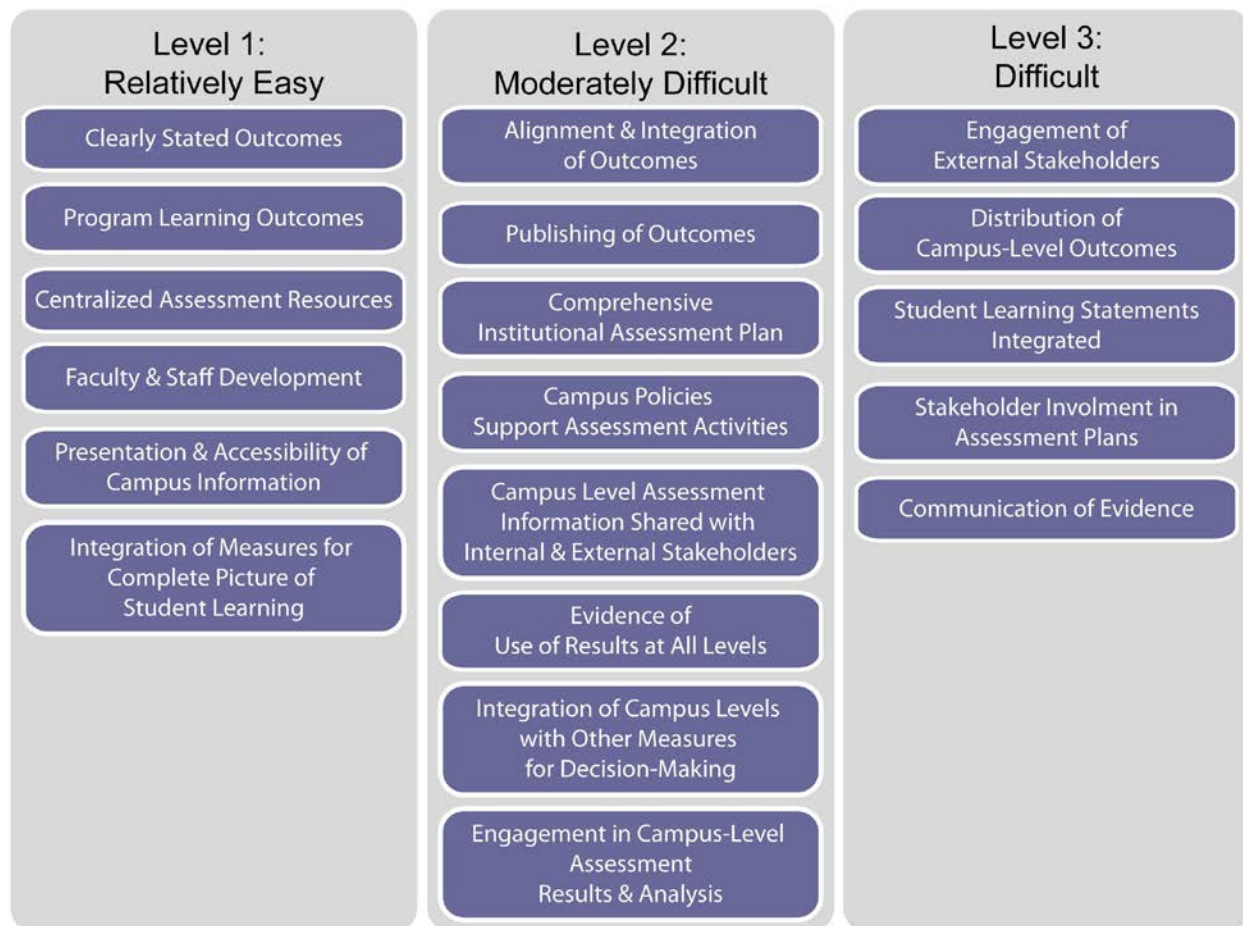
A gap analysis is a technique businesses use to determine what steps need to be taken in order to move from its current state to its desired, future state (e.g., Parasuraman et al., 1985). This type of analysis is also sometimes called a need-gap analysis, a needs analysis, or needs assessment. A gap analysis consists of (1) listing characteristic factors (such as attributes, competencies, performance levels) of the present situation ("what is"), (2) listing the factors needed to achieve future objectives ("what should be"), and then (3) highlighting the gaps that exist and need to be filled. A gap analysis forces a company - or in this case, a university - to reflect on who it is and who it wants to be in the future. At UNC Charlotte, our gap analysis also examined the difficulty and practicality of closing identified gaps as well as the extent to which coordination and participation of multiple stakeholders would be needed.

APPLYING THE EIA RUBRIC

The EIA rubric criterion includes the six domains of the NILOA Transparency Framework: (1) Student Learning Outcome Statements, (2) Campus-Level Assessment Plans, (3) Campus-Level Assessment Resources, (4) Current Campus-Level Assessment Activities, (5) Evidence of Campus-Level Student Learning, (6) Use of Campus-Level Student Learning, and a seventh category for a Reflection and Growth/Improvement Plan. Each domain contains three to four dimensions that are each evaluated, for a total of twenty-five dimensions. Additionally, the EIA rubric also evaluates the diversity of campus representatives participating in campus assessment activities and how routinely external stakeholders participate in campus assessment activities. For our gap analysis, UNC Charlotte examined our current assessment practices as they related to each of the twenty-five NILOA Transparency Framework dimensions. We then compared our current practices to the descriptions of excellence indicated on the EIA rubric in order to self-evaluate where we believed we met a standard of excellence and where existing gaps remained between our current practices and these standards.

FINDINGS AND RESULTING ACTIONS

Using the 25 dimensions and the excellence criteria on the EIA rubric as the aspirational goals, 19 gaps were discovered. Once gaps were identified, we then characterized those gaps according to the following criteria: (1) the amount of work required to meet the standard of excellence identified in the relevant dimension, (2) the level of involvement and amount of time required of faculty to meet the expectation, (3) the ease of the Office of Assessment and Accreditation's access to relevant information, and (4) the degree to which stakeholders external to the University needed to be involved. The gaps were then coded in terms level of difficulty ("relatively easy", "moderately difficult, or "difficult") to achieve the excellence standard. The following figure illustrates the dimensions where we identified gaps between our current assessment practices and the excellence standards of the EIA rubric, and how we characterized these gaps based on their relative ease or difficulty in closing them.



Six gaps were characterized as “relatively easy” to close and achieve the excellence standard because much of the information, data, processes and structures already exist and require minimal input, time and/or effort to get it accomplished. For instance, our campus level outcomes (critical thinking and communication) are newly adopted and have not yet been clearly stated on our University websites and reports. Our program level student learning outcome statements for undergraduate and graduate programs are prominently posted and accessible to students; however, the assessments of student work in courses and programs has not been linked to our campus-level learning outcomes yet. In order to fill this gap, the course and program outcomes needed to be aligned to the campus-level outcomes.

Eight gaps were coded as “moderately difficult” because they required the creation of internal committees, processes, and collaborative efforts in order to accomplish the excellence standards. For example, although the University has collected data for years on critical thinking and communication in courses and programs, our institution does not have a rigorous plan in place that engages stakeholders in monitoring, compiling and analyzing campus level assessment results. As a result, we have also not yet published direct evidence of our campus level assessment results. In order to fill this gap, new internal processes and collaborative structures are needed.

Five gaps were characterized as “difficult” because they required creation of new committees and processes, as well as a significant commitment of time and effort and involvement of internal and external stakeholders. For example, in order to meet the standard of excellence for participation in and sharing of information regarding campus-level assessment activities, the University would need to solicit active participation of faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders like employers or graduate school admissions professionals in the decision processes related to campus-level assessment. While faculty and staff are involved in decision processes, the prevailing campus assessment practices do not routinely and systematically involve students and external stakeholders. To overcome this hurdle would require a shift in our campus cultural attitudes to move beyond our suspicions about how outsiders view assessment results.

CLOSING THE LOOP

With the identification and characterization of the gaps between our current assessment practices and the EIA criterion for excellence in place, we are currently working on filling these gaps at our institution. Importantly, as we work to strengthen our assessment practices we are being mindful of our senior leadership’s vision for our institution. We also recognize the need to ensure that new processes will not place an undue burden or workload on our faculty and others involved in assessment. To these ends, we have sought to proactively engage campus stakeholders whose leadership will be necessary moving forward.

ENGAGING CAMPUS STAKEHOLDERS

The Office of Assessment and Accreditation staff presented the EIA Designation criterion and gap analysis results to senior leaders from across campus at the 2016 Provost’s academic affairs assessment retreat. This presentation was important given that the Office of Assessment and Accreditation recognized leadership and support from both senior-level Academic Affairs administrators as well as mid-level leaders in Academic Affairs and Student Affairs would be needed to meet the expectations of the Transparency Framework. This presentation included discussions on the history and goals of the VSA, the potential benefits of using the NILOA Transparency Framework to tell our story of student learning, and the Office of Assessment and Accreditation’s analysis of where our current campus assessment practices differed from the best practices put forth by the NILOA Transparency Framework.

At the assessment retreat we also organized small groups to begin to develop strategies to close the NILOA Transparency Framework gaps. The goal was for the groups to identify practices and processes needed to fill these gaps (who, what, and when). We organized our identified gaps according to themes (integration of campus-level outcomes and assessment results, involvement of external partners in campus-level assessment processes, and campus-level measures and review process). Group tasks were then assigned based on members’ spheres of influences. For instance, the Provost and Deans were charged with developing strategies to close the loops on dimensions that included engaging external stakeholders. Our college assessment directors were charged with making recommendations on the integration and alignment of outcomes at the college, program, and course levels. Representatives from

the faculty provided perspective on the adoption of campus level outcomes, measures and review processes.

TIMELINES TO CLOSE THE GAPS

Using the recommendations generated at the assessment retreat, the Office of Assessment and Accreditation drafted a list of activities, timelines, and responsible persons to address each of the gaps. The priorities for the year following the retreat included mapping the curriculum to align course, program and institutional outcomes, developing an institutional student learning outcomes assessment plan, establishing a process for external advisory committee reviews, and implementing campus policies and procedures to support and recognize the advancement of assessment practices.

DISCUSSION

To date, our campus-wide discussions on our current assessment practices and how our practices compare to the standards of excellence outlined in the EIA Designation rubric have produced several actions that have helped improve our campus's culture of assessment. For example, mapping and aligning learning outcomes at the college, program, and course levels has helped promote faculty buy-in to their role in student success and program responsibility by facilitating connections between individual courses and the broader curriculum.

Closing the remaining gaps between our practices and the EIA Designation standards will also necessitate that we broaden the range of stakeholders involved in our assessment practice. We believe including external stakeholders, such as employers, in our campus level outcomes assessment will help those stakeholders be informed about student learning at our University, and will allow those external stakeholders to provide feedback based on their needs and us to respond to their feedback with appropriate course and curricular changes. For instance, the College of Education piloted an event where external stakeholders such as P-12 representatives, recent alumni, and pre-service student teachers came together to discuss how education and training in the College of Education prepared teachers for working in the field and the challenges and successes first year teachers often experience. This event provided invaluable feedback to faculty and staff within the College of Education about the value of their programs as well as areas they could further strengthen.

NEXT STEPS

While the EIA rubric was a useful tool to help the institution understand where we stood and where the gaps existed, the process of discussing each gap with our College assessment stakeholders also revealed that best practices we assumed to be in place were not always implemented systematically. We are working with stakeholders to accomplish the following:

- 1) addressing discrepancies about how course-level outcomes are described on syllabi, as some were outdated and others did not exist;

- 2) identifying a manageable set of program-level general education outcomes to track and publicly communicate; currently, our general education assessment plan tracks 35 course-level outcomes;
- 3) stating explicit outcomes and measures for critical thinking and aligning them across the course, program and institutional levels;
- 4) communicating on the website aggregated results for program outcomes in all Colleges; currently, only one College's outcome results are posted;
- 5) reviewing and graphing College outcome results for the past four years; thus far, this work revealed programs that were models of excellence, as well as emerging models where attention was warranted; and
- 6) discussing emerging issues in assessment and accountability in higher education.

CONCLUSION

The results of the gap analysis were invaluable for the Office of Assessment and Accreditation because it brought neglected issues to the forefront of our campus conversations. It brought administrators, staff and representatives from the faculty together to explore ways to bridge the gaps. It also provided an opportunity to stop and reflect on the effectiveness of our current assessment practices. This process may have moved the needle on curricular coherence because it encouraged attendees at the assessment retreat to engage in dialogue about aligning and integrating course, program, and institution level outcomes. Finally, we learned to be unafraid of what an introspective self-study of our assessment practices might reveal. Instead, we are embracing the opportunity afforded by the call to begin this daunting task, staying calm and assessing on.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Christine Robinson is the Executive Director of the Office of Assessment and Accreditation at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. As the Executive Director, she leads a team that promotes continuous improvement in student learning, educational practices, and support services and facilitates an institutional culture of ongoing and systematic self-evaluation and improvement. Her Office is responsible for guiding and facilitating assessment efforts as they relate to annual planning, student learning outcomes, and faculty development. Dr. Robinson is a co-author of "Discovering Our Way: Defining and Implementing an Integrated Culture of Assessment", which is a case study about creating an integrated culture of assessment, published in *Coming to Terms with Student Outcomes Assessment*, edited by Peggy Maki.

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Ms. Cathy Sanders is the Director of Assessment in the Office of Assessment and Accreditation at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She provides guidance and training for colleges and academic support units on the assessment of program level student learning outcomes. She took the lead role in conducting the NILOA gap analysis described in this article, identifying the steps necessary to address the gaps, and establishing a timeline for

completion. She continues to work with her office colleagues and college and university administrators to address the remaining gaps. She has 17 years of experience in student learning outcomes assessment, strategic planning, and SACS Accreditation and 30 years experience in university administration.