

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Slow and Steady Wins the Race: Continuous Improvement and Assessment 2.1 at McKendree University

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Foreword

Pat Hutchings

As part of an ongoing effort to track and explore developments in student learning outcomes assessment, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has published a number of institutional case studies which are [housed on its website](#). We are now revisiting and updating some of those earlier examples in order to understand more concretely how campus assessment practices evolve over time—through lessons learned from local experience but also as a result of changes in institutional priorities, the launch of new initiatives, leadership transitions, and trends in the larger assessment movement. This report on McKendree University is an update of the original case study from 2016 by Emily Teitelbaum and Katie Schultz.¹

A private university in Lebanon, Illinois, McKendree is the oldest college in the state. Founded in 1828 as the Lebanon Seminary, then McKendree College, it officially became McKendree University in July 2007. The institution offers 51 majors, 13 graduate programs, and 2 doctorate programs for just over 2,400 undergraduate and graduate students. With an average class size of 14, student learning is at the forefront of McKendree's mission.

McKendree was originally selected as a NILOA case study site for its use of the [Degree Qualifications Profile](#) (DQP), which was important in helping to define and refine institutional outcomes, especially around “diverse perspectives.” McKendree created a crosswalk of the DQP's five areas of learning with their own student learning outcomes—seven of them—and with the Association of American Colleges and Universities' Essential Learning Outcomes along with the NCAA Life in the Balance Key Attributes. That crosswalk was useful not only to McKendree but to many other institutions that have accessed it [online](#) and has been instrumental in helping institutions think about linking multiple learning frameworks in the [Comprehensive Learner Record](#) project by NASPA and AACRAO. McKendree was active in the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) Consortium on DQP work, as well.

As reported in the 2016 case study, McKendree began an ambitious Assessment 2.0 initiative in 2010, focusing on one of its seven student learning outcomes each year. This model allowed the institution “to take a ‘deep dive’ into each outcome, year-by-year, providing faculty and staff (and students) with the opportunity to become fully engaged with each outcome and build consensus and shared understanding” (2016, p. 2). This work was led by the Student Learning, Assessment, and Teaching Effectiveness Committee (SLATE), along with subcommittees that worked sequentially on each of the seven outcomes. SLATE also oversaw—as

¹Teitelbaum, E., & Schultz, K. (2016, June). *DQP case study: McKendree University*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

it does today—professional development programming, which has been an important part of its work to ensure and improve student learning.

This updated case begins as Assessment 2.0 was winding down in 2017. Following a careful process of stock taking, exploring what had been done and learned, the institution has now moved into Assessment 2.1. As readers will learn, the seven-year cycle of 2.0 is still largely in place—it served the campus well and was positively received in the 2018 accreditation review by the Higher Learning Commission—but 2.1 is now deepening and extending the work. The DQP continues to play a useful role, the co-curriculum is a more explicit focus of assessment, students are having new roles, and, like many other campuses, McKendree continues to explore ways to engage faculty and staff in a process of continuous improvement.

We are grateful to Tami Eggleston, Professor of Psychology and Associate Provost for Institutional Effectiveness for providing this update. “I live and breathe assessment every day,” she says, and am “excited to share plans for a next stage of work.” She notes that Assessment 2.0 and 2.1 could not have been completed without the leadership and support of McKendree’s Provost, Dr. Christine Bahr, the SLATE committee and subcommittees, the SLATE chair, Dr. Guy Boysen, and the engagement of the McKendree faculty, staff, and students.

Slow and Steady Wins the Race: Continuous Improvement and Assessment 2.1 at McKendree University

By Tami Eggleston

To understand McKendree’s assessment work today, it is useful to look back on our earliest efforts. We like to refer to that phase as Assessment 1.0, though we did not call it that at the time. To be honest, we did not know what we were doing at that point or what we were getting into. We had some student learning outcomes, we had some rubrics, but we did not have a systematic process. In 2010, we made a decision to take a more intentional approach, and (as described in [NILOA’s 2016 case study](#)) we laid out what became our Assessment 2.0 plan.

Assessment 2.0: Getting Real with Assessment

Assessment 2.0 was a seven-year plan organized around six institutional outcomes:

- Engagement
- Personal and Social Responsibility
- Diverse Perspectives
- Effective Communication
- Inquiry and Problem Solving
- Lifelong Learning

Additionally, there is a seventh category of outcomes—“disciplinary knowledge”—which are defined by programs and departments, and assessed largely through the program or major biennial assessment report.

The idea behind 2.0 was that the campus would focus on one institutional outcome each year. We would have “the year of Engagement,” “the year of Effective Communication,” and so forth. That does not mean that we did not care about the other outcomes, but we focused special attention on one at a time in order to do a deep dive. This kind of sustained attention to individual outcomes was an important lesson that we learned from the Higher Learning Commission Assessment Workshop.

Key to our 2.0 plan was the creation of a central coordinating committee which we called SLATE: Student Learning, Assessment, and Teaching Effectiveness. Additionally, under the SLATE umbrella, we created subcommittees for each of our institutional learning outcomes. When these groups began their work there were lots of unknowns, as there are on any campus: You do not know whether there will be stability in administrative leadership, for instance. What we were trying to do was to have “stability in process.” And that

meant being very intentional about our 2.0 process. We set up a clear timeline, with clear goals, and even had activities for the subcommittees by month. We also set up a workshop each May called “Closing the Loop” and created an Assessment 2.0 website.

Jumping ahead, when we finished our first full seven-year cycle of that 2010 plan, in 2017, we felt really good about having committed to a process and sticking with it. Maybe that sounds like a low bar, but, in so much of the work on assessment, plans get made and remade; you make a plan, and a new administrator arrives and changes it, and then it gets changed again. Or a rubric is used and then abandoned, and years go by trying to create the perfect rubric. Pretty soon no one feels that they really know what the process is. It is frustrating in ways that erode buy-in from faculty and staff. And you can never close the loop because there is no continuity of focus.

At McKendree, we were really pleased and excited to have completed our 2.0 process. We stuck with it and we got the work done. It was not perfect. In academia we’re very good at seeing flaws and wanting to start over with a better idea. We like to go from 0 to 100 miles per hour, but McKendree’s approach to assessment has put a premium on moving more slowly—at something more like 25 MPH, you might say, one step at a time, learning from our successes and failures along the way. We decided that slow and steady really could win the assessment race.

To use a different metaphor: We knew we were “building the plane as we were flying it,” and that was ok. New ideas were welcome but we learned to put them on the drawing board for the future—to stick to our plan and process. As we went along, we learned what worked best or what did not work as well and just kept moving forward. Our goal was continuous improvement in the process.

Reflections on Assessment 2.0: What Worked and Why

Looking back on our seven-year cycle, we can point to a number of features that made it a success. For one thing, the members of the 2.0 subcommittees on each of our institutional outcomes signed on for a two-year term: a year of planning and then an implementation year, after which the group disbands. And this understanding was important: the committees did not have seven years to work on (say) a writing rubric. That was key, we believe, because academics are often inclined to tinker indefinitely, wanting to make things perfect. “We’ve been working on our writing rubric, and now we’re editing it, and we have to work out some disagreements about wording.” A comment we hear consistently on other campuses. And the work goes on forever, and things are not completed. Having these two-year cycles was critical to our progress. We did our best work, we implemented our assessment activities, and we basically committed to those assessment initiatives until the cycle repeated.

Also critical was the breadth of engagement. The subcommittees typically comprised of six to eight people—including faculty, staff, and a student; all critical to campus-wide buy-in. SLATE had just eight people but when you add up all the subcommittees, our process engaged over 50 people; meaning that what we were doing was broadly understood and embraced because so many people had been involved.

What has also helped was (and is) a spirit of fun. Assessment presentations at McKendree often feature cartoons and funny stories. With help from a graphic designer, the campus has created logos to represent institutional outcomes and make them more visible to all of our stakeholders. These show up on syllabi and on PowerPoint slides. And small steps are valued and celebrated. In general, faculty and staff developed a sense of ownership and felt good about what we are doing. While we still do not have one hundred percent buy-in and still have some “assessment laggards” but we try not to let that get in the way of our process.

Reality Check: A Successful Reaffirmation Accreditation Visit

Seven years can sound like a long time, but Assessment 2.0 went by quickly. We were eager to present what we had done for our scheduled visit from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) in 2018. We were also very intentional when we built the program in 2010 that we wanted our accreditors to come when we really had something we could be proud of—rather than just vague promises (“trust us”) about what we planned to do. We were proud that we had a completed seven-year cycle of work. It was not perfect, but it was complete. We do believe that assessment should be done for many more reasons than accreditation, but we were keenly aware of the importance that accreditors put on quality assessment practices. We were able to design our McKendree Assessment 2.0 webpage using the [NILOA Transparency Framework](#), a valuable way to organize and share our assessment activities with the accreditation visiting team.

The visit was a success. To be honest, we think the visiting team was pretty shocked at what we had accomplished. They liked our timeline and stakeholder engagement, and they understood that the work was not perfect. Sometimes, when you get a lot of buy-in and a lot of voices at the table you do not get things perfect or as neat and organized as it could be with fewer people involved. But the bottom line was we had a plan we stuck to, with a lot of buy-in and intentionality. And the accreditation visit affirmed the approach we had taken and encouraged us in going forward. The accreditation team also gave us some excellent feedback on ways to continue to improve our assessment activities (e.g., adding student affairs in a more consistent manner.)

The Role of the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP)

During the earliest (1.0) phase of McKendree’s work, assessment was in place at the course level, certainly, and to some degree at the program level. But defining and agreeing upon *institutional* level outcomes is harder. It is easy to get stuck, or to have too long of a list of outcomes. The DQP was really helpful to us in this regard.

As described in the earlier case study, McKendree did a “crosswalk,” identifying the outcomes we really cared about for our students and then looking at what the DQP says. The crosswalk was to see where our outcomes matched the DQP framework and where they did not. And we understood that the DQP was a tool: it was not all or nothing; we picked and chose what worked for us. And that was very helpful as we moved through our 2.0 cycle. In our work on our diversity outcome, for instance, we originally used the language of “appreciating diversity.” But no one was really happy with that. How do you measure appreciation? What does it look like? Agreeing that the language of “appreciation” was not going to serve us or our students well, we turned to the DQP, noted the alternative language of “diverse perspectives,” and agreed on that change. In this way, the DQP helped us get unstuck.

And that has continued to be true. There have been numerous occasions when we pulled the DQP back out in order to see how outcomes are articulated there and to look for framing that is a good match with our intentions. What does the DQP say about engagement? About lifelong learning? There have been times when we have had disagreements about the language for a particular outcome and have turned to the DQP as a kind of “tie breaker.” Outcomes at the Master’s level have been especially helpful as our graduate programs have become engaged with assessment. In this sense, the DQP continues to serve as a kind of “just in time” framework, a tool, to help us move ahead thoughtfully and efficiently. The DQP provides some external validity to our assessment activities.

Finally, the DQP has been and continues to be helpful to McKendree in connecting outcomes across levels. For instance, drawing on the DQP helped us develop a rubric for communication at the institutional level; in turn, having that in place helped programs define their outcomes more clearly and also shaped course-level outcomes. Although we understand that the things faculty care about on a day-to-day basis are at the course level, the planning has to start at the institutional level. That is where the DQP has been invaluable.

Enter Assessment 2.1: Goals, Plans, and Progress

At the end of Assessment 2.0, in 2017, we took a brief pause—partly in order to prepare for and participate in the HLC visit, but also to reflect back and look ahead. Following the visit, we had an academic retreat where we asked ourselves: What are we going to do in this next cycle? Are we going to revamp our student learning outcomes? Do we want to change our process? And it was pretty unanimous that our best road forward was to repeat the cycle we originally designed. The feeling was that we had learned a lot and now it was time to re-do the cycle, drawing on our previous experience and lessons learned.

In short, with the HLC visit successfully completed, we were eager to move ahead, and we marked the occasion with a celebration. This was a chance for the campus to come together and identify the accomplishments that gave us confidence that we were ready for the next iteration of the cycle—[Assessment 2.1](#)—in which our focus was on further development around a number of ongoing, interrelated challenges.

1. Refining student learning outcomes and assessment tools

One of the key elements of the 2.0 cycle was sustained attention to each of our seven institutional outcomes. That process is continuing as we undertake “deep dives” into each outcome, refine our thinking and language, and develop new approaches to assessing them. For example, in 2.0, we changed “appreciating diversity” to “diverse perspectives” (as noted above), and now, in 2.1, we have more clearly specified this outcome, as follows: “students will understand human and cultural differences and acknowledge a variety in viewpoints in order to foster empathy and interpersonal understanding.” After we more clearly articulated the outcome and what it means at McKendree, we also updated our diverse perspectives rubric, which is used across general education courses. And in keeping with our commitment to “stability in process,” we will now keep this definition and rubric for six years in our assessment process.

2. Representing and using data more effectively

Further work on outcomes and tools is critical to another of our 2.1 goals: getting better at using the data we generate. Higher education is good at collecting evidence, but using it is always the real challenge, and that is true at McKendree as well. One step toward addressing this goal has been to revise what had become a very oversized assessment grid—a tool we used to represent and track our efforts. The grid worked well in the beginning, but as we collected more and more data over the years, it became cumbersome. Eventually the grid had to be printed in 4-point font, which no one could read. It is pretty hard to use data when you cannot see it! (Please note, we still have the [Assessment 2.0 grid](#) on our website for archival purposes, so feel free to get out your magnifying glass and enjoy!)

What we have done in response is to whittle the “monster” grid down to [six succinct pages](#). We now have materials that people can read (in 12-point font!), and we are much more intentional, as well, about sharing those materials at different events, and talking about how to use the information. Closing the loop is still a work in progress—as it is on many campuses—but we are doing better. Each May we bring faculty and staff together to share data that was collected in the past year (e.g., from the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE], rubrics, a fall survey). We then break into small groups usually by topic areas (e.g., engagement, communication, diversity). In these groups we have faculty look for changes or trends, we document what we have learned, and we document what specific changes we can make in the future. Some of the changes are very minor, such as encouraging the use of “Not Applicable to this class” on the rubrics. But findings about written communication have prompted us to organize professional development workshops to help us create better writing assignments.

3. Disaggregating data

Another aspect of our commitment to using data is disaggregating assessment results more fully. In the beginning, when we had just a few classes gathering data on student writing, we did not have the luxury of

disaggregating. The numbers were too small to slice and dice by gender, race, and so forth. The overall results were good—a 4.2 on the rubric we were using—but we could not really dig into the data with such small numbers. Now, with more (and more varied kinds of) data in the picture, we are looking at results in more fine-grained ways, comparing face-to-face versus online courses, and first-year versus senior-year groups. With disaggregated NSSE data, for instance, we found that McKendree students reported doing more service in the first year than they reported doing in the senior year. This has caused many of us to think about ways to encourage service in upper-level courses.

4. Engaging Student Affairs

Assessment 2.1 is also focused on more fully engaging student affairs—which has always been represented on our assessment committees and has been important to our efforts over the years but was not a central focus of our 2.0 work. Seeking to change this has sometimes meant starting small—adding a two-item survey for students attending an event, asking “what did you learn?” and “how could this experience be more helpful to you?” Assessment can also mean paying greater attention to how students vote with their feet: how many people came to a workshop on resumé building (not many) and how many came to one-on-one interviewing (a lot!). Assessment can seem daunting, but sometimes simple data, such as a survey or attendance numbers, can be very helpful in deciding what is working and perhaps what can be eliminated.

Additionally, as we have moved into 2.1, student affairs is now using the [same outcomes framework and biennial reporting schedule](#) used by academic programs. This is important because we know that learning does not happen exclusively in the classroom. Like other programs, student affairs has its own outcomes. But they also assess their contributions to student learning around our agreed upon institutional outcomes. In 2.1, student affairs programming is more focused on contributions to student learning; they are full partners in McKendree’s assessment work, developing smart ways to understand how to improve their work with students. And that after all, that is why we do assessment.

5. Evolving our use of technology

Our original case study pointed to an interest in technologies that would support our assessment work—and technology was accordingly highlighted as an area for future work. That work is now underway and moving in directions we are pleased about, with technology in a supportive role, shaped by our process and planning. What we realized early on is that we did not have a good way to compile rubric data. We then found an add-on to Blackboard—called IEC Virtual Data—that allowed us to do that virtually. It integrates with Blackboard—not perfectly, but well enough to be an improvement. More recently, as part of Assessment 2.1, we conducted a major review of various technology systems, looking at what would best meet our needs. We are now preparing to move to a new system, leaving Blackboard behind and turning to Brightspace: Desire to Learn. What we have learned is that technology is secondary: the assessment process is the primary work and then you find the technology to support that work. We believe that good assessment can still be done with very little technology assistance.

Making a Difference and Doing What Works for the Institution

McKendree is not just drinking “the assessment Kool-aid.” We can show that our efforts are making a difference for students, faculty, and the institution.

For starters, we can now document that students make important gains as they journey from first year to graduation. In written communications, for instance, we see positive change from first year to senior year. That is our number one goal. Is the level of writing really where we want it? Absolutely not. But we can show value added. And that is true on each of our institutional outcomes.

Assessment has also helped McKendree strengthen student engagement. We administer the NSSE every three years, and that feels like the right schedule for us. We administer the survey one year, and then it takes us almost another whole year to look at the data—to talk about it, figure it out, have workshops about it—and then if you want to have an action plan, to change anything, that is yet another year. Then it is time to do it again. For us, a three-year cycle works and has led us to make changes. For instance, our NSSE score on student engagement in capstone experiences was really low relative to peer institutions. At first, we did not believe this because we thought we were doing a pretty decent job—at least average. We were very intentional about making every department offer a capstone and then assess some outcome in that capstone.² And then we went further: requiring that every program has to list in the catalog any required service, any required research, and any required capstone course. We believe that this improvement will be reflected in our NSSE results going forward. But more importantly, it will help students see that these are engaging experiences the college cares about. That is an example of how we are acting on assessment results to make change.

Being able to document real growth in student learning gives us confidence that our work as educators is making a difference. But we are also struck by other kinds of impact. Assessment has shaped the campus culture and how we work in ways that are harder to document but, we believe, deeply important. Broad, ongoing engagement with student learning outcomes has given all of us a shared vocabulary and an ability to say more clearly to one another and to students what the institution values. Indeed, one of the things we are most proud of is the extent to which students understand and internalize the institutional outcomes that shape the curriculum. You could stop just about any student on the street and they would be able to tell you what those outcomes are—because they hear them all the time, for instance in the acronym we’ve created: REAL, which stands for Responsibility, Engagement, Academic Excellence, and Lifelong Learning. Most students know that phrase. The outcomes are captured and reinforced in activities like our speaker series, for instance, and highlighted in admission materials, the catalog, and across campus.

And of course, the rubrics send powerful messages. Students see the writing rubric (to pick just one example) over and over; it is used in all introductory English courses and then in follow-on capstone and writing-intensive courses. Students get the message that we care about writing, and they know what good writing means at McKendree. The upshot is that students understand that general education courses are not just hurdles to get over but occasions to demonstrate learning that matter to the faculty, the institution, and to their own futures as responsible citizens.

Student Involvement in Assessment

McKendree’s student government is very closely associated with student affairs. And, as noted earlier, student affairs people have always been very involved with assessment. As a result, we have been able to go into student government meetings and involve student government representatives on our various assessment committees. We try out ideas on them; we ask for their guidance. For example, we went to students to help us identify appropriate incentives for participation in the NSSE (their answer: \$25.00 coupons for the book store). We sought their help, too, in understanding McKendree’s (to us) surprisingly low NSSE score on participation in culminating capstone experiences. An informal student focus group revealed that students understood “culminating” as meaning their final semester, whereas some capstone experiences at McKendree are in the first semester of the senior year or even junior year. This was an opportunity for some useful clarifications. We are currently having students assist us with the marketing of the NSSE via social media and a newspaper article. We have tried various ways to ensure that students are engaged in assessment initiatives but this is something we are committed to improving (perhaps in Assessment 3.1!).

² For better or worse, many schools have found it easier to assess course work toward the beginning of the students’ experience—101, 102, kinds of courses. And at McKendree, every general education course has some kind of mandatory assessment of one of our institutional goals. Then we push the assessment responsibility to the programs at the capstone level. But sometimes I worry that maybe we’re trying to do too much in the capstone. Not only is the capstone difficult to teach; if you start to put a lot of assessment on top of that, it is challenging. You do not want to put all of your eggs in that capstone basket. I’ve never been a fan of summative assessment, at the end where you cannot change anything. I worry about that with capstone assessment. Should we be looking more carefully at the junior year? Or at the sophomore-to-junior retention problem? Should we be looking more carefully at that middle part of the student experience? Maybe that is for assessment 3.1!

Assessment and Professional Development

As a 2,500-student, tuition-driven institution, McKendree does not have a teaching center (nor, for that matter, a formal office of assessment). But here, as on other campuses today, assessment is nourished by sustained attention to professional development. Indeed, SLATE not only organizes and oversees assessment activities; it also organizes teaching-development activities, including major events in August, January, and May, which we have worked to connect to our assessment efforts. During the year of diversity for instance, we focused on diversity in teaching.

Lessons for Other Campuses

1. Make a systematic plan and timeline and stick to the cycle for at least a few years. Even if the work is not perfect (and it will not be), sticking to a plan yields valuable learning that can fuel a next stage of work. Be patient. Getting assessment right takes time.
2. Fit your reaffirmation accreditation visits into your assessment timelines. Try to have a complete cycle of data and data usage when the team visits campus.
3. Cultivate buy-in from the top-down, bottom-up, and middle-out with leadership, committees, faculty, staff, and student involvement. Accommodating and valuing this kind of broad involvement can sometimes make assessment “messy” (people will bring different perspectives and goals to the work) but the trade-off in terms of widespread investment is more than worth it.
4. Use quality resources such as the DQP, AAC&U VALUE rubrics, and the NILOA Transparency Framework to inform your assessment work. These kinds of external resources can be helpful in getting “unstuck” and in seeing possibilities that might not emerge locally.
5. Involve student affairs in a meaningful way in the development of assessment activities. Learning happens in the classroom and outside of the classroom.
6. Develop and use rubrics across the curriculum in ways that reinforce shared language among faculty, and that communicate consistent expectations to students.
7. Create opportunities through workshops and/or reports for stakeholders to make sense of assessment results and think together about how to close the loop. Document specific actions that happen as a result of the data—an important step in maintaining and growing the sense that assessment is worth doing.
8. Involve students in assessment committees and activities in creative ways, for instance in helping to understand findings that are otherwise puzzling, or spreading the word about the value of participating in assessment activities (such as NSSE).
9. Assessment and professional development can support each other, for instance when assessment results are used to shape professional development programming. This kind of linkage can happen (as at McKendree) through coordination by a central committee, but other campuses will find other ways to support collaboration.
10. Remember that assessment is about continuous improvement and therefore always a work in progress.

Additional Resources

The McKendree University [Assessment 2.1 Plan](#)

The [six-year cycle and one page checklist](#)

The [data reports](#) (new and old grid)

The biennial [assessment reports](#) (including student affairs)

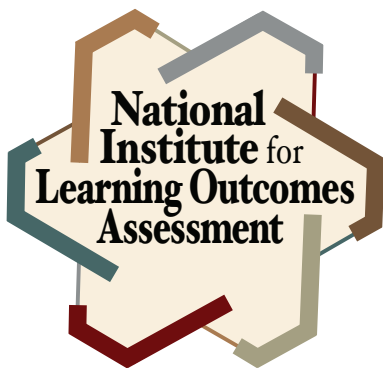
About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free resources and can be found at <https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>
- NILOA supports institutions in designing learning experiences and assessment approaches that strengthen the experience of diverse learners within a variety of institutional contexts.
- NILOA works in partnership with a broad range of organizations and provides technical assistance and research support to various projects focused on learning throughout the U.S. and internationally.
- NILOA's Vision is to broaden the dialogue and conversation on meaningful and sustainable assessment practices that address issues of design and implementation, and position institutions, organizations, and individuals to achieve their goals.

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