



Excellence in Assessment Designations: Reflections on Previous Applications & Guidance for New Applications

The Excellence in Assessment (EIA) program recognizes exemplary colleges and universities that successfully integrate assessment practices across campus, provide evidence of student learning outcomes to stakeholders, and utilize assessment results to guide institutional decision-making and improve student performance. The EIA designations focus on campus processes and use of assessment results, rather than on student performance or accomplishment. While student learning outcomes are an essential component of assessment processes, they are only one of many pieces necessary to facilitate institutional growth and improvement. The EIA designation evaluation process is directly linked to the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) [Transparency Framework](#) and builds on the foundation of student learning outcomes reporting within the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). The Transparency Framework provides a structure to make evidence of student accomplishment accessible, useful, and meaningful to audiences both on and off campuses.

In reflecting on the first year of the EIA designation, reviewers and sponsors noted several points where applicants appeared to struggle in compiling their application narrative. Some of these areas were due to lack of clarity in the application guidelines, which we've attempted to rectify. Some areas, similarly, were due to misalignment between the evidence we asked institutions to provide and the evidence our reviewers said would be most useful to evaluate a campus. We've likewise made adjustments to these guidelines to address those areas, as well as updating the scoring rubric to clarify the essential elements of each component. The following additional guidance is offered to applicants for the 2017 Designations in hopes of helping them craft successful narratives based on evaluations of the 2016 inaugural applications.

The ability of a campus to clearly and convincingly communicate the learning outcomes of all their graduates, regardless of program of study, is paramount to the success of our students, institutions, and larger national economic and competitive priorities. Policymakers and external stakeholders are increasingly questioning the value of higher education experiences as a whole,¹ focusing on labor market outcomes to hold certain types of programs or majors up as preferred.² Institutions and the higher education industry as a whole have struggled to push back on these claims, citing the complexity of evaluating student learning across varied and disparate programs in easily comparable ways.

Despite these challenges, many campuses are successfully designing and implementing campus-wide assessment systems that provide evidence of the learning of all students. These systems are horizontally and vertically integrated to encompass learning both in and outside of the classroom, and are validated

¹ See for example: USA Today College (December 10, 2015). "Is college worth it? Goldman Sachs says not so much": <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/12/10/is-college-worth-it-goldman-sachs-says-not-so-much/>; The New York Times TheUpshot (May 27, 2014). "Is College Worth It? Clearly, New Data Say": http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/27/upshot/is-college-worth-it-clearly-new-data-say.html?_r=0; and Money (October 5, 2015). "Why College is Still Worth It Even Though It Costs Too Much": <http://time.com/money/4061150/college-degree-worth-it/>.

² Carnevale, A.P., Cheah, B., & Hanson, A.R. (2015). *The Economic Value of College Majors*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce.

Excellence in Assessment Designations are sponsored by the Voluntary System of Accountability, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, and Association of American Colleges and Universities. More information can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/eiadesignation.html>



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by participation and evaluation of external stakeholders, including alumni, employers, and schools their students subsequently attend for additional study. By incorporating all areas of campus, not just the academic experiences that occur in the classroom, institutions are able to confidently assert the competency of their students in areas of leadership and teamwork, essential outcomes for employers in today's diverse workplaces.^{3,4}

Reviewers noted, however, that many institutions seemed to struggle with presenting a cohesive and concise narrative regarding their campus-level assessment process. The difficulty came from making an active shift away from simply listing processes and/or activities to focusing on explaining why the processes in place on their campus mattered for their specific setting or students. Providing appropriate background context for assessment practices is important for the reviewers and others to understand why the institution engages with and approaches assessment in the manner it does. Many campuses defaulted to providing lists of various disconnected activities without connecting or aligning the activities into a cohesive narrative and describing or explaining the relationships between the various parts. Applicants are strongly encouraged to approach the narrative as a representation of the collective whole of assessment activities, one that is placed within a specific institutional context, and to provide that context explicitly within their narrative when necessary. It is not enough to say that an institution is engaged in a particular assessment practice without articulating why **that** practice is important within **that** context.

The 2016 guidelines included an expectation for a large and diverse campus application team to engage in the self-study process that we feel is best to aid campuses in preparing their EIA designation application narrative. Unfortunately, we placed too much emphasis on representation within an application team without addressing our true intent: that a broad and diverse group of campus committees and individuals are actively and substantively engaged in on-going assessment activities. The application guidelines have been altered for 2017 to make it clear that while an ideal campus assessment plan will be inclusive of a broad and diverse set of constituents, it is not a requirement that all of those parties engage directly in creating the campus application narrative. However, we would encourage the team charged with crafting the campus application narrative to be inclusive of various audiences in some substantive way. This expectation is an intentional effort to address a barrier to integrated approaches to assessment—that only one office or a few individuals are in charge of and responsible for supporting the entire campus enterprise. The majority of 2016 EIA applicants revealed in their narrative that they struggled to engage various groups in their campus-level assessment processes in a consistent and connected manner. For instance, either student affairs were not involved in assessment at a campus-level or they had a separate approach not connected with the academic side of the house that was made clear in the application process. Further, few campuses reported actively

³ Hart Research Associates. (2015). *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U).

⁴ Deming, D.J. (2015). *The Growing Importance of Social Skills in the Labor Market*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University and NBER.



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engaging adjunct or part-time faculty, students, alumni, receiving institutions, and employers in their assessment work. These areas were subsequently identified in the Reflection and Growth/Improvement Plans, with many applicants stating intentions to make better connections with these groups moving forward. Using the application process as a means to think collectively as a campus about strategies to better address areas of disconnect proved to be a strong use of the EIA application self-study process.

Finally, we heard from many other campuses that reported they used the EIA evaluation rubric and application materials as a means to examine institutional readiness to apply for a Designation or to review current campus-level assessment processes. This is an important and meaningful use of the EIA designation materials and one that can help identify priorities or current needs within an assessment process. Indeed, one of the primary goals of the EIA Designations is to help foster meaningful communication and discussion on campuses regarding the creation of scaffolded and horizontally integrated assessment practices in order to create more cohesive learning environments for all our students.

As increased attention has been paid to campus-level assessment outcomes as an indicator for campus accountability, pressure on campuses to simply report results to meet external demands has intensified. In some cases, this pressure has led to decoupling the campus-level assessment activities from those that support and give credence to their results. Even campuses who are engaged in strong student learning outcomes assessment struggle to tell their stories to stakeholders both on and off campus. The purpose of the EIA designations is to recognize the work of those campuses that are engaging in the full breadth and depth of vertically and horizontally integrated student learning outcomes assessment, ensuring that all systems are linked and cross-validated. These campuses deserve recognition of their accomplishments and by identifying them, the EIA designations also highlight them as exemplars for other campuses to explore.