National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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DQP Case Study:

Daemen College

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Founded in 1947, Daemen College is a small, private college located in Amherst, New York. Originally chartered as a women's Catholic college, Rosary Hill College, Daemen became non-sectarian and opened its doors to male students in the 1970s. Since then, the college has offered a liberal arts education to students at the undergraduate level. Daemen maintains its identity as a small, student-focused institution with an average class size of 16 students. They offer over thirty undergraduate courses of study, as well as six graduate tracks. Although they were founded and continue to identify as a liberal arts institution, they also provide a series of professional degrees and certification programs.

As of Fall 2014, Daemen College enrolled a total of 2,800 students, with the large majority matriculating as undergraduates. The majority of the undergraduate population (72%) is women, with 18% of the student body composed of minority students. Further, the vast majority of students are full-time, attend classes on campus as opposed to distance learning/online programs, and are under the age of 24.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) selected Daemen College as a case study site due to their involvement in the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) consortium on the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP). As part of this project, Daemen College engaged with the DQP to further their preexisting curricular mapping projects, as well as advance their newly instituted assessment program and assignment design initiative. NILOA met with three administrators and seven faculty members involved in the DQP project and the assignment design initiative during a visit in November of 2015.

Institutional Context

Prior to working with the DQP, Daemen College undertook a series of initiatives designed to define institution-level learning outcomes and codify what a Daemen graduate should be able to do. Daemen College faculty and administrators worked to create a series of learning outcomes, referred to at the college as competency statements, which specified seven different core competencies of every graduating Daemen student. The finalized competencies are: critical thinking and creative problem solving, information literacy, communication skills, affective awareness, moral and ethical discernment, contextual integration, and civic responsibility.

> The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) presents outcomes for three levels of degrees (Associate, Baccalaureate, and Master's), and five broad categories of proficiencies: Specialized Knowledge, Broad and Integrative Knowledge, Intellectual Skills, Applied and Collaborative Learning, and Civic and Global Learning.
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> To learn more about the DQP and institutions working with it see:
> http://www.degreeprofile.org

Discussions among administrators and faculty members led to statements explaining what each of the core competencies should encompass in terms of specific abilities, general characteristics of the competency, and what demonstrations were necessary to indicate student attainment. It should be noted, however, that despite descriptions developed as a part of this process, several of the competency statements remain under discussion, and conversations continue regarding how these competencies should be understood, observed, and measured.

The ongoing process of refining the Daemen College core competencies made clear that what was needed was not only clarification and mutual understanding of what the core competencies should mean, but also where the competencies should be taught. Daemen faculty and administrators agreed that it was not enough to relegate instruction of core competencies to the general education or core curriculum. Rather, what was needed was to align and integrate the curriculum from the general education core to programs and majors to reinforce student learning throughout the entirety of the curricula at Daemen College. As one administrator described this process:

> A big focus [of this project] was trying to see how the core curriculum is reinforced in junior and senior year. We had also come to the conclusion through our fledgling assessment efforts that you don't become competent in one required course in critical thinking. We wanted to assure ourselves that these competencies were being reinforced.

What followed, then, was a course alignment initiative, named the 4Cs project, or the "Connecting **C**ourse **C**ontent to **C**ore **C**ompetencies" project. The project sought to track the extent to which individual courses in general education aligned with the core competencies and the major, and to assess the extent to which students were meeting those competencies at the core, major, and pre-graduation capstone levels. Daemen College administrators further elected to gauge the success of this (and other) initiatives through an assessment project instituted in 2012 called the Core Assessment Project, which sought to improve the extent to which classes in the general education core as well as courses within individual programs, aligned with institutional outcomes.

Daemen College then began engaging with AAC&U's LEAP initiative, investigating and implementing the VALUE Rubrics. By identifying the VALUE rubrics that best matched stated Daemen competencies, and then modifying the rubrics to fit the Daemen mission and individualized competencies, faculty and assessment-focused administrators were able to build the foundation of an assessment program that gauges student learning in all seven competencies.

This project was fruitful in allowing faculty and administrators to understand how competencies were being taught, learned, and assessed at various stages within the overall undergraduate curriculum. As a result, a systematic yearly assessment plan focusing on a singular competency was implemented, assessed, and discussed. Administrators and faculty members highly engaged in the process repeatedly emphasized that these assessment conversations are not compliance-focused discussions of data results, but are rather intended to present data to faculty as a starting point for a discussion of how class content, curricula, and pedagogy can be deployed to better serve the needs of their students on campus.

Daemen College and the DQP: Initiative Integration

Daemen College first began to work with the DQP in 2011, as a part of the CIC Consortium to complement the initiatives currently in process. Given the extent to which the perceived mission of the DQP matched with the intent of projects already in process at Daemen (e.g., curricular alignment and mapping processes underway), they elected to join the consortium to investigate how the DQP might inform their own existing initiatives.

The project was headed by a core group of administrators and faculty including the director(s) and coordinators of the core competency project, assessment director, and other engaged faculty developing

associated programs and frameworks within the 4Cs project. As was suggested by one administrator, the project was seen as a way of using a "new tool to promote intentionality in developing or revising programs at the department level."

However, many of the administrators and faculty most directly involved in implementing the CIC DQP project were concerned about the DQP being received as "yet another thing to do" for faculty already asked to do a great deal on a relatively small campus. Given these real concerns about a possible case of "initiative fatigue" among the faculty at Daemen, the project was presented not as separate, but rather as a part of the greater 4Cs and alignment project. In terms of how the DQP project was presented to faculty, one administrator in charge of the implementation of the CIC consortium initiative explained:

> Honestly, I don't think many faculty are aware of the DQP, but I am confident our participation in the DQP consortium did more to move along institutional initiatives related to clarifying learning goals and aligning core and program curricula.

The DQP integrated into the 4Cs project at Daemen College, and thus facilitated the curricular alignment and associated student learning assessment projects and structures at Daemen in at least three ways. The first of which, and the one referenced most frequently by both Daemen faculty and administration, is the common language and external reference points provided through the DQP, allowing faculty and administrators to communicate across disciplines and develop a common understanding of what their core competencies mean for students.

Second, common language facilitated conversations regarding the curricular mapping process from the core into the departments, and vice versa. Such conversations led to an increased awareness of the need to develop a coherent and broadly distributed assessment structure to better understand how and when students met institutional and departmental learning outcomes. This led to the institutionalization of a fully developed and continuous assessment program, which seeks to analyze one core competency a year to understand how that competency is being addressed both within the core curriculum and students' individual majors.

Finally, the DQP project at Daemen College was instrumental in the development of the assignment design project, an influential project which continues at Daemen independently of the CIC consortium. This project provides resources and peer review groups for faculty interested in designing assignments for their courses, closely aligned with the Daemen core competencies and departmental learning goals. This project is not campus-wide in its implementation, as many single departments are not using the assignment design project fully in their alignment efforts. Yet, many faculty on campus from various disciplines and departments are engaging with this process and expanding the conversation on the importance of intentionality in assignment design and alignment.

Shared Language and the DQP

After signing on to the CIC DQP project and introducing the DQP document to campus, the general education director and associated faculty and assessment professionals at Daemen embarked on a curriculum mapping project. Faculty members from participating departments began to develop their own learning outcomes or refine existing learning outcomes as necessary to better align departmental objectives with institutional outcomes. Although this curricular mapping project was indeed a project that fit into the goal of creating coherent pathways for students, the DQP was introduced as a series of external reference points through which a bridge could be made between learning goals articulated by the programs and those articulated through the core competencies.

Communicating Learning Outcomes at the Department Level

Use of the DQP as a language bridge to map departmental learning outcomes to institutional learning outcomes occurred in various ways for participating departments. For some departments, faculty gained

an understanding of their own learning outcome statements and how to align these statements more fully with the core curriculum through framing, as well as generate a common understanding concerning what a Daemen graduate in that particular major should know and be able to do. As a faculty member from one participating department explains:

> We wrote our learning objectives and they were not very good. When we went through the required five year review we realized that most of us didn't know what our learning objectives were. One of them was that our students should have jobs, which is not a learning objective.

For the faculty in this and some other departments, the DQP was part of a process of developing a common language that allowed members of these departments to understand better the extent to which their learning goals were or were not measurable, and where they could be reframed to better reflect what faculty intended to teach and what they intended students to learn.

For additional departments, the language of the DQP helped identify misalignment or clarify when different aspects of course content or assignments were not aligned. One administrator remarked, "One thing we realized is that the assignments in a capstone course didn't have a lot to do with the core competencies."

Mapping Course Content to Core Competencies

Although the prior remark speaks in many ways to the importance of using the DQP with assignment design in particular, the DQP provided a language bridge not just from the learning goals within a department to the institutional core competencies, but also from individual course content to the institutional learning objectives, the core mission of the 4Cs project. One faculty member involved with the CIC Consortium described the impact of this alignment process on how the language derived from the DQP allowed departments with differing perspectives to find a common language to articulate learning outcomes.

By using the DQP language as one type of external reference point, it became clear that a lack of clarity and in some cases disagreement existed regarding the meaning of several of the core competencies and how competencies should be demonstrated and assessed. Through discussion, faculty and administrators were able to isolate where disagreement existed. Although it is not necessarily the case that these disagreements have been resolved, at least one administrator reports that, "Participating in the DQP forced us to admit it [that we did not have a clear understanding of some of the competency statements]. We are being more honest." Indeed, although these competencies have not been fully revised, participants report that the conversations regarding competencies are ongoing and continue to be productive.

Communicating Expectations to Students

The translational aspect of the DQP language also proved to be a helpful tool for faculty in terms of communication with students regarding expectations about their learning and work. One faculty member expressed that while the project was not necessarily presented to the full faculty stakeholder group at Daemen as "The DQP Project," the language in the document was presented as a tool for faculty members to use when communicating with students about course expectations and how course assignments were designed to increase student learning:

> We already had those assignments created, but they really needed revision. And what I really found the DQP helpful for that I didn't find in other places is writing the learning objectives properly, which is really a big part of what was missing, that is having a common language.

Further, the language in the DQP provided coherent examples for involved faculty of how to more clearly state their expectations through their learning outcomes for classes and individual assignments in ways that students better understand both the purpose of the class or assignment. As one faculty organizer of the project explained:

> Common language is one thing, but really clear language for students, from the student perspective [is another]. Because the idea for them is to look at it from a student point of view: Is that clear to me as a student? What does it mean for me to analyze a paper?

Such clarity may be beneficial to various student populations, such as underserved students. As a faculty member reported, "Often these students do not know they could go to the instructor to clarify expectations."

Specifically, the increased clarity in terms of expectations and outcomes has helped students understand what they need to do without having to intuit the purpose and expectations behind assignments. Students at a disadvantage in terms of navigating the collegiate culture at Daemen may find increasing support with more explicit assignments and classes as a result of DQP work. As one administrator explains, "A culture change that has happened both through the DQP and before is that we are now being more explicit with students with what they should know and be able to do."

DQP and Assessment at Daemen College

As part of the Daemen 4Cs project, in 2012 the director of the core curriculum on campus drafted and piloted an assessment framework to be instituted campus-wide. The assessment framework was first developed in order to examine individual assignments used in individual courses, both within and outside the core curriculum. These assignments were designed to assess at least one of the core competencies, with assignments from both the core and the majors collected. Assignments were then scored by faculty using modified versions of the VALUE rubrics. The data from these assignments were submitted to the assessment committee for compilation and analysis, which was subsequently distributed to faculty on an annual basis. Yet, the conversation did not focus on assignment design or alignment of the assignment to core competencies.

Assignment Design Project

It is important to note the extent to which the assignment design project at Daemen was a faculty-driven project. The assignments themselves were designed by faculty for use in their own classes, the assignments examined for each assessment cycle were scored by faculty, and at the course-level the data were aggregated and analyzed by faculty. Further, in addition to collecting data regarding student performance on these different assignments, data were also collected regarding faculty impressions on what worked and what did not in regards to what their students learned. Thus, the assessment process at Daemen College is structured not to collect data for external compliance but rather to help inform teaching practice on campus.

The DQP allowed faculty and administrators at Daemen to become more intentional in creating assessment opportunities, empowering faculty to change their practice to increase student learning around the competencies. As one assessment professional on campus explained:

> I don't think it's intentional in assessment and alignment work, but intentional in teaching work. Instead of, "I have this content to cover," which one does, but intentional in, "I want students to be able to do this, therefore, I need to structure my assignments or learning activities or lectures or whatever it is in a way that gets them there."

After faculty participated in a NILOA assignment charrette, they sought to recreate the experience at Daemen College for faculty members to redesign assignments with the intention of aligning them to core competencies. The realization that a core "competency was not achieved in one class," was a further motivator in developing and building the assignment design initiative.

Several opportunities have been provided for interested Daemen faculty to come together to modify and edit each others' assignments to better align with particular core competencies. As one faculty member in charge of organizing the assignment design project at Daemen stated, "We did the mapping and then realized the next step was making sure this [assignment conversation] was happening."

However, the process of mapping individual assignment content to departmental and institutional learning outcomes and core competencies was not necessarily straightforward. As was mirrored in discussions at the institutional level concerning the clarity of the learning outcomes among various faculty stakeholders, translating the learning goals for each assignment, as well as how they mapped onto the competencies and/or departmental learning goals, was a complex and multi-step process. A faculty member and developer of the assignment design process described this need for clarity at the assignment level:

> When I first started we really realized we had to focus on classroom assignments, because we [Daemen] have seven competencies and some faculty didn't even know how to define competencies. Defining them, and what they mean, what it means to be a critical thinker. We struggled for a while.

The DQP was helpful in providing a tool, which faculty members used to clearly articulate the learning goals and expectations for particular assignments, better map those assignments to Daemen competencies, and effectively communicate those goals and expectations to students.

Faculty and administration also noted the importance of the assignment design project in terms of making the work of teaching in the classroom more student-centered. Through charrettes, many faculty members were able to better think about learning from a student perspective, not just in terms of what they teach, but rather about what students need to do or demonstrate in order to show deep and lasting learning. Allowing faculty to be more intentional in their assignment design processes, as well as explicit in their communications with students, the assignment design project facilitates a more student-centered perspective for participating faculty. One original designer of the Daemen assignment design project described this process directly:

> It is working on making sure the student is learning more…thinking about the student nature, the changes in the student, how you make sure students are getting a better product. Changing the focus from, "What I do" to "What I need to do to make sure the students are learning."

Assignment design conversations remain active and ongoing at Daemen, with participation of faculty from a diverse set of departments from both the liberal arts and professional sectors. To broaden involvement, work is underway to recruit adjunct and new faculty to better facilitate intentionality in assignment design from the ground up.

Final Thoughts

In the past decade, Daemen College has embarked upon an ambitious institution-wide effort to create a more coherent and well-defined curriculum for students, both within the general education core and in each individual student's chosen program of study. This effort has been far reaching in: revising the entirety of the institutional learning outcomes into new competency statements, mapping curricula in the core and in the major to those statements, thinking about learning experiences and course content in ways that reflect the college's competency statements, and finding new ways of assessing student learning throughout the college.

Administrators and faculty members at Daemen sought and relied on a multitude of resources available both on campus and off as part of other national initiatives, in order to better implement the homegrown institutional changes the Daemen community felt necessary. The DQP was one of these projects. The DQP project on Daemen's campus has allowed for more coherent communication about how learning outcomes connect to curricula, course content, assessment of student learning, and ultimately the design of student learning experiences at the college. For colleges and universities looking to think differently about connections between courses, content, and student competency, the DQP can be used as a tool to help facilitate communication among diverse stakeholders involved in the process, and to coordinate understanding across multiple initiatives. The DQP can be understood as a tool to both build necessary

curricular change on campus, and to inform work already underway. As one administrator described her view of the impact of the DQP in this multi-initiative context, "…[I]t deepened our understanding of our previous projects."

Lessons Learned

- DQP language and proficiency statements can be used to facilitate discussion and a shared language of learning outcomes among diverse faculty and administrative stakeholders.
- The DQP provides external reference points for faculty and administrators to think about intentionality in assessment, assignment design and teaching, and to better communicate expectations to students.
- The curricular mapping process can be aided by the DQP, in that the DQP may provide external reference points that help link departmental learning outcomes to institution-level learning outcomes.
- Information from or about the DQP need not be explicit in order to be impactful. Instead, the DQP language and resources can be used in conjunction with other initiatives, or presented as one tool among many rather than as its own, stand alone project.
- The DQP can aid in linking existing, diverse on-campus initiatives.

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 assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- NILOA's founding director, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.

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