National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment
Making Learning Outcomes Usable & Transparent

Assessment in Practice

The University of North Carolina System's Adoption of the NILOA Transparency Framework

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Recent higher education institution closings and fines, skyrocketing tuition, and increasing student debt have contributed to a lack of public trust and recommendations for additional operational oversight. Calls for more accountability, different quality measures, and increased transparency have been suggested as methods to increase the public's trust (Miller, Bergeron and Marting, 2016; Spellings, 2006; Senate Bill 3380, 2016). As part of their mission to address these concerns, the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) adopted the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) Transparency Framework as a guide for its participating institutions to tell their stories of student learning and success. This model serves the purpose of meeting transparency demands in understandable language and creates opportunities for faculty to reflect on the curriculum and instructional practices.

While adopting the NILOA Transparency Framework allows institutions flexibility and autonomy in how they meet the VSA requirements for transparency in student learning outcomes assessment and data, adopting the Framework requires a great deal of thought about how to publish student learning outcomes data in a way that is appealing to multiple audiences and clearly interpretable. It also requires institutions to decide what data is appropriate and acceptable to publish on the web. Institutions within a state system have an additional challenge of determining what common information to publish as they relate to the components of the Transparency Framework.

Rather than having these important conversations in isolation, the assessment officers at the UNC System institutions decided to work collaboratively on a common set of practices and to collectively decide on guidelines for publishing on student learning. Here, we describe the process the UNC System institutions used to adopt the NILOA Transparency Framework, including how we addressed individual needs while maintaining consistent publishing guidelines and how we navigated issues around handling potentially sensitive or identifiable information. This process has allowed the UNC System to responsibly address the policy calls for greater accountability and transparency for student learning outcomes.

At the recommendation of the UNC General Education Council (GEC), and with the support of the UNC System President and General Administration, assessment leaders from the different institutions formed an Assessment Council as a forum to address adopting the NILOA Transparency Framework. The Council's steering committee consisted of Dr. Christine Robinson (UNC Charlotte), Dr. Muktha Jost (NC A&T State University), Dr. Jodi Pettazzoni (UNC Greensboro), Dr. Erin McNelis (Western Carolina University), and Dr. Michelle Soler (UNC General Administration). This committee facilitated discussions with campus assessment directors about how each campus understood the Transparency Framework and how they were approaching it. The Council also met in person to reach consensus on common elements that all institutions within the UNC System will share with the public as part of their adoption of the Transparency Framework.

Perhaps one of the most critical discussions the Council had was how to negotiate the ethical tensions created by the Framework and how to address potential pitfalls of sharing student learning outcomes data publicly. For instance, while transparency about student learning outcomes is a laudable goal, higher education institutions must also comply with federal laws that protect student privacy and student records (e.g., FERPA). Student outcome data therefore must be appropriately de-identified and/or aggregated. Campus faculty have also raised concerns about publishing results that could link directly back to a particular course or instructor. Additionally, campus assessment efforts are continuously being refined to improve their quality, validity, and authenticity. Published snapshots of assessment data may not fully capture this process. Assessment practitioners and faculty also recognize that assessment results sometimes point out potential shortcomings of programs or institutions; campus stakeholders may have concerns about publishing less than favorable results, particularly without an adequate discussion of how these results are being used for improvement. Finally, it is also a difficult task to create websites for student learning outcomes data that are visually pleasing and useful for a broad range of external stakeholders, including current and future students, parents, and policy makers in ways that provide meaningful context to understand the shared assessment data.

After much deliberation on these potential concerns, the Council focused on reaching consensus in three areas: What is the minimum amount of details that should be included in an institution's publications? What details might cause concern if published to the public, and how do we address these concerns? Where should institutions publish their assessment documentation, and what format should be used?

The Council agreed all UNC institutions should publish the following details at a minimum:
1. A description of the overall assessment process that is suited for multiple audiences such as parents, students, and legislators.
2. Aggregated data for general education and/or institutional outcomes to ensure that faculty and students cannot be easily identified.
3. A sample of program student learning outcomes data without compromising course, instructor or student privacy. The use of visual or graphic displays were preferred over textual reports.

Some of the UNC institutions have now published their student learning outcomes data in accordance with the guidelines reached in our group discussions and have provided a link to their framework on the College Portrait's webpage. Examples of the framework in action within the UNC System are provided at the end of this piece. While these publications help address the UNC System's desire to have a cohesive system-wide response to the NILOA Transparency Framework guidelines, we still face challenges in how we can most effectively achieve transparency in showcasing student learning on our campuses. Some institutions have elected to show mainly indirect evidence of student learning, such as surveys, rather than direct evidence, such as performance on assessment tasks. Institutions have also found it challenging to include relevant documentation about how student learning evidence is used for program improvement, as this information is sometimes under-documented or is not widely communicated.

Despite the potential challenges associated with undertaking a new assessment task, the opportunity to adopt the NILOA Transparency Framework has helped the assessment leaders within the UNC System become a more tight-knit community. The UNC Assessment Council and the discussions on our respective campuses have facilitated the sharing of best practices and ideas from other institutions about how to best serve the assessment needs of our campuses and our broader system. These connections are likely to endure and expand beyond the initial task of adopting the Transparency Framework, helping to serve as a useful resource for addressing emerging issues in assessment and accountability in higher education.

Examples of the framework in action within the UNC System:

North Carolina Agricultural and Technical University

UNC Asheville

UNC Charlotte

UNC Greensboro

UNC Wilmington

Winston-Salem State University

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