# Assessment *in* Practice

# Library PECConomics

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This Assessment in Practice article examines Sullivan University's (SU) Library PECConomics[1] (PECC) within the academic context of:
- the meaningful ways in which the library navigates accreditation and assessment;
- the library's role: what has worked well at Sullivan and why?;
- the future of SU PECConomics; and
- from culture of compliance to culture of continuous improvement.

## THE MEANINGFUL WAYS IN WHICH THE LIBRARY NAVIGATES ACCREDITATION AND ASSESSMENT

For the library, Dr. Keston H. Fulcher of the James Madison University's Center for Assessment and Research Studies, has ideally distilled an assessment algorithmic learning improvement model into its most elliptically palindromic—and, for assessment practitioners, now almost talismanic—formulation, viz.: "weigh pig, feed pig, weigh pig." While postulating porcine-modeled input, throughput and output, Fulcher more signally emphasizes that assessment "processization"—at whatever targeted departmental, program or course assessment level—is not cognate with nor does it inevitably result in demonstrable performative improvement [Fulcher, Good, Coleman, & Smith, 2014).

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[1] Similar to other Pickwickian coinages such as, Reaganomics, wikinomics, cinderellanomics and faithonomics, "PECConomics" refers to management of the university's PECC's (Planning and Evaluation Coordinating Council) IE process, protocols and its associated body of knowledge. In encapsulating the PECC's systematic and integrative assessment oversight process, PECConomics exemplify both microPECConomic characteristics, viz.: smaller or more circumscribed microassessment criteria that do not change from one annual assessment cycle to another, such as: departmental missions, and macroPECConomics characteristics, viz.: larger or more global macroassessment criteria that change from one annual assessment cycle to another, such as a department's current analyses of outcomes. Perhaps, the changeability of these criteria could be more accurately defined as, respectively: stabile (no change) PECConomics; and, labile (changing) PECConomics. http://libguides.sullivan.edu/Pecconomics

The most meaningful way in which the library navigates accreditation and assessment is by means of hands-on assessment/accreditation professional development via participation on SACSCOC visiting committees. This professional development functions as a master class in assessment and accreditation whereby key institutional effectiveness (IE) algorithms are modeled at other institutions. This modeling subsequently manifests itself in the development of intramural IE processes and protocols. Most significantly, this professional development generates a collective IE knowledgebase among the university's many participants. That knowledgebase is exploited via the PECC IE processes emanating from the SACSCOC Principles of Accreditation iconographically modeled by the university's Continuous Improvement Circle (CIC) and operationalized through its Targeted Issues Checklist (TIC) table.

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Figure 1: Culture of Continuous Improvement Operationalization.

Revised for the 2016 assessment cycle, the most recent PECConomic process flow (see Figure 4, below) comprises the following essential steps, which emphasize Fulcher-ian improvement/accountability over the subtextual process. During each departmental presentation, the PECC examines these seven Targeted Issues Checklist-ed macro- and microPECConomic assessment areas:

1. Alignment of Mission (microPECConomic);
2. Identification of expected outcomes (macroPECConomic);
3. Satisfaction of Key Constituencies (microPECConomic);
4. Culture of Continuous Improvement (macroPECConomic);
5. Notable Initiatives or Accomplishments (microPECConomic);
6. Appropriateness of Curriculum (microPECConomic);
7. Programmatic Accreditation (microPECConomic).

Fundamentally, as might be expected, the PECC's primary IE focus centers on the macroPECConomic assessment area of "Culture of Continuous Improvement," (CoCI) whereby individual educational program or support units apply the seven-step Sullivan University Continuous Improvement Circle (CIC) [see Figure 3] to assess and to analyze their expected outcomes. The university's CoCI embraces a culture of both assessment and of informed action in which department-determinant and -specific outcomes are assessed so that the resultant data may be used to drive actionable plans for improvement. As a result, IE principles

of accreditation are operationalized via the university's seven-step Continuous Improvement Circle. Outcomes need to be S.M.A.R.T.[2] and clearly articulated as outcomes, not vague wishes: almost 35 years ago, S.M.A.R.T. outcomes were first identified by George T. Doran (1981).
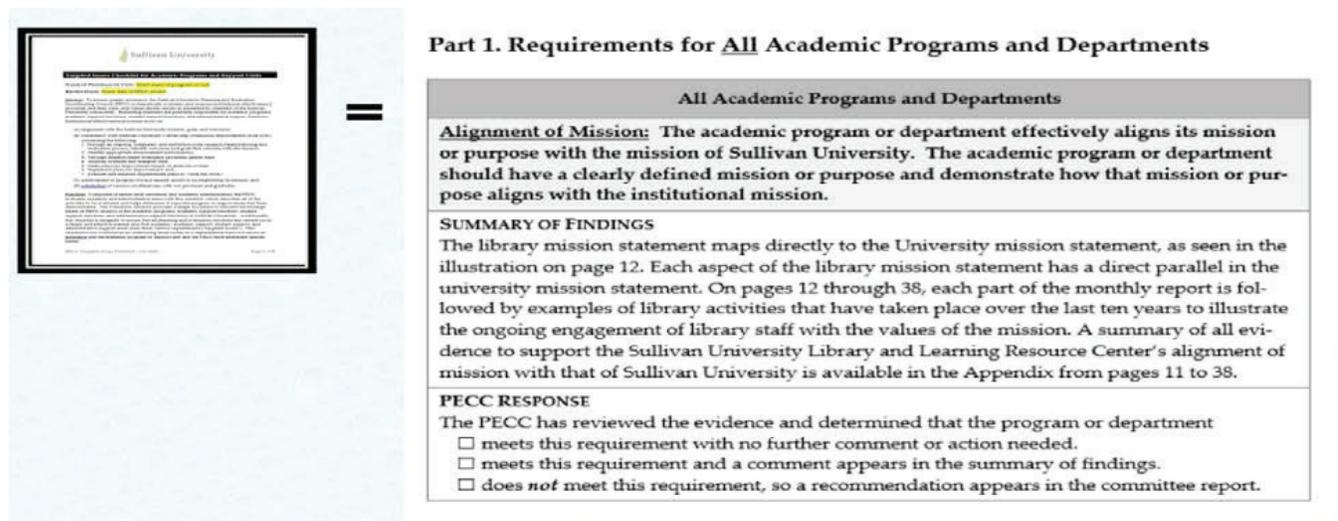


Figure 2: Planning and Evaluation Coordinating Council Targeted Issues Checklist (TIC).



Figure 3: Institutional Effectiveness Continuous Improvement Circle

## THE LIBRARY'S ROLE: WHAT HAS WORKED WELL AT SULLIVAN AND WHY?

Management authority Peter Ferdinand Drucker said, "there is no substitute for leadership" (1954, p. 159) which he later distinguished from management: the former does the right things; the latter does things right (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, p. 21). Through its decade-and-a-half-long co-development and involvement with SU's PECConomics, library leadership (along with the administration's unmitigated support), first, discovered the assessment mandates as codified in

[2] In addition to Doran's "SMART" outcomes approach, I also suggest that you review Clifford Adelman's 2015 essay entitled, To Imagine a Verb: The Language and Syntax of Learning Outcome Statements. This occasional paper of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, "provides language-centered principles, guidelines and tools for writing student learning outcome statements" (p. 3). Lastly, Dr. Tony Piña, the SU Associate Provost for Online, has generated a list of Measurable and Non-measurable Objectives, which is available on the LibGuide.

the *SACSCOC Criteria of Accreditation* (now, the *Principles of Accreditation*); then, *pari passu*, evolved departmental assessment best practices, procedures, and data-capturing instruments to facilitate regional compliance. In so doing, an increasingly metacognitive continuous improvement ethos (AKA "culture of assessment") also evolved whereby "accreditation activities [became] part of regular faculty service and committee work…[whose mindset did] not consider the work of improvement to be an onerous task or something that an accrediting body forces them to do, but an essential part of [our] management" (Wheelan & Elgart, 2015). Foremost, this system-based leadership, even at the library departmental level, was instrumental in effective library assessment interventions. Perhaps, this effectiveness results from perception of the library's systemic role as positively neutral and discipline-supportive.

In 1999, Sullivan University, a level-V, regionally-accredited for-profit university located in Louisville, Kentucky, debuted its new and greatly expanded library. Coincident to this opening, the library, "recognizing the value of information literacy to overall student success" (Gilchrist & Oakleaf, 2012, p. 6) —also initiated its first-year experience (FYE) project with quarterly assessment reports predicated on General Education outcomes mapped to student-centered library outcomes. Since the library does not deal directly with student competencies as do teaching faculty, its efforts may only be said to attempt to achieve quasi-competency-based learning objectives mapped to corresponding General Education Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs).

The library's burgeoning IE culture increasingly involved it in intradepartmental assessment-practices modeling. Then—post-2005-SACSCOC reaffirmation, in which the university's IE was cited as being too discursive, unplanned, and ineffectually evaluated—the university's Planning and Evaluation Coordinating Council (PECC) was born when the library wrote the PECC's mission and charter. Predicated on a history of accreditation-based assessment, the library director was asked to become the university's IE lead. Consequently, a cultural paradigm shift—using the library's paradigmatic practices—slowly insinuated itself into all academic and many nonacademic departments to support compliance.

At this point in its institution-wide evangelization of a culture of assessment, the library's social capital and human resource skills—supported by the CAO's grey eminence—was paramount in persuading all to participate. A new CAO/provost modified the PECC process/protocols (see Figure 4, below) from being IE/IR-director-driven to one in which the PECC membership served as an interlocutory panel of assessment experts before whom departmental presenters would present their assessment data.

The PECC comprises 14 senior-level university and academic administrators who serve—based on their assessment credentials or experience—as de-jure-if-not-de-facto IE experts, assessment evaluators and interlocutors before whom each academic and non-academic department annually presents their assessment plan and *Targeted Issues Checklist* (TIC).

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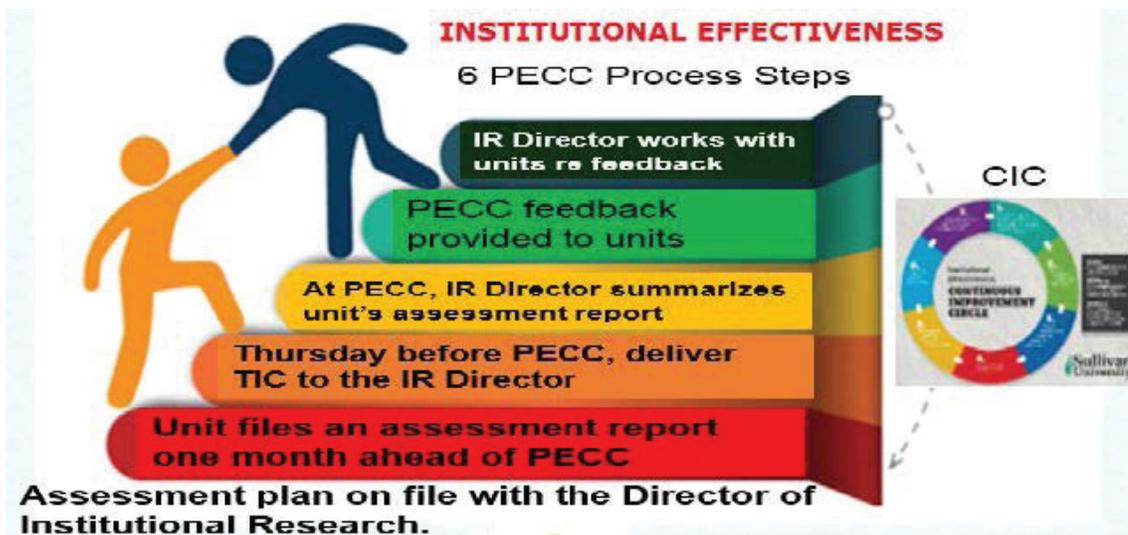
*Figure 4: Planning and Evaluation Coordinating Council (PECC) process flow*

Finding that development of a remodeled first-year experience (FYE) project mapped to re-codified and student-centered General Education outcomes might better address co-departmental information literacy needs, the library teamed with that department to develop not only new assessment instruments predicated upon pre-/post-test data, but also ancillary electronic workforms and electronic database pedagogical practices. Initially, due to faculty database learning curves, the library actually team-taught all courses—now hands-on—in the library's new computer lab.

Library leadership were asked to coordinate the institution's 2015 comprehensive SACSCOC compliance certification for full decennial review and reaffirmation. As a by-product, library leadership began to write a "SACSCOC Matters" column for the Provost's *Academic Illuminator* quarterly newsletter to faculty. This column focused on explication of standards; and, in so doing, abetted the development of a culture of assessment. Recently, I focused another column on PECConomics and Fulcherian PIGonomics; and, most recently, the column focused on Kuh-homaged **High Impact Practices (IE/HIP)**.

## THE FUTURE OF SU PECCONOMICS

With the same commitment with which it assesses other departments IE achievement, the SU PECC applies its processes to itself. The PECC also solicits input from its stakeholders, among which the library is a vital contributor. The library has provided the following "Top 8 Recommendations for Improvement of the PECC:"

1. Modify the PECC mission to include a planning process component in addition to its long-active evaluation process component;
2. Designate a PECC subcommittee as its assessment experts;
3. Develop a pre-PECC-presentation completion checklist to be used by the IR Director as he prepares each department for its presentation before the PECC assessment panel;
4. Develop a more robust qualitative rubric-based form, mapped to

the SACSCOC IE-standards-aligned—and weighted for year to year comparability;

5. Continue to expand the PECC's assessment oversight into the administrative and academic/nonacademic unit areas per the PoA and as also endorsed by the SU SACSCOC VP;

6. After each assessment cycle, PECC process elements will be reviewed annually by means of a holistic survey of all departmental stakeholders. Based on this explicit and systemic input, the plenary PECC will recommend iterative refinements to its processes and forms;

7. Develop internal assessment skills by hosting extramural assessment expert speakers, workshops, faculty retreat sessions, encouraging assessment scholarship and conference attendance, and by utilizing/enhancing the burgeoning skills of selected in-house guest PECC interlocutors from the D&D's; and

8. Create an associate provost of institutional effectiveness and accreditation position.

## FROM CULTURE OF COMPLIANCE TO CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

As a *locus classicus*, a definition of a "Culture of Assessment," is to be found in most higher education assessment books. In her landmark book *Assessment Essential*, Trudy Banta, the doyenne of U.S. higher education assessment, co-opts Barham, Tschepikow, and Seagraves' "culture of assessment" characterization of exhibiting "values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors [that] reflect a shared appreciation of assessment practice and its value to instructional advancement" (2nd edition, 2015, p. 276). However, a culture of continuous improvement (CoCI) occurs when an idea, action, function, or initiative has been organizationally routinized to become an engrained part of an institution's *modus operandi*. Theoretically, CoCI constitutes the purposeful and metacognitive process of internalizing an ontological operational ethos. These iterative practices and their concomitant inculcation of value are acculturated over time as noted in the SACSCOC CR 2.5 (i. e., the new R7.1), which asserts that assessment should be "ongoing." Since 2006, when the PECC was inaugurated, Sullivan University has proactively evangelized CoCI, which is documented and assessed annually by all academic/nonacademic department completes by means of the corresponding *TIC* section (see Figure 2, above). Those *pro forma* presentations cumulate the year's CoCI efforts, which are culturally integrated into workaday functions, committee work, etc. For example, CoCI evangelism has spread to every department of the university: "continuous improvement" is a mantra often heard whenever any department head/dean/director mentions their daily activities. Moreover, library faculty write CoCI articles and present CoCI workshops at SACSCOC annual meetings. A series of Faculty Retreat workshops owed their genesis to a corresponding series of CoCI high impact practices chronicled in system-wide, quarterly *Academic Illuminator* digital newsletters (see: http://libguides.sullivan.edu/Pecconomics). The Library provides SACSCOC STILL MATTERS updates to the university's faculty senate, i. e. the Academic Council, at their twice-a-month meetings. A PECC Scholars program has been proposed to incentivize faculty to devote some of their professional development to CoCI; and, as an integrative

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feature of that proposal, an annual Faculty Grant may be earmarked for CoCI. Internal processes, such as the university's quality enhancement plan (QEP), i. e., "Putting Care Back in Career," focus specifically on enhancing student learning by means of stepwise CoCI. Likewise, new forms are mapped to the university's CoCI principles; then, everything is assessed in order to provide a baseline for ongoing improvement. Additionally, the new *Principles of Accreditation* assert, "effective institutions demonstrate a commitment to the principles of continuous improvement" (2017, p. 7).

MacAyeal also notes this as one of a culture of assessment's five mindsets, i.e.: "1. Assessment needs to live in the ongoing, daily work of everyone….Libraries, departments, and individuals need to include assessment as part of their expected work and build assessment activity into their goals. Initiatives should grow organically out of continuing work and should be completed by those engaged in that work" (p. 1-2). Consequently, one's commitment to the culture of assessment ensures that one will value, per Barham, Tschepikow, and Seagraves (2013), the importance of the assessment standards and its associative assessment peer-review process in abetting the inculcation of a CoCI.

On May 21, 2005, the late author David Foster Wallace delivered the Kenyon University Commencement Address in which he told this story: "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes 'What the hell is water?' https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf. If they have successfully annealed assessment to their workaday practices – as Sullivan University and its library have with their PECConomics – a culture of continuous improvement becomes higher education's water.

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- 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.

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