

# Assessment *in* Practice

## **Developing Systematic Assessment Practices for Administrative, Educational, and Student Support (AES) Units**

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July 2017

Institutions of higher education, whether two- or four-year, public or private exist for one purpose – to provide students with the academic programs and support that enhances student learning and the environment for success. Regardless of the precise wording, these principles form the core of collegiate mission statements, and achievement of these missions and the measured progress towards the realization of the corresponding goals reflect institutional effectiveness.

During the past decade, as more public attention and regulatory scrutiny has been placed on the cost of attendance, student outcomes, and student learning, regional accrediting bodies have adjusted accreditation standards and criteria to help colleges and universities more effectively respond to the increased pressure. Expectations for not only systematic institutional effectiveness systems, but also evidence of implementing, using, and assessing the effectiveness of these systems has become a requirement for continued reaffirmation. At the core of these systems is the assessment of student learning and the environment for student success. Inherent within these expectations is an explicit requirement that higher education institutions examine effectiveness in the classroom, throughout the educational and student support areas, and with consideration to the backbone, functional departments and units. Within the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) region, these non-academic areas are labeled as administrative, educational, and student support (AES) units. The institutional effectiveness system in place at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), which is built on an integrated planning model, is driven by the use of assessment results in both the academic programs and AES units.

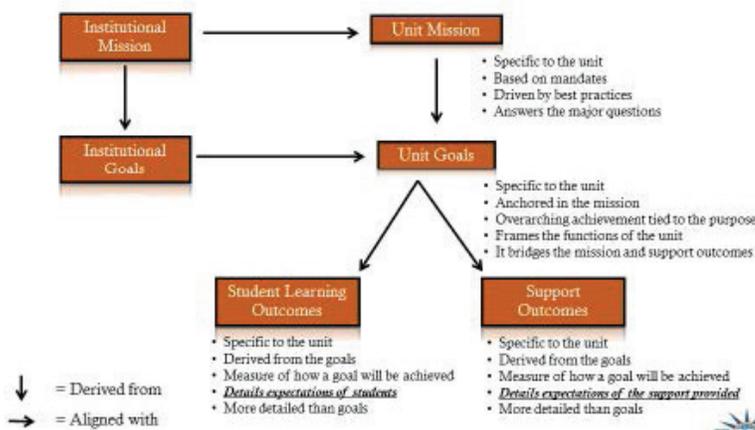
## A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO AES ASSESSMENT

There were several steps involved in building a comprehensive and useful assessment system at BMCC. First, we had to identify who would be included in the AES assessment process. What areas are essential to the functioning of the College and which areas could be grouped together under common functions? Once AES units were identified by members of the Cabinet, IEA began the process of meeting with units to discuss assessment. From the very beginning, this was a difficult process. Everyone was on a different page about what assessment was and how they could even begin to engage in the process. We quickly realized that a successful and organized system of assessment meant that everyone needed to be speaking the same language. With this in mind, IEA worked with units so that everyone had clearly defined and articulated missions, goals, and outcomes.

Administrative, educational, and student support (AES) Units are an indirect, yet fundamental part of student learning and student success that has gained increasing recognition in recent years. Our institution made it a priority to work with staff to develop clear missions, goals, and outcomes for each of these areas. This is a foundational step in creating a systematic and organized assessment process. A mission is a broad statement of purpose. It answers three distinct questions: What is the unit and what does it do? Whom does the unit serve and how does it serve them? What resources does it provide? Once these questions are answered, our units will have an active, and accurate mission that will allow for anyone outside of the unit to understand who they are, what they do, and who they serve. Goals describe the functions of the unit. They are clear, meaningful statements of the unit's purpose. They stem from the unit's mission statement. Units typically identify 3-5 goals. From the goals, outcomes are identified. An outcome can be identified as either a support outcome or a student learning outcome. A support outcome is a statement of expectation regarding the delivery of services, processes, activities, or functions to students, faculty, or staff. All units will have support outcomes, and additionally, some will also have student learning outcomes. A student learning outcome is a statement of what students will know, think, or do as a result of unit efforts. Units will typically identify 3-5 outcomes per goal. All outcomes identified must be measurable. Finally, each units' goals and outcomes activities are also mapped to BMCC's institutional strategic goals, objectives, and outcomes which allow the college to demonstrate how it is achieving its overall mission.

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### Foundations for Assessment



This framework was a necessary starting point to help get all of our areas on the same page. However, even with the AES framework, everyone was still speaking a different language. Assessment of student learning is often described through the language of Bloom's taxonomy. Since its development, this taxonomy has been a staple tool for faculty and educators to articulate what students will know, what skills they are expected to gain, or describe changes in disposition. Unfortunately, no such system existed for AES units. Administrative areas were being asked to develop consistent and organized systems of assessment, without having access to tools that would help them in this process. Those of us in IEA saw an opportunity to develop a system that could be used across AES units, from facilities and public safety to tutoring and student activities. The Shults Dorimé-Williams (SDW) Taxonomy provides AES units with a method of organizing and describing the complexity of tasks that are performed within their respective areas.

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## BMCC'S ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Under our new assessment process, one-on-one meetings took place with each AES unit to discuss who they were, what their purpose was, and their main functions at the college. Using the SDW Taxonomy, units were able to more effectively articulate their missions, goals, and outcomes. Most importantly, the taxonomy and direct feedback from IEA helped to ensure that outcomes were measurable, which made the process of developing assessments easier as well. After developing and revising their missions, goals, and outcomes, units followed-up with IEA to identify priority areas. Instead of approaching assessment as a series of isolated and disconnected activities, our new process sought to place assessment activities firmly within the priorities of each unit. This method leads to meaningful conversations about areas of importance for each unit. In addition, it made clear to AES units that the assessment process was guided by what their needs were, not the needs of IEA or some external accreditor. By focusing on priority activities or processes, discussions about what information needed to be collected were much more meaningful and productive. It also helped to shift the focus from assessment as an accountability process to one that was

genuinely about continuous improvement and student success. This is now an annual process, with units selecting one or more outcomes to assess each year.

These activities also tie directly into the new unit review process at the College. Units will assess all of their outcomes prior to their unit review or within a four year period. In the fifth year, AES units will go through a unit review process. The completed assessments will serve as a major source of information about the efficiency and effectiveness of the unit in achieving its stated mission and goals. As we illustrated previously, demonstrating the achievement of goals is ultimately aligned with achievement of a unit's mission.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Throughout this process, there have been several key issues that have stood out. We've made note of the most important factors that have helped or hindered our progress at BMCC.

- 1. Words mean things!** The importance of a common language for all of our AES units has been an essential part in implementing a new assessment progress. Having an agreed upon set of terms and a common understanding of what words like "mission", "goals", and "outcomes" means has made a significant difference in creating a structured and organized system of assessment.
- 2. If at first you don't succeed, try again.** Over the course of 15 months, IEA has worked continuously with AES units to provide support for this new process. While some areas were able to get started immediately within this new framework, others took many visits, lots of emails, and ongoing conversations for others to feel comfortable with this new process. Implementing a new framework for AES units did not take place overnight. It was important for us that units felt supported, by IEA and their respective Cabinet members. IEA not only works with units on an individual basis, but also offers workshops, trainings, and forums throughout the year to support units writing their mission, goals, and outcomes; highlight the importance of an organized assessment process; offer information about assessment methodologies; and serve as a resource.
- 3. Structure matters.** One of the greatest benefits to BMCC's AES assessment process is that it provided a structure to the assessment process, whereas previously units were left to figure out an approach on their own. This contributed to assessments taking place, but in a more piecemeal fashion. Now, with a focus on clarity, alignment, and transparency, our AES units are able to better understand not only the assessment process, but how they contribute to the College's ability to articulate how we are achieving our mission. In addition, through our assessment management software, AES units can see the work of other units around assessment and access information that may be relevant to their own area. This also contributes to the ability of our AES units to work more collaboratively.

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4. **Revise and resubmit.** One of the challenges has been working with AES units around the idea of assessment as an ongoing and imperfect process. Many struggle with wanting to have perfectly articulated mission, goals, and outcomes or an assessment that measures everything relevant for a particular program. Working with our AES units, we stress that the only way to fail at assessment is to not do it at all. Every effort contributes to a better understanding of the work of a unit and can highlight areas for improvement. This improvement can even be the assessment method itself.
5. **Assessment is not evaluation.** Perhaps one of the most important lessons that has come from this process is the need to educate and provide information about the difference between assessment and evaluation. Assessment is not evaluation; assessment is about collection, analysis, and interpretation of data and information related to an issue or area of interest, primarily to make changes or improvements. Assessment is a process of ongoing and continuous improvement. Evaluation is about determining the worth, value, or effectiveness of something. Evaluation is about rendering a judgment about how well something has achieved an expected level of performance. While assessment and evaluation are inherently related, they are different. For many AES units, there is legitimate concern about the ways in which assessment results may be interpreted. This is especially true for the many “offices of one” that exist at the College. IEA continues to work with AES units as well as their respective Cabinet members and senior leadership at the College to build an understanding of the difference between the two. We do not want individuals to feel that their personal job performance is being called into question. Instead, our approach is that assessment is looking at process and policies, not people.

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## FINAL WORDS

While the push from accreditors, the public, and governmental agencies have provided incentive and guidelines for measuring BMCC’s institutional effectiveness, the College is committed to ensuring that all students are provided with the support required to meet their educational goals. The College places equal emphasis in assessing both academic programs and the corresponding student learning outcomes and the AES units with both SLOs and support outcomes. Whether through institutional assessment bodies, academic and AES assessment days, workshops, and direct support from IEA, assessment and evaluation of AES units are institutional priorities and central to the College’s assessment of institutional effectiveness.

## Please Cite As:

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Dorimé-Williams, M., Carlson, E., & Shults, C. (2017, July). *Developing systematic assessment practices for administrative, educational, and student support (AES) units*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

## About NILOA

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- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and 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.

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