

Assessment *in* Practice

The Development of a Student Affairs Assessment Structure

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Words and visuals have power. We have most assuredly found this to be true in developing structure in student affairs assessment. As the co-curricular moves towards learning outcomes, assessment and robust assessment planning, a paradigm shift looms for multiple parties. Some within Student Affairs needed to be reminded/encouraged/affirmed in their educational prerogatives. This structural clarity directly assisted in a season of shifting professional educational paradigms. Prior to programmatic impact, we first needed to impact those developing programs, and little did we know with our recent entry into the world of student affairs assessment that we would see revolutionary results in a short space of time.

We were already experiencing the movement of student affairs towards assessment as the single most influential factor in increasing collaboration and alignment between student and academic affairs. However, before we could converse regarding co-curricular alignment, we needed to both comprehend and visualize how student affairs assessment was structured and understood. That said, we've had to stop trying to fit the round peg into the square hole. Yes, student affairs needs to engage in the work of assessment, but it's also going to look a bit different from assessment in academic affairs when talking about outcomes related to holistic student development.

To begin this process of alignment we gathered feedback from all of our departments asking questions like "what are you currently engaged in and what are the values guiding your practice?" "What are the outcomes for your areas?" "What do you hope to see from students?" These questions assisted in forming our Student Success Objectives. We found it critical to begin with the current functioning of the division rather than a futuristic aspirational dream. Student affairs cannot take a year off to focus solely on assessment structures; assessment needs to be integrated into the fabric of our daily work and evolve from the "what is now" into the "what could be."

Data from each department were then compiled and distilled by the Deans Council (student development senior leadership who directly supervise the directors); in doing so, however, we realized there was a layer missing. It was challenging to map directly onto the Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs) from our student affairs perspective. The unique structure and work necessitated a unifying layer between the ILOs and the Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs). As such, a broad set of Divisional Learning Outcomes (DLOs) were created. These outcomes brought together the extremely diverse threads of the student affairs scope. The graphic in Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the various outcomes—institution, program, and division. I have modified some of our faith-based language to be more applicable in a generalized educational context.

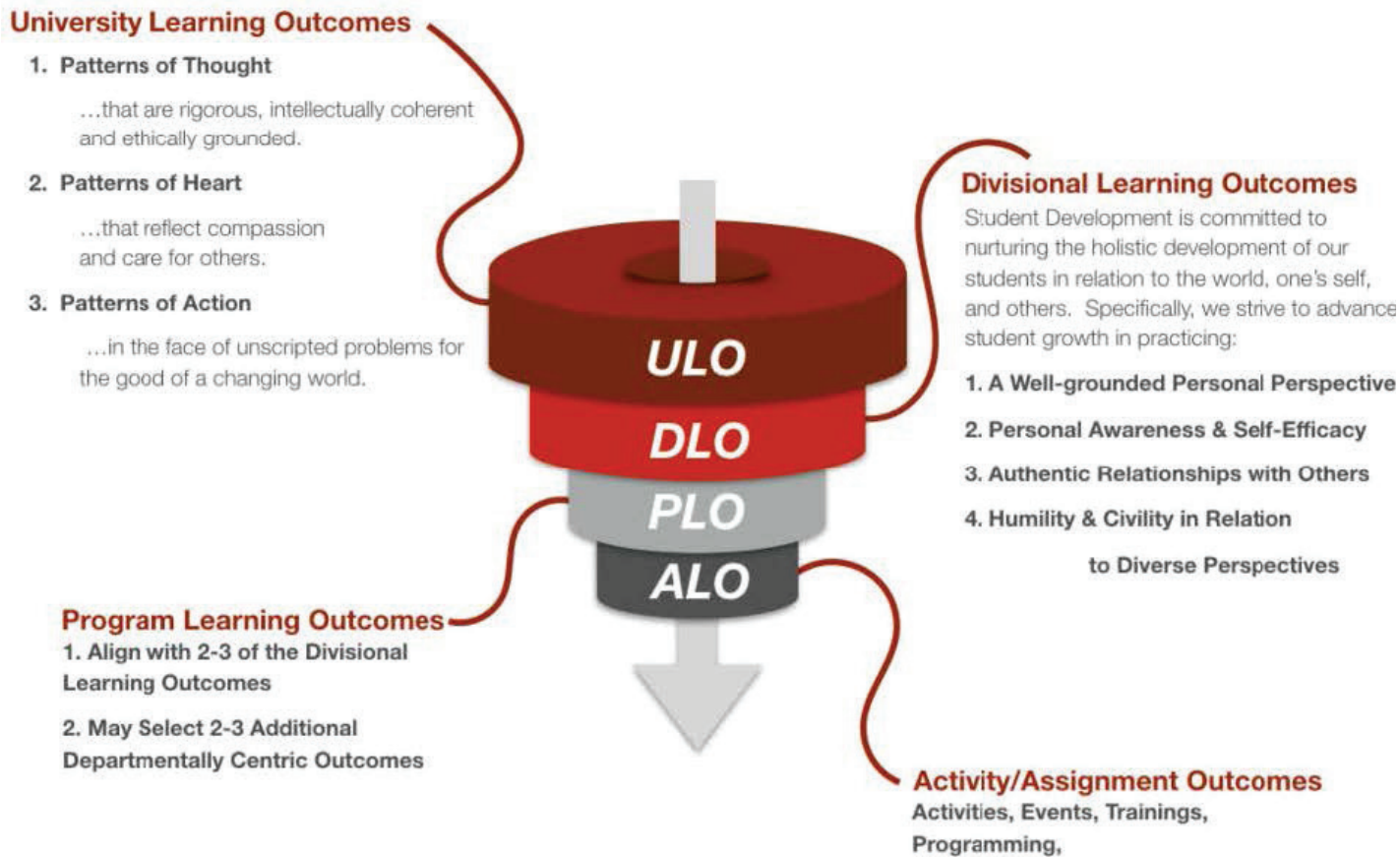


Figure 1: Student Affairs Learning Outcomes Structure

In addition, each of our Student Affairs departments created Strategic Educational Plans. These plans included their Program Learning Outcomes, departmental goals and their plan for assessing each of their PLOs over the next three years. Each department was required to map departmental goals onto at least two of the four Divisional Learning Outcomes.

We initially implemented a four-year program review cycle in which departments would rotate through approximately two outcomes at a time (Figure 2). After consultation with sister institutions, we have since shifted to an all-encompassing review model every four years. Now the entire division comes together for a

“year of assessment.” We hope this will maintain momentum throughout the year and departments will not experience isolation, as now the entire division will be together in the same boat.

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT ASSESSMENT CYCLE



Figure 2: Student Development Assessment Cycle

This mapping process yielded some important discussion and distinctions. For example, if departments are not connected with the overarching outcomes of Student Affairs, then perhaps they should be moved to another division or they may need to consider adjusting their alignment. These conversations proved to be invaluable as we had initially failed to differentiate between programs and services. These areas still maintain departmental goals, but to force the development of learning outcome alignment for the sake of alignment is just plain futile... again, square peg meets round hole.

Professional competencies for student affairs professionals were also considered in the process. Because the types of professionals we strive to be ought to impact our work with students, it made sense to look at what is expected of student affairs professionals as outlined by the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies. As such, we have integrated professional development into the conceptual, ideological and strategic framework of our division (Figure 3). This provided another level of visual clarity and cohesion to several components within our Student Affairs unit.

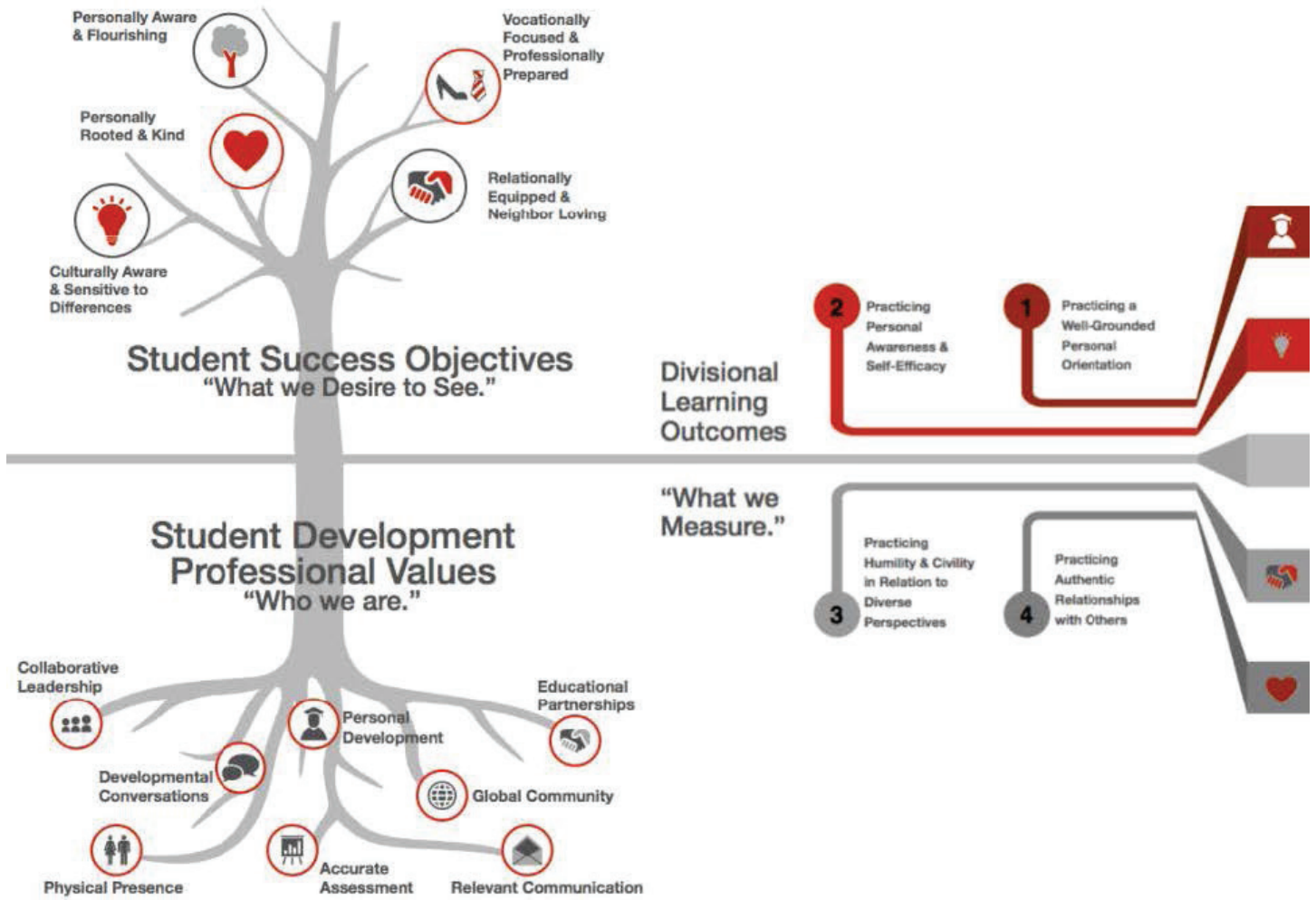


Figure 3: Strategic and Ideological Structure

We think of our vocational competencies and values as the nourishment for our professionals. This encompasses “who we are” and “who we strive to be.” The fruit harvested from that nourishment are the Student Success Objectives. They are the large picture aspirational goals that we have for our students upon graduation.

Lastly, our Divisional Learning Outcomes enter the picture and permeates the educational process of student affairs. The learning outcomes are essentially like looking at a slice of the tree trunk. Through examination of one slice we are able to make inferences that tell a much bigger story. These are the measurable markers of progress that we seek along the way to the aspirational, holistic, interpersonal and intrapersonal development. Furthermore, our clearly stated learning outcomes on divisional and departmental levels are what we are committed to assess. This clarity focused our effectiveness efforts in a way that made the work of assessment more doable for all five steps of the assessment cycle.

We have found the visual clarity to be significantly beneficial both within our division and across the university. The student story and the work of student affairs needs to be told through the work of assessment. Assessment in student

affairs now tells the student story—with footnotes, citations, and data. In times of tightening budgets and college affordability, we simply cannot afford to neglect the assessment and evaluation of our co-curricular work with students. Assessment structures have assisted in the transformation of our work, adding a level of purpose, synchronicity, and alignment we didn't know was missing.

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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.
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- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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