

# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

February 2015

## DQP Case Study:

### American Public University System

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The American Public University System offers online education through American Public University and American Military University. Founded in 1991 by a retired Marine Corps officer who envisioned an innovative way to offer quality and affordable education to the U.S. armed forces, American Military University (AMU) later extended its reach to those in or seeking to enter public service related fields. In 2002, American Public University (APU) was established, as was the American Public University System (APUS) comprising both AMU and APU, enabling the university system to reach a broader base of adult learners wishing to enter or deepen their careers in the national security and public safety sectors. APU appealed to those pursuing business, IT, healthcare, and related careers who were seeking a combination of quality and affordable curriculum delivered through the innovative-for-its-time flexibility of an online curriculum and delivery platform. This expanded university system now serves a diverse population of military, public service, and corporate professionals, and is recognized by the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) for best practices in online education. APUS is committed to offering an affordable, quality, and career-focused education for students with the goal of successfully preparing them for leadership in a diverse global society. With a supportive organizational culture emphasizing innovation, APUS strives to create interactive, effective learning environments and to deliver program and service standards that effectively serve the current and emerging needs of the working adult student.

APUS is a for-profit, online learning institution wholly owned by American Public Education, Inc., a publicly traded private-sector corporation. It is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. APUS enrolls more than 100,000 students. Most are working adults, including 52% who are learning while actively serving in the U.S. military. Students are enrolled in more than 190 degree and certificate programs. The most popular majors at APUS are international/global studies, business administration and management, general studies, criminal justice, and homeland security. About 60% of the degrees conferred are bachelor's level. The rest are split between associate's and master's programs. The majority of students transfer credit from their prior learning, previous university coursework, or military experience. On average, students transfer 28 semester hours at the undergraduate level and five hours at the graduate level. APUS has more than 1,750 full-time and part-time faculty members from around the world, many of whom hold teaching positions at other universities or are active professionals in organizations including the National Security Agency, the United Nations, and the U.S. military.

**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.**

**To learn more about the DQP and institutions working with it  
see: <http://www.degreeprofile.org>**

NILOA selected APUS as a case study site for its unique mission and for the significant headway it made in experimenting with the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP). In addition, APUS was one of more than 100 institutions that accepted the challenge of testing the DQP without the benefit of participating in a Lumina Foundation for Education funded initiative. Building on Jennifer Stephens Helm's 2013 summary of phase one of APUS's DQP work, this case study highlights insights from the initial exploration, focusing on four significant themes in that work: the institution-wide commitment to testing and implementation, the thoughtful process for working through the DQP, the development of signature assignments, and the incorporation of the DQP framework into the university system's program review process. The case study concludes with a description of next steps—phase two—in APUS's DQP work.

## Institutional Context

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In 2011, APUS learned about the DQP from several higher education organizations including the American Council on Education and inquired about a call from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) inviting colleges and universities to test and offer commentary on the beta version of the DQP. Although APUS was not included in the HLC project, the institution's leadership was determined to test the DQP without the support of grant-funded HLC workshops and convenings. APUS's motivation for testing the DQP was to explore how a 100% online institution could demonstrate equivalence to face-to-face programs across five learning outcomes that all graduates need for work, citizenship, global participation, and life. The DQP offered an opportunity to explore educational quality through a robust framework emphasizing student learning outcomes.

The first phase of DQP work at APUS began in 2012 with an initial exploration of the qualifications framework and its relationship to university system interests. This early work developed into a comprehensive review of curricular gaps between APUS programs and the DQP framework. APUS aimed to take advantage of the DQP to strengthen the overall university and discipline-level curriculum; examine relevancy between curriculum and industry expectations; assist in the focus on interdisciplinary studies; enhance readiness to implement general education revisions; provide transparency to the student by establishing expectations; assist students with taking responsibility and ownership of their own learning; and ensure that students are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies needed for success in work, citizenship, global participation, and life.

The DQP initiative began with the establishment of a DQP leadership team that consisted of select provost council members. The team immediately reached out to a range of stakeholders including deans, faculty, and program directors to discuss the DQP framework, in particular, the five areas of learning. This large group of more than 75 institutional leaders then connected the DQP areas of learning to their respective programs. Program directors engaged in exercises to map their program and course objectives to the DQP areas of learning, identify relevant assessments and assignments, and develop an action plan for moving forward.

Program-level efforts were led by provost council members and, most important, by the encouraging and dedicated staff in institutional research and assessment who developed resources, conducted workshops, and facilitated meetings in which program and academic leadership worked through program maps. APUS developed resources, including the Guidebook for Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) Mapping, which provided guidance in mapping existing program objectives, course objectives, and assignments to the DQP (see [http://degreeprofile.org/press\\_four/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/guidebook-for-APUS-in-practice.pdf](http://degreeprofile.org/press_four/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/guidebook-for-APUS-in-practice.pdf)). After programs completed their mapping, they all engaged in DQP review meetings that focused on how alignment or nonalignment of program-level objectives and a particular DQP learning area was determined, what gaps were discovered in courses and curriculum, and what was learned during the process. The review process—which was carefully crafted, engaging, and collaborative—lasted several months, allowing time for peer feedback and consultation with faculty.

This phase-one DQP work led to several outcomes. First, the observed relevance of the DQP's five areas of learning to APUS programs influenced the decision to replace the existing APUS institutional learning outcomes with the DQP areas of learning, plus the additional area of digital information literacy that is unique to the APUS mission. These learning outcomes, designated for all students regardless of their program level or

discipline, were adopted and approved by the Academic Leadership Curriculum Committee and the Executive Team in May 2013 and were affirmed in July that year by the Academic Affairs Committee of the Board of Trustees. Second, the DQP initiative demonstrated the value of the DQP framework for a deep analysis of the curriculum and exposed gaps in particular areas, such as civic issues and skills. Third, the DQP framework enabled APUS to distinguish differences in degree levels, and to redesign program review as a discipline family review versus each individual degree program.

Additional information about the APUS DQP process, the guidelines for mapping, and outcomes of this initial review are further documented by Jennifer Stephens Helm (2013) in the NILOA In Practice brief, *Implementing the Degree Qualifications Profile Framework at the American Public University System* (<http://degreeprofile.org/example/implementing-the-degree-qualifications-profile-framework-at-the-american-public-university-system/>)

### Institution-Wide Commitment

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The explicit commitment by APUS leadership to explore the value of the DQP across the institution was a key factor in moving the initiative forward. As faculty and program directors attested, APUS President Wallace Boston and Executive Vice President and Provost Karan Powell were passionate about the DQP and provided support, resources, and faculty and staff time for the work. Despite APUS's military-influenced top-down governance model, APUS leadership was committed to involving all programs and engaging many faculty members in the DQP work from the outset.

One aspect of the DQP that was attractive to APUS was its clear framework and common outcomes language. The provision of a universal language for discussing learning outcomes came at a time when APUS faculty across a range of disciplines were coming together to dialogue about institutional learning outcomes, enhanced curriculum, and general education. The DQP provided an institution-wide common base for discussion about curriculum and learning outcomes.

Although the university system leadership team was interested in increasing program director responsibility for enhancing the curriculum and ensuring relevancy to industry standards, they were concerned that program directors were consumed with administering programs—scheduling, handling student complaints, and so forth—and were dedicating too little time to reviewing and improving program curriculum and educational quality. To address this concern, shortly before the DQP work began, Provost Karan Powell reassigned some program director administrative responsibilities to other positions, freeing program directors to focus more on managing the curriculum. This shift placed the DQP and curriculum mapping squarely in the hands of program directors.

The decision for a test of the DQP involving the entire institution—instead of just a coalition of the willing—was ambitious. Undeniably, some faculty and program directors were reluctant or not at all interested at the outset of the testing and review process. One program director recalled, “I didn’t want to do it, but I did. The work was necessary...and doing it opened my eyes to different aspects of the curriculum...in the end, I became converted.” The dean of the school of education commented, “Once the program directors got into the work, they saw things they had not seen before...and some developed greater ownership of the curriculum and outcomes.” Deans and program directors attributed faculty and program director ownership of the DQP process to the strong support from leadership and the commitment to developing a thoughtful process for institution-wide testing.

### A Structured Collaborative Process for Working Through the DQP

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The process that APUS adopted to test and apply the DQP framework was, by all accounts, an essential step for gaining program director and faculty commitment and for advancing understanding of the full potential of the framework. The process was initiated by a DQP leadership team that consisted of selected

provost council members, including several deans. It was critical at this early stage for many APUS faculty and program directors to be involved and to be provided time to thoughtfully review the DQP. The first step was to introduce a guided process to align program objectives to DQP areas of learning using the mapping template at the associate's, bachelor's, and master's levels where appropriate.

Several introductory sessions and workshops about the DQP were conducted to provide faculty and program directors opportunities to learn more about the framework and ask questions. Most important, a variety of resources, including the Guidebook for Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) Mapping, provided direction in mapping existing program objectives, course objectives, and assignments to the DQP (see [http://degreeprofile.org/press\\_four/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/APUS.pdf](http://degreeprofile.org/press_four/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/APUS.pdf)). The belief influencing the decision to begin with a mapping exercise was that the DQP provided a solid framework against which program objectives could be judged, and that gaps would expose weaknesses for consideration by the program.

The program director in criminal justice indicated that mapping outcomes to the DQP was challenging, and that “seeing all the outcomes on the Excel spreadsheet was at first overwhelming, but then it clicked...it was eye-opening to see that we had objectives that didn't map to anything—not to courses or assignments.” A program director in education explained that “The DQP process revealed that the program content was better than I thought, but the assessments were weak...in fact, unimaginative,” adding that the process “has motivated the incorporation of other forms of assessment into the program.” The mapping process exposed a lot and was particularly useful to new program directors, who appreciated the more complete display of what was going on in their program. A collaborative peer review process was used in the mapping process, in that faculty and program directors sat in mixed discipline groups and had to share their maps and their explanations for alignments. Faculty noted that it was important in these early stages to know that it was okay to have gaps and that mapping was a way to better understand the program. Leaders in the peer review process emphasized that this was an opportunity to learn about the program different from required, cyclical program reviews.

The dean of the school of business reported on the value of bringing all program directors together to ask questions about the DQP and working through their concerns. He met with all directors to review what they were learning from their deep dive into the curriculum. They were finding great value in looking at every objective, all assessments, and each assignment. Since some directors had never even looked at some courses in their program, they had never before had an occasion to do this sort of meaningful review. The DQP work provided them a reason and a structure, tools, and time to engage in this substantive review. This process was important to faculty engagement and boosting faculty morale. According to the dean, it was important to assure the program directors that identifying gaps was not about exposing flaws but, rather, about learning and improvement.

Feedback was an important component in the DQP testing process. Over a three-month period, the DQP review team conducted meetings with 44 programs. Every school dean and program director presented to the team and had to respond to the DQP prompts (illustrated below), submit the common spreadsheet, and complete the action plan. Some form of the following questions were posed to all programs:

- What steps/actions did you go through to complete the maps and action plan?
- How were faculty engaged in the process?
- As you conducted the mapping and alignment process what were your findings?
- What did you learn in this process?
- Did your program objectives align with the DQP areas of learning?
- Are there gaps in your courses and curriculum? If so, what implication does this have for your program?
- What are your next steps?

The review meetings were an opportunity for feedback and for providing resources to the program. The collaborative, nonpunitive, learning culture established for the reviews fostered openness and encouraged progress.

The essential process elements in APUS's DQP work included thoughtful consideration and workshops to introduce and explain the DQP concept, structured exercises to map program objectives to DQP areas of learning, feedback given in an encouraging context, and the development of a plan for taking action.

### Signature Assignments

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APUS's phase-one DQP work exposed important insights about the potential for documenting proficiency through the curriculum and the role of well-crafted assessments of learning. A challenging but important component in the DQP mapping process was the identification of assignments that measure mastery in each DQP area of learning and program or course objective. The dean of graduate studies explained that "the DQP mapping really got faculty to look critically at assignments, and to consider the extent to which assignments actually connected to program goals." Through the mapping process, programs identified assignments that best represented their program, and some programs discovered that assignments could be improved to better elicit specific learning outcomes.

Although "key course assessments" have been part of the student learning assessment reporting at APUS for a while, the DQP advanced this work through the identification of "signature assignments." APUS defined such an assignment as "an assignment, task, activity, project or exam purposefully created or modified to collect evidence of a particular DQP outcome." Programs were advised to identify assessments that are authentic (being similar to what a professional in the field actually does), independent (the student choosing how to solve a problem rather than following a particular set path), and closely associated to the field (being not widely generalizable between fields).

The identification of signature assignments is intended to create specific measures of student learning for each DQP learning area. The idea for identifying signature assignments is to provide faculty a means for capturing a holistic picture of program-level proficiencies. Signature assignments provide a consistent and systematic way to gather evidence that the DQP and program proficiencies are actually being mastered at the levels claimed, while providing students and faculty a sense of program-level achievements. In addition, programs are expected to consider the documentation of students' program-level proficiencies to assess program goals and outcomes and to report on them in the program review process.

Interestingly, as a completely online institution, with a robust learning management system, the collection and consideration of assignments was relatively easy to undertake. The assessment office has the capacity to review assignments and examine how students performed on assignments over time, and program directors have access to these results so they can interpret the data and integrate into program review. APUS is also advantaged because all assignments and student products are digitized. These features have the potential to allow for the creation of two transcripts for APUS students—one that is a record of courses and credits and another that documents proficiencies. The technology and structured process of identifying and developing signature assignments to represent all areas of learning and program objectives is extending quality assessment activities and advancing the documentation of proficiencies.

### Incorporation of the DQP Framework into the Program Review Process

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The requirement for programs to develop an action plan based on observations from the DQP mapping exercise provided program directors encouragement to identify and act on their findings. Programs had to follow up with the curriculum committee to address deficiencies and gaps and modify the curriculum and goals. The dean directing the curriculum committee observed that many program directors began their presentation to the committee with the phrase: "While we were testing the DQP and mapping the curriculum, we found this, and now we need to fix the curriculum." For example, gaps in the school of education undergraduate

program course progression required the creation of several 200 and 300 level courses. In addition to revealing misaligned objectives and course gaps, the process also exposed insufficient distinction in some programs between objectives of the associate's and bachelor's degrees, revealing that some associate's and bachelor's programs were almost identical. The DQP initiative helped APUS organize and drive improvement in the curriculum and suggested the importance of systemizing this level of analysis in the regular cycle of program review.

The phase-one DQP mapping process that exposed gaps and misalignments in the curriculum and unclear degree levels, and that revealed the value of curricular analysis and change, led to the next phase of action at APUS. Phase two of DQP work involves extending quality assurance through the program review process. The program review process is a three-year cycle, requiring an external advisory board, program review meeting, a three-year plan, follow up, and data collection and analysis.

By incorporating DQP maps, assessment results, and questions about what this suggests for student learning and the curriculum in the program review process, APUS will realize improved program review. The next phase of DQP work will promote more extensive curricular revision, authentication of assessments aligned with institutional and program learning outcomes, and analysis of assignment results in the program review cycle.

### Extending Engagement with the DQP: Moving to Phase-Two DQP Work

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APUS's thoughtful review of the DQP framework—including intentional efforts to engage and provide support for the work of deans, faculty, and program directors—is important to understanding APUS's significant progress in the months following its initial DQP exploration. APUS leadership for phase-two DQP work has shifted completely to program directors, who are working with course leaders and faculty on the identification of additional curricular gaps and needed revisions and enhancements. The process continues to be very collaborative, within programs and across the institution, with program directors coaching and mentoring each other. The positive spirit of collaboration is encouraging program directors who initially struggled with DQP ideas and assessment and attracting the involvement of some early resisters.

APUS has identified four major goals of its phase-two DQP work:

1. Create university-wide rubrics aligned with the DQP learning areas. Building on the assessment and signature assignment work from phase-one DQP work, APUS intends to create rubrics to measure DQP learning areas across associate's, bachelor's and master's levels by considering existing APUS rubrics, the Association of American Colleges and Universities VALUE rubrics, the commercial performance assessment ShowEvidence tool, and the RCampus iRubric.
2. Develop institution-wide processes for and conduct quality assurance of the DQP maps and authentication of assessments aligned with institutional and program learning outcomes, and identify additional assignments and assessments as needed.
3. Incorporate the APUS identified proficiency of digital information literacy into mapping for all programs.
4. Expand the development of signature assignments and establish a system for reporting and analyzing results that is built into program review. Embedding this into the program review process is important to continue the process of enhancing maps, and selecting and reporting on signature assignments and assessments.

APUS's signature assignment activity and the development of rubrics to assess student work is taking up a significant extent of its DQP agenda. Assessment approaches must be developed alongside the identification of outcomes to document the skills and competencies expected of students earning associate's, bachelor's, and

master's degrees. In addition, by emphasizing the importance of using assessment and assignment evidence to document student learning and to develop a holistic picture of student achievement and progression and curricular coherence, APUS is integrating student attainment across the postsecondary years in ways that encompass what students gain from general education and the major program. Documenting what institutions like APUS are doing by way of assessment within the DQP framework and sharing the most promising practices and approaches is important to advancing efforts to improve student learning. Phase two of APUS's DQP initiative holds the promise of making significant contributions to the field.

## Reference

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Helm, J. S. (2013). *Implementing the Degree Qualifications Profile framework at the American Public University System*. NILOA In Practice Brief. Available at <http://degreeprofile.org/example/implementing-the-degree-qualifications-profile-framework-at-the-american-public-university-system/>.

## About NILOA

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- 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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