

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Alverno College: Lessons from an Assessment Pioneer

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Alverno College

Alverno College is an independent, liberal arts college for women located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Alverno offers undergraduate degrees in over [sixty areas of study](#), and its [graduate programs](#)—open to both men and women—offer Master of Arts in Education, Master of Business Administration, Master of Science in Community Psychology, and Master of Science in Nursing degrees, as well as a handful of post-baccalaureate certificates and teaching licenses (Alverno College, 2016). Alverno is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (HLC), the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the Wisconsin State Department of Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Board of Nursing, the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, the National Association of Schools of Music, and the American Music Therapy Association.

Roughly 2,500 students are enrolled at Alverno, about 1,800 of whom are undergraduates (Alverno College, 2016). The relatively small student population allows for class sizes of 20 to 25 students. Although the majority (58%) of students identify as White, the college is structurally diverse, with about 17% of students identifying as Black or African American, 15% Hispanic or Latino, and 4% Asian. More than 70% of Alverno students are first-generation, most are commuters, and about half are from Milwaukee and the surrounding area (Alverno College, 2016).

Alverno College was selected as a National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) case study institution due to its innovative and long-standing assessment practices and its commitment to student-centered teaching. Although Alverno is well established in its assessment practices, other institutions can learn from and adapt many aspects of Alverno's assessment model to improve and sustain their own meaningful assessment work. Alverno's approach to assessment is thoughtful, intentional, and distinctive, and the college has been recognized as a pioneer in assessing student learning. This case study provides an overview of the major aspects of assessment at Alverno and how those aspects function together to create a campus culture of assessment, as well as insights from students about how the various components of the assessment model influence and shape their learning. Students and faculty shared their perspectives during a NILOA case study visit in the fall of 2015.¹

¹Data gathered for this case study included email correspondence with a faculty member and Associate Dean of Humanities; observation of two classes; observation of a faculty meeting; informal interviews with four faculty members; a focus group interview with eight students; and examination of Alverno's website and publications. Data collection took place in September and October 2015.

Institutional Context

Alverno's unique approach to assessing student learning began in the early 1970s when Alverno faculty established **eight core abilities**, known then as "competences": Communication, Analysis, Problem Solving, Valuing in Decision Making, Social Interaction, Developing a Global Perspective, Effective Citizenship, and Aesthetic Engagement (Alverno College Faculty, 2005) (see Figure 1). These abilities are woven into Alverno's **curriculum** across all disciplines, and students must demonstrate proficiency at beginning and intermediate levels in all eight abilities, and at advanced levels in two of the eight. Each course offers an appropriate subset of the abilities, which then determines the outcomes students will be expected to meet and helps the instructor organize and teach the course.



Figure 1. Alverno's Eight Abilities. (<http://www.alverno.edu/academics/ouruniquecurriculum/the8coreabilities/>)

Alverno students do not receive **grades** for their work; instead, faculty use rubrics to assess students' learning and provide detailed feedback on assignments. Students are also required to reflect on their own work through self assessments (see Figure 2). Additional assessments are coordinated through Alverno's **Assessment Center**, which works with external assessors from business and professional communities in Southeast Wisconsin to assess abilities not linked to a particular course, such as problem solving and social interaction. Stu-

dents are also required to complete an off-campus internship, organized through the [Career and Professional Development Center](#). Students' internship work—as well as work completed in an accompanying course—is assessed through poster presentations which are open to all Alverno faculty, staff, and students. Student learning is further examined by the [Educational Research and Evaluation](#) department, which conducts collaborative research with faculty, staff, and administrators to study learning outcomes and student progress at the program and institution level. This research is essential for maintaining and improving Alverno's assessment model and highlights Alverno's commitment to the learning, growth, and development of its students.²



TEACHING

We care deeply about what is taught and how it is taught. We are world renowned for our teaching and learning methods, which are based on the content of your major area of study and specific abilities we know you will need through your personal and professional life.



LEARNING

We believe that the best learning occurs in an academic environment with a real-world approach. You will master the content of your major and minor in the classroom and also gain experience and skills through required internships.



ASSESSMENT

We use various assessment tools to understand what you have learned. Your professors will guide the assessment process, but you will also assess yourself, a skill you will use long after you earn your degree.



FEEDBACK

Faculty members, peers and professionals constantly provide in-depth written and verbal feedback on assignments and projects. This feedback will allow you to understand how to capitalize on your strengths and how to improve your weaknesses.

Figure 2. Alverno's grading system. (<http://www.alverno.edu/grades/>)

During a focus group interview, Alverno students identified four components of Alverno's assessment model as having the most positive impact on their learning: explicitly stated learning outcomes; meaningful, useful feedback tied to these outcomes; self assessments; and faculty who see the value and purpose of assessment as integral to student learning. These components, combined with ample campus resources to improve learning, hands-on experience in the major, and a student- and learning-centered campus culture, provide a meaningful and positive undergraduate experience for Alverno students.

² More information on these and other assessment practices at Alverno, written by Alverno college faculty, can be [purchased online](#).

Explicitly Stated Learning Outcomes

In order to produce meaningful change in students' knowledge and performance, students, as well as faculty, must have a concrete understanding of what is expected at the assignment, course, department, and institution level. Specifically, students need to know *before* they begin an assignment (indeed, before they begin a course) what they are being asked to learn or produce and what they should know and be able to do as a result. To communicate this information to students, Alverno faculty translate broad institutional outcomes into terms appropriate to each major. These program-specific outcomes are then used to inform the design of explicit learning outcomes at the course level. Each course [syllabus](#) provides students with these course-level learning outcomes, and each assessment includes performance criteria based on the same outcomes. Through this process, students know going into their work what is expected of them, as well as how this learning aligns with larger course goals and Alverno's eight core abilities. This commitment to explicit learning outcomes helps to tie together learning that occurs at all levels and creates a clear learning path for students.

Feedback Tied to Outcomes

Student work at Alverno is assessed based on explicit learning outcomes and through the use of detailed rubrics. Faculty determine what abilities should be met, and at what level, within a given course. Students receive feedback on their work through formal assessments from faculty (after assignments and at other points throughout the semester) and through online portfolios that track students' progress. Because of this abundance of feedback, students know if and how they are meeting goals at the assignment, course, and program level – they are always aware of where they are in the developmental learning process. Students find this knowledge extremely valuable. One student who had transferred from a larger university spoke about the difference between feedback at Alverno and at her previous school: “I would meet with [my program advisors] and they would talk about the potential that I had, but they would never talk about how I was doing at that moment. It really bothered me because I knew I wasn't doing well.” The feedback the student received was not specific; she knew she was struggling, but the feedback she received was not useful in helping her identify exactly where she was having trouble and how she could improve. At Alverno, however, the feedback she receives is much more concrete, and therefore more meaningful and useful to her as she progresses. Clearly defined outcomes, combined with substantive feedback, helps students understand their own learning processes. The outcomes inform students of what they should be learning, and the feedback tells them what they have learned and what they need to do to continue to build on this learning. Such individualized feedback also helps to identify students who may be struggling with their learning as well as those who are producing exceptional work, allowing faculty and advisors to provide appropriate support in a timely manner.

Self Assessments

In addition to receiving feedback from faculty, Alverno students are required to regularly assess their own work. Because students are assessing *performance* rather than themselves, Alverno uses the term “self assessments” instead of the hyphenated “self-assessments.” Learning to adequately assess one's own performance is a skill that must be cultivated over time as students develop four required component skills: observing, interpreting/analyzing, judging, and planning (Alverno College Faculty, 2000). Mastery of these components does not necessarily happen in order, but students tend to make better judgments of their work after learning to appropriately analyze it, and students tend to conduct better analysis after having learned to examine it objectively.

The self assessment process takes considerable time and effort on the part of Alverno students. Some students do not regard the self assessment process as the most enjoyable aspect of their experience at Alverno, yet they

recognize the value of identifying strengths and weaknesses in their work. Whereas traditional grades may encourage students to move on to the next assignment, course, or semester without analyzing or reflecting on their work, self assessments (and substantive feedback on those self assessments) allow students an opportunity to learn about themselves and their learning processes, which can lead them to improve their efforts in the future. One student said the key phrase when thinking about self assessments is “next time”—perhaps she was unable to meet an assignment or course goal, or perhaps her process for solving a problem, researching, or writing could have been more effective. Once she has completed the self assessment and carefully reflected on her work and her working processes, the student can take steps to improve so that she meets the intended goals next time.

While identifying weaknesses can help students improve, identifying strengths through the self assessment process is also highly beneficial, as one student noted: “I appreciate it because I can be critical [of myself], and it forces me to look for what is good with my work. I have to find evidence. It is hard for women to be proud; this part of self assessment is empowering and now I am less critical.” Students also noted that, as women, they tend to compare themselves to others and judge their merit based on the achievements of other women. The self assessment process allows students to evaluate their own individual performance instead. The self-awareness that results from the self assessment process is not only empowering for Alverno women as students, but also carries over into aspects of their lives outside of the college experience. Students have evidence of their knowledge in the form of portfolios, recordings, and other projects, and they are able to both articulate and demonstrate what they have learned through completion of their work. As a result, they are better prepared to tell (and show) potential employers what they know and what they are able to do.

Shared Commitment from Faculty

Alverno faculty are selected, hired, evaluated, promoted, and retained based on their dedication to students and their learning. Applicants are routinely required to supply a teaching philosophy and evidence of teaching performance (if available), and in interviews, emphasis is placed on an applicant’s pedagogical approach and interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Faculty are evaluated in four areas: Effective Teaching; Works Responsibly in the College Community; Develops Scholarship; and Serves the Wider Community (Alverno College Faculty, 2015). Evaluation criteria are specific to a faculty member’s stage of development (i.e., Beginning Assistant Professor, Experienced Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Full Professor). Faculty receive feedback from their students on a rotating basis, with about one third of all faculty receiving student feedback each year. Students provide feedback through surveys collaboratively created by the faculty senate and the Office of Academic Affairs. Faculty also have the option of including additional questions on the surveys.

Maintaining Alverno’s assessment model creates a heavy workload for faculty and requires significant training and mentoring; full acclimation to the system takes an average of five years for new faculty. Challenges persist, however, even after this period of adjustment, and the time commitment required to adequately and effectively provide this kind of feedback can be daunting for newer faculty. One faculty member described assessment as an “ongoing learning process” that requires flexibility, discipline, and patience.

Faculty participate in assessment efforts at Alverno in a number of ways, both in and out of the classroom. Instead of assigning students grades for coursework, faculty provide students with a thoughtful, thorough analysis of their performance and explicitly communicate how (and how well) students have met the learning outcomes of the assignment and how those outcomes align with Alverno’s eight core abilities. In addition to assessment work that occurs in their courses, each faculty member (excluding those in their first year) serves in one of eight Ability Departments, each of which focuses on implementation and assessment of one of the

eight core abilities. This structure supports the college's ongoing commitment to providing students with opportunities to demonstrate proficiency in each ability across disciplines and at beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels.

Faculty commitment to teaching and learning does not go unnoticed among students. One student described faculty at Alverno as the “one thing” that has had the most impact on her college experience. For many students, the approachability and accessibility of Alverno faculty is paramount. Faculty encourage students to use their first names instead of addressing them as “doctor” or “professor,” and by doing so, create an atmosphere in which students are less intimidated by their instructors and more likely to ask for help or clarification. Further, faculty are not simply focused on a student's activities and performance in a single course, but instead understand that one course is part of a larger experience. Because faculty across departments communicate with one another frequently, they are able to compare notes on students who might be struggling, either in class or with personal issues, and intervene when necessary. Students recognize and appreciate this communication among faculty (and between faculty and students) because, as one student noted, it not only keeps students accountable in their courses but also indicates that faculty are invested in the overall learning experience and wellbeing of students, both in and out of the classroom.

Final Thoughts

Alverno is widely regarded as a pioneer of successful assessment practice, and Alverno's assessment model continues to develop and evolve. A number of questions regarding the future of assessment are currently being addressed at the college. For example, how does Alverno's core assessment model apply to blended learning courses and programs, which are increasingly popular among adult students? As the first and second generation of faculty involved with development of Alverno's assessment model move toward retirement, how are new faculty to be trained? How might the latest scholarship of teaching and learning inform assessment theory and practice going forward?

Other institutions may see Alverno's approach to teaching and assessment as a product of its distinctive context and culture, but there is much to be learned and borrowed from that approach. Particularly, other institutions may garner lessons about ways to actively include students in their own learning, integrate outcomes across all courses and disciplines, and use rubrics in ways that are built into the learning process. Other transferable aspects of Alverno's assessment practices include the following:

- Student learning outcome statements are aligned and integrated across the entirety of the curricular experience, from the assignment level within specific courses, to the eight core abilities at the institution level.
- Assessment processes at Alverno are collectively designed and focused on enhancing student learning. As a result, students receive regular and timely feedback, are informed of outcomes and where these outcomes fit within the larger institutional context, and are given opportunities to develop skills over the course of their educational experiences.
- Students are active partners and collaborators in the assessment process. They are frequently and consistently made aware of learning outcomes, are involved in active reflection on their learning, and are provided opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do.
- Assessment is faculty-driven and an integral part of teaching and learning. Hiring, mentoring, and training practices align with assessment processes to provide faculty with the necessary supports to engage in a “high-touch” assessment process with students.

References

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NILOA Examples of Good Assessment Practice

With funding from several foundations, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) mission is to examine institutional practice and help institutions productively use assessment data to inform and strengthen undergraduate education as well as to communicate with policy makers, families, and other stakeholders. Documenting what students learn and can do is of growing interest both on campus and with accrediting groups, higher education associations, families, employers, and policy makers. And yet, we know far too little about what actually happens in assessment on campuses around the country. NILOA conducted several short case studies, titled *Examples of Good Assessment Practice*, of two- and four-year institutions in order to document institutional achievements in the assessment of student learning outcomes and highlight promising practices in using assessment data for improvement and decision-making. The data collection process included a thorough examination of the websites and relevant assessment documents (accreditation self-studies, assessment reports, program reviews, etc.) for selected institutions and interviews with key institutional representatives.

About NILOA

- 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.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, 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.

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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