

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

July 2011

Augustana College: An Assessment Review Committee's Role in Engaging Faculty

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Augustana College

Augustana College, located in Rock Island, Illinois, is a liberal arts institution related to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with approximately 2500 students and 250 faculty members. The stated mission of the institution as follows:

Augustana College, rooted in the liberal arts and sciences and a Lutheran expression of the Christian faith, is committed to offering a challenging education that develops qualities of mind, spirit and body necessary for a rewarding life of leadership and service in a diverse and changing world.¹

The NILOA team decided that Augustana College would be an instructive case study because of the assessment work that the institution has done through participation in the Teagle Foundation Grants and the Wabash Study. Over the last six years, Augustana has been active in the area of assessing student learning and has become a leader in gaining faculty involvement. This involvement is due in part to the institutional type—which focuses on teaching and learning, the dynamic role of the Assessment Review Committee, and the communication strategies. This has allowed them to make several improvements on campus based on their assessment activities.²

Institutional Context

In 1994, Augustana created its first committee on assessment, which later became the Assessment Review Committee. The charge for this committee was to consider strategies to assess student learning in the revised general education curriculum. The committee created a plan and shared it with the North Central Association (NCA) (*Brief History*). The accreditation visiting team followed up with Augustana two years after the self-study to see how the assessment plan was being implemented. During 1996-1998, Augustana began to implement the assessment plan including analyzing student transcripts and syllabi, administering ACT COMP, reviewing senior surveys and alumni surveys, analyzing senior papers and projects. The Assessment Review Committee collected and analyzed the data they collected “to identify and confirm patterns of strength and weakness” in the curriculum. They presented a report to the entire faculty during the September 1999 faculty

¹ See <https://www.augustana.edu/about-us/mission>

² The data gathered for this case study involved phone interviews with the Academic Dean, Associate Dean, Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, two faculty members and a student as well as a systematic review of the institutional website and document analysis. Interviews took place over December 2010 to January 2011.

retreat. After that meeting, “there was an overall sense that while we were good, we could be better” (*Brief History*), so over two-thirds of the faculty formed twenty different study groups (called “Think Forces”) to examine different issues of interest to the faculty, such as “developing abilities to write, speak and think critically, enhancing understanding of the liberal arts, multiculturalism and diversity, and improving our delivery of instruction and curricular structure” (*Brief History*). The various reports were distributed at the 2000 Faculty retreat.

While the NCA commended the institutional level activity of Augustana, the visiting team suggested that more focus be placed on the departments and programs. Therefore, the Assessment Review Committee met with representatives from each of the departments, in 1998-1999, and requested descriptions of assessment activities and changes made because of assessment. During this time a procedure was established that still exists today, where the departments are contacted each Fall about their assessment activities and submit an update each Spring. In addition, for every faculty opening, a program review and an updated assessment plan must be submitted before the position can be advertised. By embedding assessment into the structure of the institution reinforces the importance of the activity.

From 2000-2004, the Assessment Review Committee continued to work on General Education by creating learning goals and rubrics to assess those goals. The Assessment Review Committee continued to gather information including syllabi; papers of first year and senior students; and surveys of alumni, seniors, first year students and faculty. They first administered the National Survey of Student Engagement in 2002 and 2003. The goal was to compare this information with the results from before the new curriculum was created to note changes.

In 1996 Augustana was told that “the assessment plan and its implementation [were] not up to the high standards of the rest of the institution” (p. 12), but by the 2006 self-study, the institution had much to share about the strength and systematization of its Assessment Review Committee (ARC), assessment of general education, and departmental assessment plans (*Tradition and Transformation*, p. 12). One way that Augustana has worked to sustain its assessment practices is by their involvement with the Teagle Foundation Grants on student learning and liberal education. The first of three Teagle grants, received in 2005, focused on student growth in writing, critical thinking and civic engagement. The second, in 2008, allowed them to build and assess their Senior Capstone experience. The third grant, in 2009, began an exploration of how faculty work can be restructured to allow for more active, experiential learning strategies ([Teagle Foundation Grants](#)). In January 2007, the institution began participating in the *Parsing the First Year Study* to understand the influence of institutional structures in supporting student learning and persistence, using direct measures such as the ACT CAAP Critical Thinking Test and surveys such as National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), ([Parsing the First Year Study](#)). In addition, the institution participates in the Wabash National Study, which will follow the first-year students from 2008/09 through their senior year. This will allow the institution to examine the teaching, programs, and institutional structures that support learning as well as ways to assess the learning ([Wabash National Study](#)).

This brief history of assessment practices at Augustana points to how this small college has become deeply involved in assessment for the last seventeen years. One of the themes that emerged in the discussions with people at Augustana and the review of their documents and materials is that Augustana is a college focused on teaching and assessing how teaching leads to improvements. Ellen Hay, Academic Dean, says that “assessment permeates the college.” An indicator of the

embeddedness of learning at the campus is the strategic plan. At the start, the document outlines the importance of faculty and students working together to create effective learning opportunities that lead to students “developing a passion for learning” (*Authentically Augustana: A Strategic Plan for a Premier Liberal Arts College*, p. 2). In addition, there is a focus on assessing the programs and outcomes at the institution “to understand their effects on student learning” (p.7). Dr. Hay mentioned that they are adding an addendum to the strategic plan. Those involved with this Plan stressed the importance of assessment information being used to measure the impact of decisions. The sentiment of focus on student learning is further illustrated by Augustana’s President Steve Bahls, who mentions this culture of teaching and learning in the 2010 Opening Convocation:

. . . many students are nonetheless asking value-oriented questions. They want to know what skills they can expect to gain at Augustana College, what the world will be like for them after Augustana, and whether they will be able to find fulfilling jobs that speak to their sense of calling.

I believe this is part of a shift in students and their families asking about value and outcome, and that is precisely what we have been working on for the past 10 years at Augustana: shifting to an outcomes-based education, assessing student learning, and providing more internship, research and international experiences — all of which lead to great outcomes. . . . We need to develop principles for prioritizing projects on campus with the overriding objective of improving student learning outcomes. ([Opening Convocation](#))

Augustana outlines institutional level outcomes from the general education curriculum focused on knowledge, skills, and dispositions. These areas are then broken down to specific intellectual, practical, and spiritual goals. These goals were developed looking at standards of “well-known educational organizations (such as the Mathematical Association of America, The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the American Association for Higher Education), and even more so on the Think Force reports generated by our own faculty” (*General Education Goals: Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions*).

Assessment Review Committee

As illustrated in the history, the Assessment Review Committee has been actively involved in promoting assessment from the very beginning. This committee is made up of faculty from each of the six divisions, administrators, and, recently, two students. This committee serves as the leaders on campus for the assessment activities, and this committee has changed focus as the assessment activities have deepened across the campus. Bob Haak, the Associate Dean, explains that “until a few years ago the assessment committee was primarily tasked with getting the department assessment reports turned in on an annual basis and reviewing them.” While this role is still important for the committee, they now take a less mechanical role with assessment. Instead the committee tries to work with departments and programs prior to their five year program review by helping the department create questions about student learning and collect data to answer the questions. The committee has become, in some ways, the assessment experts and consultants on campus. For instance, the assessment committee is helping with the assessment work for the campus advising office.

Mark Salisbury, the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, explains that all members of the assessment committee are actively involved in looking at the data, and thinking about what to do with the data. In this way, they bring their different perspectives to what can be done to improve the assessment process and the program. He states that “this involvement empowers them to participate in the assessment process and understand how it works, so that they have gathered experience that they can bring back to their departments.” Or as Michael Zemek, a division representative on the Assessment Review Committee and professor of Music says, the committee has changed from a group that “grades the assessment reports to one that provides consulting on the assessment activities.” He explains, “If you don’t plan for assessment, you won’t get to what you really want to know.” Therefore, the assessment committee often helps departments hone their assessment plans by having them create one or two questions that are more specific. Then, the committee assists the departments as they think about ways that the information gathered from assessment can be used for decision making. Zemek states that the committee wants the departments to think, “Assessment helps us make good decisions versus it’s a report that is assigned to be written at the end of the school year.” Zemek continued that this shift allowed for departments to “learn” and not just to “report,” which lead to “opportunities for deep conversation about programs, offerings, and students.” By doing so, Augustana has moved toward using the assessment data rather than simply doing assessment for assessment sake. The assessment review committee has served the campus in a variety of ways to purport assessment activity into the mainstream at Augustana College. They were instrumental to starting the assessment activities, and now have shifted their role to continue to adapt to improve the assessment activities that are in place. In addition, the institution has created a training opportunity for those who serve on the assessment committee, which has allowed this group to serve on campus as experts (or as one faculty member stated, “assessment person”) in their individual divisions or departments.

Communication Strategies

Part of a good communication plan is making information readily available and transparent to multiple audiences, and Augustana College uses several techniques to communicate, and as Interim Academic Dean, Ellen Hay, states there has been “much more openness in sharing data in the last six or seven years.” To this end, the College has incorporated sharing data into their Friday Conversations, events where faculty can talk about information related to the campus. These informal events allow faculty to hear about NSSE outcomes and the Teagle grants and “talk about them in a “low pressure sort of situation,” according to Dr. Hay. The idea is to not only offer data, but to make sure that it is “digestible” says the Director of IR, Mark Salisbury. People need to be able to make sense of the information. Dr. Salisbury, who joined Augustana in August 2010 when Institutional Research and Assessment were merged, said he is committed to working individually with faculty and with departments on their assessment efforts by looking with them at NSSE and other data to help them inform their assessment activities. By helping the departments and faculty understand the data helps empower departments and to achieve buy in for assessment, according to Jon Clauss, Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning. For any audience, there are two goals: share data openly and make that information accessible.

To that end, Augustana College also shares assessment information on its webpage, titled *College Data: Open Book Programs A resource to help you assess your college options*. The information in *Open Book* covers data on academics, co-curricular and social aspects of the school. The *Open Book* provides information on the key indicators, governmental data, Augustana experiences and satisfaction survey, senior survey, student profile, National Survey of Student Engagement, Common Data Set, alumni study, and athletics. It also connects readers to the Institutional Research Office for information on institutional data, survey reports, students rating of instruction, and assessment

studies. The *Open Book* describes the posted information and then gives highlights of the data in bullet points or tables. Readers may connect to the complete surveys if they are interested. Unfortunately, some of the information on the *Open Book* seems outdated, for instance the NSSE information is from 2006, the satisfaction survey 2007, governmental data from 2007-2008. At the same time, searching in other locations allows you to find 2009 data, such as in the Report Card 2009 and the institutional research page. Therefore, it appears as if the Open Book was prepared and not updated as assessment activities occur. At the same time, much of this work on transparency was done previous to the loudest calls for transparency at the national level, which resulted in transparency initiatives such as the Voluntary System of Accountability or the University and College Accountability Network.

Interestingly, the Augustana College on-line Catalog for Admission page on *How to Apply* lists information on applying, but also purports the importance of assessment. Specifically it says, “As part of its efforts to improve teaching and foster greater student learning and growth, Augustana pursues an active assessment program” (*How to Apply*). Further, it is noted that “All Augustana students should take any assessment work seriously, even when it does not contribute to a course grade. When students do their best work for assessment activities, Augustana can more accurately gauge their level of achievement and determine areas where the college can make improvements” (*How to Apply*). Besides making the expectations for assessment clear to incoming students, Augustana hopes that the assessment information that they post will help faculty see how assessment data is being used.

Bit by Bit

Part of what seems to make the Augustana College assessment successful is the idea that assessment does not have to be something large, but that small steps towards assessing student learning can lead to improvement. This idea is illustrated in the shift of the assessment committee to focusing on a few answerable questions, but also in the way that the administration talks about assessment. Bob Haak, the Associate Dean, says that they made a concerted effort to communicate assessment in “small bite size pieces” so it is not overwhelming. Seeing assessment as much smaller and more tied to the teaching and learning fits with the faculty desire to improve student learning. He said, “Faculty are interested in student learning. If you can convince faculty that something affects student learning, they are interested in doing it.” Mark Salisbury, says “many faculty have a real nuanced sense of the holistic nature of learning, so that things are not just thought of in terms of what is going on in the classroom and then everywhere else, but instead there is an understanding that these connect, and in the College, we need to accentuate those connections to think about the entire student experience.” In so doing, the institution can see the impact of the entire experience for the students.

Not all departments or faculty at the College have bought into assessment. As one faculty member stated, “A lot of people are just afraid of it, because they think it’s a big challenge—they were never trained in assessment. On the flip side, most people really care about it, and want to do a good job, and the little things that they do have a great benefit.” To this end, the administration appears to strongly support assessment through their role in supporting the assessment review committee, providing the time and funding to advocate assessment, and by educating the campus by bringing in speakers. The thought appears to be that “faculty own the curriculum, but the administration is very supportive and creative in the way that they encourage, support and reward faculty for assessment.” In so doing, the faculty are motivated with carrots rather than sticks. The goal appears to be creating a culture of inquiry, so that the campus community remains engaged with assessment in an ongoing manner even if individual commitments are different. There is an understanding that the continuous process will be more fruitful for the campus to make decisions and to improve the learning. In this

way, when it is time to share with accreditors what is happening on campus, the institution will be ready to talk about the process, rather than having to scramble to figure something out to share. As Ben Zimmerman, senior student, stated, “the faculty here want to make a difference.” Whether these faculty are involved with systematic assessment or not, the teaching and learning culture on this campus permeates all parts of it.

Using Evidence of Student Learning

Augustana has built assessment into its teaching and learning culture over the last dozen years through a strong Assessment Review Committee and administrative support. The important factor is whether this assessment program is actually improving the learning at the institution. Dr. Clauss, the Director of the Center of Teaching and Learning, asserts that the institution is still learning how to use results and disseminate promising practices. Even so, the administration asserts that information from assessment is regularly talked about and used during the weekly dean’s meetings. In addition, individual faculty use assessment data to change courses.

The General Education Working Group studied learning goals set forth by several national organizations and reviewed the campus’s priorities. The result was the creation of institutional level outcomes that are supported by the general education curriculum (*General Education Goals: Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions*). While they continue to perfect the goals set forth for the general education curriculum through using assessment data, some areas are achieving the goals they were set out to achieve, such as the first-year experience program.

One way that they have used assessment results is by combining CIRP data with ACT scores and high school performance to identify students who need special attention. These students are provided with additional support and attention in the way of advising. As a result, the retention rate for first-year students has increased.

Another example of institutional change that occurred as a result of assessment would be the creation of the Augie Choice program, which provides juniors and seniors with a grant of up to \$2,000 to support a hands-on learning experience such as research, internships, study abroad, or service learning activities. This program came about because the psychology department noticed that their students were not as intentional as they wanted them to be about choosing their capstone experience or what they wanted to do after they attained their degrees. To remedy the problem, the department created a class to address this issue and allow students to see the opportunities available to them. As a result, the number of students participating in internships, study abroad opportunities, and such, has doubled, which was the intended outcome. Augustana College wants all students to begin thinking about their long time goals and the way that they can be accomplished as they start their program of studies. Given the success of the additional psychology class and the turnaround of the students, the idea was scaled up to the institutional level, which led to the Augie Choice program, which has already caused an increase in the number of students participating in the opportunities. The administration says that the next step is to assess these experiences and to assure that the learning in these experiences is tied to the curricular learning. This change in co-curricular activity supports the claim that the Associate Dean, Bob Haak makes about “the use of the results of assessment appears to be tied less to changing coursework, but to the co-curricular learning experiences which are important to the whole educational process.”

Senior inquiry is a capstone experience. Five or six years ago half of the departments had a capstone experience, but not all of them did. Dr. Haak led an initiative to assess this experience and to make

it a college wide requirement in each department. This work was also part of the second Teagle Assessment grant that the college received. He used a backward design approach that built off the existing programs and established learning goals. Only one or two majors on campus have not incorporated senior capstone experiences at this time.

Next Steps

The assessment efforts at Augustana College have reached a “critical mass” that has resulted in a “momentum” surrounding assessment. So much so that representatives at Augustana College mentioned that assessment is so ingrained in the culture now and that when people on campus think about creating new programs, they also think about how they will assess those programs. This attitude shows an openness to assessment and an understanding of the expectations. At the same time, the Director of Institutional Research and Assessment, Mark Salisbury is challenging faculty to move beyond their original notions of assessment. For instance, he wants them to consider ways to collect qualitative information on student learning from focus groups or how to include students in the assessment process as researchers.

While including students on committees at Augustana College is not a new practice, they have recently begun to include students in the assessment processes. A group of students have been selected to engage in focus groups based on assessment questions outlined by the Assessment Review Committee. Dr. Salisbury has trained the students in conducting this research and has taken them to workshops at Wabash College to learn about it. The goal is to have students collect assessment data, to assist faculty and staff understand the assessment data, and to provide some guidance in ways to improve the College. Involving students in this fashion shows how Augustana College continues to grow and develop their assessment strategies.

Lessons From Augustana College

1. Create a group of campus assessment experts, through an assessment committee that is made up of faculty from throughout the campus as well as top administrators. Allow this group to monitor the program reviews but also to become the campus experts on assessment.
2. Openly share assessment information with faculty at faculty retreats and with all stakeholders through an on-line, easily accessible website. By doing so, an institution will foster using the data, since multiple people need to be involved to discuss what the data mean for the institution.
3. Remember that some assessment is better than none at all. No need to create large projects, but instead create smaller manageable assessment projects. These projects will allow for the campus to see the fruits of its labor sooner, and, hopefully, will encourage larger scaled projects. In other words, institutions can create some *good* assessment projects, rather than wait and plan for *perfect* ones that will likely not happen.
4. Programs can learn from each other, so that evidence from one program might be a starting point for another program or a place to create an initiative for the entire institution.

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, parents, 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. It is funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, Lumina Foundation for Education, and The Teagle Foundation.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website went live on February 11, 2009.
www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- The NILOA research team reviewed 725 institution websites for learning outcomes assessment transparency from March 2009 to August 2009.
- 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. He served again as Interim President of the University of Illinois in 2010.

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