

# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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## DQP Case Study: University System of Georgia—Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College

Jillian Kinzie

Two institutions in the University System of Georgia—Georgia State University and Georgia Perimeter College—collaborated on a project to explore the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) proficiencies at the associate's and bachelor's degree levels, focusing particularly on transfer student success. Georgia State University (GSU), a public research institution in the heart of downtown Atlanta, offers more than 250 degree programs in 100 fields of study at the bachelor's, master's, specialist, and doctoral levels. GSU serves about 32,000 undergraduate and graduate students, with transfer students making up more than half of its undergraduates. GSU is a national leader in graduating students from diverse backgrounds and has achieved national recognition for its commitment to students' successful progress toward graduation. Georgia Perimeter College (GPC), with multiple campuses conveniently located throughout the Atlanta area, is a two-year associate's degree-granting institution that offers more than 30 associate's level programs and even more career programs and certificates. In 2013, more than 6,000 former GPC students were attending GSU.

NILOA selected GSU as a case study site because of its exemplary work as the institutional leader in one of the three university-system projects funded by the American Association for State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). The goal of the AASCU project was to test the feasibility of using the DQP in the association's continuing efforts to help transform campuses into learning-centered institutions. In particular, AASCU aimed to support state systems' use of the DQP to strengthen degree outcomes, aid in the assessment of learning outcomes in majors, and facilitate two- to four-year transfer. The University of Georgia System project was a partnership between GSU and GPC to explore the application of the DQP to improve the success of transfer students in biology, psychology, and criminal justice—programs that involve high numbers of transfer students between the two institutions. The project provided the opportunity for faculty and staff in these three programs to work together to explore the creation of discipline-specific versions of the DQP, establish common learning outcomes between two- and four-year programs, and devise mechanisms for assessing the DQP and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of individual students relative to the disciplinary DQPs.

**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://degreeprofile.org/>**

This project illustrates the potential for using the DQP to increase transfer student success by strengthening efforts to create clear, common learning outcomes and assessments within disciplines and between sectors. The GSU and GPC DQP project provided a particularly rich testing ground to learn more about the challenges as well as the advantages of employing the DQP to support successful student transfer from associate's to bachelor's level programs.

## **The DQP Project and Institution Context**

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AASCU's project to explore the feasibility of the DQP was a collaboration of the University System of Georgia (USG), Texas A&M University, and the State University of New York systems. AASCU staff provided project coordination. Regularly scheduled AASCU conferences and other association activities—in which the DQP was prominent—were a convenient venue for assembling project participants and disseminating results. A central goal of the project was for institutions to test the feasibility of the DQP by connecting and integrating it with other reform efforts already underway, thus, not to create a stand-alone activity.

As one of the AASCU-funded projects, the University System of Georgia DQP project built directly on an existing two-year collaborative effort by USG institutions to construct a revised systemwide core curriculum and efforts underway to improve college completion rates by focusing on transfer students. These two emphases, systemwide core curriculum and transfer students, brought together two USG institutions: Georgia State and Georgia Perimeter. The University System of Georgia mandates and maintains a common core curriculum, with systemwide alignment of learning outcomes between GSU and GPC and the other 29 USG institutions. During the process of constructing a core curriculum, GSU and GPC worked to ensure the compatibility of first-year and sophomore offerings at the two institutions. This infrastructure enabled the consideration of the usefulness of the DQP as a tool for improving successful transfer between institutions without first having to align course learning outcomes at the two institutions.

At the same time, the state of Georgia was working to improve college completion and graduation rates, paying particular attention to transfer students. GSU and GPC are the largest transfer partners in the University System of Georgia. Each year, between 1,000 and 1,500 GPC students transfer to GSU, and approximately 6,000 former GPC students are pursuing their bachelor's degrees at GSU. Separated by less than 20 miles in metro-Atlanta and characterized by rapid growth over the past decade, these two institutions have some of the most diverse student demographics in the Southeast. Both schools are “majority minority” institutions with student populations that are roughly 40% African American, 10% Asian, and 10% Latino. Over half the students at each institution are Pell eligible. Both institutions struggle with issues of attrition. College leaders at Georgia institutions have promised that more course credits will be accepted as students move from one institution to another, and some campuses have created special orientation and advising programs for transfer students. State interest in easing transfer between the two- and four-year sector—and, in particular, aiding student success in the transition from associate's degree programs to bachelor's degree programs—prompted GSU and GPC to explore the application of the DQP to aid transfer student success.

The USG DQP project was intended to draw on and maintain the momentum of these two related systemwide efforts. The faculties and administrations at GSU and GPC pursued three key implementation questions surrounding the DQP:

- What are the alignments and disjunctions between existing course and program learning outcomes, on the one hand, and the DQP, on the other?

- How can DQP competencies be fairly and accurately assessed? Can such assessments gauge past achievement and predict future performance at the individual student level? At the program level?
- Once a protocol for measuring student DQP competencies is established, can we determine whether strong performance in meeting DQP standards provides a better means of predicting student success (individual and programmatic) in the associate's- to bachelor's-level transition than do traditional achievement measures such as course grades and cumulative GPA? Is the effectiveness of the DQP in this area influenced by such factors as gender, race, ethnicity, and income level?

The USG DQP project addressed these questions by focusing on several of the more common disciplines among students transferring from GPC to GSU: biology, psychology, and criminal justice.

Leadership for the USG project included Tim Renick, vice provost at Georgia State University; John Siler, a faculty leader, in criminal justice at Georgia Perimeter College; and faculty members in biology, psychology, and criminal justice at both institutions. This project was very much driven by participating faculty in the three disciplinary programs, who received a modest honorarium of approximately \$1,500.

## **The DQP Project Process**

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The USG DQP project collaboration between GSU and GPC built on USG's existing efforts to create common learning outcomes and to aid student transfer. The DQP project process had four steps: building the framework, developing the protocols, testing to assess performance, and evaluating the process.

### **1. Building the Framework**

Because some relationships were already in place between faculty and staff in the three academic programs—biology, psychology, and criminal justice—the first step in the DQP project process included a series of meetings to introduce the DQP, focus on the particular competencies, and develop DQPs at both the associate's and bachelor's level. This step in the project's process involved the identification of at least two faculty members as leaders in each of the three disciplines at GSU and GPC, an initial meeting with the project's full leadership, and multiple meetings over the spring and summer of small groups of faculty in the three disciplines. Each disciplinary group, first, established a set of learning outcomes and competencies based on the DQP for students who have completed the associate's level courses in that discipline and, then, developed a common understanding of the outcomes and competencies expected of a bachelor's-degree graduate in that field.

Each of the three disciplinary groups was to develop its own process for arriving at consensus. The biology group, for instance, created and distributed a survey of major themes in that discipline, polling the biology faculties of both GSU and GPC to formulate a consensus about the outcomes and competences most essential to associate's and bachelor's graduates in biology. The criminal justice group, on the other hand, brought faculty members together for a series of in-person conversations.

The development of discipline-specific versions of the DQP began by comparing DQP competencies to existing course and programmatic learning outcomes used in program assessment—to identify parallels and disjunctions between the two measurement models. The work of psychology faculty members from GSU and GPC illustrates the process implemented in disciplinary team meetings. In creating the DQP for psychology, the psychology departments at GSU and GPC relied extensively on the American Psychological Association's ten learning goals for the undergraduate psychology major (APA, 2007)—most of which were measured in the GSU psychology department's assessment for the psychology major.

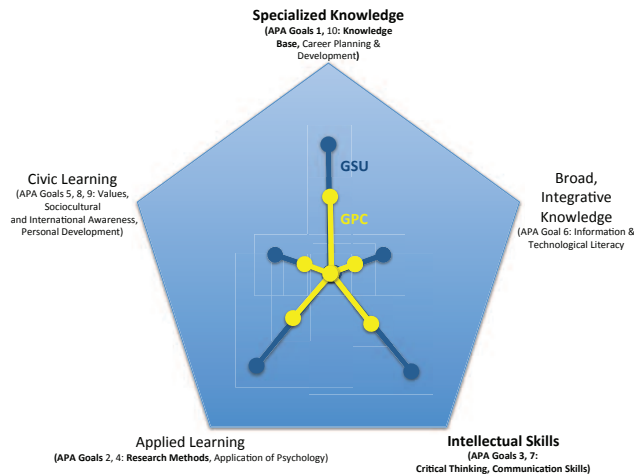
The DQP team concluded that each of these goals maps quite well onto one of the DQP’s five “areas for learning”—as the table in Figure 1 illustrates. Psychology students work toward most of these goals in courses at GPC and continue progress toward all of them once at GSU.

**Figure 1. GSU-GPC Psychology Faculty Map: DQP Areas for Learning to APA Learning Goals**

| DQP Areas for Learning       | Psychology (APA) Learning Goals  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Specialized Knowledge        | <p>Goal 1. Knowledge Base of Psychology. Students will demonstrate familiarity with the major concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and historical trends in psychology.</p> <p>Goal 10. Career Planning and Development. Students will emerge from the major with realistic ideas about how to implement their psychological knowledge, skills, and values in occupational pursuits in a variety of settings.</p>   |
| Broad, Integrative Knowledge | <p>Goal 6. Information and Technological Literacy. Students will demonstrate information competence and the ability to use computers and other technology for many purposes.</p>   |
| Intellectual Skills          | <p>Goal 3. Critical Thinking Skills in Psychology. Students will respect and use critical and creative thinking, skeptical inquiry, and, when possible, the scientific approach to solve problems related to behavior and mental processes.</p> <p>Goal 7. Communication Skills. Students will be able to communicate effectively in a variety of formats.</p>   |
| Applied Learning             | <p>Goal 2. Research Methods in Psychology. Students will understand and apply basic research methods in psychology, including research design, data analysis, and interpretation.</p> <p>Goal 4. Application of Psychology. Students will understand and apply psychological principles to personal, social, and organizational issues.</p>  |
| Civic Learning               | <p>Goal 5. Values in Psychology. Students will be able to weigh evidence, tolerate ambiguity, act ethically, and reflect other values that are the underpinnings of psychology as a discipline.</p> <p>Goal 8. Sociocultural and International Awareness. Students will recognize, understand, and respect the complexity of sociocultural and international diversity.</p> <p>Goal 9. Personal Development. Students will develop insight into their own and others’ behavior and mental processes and apply effective strategies for self-management and self-improvement.</p> |

As illustrated in Figure 2 faculty in psychology also mapped these goals at GSU and GPC in the form of a DQP “spidergraph” that provided faculty a visual depiction of the overlap and emphases at the associate’s- and bachelor’s-degree level.

**Figure 2. GSU–GPC Plot of DQP Areas of Learning by Degree Level<sup>a</sup>**



Overall, the establishment of learning outcomes common between the two- and four-year programs in biology, psychology, and criminal justice went smoothly. GSU Vice Provost Tim Renick commented, “The most interesting thing about this phase of the project was seeing the different ways the programs approached the work.” For example, biology faculty reviewed common biology textbooks to identify topics and themes they could agree on and then developed learning outcomes, whereas psychology faculty explored American Psychological Association (APA) learning goal statements as a basis for identifying shared outcomes. In the case of criminal justice, which does not have a set of disciplinary learning outcomes established by a national organization, faculty members spent more time in conversation and were often surprised by the extent of the differences in their initial assumptions. Despite the different starting points and approaches, the DQPs in the programs of the three disciplines were developed with considerable consensus.

According to Renick, the development of the disciplinary DQPs also led to some valuable university-level discussions. “The spidergraph developed by the psychology faculty placed the greatest focus on developing student proficiencies in Specialized Knowledge and Intellectual Skills. This led us to ask as an institution whether and where at Georgia State such things as Civic Knowledge and Broad Integrative Learning would be developed. The visualization of the spidergraph here was helpful in framing this discussion.”

## 2. Developing the Protocols

The second step in the DQP project process was to establish a means of determining student DQP attainment in each of the selected disciplines. This step tasked the GSU and GPC faculties in the targeted disciplines to develop a mechanism for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of individual newly transferred students relative to the disciplinary DQP. This step included examining various protocols for their capacity to determine attainment of DQP competencies by individual students and program wide as well as piloting selected protocol(s) with a cohort of students. Each of the three disciplinary groups again approached the

a. Plot depicts profile for psychology at GSU and GPC. Lines indicate the degree to which APA-defined goals within the five DQP areas are pursued within the psychology major at the bachelor's level (GSU, blue) and at the associate's level (GPC, yellow).

task in distinctive fashion, meeting several times to hammer out assessment instruments. Perhaps for practical reasons, all three groups gravitated initially toward the creation of written—and other multiple choice/short answer—exams designed to measure a student’s demonstration of the prescribed outcomes and competencies.

The work of the psychology faculty again illustrates this step in the project process. Chris Goode, the psychology DQP team leader at GSU, explained that for the DQP project the department took advantage of their existing structure for learning outcomes assessment. “As the learning outcomes assessment coordinator for psychology, I regularly collect assessment evidence from specific courses that we have identified for assessing APA goals. Since this infrastructure was in place when we started the DQP project, it was easy for faculty to submit assessment results to me.” The psychology team proposed a series of course-embedded assessments to measure individual student progress relative to the DQP. For instance, they devised a straightforward, multiple choice “psychology master test” to measure student competencies relative to the APA goals and the DQP’s Specialized Knowledge. To further explore the instrument’s efficacy in assessing levels of learning at the associate’s and bachelor’s level, the psychology faculty plan to administer the instrument to all newly arrived transfer students from GPC to measure their strengths and capabilities relative to the DQP.

Once again, the different approaches of the three programs in designing assessments were noteworthy. While the biology and psychology faculty elected a pre-post approach to assess student learning, the criminal justice program designed a straightforward multiple choice examination. The design of assessments of student learning outcomes proved challenging and the results were surprisingly traditional assessment measures—in other words, tests—not more authentic demonstrations of learning. According to Tim Renick, “The biggest challenge was developing efficient and widely accepted means of measuring the competencies of individual students relative to the DQP, especially ways of measuring skills beyond the acquisition of content knowledge.” Although more difficult and time consuming than first imagined, this is the project’s most promising aspect in that it provides faculty and students a better means of identifying strengths and weaknesses in what students know and can do. Even more, it pushes beyond the blunt measure of grades as the common assessment of competency and, instead, provides direct evidence of individual student learning. As Renick pointed out at a session on the project at an AACSCU meeting, “There is an inevitable correlation. If we are to describe the proficiencies we expect of our students in more nuanced ways and as consisting of far more than content knowledge, then we are going to have to develop more nuanced measures of student achievement.”

### **3. Testing to Assess Performance**

The third step in the DQP project process was the most ambitious: using the DQP to assess the performance over time of GPC-to-GSU transfer students in the three targeted disciplines. In this step, the project began to explore if students who perform well by DQP standards at the associate’s level at GPC also perform well at the bachelor’s level at GSU. This aspect of the project will help faculty and staff examine if the DQP provides a better means of predicting future performance than course grades and GPA, and for which student groups. The idea is to compare results of transfer based on GPA and other existing metrics versus transfer based on DQP learning outcomes. The results from this analysis may make a useful contribution to understanding persistence and graduation rates within the disciplines and to determining what matters in transfer student success. This analysis might also help to identify specific gaps in the training of students at GPC that lead to struggles in their work at Georgia State, hence, informing programmatic concerns such as curriculum



planning and tutoring programs. Essentially, this analysis explores if the DQP-related assessment of the associate's degree can be a better predictor of success than GPA.

While this step is still underway, some practical challenges have already emerged. For instance, the psychology group's model of pre- and post-assessments relies on the timely administration of the pre-assessment instrument immediately after the student enrolls at GSU, but initial participation by GSU psychology faculty was spotty. Still, preliminary data has led the faculty to some helpful insights, including the realization that certain competencies that were assumed evident upon students' arrival at GSU needed further development.

#### **4. Evaluating the Process**

The final step in the DQP project process will be a discussion about the utility of the DQP. The GSU and GPC faculties in the three targeted disciplines will have structured discussions on the issue of whether the knowledge gained through tracking DQP competencies in students can be used effectively to shape course curriculum, to adjust course prerequisites, and to inform and direct student advisement. The hope is that these discussions—including the sharing of preliminary assessment data—will encourage faculty members to more fully participate in the DQP assessment modules in their course sections. To discuss the insights gained through the project, Georgia State will also host a transfer summit attended by representatives not only from Georgia Perimeter College but also from eight other transfer partner institutions.

### **Overall Findings and Reflections**

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The DQP project provided GSU and GPC multiple benefits for increasing faculty collaboration and expanding emphasis on learning outcomes, and it also offered substantive opportunities to examine and improve supports for transfer student success. Those three major themes capture the salient findings from this project.

#### **1. Increasing Faculty Collaboration**

The DQP project provided the rare opportunity for GSU and GPC faculty to engage in substantive conversations about what their degrees mean across sectors. According to Chris Goode, psychology professor at GSU, the project provided a meaningful context for collaboration among faculty who otherwise would have limited opportunities to discuss common learning outcomes. Goode explained that the GSU and GPC “faculty enjoyed getting to know one another, and that the project helped engender greater respect for the distinctive contributions of the program sectors and the transfer process specifically.” In contrast, the faculty in the criminal justice programs knew each other reasonably well at the start of the project. Michael Shapiro, criminal justice professor at GSU, explained that because the GSU and GPC criminal justice programs have between them only about 20 faculty members, they were able to get together at one campus or the other or meet informally over lunch to discuss the project. These faculty were particularly interested in identifying the outcomes for which student learning was not as robust and working collectively to improve the curriculum and help more students complete a four-year degree. Commenting on the value of faculty collaboration across the sectors, criminal justice instructor John Siler stated, “The simple process of discussing mutual expectations and ways to reach them is working well and should be continued.”

#### **2. Expanding Emphasis on Learning Outcomes**

Acknowledging that the emphasis on improving learning outcomes is an important initiative in higher education today, Chris Goode, in psychology at GSU, noted that the process of aligning the APA goals and DQP competencies strengthened faculty understandings of the growing national emphasis on learning outcomes: “The discussions with GPC faculty about APA goals and DQP learning outcomes helped us clarify

what students should be working toward at GPC and be more specific about what we want students to know at the point they enter the GSU program.” The project also demonstrated the value of considering learning outcomes as a basis for making changes in the degree programs, including curricular changes, adding new courses, and opening up new concentrations. “The decision, for example, to create a new course emphasizing critical thinking should be based on the need to improve a desired outcome,” Goode explained. The criminal justice faculty members made similar discoveries about the value of specifying and assessing learning outcomes to identify weaknesses in the curriculum. For example, faculty adjusted a core criminology course after discovering that GPC students were not learning what GSU faculty expected. Also, faculty are modifying mathematics courses and assessments to increase student success in subsequent statistics courses and are thinking more about the learning contexts in which critical thinking and problem solving outcomes are developed.

Students also benefit from the specification of learning outcomes. Goode acknowledged the value of more clearly communicating learning outcomes to prospective students to set expectations and reinforce what students should be able to know and do. His interest is now in ensuring that students see the value of understanding outcomes as they present their abilities to potential employers.

### **3. Enhancing Articulation and Transfer from Two-Year to Four-Year Institutions**

The resolve to enhance articulation and the transfer experience between the two- and four-year sectors is an important outcome of this project. Michael Shapiro, criminal justice faculty member at GSU, explained that this goal was primarily pragmatic, with the program committed to increasing four-year degree completion, but that the goal was also responsive to faculty members’ genuine interest in improving the curriculum and learning experiences to increase transfer student success. “We need more two-year students to graduate from the four-year program in criminal justice and it is essential that faculty work to make this happen,” explained Shapiro. The DQP project helped the criminal justice faculty see where greater consistency in course content and instructional practice was necessary to ensure that students who transferred into GSU were well prepared. Similarly, the GSU and GPC psychology faculty learned more about where students have struggled in the transition from the two- to four-year degree program and, in particular, where challenges exist in the curriculum. Furthermore, Shapiro emphasized the importance of lowering barriers for two-year students to move to a four-year degree program by cross-listing classes and providing opportunities to take courses as “transient students” without the normal associated expenses. He also stressed the need to give students a taste of classes at the four-year institution before leaving the two-year institution completely to increase student success and to encourage two-year students to continue their studies.

### **Closing Reflections**

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This AASCU-supported DQP project provided the opportunity for faculty at two University System of Georgia institutions to employ a quality framework for understanding learning outcomes and for making meaningful enhancements to undergraduate education. In addition to the specific findings related to faculty collaboration, learning outcomes, and improving the transfer experience outlined above, it became clear to Tim Renick, the project leader at GSU, that the DQP was a “positive disrupter” in faculty curricular discussions. The DQP offered faculty across sectors a unifying external framework for practical discussions about program and student learning outcomes, and it was effective in raising issues central to successful student transfer. However, the usefulness of the DQP to the transfer process hinges on developing accurate, trusted, and easily implemented assessment approaches and on garnering the commitment of faculty to make changes in teaching and curriculum.



Although all three programs realized modest improvements in transfer student success, challenges associated with transfer articulation remain. For example, faculty at GSU and GPC expressed misgivings about how best to proceed without drastically changing the common course outlines and maintaining sector program identities. More broadly, one of the most anticipated goals of the project, but still a way off, is the development of a more nuanced model for transfer that moves away from relying on course credits and grades as outcomes measures and toward consistently and systematically gathering evidence that the described competencies are actually being mastered at the claimed levels. Notwithstanding the persistent challenges of increasing transfer student success, the process of bringing faculty together for the DQP project contributed to enhanced clarity of associate's- and bachelor's-level learning outcomes and improved alignment of the curriculum between two- and four-year programs to smooth student transfer and to assure quality learning.

## Reference

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American Psychological Association. (2007). *APA guidelines for the undergraduate psychology major*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/about/psymajor-guidelines.aspx>

## About NILOA

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- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008. It is funded by 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](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org)
- The NILOA research team has reviewed over 1,000 institution websites for learning outcomes assessment transparency.
- 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. He served again as Interim President of the University of Illinois in 2010.

## NILOA Staff

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### NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

**Stanley Ikenberry**, *Co-Principal Investigator*

**George Kuh**, *Co-Principal Investigator and Director*

**Peter Ewell**, *Senior Scholar*

**Jillian Kinzie**, *Senior Scholar; Indiana University Associate Director*

**Pat Hutchings**, *Senior Scholar*

**Timothy Reese Cain**, *Senior Scholar*

**Paul Lingenfelter**, *Senior Scholar*

**Natasha Jankowski**, *Assistant Director and Research Analyst*

**Robert Dumas**, *Research Analyst*

**Katie Schultz**, *Research Analyst*

**Carrie Allen**, *Research Analyst*

**Jelena Pokimica**, *Research Analyst*

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## National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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For more information, please contact:

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
51 Gerty Drive  
Suite 196, CRC, MC-672  
Champaign, IL 61820

[learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://learningoutcomesassessment.org)  
[niloa@education.illinois.edu](mailto:niloa@education.illinois.edu)  
Phone: 217.244.2155

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