National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

DQP Case Study:
Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, California

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Point Loma Nazarene University (PLNU) is a liberal arts, mission-focused university serving a traditional residential undergraduate student population (2,500 students) as well as 1,000 graduate students in a number of professional programs. In addition to the main residential campus in San Diego, the university has three regional centers. It has no online programs or presence.

NILOA selected PLNU as an appropriate site for a case study because its engagement with the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) began early and has been sustained over a number of years, involved key players in a variety of roles, focused on a range of academic fields from across the institution, and moved beyond conversations about outcomes and curricular alignment to significant assessment activity. And while one campus leader notes that the DQP did not fundamentally change the university's assessment system, which was already well developed, "it did provide additional data for each academic department and also gave the university a way to look at some basic learning outcomes in [the DQP areas of] Specialized Knowledge (tied to the major) and Intellectual Skills across the university." These data are now prompting conversations about how to more effectively assess learning in ways that are comparable across programs, and about how to continue to improve the experience of Point Loma students.

PLNU was also identified as a case study site because it participated in two funded DQP projects— one organized by the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), and the other by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the institution's regional accreditation body. The CIC hosted bi-annual meetings of the DQP institutions and provided ongoing support through the development of action plans, the review of progress reports, and a community web-based discussion board. For its participating campuses, WASC hosted a DQP workshop before its annual meeting each year of the project, and also organized one regional meeting hosted by Brandman University. PLNU thus provides a window into the effects of more intensive institutional development and support opportunities for work with the DQP.

Institutional Context

The DQP came to Point Loma "at a particular moment in time," Provost Kerry Fulcher recalls, "looking at our own assessment, looking at things we saw coming down the pike."

Over recent years, the institution has made significant strides with assessment, identifying institutional learning outcomes and establishing a regular three-year cycle of assessment focused on those outcomes and linked to the formal committee and reporting structure. Each curricular and co-curricular unit now has an assessment coordinator who serves as the liaison between the unit and the four committees that play a role either in monitoring and/or using assessment data: the Academic Policies Committee (Undergraduate Curriculum Committee), the Graduate Studies Committee (Graduate Curriculum Committee), the Institutional Effectiveness Committee, and the Program Review Committee. The Graduate and Undergraduate Curriculum Committees review assessment evidence when considering proposals for programmatic and curricular change.

The Institutional Effectiveness Committee assists departments in assessing the quality of their assessment data. The Program Review Committee, for its part, looks for two complete cycles of assessment data to accompany the academic unit self-study. Additionally, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Institutional Research works with the assessment coordinators in each program to review and support all assessment activities and provides technical support for the use of LiveText, which is employed by some units. The School of Education uses TaskStream and has external support.

Building on this work, Point Loma recently introduced a significant revision in its assessment reporting processes. In fall 2011, the university adopted the NILOA [Transparency Framework](1)[1]--a visual representation of the assessment cycle for continuous improvement. The PLNU faculty made slight modifications to the framework and then each curricular and co-curricular unit was provided with its own "[assessment wheel](2)"[2] (along with guidelines, examples, and technical support) to populate with their assessment documents and artifacts.

In spring 2012, all curricular and co-curricular units began migrating their assessment plans and activities onto their assessment wheels in the public portal. The migration was completed in less than three months and replaced the annual assessment reports. The assessment wheels are now continuously updated and form the corpus of data and documentation supporting curricular and co-curricular programmatic changes. In addition, every academic unit has been encouraged to provide a link to their assessment documents on the front page of the academic unit's web page. At the time this case is being prepared, all academic units have voluntarily done so.

Unfolding over several years, these efforts have led to an increase in inter-departmental exchanges about assessment methods and the sharing of rubrics and reports. In addition, to better align with the national conversation about benchmarking student learning, the university has begun to place an increased emphasis on the use of the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics in the assessment of the undergraduate core competencies and general education. In short, Point Loma has come a long way toward the intentional culture of evidence and improvement that is the goal of assessment. It was in this context that the DQP first caught the attention of PLNU leaders.

Initial Exploration of the DQP

The initial exploration of the DQP was undertaken by a leadership team that included the President's Administrative Cabinet and Provost's Council, and was led by Dr. Kerry Fulcher, the Provost and Chief Academic Officer; Dr. Margaret Bailey, the Vice Provost for Program Development and Accreditation; and Dr. Maria Zack, the Chair of the Mathematical, Information and Computer Sciences, who also serves as the Co-chair of the Planning Action Committee which leads the strategic planning processes. Though the campus began with a "wait-and-see" attitude toward the DQP (we were "both intrigued and skeptical," Fulcher says), several possibilities were of interest in early discussions with the leadership team. The DQP might help sharpen the institution's recent work on general education, pushing further toward an integrated model in which general education is seen not as an isolated requirement but as a set of outcomes developed throughout the student's path to graduation; it might position the university for the possible use of national benchmarks in assessing student learning; and, one member of the leadership team told us, it offered the possibility of helping to shape national educational policy rather than simply responding to it.

These possibilities piqued the interest of campus leaders, and when an invitation arrived from the Council of Independent Colleges to be part of a DQP pilot project, the time seemed right to step into action. As one member of the leadership team recalled, involvement in the CIC had "always been very valuable," and the chance, in this case, to be part of a group of similar institutions trying out the DQP was a welcome one.

1 https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/ourwork/transparency-framework/
2 http://www.pointloma.edu/experience/offices/administrative-offices/institutional-effectiveness/assessment

Soon thereafter, a second opportunity arose—to participate in a project supported by WASC. Several campus leaders had served as reviewers for WASC and were aware of its emerging directions, including the prospect of external validation of graduate proficiencies. Point Loma signed on for this second pilot project as well. Looking back on the experience, campus leaders note that interacting with other campuses, whose leaders sometimes interpreted the DQP in quite different ways, was very helpful, "prompting us to shift our thinking" and see new ways of understanding the potential of the DQP.

Identifying Issues and Opportunities

With PLNU committed to participate in both the CIC and WASC pilot programs, discussions of the DQP were expanded to include the Academic Council, which comprises all deans and department chairs, and a DQP Task Force was formed. Faculty, the Board of Trustees, and other stakeholders were also brought into the conversation, and Lumina publications about the DQP were widely shared.

Looking back on the rollout, Provost Fulcher notes that faculty, in particular, could have used more time to talk about the DQP and understand its "aspirational" vision. Many other initiatives were underway at the same time, and things were moving fast. As it was, faculty response to the DQP, and to Point Loma's participation in the CIC and WASC projects, was mixed. At the most basic level, one department chair told us, some faculty were put off simply by the prospect of "one more thing" in the growing litany of demands and expectations that characterize academic life today. Additionally, as a faculty member in the humanities reported, the DQP may have seemed to some like the newest addition to an already long list of models for assessment that the institution had embraced over the years.

As the substance of the DQP became better understood, there were more specific questions and concerns as well. One such issue was about having to adopt a new set of outcomes on top of those the faculty had already worked out among themselves. Many were deeply engaged with and committed to Point Loma's recent work on student learning outcomes and assessment, and it was unclear how the DQP would complement rather than displace their current efforts. Even some who found the DQP framework appealing were, perhaps understandably, confused by the proliferation of lists of outcomes: Point Loma's own institutional outcomes, general-education outcomes, program-level outcomes, WASC core competencies, AAC&U's Essential Learning Outcomes, outcomes specified by professional accreditation…..faculty expressed confusion about how these multiple student learning outcomes fit together and complemented each other. In short, Point Loma, like many institutions engaging with the DQP, faced issues of overload and "initiative fatigue," and those were particularly evident at the outset of their work.

As conversations progressed, however, it became clear to many that the DQP was also an opportunity for synergy. In November 2011, WASC announced a new requirement for more in-depth assessment of graduating seniors in five core competencies: oral communication, information literacy, written communication, critical thinking and quantitative literacy. Campus leaders and faculty alike began to see that these skills aligned rather well with the DQP domain of Intellectual Skills. Indeed, as a faculty member in education told us, the domains of Intellectual Skills, Integrative and Specialized Knowledge resonated strongly for faculty in most fields, who saw these as areas of learning they naturally cared about.

It also became clear that what appeared at first as multiple sets of outcomes could in fact be approached in an integrated way. That is, rather than approach each proficiency as a separate assessment target or activity, the DQP Task Force saw the value of thinking in a more strategic and interconnected way. From this insight was born the idea of using the major programs' culminating experience for graduating seniors as a place to assess the DQP outcomes. Because PLNU is a university with a large general education requirement, students

take GE classes throughout their four years at the university. This has led to some interesting institutional conversations about how best to assess general education and how the learning in that area connects with learning in the major. For example students take a freshman writing course, but then are asked to do many additional writing tasks, both in general education courses and in their discipline. For this reason the notion of assessing competencies at the end of the degree rather than simply assessing general education resonated with PLNU's approach. In short, it made both conceptual and pragmatic sense to focus the DQP pilot on students' learning in culminating experiences such as capstone courses or senior seminars--contexts where summative assessment in the major was (in most cases) already taking place—but in ways that drew on and integrated the general education outcomes.

A Focus on the Senior Capstone or Seminar Experience

A first challenge in implementing this decision was to identify the culminating experience for each academic major and to inventory the similarities and differences among them. The DQP Task Force suspected (rightly, as it turned out) that there was a wide range of end-of-program experiences and that not all of the academic programs offered a capstone course or similar culminating experience. A second challenge was how best to combine DQP assessment with major-specific assessment. If faculty were going to assess DQP learning outcomes and use DQP assessment strategies, then it was important to identify what was currently being assessed in the majors related to the five skills identified by WASC. To gain a better understanding of all of the types of culminating experiences present in the academic majors (e.g. capstone, senior seminar, research project, exhibition, recital, etc.) and to identify what was already being assessed in those culminating experiences, the Task Force conducted a survey[3] of all academic department leaders in spring 2012.

Survey results confirmed the presence of significant structural variations (e.g. in number of units, length, requirements, assessment activities, etc.) among the culminating experiences. For example, they learned that some capstones were one credit hour, others as much as four, and that some programs spread the capstone over two semesters. Data from the survey also indicated variation in what skills and knowledge were being assessed in these culminating experiences.

With these variations in view, chairs and deans were invited to discuss with their department faculty whether or not their department's participation in the DQP pilot would benefit their current assessment efforts. Several departments then volunteered for the pilot study and a group that balanced participation among the various colleges and schools was selected. These included: School of Theology and Christian Ministry (Philosophy major); Fermanian School of Business (Business Administration major); Literature, Journalism and Modern Languages (Literature and Spanish majors); Mathematical, Information and Computer Sciences (Computer Science, Computer Information System, and Mathematics majors); and School of Education (Cross Disciplinary Studies: Teacher Education). Accordingly, academic unit chairs and faculty teaching the culminating experience course from each pilot department were added to the DQP Task Force.

Implementing the Plan

With these preparations in place, the institution was ready to move its DQP pilot assessment plan into action. Several final steps set the stage.

First, a glossary[4] was created to clarify terms such as "culminating experience," "capstone," "information literacy," and "DQP outcomes." The glossary also included definitions and clarifications of many of the DQP proficiencies, the language for which many faculty found dense and unnecessarily complex. (Indeed, one professor we spoke to said that when faculty read the language describing DQP Intellectual Skills, "they just

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3 http://assessment.pointloma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/PLNU-Culminating-Experience-Survey.pdf
4 http://assessment.pointloma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/DQP-Glossary.pdf

laughed.") Predictably, however, the issues were not simply about language. It quickly became clear that the ability of different fields to engage the DQP framework varied significantly. For instance, faculty in art found the DQP outcomes a poor match with their senior exhibition assignments and eventually decided not to participate in the pilot. Similarly, a number of programs found the DQP's Civic Learning proficiencies a poor match with their field's focus and requirements; others (like teacher education) found it more natural. In short, coming to shared understandings about the DQP and the elements of the pilot—even with the help of a glossary—required repeated conversations. This is not surprising, one campus leader pointed out, since the DQP seeks to define learning outcomes that are not discipline specific. But this issue had implications for the institution's ability to aggregate the findings of its pilot assessment across departments, which turned out to be challenging, despite its best efforts.

Following on this work, DQP outcomes, assignments and rubrics were created in each of the pilot departments. In some fields this meant little change from what had been done before. In teacher education, for instance, the pilot assessment entailed an integrated set of tasks that the department had designed and used previously. Students are asked to use their knowledge of language acquisition theory and practice to deal with challenges presented in a classroom of English language learners; to deal with these challenges, students must demonstrate their ability to gather and analyze information (including statistics), apply their knowledge of relevant cultural contexts, prepare an effective 5-page scholarly paper, and make an oral presentation to their peers. This multi-faceted set of performances is assessed by two faculty members using an existing rubric that the department adapted to more closely align with DQP outcomes. According to the faculty member in whose course the assessment took place, this meant "looking at the students' work through the DQP lens," a modest shift from existing practice but one she found very useful and expects to continue.

In the philosophy department, on the other hand, the DQP pilot required more significant change. A small unit, housed within the School of Theology and Christian Ministry, the philosophy department had no previously existing capstone course, no experience that asked students to pull together and demonstrate their learning across the program. When invited to participate in the DQP pilot, faculty saw an opportunity, says one department member, especially given an upcoming program review to which the pilot could contribute. The broad outcomes of the DQP were appealing to many colleagues in the humanities, this faculty member told us—a welcome change from more quantitative models of assessment--and the department accepted the invitation to participate.

Philosophy department faculty thus set about designing a capstone experience that called on students to pull together their learning from previous courses. Focusing on 20th Century philosophy, the capstone assignment was an extensive research-and-writing project shaped around the ways of thinking valued by the discipline. The results were mostly not surprising, says one member of the department, confirming the faculty's sense that philosophy majors at Point Loma were fairly accomplished writers. But it also pointed to the need for some curricular revision. What stood out was that students "need more practical, hands-on experience learning to do research." Thus, in its program review, the department is recommending such changes, including the continuation of the new capstone assessment--though what will be possible depends on resources.

Overall Findings and Reflections

At the end of the pilot assessment process, which took place in Spring 2013, the DQP Task Force conducted an analysis of their findings both from the assessment activities themselves as well as the challenges and benefits of implementing the DQP framework. A report was prepared and presented to the CIC and is made public in the Institutional Assessment page.[5] Additionally, a page in the public web portal was created to house all of the DQP artifacts including, outcomes, syllabi, assignments, rubrics, surveys, results and reports; the site is available to all faculty and students and is a public record of the university's progress and participation in the DQP pilot programs.[6]

5 https://portal.pointloma.edu/documents/11178/461cfe3a-b6b8-46ed-a01c-ab75f1bac0fc

6 https://portal.pointloma.edu/web/institutional-effectiveness/dqp

Programs participating in the pilot were asked to assess Specialized Knowledge and Intellectual Skills (specifically critical thinking, information literacy, written communication and oral communication). They were also given the option of assessing the DQP areas of Applied Learning or Civic Learning if they desired.

Reviewing the rubric data, it is clear that different departments were using somewhat different scoring systems. That is, not all programs used the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics; some used discipline specific rubrics. Even among those that used the VALUE Rubrics, there were understandable inconsistencies. Though it was agreed that the pilot participants would map assignments and assessments to the VALUE Rubrics and DQP outcomes, this exercise was interpreted by the faculty in varied ways and resulted in some difficulty in making cross-disciplinary comparisons. This highlights a challenge, Point Loma leaders note: When individual departments within a single university are allowed to define how they will measure a DQP outcome, it is difficult to make valid cross-disciplinary comparisons. As one person put it, "Ultimately the meaning that comes from the DQP is a function of how the outcomes are interpreted and how the achievement of those interpreted outcomes is measured. If both of these are left to the discretion of each university and discipline, there will be a variety of meanings of a degree rather than a common meaning."

One consequence of this reality is that Point Loma's assessment results, though helpful and important to individual programs (as noted above), do not lend themselves to many statistically sound conclusions that can be drawn across programs. However, trends can be observed. One campus leader explained it this way: If it is assumed that a score of 3 (scale of 1-4 with 4 high) is considered "high satisfactory" and thus a score of 2 is "low satisfactory," then the significant majority of Point Loma students who participated in the pilot are above "low satisfactory" in all skills and in most cases a majority are above "high satisfactory." But beyond this broad generalization, it is clear to PLNU that there are important discussions ahead about how to use the VALUE Rubrics to assess DQP outcomes, and how to make the data across departments better suited for use in the aggregate.

In addition to findings from the assessment of DQP proficiencies in capstone experiences, PLNU examined data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and results from the ETS Proficiency Profile, learning different things from each source. NSSE, as many readers will know, is an instrument administered to first-year students and seniors, asking about their participation in a range of "engaged" behaviors, and NSSE researchers have mapped connections between the survey's questions and the DQP domains.[7] PLNU leaders are interested in NSSE data because it provides external benchmarking and general insights about the PLNU experience with the DQP. Most notably, NSSE results[8] reveal that the institution, though it was at or above the level of its comparators on most indicators, has significantly fewer students engaging in culminating experiences than would be expected in a university of its type. That, says one administrator, is "an area of concern." This issue is under discussion and will be considered further in the coming academic year.

In 2011, PLNU ran a pilot test using the ETS Proficiency Profile (PP) and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to compare their utility in benchmarking core competencies and to provide a context for the DQP pilot data on culminating experiences. Both the PP and CLA exams were given to incoming freshmen and outgoing seniors. Based on the outcome of the pilot test, PLNU decided to use the PP because the data appeared to be more actionable, and it has now been used for two years to look at learning outcomes in the area of writing, critical thinking and mathematics. PLNU comes out above the comparison group in the scores of both freshmen and seniors, but, campus leaders agree, the university needs to engage in further conversations about the data and its implications for curricular reform. For example, 49% of seniors are not proficient at critical thinking (vs. 73% for comparators). Should the institution be satisfied with this outcome? Campus leaders see the PP findings[9] as "a useful verification" of findings from the capstone assessment process and a further stimulant to discussion.

7 http://nsse.iub.edu/_/?cid=487
8 https://portal.pointloma.edu/documents/11178/71010115-4cf8-4541-8c2d-f55d064fec58
9 https://portal.pointloma.edu/documents/11178/7ae878a8-a837-4681-bb41-984c1ab1e921

Sustaining and Extending Engagement with the DQP: Next Steps

The conversations that were begun during the pilot will continue "as the university engages in ways to improve the student academic experience leading to greater student learning and success," according to Vice Provost Margaret Bailey. "While the university made great strides in assessment, we did not accomplish all of our initial objectives, experienced some surprises, and had to overcome a few challenges." Thus, in the 2013-2014 academic year, the university will be taking several steps to build assessment leadership, capacity, and standards as part of its work toward national outcomes and the effective use of the DQP Framework.

1. The experience of the DQP pilot highlighted the value of a culminating experience in each academic program. In recent years more academic units have created these summative and integrative experiences; in the next stage of work the focus will be on encouraging the remaining academic programs to do so, adding a capstone, senior seminar, senior exhibition, ePortfolio, or other culminating experience. This will be a challenge because, like many universities, PLNU operates under constraints that make it impossible simply to add additional units to the majors. Thus, in order to add a culminating experience to a degree program, a department will need to transform or eliminate an existing course from the curriculum. Meanwhile, the institution will build on the DQP pilot by continuing to define the commonalities of a culminating experience and what that means for the major and for summative assessment.

2. The curriculum committee charged with rewriting General Education Learning Outcomes will complete its work to align them more closely with the AAC&U LEAP Outcomes. This will allow the university to make better use of the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics for assessing general education and the WASC Core Competencies for graduating seniors. This, in turn, will set the stage for adopting national learning outcomes and core competencies similar to the DQP for all undergraduate programs.

3. PLNU will continue to build an assessment infrastructure to support the WASC Core Competencies (written and oral communication, information literacy, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking) embedded in its Institutional Learning Outcomes and in its General Education Learning Outcomes. These will be assessed using the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics in both the lower division GE courses and senior capstone experiences.

4. Academic leadership will lead a campus-wide movement to use the AAC&U VALUE Rubrics to assess the five WASC core competencies, which are embedded within the DQP domain of Intellectual Skills. Discussions will continue, as well, about how the other four DQP domains can assist in building a more robust assessment of the meaning of the degree across programs.

5. The university's DQP pilot has been primarily focused on the undergraduate program, but, looking ahead, deans and chairs of graduate programs have been asked to think about the challenges and benefits of implementing the DQP framework at the master's degree level.

The DQP itself will continue to be important to Point Loma as one tool for thinking about quality. It is not, says Provost Fulcher, "something that people have to do." That doesn't work. He sees it rather as a framework to "lay along side a program," and "an aspirational articulation of what we want our degrees to be."

About NILOA

- 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
- 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.

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