

# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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## St. Olaf: Utilization-Focused Assessment

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### St. Olaf College

Founded in 1874 by Norwegian Lutheran immigrants and affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, St. Olaf College is located in Northfield, Minnesota. One of the nation's leading four-year residential liberal arts colleges, St. Olaf is committed to enhancing students' global perspective as well as fostering the development of the whole person in mind, body, and spirit. St. Olaf has roughly 3,100 students, with more than two-thirds studying abroad before **graduating**. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) selected St. Olaf as a case study institution due to the institutional framing of assessment as inquiry in support of student learning and as meaningful, manageable, and mission-driven; the utilization-focus/backward-design approach employed in assessment; the integration of student learning outcomes assessment processes into faculty governance structures; and the collaborative involvement of multiple stakeholders and diverse ways in which evidence of student learning is utilized throughout the institution.<sup>1</sup>

### Institutional Context

St. Olaf has a long history with assessment, having participated in many different assessment initiatives over the years including numerous Teagle-funded initiatives, such as the Collaborative Assessment for Liberal Learning and *State Your Case!* projects with Carleton College and Macalester College, focused on gathering and using assessment evidence to improve specific learning outcomes, as well as the **Associated Colleges of the Midwest-Teagle Collegium on Student Learning**, focused on understanding how students learn and acquire the knowledge and skills of a liberal education. St. Olaf is participating in the **Wabash Study 2010**, which focuses on the creation of deliberative processes for using evidence to improve student learning, and has been highlighted by the **Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)**, for its work with the **Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)** initiative on its use of assessment to deepen learning and to establish a culture of shared purpose. St. Olaf won a Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) award in 2010 for its work with student learning outcomes assessment and, more recently, was a featured case study in the AAC&U's *Assessing College Student Learning* (Reed, 2011).

The student learning assessment process at St. Olaf occurs at the institutional, program, and general education levels. St. Olaf **gathers and reports** on a variety of assessment information including data from the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA); the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE); the Research Practices Survey; the Higher Education Data Sharing (HEDS) senior survey; alumni surveys; the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE); and the Essential Learning Outcomes Assessment (ELOA).

The **ELOA** is a 20-minute institutional-level questionnaire developed by a team of St. Olaf faculty and student affairs staff and piloted with incoming freshmen in 2009 and with graduating seniors in 2010. The questionnaire gathers information about students' prior learning experiences, current understandings, and future aspirations in relation to the AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes. The administration of the ELOA test is built into the first-year orientation week with the idea not only to get high response rates but also, as a faculty member stated, "to build the expectation for first-year students that providing assessment information – demonstrating what you know and how you are developing as a student – is just part of what being a St. Olaf student is about."

<sup>1</sup> Data collection for this case study involved phone interviews with two students, the Director of Evaluation and Assessment, the Research Associate and the Office Coordinator for Institutional Research and Evaluation, three department chairs, six faculty members, the chair of the Assessment Subcommittee, the Vice President and Liaison to the Board of Regents, the Registrar, the Associate Dean of Students, four members of the Assessment Subcommittee, the Director of the Writing Program, and the Director of the Center for Innovation for the Liberal Arts. These interviews took place from December 2010 through March 2011. In addition, a systematic review of the institution's website was conducted and relevant documents and videos were analyzed.

The **Research Practices Survey**, developed by a consortium of liberal arts institutions led by Carleton and St. Olaf and supported by a grant from the National Institute for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE), is an instrument for assessing the research experiences, habits, attitudes, and proficiencies of undergraduates. This survey is now being used by more than 70 institutions, and is now regularly available for administration through the HEDS consortium.

To ensure that evidence of student learning is gathered yearly but to avoid overwhelming students or faculty with too many assessments at one time, St. Olaf developed an institutional data collection schedule. This is a **five-year plan** in which every fourth year is reserved as a time for reflection—during which no new evidence of student learning is gathered but rather evidence already gathered is used to improve student learning. This year of reflection focused on utilization provides opportunities for departments to examine and reflect on institution-level results in an attempt to integrate and use them with departmental data. As one faculty member put it, St. Olaf’s five-year plan “coordinates all levels of assessment activity, from departmental to institutional to general education assessment. All the time we are doing something, but we are not trying to do everything at once.”

In 2008 at the program level, every department established intended learning outcomes, or **ILOs** and, in 2009, gathered and provided assessment action reports on evidence in relation to one or more of the ILOs. In addition, all **general education** requirements at the college include intended learning outcomes, and these are the focus of campus-wide assessment during the 2011-12 academic year.

Yet, the assessment of student learning at St. Olaf has not always come as easily as these accomplishments would suggest. In the mid-1990s St. Olaf, like many other institutions at the time, launched an unsuccessful department-level assessment initiative in response to regional accreditation. It was an “uphill climb to persuade departments that this time around, things would be different” (Beld, Walczak, & Gross, 2009, p. 3). In the late 1990s, a decision was made to establish an office, then called the Office of Academic Research and Planning, to be headed by a faculty member with released time from teaching with the role of evaluation and assessment, as a complement to the college’s institutional research office. Dr. Jo Beld, a faculty member in political science, was appointed as director of that office in 2001 and has continued in that position since.

Faculty engagement with assessment has been steadily growing since 2001, in part due to how assessment has been conceptualized and approached. The current conceptualization of assessment at St. Olaf was developed in 2003 by the Director of Evaluation and Assessment and was reviewed and affirmed by a faculty advisory group where now, “the key words and phrases characterizing our conceptualization of assessment are being integrated into our public documents, our committee conversations, and our faculty-wide deliberations” (Beld, Walczak, & Gross, 2009, p. 10). It is the characterization of assessment as a form of “inquiry in support of student learning” and one that is “**mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable**” that has helped integrate assessment into St. Olaf’s institutional culture.

## Inquiry in Support of Student Learning

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Providing a vision for assessment at St. Olaf in her role as Director of Evaluation and Assessment, and showing a knack for developing assessment mantras, Dr. Beld has been an agent for change within the institution, especially in program-level assessment. Assessment at St. Olaf is defined on the Institutional Research and Evaluation (IR&E) website as “the ongoing collection and analysis of systematic evidence concerning the relationship between educational practices and student learning, for purposes of program improvement.

- Systematic evidence may be gathered through a variety of methods, both qualitative and quantitative.
- Educational practices may include curriculum requirements, instructional strategies, programs of study, and other dimensions of the educational programs and services offered by the college.
- Student learning may include many kinds of outcomes, including not only knowledge, but also skills, attitudes, and values.” (<http://www.stolaf.edu/offices/ir-e/assessment/principles/inquiry.htm>)

The purpose of assessment at St. Olaf is to determine how—and how well—the institution is meeting its educational promises to its students. Assessment is framed as one of several forms of inquiry into student learning, with implications for classroom practices, curriculum, and faculty development. As stated on the **website**, “At its best, assessment can help us *sustain* what we are doing well and *strengthen* what we need to do better.” Framing assessment as “inquiry in support of learning” as opposed to referring to it as assessment of student learning alters what is assessed, and also how and why it is assessed. By focusing on inquiry in support of learning, according to one faculty member’s description, assessment emerges out of questions within the lived experience of faculty members. Furthermore, a variety of assessment approaches and methodological tools may be utilized to address the questions of interest.

Assessment is about innovation and improvement. Most faculty at St. Olaf not only want to do their work well, they want to find ways to do it even better. A faculty member articulated this well:

Our primary focus of work here is teaching and what we want students to learn. What we really want to understand as faculty are the practices, structures and experiences that will support learning. We may have hunches, but focusing on inquiry in support of learning allows us to think about what we are trying to achieve and be more intentional about it by seeing if a change we made in our instruction did impact student learning.

Inquiry in support of student learning conceptualizes assessment as a resource to help faculty do their work more effectively. Inquiry-driven assessment is like any other research project, requiring many of the same skills and commitments faculty bring to their disciplinary scholarship. Further, assessment addresses something faculty really care about: student learning. Assessment helps faculty figure out if students can actually do what they say they can do at graduation and beyond. One department chair, noting that part of her role was to dispel the initial reaction to assessment from faculty that it was just another bureaucratic hurdle, said that she “started talking about assessment as informing teaching—how do I know that what I am teaching is what students are actually learning. Just because we say it doesn’t mean they learn it, so how do you know?”

Dr. Beld’s office is not the only place at St. Olaf touting assessment as inquiry in support of student learning. St. Olaf’s Center for Innovation in the Liberal Arts (CILA), is the college’s equivalent to a teaching and learning center which began originally in 1975 and was revived in 2000, encourages faculty to inquire systematically into student learning at the classroom level through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). CILA provides learning communities for faculty, convenes faculty conversations over lunch on a variety of topics, and has associates who undertake a formal SoTL project. A faculty member involved with CILA noted,

St. Olaf eased into the assessment process this time and it was due to Jo’s [Beld’s] leadership. Instead of demanding things and making requirements she has said, “Here are some things that people are doing. Here is what we would like to see you do. How has the data in the last year helped you change what you are doing?” She was more of a coach than anything else.

The scholarship of teaching and learning is not the same as institutional assessment, but it shares with assessment a commitment to systematic inquiry into student learning. In fact, CILA’s strong support for SoTL helped create a climate that was more welcoming of assessment than would otherwise have been the case.

## The Three-Ms: Mission-Driven, Meaningful, and Manageable

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To help operationalize inquiry in support of student learning without being too large of an undertaking and to reinforce the principles of assessment, the three Ms of assessment emerged. The mantra of mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable assessment is more than a tool to assure faculty that the work they do related to assessment will not be an add-on or burden but will instead align with and strengthen their current work. It is also a philosophical stance on how and what to assess, and it provides a framework to help alleviate a variety of faculty concerns.

Every person interviewed for this case study mentioned and/or discussed the three Ms of assessment. **Mission-driven**, at the institutional level means that, all assessment should be consistent with the unique mission of a liberal arts college of the Lutheran Church focused on fostering a global perspective; at the program and classroom level, assessment should be guided by the intended learning outcomes and designated course objectives. **Meaningful** assessment is designed in ways to inform decision-making, address questions of interest, improve student learning, and promote faculty development. **Manageable** assessment is realistic about the resources available and the time needed to design, administer, disseminate, discuss, and apply results.

An example of mission-driven, meaningful, manageable assessment is that of the general education (GE) requirements at St. Olaf. Faculty teaching a GE course over the past academic year were asked to assess one GE outcome for one GE requirement in one course. As stated on the institutional [website](#),

The assessment approach is completely organic, relying on work students are already doing to complete course requirements. Instructors do not have to invent any surveys, rubrics, or other assessment instruments; instead, they will simply record how well students demonstrate the outcome of interest in whatever assignments the instructor believes are most germane to that outcome. Instructors will be asked to describe and reflect on their students’ work in a brief General Education Student Learning Report, designed to be completed as soon as the instructor has graded the work.

The reports prepared by individual instructors will be aggregated by requirement, so a composite picture of learning in the GE curriculum as a whole will emerge from the course-level data. The three Ms also help alleviate a variety of faculty concerns, as outlined in the comments of one faculty member:

One phobia about assessment is that faculty will be compelled to gather evidence and make an elaborate report that will die in a file cabinet somewhere. By focusing on “meaningful” assessment, you know that we will not do anything unless it is responding to a question about which an action can be taken. “Manageable” means that we will take pains to make sure that every step in the project can be incorporated into faculty members’ life without undue cost to the teaching enterprise. “Mission-driven” means we are not going to do assessment that is satisfying some external entity’s demands to know what students learn; we are only going to do assessment that is relevant to us, our history, and our identity.

## Utilization-Focus/ Backward-Design Assessment

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St. Olaf employs a utilization-focus/backward-design approach to assessment. The utilization-focused approach is one that begins with consideration of intended users and uses (Walczak, Harper, McClure, & Hisey, 2010). It is informed by Michael Quinn Patton’s (2008) work on utilization-focused evaluation and treats the results of assessment as a means to an end as opposed to an end in themselves—meaning that assessment is not complete until results are utilized in some manner. The backward-design approach, taken from classroom instruction, begins with identification of intended learning outcomes. Once outcomes are determined, instruction and practice as well as evidence collected in support of those outcomes are identified with the purpose of facilitating students’ movement towards the outcomes. The “utilization-focus/backward-design” model of assessment begins with the question, “Who are the likely users of the evidence we want to gather, and how will they use it?” This approach is thought to increase the likelihood that faculty and staff will be able to *act* on the evidence of student learning they collect. Focusing on intended uses by intended users leads to a variety of uses within departments including redesign of gateway courses, different approaches to providing feedback on student writing, or even different sequencing of courses (Beld, 2010). Through the utilization-focus/backward-design approach, departments are beginning to realize the rewards of assessment that are possible without the excessive burdens that many faculty fear. One department chair stated,

Utilization-focus and backward-design is about starting with the end in mind and making sure that what you want your students to achieve is actually possible given what you are asking them to do. For instance, assigning homework problems from the back of the chapter may help with disciplinary skills but it is not going to help them with their writing – so if that is an important piece, then assignments need to be designed for students to work on those skills.

A focus on use from the outset has led to evidence of student learning supporting arguments for decisions, changes, or conclusions around student performance. Departments are encouraged to develop their assessment structures around a concrete problem or an area of interest. In departmental reports to the college, the first question asked is not what the results were but rather, “Which features of your major/concentration are likely to be continued and which might be modified or discontinued on the basis of the evidence you gathered about student learning?” (Beld, Walczak, & Gross, 2009). Relevant results are presented in support of decisions made or conclusions reached as opposed to being presented as conclusions in themselves. As helpful as framing assessment as inquiry in support of learning and identifying approaches such as utilization-focus or backward-design are, these alone will not guarantee widespread success in gathering actionable evidence of student learning at the department level. Equally important is the capacity and desire for departments actually to do the work. This is facilitated by a *meet in the middle strategy* and the structure of faculty governance and ownership of assessment.

## Embedding Assessment in Faculty Governance Structures

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“Faculty members cannot work in isolation,” Dr. Beld has noted, “Work in this area is significantly easier when assessment is integrated formally into the campus governance system.” St. Olaf adopted what has been described as a *meet in the middle strategy* that is “top-down” as well as “bottom-up” and thus both faculty-driven and administration directed. The bottom-up approach utilizes the college’s faculty governance system to establish the purposes and specific procedures departments follow in articulating learning outcomes, gathering assessment evidence, and supporting departmental efforts. The top-down approach utilizes the authority of administrators to activate the process. The integration of faculty governance into the assessment process has proved instrumental to St. Olaf. As one faculty member stated,

I think assessment is important, but what is more important is the way that we are doing it. We are not doing assessment because administratively we have to, we are doing assessment that actually makes a difference and that is because there has been continuity, consistency in message, and the integration of assessment into faculty governance [through the Curriculum Committee] and deliberations [at faculty meetings].

Principal responsibility for assessment resides with the faculty **Curriculum Committee**, which in turn delegates the work of directing and overseeing assessment efforts to an Assessment Subcommittee. The Assessment Subcommittee, which emerged in 2008 as part of a reconfiguration of St. Olaf's faculty governance combining several committees, meets on alternating weeks and has representatives from the dean's council, each of the five Faculties,<sup>2</sup> associate deans, a student, and members of the Curriculum Committee. The Assessment Subcommittee's role is of "assessment coach – providing feedback and building relationships." Members who serve on the Assessment Subcommittee also serve as assessment liaisons and provide support for faculty within their departments.

The Assessment Subcommittee is composed of faculty members appointed from outside the Curriculum Committee as well as members of the Curriculum Committee. The Assessment Subcommittee led the efforts to articulate Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) for all departments and programs as well as the plans for gathering evidence and reporting on the evidence. The subcommittee reviewed each department's ILOs as well as departmental plans and provided feedback and assistance to departments implementing their plans. Feedback on ILOs and departmental plans was given based on a rubric designed by the Assessment Subcommittee. The ILO rubric scored departments on a scale ranging from "Exceptionally Strong" to "Insufficient Information to Judge." Eight scoring criteria were developed and divided into mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable categories (Beld, Walczak, & Gross, 2009). For the departmental plans, feedback was given based on four questions:

1. Does the proposed strategy provide direct evidence of student learning?
2. Does the proposed strategy disaggregate performance data in a way that provides useful information to the department or program?
3. Is the plan appropriate in scope (neither too large or too small)?
4. Does the information provided by the department or program provide a sufficient level of detail to determine how the information will be gathered? (Beld, Walczak, & Gross, 2009, p. 15)

Yet there is only so much the Assessment Subcommittee can do, as a faculty committee at St. Olaf cannot require the faculty to do anything, but can recommend actions. The Assessment Subcommittee reports to the Curriculum Committee and once agreement is reached, the Curriculum Committee sends recommendations to the dean on how to proceed. The dean, in turn, then sends the recommendation out to the faculty -- so the dean as opposed to the Subcommittee asks the faculty to complete the assessment-related activities. This process of meeting-in-the-middle provides, as one faculty member noted, "faculty-based recommendations from the Curriculum Committee with the clout of the dean combining the weight of an elected faculty committee with the dean's authority."

## Collaborative Approach in Assessment

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Assessment at St. Olaf is not the domain of one office or one person but is a collaborative effort. In fact, most people interviewed for this case study had been involved with assessment in some form or another over multiple projects for multiple years, creating a diffuse network of assessment relations across the campus. Not only has the college been involved in several *inter*-institutional collaborations on the assessment of student learning, but it has also implemented *intra*-institutional collaboration involving its own faculty, staff, and students. For instance, the Director of Writing was involved in developing writing rubrics in the CALL project, the implementation and refinement of the Research Practices Survey, and the CLA pilot project. Students are also involved in the assessment process including through representation on the Assessment Subcommittee. Being involved in assessment has been very beneficial to students, as one student on this subcommittee mentioned:

It makes me think more intentionally about registering for courses. When I see the general education requirements on the side, I know what those abbreviations mean and how it will influence or affect the course, so it helps me decide which to take. It also has made me more critical of a course after completing it. I wish I would have known about this before, as I would have taken courses differently. I would have chosen courses that were a better fit for me by looking into ILO and aligning them more with my academic requirements.

An example of the power of intra-institutional collaborations is the rate at which students participate in assessments. Student involvement in assessment has been substantial at St. Olaf with 90% of all first-year students completing assessment activities as part of **orientation**, referred to as Week One. Such numbers would not have been possible without the collaborative work of several offices.

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<sup>2</sup> The academic divisions at St. Olaf – Fine Arts, Humanities, Interdisciplinary and General Studies, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, and Social Sciences -- are referred to as Faculties.

When St. Olaf joined the longitudinal administration of the CLA in 2005, the institution needed student involvement and partnerships with offices across campus to ensure success in the recruitment process. Students would take the CLA as incoming students, rising juniors, and then as graduating seniors, so the Associate Dean of Students made time available within Week One for assessment and provided materials to students beforehand—stressing the importance of assessment, why they should participate, and what the results mean to the institution. To encourage students to be involved over the course of the pilot project, the registrar, residence hall professional and student staff, academic advisors, student government, president, student membership organizations, and others were all involved in the recruitment and advertising process. As part of this effort, Dr. Beld came and spoke with the student government association about the test. The person who had been student body president at the time recalled that experience:

I think the most significant thing she was able to communicate in describing the CLA was not its content or how it works but why it's important. She was able to convince me that this type of assessment work is really valuable and can shape institutions. She made research and assessment cool to the students and made it an initiative of the students as well as administration and faculty.

The CLA project also involved CILA in collaboration with the Office of Institutional Research and Evaluation. They worked with faculty, noting that the CLA appealed to faculty because “it looked like what they were teaching, and when faculty saw that students did relatively less well on making an argument, they took the opportunity to move that finding back into the classroom and CILA was able to provide support and help.”

## Using Evidence of Student Learning

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St. Olaf is very focused on the use of assessment results and utilizes evidence of student learning in a variety of ways including the improvement of student learning, strategic planning, and accreditation initiatives such as the Main Street Initiative. To help facilitate use of evidence of student learning, results are presented in a variety of meaningful and user-friendly ways. One way that multiple measures of evidence of student learning have been combined to tell a story is through the combination of data from seniors, alumni, and prospective employers regarding the importance of general education courses. The website “[Don't Just Check Off Those Requirements](#)” is designed to help students learn more about how their general education courses will contribute to professional achievement and success after graduation.

In addition to presenting evidence to students in a user-friendly manner, reports available online arrange a variety of evidence of student learning by themes such as critical thinking, oral communication, research proficiency, and quantitative reasoning, to name a few. Arranging assessment evidence by theme allows users to connect with resources they might not have previously considered. It also provides departments with accessible institution-level data related to specific concerns and questions. The college-wide topic or issue reports connect multiple measures of student learning to tell an evidence-based story regarding specific areas of interest. In addition, there are specific learning outcomes or curriculum area reports, reports supporting initiatives, and reports of results by source of evidence such as CLA or NSSE.

The St. Olaf approach to using assessment results does not mean that paying attention to assessment necessarily means “doing more” (although it might mean “doing differently”). As stated on the institution’s assessment principles website, “Assessment provides evidence that can help faculty to set priorities among an array of valuable activities that they are likely to undertake anyway.” Results from the Research Practices Survey, for example, suggested that certain aspects should be emphasized when providing instruction and practice in research skills, but they also identified areas where students are already successful. Similarly, institution-level NSSE results suggested areas where students were excelling but also identified somewhat lower scores on faculty engagement than desired by faculty—leading to the selection of specific courses in which enrollments are kept under 20 students. In another example, results from the ELOA survey on students’ entering expectations and thinking regarding learning outcomes informed the changes to the next year’s orientation including a more formal session on the foreign language requirement for incoming students. Commenting generally on the college’s utilization of assessment results, one staff member said,

I am new to the institution but it is quickly apparent that this institution is much more focused on utilizing the results. At a previous institution, the surveys were almost mandatory and you went through them if you had the time to look at them, but here that is not the case. Here, reports are made available over subsequent years and pool a variety of data sources. The surveys aren’t done for the sake of surveying but done because there is an interest in finding out what the surveys have to say and then using those results to impact the college community.

A previous chair of the Assessment Subcommittee noted that the St. Olaf faculty’s increasing comfort with assessment over time was, “in large part due to the guiding principles and framing of the work as meaningful—but the largest vote of confidence came from examples that began to emerge of departments and programs using results and getting excited about what they were finding.” Three of these examples are described below.

St. Olaf's psychology department applied for and received funding to bring assessment consultants to campus, to secure time for faculty to meet and reflect on assessment results and to connect with other areas of campus to strengthen students' departmental experiences. To inform their curriculum revisions, psychology faculty examined a variety of evidence such as course sequences, course evaluations, senior surveys, and student feedback. Changes made based on the senior survey and course-embedded assessment findings included altering course sequences, increasing and altering major advising, and developing an introductory course to psychology for psychology majors.

The religion department wanted to know if their students were writing at a desired level, and so the faculty developed a writing rubric, gathered a random collection of student essays, and had a faculty panel rate them. A report was generated from the rating that outlined where students demonstrated or fell short on the outcomes in question. Areas where students fell short were used to refocus teaching and also to rethink the sequence of courses and assignments within courses so as to better reinforce the desired outcomes and help students improve. A faculty member involved in this effort remarked,

It seems so modest to state it now – we identified an intended learning outcome, made rubrics, looked at essays, and altered teaching – but that fairly modest process generated a holistic view of what students were doing well and what they were not doing so well, which allowed for minor adjustments. In a year or two these adjustments will show, I think, that students are doing better on a given outcome.

In St. Olaf's exercise science department, ILOs have been developed for every course and assessment occurs via senior exit interviews, employer and internship feedback, performance evaluations, and course-embedded assessments. One faculty member in this department decided to study—in two of her course sections—the impact of including the course ILOs in the syllabus. About two thirds of the way through the course, this faculty member gave the students in one section a blank piece of paper and asked them to write down what they thought the ILOs were for the course. Students in the other section, in contrast, were first provided the course's ILOs; then, on a blank piece of paper, they were asked to write if the class was enabling them to meet each of the ILOs. The results showed that students in the first section could clearly identify the ILOs while those in the second section could validate the ILOs with accounts of their experiences of where they thought the course reinforced each of the ILOs. In this same department, students are evaluated on their communication skills as part of the institution-wide general education assessment program. Noting that the curriculum itself does not actually address communication skills, a faculty member in the department commented, “We had just assumed students were acquiring the skills somewhere but it needs to be included because our students are lacking it as a group.” She further said of the assessment experience, “As a faculty member, learning outcomes helps you to look closely and to make sure that you are covering all the areas students need, not just the ones you are most interested in or are related to your field.”

## Next Steps

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Assessment at St. Olaf will continue to gain traction and become further integrated into all parts of the institution. In lunch-time chats about results presented in department meetings as well as in year-long reflections shared across the institution, informal as well as formal conversations on assessment occur frequently across the St. Olaf campus, providing space for discussing what assessment means to the institution and to the students served. One student affairs professional noted, “The assessment staff make it easy for us. It has been a steady progression for the last eight years and the institutional staff have worked hard to make conducting assessment and looking at the results easy to do.” Even the **president** is involved in presenting information on evidence of student learning through a publically available video.

One means of integrating assessment further across the institution is the **Main Street Initiative**, St. Olaf's “Quality Initiative” for purposes of reaccreditation by the Higher Learning Commission in Spring 2013. The Main Street Initiative focuses on students' preparation for life after college, particularly in the first few years after graduation, and is connected with institutional strategic planning as well as with reaccreditation. The initiative brings together a variety of assessment resources, including a portfolio of institution-level assessment evidence developed under the auspices of St. Olaf's participation in the Wabash Study, and survey research projects conducted by teams of sociology students. The breadth of the assessment data under consideration, and the reach of Main Street programming across both curricular and co-curricular life, holds promise for significant data-informed institutional improvement.

Interest in assessment and evidence of student learning at St. Olaf continues to grow. Paula Carlson, in the president's office stated, “Even the Board is interested in and excited about data. The mantra of the board is ‘better data, better decisions.’” The future of assessment at St. Olaf includes the hope of the Director of CILA to “scale up classroom assessment and scale down institutional assessment to meet in meaningful ways.” St. Olaf will continue to work with and engage students in the assessment process, as reflected in this comment by the Assessment Subcommittee's student member: “St. Olaf is always going to change each freshman class that comes in and each senior class that graduates. It is never-

ending work, but at the same time it has to be done so you can get a feel for where you are.” St. Olaf will continue to grow in its assessment knowledge and activity and to share information and experiences about its assessment efforts at national and regional conferences.

## Lessons from St. Olaf College

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1. Assessment of student learning is enhanced when aligned with the interests of faculty and with the work regarding student learning that is already underway.
2. Focusing assessment on questions related to student learning in meaningful and manageable ways that align with institutional mission, helps foster a culture of assessment across an institution.
3. Involving a variety of stakeholders in assessment activities and then providing reports on the success of those activities can bolster a culture of assessment.
4. Coupling faculty and administrative directives to provide a middle-ground can help to disperse assessment activities across campus.
5. Being intentional about potential uses from the beginning of assessment efforts and providing opportunities for dialogue around evidence of student learning through designated reflection times will lead to enhanced use of assessment results.

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## NILOA Examples of Good Assessment Practice

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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

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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.

## National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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