

# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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## Texas A&M International University: A Culture of Assessment INTEGRATED

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### Texas A&M International University

Texas A&M International University (TAMIU), located in Laredo, Texas, is a public four-year university in The Texas A&M University System. TAMIU's **mission** involves "preparing students for leadership roles in an increasingly complex, culturally diverse state, national, and global society" and providing "a learning environment built on a solid academic foundation in the arts and sciences." TAMIU enrolls nearly 7,000 students, among whom over 5,800 are undergraduates. In 1995, TAMIU welcomed its first freshman and sophomore students, inaugurated a newly constructed 300-acre campus in northeast Laredo, and marked its 25th anniversary.

TAMIU was selected as a NILOA case study institution due to its commitment to choosing assessments and tools appropriate for its students, its long history with and innovative approach to assessment, and the influential role of professional development at the institution to help prepare "Assessment Champions" and expand the number of "pockets of excellence" in terms of assessment practices throughout the campus.<sup>1</sup>

### Institutional Context

TAMIU is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools—Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC) and participates in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). While accreditation is generally portrayed as being undertaken for external accountability purposes as opposed to internal improvement, TAMIU is firmly committed to being transparent about the assessment of student learning outcomes, and TAMIU faculty and staff use accreditation to further their assessment work. According to a TAMIU administrator, the assessment process required by accreditors has helped reinforce the link at TAMIU between teaching and learning, thus promoting the use of assessment by committed faculty in the classroom. As the focus of accreditation has shifted over time from inputs to outcomes, institutions have similarly changed focus. For this reason, as acknowledged by the same administrator, "Student learning outcomes have been the foundation, or the fundamental piece of everything we do." Hence, the elements and assessment activities conducted by TAMIU reflect an institutional commitment to cultivating a culture of assessment on its campus.

TAMIU engages academic programs and administrative/educational support units in the assessment and evaluation process through **Project INTEGRATE** (Institutional Network Targeting Evaluation, Goals, Resources, and Accountability Toward Effectiveness). This initiative aligns strategic planning, assessment activities, and resource allocation—activities reported through the Annual Institutional Effectiveness Review (AIER), documenting the linkage between institutional mission, strategic plan, assessment outcomes, and resource allocation. Project INTEGRATE formalizes the policy, process, format, cycle, and documentation of the assessment process. Each academic department is involved in the assessment process and has designated degree program coordinators responsible for overseeing assessment activities, reporting results, and implementing program improvements, as appropriate. All of TAMIU's academic programs and administrative/educational support units conduct annual assessments of their programs and publicly report their findings (see <http://www.tamiau.edu/adminis/iep/assessment.shtml>).

<sup>1</sup> The data gathered for this case study included phone interviews with a faculty member, the Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning, the Associate Vice President for Academic Enrichment/International Development, the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Executive Director of the University College, the Associate Provost, the Director of the Writing Center, and the Provost, as well as a systematic review of the institutional website and analysis of relevant documents. The phone interviews took place during July and August 2011.

The University Assessment Committee (UAC), established in 2002, leads the institution's assessment efforts through the program assessment cycle described above. According to the UAC chair, faculty buy-in and actualization of established assessment goals are part of the committee agenda. Individuals are identified for UAC membership by work done in the assessment of academic programs or administrative departments. The UAC is comprised of six subcommittees, each with three to four members who serve two-year terms and who represent TAMIU's faculty and administration.

TAMIU has strived to create and maintain both a culture of assessment and a culture of engagement of its administrators, faculty, and students. Several interviewees noted the commitment of TAMIU administrators and faculty to inculcating a culture of assessment. TAMIU leadership has helped sustain and foster assessment by demonstrating commitment by, among other things, securing resources needed to conduct effective assessment activities on campus. Thus, as one administrator noted, administration is "there to serve and play a more supportive role—not to be judgmental." One administrator also noted the prevalence of "faculty buy-in, with support from leadership, in involving assessment in their classrooms," where "assessment is a way for faculty to inform and enhance their teaching." In addition, engaging students and TAMIU's surrounding community is of chief importance.

To understand more about student learning and engagement and also to improve the campus and better address student needs, TAMIU administers several surveys to students and other constituents including the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), and the Graduating Student Survey. Results from these assessments are publicly reported on the website of TAMIU's Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning (IEP). Assessment tools, such as national surveys, can be expensive. To offset some of the costs of these innovations TAMIU implemented a mandatory student assessment fee (\$20/term and \$10/summer term) in 2005. The Office of IEP uses the revenue generated from this fee to fund assessment activities, provide incentives for student participation, and purchase assessment instruments such as the CLA, the Area Concentration Achievement Tests, the Major Field Achievement Tests, the NSSE, the BCSSE, and the Student Opinion Survey.

### **"Best Practice, Best Fit"**

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Aspiring to be a student-oriented institution, TAMIU prides itself on being responsive to its student needs. Classified by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities as a Hispanic Serving Institution, TAMIU's student population mirrors its surrounding community, with 93% of its students of Hispanic/Latino descent; additionally, 63% of students attend full-time and 59% are female. Wanting to involve the surrounding community in TAMIU's activities, an administrator acknowledged that while "our real audiences are our faculty and students, our ideal audiences would include our community."

Using the phrase "best practice, best fit" to describe the assessment of student learning at TAMIU, one administrator noted that while an assessment activity and/or tool may be considered a best practice in the field of assessment, it may need to be adapted or changed when applied to TAMIU's population: "We always want it [the assessment activity/tool] to fit us," but those involved in the selection of assessment activities/tools need to "give special attention to the needs of our institution and ask themselves what we expect not only from our students but also our institution."

An example of this "best practice, best fit" model can be found in the student results of the Educational Benchmark Institute (EBI) First-Year Initiative Assessment. TAMIU's University College directors and faculty noticed in the results of this assessment that they had a large population of students identifying as first-generation and in need of "increased understanding of the knowledge of academic services and university experiences and practices." Informed by these results, modifications were made to the students' first-year experience such as student weekly meetings with student mentors to discuss time management, study skills, academic support services, and campus events. Additionally, each student was given a planner, as an administrator stressed, "to encourage time management skills and social engagement."

### **TAMIU's History of Assessment**

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Although TAMIU has been involved in assessment since the 1990s, its assessment process has evolved considerably over the last decade. While it has been a "slow and gradual process of understanding assessment," according to an administrator, TAMIU has been fortunate in having several administrators and faculty familiar with and committed to assessment on campus. In fact, in one office alone, there are over 20 years of combined assessment experience.

To integrate the variety of assessment activities and to help TAMIU build toward a culture of assessment, a couple of initiatives have become aligned. Two processes created by the TAMIU campus include Project INTEGRATE and the electronic submission of reports through Digital Measures. The previous experiences of administrators and faculty with assessment have enabled TAMIU to tailor these and other assessment activities/processes to meet the institution's specific needs.

The implementation of Project INTEGRATE, described above, allowed TAMIU to transform and advance assessment and continuous improvement efforts occurring on campus. Developed and implemented with the feedback and collaboration of both faculty and administrators, Project INTEGRATE's goal is "to integrate planning, evaluation, and budgeting processes into a comprehensive program that not only encompasses teaching and learning but also the array of administrative and support services which sustain the core activities of the university." Because of limited resources for assessment and strategic planning activities, TAMIU chose to link the budgeting process with assessment to enhance institutional effectiveness. Through this effort, as one faculty member noted, all materials documenting the planning, evaluation, and use of results for improvement are readily accessible in a central location—the [IEP website](#).

The IEP website serves as the repository for AIER documentation as well as a resource for information related to the institutional effectiveness process. Included in this repository are strategic planning materials, the practitioner's manual, assessment resources for faculty and administrators, planning templates, links to accreditation resources, program reviews, and the Institutional Effectiveness (IE) Plan. The IE plan provides a basis for understanding the importance and significance of the institutional effectiveness process as well as a complete explanation of the roles and responsibilities of participants and the flow of the institutional effectiveness process. The practitioner's manual is a resource for developing institutional effectiveness plans for academic programs and administrative/educational support units. It provides information on the institutional effectiveness process, the mission statement, the development of goals, examples of student learning outcomes and assessment methods, and tips on sharing results. It also provides resources to facilitate further study and review of assessment efforts for a variety of programs.

In 2009, TAMIU moved from its former homegrown data management process to the Digital Measures software, where all AIER assessment reports are uploaded to a local data management system. While it is easier for faculty to access and upload these reports, it is a challenge to keep up with the continuity of information due to turnover in faculty and administrative positions. TAMIU moved to the Digital Measures software in hopes of circumventing this challenge through the creation of a permanent repository.

In addition to the creation of assessment processes on campus throughout TAMIU's long history with assessment, several assessment committees have also been developed. Not only is there the University Assessment Committee (UAC), which leads TAMIU's assessment efforts, but there is also the Department Assessment Committee (DAC), which helps advise the department faculty on assessment issues. The faculty-initiated DAC is instrumental in the effectiveness of the UAC and is considered a resource within each department. One administrator described these committees as a synergistic relationship between faculty and administration. DAC members not only get to bring issues from their respective departments to the UAC committee but also regularly gather ideas and solutions to take back and implement in their departments. Program coordinators who are members of DAC often review assessment reports before they are sent to the UAC in order to improve the utility and effectiveness of the UAC.

## Professional Development

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Throughout TAMIU's campus are faculty committed to using assessment to enhance teaching and learning. Known as "Assessment Champions," these faculty are often "well-respected by their colleagues" and are considered to be proficient and current in the assessment field, according to an administrator. Often tapped to serve on key committees, as mentors to other faculty, and as providers of assessment expertise, these assessment proponents are "constantly developing ways of providing access to data" for use and improvement not only in their classrooms and departments but across the entire campus.

In the regular cycles of assessment and the history of faculty and administrative experience with assessment at TAMIU, "pockets of excellence" have developed throughout campus. The nursing, education, social sciences, and language and literature departments were cited by several interviewees as excellent examples of departmental assessment. It is the intention of TAMIU that the assessment practices of these departments permeate the entire campus.

One way to facilitate the expansion of pockets of excellence and Assessment Champions is through the effective use of professional development. While training for faculty on TAMIU's assessment process began in 2002, targeted training for adjuncts and first-year faculty on TAMIU's assessment process started in 2006 to "enhance the quality and effectiveness of their assessment activities" in classrooms. Training activities include one-on-one discussions, departmental orientations, and mentoring by Assessment Champions.

The [Professional Resources and Opportunities for Faculty \(PROF\) Center](#) at TAMIU helps in the cultivation of Assessment Champions by offering several opportunities for professional development. Established in 2009, the PROF Center responds to faculty and university calls for professional development and has, as an administrator noted,

sponsored numerous professional development initiatives to help faculty better understand their students and use various resources, including technology and different instructional arrangements, to implement rigorous and meaningful learning experiences to appropriately challenge their students and prepare them for their respective careers.

In addition to the expertise of TAMIU's faculty, external consultants are brought in to give workshops or provide assistance on specific assessment topics and/or tools. In collaboration with the PROF Center, TAMIU faculty have had opportunities to work with consultants on topics ranging from integrative learning, effective teaching, distance learning pedagogy to mentoring and higher order thinking skills.

In addition, the PROF Center activities, according to one administrator, "have focused on helping faculty design their degree programs and instruction to be more culturally responsive to the needs of their students." Results from different assessments such as surveys, feedback forms following professional development experiences, individual and focus group interviews, and faculty inquiries are obtained to determine or inform future professional development opportunities.

## Using Evidence of Student Learning

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TAMIU has been involved with the **Building Engagement and Attainment for Minority Students (BEAMS)** project, an initiative focused on using data to improve student learning. The BEAMS project, which lasted from 2004 to 2008, focused on the improvement of student engagement, learning, and success at more than 100 baccalaureate-granting Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). As a result of inclusion in this project, several programs or ideas have been actualized on TAMIU's campus. For instance, *Write-On, TAMIU!*, TAMIU's most current Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), is a direct outcome of its BEAMS work.

For the BEAMS project, TAMIU examined NSSE results and found that students were getting insufficient practice in short writing assignments (see <http://www.tamiu.edu/adminis/iep/pdf/QEP-Final.pdf>). After campus-wide discussion among faculty, staff, and students, it was decided that the focus of the QEP would be "to improve undergraduate student writing and to develop a campus climate that fosters writing." Three goals of the QEP were identified:

1. Provide entering students a strong foundation for academic success through the development of a comprehensive First Year Writing Program;
2. Create a university-wide culture of writing by establishing learning outcomes related to writing in all academic programs; and
3. Ensure that TAMIU graduates have mastered those writing skills necessary for professional success in their chosen careers.

Thus far, each goal has been addressed and new programs or courses have been implemented as a result of different assessments. English Composition I and II were redesigned, for example, and capstone courses for each degree program were identified. To address the third goal, data are currently being collected from both employers and students; in addition, employers are involved in annual focus groups through TAMIU's Office of Career Services. Graduating students are now asked about their writing experiences while enrolled in TAMIU's degree programs as well as asked to provide a writing sample from an upper-level course. Collecting a variety of forms of data provides the campus with an opportunity to learn how TAMIU students are faring in terms of employment in addition to providing faculty with actual data to help improve their own teaching practices.

TAMIU has used the data obtained through its involvement in BEAMS to improve its campus. The PROF Center was one outcome of the BEAMS work at TAMIU. In addition, TAMIU representatives wanted to create a culture of teaching and learning on campus. While this goal is always evolving, TAMIU has made several steps toward doing so including fostering the use of assessment results to improve academic programs. Here are a few examples:

- Scores on senior thesis papers of communication majors were found to be below the faculty's agreed-upon acceptable score. An action plan was incorporated to include the following: require assistance from the Writing Center for all major papers; offer research writing workshops for seniors to reinforce writing strategies; explore opportunities within the community to give students more writing experience; and mentor students to participate in student academic conferences. Faculty also began recognizing excellent research and writing by students through the Communication Program newsletter and Facebook page. These program modifications will be monitored and assessed in a future assessment cycle to determine their impact.
- As a pilot study, freshman students in HIST 1301—a history course on the U.S. to 1877—were given pretests and posttests during the semester they were enrolled. The 30-question multiple-choice test was written by program faculty and administered to three large sections of the course. Ten questions relate to each of the three learning objectives, which center around knowledge of political, social, and global history. This project was

undertaken, in part, to further address the course's significant drop/failure/withdrawal rates. Increased scores on the posttests revealed positive measures of student learning. History faculty members saw students' understanding of political, social, and global history increase through significant improvement between pretest and posttest scores. To assess the impact of the program modifications, the pretests and posttests will be expanded to include HIST 1302, a course on the U.S. since 1877, as well as HIST 1301.

- Too many senior sociology majors had low average rubric scores on “understanding professional literature” in their research papers. While students had demonstrated improved writing skills, they had not demonstrated proficient use of the professional literature. Program faculty decided to restructure the senior seminar to enhance the focus on understanding professional sociological literature. In addition, it was determined that only full-time faculty would teach this course. The first part of the seminar is now devoted to literature review, which includes locating the research problem through reading, taking notes on research articles, and writing the literature review. The second part of the seminar is now devoted to doing a qualitative or limited quantitative study related to the student's literature review. Future assessments will be conducted to determine the impact of this program change.

In addition to using assessment results for internal improvement, TAMIU representatives have shared their experiences with external groups and other institutions have invited TAMIU representatives to present at workshops and seminars. For instance, TAMIU collaborated with other BEAMS institutions in the writing of a practice brief titled “Strengthening Writing across the Curriculum,” which outlined how “strengthening the writing component across an institution's curriculum can ultimately result in increased student engagement and success.” Other examples include presentations at the SACS-COC on the university's assessment process and presentations at the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities by faculty and students on student writing. Future presentations on the QEP as well as the Project INTEGRATE AIER process are planned.

## Next Steps

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According to one administrator, TAMIU has “made a very good start on assessment” and has “people to continue the work.” Still, there is much to be done. TAMIU is striving to become more transparent to both its internal and external audiences about its current assessment activities as well as about its use of evidence of student learning for institutional improvement. With this emphasis on improving student learning, students are the primary beneficiaries of assessment conducted on campus. To fulfill this purpose for assessment at the institution, TAMIU works hard to evolve and stay current in the field of student learning outcomes assessment.

Several external pressures will shape how assessment is done at TAMIU in the future. As part of The Texas A&M University System, TAMIU has to be responsive to system initiatives. At the same time, TAMIU can customize to some degree these initiatives to mission and students served. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) recently mandated—beginning in fall 2014—the assessment and evaluation of six core objectives designated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) as Essential Learning Outcomes in its **LEAP** report: critical thinking skills, communication skills, empirical and quantitative skills, teamwork, personal responsibility, and social responsibility.

In addition, TAMIU is participating in the LEAP Texas Initiative, a voluntary coalition of institutions of higher education vying for Texas to be designated a “LEAP State” by AAC&U. The institutions seeking this designation are pursuing three goals:

1. Leverage the new core curriculum for the overall improvement of undergraduate education;
2. Create a capacity for interinstitutional collaboration in robust and authentic assessment; and
3. Embed high-impact practices in the undergraduate curriculum.

Finally, the Texas legislature recently issued a statewide initiative to connect K–12 through the university system, which will more than likely involve curriculum alignment activities and survey work. Therefore, many of TAMIU's next steps in its assessment work will likely be influenced by its external environment.

Although the AIER process is established, some interviewees acknowledged that there are still opportunities to increase the efficiency of the process. The AIER process “facilitates the documentation of assessment results and actions taken for continuous improvement, as well as the need for additional resources,” according to an administrator. As such, this process is becoming more important as deans “rely on AIER to make a case for more resources” toward improving curricular practices as well as student learning. One initiative underway is to look at assessment at a more granular level through the AIER process. Administrators also want more research about the effectiveness of the documentation management system. One administrator stated, “While it [Digital Measures] has done a tremendous job of customizing our reporting and repository needs; in order to effectively document our processes, we are continuously looking for additional options that best align with our needs.”

As stated earlier, faculty acknowledgement of the importance of assessing student learning outcomes and implementation is key if the assessment process is to work effectively on campus. TAMIU has recognized the role that faculty play in promoting and enhancing the assessment of student learning outcomes in their classrooms and seeks to continue supporting and incentivizing this work.

Describing assessment at TAMIU, one administrator called it complex and consisting of several moving parts including students, faculty, course materials, programs, and the community at large. Historically, it has been hard to see how these moving parts could come together; however, through the creation of processes like Project INTEGRATE and AIER, the moving parts are becoming more intertwined. Resistance has been low to the integration of new processes and programs, an administrator noted, because the question driving assessment at TAMIU is not “Are we doing our jobs and how do we make it better?” Instead, the institution is asking “Are our students learning and understanding why we are assessing?”

## Lessons from TAMIU

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1. Developing effective assessment processes takes committed “assessment champions” and time.
2. Support from administrators who have been involved with assessment and a faculty steering committee help motivate faculty and staff to engage in and stay engaged with assessment.
3. While state-initiated assessment and accreditation requirements continue to drive assessment activity, institutions can leverage these opportunities to ensure that assessment processes are developed and integrated to further student learning.
4. Openness, accessibility of information in central locations, and sharing of practices are instrumental in integrating a culture of assessment on campus.
5. Effective assessment requires an understanding of students and their needs, the campus context, and the institution’s educational and assessment goals.

## 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.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001. He served again as Interim President of the University of Illinois in 2010.

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