Assessment *in* Practice

Trekking Towards Sustainable Excellence Through Systematic Outcomes Assessment

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In an age of greater accountability coupled with shrinking state and federal appropriations for higher education, post-secondary institutions across the country face increasing demands to provide evidence of student learning and institutional effectiveness. This article advances a framework and approach to outcomes assessment that has proven to be effective in promoting and advancing institutional effectiveness while demonstrating compliance with accountability standards.

INTRODUCTION

Institutional effectiveness and accountability within the postsecondary context have received much attention over the past decade. These are increasingly important national issues believed to have been spurred by the rising cost of the post-secondary experience, less than desirable retention and graduation rates, concerns by employers that graduates do not possess the requisite knowledge, skills and disposition to make an immediate contribution to the workplace, and questions about the quality of learning and value that higher education provides to students (Alexander, 2000; Kelchen, 2018; Liu, 2011). In response to these challenges, the U.S. Department of Education, regional accreditors, and specialized accrediting bodies have placed significant emphasis on the assessment practices and use of outcomes data for the continuous quality improvement of academic and non-academic programs at institutions of higher learning. Senior leaders and administrators are tasked with raising the quality, effectiveness, and competitiveness of their institutions while doing so in a way that demonstrates compliance with the rising tide of accountability. The result has been a significant increase in the establishment and expansion of teams and offices that are charged with facilitating systematic assessment and use of outcomes data for improvement.

Despite the increased focus and allocation of resources in this area, the authors have found that institutional effectiveness practices related to outcomes assessment and the use of data for continuous quality improvement have consistently been identified as areas of needed improvement for institutions. Based on preliminary data published by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), institutional effectiveness standards were among the top ten most frequently cited principles in the decennial reaffirmation reviews for the class of 2017 (Matveev, 2018). The report showed that in the final stage of review, 51% of the total number of findings of non-compliance that persisted to the final stage revolved around Institutional Effectiveness (Matveev, 2018).

SACSCOC standards require that regionally-monitored institutions engage in ongoing, comprehensive, and integrated research-based planning and evaluation processes that: (a) focus on institutional quality and effectiveness; and (b) incorporate a systematic review of institutional goals and outcomes consistent with its mission ("Resource Manual for the Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement," 2018). Additionally, the SACSCOC principles of accreditation require that institutions identify expected outcomes, assess the extent to which they achieve these outcomes, and provide evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas ("Resource Manual for the Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement," 2018):

a. Student learning outcomes for each of its educational programs.
b. Student learning outcomes for collegiate-level general education competencies of its undergraduate degree programs.
c. Academic and student services that support student success.

Efforts to implement effective assessment systems that are both compliant and successful in advancing priorities of institutions of higher learning frequently miss the mark. The authors of this article recently coordinated an effort to redesign an institution's assessment process and to implement a well-structured assessment system that advanced the strategic priorities of the institution while at the same time meeting all internal and external accountability standards. The goal was to implement a system characterized by the following key components:

1. Unit level goals and outcomes that are aligned with the institution's mission and strategic priorities.
2. Performance targets and measures that are aligned to strategically-defined milestones.
3. A system of analysis, outcomes reporting, and flow of information regarding results between senior and unit leaders.
4. Mechanisms for documentation of the use of assessment results for improvement at all levels of institutional operation.
5. A process for follow-up to determine the impact of improvement actions.
6. Documented use of long-term assessment outcome results for refining the institutional strategic priorities.

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7. Plan for quality assurance and continuous improvement of assessment processes and practices.

The authors worked with key institutional stakeholders to design the resulting process which integrates institutional effectiveness assessment planning and strategic planning for the institution. Although each of the authors now lead assessment and institutional effectiveness efforts at other institutions, the model that was designed and implemented is still in use at the institution to this day. It serves as a model for effective assessment planning and reporting and continues to meet and exceed all accountability standards. What follows is a description of the core elements of the model that was designed. The uniqueness of this model lies not in the cyclic assessment process design, but instead in the integration of the process into a context of strategic planning and institutional effectiveness operation.

ALIGNMENT OF STRATEGIC PRIORITIES TO THE ASSESSMENT PROCESS

In order for an integrated system for institutional effectiveness and assessment to work, the college/university mission and vision must be understood not only by faculty and staff, but also by students and the community it serves at large (Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996; Harrison & Braxton, 2018). The mission and vision statement are the cornerstone on which institutions are built, and as such, should drive everything that happens within. The mission statement describes the institutions' fundamental purpose for existence. Designing an institutional effectiveness framework for outcomes assessment with alignment to strategic priorities should then logically commence with a focus on the mission. The mission statement drives institutional strategic priorities which then influences the strategic priorities at the college/school/division levels. Strategic priorities should reflect the things that are important to the institution (i.e., students, graduates, faculty, administrators, employers, funders etc.). The priorities should also account for quality assurance, governance, and aspirational goals. The assessment process should then be leveraged as a tool to monitor and document progress towards the accomplishment of strategic priorities. This process supports institutional effectiveness which then moves the institution closer to the realization of institutional priorities in fulfillment of its mission (Refer to Figure 1 for a graphical representation of the framework for integrated outcomes assessment).

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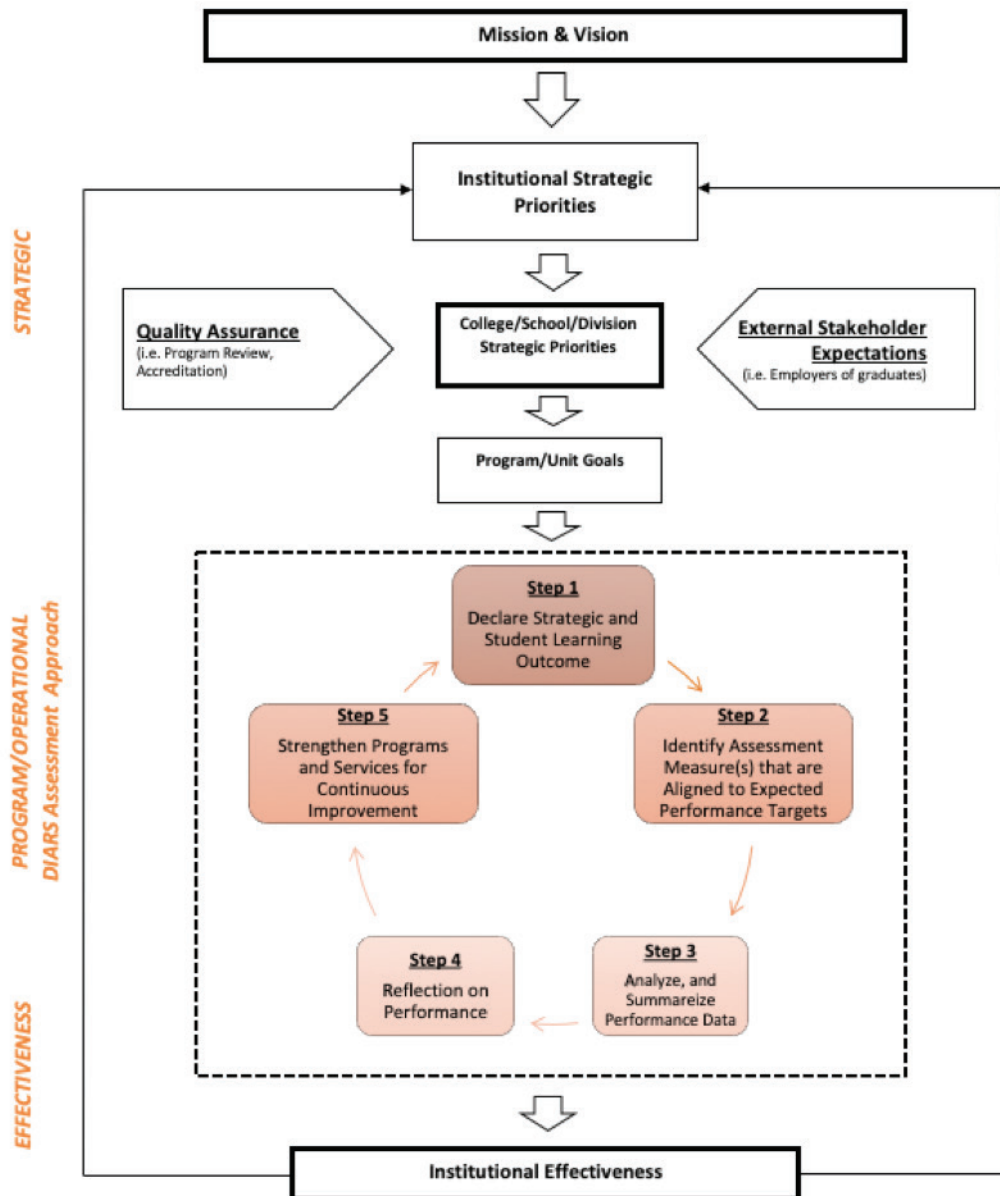
Mission & Vision

Institutional Strategic Priorities

STRATEGIC

Quality Assurance
(i.e. Program Review, Accreditation)

College/School/Division Strategic Priorities

External Stakeholder Expectations
(i.e. Employers of graduates)

Program/Unit Goals

PROGRAM/OPERATIONAL
DIARS Assessment Approach

Step 1
Declare Strategic and Student Learning Outcome

Step 5
Strengthen Programs and Services for Continuous Improvement

Step 2
Identify Assessment Measure(s) that are Aligned to Expected Performance Targets

Step 4
Reflection on Performance

Step 3
Analyze, and Summareize Performance Data

EFFECTIVENESS

Institutional Effectiveness

Figure 1. Institutional Effectiveness Framework for Outcomes Assessment

The Institutional Framework for Outcomes Assessment situates the cyclic assessment process with which many professionals are familiar within the frame of strategic planning and institution effectiveness monitoring in alignment with the mission and vision of the institution. The system is also fortified by the integration of quality assurance practices and balanced by the infusion of external stakeholder expectations. These elements of the framework promote a culture of ongoing assessment that transcends compliance with accreditation standards. It ensures that unit-level goals and outcomes are aligned to strategic success and that assessment reporting at the unit level is attributable to the overall effectiveness of the institution in advancing its mission.

OVERVIEW OF THE DIARS ASSESSMENT APPROACH

The cyclic assessment process represented in Figure 1 was named the DIARS Assessment Approach.[1] DIARS is a five-step approach to outcomes assessment designed to support meaningful assessment where each letter in the acronym **DIARS** represents a step in the assessment process (Figure 2). Following is an overview of DIARS.

Step 1: **D**eclare Strategic and Student Learning Outcomes that are aligned to institutional Mission/Goals/Strategic Priorities.

Step 2: **I**dentify Assessment Measure(s) that are aligned to **expected performance targets**.

Step 3: **A**nalyze, and summarize performance data.

Step 4: **R**eflect on Performance in relation to the **outcome, expected** and **actual results**.

Step 5: **S**trengthen Programs and Services for Continuous Improvement.
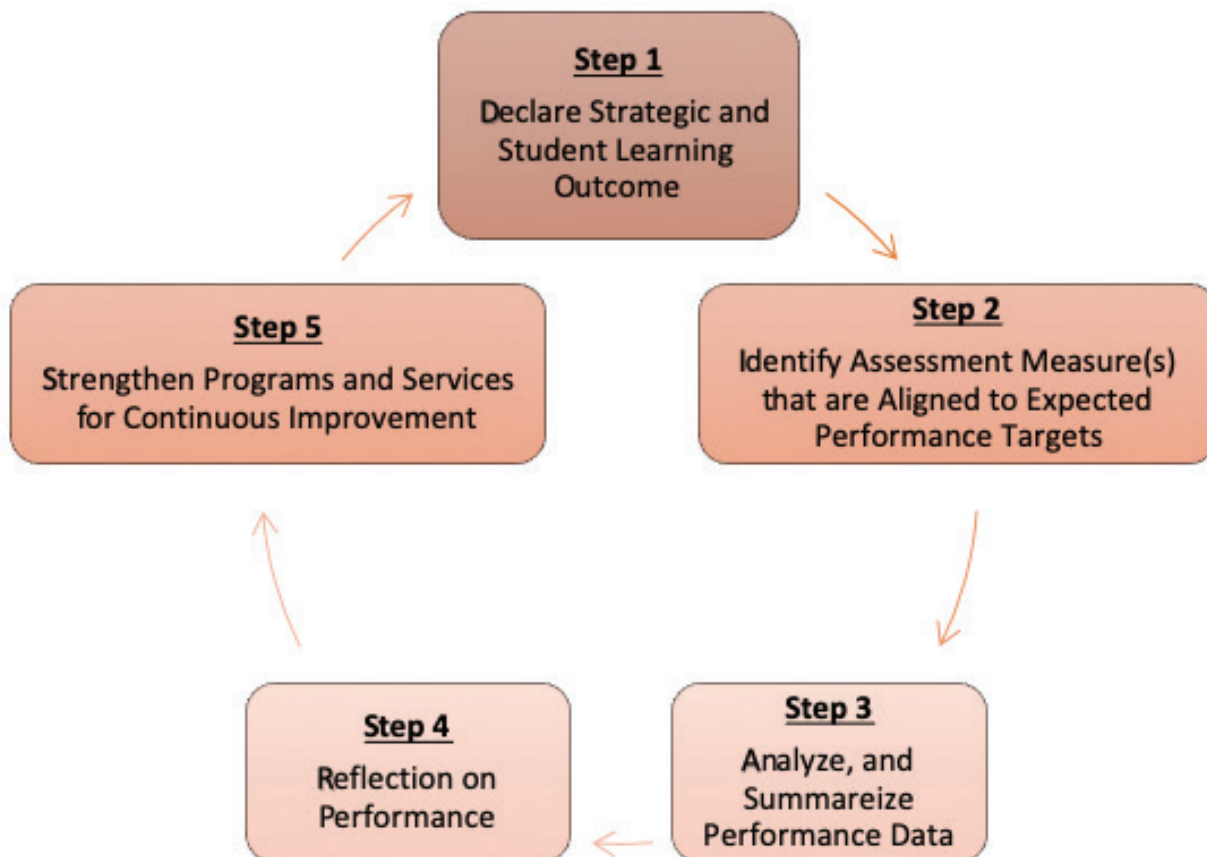

F*igure 2*. DIARS Assessment Approach

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[1]The name of the approach to assessment was modified to protect the anonymity of the institution at which it was developed and implemented.

While this approach to outcomes assessment is similar to that used by many institutions and published in the assessment literature (Nichols & Nichols, 2005; Suskie, 2018), there are some distinguishing elements. The approach to assessment was explicitly designed to bridge the gap between strategic planning and outcomes assessment. Step 1 of DIARS emphasizes the alignment of outcomes to strategic priorities as represented in Figure 2 and through the assessment process, supports the monitoring and documentation of progress made towards strategic and institutional priorities. It should be noted that the extent to which outcomes are achieved is difficult to determine if acceptable thresholds for performance are not established. In Step 2 of DIARS, unit planners identify relevant measures and declare expected performance targets for each outcome.   The analysis and summary of performance data is then conducted for each measure with actual results reported in Step 3 in alignment with targets for performance. Step 4 is unique as it emphasizes the reflection on performance in relation to the outcome, expected, and actual results. The reflection process should not be an individual responsibility, but a group effort that includes key stakeholders who are involved in the assessment process. Guiding questions in the reflection process include the following:

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1. Were target performance levels achieved?
2. If yes, Why? If not, Why not?
3. What must be done to take performance to acceptable and/or aspirational levels?

Step 4 in the DIARS assessment approach helps to stimulate deep conversations that support continuous improvement initiatives, and as such, contributes to what is reported in Step 5. Meaningful outcomes assessment requires programs/units to continuously evaluate, plan, allocate resources and to implement new approaches, as appropriate, to move performance to levels of sustainable excellence.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ASSESSMENT PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

To achieve sustainable excellence in student learning and operations, institutions of higher education must also apply quality process reviews to their assessment infrastructure. Quality assurance, however, is often an overlooked element of the assessment processes used by many schools, colleges, and universities. *Assessment of assessment* (meta-assessment) which refers to the evaluation of the assessment process (Orv, 1992) and engaging personnel who are involved in the assessment process, is key to the effectiveness of the DIARS approach. The authors and key contributors to the design of the DIARS process situated the assessment model within a quality assurance framework characterized by the following:

1. The employment of a core team of full-time experts with training in assessment processes and systems development.
2. Clearly identified and defined components of the assessment process that are to be reviewed and monitored.
3. A designated team of academic content/discipline experts responsible for the facilitation of assessment planning and reporting for each

program/unit (assessment coordinators).

4. A training plan for unit leaders, assessment coordinators, and other key stakeholders.
5. A systematic review and approval of unit plans and reports (including the review of goals/outcomes, and success benchmarks for alignment to unit-specific and institutional strategic priorities) by senior leaders (chairs, deans, VPs, etc.).
6. Formal scoring or quality rating rubric for use by core assessment experts and/or broad-based stakeholder committee to evaluate units' assessment planning and process execution.
7. Assessment accountability framework that is adopted and used by senior leaders to evaluate unit leadership and to gauge the effectiveness of unit operations.

While the authors believe that these seven elements are the markers of a comprehensive assessment quality assurance approach, it is suggested that, at a minimum, institutional assessment professionals adopt and employ processes and procedures: 1) to monitor the quality of assessment plans and reports; 2) to gauge the level of fidelity to assessment plans and action plans for improvement; 3) to document the use of results to improve institutional outcomes and operations; and 4) to evaluate the frequency and quality of engagement in assessment processes by key stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Assessment is a cumulative process, one that does not end but instead provides the mechanism for continuous improvement and sustainable excellence. For assessment to work, it must be integrated into the operations of the institution with support and commitment from senior leadership. Without a clear framework for institutional effectiveness and an intentional and deliberate focus on the integration of a quality assurance process, outcomes assessment runs the risk of focusing on what is easy (i.e., the path of least resistance) rather than that which is important in moving the institution closer to the realization of its strategic priorities and mission. The authors continue to advance this work at their respective institutions. The DIARS approach is a framework that not only allows institutions to conduct assessment in a manner that is compliant with accreditation standards, but it also promotes evidence-based, ongoing improvement of programs, services, and operations in alignment to the institution mission and strategic priorities.

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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