

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Juniata College: Faculty Led Assessment

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Juniata College

Juniata College is an independent, private, co-educational, undergraduate liberal arts college founded in 1876, located in the Allegheny Mountains of central Pennsylvania in the town of Huntingdon. With 100 faculty members and 1600 students, the institution shows its commitment to assessment of student learning in multiple ways that led to its selection as a NILOA case study site. Juniata College was identified as a case study institution for the faculty-led Center for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL Center) that champions and supports evidence-based teaching; an administration-supported accountability website that provides data and information about outcomes to multiple audiences; and the use of evidence of student learning to make improvements at the institution and individual course levels.¹

Institutional Context

Assessment at Juniata College has been underway since the 1980s, beginning with the Assessment Resource Team (ART). ART was a group of faculty which would, as one faculty member described it, “come in and do assessment for you.” ART was formed to help with accreditation issues, program review, and improvement of student learning. An example of ART assessment activities was providing assistance to a humanities faculty member in how to articulate measurable student learning goals. This was followed by the development of rubrics to determine how well students met those goals. Then, students in the course were given pre- and post-essays and faculty used the rubrics to evaluate the essays. The results showed evidence that students were making progress on achieving the stated course goals. Despite these accomplishments, ART “fizzled” on campus. After ART, one faculty member claimed that “Faculty did little systematic assessment. Or some were doing it but did not document what they found or called it something else. Nor did they document changes they made as a result of assessments.”

Today, student learning is assessed at three levels at Juniata (a) institutional, (b) program, and (c) course. As the provost stated, “We have always had a focus on student outcomes and have thought for a long time that we needed to do more than satisfaction surveys to get the whole story of student learning.” At the institutional level, surveys such as the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE), standardized tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), graduation, retention rates, and interviews are used to assess learning. Juniata College is a member

¹The data gathered for this case study involved phone interviews with four faculty members, the provost, and the Director of Institutional Planning and Research as well as a systematic review of the institutional website and analysis of documents. Interviews took place during the months of March and May 2011.

of the Council for Independent College's CLA consortium. The multi-year effort asks institutions to use evidence from the CLA to improve student learning. As a member of the consortium, Juniata has given the CLA every year since 2005. In addition, Juniata has administered NSSE every 2 to 3 years since 2000 and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey every year since 2000. For programmatic and course-specific assessments, strategies to assess learning vary and range from student interviews to alumni surveys and standardized tests. Course embedded assessments are used such as portfolios, rubrics, and pre-post essays. At the heart of the support for the course level assessment is the faculty-led SoTL Center, which is in its third year of operation.

The SoTL Center

The SoTL Center was created in 2009 by a three year grant from the Teagle Foundation. The idea for the SoTL Center emerged after a faculty member in Biology, Mike Boyle, attended a disciplinary conference where the scholarship of teaching and learning was discussed. After returning to Juniata and energized about the idea of SoTL, the Provost connected him with other interested faculty. Dr. Boyle and another faculty member attended a Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) conference where the establishment of campus centers and SoTL research were featured and came back with ideas about teaching effectiveness. Their experiences prompted the faculty to ask, "Why don't we have one of these [SoTL Center] things here?" As a small teaching focused college, Juniata relied on the faculty as "people that care about teaching" even if they did not have specific training in pedagogy. The SoTL Center would allow for a commitment to teaching to grow, given that it provides the training and analysis of teaching practices to foster enhanced teaching effectiveness. Reflecting on the impetus of the SoTL Center as a faculty developed and led initiative, a faculty member involved stated, "it was so important that two of us went to the conference in order to keep each other energized and to have someone else to talk to about it." Four faculty members came together and wrote a Teagle grant to start the SoTL Center, which would focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning and also help faculty assess their own work in the classroom. A faculty member involved with the SoTL Center said that "SoTL is assessment the way faculty want to do it."

Mission and Design

The mission of the **SoTL Center** is to promote professional development related to evidence-based practice in higher education. As defined on the website, "SoTL is the systematic investigation and reporting of issues that influence student learning and how faculty use what they learn to inform teaching practices." The SoTL Center employs a unique model of leadership through a three-person rotating board. Interested faculty apply to be director of the SoTL Center and commit to three years of involvement. In their first year they are the director designate, in the second year they are the director and the third year they serve as the past director. Directors assume primary responsibilities for center programming and for the administrative work needed to keep the center operating smoothly. The director designate and past director assist with programming and all three are available to provide technical support for SoTL projects being conducted by other faculty. During one's three year tour, faculty are expected to execute a SoTL research project with the goal of publication and/or conference presentation.

When possible, board members supervise students involved in assisting with SoTL research. Participating faculty receive release time from teaching. As director designate they receive one course release from teaching, as director they receive a half time teaching release, and as past director they receive one course release. This model was developed as a deliberate attempt to distribute SoTL expertise across the campus. As a past director stated, “What we wanted to do was essentially spread evidence-based teaching and scholarly teaching and the literature throughout the campus and thought that one good way to do that would be through a rotating director position.”

Activities

The SoTL Center hosts brown bags, where lunch is paid for by the institution, and topics include discussion of current faculty SoTL projects, teaching and learning literature, and areas such as writing assignments, portfolios, self-assessment and teaching online. In addition to brown bags, there are summer grants for SoTL projects, and a community of teaching excellence for non-tenured faculty to discuss teaching in a safe environment. Moreover, the center has learning communities, “broadly defined” each year which are groups of faculty who come together to informally learn more about a chosen topic. The learning communities involve faculty in the reading of a book on the designated topic with the most recent being on teaching portfolios.² Faculty then meet to discuss the book and a speaker is brought in to provide further insight on the topic. From their involvement in the learning community on portfolios, currently 15-17 faculty members are involved in developing benchmarks or inquiry portfolios in one or more of their courses. Overall, participation of faculty members in SoTL activities has been large with every department on campus represented at one brown bag at least over the last two years. In addition, roughly 60% of the faculty have been involved in one or more activities of the Center since its inception.

The SoTL Center assesses the effectiveness of its efforts through participation numbers, faculty SoTL publications and presentations, and a survey that addresses attitudes, knowledge, perceptions, and engagement with SoTL. The survey was conducted in 2009 to serve as a baseline for comparison and will be administered again in the next year or so to examine how perceptions have changed over time.³

SoTL Center and Assessment

The SoTL Center’s role in student learning assessment is, as one faculty member involved in the center claimed

It really turns the assessment issue into something that is controlled by the faculty members that are teaching the courses so they can say, “Well I have questions about what my students are learning; how do I assess that?” It turns assessment from a very top down process that has political overtones to one that is really rooted and faculty-centered on questions of: what are my students learning, how can I improve their learning and what questions do I have about this process?

² Those involved in the learning community on portfolios read: Bernstein, D., Burnett, A.N., Goodburn, A. and Savory, P. (2006). *Making teaching and learning visible: Course portfolios and the peer review of teaching*. Bolton, MA: Anker.

³ The survey was adapted from one developed by Kathleen McKinney at Illinois State University. Those interested in learning more about the original survey should contact her via email: kmckinne@ilstu.edu

Through helping faculty assess areas of student learning identified within their courses, the SoTL Center supports evidence-based teaching. Faculty involved with the center state that the SoTL Center “tries to continually bring them [faculty] back to say, well what does the literature say about this and if you have some anecdotal experience that contradicts the literature then that might be a great opportunity to collect some data and to test something interesting.” The center fosters effective teaching and assessment of student learning by making assessment related to the scholarship of teaching and learning. This connection has allowed faculty to discuss issues of teaching across the campus. A board member of the SoTL Center stated,

Faculty now recognize that the problem the physicists have is not that much different from the problems their colleagues teaching literature courses have. So we now recognize that there are skills or competencies that basically we would like all of our students to have irrespective of their major and we can ask as a collective – What are the things that we do that promote the acquisition of these skills?

In one project currently under way, faculty are engaged with a SoTL project on campus that examines the impact of student attendance at events, such as lectures or concerts, on their learning. Students in the Freshman Writing Seminar are divided into three experimental groups: one section that does not require students to attend any events, a second section that attends five events of any kind, and a third section that attends five lecture type events only. Students will then be measured on several items including written essays on their event attendance, pre- and post-tests of social identity, and other measures of student learning. Faculty involved with the project stated, “most schools do it [have students attend events] on the assumption that it is good for you, that just going to them [events] is good for you whether or not you have any sort of obligatory involvement in doing anything after attending.” This study examines whether that is true. The SoTL project also involves students in the data analysis, specifically content analysis of written work.

Administrative Support of Assessment

Even though the SoTL Center had its impetus and sustainment within the faculty at Juniata, administrative support was vital to its success. Administrative support of assessment of student learning at Juniata begins with the president and is reflected throughout the organization. For instance, the provost’s office provided “behind the scenes” support for the SoTL Center through buying faculty lunches at all the brown bags, providing the center with a centralized location, and committing to fund the center when the grant ends. As one faculty member stated, “faculty need to know their time is valuable so providing wine and cheese or lunch signals this to faculty.” In addition, SoTL was included in the strategic plan for the institution and the provost attends brown bags whenever he can. Providing release time to faculty involved with the center, sabbaticals for those conducting SoTL research, as well as the general commitment and interest in SoTL has legitimized SoTL research on campus. The provost was also influential in connecting faculty interested in SoTL across the institution and supporting faculty to attend the conferences that led to the creation of the center. The administration has also endorsed the idea that SoTL research is compelling evidence of faculty development on par with disciplinary research in the faculty evaluation process.

A faculty member involved with the SoTL Center claimed that “administration took a hands off approach by providing support but not direction so this [SoTL Center] became a faculty driven group.” The location of the SoTL Center is in the library, which was space the provost designated.

This location is important, as a SoTL board member described it, because it is “central, not administrative, in essence neutral ground where no one claims ownership, but it is accessible to everyone.” The SoTL Center completed its last year of Teagle funding in 2011; however, the institution has committed to continue funding the center. In fact, the SoTL Center has been renamed after the provost to become the James J. Lakso Center for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The administration provided guidance, resources, and support, but the institutional leaders have a delicate role of, as one administrator stated, “ensuring that assessment is getting done and supported but not stepping on toes and making faculty feel like it is a mandate.” Beyond the support of the SoTL Center, the president developed and implemented the idea for an accountability website to enhance institutional transparency of student learning outcomes.

Accountability Website

The idea for the Juniata College's Just the Facts website came from the president of the institution and any feedback on the website goes directly to him. His idea, as a staff member described it was that,

We really shouldn't be saying things about ourselves that aren't true and one of the tests of that is to be more transparent about things we said. So, we published our results and if we were saying things about our students or ourselves that weren't true we would hear about it.

The user-friendly website is aimed at a broad audience. The website addresses topics such as: students, academics, cost, outcomes, classroom environment, and strategic plan. In addition, results of student learning outcomes, from assessment activities such as NSSE and CLA, are shared and incorporated throughout. If survey results are posted, there is information on what the survey entails, what year it was given, benchmarks, contact information to acquire the full report, and text as well as graphical representation of the results. As an administrator commented, “Juniata is a data rich institution and is intentionally transparent, it is part of the culture. We don't want to hide - we want to put everything out there.”

Embed in Program Review

One way of ensuring that assessment of student learning outcomes is being done is to incorporate assessment into program review. Every six years, programs go through a review process which involves a self-study including assessment data. Once the self-study is approved by a faculty committee referred to as the Academic Planning and Assessment Committee (APAC), an external team reviews the self-study and writes a report. The completed packet goes to the provost and president who sit down with representatives of the program and together develop a memo of understanding where programs outline what they would like to accomplish prior to the next review. The assessment plan that is part of the review process requires that programs have at least three different methods for measuring student learning within the program. In addition, a mid-year review cycle allows administrators to touch base with the programs in regard to their progress on the memo of understanding and to address assessment of student learning.

Use of Evidence of Student Learning

An institution-wide example of the use of evidence of student learning involves writing at Juniata. Faculty were not entirely satisfied with students' writing so they looked at the results of the first CLA

test given in 2005 and found that their students were not doing as well as expected. In addition, they turned to NSSE results and discovered that their students were not as engaged with writing as comparable institutions. Their perceptions as well as the results led faculty to change the writing curriculum. As a faculty member involved in the process commented,

We thought that we had a writing intensive curriculum and therefore our students must be good writers. Students were doing a lot of writing, but they weren't being assessed on it or improving it. They were just doing a lot of writing. We thought that because students were doing a lot of writing that it followed that they were better writers, but when we looked at the results this was not the case.

Faculty spent time discussing the results of the tests in a forum convened by the Academic Planning and Assessment Committee. They then took action as a collective group and over the course of four years made changes to the college writing seminar. Writing goals were added and courses went from 3 to 4 credit hours so additional writing components could be built into the courses. During the change period, student satisfaction with the writing course was high, but the institution did not yet have evidence that students were learning. The second component of the changes involves a commitment of institutional resources to do workshops for all faculty on writing as well as discussion on how to measure the writing goals. Writing across the curriculum underwent a major restructuring and the changes are currently being rolled out with a new set of standards and specific goals from faculty in writing. This is an ongoing process with the redesigned courses being offered in Fall 2011.

To further help facilitate the use of evidence of student learning, the Institutional Research office created an Institutional Effectiveness Council. The purpose of the Council, as the Director of Institutional Planning and Research outlines, is to

get data out of the IR office and into the hands of people that need it. We collect data and want to ensure it is not just getting shelved but getting put out there, that we are getting key people into the room to determine what data we need to gather and what we will use it for.

Next Steps

Assessment of student learning at Juniata is, as one administrator described it, “engrained in our culture.” However, there is still area to grow and much to be done. The provost stated that:

We must continue to move forward with the idea of transparency and focus on the notion that it is OK and in fact desirable to talk about what faculty are trying to accomplish. Understanding what worked and what didn't and when and how to get help from other people is important. Recognizing and acknowledging when you failed to accomplish the goals you set is not necessarily a bad thing. This is not about blame but about rethinking approaches so a really good teacher becomes one that helps students achieve the outcomes they have set for them.

Even small steps can move an institution forward. According to a faculty member involved with the SoTL Center, “Any procedure, process, activity that makes faculty think hard about what they are trying to do, what they want to accomplish, is good. The more explicitly you make faculty think about it, the better their courses are going to be whether they collect any data at all.”

Lessons from Juniata College

1. Emphasize that assessment is a kind of scholarly inquiry as featured in the literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning. Faculty have been trained in research and scholarship, but not necessarily in teaching. Focusing on their interests and questions within their courses may help achieve faculty buy-in for assessment. For additional information on faculty and assessment, see [Pat Hutchings Occasional Paper](#).
2. Support from the administration is vital to encouraging and supporting student learning outcomes assessment. The support can take the form of meals, course release, space, and encouragement.
3. Connect assessment activities in other efforts already underway on campus, such as program review.
4. Involve many around campus in conversations about assessment activities and the results, including faculty, administrators and students.
5. Understand that it takes time for thoughtful analysis of assessment information and the improvements that evolve from the actionable items created after the analysis.

NILOA Examples of Good Assessment Practice

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, parents, 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

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008. It is funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, 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 reviewed 725 institution websites for learning outcomes assessment transparency from March 2009 to August 2009.
- 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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