

Assessment *in* Practice

Actively Engaging Undergraduate Students in the Assessment Process

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Oftentimes we think of assessment in terms of how are we going to assess student learning. Focusing on developing a culture of assessment, Bowling Green State University (BGSU) wanted to expand this mindset and more intentionally involve students in the assessment process. While graduate students across campus were involved with assessment practices, there was an opportunity for undergraduate students to participate on a deeper level. For students involved in the assessment process, there is documented evidence of increased engagement and awareness (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014), enhancing their understanding of learning (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016), and increasing diversity of voices in the teaching and learning process (Felten et al., 2013). Intentionally involving students in assessment is beneficial not only for students, but also for institutions who gain insight and a student perspective about learning, development, and engagement (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014).

STUDENT LEARNING ANALYST (SLA) PROGRAM

BGSU explored how other institutions were involving students in the assessment process, such as the [UCLA Undergraduate Research Partnership Initiative](#) and [North Carolina A&T State University Wabash-Provost Scholars Program](#). BGSU modified and adapted various practices, and made its program a paid student position irrespective of major. The Student Learning Analyst (SLA) program seeks students who are curious by nature and interested in learning, and there is no requirement for previous assessment experience or knowledge. The goal was to hire students from a variety of majors and class standings, so students could continue in the position and train upcoming cohorts. A byproduct of the SLA experience is that these students informally talked about student learning and assessment with peers

in their various programs. Additionally, BGSU was intentional about using best practice, such as the 2011 [National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment \(NILOA\) Transparency Framework](#), and wanted to share assessment data with various constituents.

In the academic year 2016-2017, BGSU piloted the project to actively engage undergraduate students in the assessment process and involve them in the analysis of learning. Through this pilot, the Office of Academic Assessment hired a group of eight undergraduate students from various majors and class standings. These students were given the title of Student Learning Analyst (SLA), and their focus was to gather information on student learning experiences by designing assessment projects to investigate topics focused on learning. The SLAs not only designed the assessment projects, they also implemented these projects, analyzed the data, created summary reports, and presented findings to the campus community.

The SLAs did not have prior assessment knowledge, so they participated in trainings on data collection approaches (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods), with extensive apprenticeship-style training on developing and facilitating focus groups, data analysis and coding, report writing, and data visualization methods. For scheduling purposes, the SLAs were divided into two teams. For the pilot, the expectations were that each team would complete one assessment project for the academic year. However, the SLAs exceeded expectations and each team completed one assessment project per semester. During the first semester, one SLA team investigated students' expectations for learning, while the other SLA team investigated student engagement in the classroom. Both teams used a series of focus groups to gather assessment data. During the second semester, the SLAs investigated areas aligning with the university's National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results—reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, and higher order learning—through a series of focus groups. The SLAs presented their findings at the university-wide Teaching and Learning Fair and also met with a variety of campus constituents.

Based on the success of the SLA pilot, the program has and will continue. In the second year, the SLAs explored the topics of quantitative literacy, diversity and inclusion, academic honesty, and capstone experiences. In the third year, the SLAs investigated high quality teaching, innovation in the classroom, experiential learning, and student success. In the fourth year, the SLAs examined belonging at BGSU and students' perceptions of writing. Visit the BGSU [Office of Academic Assessment](#) website's [Student Learning Analysts](#) page for more details about these assessment projects.

BENEFITS

Implementing a program involving students with the assessment process takes time and resources. It takes time to develop the program and to continually train students. It takes resources in terms of knowledgeable staff to train and mentor undergraduate students, and funds to pay the students for their effort. However, BGSU has seen firsthand how involving students in the assessment process is beneficial and worth the investment. One of the best outcomes is that students

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take ownership of their projects. For example, during the pilot program, one SLA asked if she could create an infographic to visually represent the data in addition to the executive summary and report. This was an innovative way of representing the data and it has become the standard for all SLA projects (see Figure 1).

By having students develop the assessment project, SLAs are able to speak the language of their peers and offer an unfiltered perspective on learning topics. As a result, students were able to provide their perspective on the topic and engage more fully in the process.

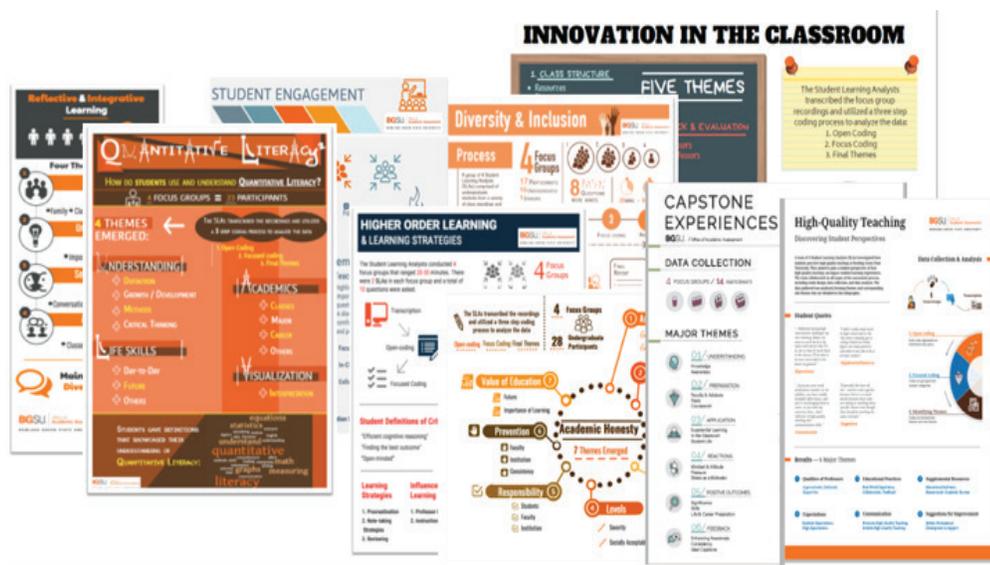


Figure 1. A Sampling of SLA Infographics

Furthermore, by having students develop the assessment project, SLAs are able to speak the language of their peers and offer an unfiltered perspective on learning topics. During the focus groups, the SLAs engage students in deep conversations that would be near impossible if a faculty or staff member was conducting the focus group. For the quantitative literacy project, the SLAs collaborated with a faculty member working on a grant and developed questions that were on their peer's level and meaningful to them. As a result, students were able to provide their perspective on the topic and engage more fully in the process.

The SLAs continue to work with other departments across campus on assessment projects, such as the Center for Faculty Excellence, the University Writing Program, and the Division of Diversity and Belonging. Results from the assessment projects have been incorporated into professional development sessions and materials offered by the Center for Faculty Excellence to help further a student-focused mindset. Additionally, students can help the university make meaning of institutional data. For example, BGSU administers the NSSE bi-annually and there were some issues warranting further exploration. The SLAs designed focus groups to explore these topics and gained great insight into the data.

The university is not the only area that benefits from the SLA program; students also gain value from this experience. The SLAs are able to take the assessment knowledge they gain and apply it to their future careers and/or graduate school. While the SLA program focuses on assessment, it also enhances students' teamwork, critical thinking, communication, project management, and leadership skills. SLAs work both independently and in teams to develop and implement

their assessment projects. They write high-quality assessment reports and executive summaries and present their findings to the campus community via presentations. Students make connections with assessment staff who serve as mentors not only in the assessment process, but also as connections to the campus community. Additionally, continuing SLAs have trained new SLAs demonstrating key leadership skills. Student participants in the assessment projects also benefit because they have an opportunity to voice their experience with learning on various topics. In fact, there are students who have participated in focus groups across the different semesters, and they expressed their appreciation in being actively involved in the assessment process at BGSU.

ENGAGING STUDENTS AT YOUR INSTITUTION

There is not a one size fits all for engaging students in the assessment process. Institutions need to identify what will work best for them. Starting with a manageable number of students and identifying how they will compensate students for their efforts are recommended initial steps. Institutions should consider involving students throughout the process: topic selection, assessment design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Training is essential and an apprenticeship model where students are guided along the way and practice all aspects of the assessment model is worth the time and effort. The key question to keep in mind is “How will you make this a worthwhile experience for your students?” and the institution will greatly benefit.

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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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