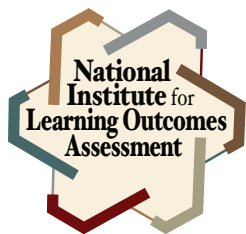


September 2020

# St. Edward's University:

## Rethinking General Education to Support Social Justice

Matthew DeSantis



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St. Edward's University is a Catholic, liberal arts university and Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) of approximately 3,700 students located in Austin, Texas. The Congregation of Holy Cross founded St. Edward's in 1877, encouraging students to think critically, act ethically, embrace diversity, strive for social justice, and recognize their responsibility to the world community. Today we continue to draw from our founders' tradition of "whole person education," inspiring and empowering students to embrace the opportunities and challenges of an interconnected world and to actively promote justice and peace.

Within the context of our founding and mission, equitable assessment at St. Edward's is best understood in terms of investigating equity in learning to ensure that all student populations are demonstrating proficiency in general education and programmatic learning outcomes. The focus on equitable learning has always been of particular interest to faculty, staff, and administrators at St. Edward's, but until recently, it had proven difficult to interrogate potential learning gaps due to curricular construction and a lack of institutional data connected to assessment results.

## General Education Renewal: Setting the Stage of a New Assessment Model

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In 2014, St. Edward's began a general education renewal process in an effort to revamp a curriculum that had been in place for over two decades. The **previous general education curriculum** was highly-scaffolded and had several positive features, including a strong connection to the mission of the university, but there were some drawbacks, particularly in the area of assessment. Due to the highly-scaffolded nature of the previous curriculum, all general education courses were contained within an interdisciplinary department that was comprised of mostly contingent faculty. As a result, few full-time faculty taught or participated in the assessment of the general education curriculum. The assessment that was conducted took place at the course-level with continuous improvement strategies and analysis of assessment data reflecting the same course-based approach, results of which were rarely shared with the larger university community. As a result, faculty did not find general education assessment particularly meaningful and did not see how it served to advance the mission of the university or the general education curriculum.

After a four-year renewal process, St. Edward's adopted a new general education curriculum in the fall of 2018 that continued to reflect the social justice mission of the institution while also spreading

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general education courses across the curriculum to ensure greater full-time faculty involvement. The new general education curriculum is comprised of the following areas:

#### Foundations (22 credit hours)

- o First-year Seminar
- o Writing I and II
- o Quantitative Reasoning
- o Modern Languages
- o Oral Communication

#### Content and Context (21 credit hours)

- o Natural Sciences
- o Exploring Artistic Works
- o Global Perspectives
- o Creativity and Making
- o Diverse American Perspectives
- o Studies in Theology and Religion
- o Ethics

#### Mission Markers (9 credit hours)

- o Social Identities
- o Experiential Learning for Social Justice
- o Writing Rich Course

#### Culminating Experience (3 credit hours)

The transition to a new general education curriculum provided an opportunity to reshape not only the educational experience of students at St. Edward's, but also for the assessment process to be revamped to reflect the equity and social justice mission of the university. Through constant faculty engagement, partnering with multiple offices, and leveraging new software, St. Edward's was able to transform assessment from a course-based silo to a university-level discussion that sought to engage all campus stakeholders in the development of continuous improvement strategies.

### **Transformation Process**

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The first critical step in transforming general education assessment was developing effective, measurable, and durable outcomes. The process of developing general education learning outcomes engaged faculty from every school at the university. First, the university's General Education Oversight Committee (GEOC) and General Education Renewal Committee (GERC), both of which are composed entirely of faculty, drafted a list of over 15 potential learning outcomes they felt reflected the mission of St. Edward's and the essence of the new general education curriculum. The list of potential learning outcomes was then sent out via survey to all full-time and part-time faculty. Faculty were asked to identify between six and eight outcomes they felt would best serve the new curriculum and were invited to enter their own outcomes for consideration. The survey achieved a 60% response rate, which was evenly divided across the various schools. At the conclusion of the survey GEOC and GERC reviewed the results,

which showed three distinct tiers. The first tier were outcomes with near universal approval, the second tier were outcomes that received a significant majority, and a third tier that received fewer than a third of faculty support. Based upon the results, GEOC and GERC combined some outcomes with significant overlap and arrived at the following list:

- Critical Thinking
- Intercultural Knowledge
- Communication
- Problem Solving and Innovative Thinking
- Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility
- Ethical Reasoning

The six newly-crafted outcomes were then shared again with faculty and feedback was solicited. Faculty overwhelmingly approved and the six outcomes listed above were adopted for the new general education curriculum. After the six outcomes were established, faculty teaching within each general education requirement area engaged in an extensive curriculum mapping process in which they deliberated about which selected outcomes should map to their area. At the conclusion of the mapping process, university leadership engaged faculty from across St. Edward's to develop institutional-specific rubrics using a four-point scale to assess the outcomes to ensure they reflected the university's mission. Finally, to ensure effective communication regarding assessment, each general education requirement was assigned a designated faculty coordinator who informed faculty of teaching and assessment expectations.

### **Logistic: Turning Equity Assessment from Idea to Reality**

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Simultaneous to the development of a new general education assessment structure, St. Edward's was also developing a more robust data warehouse and adopting new software that allowed for the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning (IEP) to blend and visualize data with the university's student information system. The opportunity to join assessment results with student attributes allowed for St. Edward's to investigate whether learning equity gaps existed between different student populations.

In 2019-20, St. Edward's chose to assess the outcomes of Critical Thinking and Intercultural Knowledge, which, based upon the previous mapping work done by faculty, meant the following areas would submit student artifacts for assessment:

#### Critical Thinking

- o Exploring Artistic Works
- o Global Perspectives
- o Writing I

#### Intercultural Knowledge

- o Diverse American Perspectives
- o Modern Languages

During fall 2019, the Office of Instructional Technology (OIT) partnered with IEP to ensure student artifacts were extracted from the university's Learning Management System (LMS). During that time, faculty teaching courses scheduled for assessment informed IEP staff of the name of the assignment in

the LMS and marked the dimensions the assignment met within the outcome rubric. After a systematic random sample of artifacts were extracted through the LMS, IEP staff connected the artifacts to record-level data within the student information system. In total, over 300 student artifacts would be used to assess the outcome of Critical Thinking and over 225 artifacts would be used to assess the outcome of Intercultural Knowledge. Once the artifacts were selected, IEP staff were able to align key variables such as gender, race, or Pell status to the appropriate artifact before anonymizing both the artifact and the student identification number to ensure results could not be traced back to an individual student. Anonymizing the artifacts were done for two reasons, (1) to protect student identity since artifacts were posted to an institutional shared drive during the scoring process; and (2) to remove any potential faculty bias during scoring. Faculty were not allowed to score artifacts from their own courses, but due to the size of St. Edward's, there was a strong probability that most faculty scoring artifacts would have interacted with at least a few of the students whose artifacts were used. Anonymizing artifacts eliminated those concerns and ensured all faculty scorers reviewed the artifacts without preconceived notions regarding the quality of student work.

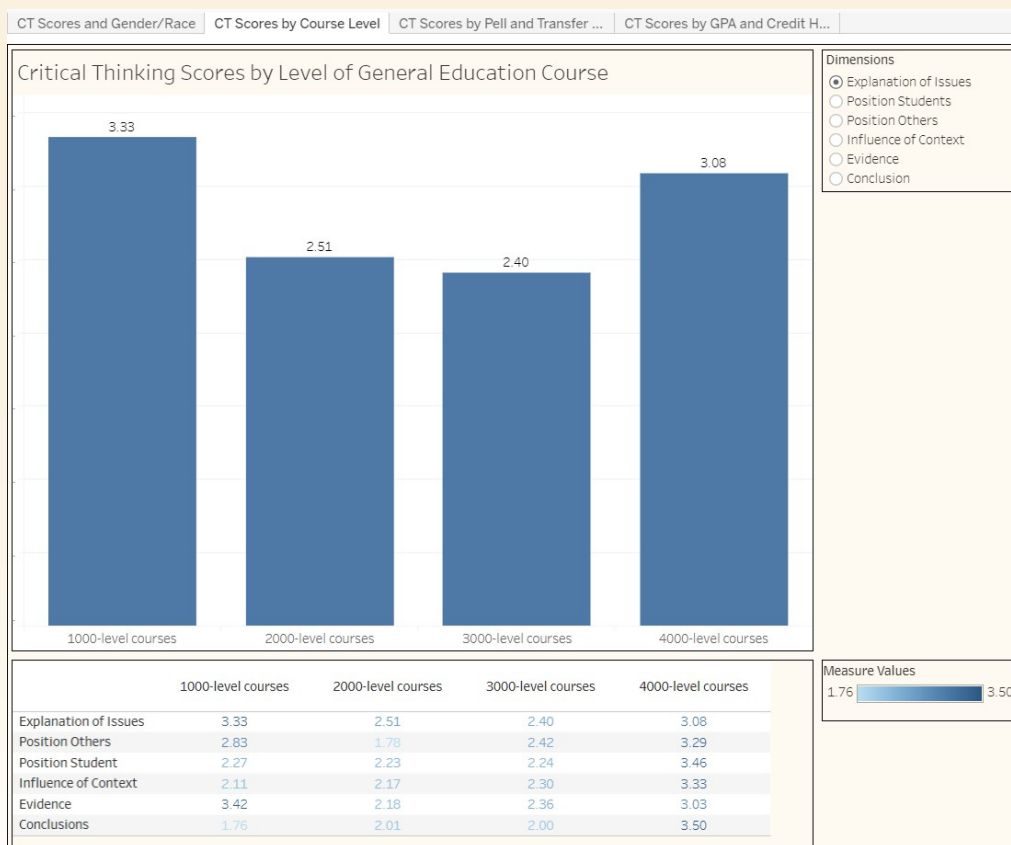
During spring 2020, faculty volunteered to score artifacts and went through a three-hour norming process in which they discussed the university-specific, four-point rubrics and scored three artifacts while engaging in guided discussions. After the norming session, faculty completed scoring their allotted artifacts by the end of the semester, at which point IEP staff connected the scores with the anonymized data and built visualizations that showed scores by different student populations, such as race/ethnicity, gender, transfer status, Pell status, credit hours earned, and GPA. The dashboards were shared with key stakeholders before being shared with the broader campus community.

An example of two of the dashboards can be found below:

Figure 1: St. Edward's University Critical Thinking Scores by Ethnicity



Figure 2: St. Edward's University Critical Thinking Scores by Course Level



The dashboards allowed users to toggle between different student attributes for various rubric dimensions for Critical Thinking and Intercultural Knowledge. Additionally, the dashboards are highly flexible and easily edited, which proved extremely useful once they were shared with the faculty who wanted to see different types of segmented analysis and intersectionality by race, gender, or Pell status.

By shifting the focus from course-based assessment to equity-based assessment, faculty approached the results in a more holistic way. The shift to equity-based assessment meant that rather than being concerned with how students scored in their class, faculty were focusing on systemic reasons for why different populations over- or under-performed. The macro-level focus fostered a healthy discussion in which faculty asked critical questions that could be applied across schools and disciplines.

## Results

As an HSI, St. Edward's has always been committed to tracking the success of historically marginalized student populations and providing high-impact interventions when needed. However, the institutional data at St. Edward's has run counter to much of the national narrative surrounding students of color. Currently, Hispanic students at St. Edward's boast a comparable or higher fall-to-fall retention rate and six-year graduation rate than White Non-Hispanic students. Additionally, Hispanic students at St. Edward's, in relation to other student populations, routinely demonstrate the highest sense of belonging to the institution and satisfaction with their educational experience on internally-administered surveys. Similar trends of satisfaction and engagement are found when comparing Hispanic students to those at peer and aspirant institutions in nationally-normed surveys such as the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE). While institutional success rates and survey responses have shown the institution effectively serves Hispanic students, there has been a lingering concern among faculty and university administration that learning equity gaps existed and needed to be addressed.

The new general education assessment structure and development of interactive dashboards has allowed the university to interrogate these concerns and the initial results have been positive. As shown in Figure 1, Hispanic students, which made up 38% of the systematic random sample of artifacts and 42% of the overall undergraduate student body, achieved slightly higher scores, on average, across every dimension of the Critical Thinking rubric. While the gap between different racial/ethnic groups was not statistically significant, it did reveal that students of color were performing at roughly the same levels as White Non-Hispanic students. These results also held true for Intercultural Knowledge.

Interestingly, St. Edward's found minimal variation of race/ethnicity, gender, Pell status, or transfer status for both Critical Thinking and Intercultural Knowledge, but did find interesting results based upon the level of course being assessed for the Critical Thinking outcome. In analyzing the general education assessment data for Critical Thinking, shown in Figure 2, it was discovered that students enrolled in a 1000-level Writing course scored highly across all dimensions, but scores dropped for students enrolled in intermediate-level courses before rising for those enrolled in 4000-level courses. When reviewing the 1000-level Writing course, it was apparent the assessment assignment chosen was very intentional and allowed for students to go through a revision process prior to submission. Many of these practices were not commonplace in intermediate-level courses, but were present in 4000-level courses. As a result, a pilot program composed of over 20 faculty members has been conducted with facilitation from the Center for Teaching Excellence to help improve assignment intentionality and design across a variety of disciplines and assignment types.

### **Takeaways**

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The success of adopting an equity-based assessment model at St. Edward's required two critical components, (1) faculty committed to the mission of equity, inclusion, and social justice; and (2) a data warehouse and software that allowed for the connection and visualization of assessment data with student attributes. As a result, key stakeholders at the university were able to focus on establishing institutional-level continuous improvement strategies, which is juxtaposed with the previous assessment model in which continuous improvement strategies were siloed within specific courses and isolated to a small group of faculty.

However, developing an equity-based assessment model is not without its own drawbacks. As mentioned previously, very little variation was found across key equity variables, which may corrode interest in continuing to analyze assessment data in such a manner. Fortunately, the initial reaction from faculty to the assessment data has been to request more segmented analysis. Furthermore, some individual programs have been inspired by the assessment approach of the new general education curriculum and have partnered with IEP and OIT to implement similar methodological approaches within their majors to help them analyze the presence of possible learning equity gaps.

## **Additional Links**

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[St. Edward's University General Education Administration and Oversight Structure](#)

[St. Edward's University General Education Outcomes and Mapping Structure](#)

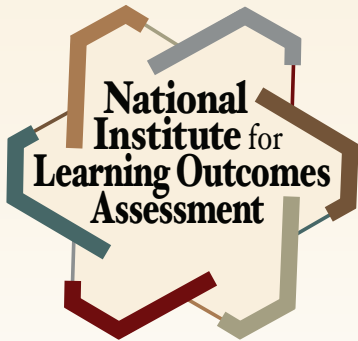
[St. Edward's University Intercultural Knowledge Rubric](#)

[St. Edward's University Critical Thinking Rubric](#)



## Equity Case Studies

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), and Campus Labs (now Anthology), in collaboration with the field of assessment in higher education, have undertaken a series of case studies focused on providing short, instructive examples focused on equitable approaches to assess student learning. The cases provide lessons learned that are widely applicable, and emphasize collaboration across the institution, specifically between academic and student affairs.



NILOA is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning. NILOA supports institutions in designing learning experiences and assessment approaches that strengthen the experience of diverse learners within a variety of institutional contexts. NILOA works in partnership with a broad range of organizations and provides technical assistance and research support to various projects focused on learning throughout the U.S. and internationally. Learn more at [www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org).



Leading the way for over 40 years, CAS is a consortium of professional associations in higher education that promotes the use of its professional standards for the development, assessment, and improvement of quality student learning, programs, and services. CAS reflects good practices and promotes intra-campus collaboration among its over 40 collaborating professional associations representing over 115,000 professionals in higher education. Learn more at [www.cas.edu](http://www.cas.edu).

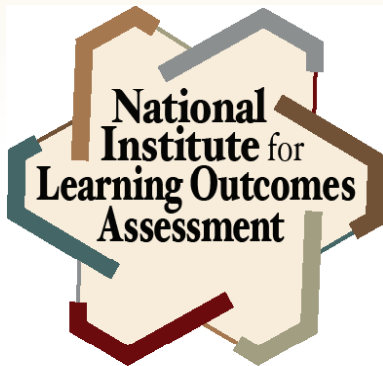


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## National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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# Equity Case Study

[www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/equity](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/equity)