

Assessment *in* Practice

Coming in from the Wilderness: Using an Annual Faculty Symposium to Make Connections, Fête Excellence, and Build Capacity in Assessment

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The assessment of student learning is hard work, done best when its practitioners exist on a sort of Einsteinian cognitive plane. I am only just barely overstating the case. After all, consider the sorts of complex dynamics an instructor need hold in their mind when practicing assessment at its best and most impactful: the alignment of assignments with learning outcomes within a course (micro-level) as well as how to analyze the collected data and interpret the results; the implications for student learning both across course sequences and the degree program as a whole (meso-level) as well as how to connect productively and diplomatically with colleagues to address any shortcomings; and the role that department-level student learning plays both in the university's general education curriculum (macro-level) as well as any contributions to external processes such as accreditation, recruitment, or program review.

Add to this the weird ways in which assessment collides with recent pivots toward big data analyses and learning analytics; add to this increased imperatives to conduct assessment rightly and with justice; add to this the mounting anxiety that learning be conflated with program success and, as a result, program budgets and continuance. The coup de grâce is the persistent institutional reality that all of the above still falls with uncomfortable regularity to that archetypical “lone warrior” of assessment, the put-upon, short-straw-drawing colleague who shoulders the burden on behalf of the rest of us.

Against this backdrop, it is easy to lose sight of the *narrative* behind the actions—the driving *why* that justifies our efforts and explains our place in the complex web of initiatives at the course, department, and institution levels. Different universities solve (or do not solve) this conundrum in different ways, whether through launching muscular compliance initiatives that drive up faculty participation,

dedicating resources to increase their level of interest, or staffing up assessment centers to lend a helping hand. But these three things— participation, incentives, and assistance—do not necessarily make *meaning* or narrate our assessment work in a way that satisfies and sustains.

THE SYMPOSIUM AS CONNECTION

At the University of Kansas, the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) annually enlists the help of hundreds of faculty and a few key administrators in collaboratively building the narrative that underlies our teaching and learning efforts. We do this by convening a Teaching Summit every Fall (which focuses on teaching innovations at the course level), a Student Learning Symposium, or SLS, every Spring (with a focus on learning outcomes assessment), and an end-of-year Celebration of Teaching poster event (where faculty report out on the results of dozens of year-long projects in their classrooms). The hallmarks of these events are peer-to-peer knowledge transfer between instructors, public recognition for excellent work, and the cultivation of a commonly-held understanding of our priorities as a university.

The SLS, in particular, is designed to get faculty speaking to one another, put administrators at lunch tables with classroom instructors, and use plenary sessions to connect course- and program-level assessment work to the general education curriculum, accreditation, and the university's strategic initiatives. Annual attendance at the SLS comes to about 100 individuals, most of whom have been invited purposefully as representatives of departments with reputations for creative assessment or offices with responsibility for student success. The event is just as much a learning experience for our administrative leaders as it is for faculty, an opportunity for us to hear from one another, reassert our mutual investment in—and ownership of—the assessment of student learning, and develop plans for future work.

FÊTING EXCELLENCE AND BUILDING CAPACITY

The SLS is framed as a celebration of success, with emphases placed on sharing examples of excellent work and inviting participants into repeated (sometimes lighthearted) interactions with one another. I have always thought of this aspect of our program as bringing people back in from the wilderness: our award-winners are fêted in front of an audience that appreciates the type and tone of their work (whereas their effort might not resonate as forcefully in their department's local culture); and our attendees, all of whom make outsized contributions to assessment in their own right, have a chance to discover like-minded friends in other corners of the university (whereas, again, they may be left largely to their own devices within their departments). Because the attendees are academics who readily connect with colleagues at disciplinary conferences, this type of rapport-building comes naturally to them—but they are pleasantly surprised to discover an epistemic community surrounding the assessment of student learning! Reviews of the event tend to be glowing, with feedback ranging from “I did not know anyone else was working on these issues” to “I was finally able to connect my students' outcomes to something larger at KU.”

The Student Learning Symposium (SLS) is framed as a celebration of success, with emphases placed on sharing examples of excellent work and inviting participants into repeated (sometimes lighthearted) interactions with one another.

Aside from the socializing, faculty also attend to learn about best practices and improve the quality of their own efforts. To this end, the SLS features breakout panels—sometimes didactically-focused, other times more workshop-oriented—that move the discussion beyond appreciation and toward application. Award winners are now presenters and facilitators, helping their audiences identify opportunities to try out new techniques. Representatives from the CTE lead dialogues about assessing specific general education goals, evaluating student learning across the curriculum, or representing assessment results to external stakeholders like prospective students or accreditors. At the end of the day’s program, attendees reconvene over a catered lunch to connect their new knowledge back to a central theme or conundrum facing KU.

LEVELING UP

Outside of this barebones structure, however, the SLS is an adaptable animal. Early iterations of the SLS featured panels and workshops developed around assessment’s procedural aspects: assessment in degree programs, assessing our general education curriculum, undergraduate assessment, and graduate assessment. Our plenary speakers dealt with institution-level concerns such as student retention and navigating the hidden curriculum, but these themes were not always directly reinforced by the breakout panels. As the years have gone by, however, and as the acumen of our faculty ever increases, the event has been able to leave aside much of the foundational discussion surrounding assessment. In its stead, we have begun to tackle higher-order considerations like integrating assessment data with institutional data, and the use of novel instruments—developed at KU—to evaluate complex learning outcomes. With increasingly more examples of great faculty work from around campus, we have also been better able to strategically select presenters that together speak to a unifying theme.

Our most recent iteration of the SLS was titled “Using Assessment to Tell Your Story” and, from stem to stern, featured content that spoke directly to the idea of constructing narrative from assessment results. It awarded projects from departments that had leveraged sophisticated design work to track students’ growth throughout a curriculum, and had triangulated course-level data on learning with survey-based and institution-level data on students’ enrollment histories and study skills. Breakout sessions discussed how to convert the results of assessment into peer-reviewable scholarship on the science of teaching and learning, and our plenary speaker—an outside guest from the National Institution for Learning Outcomes Assessment—presented strategies for building assessment narratives, en route to representing the quality of a program to administrators or the public at large.

In the time of COVID-19, the SLS continues to change. This year’s event will be hosted fully online, with a focus on leveraging course-level innovations in assessment for curriculum-wide improvements to student learning. Especially apropos in a setting where instruction has become discouragingly atomistic, now more than ever the SLS will work to stress the interconnectedness of our pedagogical efforts. While the event’s basic structure remains similar, the focus on scaling up the benefits of good work will be another unique installment to this rewarding and flexible event.

Please Cite As:

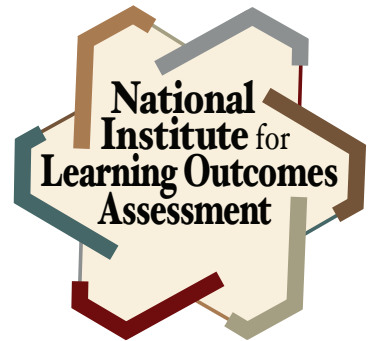
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About NILOA

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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