

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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National Louis University: Designing Pathways of Intentional Learning

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Institutional Context

National Louis University (NLU) is a private, non-profit institution based in Chicago, Illinois. Focused on community impact and the founding values of access, innovation and excellence, NLU has become a leader in serving non-traditional students. In 2018, NLU was in the top 5% of schools in the nation for serving returning adults and other non-traditional students. The goal is for all NLU students to have an educational experience characterized by academic excellence, one that prepares/advances professionals—at the undergraduate and graduate levels—who will positively impact their communities. NLU is a Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) case study institution due to the intentional use of the DQP in the design of the Pathways Program including competency development, curricular focus, and assessment alignment. NLU's use of the DQP provides an example for other institutions interested in using the DQP to develop new programs as well as curricular pathways that include a focus upon differentiated levels of learning.

Why Pathways?

Historically, NLU's average student age was 35 and the population was primarily degree completion undergraduate students and master's or doctoral-level students. There were very few students coming straight out of high school. The opportunity to build a program designed for 18 year olds coming right out of high school was unique and had the potential to change the face of the University. What sets NLU apart from other institutions building a pathway from high school is the clear vision and steadfast commitment to providing equal access to higher education, closing the opportunity gap in bachelor's degree attainment and promoting upward mobility for our graduates, often individuals from underserved populations. Ultimately, the decision to build a **Pathways Program** fit with the mission of the University and was an opportunity to address moral and economic imperatives, as well as, significantly grow enrollment at NLU while addressing the national need for additional college graduates (Lumina, 2016).

In 2017, National Louis University served 7,344 students, 35% of which were undergraduates. In the newly designed/implemented undergraduate Pathways Program, 82% of students were Pell eligible, 82% were first-generation, and 94% were minoritized students. Students entering Pathways had an average ACT score of 17 and a GPA of 2.7. As of 2021, NLU served 10, 838 students, 49% of which were undergraduates, indicating growth from the program offerings. Further in 2021, 82% of students were Pell eligible, maintaining the focus on access, 80% were first-generation, and 94% were minoritized students. Students entering Pathways in 2021 had an average SAT score of 878 and high school GPA of 2.79.

In the design of the Pathways program, the student population to be served was of paramount importance to the factors considered when designing this program, which led to a unique model.

Some of the key features are listed below:

- \$10,000 annual tuition before financial aid, which can mean zero out-of-pocket expense for students qualifying for full federal and state aid.
- A streamlined admissions process with a 2.0 GPA or higher admissions requirement.
- Schedule flexibility, consistency and dependability (students attend classes two days a week on-campus and complete the remainder of coursework online).
- Personalized, flipped, adaptive instructional model leveraging technology and small class sizes to differentiate support for every student.
- Clear and well-rounded pathway to a degree where students can articulate what they have learned.
- Embedded career preparation through required curriculum, work-based learning, and career coaching.
- High-touch, supportive environment, with a success coach for every student and cohorted teams of instructors and staff who collaborate, informed by data, to focus on each student.

In order to serve these new students, NLU needed to develop a program that reengineered General Education. NLU's Associate Dean of General Education and Pathways, Stephanie Poczos convened a task force of faculty, administration, instructional design, advising and employers to determine the most appropriate framework for the redesign in 2015. The mission was for NLU to be a local and national leader in increasing undergraduate college access and closing the opportunity gap in bachelor's degree attainment driven by the uniquely affordable, rigorous, supportive, and professionally-focused education we offer students by 2020.

Over a 6 month period in 2015, the task force met regularly to vet options of the program model. The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) was a natural fit to design the program. Because the DQP describes what students should know and be able to do along their academic journey and emphasizes the degree, not the field of study, it provided an opportunity to build out beyond just the first two years in the Pathways program. The DQP does not prescribe content or pedagogy, but it does serve as a reference point for what students should be able to do and hopefully articulate at every level of post-secondary learning.

NLU selected the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) to define the themes at the associate's level, as the Pathways Program was originally designed to be a 2-year program that prepared students to finish their Bachelor's degree starting in their Junior year. DQP would provide a framework to design general education outcomes aligned with the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Essential Learning Outcomes and the AAC&U VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) Rubrics. With well-articulated levels of development built into the DQP framework, the potential to eventually expand the DQP University-wide was significant.

The five themes of the DQP-Specialized Knowledge, Broad and Integrative Knowledge, Intellectual Skills, Applied and Collaborative Learning and Civic and Global Learning were a fantastic starting point. Considering NLU is professionally focused, it seemed like there was another possible theme that could be added. [Through the work of NLU's Assessment committee and the Pathways task force, another competency was added to the DQP themes-Professional Skills.](#)

Philosophy and Framework

Because the program is open access, it was important to design a model that met students where they were. The target student population faces significant barriers to college access and completion. Many students need to work to provide for their families and as first-generation students, they often do not have a caregiver at home that can provide assistance with navigating financial aid, picking classes, and some of the essential non-cognitive skills needed for success at a rigorous college. Other obstacles to completion for this at-risk population include, but are not limited to:

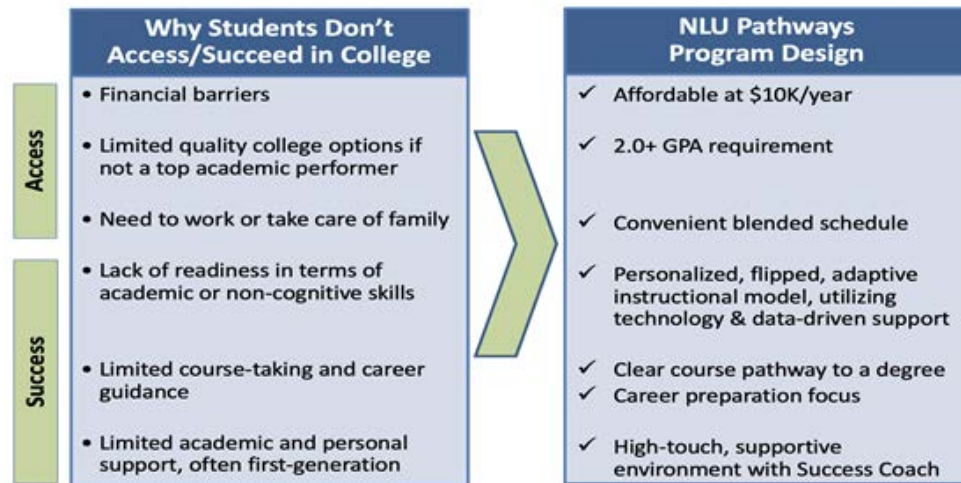


Figure 1. NLU Pathways Program Design.

At-risk students often take too few credits each term, so the program is built for students to take 15 quarter hours per term leading to 180 hours to degree at the end of four years. No superfluous courses are taken and no credits are wasted, leaving students with very little debt. Courses are intentionally developmentally sequenced taking the guesswork out of course selection. “In order to be inviting and compelling, clear curricular pathways leading from cornerstone to capstone must offer increasing, carefully ratched levels of challenge. Otherwise, there is a risk that general education...will continue to offer...requirements to be fulfilled and checked off a list.” (Gaston, 2015 p. 27).

Research suggests that remedial courses led to high fail and drop out rates, so additional academic supports are built into the schedule as Developmental Education, with co-curricular labs attached to core courses. According to a report by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University’s Teachers College, nationally, nearly two-thirds of entering community-college students and more than one-third of those starting at less-selective four-year colleges are found to be not ready for college-level math or English classes. One study by the center found that, “of students referred to three levels of remedial math, only 17 percent completed the sequence within three years. For reading, the rate was 29 percent.” (Jaggars, Edgecomb & Stacey, 2014)

Students who take remedial course before entering into entry level courses are much less likely to persist. (Whistle, & Hiler, 2018). There were many decisions to be made about the instructional and assessment model. First and foremost, the Pathways program needed to make assessment be seen as the evidence of learning, not just a “grade.” When students are able to apply what they have learned and articulate that to employer, it is likely to create a strong intrinsic motivation to succeed and complete their degree. In order to make this a reality, NLU designed a competency-driven approach. This is not the same as competency-based education, but rather utilizes formative and summative assessments that include authentic assessment in a paced environment.

Competencies

To make this meaningful for students, NLU designed 34 competencies and a master rubric that would cascade across all courses. Students would then see the same 34 competencies in various Bloom’s Taxonomy levels throughout all of their classes. All of the rubrics contain both the DQP theme and the competency language. Competencies were originally fleshed out across three rubric levels and then expanded to be a 4-category rubric that allowed for more accurate grade distribution. Competencies were written in language that was accessible to students. See example below of competency alignment to the DQP theme:

Often, the transference of learning is one of the greatest challenges that students face. Having consistent

language in rubrics allows for students to evaluate their progress on these competencies over a long period of time. In each rubric the competency is listed and then a more detailed explanation of the competency is also included. See example below:

Competency	4-Mastery	3.5	3-Approaching Competency	2.5	1.5-Needs Work	0
Integration and Application of Knowledge using Analytic Inquiry Formulation of questions and examination of problems through the application of knowledge from the field of study.	Speech includes an introduction and conclusion, fully developed body that follows Monroe's Motivated Sequence and transitions between sections. Speech accomplishes the thesis statement set forth in the outline.	Speech includes an introduction and conclusion, body that mostly follows Monroe's Motivated Sequence and transitions between sections. Speech accomplishes the thesis statement, though it could be more successful.	Speech is missing one of the following: introduction, conclusion, fully developed body that mostly follows Monroe's Motivated Sequence or transitions between sections. Speech almost accomplishes the thesis statement set forth in the outline.	Speech is missing one of the following: introduction, conclusion, fully developed body that mostly follows Monroe's Motivated Sequence or transitions between sections. Speech does not accomplish the thesis statement set forth in the outline.	Student does not demonstrate minimal evidence of criteria in submitted assignment.	No evidence of criteria was submitted.

Table 1. Rubric competency explanation.

In 2018, NLU introduced competency reporting that outlines progress on competencies to date. Competency reporting was meant to bring transparency for the student on their overall progress outside of just the “final grades.” The intent is also for students to be empowered to articulate their strengths to potential employers. See example below:

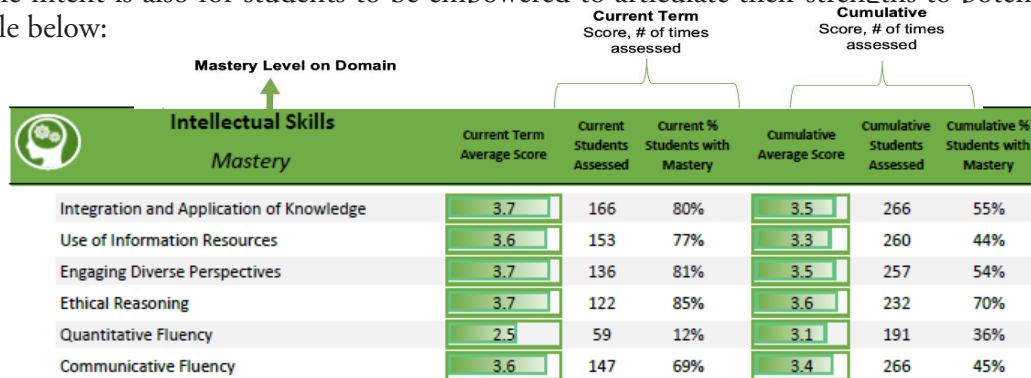


Figure 2. Intellectual Skills example.

The competency reports highlighting the DQP themes are also used to look at student performance at the course level and overall. See example of aggregate report for the DQP theme of Broad and Integrative Knowledge below:

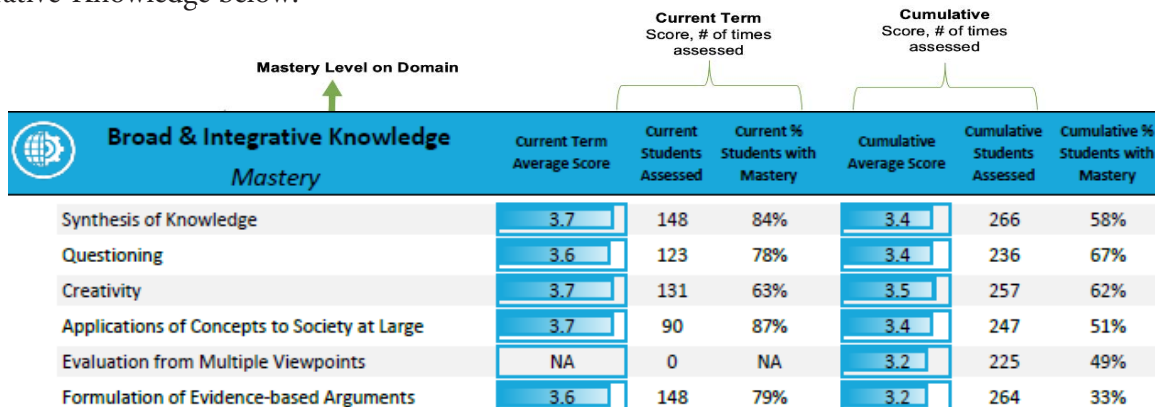


Figure 3. Broad & Integrative Knowledge example.

Competency reporting that is aligned to the DQP is reviewed on a yearly basis for the purpose of reflection, dissemination of data, and planning for continuous improvement. Reviewing the competency reports in a summary? format that includes faculty teaching across disciplines allows the space for faculty to reflect on the competencies that assessments are measuring and to evaluate their significance. The faculty reviews allow everyone with the students to come together and review overall learnings from various vantage points. These discussions often to lead to changes in curriculum and instruction in the following year.

When creating the assignment framework, NLU needed to design authentic assessments as “Authentic assessments require students to be effective performers with acquired knowledge” (Wiggins, 1990, p.92). Assessment is authentic when we directly examine student performance on tasks that are relatable to students and worthy. This aligned with the AAC&U’s Signature Work projects. In each class there are 3-4 milestones that lead to a final project that is true Signature Work. The projects are all relevant to students’ lives and important topics in society.

It was also important to scaffold skills over the two years for which the program was designed. After careful mapping of these skills and aligning Bloom’s level’s, it was important that the skills leading into the junior and senior year major courses were the right foundational skills needed for success. Through collaboration with department chairs and faculty, DQP spider webs were built that aligned to each major. Every year, these are reviewed to determine if the foundational skills being assessed in the front two years of coursework are preparing students for major courses.

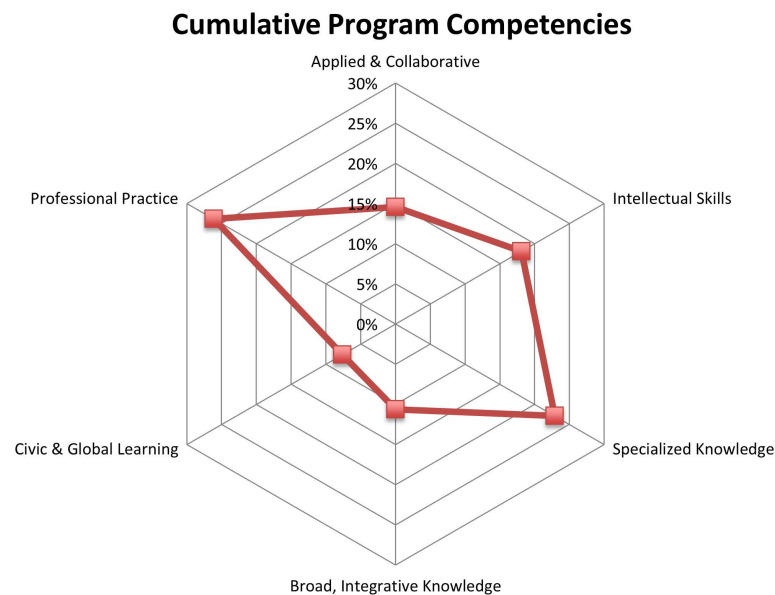


Figure 4. Spiderweb of cumulative program competencies.

Implementation

In the fall of 2015, the Pathways Program launched with a class of 85. The instructional model was established. Pathways would offer flipped, blended instruction utilizing adaptive courseware. Classrooms would be active and mobile, allowing for group work and application to happen inside of the classroom. There is little lecture and the “sage on the stage” is completely removed from the pathways classrooms. An important part of individualized instruction in this program is the continual feedback loop. Adaptive courseware allows for students to receive immediate feedback on their learning progress. This immediate feedback helps the student to stay on track, while also giving the instructor valuable feedback to target areas where students need the most

direct instruction and support during the next class period (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Suskie, 2009). This helps, as well, to equalize the playing field (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017), less “teaching to the middle” and more targeted instruction in class. If students are struggling with a concept, they can make multiple attempts in the courseware at their own pace, removing some of the anxiety of keeping up with peers in class.

Throughout curriculum and instruction, students are afforded opportunities for self-assessment, as well as peer-to-peer assessment. Students can utilize instructor or peer feedback to revise or further enhance their work, enabling opportunities to react and apply to constructive feedback (Angelo & Cross, 1993; Suskie, 2009). Faculty and staff meet regularly to discuss student success (academic progress, attendance, course performance, behavioral patterns) in order to holistically understand students, following up to provide praise, support, or interventions as needed.

Continuous Improvement

Adjustments to curriculum, instruction and assessment are made each year. Some examples of adjustments made based on weekly meetings between faculty and student success coaches include:

- Workload adjustment and sequencing changes based on the amount of writing and canon reading in each course;
- Redistribution of competency measurement based on gaps in knowledge not met by scaffolding;
- Different instructional strategies to aid in the achievement of certain outcomes. Ie-station rotation in classes where students are struggling, reciprocal teaching when leveling in the class is broad and leadership opportunities are needed to engage struggling or high achieving students;
- Professional development on the use of growth mindset language and asset-based vocabulary to build trust and confidence in students;
- Restructured class time when students are able to progress, but are not able to apply knowledge in multiple contexts;
- Adjustment of scaffolding when students are not experiencing an active, iterative learning environment that situates learning sequentially; and
- Utilization of data to drive instructional interventions.

This new model at NLU has garnered a lot of praise and attention for breaking down some of the traditional norms that were not leading to progress and also removing barriers to success for students. NLU will see its first class of Pathways seniors graduating this year. The program has grown leaps and bounds and because of that success, NLU has adopted the DQP as its University level Outcomes (ULO). From 2018-2019, faculty teams have worked with assessment teams to align existing outcomes to the DQP at the bachelor’s level. A master’s level alignment of Program Level Outcomes (PLO) to ULO’s is expected to happen in 2022. Currently all 11 majors have rebuilt assessments to align to the DQP at the Bachelor’s level. This is a grand undertaking, but the DQP has provided the much needed framework for University coherence.

When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the Pathways Program was uniquely ready for the challenge of shifting learning to remote instruction. Because of the data reporting being done, it was simple to pull data on a weekly basis to make adjustments as we shifted to remote, synchronous instruction. When variations were needed for in-class work or homework assignments, it was easy for faculty to revise the assignment using the same competencies since they are all clear in the rubrics.

Reflection and Takeaways for Practice

Throughout the implementation of the Pathways model, many lessons have been learned.

1. If you put faculty and students at the center of assessment design, you cannot go wrong.
2. Building trust with faculty is paramount for authentic, organic conversation about student outcomes and assignment design.

3. Collaboration with the entire student lifecycle only enhances outcome achievement. Working regularly with advising and coaches helps to make revisions based on the holistic student.
4. Regular review (weekly or bi-weekly) of student outcome achievement is much more effective than a “post-mortem,” after a term ends. Everyone is too tired and detached from the everyday of the formative and summative instruction going on all the time inside and outside of the classroom.
5. All parties that surround the student must work on early interventions and focus on a strong start to keep students engaged.
6. Students who consistently reflect on their progress are more likely to adopt a growth mindset and have the confidence to stay in school.
7. Commit to continuous improvement. It is exhausting. But, it is worth it.
8. Paying attention to workload, assessment fatigue, grading practices and timelines makes a big difference in on-time assignment submission rates and timely sharing of feedback from instructors.
9. A common framework like the DQP aligns programs to University outcomes seamlessly. In NLU’s review of Program Learning Outcomes for alignment to DQP, there were no Program Learning Outcomes that could not be aligned.
10. Faculty cannot ever see assessment as, “another thing to do.” It is important to constantly evaluate if the assessments are measuring learning in a way to drives further, deeper levels of learning and instruction.

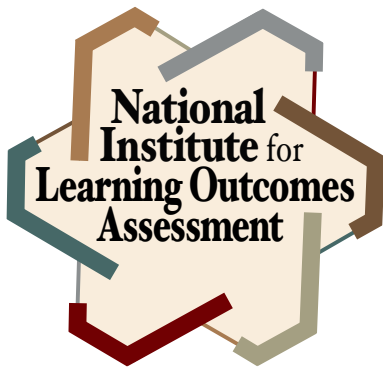
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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free resources and can be found at <https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>
- 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.
- NILOA's Vision is to broaden the dialogue and conversation on meaningful and sustainable assessment practices that address issues of design and implementation, and position institutions, organizations, and individuals to achieve their goals.

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