

# ASSESSMENT MATTERS

## ASSESSMENT: BACK TO BASICS WORKSHOP

Are you new to assessment? An incoming director of undergraduate or graduate studies? Need a refresher on how to develop a simple and effective assessment plan? Do we have a deal for you! The OIA assessment team is offering two interactive workshops (FREE!) to anyone who has an interest in program learning outcomes assessment. These workshops will take you through the steps of writing learning outcomes, creating an assessment plan and reporting out on findings and changes. (They are identical, so select the one that fits your schedule.)

When? February 26, 2019 from 9:30-11:30 [Register](#)

April 18, 2019 from 1:30-3:30 [Register](#)

Where? Library Room 112A

Questions? Contact Elaine ([evm@email.arizona.edu](mailto:evm@email.arizona.edu)) or Ingrid ([novod@email.arizona.edu](mailto:novod@email.arizona.edu))

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## NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY'S JOURNEY TO MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT

**K. Laurie Dickson and Melinda Trembl**

*[We tend to forget that there are two other large institutions that we can learn from in Arizona. The following is the story of NAU and their quest to be recognized by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment with an Excellence in Assessment Designation. It would be great if UA could add this distinction as well!]*

Northern Arizona University (NAU) is honored to be recognized by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment with the Excellence in Assessment designation. As a public state institution, NAU's established commitment to undergraduate student success aligns with the Arizona Board of Regents' goal to ensure educational access and affordability in serving the needs of Arizona and its citizens. Over the past decade, NAU has experienced 45% growth in its student population (from 21,352 students in fall 2007 to 31,057 students in fall 2017). Throughout this growth, NAU has worked to continue its proud tradition of engaging in assessment and continual improvement efforts.

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THE SUCCESS OF OUR ASSESSMENT APPROACH RESTS  
UPON A SINGLE FACTOR: MAKING ASSESSMENT  
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TO STUDENT LEARNING IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS.

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### NAU's Assessment Journey and Approaches

A university does not attain excellence in assessment overnight. At NAU, achieving excellence in assessment has been an almost two-decades-long process of developing and improving the structures, procedures, and uses of assessment, while simultaneously nurturing a culture of assessment. The success of our assessment approach rests upon a single factor: making assessment meaningful by connecting assessment findings to student learning improvement efforts. NAU's assessment plan has three components: degree programs, a liberal studies program (NAU's general education program), and co-curricular programming.

Fifteen years ago, the areas of academic assessment, institutional research, and student affairs partnered to sponsor the first annual NAU Assessment Fair. Over 30 posters evaluating topics such as student learning and satisfaction were presented, and over 100 people, including the NAU president, attended this inaugural event. Over the next several years, NAU cultivated a growing appreciation for the value of assessment. For example, in 2008, personnel in the Office of Academic Assessment initiated an award program to celebrate outstanding academic assessment efforts. In addition, they published an assessment guide and began offering individualized consulting for unit leaders and committees. In 2009, NAU received recognition from the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) for strategic use of assessment data to track and improve the effectiveness of educational programs and activities. Meanwhile, participation in the Assessment Fair was growing; by 2010, the number of both posters and attendees had increased more than 50%.

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Assessment momentum was building. In 2012, NAU faculty and staff recognized the need for coordinated, institution-wide assessment, and a team was formed to develop student learning outcomes that synthesized the foundations of an NAU education. Framed by NAU's mission to provide an outstanding undergraduate education, the institutional learning outcomes define the essential educational expectations for all graduates, regardless of major. The outcomes explicitly state our shared goals for what students will know, what they will be able to do, and how they will approach problem-solving and decision-making after successfully completing academic requirements and co-curricular experiences. The "NAU Graduates Can" statements provide the foundational breadth from which our in-depth degree program, liberal studies program, and co-curricular outcomes align.

A prerequisite to meaningful student learning outcomes is a shared understanding of the *purpose* of learning outcomes. The institutional student learning outcomes serve three key purposes and constituencies:

- *For students*, the outcomes explicitly describe what students are learning in their curricular and co-curricular experiences and how their NAU education contributes to their future careers and opportunities as citizens of the world.
- *For faculty and staff*, the outcomes provide direction for the intentional design of specific student learning outcomes at the degree program level, in the liberal studies program, and the development of student affairs programming.
- *For the state of Arizona and future employers*, the outcomes highlight the skills and knowledge NAU graduates possess and contribute to the world.

In the years following receipt of the prestigious CHEA award, members of the University Assessment Committee and Office of Academic Assessment recognized the need to change due to striking differences in program assessment. Programs with strong cultures of assessment intentionally linked their assessment of student learning to curricular design, primarily through the creation of explicit learning outcomes and curriculum maps. Connecting curricula to assessment increased the usefulness of assessment, as faculty linked assessment findings to curricula. Based on these findings, NAU faculty and staff developed a system of common curriculum design and assessment expectations that, after extensive institution-wide feedback and review, received Faculty Senate approval. Per the degree program expectations (DPEs), all NAU degree programs must achieve and maintain:

- A DEGREE PROGRAM PURPOSE,
- DEGREE PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES,
- AN INTENTIONAL CURRICULUM DESIGN WITH CURRICULAR MAPS,
- STRATEGIC COURSE DESIGN OF ALL COURSES,
- SYSTEMATIC ASSESSMENT OF DEGREE PROGRAM STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES, AND
- THE USE OF ASSESSMENT FINDINGS FOR CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT AND DISSEMINATION.

In conjunction, Academic Program Review processes were improved with the inclusion of faculty peer review of program's DPE efforts. More specifically, a unit's curriculum design and assessment efforts are reviewed and feedback from reviewers is compiled and discussed with the academic unit, resulting in the creation of a Curriculum & Assessment Action Plan. NAU uses its annual planning and reporting process to monitor academic units' progress and provide just-in-time consultative support. In this manner, assessment becomes a conversation focused on the teaching and learning experiences of faculty and students.

All undergraduate majors at NAU culminate in a required capstone course. The capstone is intended to integrate degree program and liberal studies learning, and many capstones are experiential. Analysis of capstone syllabi revealed a lack of alignment with liberal studies program capstone requirements. As a result, in 2015–16, an institution-wide effort to improve and align capstone courses was implemented. Through the "Capstone Refresh" initiative, faculty intentionally revised capstone courses to ensure they culminate student learning in the major and the liberal studies program. Now, with the help of NAU assessment experts, capstone courses include authentic assignments that can be used to meaningfully assess

student learning. Given that the capstone course reflects program learning outcomes in a meaningful and authentic setting, faculty are able to use findings to identify strengths and weaknesses within the program's curriculum, by tying findings to the curriculum map.

Liberal studies program assessment plans have similarly evolved over time. Previously, NAU evaluated achievement of skills by pairing data from the National Survey of Student Engagement and Faculty Survey of Student Engagement with standardized tests, including the Collegiate Learning Assessment (2006, 2009) and ETS-Proficiency Profile (2012, 2014). These instruments assisted in identifying broad areas for improvement. The need for improved student performance in writing and quantitative reasoning led NAU to establish a writing center, an interdisciplinary writing program, and a math center.

Faculty recognized limitations with this approach, including relatively low survey response rates, little motivation for students to take the standardized tests earnestly, and lack of alignment to liberal studies learning outcomes. These shortcomings led the liberal studies program faculty to adapt AAC&U VALUE rubrics to evaluate the essential skills and distribution blocks within courses. NAU conducted a scaffolded, comparable assessment in First-Year Seminar courses and senior capstone courses by assessing an aspect of liberal studies each year using a stratified sampling of students across the colleges. Following a pilot in 2016–17, full-scale assessment of effective writing occurred in 2017–18, with dissemination of findings and institution-wide conversations planned for 2018–19. A similar approach is underway for the other essential skills. The use of the rubrics for the discipline-specific authentic assignments in the capstone courses provide degree program and liberal studies program faculty with meaningful information that can be used to improve course and curriculum design.

## Lessons Learned in Our Assessment Journey

A positive culture of academic assessment begins with a focus on student learning. Faculty and staff begin by intentionally designing and scaffolding courses into programs. Once curricula are designed to accomplish the end goal of student learning, then assessment becomes a tool to inform faculty and staff about the quality of their curriculum, or program, design. Authentic assessment motivates students to do their best work, engages faculty in substantive conversations about teaching and learning, and provides actionable data for continuous improvement. Our success is a result of our sustained commitment to discussions that involve faculty, staff, students, and external constituencies in examining, discussing, and applying assessment findings to student learning and programmatic and institutional decision-making.

## Excellence in Assessment Application Process Recommendations

We recommend using the application prompts to tell your institution's story of assessment. While it is important to address each of the criteria, we attempted to tell our journey in a manner that highlighted the evolution of our thinking about assessment, from a stand-alone mandate to an integrated curriculum and course design effort that improves student learning. Perfection in assessment is not necessary in order to achieve excellence. An organization's candor in describing how they identified and solved assessment issues is key to an institution's narrative. The rubric is a fantastic resource to apply to any assessment office's annual and periodic strategic planning initiatives. NILOA's approach will guide your institution to sustain its assessment goals, because it transforms assessment into a relationship-building experience. ■

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Any ideas for the Assessment Matters Newsletters can be sent to: [cvm@email.arizona.edu](mailto:cvm@email.arizona.edu)