

University Strategic Framework for Assessment: A Three-year Plan

Overview:

The assessment of learning at Northwestern is (and will continue to be) a school- and division-based effort strongly supported across the University by the senior administration. Across academic areas, assessment will continue to be faculty driven. Across administrative areas supporting co-curricular programming, assessment will be driven by the appropriate units in a collaborative manner. The Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Subcommittee of the Assessment/Accreditation Council has developed this strategic framework within Northwestern's decentralized model to articulate an institutional vision for student learning outcomes assessment. This framework, while rooted in a longer term vision, is focused on the initial strategic priorities for evaluating student learning, and the action steps to achieve them, over the next three years.

Overarching Vision:

Northwestern will continue to strive to be a leader in student learning outcomes assessment among its peers. Central to the University's approach is flexibility: assessment strategies across Northwestern will continue to be tailored to individual units and programs to ensure they are useful to faculty and staff and they help positively impact student learning across the University's diverse population of students.

In the long term, student learning outcomes assessment will be fully inculcated at Northwestern. Schools and units across the University will engage in assessment activities in line with the individual curricular and co-curricular goals of the unit. School assessment strategies will map onto students' progression through the curriculum of individual program(s); assessment strategies in units outside of the schools will align with students' engagement in co-curricular activities in Student Affairs, study abroad, research, internships, civic engagement, leadership, and other related areas.

Further, within 10 years Northwestern will have a complete set of learning outcomes for units of learning for undergraduate and graduate populations, including individual courses, programs, majors, departments, and schools/units. Schools will also develop learning outcomes across other areas of the curricula (e.g., distribution requirements). In addition, informed by the proposed recommendations regarding assessment and learning outcomes in the 2015 Faculty Task Force on the Undergraduate Academic Experience, faculty and schools will consider development of more coordinated sets of learning outcomes for undergraduates and graduate students and will coordinate student learning outcomes assessment activities across the schools and co-curricular units.

Short-term Strategic Priorities:

On our way to achieving this long-term vision, Northwestern will address the following key priorities over the next three years:

- Sustain and support efforts in those schools that are currently making progress and build efforts in schools where opportunities exist to make assessment activities more robust:
 - Encourage and support every academic program to reflect critically and creatively on its curriculum and consider how the learning objectives of individual courses map onto desired learning objectives at the program level; and
 - Build visibility of evidence-based assessment initiatives that have made meaningful improvements in enhancing student learning at the course, program/major, and school level.
- Develop mechanisms that support co-investment in a targeted manner, for both small and large scale initiatives.
- Develop linkages between Program Review and student learning outcomes assessment.

- Explore connections between curricular and co-curricular assessment efforts underway at the institutional level and within the schools, Student Affairs, and other units offering co-curricular programming.
- Strengthen engagement in student learning outcomes assessment among faculty and staff.
- Enhance and build capacity in faculty and staff to conduct student learning outcomes assessment activities at the individual, program, and school levels and to use findings to inform pedagogical, curricular, and programmatic changes.

In addition:

- As leaders of their schools, Deans will support implementation and expansion of assessment efforts.
- Unit leaders will include student learning outcomes assessment as a regular component of the planning process at Northwestern.
- Schools will connect programmatic accreditation efforts and institutional student learning outcomes assessment efforts.

Action Steps for Achieving Priorities and Timeframe:

To achieve these short-term priorities, schools and units, often in collaboration with the Assessment/Accreditation Council, will take the action steps outlined below. As needed, the schools will engage their respective curricular committees, department chairs, and/or faculties in these activities. These action steps will also be facilitated by the Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching as well as the Office of the Provost.

YEAR 1 – 2015-16

Deepen Infrastructure:

- Develop a formal *strategic framework* for assessment, including a realistic timeline for addressing the key strategic priorities.
- Examine and update online tools and resources for assessment, including the Learning Assessment website and the *Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Framework* document, to increase their usefulness for individual faculty members and staff and for programs/schools.
 - *Revised website content and location, as well as additional tools/resources developed by the Assessment/Accreditation Council, will help to enhance and build capacity among Northwestern's faculty and staff and strengthen their engagement in student learning outcomes assessment.*

Increase Campus Engagement:

- Conduct the third annual Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Forum to showcase **current assessment processes** and to encourage faculty and staff members to engage in assessing learning at the **course/activity level**.
 - *Collective conversations and insights from the Forum will facilitate development of subsequent strategic priorities to be incorporated into the strategic framework for assessment.*
 - *The Forum also provides an opportunity for faculty and staff outside of the schools (e.g., Student Affairs) to share best practices in assessment.*
- Brainstorm incentives for faculty and staff to (i) engage in assessment activities and (ii) become peer reviewers for the Higher Learning Commission.
 - *Using resources to provide incentives can encourage the engagement of individual faculty and staff members in assessment activities at the course/activity level.*

Connect University Processes:

- Conduct strategic conversations with the Office of Administration and Planning to more actively engage the Program Review process in encouraging schools/units to include student learning outcomes assessment in their self-studies (beginning in 2016-17 year of reviews).
 - *By encouraging reporting of assessment activities in the Program Review process, individual units will have the opportunity to articulate learning outcomes at the department, program, and/or major level.*
- Consider ways to incorporate discussion of learning outcomes at the program/major level into the annual University planning process.
 - *By encouraging incorporation of learning outcomes into the annual planning process, programs and departments will have the opportunity to align resources and learning objectives on a regular basis.*

Improve Data Gathering and Reporting:

- Update and implement an inventory strategy to track assessment activities across the schools and key units.
 - *An up-to-date inventory will assist in identifying assessment resource needs of schools/units with robust assessment activities already in place as well as those areas that are not currently making progress.*
 - *Schools undergoing programmatic accreditation can summarize assessment-related findings within the inventory.*
- Develop a summary of assessment activities across the University, which highlights current efforts in which pedagogical, curricular, and/or programmatic changes have been implemented based on assessment findings.
 - *This summary will be included in the Interim Report on Assessment due to the Higher Learning Commission in June 2016.*

YEAR 2 – 2016-17

Increase Campus Engagement:

- Building upon the success of the third annual forum, conduct the fourth annual Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Forum to highlight **best practices** in assessment and to encourage faculty and staff members to engage in assessing learning at the **program, department, and major level**.
 - *Collective conversations and insights from the Forum can facilitate development of learning outcomes at the major/department and school level.*
- Develop and implement a University communications strategy to promote dialogue on assessment and share best practices, including exploring available technologies to facilitate dissemination of assessment activities.
 - *Greater transparency across the University regarding assessment activities can encourage faculty and staff to make connections between student learning in courses and in the co-curriculum.*
- Actively engage the new Searle Center Director and the Center's resources to help facilitate advancing assessment efforts.

Improve Data Gathering and Reporting:

- Analyze progress made in assessment (i.e., key results that demonstrate pedagogical, curricular, and programmatic changes) and identify gaps in assessment activities.
 - *Examining trends in assessment across Northwestern will assist in identifying (and showcasing) initiatives that have engendered meaningful improvements in learning.*

- *Identifying assessment gaps will facilitate development of support mechanisms to build assessment efforts in key units.*

Connect University Processes:

- Identify connections between the co-curricular learning outcomes developed by Student Affairs and the Undergraduate Experience Task Force’s proposed *general undergraduate learning outcomes*.
- Brainstorm ways to coordinate Student Affairs’ assessment activities and those of the schools.
 - *Coordinating assessment of learning in and outside of the classroom is necessary for programs that cross both domains (e.g., transition programming, residential academic programming, etc.).*

YEAR 3 – 2017-18

Strategic Review:

- Examine linkages between assessment initiatives at the course/activity level and those at the program/major level.

Increase Campus Engagement:

- Building upon the themes of earlier forums, conduct the fifth annual Learning, Teaching, and Assessment Forum to showcase how **assessment results have been utilized to change curricular, programmatic, and/or pedagogical practices.**
 - *The Forum provides an opportunity to reflect on Northwestern’s progress in student learning outcomes assessment.*

Improve Data Gathering and Reporting:

- Develop and update a results summary regarding student learning assessment efforts and progress over the past three years.
 - *Reflecting on Northwestern’s progress in student learning outcomes assessment will facilitate the enhancement of assessment efforts and support throughout the next three years.*

Key Factors Influencing Realization of these Plans:

- Continued engagement of faculty in assessment activities
- New leadership at Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching
- Recommendations from the Faculty Task Force on the Undergraduate Academic Experience and the (proposed) formation of a new Undergraduate Education faculty working group.
- Ability to “assess” the assessment efforts across the University