Toolkit Celebrates Five Years

This fall marks the fifth continuous year of Toolkit’s publication. With the express purpose of promoting a culture of assessment at NIU, fifteen issues of Toolkit have featured 117 assessment FAQs, methods, online resources, conferences, workshops, outcomes, explanations, tips, definitions, video interviews, rubrics, and more. Other universities have been known to write or email the NIU Office of Assessment for guidance in publishing their own assessment newsletter.

Toolkit is featured in the July/August issue of Assessment Update, the monthly journal edited by assessment expert Trudy Banta. Toolkit will also appear in a poster presentation at the 2006 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis.

Both the article and the poster share secrets of the newsletter’s success. A few of these are:

• Offer features that describe resources from all over campus, including student affairs units as well as academic departments.
• Publish concrete information that readers can put to use immediately, such as rubrics and methods.
• Publish key concepts more than once. Remember that the average individual requires five exposures to a message before it sinks in.
• Don’t reinvent the wheel. Most publishing software includes templates that have already been designed by experts. Tweak them to reflect your organization, and use them.
• Plan ahead, but be flexible. Interviews can be taped ahead of time, and regular features lend consistency. However, electronic publication makes it easy to add extra pages, and highlight timely events.

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The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) invited its institutional members to submit applications for the 2006 Award for Institutional Progress in Student Learning Outcomes. The award was created to acknowledge outstanding institutional progress in developing and applying evidence of student learning outcomes as part of the ongoing evaluation and improvement of college and university programs of study. Thirty-two applications were received and reviewed by the selection committee. Four applications were selected for the award. Each institution provided a summary of its application.

The first year of the CHEA award attracted institutions that clearly demonstrate the significant capacity within higher education to successfully address the challenges of student learning outcomes: how to frame outcomes, evidence of outcomes, informing the public about outcomes, and using outcomes information for quality improvement.

CHEA is the largest institutional higher education membership organization in the nation, with 3,000 degree-granting colleges and universities. It is a private, nonprofit national organization that coordinates accreditation activity in the U.S. Northern Illinois University is a member of CHEA, so NIU faculty are eligible to apply for the 2007 awards. Download an application from www.chea.org. The deadline to apply for 2007 is October 20, 2006.

**2006 Award Winners**

**High Impact Course-level Learning Outcomes Assessment Projects**

The Community College of Baltimore County, Maryland

“Faculty, the true experts as to what students should know and do when they leave their classrooms, are the designers of these experimental, formative assessments. Direct advisory assistance and support ensure a risk-free process.”

**Implementing the Principles of Undergraduate Learning at IUPUI**

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, Indiana (IUPUI)

“The goal for the Principles is to guarantee every student opportunities to improve and achieve in core communication and quantitative skills, critical thinking, integration and application of knowledge, intellectual depth, breadth and adaptiveness, understanding society and culture, and values and ethics.”

**Center for Assessment and Research Studies / The General Education Program**

James Madison University, Virginia

“The University has developed compelling evidence that JMU students benefit from instruction in its General Education Program, and makes that evidence available to the public on JMU and State Council of Higher Education for Virginia websites.”

**The Department of Psychology Senior Capstone**

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, Illinois (SIUE)

“The SIUE Department of Psychology showed that an ongoing assessment program could inform curricular changes, promote program improvements, increase student learning, and improve the time-to-degree rates of psychology graduates.”
Graduate Alumni Survey Results

The Office of Assessment Services conducted NIU’s Class of 2004 Graduate Degree Alumni Survey one year after the group’s graduation. Respondents felt positive about their education at NIU:

- 93 percent indicated that their required courses offered new and relevant information
- 96 percent reported that faculty at NIU were thorough in their treatment of course material
- 97 percent felt as though faculty were academically supportive and helpful to them

Alumni were also pleased with how NIU prepared them for life after graduation:
- 80 percent of respondents felt as though faculty were interested and helpful in providing information and advice about further graduate study and/or employment opportunity
- 90 percent of respondents indicated that they were currently employed, of which:
  - 94 percent reported being satisfied with their current job
  - 95 percent felt as though their graduate degree prepared them for their job

Overall, survey respondents had good things to say about the university:
- 94 percent indicated that the quality of their interactions with other students at NIU was good
- 94 percent reported a positive attitude toward NIU and...
- 92 percent said that they would recommend NIU to their friends and family.

Meet Amy Franklin

As of June 1 of this year, the Division of Student Affairs is pleased to welcome Amy Franklin as their new Assessment and Training Officer. Previously, Amy served NIU student affairs as a health educator in Health Enhancement. Her contributions to NIU’s assessment efforts include attending the 2002 Assessment Institute at IUPUI. She also received a Harry J. Canon Fellowship in student affairs to investigate the role of assessment in student affairs.

Her duties include assisting Donna Simon, Associate Vice President of Student Affairs, with assessment and training efforts within the division. She also provides professional development activities for student affairs staff and supports them in developing assessment activities.

Of her new role, Amy says, “Supporting student learning is central to the mission of student affairs, and it’s exciting to identify and assess student learning outside the classroom. I look forward to a great year as we each do our part in enhancing student success.”
ASSESSMENT FAQ

How to Increase Employer/External Feedback

Employer or other external feedback is critical to the assessment of student learning outcomes. This feedback helps validate the quality of the teaching and learning at NIU and it is required by the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

But how can academic programs best gather this feedback? Many faculty think immediately of conducting employer surveys, which can be very useful, but are often of limited value due to low response rates or a narrow employer experience with our students. What other means can be used to pull together this external perspective?

According to Sally Conklin, Program Coordinator for the Public Health and Health Education Programs, this is an issue that faculty in the programs have worked hard to address. If your program is looking for new ways to tackle the task of collecting external feedback, you might try one of these techniques that have worked for them:

1) **Utilize a departmental or program advisory committee** to gain external feedback. The advisory committee meetings offer an excellent opportunity for interaction between employers and students. For example, at a recent advisory committee meeting employers, students and alumni engaged in a hands-on activity to clarify program values. The exercise not only helped in the planning process for the programs but also gave employers an opportunity to observe and comment on the skills and learning outcomes of both students and alumni.

2) **Bring employers into the classroom** to allow them to assess a representative sample of students demonstrating their skills. You may already invite employers to come into your classes to talk about opportunities in your field or lead a discussion on a current topic. Why not increase the value of those visits by allowing students to show the employers the skills they have learned in your program? Faculty use student presentations as an opportunity to bring employers into the classroom to observe and evaluate (based on a set of program learning objectives) the skills of a representative group of students. The result is external assessment of authentic student learning.

Conklin stresses, “The process of gathering external feedback is a win-win. Students hear potential employers supporting the goals of their professional preparation program, and employers become advocates who are networking on behalf of our graduates.”
TOOL OF THE MONTH

Measurable Verbs for Learning Outcomes

As you are no doubt aware, successful assessment begins with writing one’s desired learning outcomes in a measurable way. At the end of any given program, what should participants know or know how to do?

This compendium of verbs, at right, specifically designed to assist faculty in writing measurable cognitive learning objectives. It is organized according to Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning.

The 2006 Assessment Institute

There is still time to register for the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) 2006 Assessment Institute. Due to increasing popularity, the October 30-31 conference will be held at the Indianapolis Westin this year. Space is limited.

Registrations will be accepted until October 6, 2006. Participants may register online, by fax, or by mail.

Fees are $295 for those registering individually for the conference. Groups of three or more from the same organization, registering with a single payment, pay $285 per person.

Examples of Measurable Verbs for Learning Objectives

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<th>Measurable Verbs for Stating Cognitive Outcomes</th>
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Pre-Institute workshops are optional in-depth sessions offered on Sunday, October 29, 2006 for an additional fee. Those planning to attend these sessions should make their selections when registering. Pre-Institute workshops are $70 for half-day sessions and $140 for full day sessions.

Those with additional questions or concerns may email Heather Fuller or phone 317-274-3280.
A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education published a 28-page draft Report regarding the state of higher education in the United States today. Charged nearly a year ago with “developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education that will meet the needs of America’s diverse population and also address the economic and workforce needs of the country’s future,” the Commission describes its findings as “sobering.”

“This Commission believes U.S. higher education needs to improve in dramatic ways,” says the August 9 report. It examines findings and makes recommendations in seven broad areas of higher education, including transparency and accountability. The Commission has granted Toolkit permission to reprint excerpts from the Report which appear here.

The Commission invites comment on the future of higher education. Questions or comments may be directed to the commission by email or by telephone at (202) 205-8741.

Findings Regarding Transparency and Accountability

There is inadequate transparency and accountability for measuring institutional performance, which is more and more necessary to maintaining public trust in higher education.

Our complex, decentralized postsecondary education system has no comprehensive strategy, particularly for undergraduate programs, to provide either adequate internal accountability systems or effective public information. Too many decisions about higher education - from those made by policymakers to those made by students and families - rely too heavily on reputation and rankings derived to a large extent from inputs such as financial resources rather than outcomes. Better data about real performance and lifelong working and learning ability is absolutely essential if we are to meet national needs and improve institutional performance.

--from FINDINGS (p. 15)

DRAFT. FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY.

Postsecondary education institutions should measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes.

- Higher education institutions should measure student learning using quality-assessment data from instruments such as, for example, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress.
- The federal government should provide incentives for states, higher education associations, university systems, and institutions to develop interoperable outcomes-focused accountability systems designed to be accessible and useful for students, policymakers, and the public, as well as for internal management and institutional improvement.
- Faculty must be at the forefront of defining educational objectives for students and developing meaningful, evidence-based measures of their progress toward those goals.
- The results of student learning assessments, including value-added measurements that indicate how much students’ skills have improved over time, should be made available to students and reported in the aggregate publicly.
- The collection of data from public institutions allowing meaningful interstate comparison of student learning should be encouraged and implemented in all states.
- The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), should be administered by U.S. Department of Education at five- instead of ten-year intervals.
- Accreditation agencies should make performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning, the core of their assessment as a priority over inputs or processes.

--from RECOMMENDATIONS (pp. 22-23)
New Higher Learning Commission accreditation criteria became effective January, 2005. Some excerpts from criterion five are:

- “As called for by its mission, the organization identifies its constituencies and serves them in ways both value.
- “The organization learns from the constituencies it serves and analyzes its capacity to serve their needs and expectations.
- “The organization has the capacity and the commitment to engage with its identified constituencies and communities.
- “The organization demonstrates its responsiveness to those constituencies that depend on it for service.
- “Internal and external constituencies value the services the organization provides.”

The full text may be viewed online. Click download the Policy Book to get the pdf.

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**Toolkit is brought to you by the Office of Assessment Services:**

_Donna Askins, Editor-in-Chief_

**Carolinda Douglass, Assessment Coordinator**

_and Ashley, Amy, and Koushik, the Assessment Research Assistants._

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**Contributions Solicited!**

What assessment methods have worked well for you? What findings have helped you modify your program? *Toolkit* would love to print your assessment tips or success story! We’re looking to share the wisdom that we each develop at home, making the work of assessment more productive. If you’d like material to be considered for inclusion in a future edition of *Toolkit*, submit a Word document of no more than 300 words as an email attachment to cdooug@niu.edu.