University Data on Student Learning Outcomes

Institutions of higher education are under increasing pressure to provide evidence of student learning outcomes. From the Spellings Commission Report released in 2006 by the U.S. Department of Education to the ongoing developments in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, institutions of higher education and their accreditors are finding the need to demonstrate student achievement. Parents, students, and other constituencies are seeking to verify that high quality student learning is taking place on college campuses.

How can faculty, students and other interested parties verify that student learning outcomes are being achieved? One way is through the use of standardized tests in core educational outcomes such as writing, critical thinking and mathematical abilities. Currently NIU collects data on core educational outcomes such as student writing skills through the University Writing Project and other local assessments. It does not consistently measure student learning outcomes through nationally normed, standardized tests. One such series of tests currently under consideration for use at NIU are the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) tests. If implemented, these tests would provide information critical to understanding and improving student learning outcomes in core areas. Test results would also enable NIU to better respond to external calls for more comprehensive data in these areas.

One such call comes from the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC)
VSA APPROACHES TO ACCOUNTABILITY: PART 3 OF 3, continued

University Data on Student Learning Outcomes

and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). These organizations have joined together to create a voluntary mechanism for increasing accountability and transparency of institutional outcomes, referred to as the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA).

The VSA has proposed a three-pronged approach. Previous issues of Toolkit covered the first two, and all three are summarized below.

The third of these prongs is focused on collecting and disseminating data on student learning outcomes. It is the intent of NASULGC and AASCU to have each university participating in the VSA to voluntarily maintain data on a publicly accessible web site that reports on measures of student learning outcomes, in addition to data addressing the other two prongs. A “College Portrait” template for how these data might be displayed has been developed by the VSA collaborators. These data, expected to become available over the next 2-4 years, should aid students and faculty in better tracking and understanding the impact the educational experience on student learning outcomes.

The VSA’s Three-Pronged Approach

The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) is considering a three-pronged approach to respond to increasing requests for measurable outcomes of higher education. On a voluntary basis, the VSA suggests universities might post the following data on their respective websites:

1. Information for students and parents to aid these individuals in their search for the university that best fits their needs. These data might include actual costs of attendance, graduation rates, and employment facts. See Toolkit Volume 6, Issue 1.

2. Data to measure students’ engagement in their educational experience. See Toolkit Volume 6, Issue 2. These measures would include the amount of time students spend with faculty outside of class, the opportunities available for students to engage in active learning in community settings, and other factors related to student engagement.

3. As reported in this issue of Toolkit, the data above would be triangulated by reporting actual student learning outcomes. For extensive information, and to see how all of these data might be displayed, visit the template developed by the VSA.

Suskie Workshop Postponed

The visit of Linda Suskie, Vice President with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and author of Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide, has been postponed. Plans are for Dr. Suskie to offer two sessions for faculty and staff.

Her first presentation, “Accountability Pressures and Their Impact on Regional Accreditation,” will review sources of the recent increase in pressures for accountability, what higher education’s publics are asking for, and how the higher education community might respond.

“Understanding and Using Assessment Results” is a hands-on workshop. Small group exercises will be intermingled with short presentations on each of these topics.

A schedule of Suskie’s presentations will be published as soon as details are known.
Nursing Students Enthusiastic About Portfolio Assessment

In fall 2003, the nursing program at NIU launched a new portfolio assessment program for the undergraduate curriculum. Students submit a portfolio of their best work at the end of their junior year in order to assess curricular effectiveness in the areas of critical thinking, therapeutic interventions, writing, and self-reflection. Students can then use the feedback from the portfolio assessment to improve areas of weakness during their senior year. According to nursing portfolio consultant, Julie Robertson, “Students see the value of reflecting on their growth in the program and choosing documents that reflect that growth. This self-reflection is critical to their success in nursing and their journey of lifelong learning.”

Five student volunteers serve on the Portfolio Subcommittee. Student subcommittee members are involved in all phases of the assessment project. They accompany faculty to nursing classes, provide feedback regarding the portfolio process, and discuss ideas regarding how the process can be improved in the future. Students serving on the Portfolio Subcommittee have found that the experience has taught them how to lead meetings and assume a leadership role.

According to Brigid Lusk, Chair of the School of Nursing and Health Studies, “Students on the portfolio committee serve as a conduit between the faculty and other students.” Jeannette Rossetti, chair of the Portfolio Subcommittee, indicated, “Having student representatives going with faculty to the classes sends a message that this is a collaborative effort.”

After the portfolios are reviewed, the data are used to make programmatic changes to improve student learning. Rossetti indicated that the Portfolio Subcommittee also looks at trend data to track the effectiveness of the changes that have been made. Students are aware that the portfolio assessment program outcomes are being used to improve student learning.

Student subcommittee member, Hillary Kirschbaum, stated that the nursing program takes the results of the student portfolios very seriously, and has seen a dramatic increase in the scores since they started the portfolio assessment. Julie Gebhardt, another student subcommittee member, said the portfolios show how well the university is preparing students in their general studies.

By and large, the portfolios have generated enthusiasm among students in the School of Nursing and Health Studies. According to Kirschbaum, “Enthusiasm generates from getting feedback on the whole. Students grasp their achievement in the nursing program overall. They really get the big picture on how they are doing.”
Dr. James O. Nichols, CEO of Institutional Effectiveness Associates, has granted permission for Toolkit to reprint the Undergraduate English Program Five Column Model, shown below. This model is a graphic representation of the completion of an easy to understand and develop, step by step, assessment-based student learning improvement process. It has been utilized coast to coast, in every regional accrediting association. The model is readily adapted to the requirements for Administrative and Educational Support units. A more complete description of the model is contained in “A Road Map for Improvement of Student Learning and Support Services Through Assessment,” Agathon Press, 2005.

**TOOL OF THE MONTH**

**Undergraduate English Program Five Column Model**

**Mission Statement:**
The principal focus of Our University’s curricular program is undergraduate education in the liberal arts and sciences...

**Expanded Statement of Institutional Purpose**

1. Students completing the baccalaureate program in English will compare very favorably in their knowledge of literature with those students completing a similar program nationally.
2. Graduates will be able to critique a brief draft essay.
3. Students completing the baccalaureate program will be capable of writing an acceptable journal article.

**Program Intended Education Outcomes:**

1. Students completing the baccalaureate program in English will compare very favorably in their knowledge of literature with those students completing a similar program nationally.
2. As part of the “capstone course” during the final semester, students will critique a short draft essay. Additionally, none of the 14 rubrics utilized to evaluate the student’s critique will appear to be consistently unmet.
3. A jury of English department faculty from an institution comparable to Our University will judge 80% of those journal articles submitted acceptable for publication based on commonly accepted standards.

**Means of Program Assessment and Criteria for Success:**

1a. The average score of the graduates of the BA program in English on the MFAT “Literature in English” will be at or near the 50th percentile compared to national results, and no subscale score will be below the 30th percentile.
1b. On the Graduating Student Questionnaire, 90% of the English BA program graduates will “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “In the field of literature, I feel as well prepared as the majority of individuals nation wide who have completed a similar degree program during the past year.”
2. 92% of graduates identified 87% of errors, however, grammatical conventions regarding capitalization were not consistently applied.

**Summary of Data Collected:**

1a. MFAT score for year’s graduates (18) found to be at 37th percentile. This was due to a 23rd percentile score on the “American Literature” subscale.
1b. 93% responded “agree” or “strongly agree.”
2. 92% of graduates identified 87% of errors, however, grammatical conventions regarding capitalization were not consistently applied.

**Use of Results:**

1a. Course offerings in “American Literature” were reviewed to ascertain degree of match with MFAT “American Literature” subscale. Added additional course Lit 317 (Survey of American Lit) as requirement.
1b. Criterion met. At this time no action required. Question is deleted from next year’s questionnaire. Faculty has added question relating to electronic reviews of literature.
2. Faculty use of commonly accepted conventions regarding capitalization in reviewing upper division papers has been emphasized.

3a. 55% of articles reviewed were found acceptable for publication.
3b. 20% of journal articles submitted will be published.
3b. Additional outlets for student publishing have been identified.

3b. English 407 (Advanced Writing) modified to include journal article exercise.
**Must a Program Collect All Data Every Year?**

FAQ: Does my program need to collect data on every student learning outcome using every assessment method each year?

No. Many faculty and staff believe that they must assess all learning outcomes using all of their assessment methods and, in some cases, assessing the performance of all students each year. While this may be necessary for some discipline-specific accreditors who require these data (please check to see if your accreditor does), this is not required by NIU. It is the position of the University Assessment Panel that programs are to demonstrate trends in student learning outcomes over time and may do so in a variety of ways that best suit their needs and the needs of their students. The implications of this are threefold.

First, a program does not need to collect data on every student learning outcome every year. If, for example, your program has a student learning outcome on written communication and another on oral presentations, you can collect data on writing one year and oral presentations the next. Even if you decide to collect data on both outcomes every year, you may want to save some of the data you collect and analyze it in two-year intervals. Perhaps you will examine data collected in 2006 and 2007 related to written communication this year and data collected in 2007 and 2008 related to oral communication the next.

Second, a program may not necessarily use every assessment method each year. For example, if you measure student skills using both a performance exam and external feedback, you may decide to collect and utilize the results from the performance exam one year and collect and utilize the results from an external reviewer the next.

Third, a program may decide to not collect data on all students every year. If you have a very large cohort of students, it may be quite reasonable to sample from among those students for assessment purposes. In these circumstances, for example, you may decide to review a random sample of papers to assess writing abilities across the cohort.

With the caveat that some discipline-specific accreditors may have different reporting requirements, it is fair to say that, in general, NIU programs are not required to collect data on every outcome every year. Nor are they required to assess all students or use every assessment method each year. Rotating the outcomes you are assessing, rotating methods, and sampling are ways to increase your ability to assess more areas of your program’s student learning outcomes while still picking up on major trends in student learning.
DID YOU KNOW?

Class of 2006 Reports Positive Educational Experiences at NIU

The Office of Assessment Services conducted the Baccalaureate Alumni Survey for the class of 2006. Respondents felt positive about their education at NIU:

- 98 percent found that, in their major, professors were accessible outside of class
- 98 percent felt that their major professors’ expectations for the quality of student work were high
- 95 percent thought the amount of time it took to complete their degree was reasonable
- 94 percent expressed a positive attitude toward their degree major

Alumni were also pleased with how NIU prepared them for life after graduation:

- 95 percent described their overall university experiences and courses as helpful in developing their ability to think analytically — to make logical inferences, and reach correct conclusions
- 93 percent indicated that their overall university experiences and courses were helpful in developing their ability to plan and manage projects
- 90 percent said that their degree prepared them for their present job

Overall, survey respondents had good things to say about the university:

- 94 percent stated they would recommend NIU to their friends and family and...
- 95 percent indicated a positive attitude toward NIU.

Campus Assessment Network

All NIU assessment professionals and interested parties are invited to join the growing Campus Assessment Network. The group meets five times a year to cover issues related to promoting a positive culture of assessment at NIU. Contact Carolinda Douglass, Director of Assessment Services, at cdoug@niu.edu or 753-7120.