NIU Joins Voluntary System of Accountability

In July, 2009, NIU joined the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). The VSA is an accountability initiative by public, four-year universities designed to supply basic, comparable information about the undergraduate experience.

The VSA is sponsored by two higher education associations – The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) that, together, represent over 525 public institutions, sixty-three percent of which already participate in the VSA. Participating institutions display their information in a common web-based report called the College Portrait.

The College Portrait template is identical for each participating institution, allowing the user to easily compare information from one institution to the next. The developers created three distinct sections in which to share information about the university: Student/Family Information, Student Experiences/Perceptions, and Student Learning Outcomes. In addition to these, there are nine buttons that link to university-specific information chosen by the institution. According to NIU’s Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Development, Virginia Cassidy, “It’s designed in a way that will not only make it easy to see information on majors, costs, student profiles, and so forth, across all institutions participating in the initiative, but it also shows the unique aspects of those institutions.” NIU has chosen to create broad categories for the nine buttons, and landing pages that contain several links to various NIU resources and websites.

The Student Experiences/Perceptions and Student Learning Outcomes sections of the College Portrait are not required for a few years, allowing NIU ample time to choose and implement an assessment tool, and analyze and interpret the findings.

NIU-specific information and Student/Family information is available to be viewed in the recently published NIU College Portrait, located at www.collegeportraits.org/IL/NIU, or linked to from the “Apply to NIU” page of the NIU website. Visit www.collegeportraits.org to learn more about College Portraits. Learn about the VSA itself at www.voluntarysystem.org.
ASSESSMENT FAQ:

Can’t We Just Make the Chair Do It?

FAQ: Assessment takes a lot of time. Can’t we just assign assessment to one individual in the department or leave it up to the Chair/Director?

Assessment takes time and effort, which can make it tempting to assign the responsibility to one individual faculty member or the department chair/unit director. While assigning one or two individuals the task of coordinating assessment processes in your area may be a good idea, assessment itself requires the input and follow-through of most, if not all, individuals in a department or unit. Each person contributes to the assessment process with their own unique perspectives and suggestions for improving student learning. It is important for all faculty and staff to understand and support the student learning outcomes a particular department/unit has chosen for its students. Further, the most powerful assessment evidence generally comes from direct, course-embedded data. These data simply can not be collected and interpreted without the participation of faculty and staff who have direct student contact.

The contribution of all members of a department/unit to the assessment process is fundamental to creating authentic and meaningful assessment of student learning.

NIU’s 3rd Annual Assessment Expo will take place on Friday, March 19, 2010, in the Holmes Student Center Sky Room. The Assessment Expo is designed to highlight successful assessment practices on campus. A poster session and roundtable discussions will feature representatives from academic programs and student affairs units across campus which have been recognized by the University Assessment Panel for their outstanding assessment practices in the previous year.

This year’s topics will focus primarily on, but will not be limited to, the currently Proposed Baccalaureate Goals or three C’s – Critical Thinking, Communication and Context. Assessment of Creativity will also be included. Tools for assessment will be shared including writing rubrics, internship evaluations, student self-reflections and more.

The day begins with registration at 8:30. The poster session follows at 9:15, and roundtable discussions begin at 10:00. For more information, or to register for the event, please visit the Office of Assessment Services online or telephone 753-8659. Be there!
On October 16, 2009, the Office of Assessment Services and the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center co-hosted Dr. Catherine Wehlburg, executive director of the Office for Assessment and Quality Enhancement at Texas Christian University. Dr. Wehlburg presented two workshops, including “Faculty Learning Groups: More Than Just Another Committee.” In this morning session, participants explored the power of faculty learning groups (FLG) as a method for transforming teaching and learning using assessment processes. Small group conversation highlighted how FLGs can be used to create meaningful and sustainable methods for assessing learning and using that information to enhance the educational process.

With particular regard to assessment, faculty involved in FLGs would determine for themselves the best way to determine measurable learning outcomes, rather than have an external source tell them how to measure student learning. The point is that faculty know their disciplines better than anyone else, and therefore know best how to tell when students are acquiring the skills and knowledge of the field.

FLGs are typically given a charge, such as “What would the look like if our students were better critical thinkers than they are now?” These Groups are also given a timeline.

Dr. Wehlburg’s “E=MC²” notation signifies “Evaluation = Measurement x Common sense” or, in other words, “Don’t be too rigid!” One doesn’t have to measure everything all the time.

Dr. Wehlburg generously granted permission to reprint FLG tips for success, shown here.

To access the full content, please visit the source or follow the relevant links provided in the document.
DID YOU KNOW?

Annual Assessment Updates Continue to Improve

The Office of Assessment Services implemented the Annual Assessment Update in academic year 2003-2004. This assessment requires that each academic program in the university submit an Annual Update Form at the end of the academic year reporting on two assessment activities that have been undertaken that year. The format of the Annual Update Form calls for 1) an explanation of the assessment methods, 2) the student learning outcomes addressed by the methods, 3) evidence of findings, and 4) use of assessment results.

Upon their submission, the Annual Update Forms are reviewed by the Director of Assessment Services and other staff in the Office of Assessment Services. A standardized checklist for review is used to provide feedback to academic programs on their assessment efforts assigning scores of met, partially met, and unmet. For reporting purposes, the percentages reflect the met and partially met scores.

Across the board:
• 94% of the criteria were met for the methods section.
• 91% of the criteria were met for the learning outcomes section.
• 87% of the criteria were met for the evidence section.
• 88% of the criteria were met for the use of results section.

Overall:
• 90% of all of the criteria were met across NIU.

From a programmatic perspective:
• 85% of academic programs met the criteria for the methods section.
• 88% of academic programs met the criteria for the learning outcomes section.
• 73% of academic programs met the criteria for the evidence section.
• 81% of academic programs met the criteria for the use of results section.

Overall:
• 61% of academic programs across NIU met all the criteria.

Finally, participation in this initiative continues at maximum levels:
• 100% of programs submitted Annual Updates this year, meeting the UAP target for the 3rd straight year.

Annual Updates ask:
1. What assessment methods did you use?
2. What student learning outcomes did these methods address?
3. What evidence did you find?
4. How did you use these results?
Call for Participation: The University Writing Project

The Office of Assessment Services (OAS) invites faculty from across campus to participate in the University Writing Project (UWP).

Formerly known as the Junior-Level Writing Project, this initiative was established in the mid-1990s to specifically measure the writing ability of NIU undergraduate students. It has evolved into a course-embedded assessment of students’ written assignments.

Results of 2009 are highlighted in this issue of Toolkit.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

1. From completed coursework they would normally assign, faculty select undergraduate writing samples and …
2. send the writing samples to the OAS.
3. English department faculty review the samples using a standardized assessment rubric.
4. Faculty members receive valuable feedback on the writing abilities of their students.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

• Faculty members have ongoing input into the writing assessments. Participating instructors will select the writing sample to be scored.
• Because writing samples are obtained from work already required in the selected courses, faculty members are not asked to assign additional written coursework.
• Writing samples come from course-embedded work, so there is no need to use a class period for project administration. No one gives up valuable class time to participate in the UWP.
• Samples will be scored by trained scorers selected from the Department of English.
• Results will be tabulated by department and college in aggregate format by the OAS.

Individual student results are completely confidential.
• The findings may be used for ongoing program assessment. Finally, the project contributes to the assessment of general education at NIU.

For more information, please contact Carolinda Douglass in the Office of Assessment Services at 753-7120 or by email at cdoug@niu.edu.

Faculty choosing to participate in the UWP must agree to the following:

1. Faculty members will send a list of students’ names for each participating course to the OAS by February 19, 2010. These will be kept confidential.
2. Faculty members will send the instructions for the course assignment selected to the OAS to be shared with the English faculty evaluating the writing assignments by February 19, 2010. The maximum number of pages for any one writing sample is ten pages; a minimum if three pages of text is required.
3. Faculty members will send the student writing samples to the OAS no later than May 3, 2010 (these may be sent electronically or by hard copy).
4. Faculty will inform their students that course assignments will be submitted to the OAS for institutional, college, and program assessment.

Faculty will inform their students that the results of their individual assessments will remain confidential by the OAS and will not be shared with faculty, college administrators, or any other parties. Aggregated results will be made publicly available.
DID YOU KNOW?

Results of the 2009 University Writing Project

The Office of Assessment Services has now published the 2009 University Writing Project Report. Its 40 pages clearly explicate the procedures and outcomes of this university-wide assessment of students’ writing skills.

Four colleges submitted 493 student writing samples for review (in 2008, five colleges submitted 426 writing samples). The papers were scored on a scale of 2-6, with scores of 2, 4, and 6 indicating that the writing ‘did not meet,’ ‘met,’ or ‘exceeded’ expectations, respectively. Three hundred and eighty (77 percent) of the writing samples met or exceeded expectations. The work submitted from all four participating colleges exceeded the mean score of 4.

The 2009 scoring rubric allowed for subscale distinctions to determine areas of strength and weakness within the writing samples. Seven subscales were identified: focus, genre, audience, organization, critical thinking, writer’s presence, and presentation. As in 2008, students exceeded the average score of 4 in all subscales except presentation. Their best performances were in the areas of focus and writer’s presence.

The University Writing Project: How is it Working for You?

Each year the Office of Assessment Services (OAS) completes the University Writing Project (UWP) and publishes the results in a report that is widely disseminated throughout the campus. In an ongoing effort “close the loop,” the OAS invites you to send your feedback on the UWP and the usefulness of the results to your department. The UWP can be improved if staff know:

• How do you use the results?
• What programmatic changes have you considered or implemented in response to the results?
• How could the information provided in the report be improved to better suit your needs?

Please send your feedback to assess@niu.edu or call us at 753-8659. Let’s work together to improve student writing at NIU!
Mark Your Calendar

The next meeting of the Campus Assessment Network is scheduled for Tuesday, November 17, from 12:30 to 2:00 p.m. in Campus Life 115. The Network’s winter meeting has not yet been scheduled.

For the 2009-2010 academic year, the remaining University Assessment Panel meetings are as follows. The Panel meets from 10:00 a.m. to noon in Altgeld 203, except where noted:

2009:
November 20
December 4 - Lowden 304

2010:
January 15
February 5
February 19
March 5
March 19 - HSC Sky Room (Assessment Expo)
April 2
April 16

Several assessment conferences are coming up in February:

**AAC&U General Education and Assessment**
Maintaining Momentum, Achieving New Priorities
Seattle WA, February 18 - 20, 2010

“General Education and Assessment: Maintaining Momentum, Achieving New Priorities invites fresh thinking and new approaches to help faculty, staff, and administrators maintain momentum in general education and assessment during tough times, and reaffirms a commitment to engaged liberal education as the guiding principle for campus action. Attend this meeting to learn new approaches to aligning scarce resources with an ambitious plan for general education, and ways to integrate diversity, global, civic learning, and models for advancing scientific and quantitative literacy through real-world curricula and problem-based pedagogies.”

**The 10th Annual Texas A&M Assessment Conference**
Seeing 2020: Building on a Decade of Assessment
College Station TX, February 21 – 23, 2010

“The Texas A&M University Annual Assessment Conference provides valuable opportunities for higher education professionals to enhance their knowledge of assessment and to share their own experiences and assessment practices.”

**2010 New Mexico Higher Education Assessment and Retention Conference**
Grassroots Leadership: Doing the Right Thing in Perilous Times

“The mission of the conference is to provide a forum for a wide variety of innovative assessment and retention presentations. Most importantly, we are interested in having you share what you have done and how it has worked.”

Toolkit is brought to you by the Office of Assessment Services:
Donna Askins, Editor-in-Chief
Carolinda Douglass, Director of Assessment Services and the Office of Assessment Services staff.