Northern Illinois University has a rich culture of assessment that permeates all aspects of the university. The central focus is to serve the university’s mission to promote excellence and engagement in teaching and learning, research and scholarship, creativity and artistry, and outreach and service. In fulfilling this mission, there is a history of quality assurance and evidence-based teaching and learning practices that are anchored to our conceptual framework of assessment, placing the student at the center.

Curriculum delivery at NIU reports to the Office of the Provost, with coordination of assessment processes housed within the Division of Academic Affairs under the guidance and support of the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment. In addition to working closely with colleges, programs, and non-academic support units, the Office of Assessment Services has regular contact with the Academic Planning Council, University Assessment Panel, General Education Committee, and the Office of Teacher Certification. Established guidelines require undergraduate and graduate academic programs to develop assessment plans that are vetted by the University Assessment Panel and the Office of Assessment Services. Both academic programs and student and academic support service units submit status reports for review by the University Assessment Panel on a five to eight year cycle.

University-wide entities that impact student success, such as the General Education Committee, the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning, Office of Student Academic Success, the University Office of Teacher Certification, the University Libraries, the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, and the Division of International Programs utilize assessment resources within the Division of Academic Affairs. Centralized initiatives such as the MAP-Works Transition Survey, University Writing Project, National Survey on Student Engagement, and Alumni Surveys provide feedback and guidance on necessary improvements in the areas of student writing, engagement, critical thinking, and future student career success.

The aim of the university plan for academic outcomes assessment is to provide guidance and focus such that learning today ensures our students can lead tomorrow.

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INTRODUCTION AND MISSION

Northern Illinois University, founded in 1895, has become a multipurpose educational institution as it moves into its second century. The central vision of the university, as set forth in our Mission and Vision statement, is "to be the premier student-centered, research-focused public university in the Midwest, contributing to the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of the people of the region, the state, the nation, and the world." In fulfilling that vision, the university provides high quality undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs to serve the citizens of the 23 county-region in northern Illinois extending from suburban Chicago to Rockford and beyond. As the major public institution of higher education accessible to the residents of the region, NIU serves more than 21,000 full- and part-time students, both on campus and at regional sites. Approximately 35 percent of our students are minorities, and slightly more than half are women.

NIU offers more than 140 degree programs in the Colleges of Business, Education, Engineering and Engineering Technology, Health and Human Sciences, Law, Liberal Arts and Sciences, and Visual and Performing Arts and awards nearly 6,000 degrees annually. The university's academic programs are currently accredited by 28 separate regional and national agencies.

NIU’s Vision and Mission Statement

The vision of Northern Illinois University is to be the premier student-centered, research-focused public university in the Midwest, contributing to the advancement of knowledge for the benefit of the people of the region, the state, the nation, and the world.

With this vision, the mission of the University is to promote excellence and engagement in teaching and learning, research and scholarship, creativity and artistry, and outreach and service.

In pursuing our vision and fulfilling our mission, the University values:

- A community of diverse people, ideas, services, and scholarly endeavors in a climate of respect for the intrinsic dignity of each individual
- Access for a broad spectrum of students to high quality undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs that prepare them to be lifelong learners and productive, socially conscious citizens
- Engaged teaching and learning that evolves from the synergy of research, artistry, and service
- Research and artistry in creating, transmitting, expanding, and applying knowledge
- Student success supported through academic and co-curricular programming and activities
- The application of current technology in enhancing and broadening all institutional endeavors
• A system of shared governance that incorporates input from faculty, staff, and students in decision- and policy-making
• Commitment to a public purpose addressing regional, state, national, and global challenges and opportunities

The NIU Mission and Vision Statement supports the institution's strategic imperatives to:

• Preserve, Strengthen, and Extend NIU’s Teaching and Learning Environment;
• Develop a Strategy for Investing in Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship and Artistic Clusters – to complement NIU’s focus on individual scholarly and artistic achievement;
• Strengthen and Extend NIU’s Global/Regional Impact; and
• Make NIU an Institution of “First Choice” for Faculty, Students, and Staff.

Further, the Mission and Vision Statement supports the eight Baccalaureate student learning outcomes:

1. Integrate knowledge of global interconnections and interdependencies.
2. Exhibit intercultural competencies with people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives.
3. Analyze issues that interconnect human life and the natural world.
4. Demonstrate critical, creative, and independent thought.
5. Communicate clearly and effectively.
6. Collaborate with others to achieve specific goals.
7. Use and combine appropriate quantitative and qualitative reasoning skills to address questions and solve problems.
8. Synthesize knowledge and skills relevant to one’s major or particular field of study and apply them creatively to develop innovative outcomes.

In turn, these outcomes support the three C’s of the undergraduate baccalaureate experience at NIU: (1) Critical Thinking, (2) Creativity, and (3) Communication.

For both undergraduate and graduate students, student learning outcomes articulated by all of NIU's academic programs in their assessment plans are aligned with NIU’s Mission and Vision. The units within the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management also maintain assessment plans that specify the student learning outcomes that they address in their support of our Mission and Vision. These units provide services, activities, and learning experiences outside of the classroom that enrich students’ experience while at NIU. The University Plan for Academic Outcomes Academic Assessment describes a coordinated set of centralized and decentralized activities that are designed to assess how well academic programs and student support units meet student academic outcomes and provide a framework for continual improvement.
HISTORY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AND ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

In the late 1970s, NIU initiated a campus-based program review process conducted under the provost’s direction by the university’s Academic Planning Council as a means of systematically evaluating the quality of instructional programs, their processes and outcomes, and their resource allocations and needs. Program reviews are conducted for all academic degree programs as well as academic support units. Additionally, these program reviews are used as a basis for reporting to the university’s governing board and to the Illinois Board of Higher Education (IBHE), which was created in the 1960s as the state-level oversight agency for higher education. Since its inception, the program review process has undergone numerous modifications to meet the changing needs of the university’s academic planning processes and the requirements for reporting to external constituencies. Responding to changing reporting requirements to the IBHE, the cycle for program review has changed from a five- to a seven-year cycle, and now to its current eight-year cycle. The criteria for the review of programs have evolved, shifting in emphasis from documenting processes and inputs to demonstrating program and student learning outcomes and processes for continual program improvement.

In the 1980s Northern Illinois University initiated the development of formal assessment plans initially for its undergraduate programs, and later for its graduate and professional programs. The provost also created an assessment coordinator position, now the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment, to provide support and assistance to programs in the development of their plans and to coordinate assessment practices within the Division of Academic Affairs. Assessment plans were developed by the faculty in each academic program, and then were reviewed and approved by college curriculum committees and the appropriate university level curricular bodies; a subcommittee of the Undergraduate Coordinating Council for the undergraduate program plans and the curriculum subcommittee of the Graduate Council for the graduate and professional programs.

In the 1990s the departments and schools initiated the assessment plans for their programs, and began to incorporate the findings from the assessment activities into processes for improving student learning outcomes. Funding from the provost’s office was made available for specific program based assessment activities. Additionally, the Office of Assessment Services began working with the General Education Committee to develop methods for assessing the general education program. During this period the reporting line for the assessment coordinator was changed from the associate provost to the assistant provost, now vice provost, for academic planning and development to create a clearer connection between assessment activities and program review. Further, the administration of the undergraduate and graduate alumni surveys became a coordinated effort between the Office of Assessment Services and the Office of Career Planning and Placement. This change was made to meet the need of the university to better track
alumni satisfaction with their programs and experiences at NIU, and to develop a process for the university’s participation in the statewide alumni survey coordinated by the Illinois Board of Higher Education, which issues an annual report on the composite results of the alumni surveys. Ultimately, the responsibility for the alumni survey was assumed by the Office of Assessment Services.

In 1996, higher education in Illinois moved from a system of coordinating boards to individual boards for each of the public universities, and the NIU Board of Trustees was created. The NIU Board of Trustees exercises broad oversight of the university’s human and fiscal resources, operations, programs, and faculty and staff. In 1997 the provost commissioned a taskforce to define the roles and responsibilities for a university-level committee to provide oversight of assessment practices for the Division of Academic and Student Affairs. The result of this effort was the 1998 creation of the interdisciplinary University Assessment Panel which is comprised of faculty, staff, and students. Since its inception, the University Assessment Panel has assumed responsibility for review of academic program assessment plans, provided recommendations for funding to support the implementation of assessment initiatives, approved proposals for the creation of capstone courses, and, more recently, provided oversight for the university’s participation in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). In 2000, the panel, in collaboration with the vice provost, the vice provost for student affairs, and the assistant vice provost for academic support services, developed a process for the systematic review of the outcomes of the academic- and student-support units. As a result of the redesigned program review process initiated by the Illinois Board of Higher Education, the panel revised its requirements and schedule for the review of the assessment plans and status reports from academic programs and academic support units. The panel also reviews the findings from the university’s centrally administered assessment projects and the university’s annual Program Review Report to the higher board.

In 2009, the Program Review Report replaced the Performance Report which superseded the 1999 higher board initiated Results Report. This change provided the university an opportunity to identify the ways in which initiatives that fulfill the university’s mission also contribute to the six goals of the statewide plan for higher education, the Illinois Commitment. With the adoption of the Illinois Public Agenda for College and Career Success in 2008-2009, the program review process and the Program Review Report have been adapted to reflect the NIU’s outcomes related to the four goals of the new statewide plan: (1) increase educational attainment to match best-performing states; (2) ensure college affordability for students, families, and taxpayers; (3) increase the numbers of high-quality post-secondary credentials to meet the demands of the economy and an increasingly global society; and (4) better integrate Illinois’ educational, research, and innovation assets to meet economic needs of the state and its regions. The Agenda also guides information incorporated into new program requests.
Several efforts have been undertaken at NIU in the past few years to promote greater planning, transparency, and public accountability at NIU. A university-wide strategic planning process began in 2006-2007 which led to NIU’s four previously mentioned imperatives; (1) preserve, strengthen, and extend NIU’s teaching and learning environment; (2) develop a strategy for investing in multidisciplinary scholarship and artistic clusters – to complement NIU’s focus on individual scholarly and artistic achievement; (3) strengthen and extend NIU’s global/regional impact; and (4) make NIU an institution of “first choice” for faculty, students, and staff. The NIU Great Journeys Strategic Plan has led to many fruitful outcomes including a comprehensive baccalaureate review discussed above and NIU’s participation in the Voluntary System of Accountability, beginning in 2009. NIU currently publishes an on-line College Portrait including data on student characteristics, institutional characteristics, student experiences (as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement), and Student Learning Outcomes (including, but not limited to, measurement by the Collegiate Learning Assessment). In 2011-2012, NIU’s president rolled out Vision 2020 recommendations and performance benchmarks for NIU to reach by 2020, based on strategic planning and development work done in the previous five years. Benchmarks were set in the following areas: (1) academic programming; (2) facilities and environment; (3) faculty work, excellence, and rewards; (4) regional impact, outreach, engagement, and graduate education; (5) student experience; (6) student recruitment, retention, and success; and (7) sustainability. In FY 2013, the state of Illinois began using performance metrics in order to tie a portion of state funding to measures of campus outcomes. NIU is well situated for this development due to the intense reflective processes and planning efforts that have been undertaken on our campus since 2006-2007.

FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSMENT PRACTICES/CYCLE OF ASSESSMENT

Assessment practices at Northern Illinois University are based on a framework that has at its core the improvement of measurable student learning outcomes (See Figure 1). The framework is comprised of the cycle of assessment that occurs within an external and internal environment of driving and restraining forces. The cycle has seven components that are reflected in the assessment plans for each program or unit: identifying outcomes, establishing methodologies to assess the achievement of outcomes, gathering and analyzing the evidence by implementing the methodologies, sharing the results of the analysis, making evidence-based improvements as needed, and closing the loop on the assessment cycle. Improvements may not be needed if evidence confirms that outcomes have been achieved. The cycle continues by reaffirming or modifying outcomes as needed.

At the center of the framework are the students, supported in their learning by faculty and staff. Students, faculty, and staff are all essential actors in the assessment processes that are
undertaken at NIU. Further, the cycle of assessment is set within a culture of evidence-based teaching and learning and within a context of accountability.

Within this framework terms are defined as follows:

- **Program Outcomes** refer to the programmatic results for the academic- and student-support units of the Divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. Outcomes are stated in measurable terms and are defined by the programs and units. Examples of program outcomes could include preparing students for specific occupations or for graduate study.

- **Student Learning Outcomes** refer to the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students should be able to demonstrate at the completion of their academic program. Student learning outcomes support overall program outcomes. Examples of student learning outcomes could include those that are consistent with the Baccalaureate student learning outcomes (e.g., effective teamwork or problem-solving skills) or those that are specific to a particular degree program.

- **Assessment Methodologies** refer to those direct and indirect approaches selected by the programs and units to determine the extent to which program and student learning outcome have been achieved. These methodologies are implemented systematically, within the timeframes defined by the programs and units.

- **Pedagogical Approaches** refer to instructional strategies, activities, and experiences that faculty and staff use to present information, engage students, and foster student learning.

- **Evidence** refers to the data that substantiates whether or not outcomes were met. Data may be formative providing students with feedback that targets ways in which they can improve or summative providing evidence of how well the program or service unit is achieving its objectives.

- **Analysis of the evidence** refers to systematic appraisal of the findings in the context of the desired program or unit outcomes.

- **Sharing the results of the analysis** refers to communicating with key members of the programs or units as a basis for decision-making and continual improvement.

- **Evidence-based improvements** refer to those actions that are taken in an attempt to make changes needed to improve the attainment of program or unit objectives.

- **Closing the loop** refers to involvement on the part of faculty, staff, and students comparing program improvements with desired outcomes and modifying actions or outcomes as needed.

- **A culture of evidence-based teaching and learning** (described in more detail below) refers to the use of assessment practices and initiatives as a means for continual improvement in supporting students in reaching their learning outcomes.
- **Accountability** refers to the driving and restraining forces of the context in which assessment processes occur. These forces may be internal or external to the university, and can impact the assessment processes in positive or negative ways.

Figure 1. NIU's Conceptual Framework/Cycle of Assessment
CULTURE OF EVIDENCE-BASED TEACHING AND LEARNING

Students and their learning are at the center of the assessment framework and are supported by faculty and staff throughout the teaching, learning, and assessment processes which are embedded in a strong culture of evidence-based teaching and learning. This framework (depicted in Figure 2) includes:

- Systematic and rigorous data collection and reporting that occurs through the processes of the Annual Assessment Updates, Assessment Plans and Status Reports, and Program Review.
- A transparent tracking database posted in Blackboard that includes findings from Annual Assessment Updates, Assessment Plans and Status Reports, and Program Review materials from academic programs.
- Participation in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) and publication of the College Portrait to increase transparency of evidence-based teaching and learning. The assessment findings include results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA; until 2012), and assessments of student artifacts for written expression and critical thinking (after 2013).
- The Office of Assessment Services’ (OAS) website contains a varied collection of assessment resources, including, but not limited to:
  - a comprehensive Assessment Manual;
  - an Assessing the Assessor webpage, displaying results of the assessment practices and initiatives undertaken by the OAS;
  - student learning outcomes for each degree program;
  - a methods matrix showing the types of assessment methods being used by different degree programs and service units;
  - assessment plans and status reports for all academic programs and support units; and
  - citations for assessment related publications.
- External assessment speakers that are brought to campus twice a year to work with faculty on assessment topics.
- College-wide accreditation assessment plans and processes in the College of Business and College of Engineering and Engineering Technology.
- On-going general education assessments as discussed below.
- A formalized process for external review of all doctoral program departments.
- An Assessment Expo that highlights best assessment practices on campus.
The Campus Assessment Network (CAN), an informal group of assessment professionals and other interested parties, that meets four to five times a year to discuss current assessment issues.

The Student Advisory Council on Learning Outcomes (SACLO), a student organization that meets seven times a year to work on assessment of student learning issues and provides student feedback to faculty and staff on these issues.

Campus Assessment Framework

Figure 2. Campus Assessment Framework

OVERALL ASSESSMENT PROCESSES

The University Plan for Academic Outcomes Academic Assessment is comprehensive and multifaceted, and was constructed within the context of the NIU mission. It includes departmental components outlining assessment activities for degree programs at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels; activities for assessing general education; and activities for the support units within the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. The plan is centrally coordinated through the provost's office by the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment. This individual works closely with chairs, program coordinators, the University Assessment Panel, the Assessment Coordinator for Teacher Certification, the General Education
Coordinator, and the Director of Planning and Assessment for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management.

NIU has a decentralized assessment process that is student-centered and faculty driven. The primary focus of activities for the assessment of student learning is at the program level because our philosophy is that faculty should determine appropriate student learning outcomes, construct discipline-specific curricula, and identify the methods for demonstrating that students have achieved the learning outcomes. The primary focus for the assessment of academic and student support services is at the unit level where staff experts determine the outcomes for the services they provide, and develop the programmatic initiatives in their units. Assessment at the program and unit levels is augmented by centrally administered assessment initiatives to provide additional information to programs and the support units. These initiatives are conducted by the Office of Assessment Services, the Office of Institutional Research, the Graduate School, the Office of Student Academic Success, the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning, the General Education Committee, and other units that engage in periodic assessment initiatives.

In this integrated assessment process, the evidence gathered through assessment activities are used in several ways:

- Students use evidence to improve their own learning processes and outcomes.
- Faculty use evidence to update and improve curricula, either in content or methodology.
- Degree programs use evidence in periodic program reviews and ongoing curriculum development to ensure that the program outcomes for student learning are being met.
- Colleges use evidence to set priorities for resource allocations and to monitor the contribution of degree programs to the college mission and goals.
- Professional staff members use evidence to modify existing services and to create new approaches for delivering services to students.
- University administrators use evidence to assess the quality of the degree programs and support services provided to students and the effectiveness of the university in carrying out its mission.

Information on assessment activities and their results flows in a reciprocal fashion between the provost's office, the colleges, individual programs or units, shared governance committees and students. Programs report the results of their assessment activities via the college, to the University Assessment Panel. The panel provides feedback to the programs and colleges, and makes recommendations for funding assessment initiatives, if requested. Programs use assessment evidence to improve their curricular offerings. Similarly the support units report the results of their assessment activities to the University Assessment Panel via the academic officers to whom they report. The panel provides feedback to the units and the academic officers, and
makes recommendations for funding assessment initiatives, if requested. The support units use their findings to improve the quality of the services they provide for students, as well as accreditation, if applicable. Whenever initiatives are funded through the panel, programs and support units submit reports that inform the members of the panel on the results of the initiatives, and how the programs and units used or plan to use the evidence for improvement.

The evidence from centrally administered assessment initiatives are distributed to a variety of university committees, colleges, departments, programs, support units and students. This evidence provides the opportunity for dialogue on a variety of primarily undergraduate students’ perceptions of their experiences at the university, and has served as the impetus for the examination of existing practices, faculty development programming, and additional assessment initiatives. (See Appendix A for a summary of centrally administered assessment initiatives at the baccalaureate level and Appendix B for a summary of centrally administered assessment initiatives at the graduate level.)

The University Assessment Panel

The University Assessment Panel, chaired by the vice provost for academic planning and development, has oversight for all assessment activities for the academic programs. The panel provides peer review to units across the campus and is comprised of two faculty representatives who serve on the Academic Planning Council, the Undergraduate Coordinating Council, and the Graduate Council. Each council elects a representative to the panel to serve a term of two years. The executive vice president and provost appoint a second representative from each of the councils to serve a one year term, which can be renewed. The dean of the College of Law appoints one representative to the panel. Other members of the panel include the director of planning and assessment from the division of student affairs and enrollment management, a representative from the academic support units, and a representative from the curricular deans. One undergraduate student appointed by the Undergraduate Coordinating Council and one graduate student appointed by the Graduate Council, round out the voting members of the panel. The director of the Office of Institutional Research and the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment serve as ex officio members of the panel. The assessment coordinator for the University Office of Teacher Certification and staff from the Office of Assessment Services sit at the meetings as permanent guests. The duties of the panel are outlined below:

- Review university mission statement, other statements of university objectives, and state-level policies as a context for assessment. Provide advice on performance measures and benchmarks to be used in new state approval and review processes.

- Integrate assessment activities for undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs and academic support area. Work with the General Education Committee and the
Committee on Initial Teacher Certification on assessment activities in the general education program and in initial teacher certification programs.

- Promote campus-wide assessment activities to improve learning outcomes.
- Review departmental assessment activities in coordination with the eight-year program review schedule, and support departments preparing for program review. Make recommendations for funding support for expanded assessment activities in departments and colleges.
- Support departments and colleges preparing for the assessment component of discipline-specific accreditation reviews.
- Review and update the University Plan for Academic Outcomes Academic Assessment. Help position the University for the next HLC reaccreditation process and assist with the preparation of an HLC required self-study.
- Serve as the oversight board to the University’s participation in the Voluntary System of Accountability Initiative.

The Office of Assessment Services

The Office of Assessment Services is staffed by the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment, an associate director, an assessment coordinator, a research associate, an office support specialist, and one to two full-time (20 hours per week) graduate research assistants. The office is managed by the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment, who reports to the vice provost for academic planning and development. The office acts as a resource on assessment practices for all campus constituents and as a repository of assessment materials and documents from the NIU campus. The office is responsible for coordinating assessment initiatives within the Division of Academic Affairs; providing staff support for the University Assessment Panel; maintaining all files related to assessment initiatives and correspondence; serving as a central and transparent location for assessment plans, status/other reports, and assessment resources; maintaining the office’s website; conducting assessment outreach to the campus by holding assessment events and forums; conducting and/or coordinating a variety of centrally administered assessment projects and initiatives; and preparing and distributing reports of those projects and initiatives to university constituencies.

The Coordination of Assessment Activities

All areas directly involved in the delivery of the curriculum at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels, as well as the units providing academic- and student-support services, report
to the Office of the Provost. The provost designated the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment to coordinate selected assessment activities within the Division of Academic Affairs. The associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment works with a number of university committees, deans, chairs, directors, administrators, individual faculty and staff, and students to carry out this responsibility. The associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment also serves as a resource to all units within the division regarding assessment, and as a liaison among units for sharing information about assessment planning, for data gathering and analysis, and for curricular review and planning related to the assessment findings. To facilitate communications concerning assessment initiatives the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment works closely with the Academic Planning Council, the General Education Committee, the University Office of Teacher Certification, and the University Assessment Panel.

**Resources**

The Office of Assessment Services is located in Adams Hall. The space assigned to the office includes an office for the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment, an office for the graduate research assistants and office support specialist, an office for the assessment coordinator and research associate, and an office for the associate director. All individuals in the office have personal computers equipped with printers and Microsoft Office Suite, and have access to the Internet and email services. Other software packages and ancillary computer equipment support the work of the office. The associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment, the associate director, the assessment coordinator, the research associate, and the office support specialists also have telephones with voicemail capabilities.

The central assessment budget is administered by the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment with oversight from the vice provost for academic planning and development. The budget supports the staffing and operations of the Office of Assessment Services, and centrally administered assessment initiatives, including but not limited to: the conduct of the university’s annual follow-up surveys of alumni and the writing project. The budget also supports the funding requests for assessment activities from the academic programs and the division’s support units submitted to the University Assessment Panel, as well as other assessment initiatives.

The assessment activities included in the plans of the academic programs and the support units not funded from the centrally administered budget are supported from their general revenue budgets. Funding specific to the implementation of assessment activities in the academic programs and support units has not been appropriated by the state. Even modest costs for software, duplicating or postage can strain the budgets of some programs and units. While not all
assessment activities require funding, they do require faculty and staff time and effort to implement, and there is little funding available from program and unit budgets.

**Guidelines for Assessment Planning in Degree Programs**

The guidelines for the assessment of undergraduate degree programs were developed by the Assessment Subcommittee and approved by the Undergraduate Coordinating Council in May 1994. In 1994-1995, the Graduate Council Standards Committee adopted a set of guidelines similar to those developed by the Assessment Subcommittee of the Undergraduate Coordinating Council. The guidelines for all degree programs were updated and approved by the University Assessment Panel in 1999 and are updated regularly by the panel. The current guidelines are available in *Academic Programs Assessment Information Packet*.

**Assessment in Undergraduate, Graduate and Professional Programs**

Each academic and student support program is required to have an approved assessment plan. Prior to 2002, programs were invited to submit a current assessment plan and status report, which could include a funding request to support assessment activities, one, two, or three years prior to program review. This invitation was accepted by some programs but not by others. As the program review process shifted focus to an outcomes orientation it became clear that the systematic assessment of student learning outcomes was not uniformly implemented and that not all programs could report on learning outcomes. This finding resulted in the University Assessment Panel’s review of its policy on the submission of assessment plans and status reports, and in 2002 the panel revised its policy to require that all programs submit assessment plans and status reports in the fourth year of the program review cycle. The findings of the panel’s review of the plans and reports is sent to the program and is also included in the materials reviewed by the Academic Planning Council subcommittees in the program review process.

In 2002-2003, the University Assessment Panel conducted a review of all assessment plans using its evaluation rubric for assessment plans and status reports to ensure that they are current and meet the university’s requirements for the assessment of learning outcomes. Feedback was provided to the programs about any additional action needed in relation to the plans.

Beginning in fall 2004 each program has been required to submit to the panel an annual update on assessment findings and actions taken on those findings. Feedback is given on the annual updates by the Office of Assessment Services each year and a report of the criteria that are met in individual colleges and across the university is disseminated. The assessment plans, annual updates, and mid-cycle status reports are used by the Academic Planning Council in its review of the programs as evidence of the attainment of learning outcomes.
Beginning in spring 2011, all annual updates have been posted on Blackboard along with feedback on the updates, assessment plans, and mid-cycle reports. The use of Blackboard increases transparency and access to data for the campus community.

Each assessment plan includes:

- the identification of program and student learning outcomes;
- an explanation of the direct and indirect methods used to evaluate the achievement of outcomes;
- a matrix depicting which methods are used to assess each of the student learning outcomes;
- a timeline for the implementation of the methods;
- the identification of the individual(s) responsible for coordinating data collection; and
- at least one external method of assessment.

Each status report includes:

- a description of findings from assessment data;
- the conclusions drawn from the findings indicating that the evidence supports students’ attainment of the outcome(s) or the need for changes to improve outcomes;
- plans for changes to improve outcomes, if needed; and
- identification of gaps in data, if appropriate.

The status report may also include a request for funding to support the implementation of direct assessment methods included in the plan or for a pilot project to gather additional evidence.

Each annual update includes:

- two distinct methods of assessment used in the past year;
- the student learning outcomes assessed by the listed assessment methods, with numeric targets for success;
- evidence from the assessment activities conducted during the current year; and
- action(s) taken on findings.

Assessment in Academic- and Student-Support Units

The academic-support and student-support units within the division directly or indirectly support curricular activities. In 2000 the University Assessment Panel, in collaboration with the vice provost, the associate vice provost for academic support services, and the vice provost and associate vice provost for student affairs, developed a set of guidelines for the development of assessment plans and a five-year cycle for the review of assessment activities and outcomes in the
support units. These guidelines were reviewed and updated in 2006. Since then, they are reviewed each year and minor changes are made, as needed. The current guidelines are available in the *Student and Academic Support Services Assessment Information Packet*.

Each **assessment plan** includes:

- a history of the unit;
- the identification of mission, goals and objectives/outcomes;
- an explanation of the direct and indirect methods used to evaluate the achievement of the outcomes;
- an outcomes-by-methods matrix;
- a timeline for the implementation of the methods;
- the identification of the individual(s) responsible for coordinating data collection; and
- at least one external method of assessment.

Each **status report** includes:

- a description of findings from assessment data;
- the conclusions drawn from the findings indicating that the evidence supports attainment of the outcome(s) or the need for changes to improve outcomes;
- plans for changes to improve outcomes, if needed; and
- identification of gaps in data, if appropriate.

The status report may also include a request for funding to support the implementation of assessment methods included in the plan or for a pilot project to gather additional evidence. The most current versions of all approved academic-support and student-support unit assessment plans may be viewed on the Office of Assessment Services’ website.

**CENTRAL INITIATIVES**

As one component of the University Plan for Academic Outcomes Academic Assessment, the Office of Assessment Services conducts a number of assessment initiatives for the university. The Office of Institutional Research also conducts assessment initiatives, either in conjunction with assessment services, other offices, or independently. As shown in Figure 3 that follows, centrally administered assessment initiatives occur on a regular basis throughout the career of NIU undergraduate students. Appendix A provides a summary of all centrally administered assessment initiatives at the baccalaureate level.
Figure 3. Undergraduate Level – Central Initiatives

Current Initiatives

At NIU the Office of Admissions in the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management and the Office of Institutional Research collaborate on an assessment of students who applied to the
university and were admitted but elected not to matriculate. This assessment initiative has been conducted for nearly two decades and, at different times, both prospective students and their parents have been assessed. A locally developed survey is distributed every other fall semester (last completed in 2011) asking respondents to evaluate NIU and the school chosen on each of 25 factors that are typically considered when making a college choice. These 25 factors include items that ask about financial aid considerations, prestige and reputation of the universities, academic factors, the quality of several types of services, size of enrollment and average class sizes, intercollegiate athletics, and special events.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is administered to NIU freshmen and seniors on a three year cycle by the Office of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning (OSEEL). Last administered in 2011-2012, the NSSE focuses particularly on student participation in activities and programs that influence their academic learning and personal development. There are five NSSE benchmark areas that capture information about the student experience: (1) Level of Academic Challenge, (2) Active and Collaborative Learning, (3) Student-Faculty Interaction, (4) Enriching Educational Experiences, and (5) Supportive Campus Environment. Data from the NSSE are made available on the NIU website and on the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) College Portrait.

New students are automatically enrolled in the MAP-Works program. MAP-Works participants complete a series of brief personal surveys regarding academic skills and behaviors, social interactions, campus involvement and overall expectations. The answers to these questions are combined with the student’s academic credentials and provide a summary report that highlights personal strengths and possible challenges as well as related campus resources. In addition to the students themselves, dedicated NIU faculty and staff who work with the students on a regular basis have access to the information. Some of these professionals include instructors, academic advisors, student success specialists, and residence hall directors. Together, they provide an individualized network of support for each student by helping them transition to college life and achieve academic success by aligning student expectations with likely outcomes based each student’s behaviors and habits. It also helps students connect to resources, campus activities and organizations.

The Early Alert & Referral System is a collaborative effort between faculty and OSAS to identify students who may be experiencing academic challenges. Faculty members refer students to OSAS and a student success specialist intervenes to provide guidance and support. Student success specialists and faculty members work together to make certain that each student within the E.A.R.S. Program is armed with the resources and tactics necessary to succeed at NIU.

From 2009-2012 the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) was administered each year on our campus by the OAS. A sample of freshmen was tested in the fall and seniors in the spring. The CLA measures an institution’s contribution, or “value-added”, to student learning in higher order
competencies including critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and communication. Results from the CLA are posted on the College Portrait and are shared with individual students, faculty, and departments that participate each year. Use of the CLA was discontinued in 2013 for a number of reasons: difficulty recruiting students, low student motivation to perform, and vague feedback that produced little in the way of actionable feedback. Moving forward, critical thinking and written communication will be assessed from authentic student artifacts using AAC&U VALUE rubrics.

The First Year Composition (FYComp) Assessment Project was developed in 2007-08 to document changes in students’ writing abilities between the beginning of their first English course and the end of their second English course. Writing samples were obtained through a writing prompt administered during a 50 minute class period and assessed students’ critical analysis of reading and ability to write meaningful responses to presented information. Results of the project were mixed with students showing gains one year and losses the next. Since the curriculum and pedagogical approach in FYComp emphasizes improvements through a multi-draft writing process, it was determined that the project (timed writing task) was not providing information on the targeted question. Students’ performance in the First Year Composition sequence is now assessed via review of artifacts stored in a publicly available e-portfolio system. Review of these artifacts is conducted by a team of tenure-track faculty, instructors, and graduate teaching assistants in the Department of English. Results are used to document changes in students’ written communication and critical thinking skills across the first year composition course sequence. This information is then used to make curricula and pedagogical changes in the FYC sequence.

The University Writing Project (UWP) formerly known as the Junior Level Writing Project is an authentic assessment project designed to measure students’ ability to write clearly and effectively at the junior and senior academic levels. The purpose of the original project conducted in 1999 included a comparison of NIU students to a national norm group and a comparison of the nationally normed scoring to a locally developed rubric for scoring student writing. In subsequent years (2000–Present), writing performance has been gauged internally using a campus-developed prompt and a rubric developed by the faculty in the Department of English. This rubric was revised and vetted by the campus community in 2007. A report on the campus’ performance is generated each year and submitted to various committees and faculty participants.

The gathering of information from NIU alumni is a continuing project. During the spring of each year, alumni surveys are prepared for administration to undergraduate and graduate alumni one year post-graduation. On a revolving basis, undergraduate students graduating five- or nine-years out are also surveyed. The surveys have undergone several iterations, but generally include questions on current employment; preparation for employment; and satisfaction with the university, program major, and a variety of university services. The surveys of undergraduate
alumni also contain questions related to skills developed through the general education program. Additionally, a set of core questions is included in the surveys of all Illinois public universities that are reported to the Illinois Board of Higher Education for compilation in a statewide report of results. In addition, academic departments are invited to include a supplemental survey in the mailing and online version of the alumni survey to ask their alumni questions specific to their programs.

Records indicate that from 1984-2000, all surveys were administered in hard-copy format and were mailed; results were processed on the university mainframe and hard copy reports were sent to the colleges/programs/departments. Since survey year 2001, the surveys have been conducted in three formats: on-line, hard copy, and by telephone. The institution of the three formats has increased the survey response rate from below 20 percent to a current response rate in the 30 to 40 percent range. Data are processed and tabulated by program, and are distributed electronically to the colleges, programs, and student affairs areas, who share the results internally. Selected evidence from the surveys is also incorporated into the program review documents prepared by the departments.

General education assessment is ongoing throughout the undergraduate experience. Discussion of the General Education Program assessment efforts is presented below.

Several other centrally administered assessment initiatives are ongoing, in place, or planned. This section provides an overview of those initiatives and their dispositions.

**Assessment in the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management**

The Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management (SAEM) includes the Planning and Assessment department that helps facilitate strategic planning and assessment strategies for units within this Division. The department provides leadership and consultation of Division-wide planning and assessment initiatives; monitors and assesses student learning and other measurable outcomes; collects, manages, and distributes campus-wide data about students; and initiates and manages data and related research projects focused on strategic enrollment for the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management.

SAEM is committed to identifying and implementing methods for documenting student learning outcomes achieved through students’ interactions with each of the diverse areas represented in the Division. In order to successfully identify this out-of-classroom learning, Planning and Assessment maintains a robust annual planning process for Divisional departments to help them outline learning-oriented planning priorities, and related assessment targets. This annual process is enhanced by the Division’s “Assessment Strategy Grid” which tasks all departments with specific assessment activities for a given year. This grid organizes major departmental assessment
activities so that departments conduct a variety of assessments during a 5-year cycle. All of these activities are aligned with and directed by the SAEM strategic plans.

Assessment in the General Education Program

The general education program at Northern Illinois University is designed to help students attain a sound liberal education and to acquire sufficient general knowledge and intellectual versatility to enable them to become informed and resourceful members of society. Since 1983, the program has been comprised of course work in core competencies, and distributive studies in four areas: humanities and arts, science and mathematics, social sciences, and interdisciplinary studies. The four broad learning goals of the general education program have been that students will develop:

- Habits of writing, speaking, and reasoning necessary for continued learning.
- An ability to use modes of inquiry across a variety of disciplines in the humanities and the arts, the physical sciences and mathematics, and the social sciences.
- An understanding of the interrelatedness of various disciplines by integrating knowledge from several disciplines and applying that knowledge to an understanding of important problems and issues.
- Social responsibility and preparation for citizenship through global awareness, environmental sensitivity, and an appreciation of cultural diversity.

To achieve the goals of the general education program, students are required to demonstrate competency in the core content areas of mathematics, English, and communications. Additionally, students are to complete a minimum of 29 semester hours chosen from the four distributive studies areas: humanities and arts, science and mathematics, social sciences, and interdisciplinary studies.

The General Education Committee is responsible for the oversight of the General Education Program. The voting members of the committee consist of a constituency of faculty members from all NIU colleges with undergraduate degree programs and three undergraduate students. As part of its responsibilities, the committee reviews and revises the program goals as needed. In addition the committee selects courses for the program that are consistent with the above-stated program goals. For inclusion in the program, courses must be submitted for a comprehensive review by the committee, using either the General Education Course Submission Form or the General Education Course Resubmission Form, as appropriate. Both forms were revised in 2011-2012. Information required and particular details of the assessment of stated general education goals are inherent in these documents. Rubrics for the evaluation of these assessment activities are also available at the General Education Committee website.
The impact of course work in core competencies and the distributive areas of the program on the development of students’ knowledge and skills has been a challenge to assess. Several factors contribute to this difficulty: students select courses from a broad “cafeteria style” menu of courses, particularly those in the distributive areas; students may take courses that apply to the program at different times during their baccalaureate experience; and students may take these courses at more than one institution.

To assist in addressing these challenges, a tiered approach to assessment in the program was adopted: within course assessments, across course assessment, and program- or university-wide assessments. The first tier involves assessment at the course level (within-course), which is addressed in the (re)submission criteria and process. The department proposing the course for the program is responsible for these assessments, and for providing the committee evidence of the attainment of learning outcomes. The second tier or across-course assessment is conducted by the committee. Across-course assessment involves the determination of how all of the courses in the program match with the general education goals. The committee uses a matrix to show which of the courses addresses each program goal(s), and to determine if a sufficient number of courses are available for students to meet all of the program goals. This information is used in the evaluation of new course submissions for the program. The third tier, program/university-wide assessment, was established in 1999 by the Office of the Provost to determine whether the general education goals associated with core competency courses are being met and at what levels. The third tier assessment projects include the University Writing Project, the Collegiate Learning Assessment, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), assessments of student abilities via their participation in Undergraduate Research and Artistry Day, the Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program (URAP), the Undergraduate Special Opportunities in Artistry and Research (USOAR) program, honors capstone projects, and Themed Learning Communities (TLCs).

A General Education Coordinator oversees the assessment and accreditation processes for general education courses, manages data relating to the assessment of general education courses, coordinates the general education website, and assists faculty and staff with ideas, technology, and research to improve general education instruction.

As noted above, NIU updated its baccalaureate goals and student learning outcomes in 2010-2011. The current General Education Outcomes will be reviewed and revised as needed by the General Education Committee to ensure alignment with the new baccalaureate goals and outcomes. The General Education Visioning Task Force is examining other curricular changes to in order to insure that general education, major courses, and non-curricular activities work together to achieve the baccalaureate student learning outcomes.
Assessment from the Office of Student Academic Success

The Office of Student Academic Success (OSAS) was created in July 2009 as a direct result of the 2008 Great Journeys Strategic Plan to bolster student persistence and success. Initially, OSAS was a part of the Academic Advising Center and was staffed by a Coordinator and an Office Support Associate. In November 2009 a Research Associate was added to the staff to address the need for data mining and analysis.

The Office of Student Academic Success (OSAS) supports the university's mission by empowering students to achieve academic and personal goals through a comprehensive college-wide support network. The OSAS maintains collaborative relationships across campus, supports faculty objectives, and encourages student use of educational resources, and leads student success efforts for the university. Moreover, OSAS serves as a conduit of information and resources for students, faculty, and staff in an effort to promote best practices in student success and persistence.

Assessment of Teacher Certification Programs

The University Office of Teacher Certification is staffed by the associate vice provost for educator licensure and preparation, the assessment coordinator for teacher certification, the professional development schools coordinator, the certification assessment assistant, and an office manager. The assessment coordinator for teacher certification coordinates all assessment data for the educator certification programs across campus and chairs the Unit Assessment Committee (UAC). Established in 2005, the UAC was created to oversee the assessment efforts of all teacher certification programs with assessment data reported centrally to the UAC. In addition to the assessment coordinator for teacher certification, the UAC consists of members from the Committee on Initial Teacher Certification (CITC), the Committee on Advanced Professional Certification (CAPCE), the associate vice provost for educator licensure and preparation, and the associate vice provost for academic outcomes assessment. The Certification Assessment Assistant position was created in 2012 specifically to work with certification programs and candidates to increase performance on the Test of Academic Proficiency.

The associate vice provost for educator licensure and preparation and the assessment coordinator for teacher certification also work with the two primary committees on campus charged with overseeing teacher certification programs: CITC and CAPCE. Each academic unit offering an initial teacher certification program submits through its representative an assessment plan for its initial certification program to the Research and Assessment Committee, a subcommittee of the CITC. This committee carefully reviews the plan and, if necessary, makes recommendations for improvement to insure that all the components for a thorough plan are included. Each plan must
include a description of initial teacher certification program objectives, student outcome objectives, multiple methods, a time line for the gathering of assessment data, results obtained from the assessments, and clear statements regarding the use of the assessment results in regard to both internal and external audiences. Once the assessment plans have been reviewed and approved by the subcommittee, and the committee, they are then submitted to the University Assessment Panel for approval. The basic purpose of the CAPCE is to serve as a coordinating body regarding policies, curriculum, and procedures pertaining to advanced professional certification programs at NIU. The responsibilities of the committee include reviewing and advising on the preparation of external accreditation reports specific to advanced professional certification in cooperation with each of the representative advanced certification programs, coordinating external accreditation reports pertaining to advanced professional certification programs, as well as reviewing periodically the assessment plans and the curriculum specific to advanced professional certification programs.

Assessment in the University Libraries

The primary mission of the University Libraries, which includes the main Founders Memorial Library, the Music Library and Faraday Library in DeKalb as well as branch libraries on the NIU Hoffman Estates, Naperville, and Rockford campuses, is to provide access to scholarly information and literature in support of undergraduate and graduate programs, and faculty and student research. The University Libraries are staffed by a dean, two associate deans, an assistant dean, an administrative assistant, and business administrative associate. Additionally, the Library Advisory Committee (LAC) acts as an advisory body to the provost in matters of library policy needs and services.

The libraries developed a formal assessment plan, the most recent in 2009, which is updated and reviewed every five years. Assessment objectives include two areas of emphasis, resources and use. The University Libraries strive to have a well-planned and balanced collection of print, digital and other formats of sufficient size and scope to support the university’s research and instruction needs. Library collection development priorities are regularly monitored and adjusted based upon national comparisons and information derived from locally-created databases. Additionally, the University Libraries track the number of services offered that promote and facilitate use of the resources provided to students, faculty and staff.

Assessment in the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center

The Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center, created in 1998, has as its mission to support faculty and academic supportive professional staff through a variety of programs, activities, and resources that support the university's mission on teaching, research, and scholarly activities. The center also provides programming to address the needs of faculty that have been
identified by a variety of assessment initiatives in which the university engages. Areas of need include: assessment practices, student learning styles, and active learning and engagement. The assessment plan for the center was developed and approved by the University Assessment Panel in 2001-2002 and has been revised and approved twice since then, most recently in 2010-2011. The Center publishes annual reports outlining the types and number of programs it provides.

Assessment in the Division of International Programs

The Division of International Programs is headed by the vice president for international affairs. The division also includes the associate vice president for international affairs; and three directors, each leading an area of effort: the International Student & Faculty Office (ISFO), the International Training Office (ITO), and the Study Abroad Office (SAO). Staff members in all areas of effort share an overarching commitment to helping members of the NIU community expand their horizons beyond national boundaries. The unit developed a formal assessment plan, which was reviewed by the University Assessment Panel in 2005-2006. The division simplified their plan in 2011-12 upon the recommendation of the panel. The revised plan included two phases: Phase I to cover the five years from 2012-2017 and Phase II to cover 2018-2022.

International Student & Faculty Office

The International Student & Faculty Office (ISFO) coordinates all recruiting and admission efforts for incoming international undergraduate students and advises all international graduate and undergraduate students, scholars, faculty and staff on immigration related issues. ISFO maintains required federal compliance records and generates immigration documents and petitions. In addition, the office supports all graduate and undergraduate nonimmigrants on campus in their academic, cultural and social adjustment with such programs as comprehensive orientation, workshops on various topics, and other activities as necessary. ISFO staff work to help international students, scholars, faculty and staff to gain the maximum benefits from the many opportunities that the University offers, and also to increase international understanding and appreciation for diversity on campus. ISFO assesses program effectiveness through student satisfaction surveys and participant evaluations. The office is initiating a program of pre- and post-experience questionnaires regarding cultural learning outcomes to learn if international students self-report gains in cultural awareness during their degree programs at NIU. The instrument chosen is derived from My Cultural Awareness Profile (MyCAP).

International Training Office

Working with NIU faculty, resources, and facilities, the International Training Office (ITO) develops and implements innovative and results-driven training programs that address the societal and institutional needs of developing countries for international audiences. ITO programs and
activities provide varied opportunities for NIU faculty, staff, and students to share their knowledge and expertise with training participants from diverse cultural backgrounds. ITO has successfully implemented numerous exchange programs on youth leadership, civic education, conflict resolution and peace building which were funded by the U.S. Department of State, as well as other capacity-building programs for NGOs such as the Ministry of National Education in Indonesia, AMIDEAST, and several universities abroad. Over the years ITO has built a track record of successful program development and implementation and responsible fiscal management. In particular, NIU’s State Department programs are externally reviewed each year before renewed support is awarded for the following year. Program effectiveness is assessed regularly through formative and summative participant satisfaction surveys. Participant learning outcomes will be assessed through reflective essays which will be reviewed through a rubric based upon the AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric.

Study Abroad Office

The NIU Study Abroad Office (SAO) strives to maximize international and intercultural exposure for students and faculty by offering academic programs abroad for undergraduate and graduate students from any major or field of study in over 75 different countries. Programs include those led by NIU faculty, supported by SAO staff, as well as those offered by affiliated providers or institutions. Program effectiveness is assessed through student satisfaction surveys completed after the study abroad experience, as well as through a satisfaction survey administered to NIU faculty who lead study abroad programs. SAO is initiating a program of pre- and post-experience questionnaires regarding cultural learning outcomes, using an instrument derived from My Cultural Awareness Profile (MyCAP). The objective is to learn if study abroad participants self-report gains in cultural awareness during and after their programs abroad through NIU. The SAO requires NIU faculty leading study abroad programs to assess student learning outcomes in the courses they teach abroad, using reflective essays to be evaluated through a rubric based upon the AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence VALUE Rubric.

Assessment in the Graduate School

The Graduate School engages in assessment activities in three ways. First, in conjunction with the Office of the Provost, a formalized process for external review of all doctoral program departments is undertaken as part of the program review process. Second, all graduate programs comply with the Annual Assessment Updates described above and the Dean of the Graduate School reviews all of these updates and submits input for the Graduate Annual Assessment Update Report. This report is shared with the Graduate Council for their further review and comment. The Alumni Survey, conducted annually for graduate students 1 year past their graduation, is a third centralized assessment. (See Appendix B.)
In 2011-2012, the Graduate Council developed student learning outcomes that pertain to all graduate programs.

“Graduate education is characterized by its diversity of purpose. Programs educate for reasons ranging from the purely academic to the purely applied. All hold in common overarching learning expectations. Building on the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students possess, graduate programs seek to develop among students specialized knowledge in a discipline or across disciplines; and they train students to act as innovators, problem solvers, advanced practitioners, creators of knowledge, and keepers of their discipline.”

At the master’s and professional doctorate levels, students evince knowledge in their discipline or across disciplines when they master the pertinent content and skills at an advanced level. They apply that knowledge in innovative ways to solve problems, to contribute to scholarly discourse, or to engage in mature performance of their craft. As innovators, scholars, and performers, students demonstrate a high level of competency in critical thinking when they demonstrate their knowledge and skills or when they independently apply appropriate research methods, concepts, and theories within their fields of study. They communicate effectively and professionally both orally and in writing.

At the doctorate level, students evince knowledge in their discipline or across disciplines when they become specialists in the content and skills necessary to be independent researchers and original contributors to knowledge within their fields. They understand and appreciate the philosophy and historical development of their discipline as a field of inquiry, and they know how that philosophy and history shape their own research. As independent researchers, they identify problems and develop solutions by employing appropriate research methods. They also effectively communicate in a scholarly fashion their knowledge and disseminate that knowledge orally and in writing.

The Graduate School also has a long history of providing support for the assessment of dissertations in conjunction with the program reviews of doctoral programs. A sample of dissertations completed during the program review period is sent by the dean of the Graduate School to external experts within the discipline for review. The reports of these external reviewers are evaluated in the Graduate School, the Office of the Provost, the office of the college dean, and the department as one component of the assessment of doctoral program outcomes during the program review process. In addition, the dean designates a university faculty member from outside the students’ major departments to review the dissertation and attend the dissertation defense. The findings from the reports of these individuals are compiled by the Graduate School, and used in the assessment of programs in conjunction with the program review process.
CONCLUSION

A review of the current assessment activities for academic outcomes shows a rich culture of evidence-based teaching and learning throughout much of the campus. Further, this culture is infused with ongoing opportunities for continuous quality improvement in learning both in and out of the classroom. Increasingly, campus constituents are “closing the feedback loop” on assessment processes and disseminating information from assessment initiatives.

Strengths of the current state of assessment at NIU include, but are not limited to:

- **Increased participation in assessment.** For example:
  - Assessment plans completed and approved by the UAP for all academic programs and most academic and support units;
  - 100% compliance with Annual Assessment Updates by academic programs for the past five years; and
  - Development of the Student Advisory Council on Learning Outcomes.

- **Increased infrastructure for assessment.** For example:
  - Establishment of the University Office of Teacher Certification, staffed with permanent employees;
  - The hiring of both a Director and Assistant Director for Planning and Assessment in Student Affairs and Enrollment Management; and
  - Continued support by the University Assessment Panel of numerous assessment projects at the program and unit level.

- **Increased transparency in assessment.** For example:
  - Posting of all current assessment plans and status reports on the OAS website;
  - Tracking database available for all academic programs; and
  - Addition of the Assessing the Assessor webpage on OAS website, outlining OAS assessment initiatives and results of those initiatives.

- **Increased appreciation for assessment practices.** For example:
  - Establishment of an Annual Assessment Expo now six years running, celebrating the outstanding assessment practices at NIU;
  - Increased attendance at external assessment speakers, brought twice each year to the NIU campus; and
  - Sustained interest and participation in the Campus Assessment Network, now seven years old.

Like our academic programs themselves, assessment at NIU is continuously undergoing improvement and development in an effort to better serve the needs of our students. While some
challenges do exist, such as the assessment of general education outcomes, overall, NIU has a well-established culture of evidence-based teaching and learning.
### University Plan for Academic Outcomes Academic Assessment – Baccalaureate Level Central Initiatives

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## University Plan for Academic Outcomes Academic Assessment – Graduate Level Central Initiatives

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