National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Assessment in Motion: Steps Toward a More Integrated Model

Susan Canon, Kelsey Thompson, and Mary Walczak

St. Olaf College

Foreword

By Pat Hutchings

As part of an ongoing effort to track and explore developments in student learning outcomes assessment, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has published a number of institutional case studies which are housed on the website. We are now revisiting and updating some of those earlier examples in order to understand how campus assessment practices evolve over time—through lessons learned from local experience but also as a result of changes in institutional priorities, the launch of new initiatives, leadership transitions, and trends in the larger assessment movement. This report on St. Olaf College is an update of the original 2012 case study by Natasha Jankowski.

Founded in 1874 by Norwegian Lutheran immigrants, St. Olaf College is a nationally ranked residential liberal arts college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) located in Northfield, Minnesota. St. Olaf challenges students to excel in the liberal arts, examine faith and values, and explore meaningful vocation in an inclusive, globally engaged community nourished by Lutheran tradition. St. Olaf has roughly 3,000 students, offers 49 majors and 20 concentrations (minors), and has a robust study-abroad program, with more than two-thirds of students studying abroad before graduating.

St. Olaf has a long history with assessment, having participated in many different assessment initiatives over the years including a Teagle-funded project with Carleton College and Macalester College focused on using assessment findings to improve specific learning outcomes, and the Associated Colleges of the Midwest-Teagle Collegium on Student Learning exploring how students learn and acquire the knowledge and skills of a liberal education. St. Olaf was also a participant in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education which focused on the creation of deliberative processes for using evidence to improve student learning. The college has been featured by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) for its work with the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative and continues to be involved with the VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) initiative. In 2010, St. Olaf won a Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) award for its work on assessment, and it was a featured case study in AAC&U's 2011 collection, *Assessing College Student Learning*.

NILOA originally selected St. Olaf as a case study institution for its framing of assessment as inquiry in support of student learning, and its strong commitment to using evidence of learning for purposes of ongoing improvement—for instance through an assessment cycle that included a year of reflection and planning for needed changes. From early on, assessment was shaped by the three-part mantra of "mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable." These ideas continue to shape the institution's efforts, and they are central to a recent in-depth review looking at what elements of the assessment process were working and where improvements might be made. As a result of that review, a number of changes are now in process—including a revised assessment cycle for program assessment (aimed at greater alignment with program review), increased focus on direct assessment of general education courses, greater attention to out-of-class experiences, and a new administrative structure.

We are grateful to Susan Canon, Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment; Kelsey Thompson, Assistant Director of Assessment; and Mary Walczak, Faculty Director of Assessment, Associate Dean for Natural Sciences and Mathematics, and Professor of Chemistry, for providing this update. Please note titles and positions listed are from the time of the case study.

Assessment in Motion: Steps Toward a More Integrated Model

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As noted in NILOA's 2012 case study, St. Olaf began working on student learning outcomes assessment in the 1990s and has, since then, been recognized for its exemplary work by a number of organizations. Our purpose in this update is to suggest how our approach has changed over time and to point to plans for the next stage of our work. But it seems useful to begin with reflections on several elements of our work that have, we believe, served us especially well.

A Model That Worked

One component of our assessment model is the way we used the phrase (it's not quite clear anymore where it came from) "inquiry in support of student learning," which goes back probably 15 years. How could a faculty member be against that? It's so fundamental to what we do as academics. We don't use the phrase in place of "assessment" that much anymore, but it has helped to bring faculty on board, realizing "Oh, I could find out whether my students are learning what I think I'm teaching." That sentiment is still out there to a large extent.

A second valuable element has been our four-year cycle—assessing majors in year one, concentrations (St. Olaf's interdisciplinary minors) and other academic programs in year two, and general education in year three, with the fourth year dedicated to reflection. That structure allowed us to approach the process in a systematic way, focusing on one thing at a time and spreading out the work for faculty involved in assessing both majors and concentrations. This model kept people in touch with assessment without having to undertake some big new task every year. The reflection year was designed to create the opportunity for departments to think about what they had learned through their inquiry, and what action or improvement might be usefully put in place before the cycle began again.

A third feature that has served us really well is our commitment to broad faculty governance of assessment. At the time of the original case study, the faculty Curriculum Committee populated an Assessment Subcommittee, and that group was then responsible for designing the assessment process. But the Provost was the person who made "the ask." That was appropriate and also effective because you had faculty colleagues saying "we're going to assess general education this year, and this is how we're going to do it," and then the Provost would come along behind and use the authority of that office to make it official.

A theme running through all of these elements is faculty ownership and autonomy. We have kept that principle front and center throughout our assessment work. Additionally, our mantra of assessment that's "mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable" has served us well. Again, it's not clear at this point where the phrase came from; we have seen it elsewhere. But it is now embedded in a lot of what we do and how we think about it, and these three features continue to shape our evolving assessment plans and processes.

Taking Stock: A Self-Study (2017-18)

In 2017 an Assessment Task Force was appointed to undertake a comprehensive review of our work modeled on the program review process conducted by academic departments. It began with a self-study, which then served as background for a visit from two external reviewers who spent two days on campus and talked with a whole host of faculty and staff involved in assessment. Their recommendations are what drove the changes we are now making.

The review was prompted in part by a feeling that it was "just time." We had been employing our four-year model for close to ten years at that point, so it seemed like a good time to see if our approach was still serving us well and how we might build on it in the future. There were also some issues with our assessment process that we felt we needed to address.

One issue was about structure and governance. As noted above, the committee on assessment was a subcommittee of the Curriculum Committee. That was a long-standing model and in many ways it served us well. But there was a growing concern that assessment as an enterprise wasn't getting enough attention under that model. In reality, there would be one or two elected members of the Curriculum Committee who would sit on the Assessment Subcommittee, and we would then "fill in" to broaden participation by asking others to join—important members to be sure, but serving in an unofficial capacity. The challenge was that the Curriculum Committee itself had an enormous workload and not enough people. As a consequence, assessment did not always get the attention it needed.

So a conversation began to emerge about whether assessment should in fact be a self-standing committee. With this in mind, the Assessment Task Force created in fall 2017 functioned as the Assessment Subcommittee, but independent from the Curriculum Committee, for the year of the self-study. During the review, the faculty voted to have a free-standing assessment committee. This change addresses the principle that assessment should be manageable, with the new structure aimed at creating more time and space for the work. Today the Academic Assessment Committee comprises five elected members, along with the Director of Assessment, a representative from the Provost's Office, and a student. The Assistant Director of Assessment also attends the meetings as an active participant but is not on the list of members.

A second issue we aimed to address during the year of review was the "black hole" problem. As part of the four-year cycle, departments and programs submitted reports, but it often felt as if nothing came from those reports. There was a reason for that. Our commitment to faculty autonomy meant that each faculty member could decide what outcome to assess and what tool or approach to use to assess it. If someone were teaching, say, a general education science course, she could pick any one of the three Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) that science courses are supposed to address—and then assess that outcome in whatever way she chose: a couple of exam questions, or a paper, or a lab practicum, etc. What that meant in practice was that one person might be assessing ILO #1, a couple others would be focusing on #2, and perhaps no one was looking at the third outcome. This made it really hard to put together a coherent picture of student learning because the variability of focus and method was huge. This situation prompted us to wonder: Is there a better way? The review was aimed at answering this question.

A third issue for the review concerned the assessment of the co-curriculum and the whole set of out-of-class experiences that we know are important to St. Olaf students. In 2013 we had a visit from the Higher Learning Commission (our regional accreditor), and that went really well. We were one of the "pioneer institutions" helping the Commission launch a new "Open Pathway" model for accreditation, which put us in a favorable position. But one thing that emerged from that process was a newly forceful mandate to expand the scope of assessment into the co-curriculum. We had begun to think about that at the time of the review but hadn't taken many concrete steps forward. So the assessment of out-of-class experiences is now very much on our minds and is one of the things we're trying to advance in our next stage of work.

1. **Program review as a context for assessment:** One of the recommendations from our self-study and external reviewers was to connect our assessment cycle to the decennial program review cycle. The idea is that within the ten-year period there would be three cycles of assessment that would lead up to the department's program review self-study (Figure 1). We want departments to assess the things that are important to them, but we also want to be able to feed their assessment process and results into program review. This will enhance our goal to make assessment meaningful while also keeping it manageable by linking assessment and program review, rather than maintaining two separate cycles.

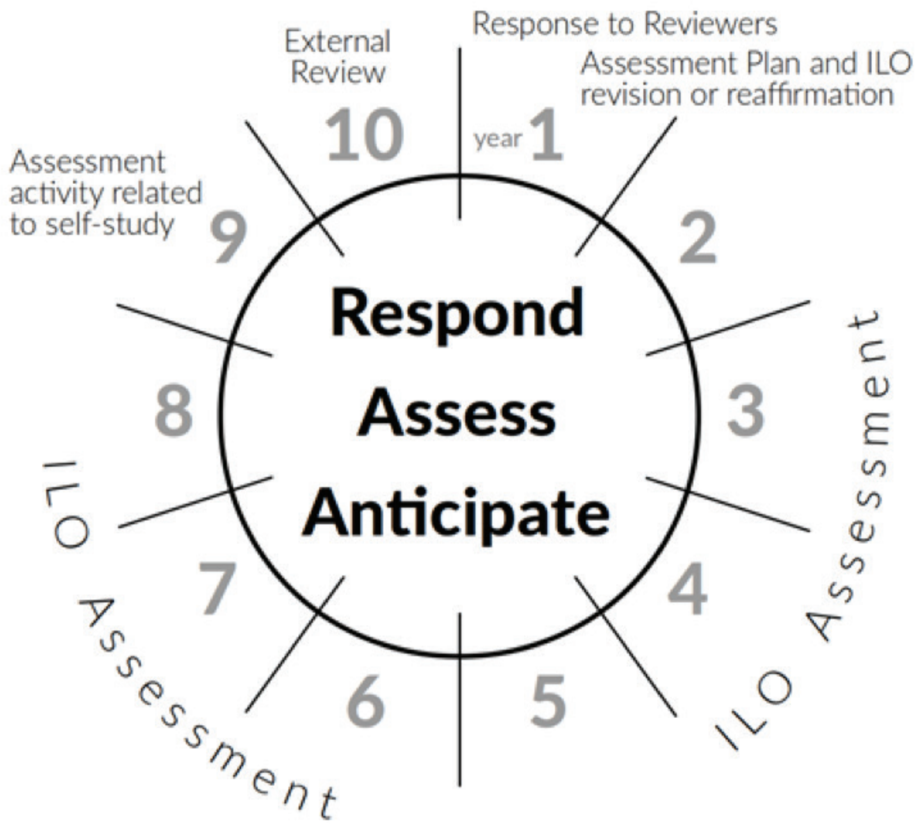

Figure 1. The above diagram that we have shared with department chairs and program directors describes the new assessment cycle, which will involve responding to the external program review, assessing their program's Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs), and anticipating their next program review by incorporating a final assessment activity to support their self-study. We're excited about this new cycle and look forward to rolling it out in the 2020-21 academic year.

2. **Direct assessment of general education (GE) courses:** In November 2019, our faculty voted on a new GE curriculum. For assessment of the new curriculum, we are beginning to explore direct assessment of student artifacts at the College level, instead of relying on individual course instructors to assess ILOs in their courses. To begin these efforts, we piloted assessing first-year writing, a requirement that has been part of the current GE program and will be part of the new one as well. Our pilot project included faculty teams who scored samples of student writing using a rubric developed for this purpose. The rubric was based on the rubrics used by the instructors of the first-year writing classes from which we gathered samples.

We sought to determine whether such a model would be appropriate and sustainable for use with the new GE program. As noted earlier, the prior process felt seriously disjointed, with every faculty member choosing both what they assessed and how, making it virtually impossible to draw conclusions in a systematic way about whether our students were achieving the goals we most care about. With some faculty development support, we anticipate that we can develop some direct assessment strategies to take a cross-institutional look at GE outcomes.

That said, we know that while the Academic Assessment Committee is largely focused on institutional assessment, faculty members care most about the assessment of "my students and my class." Our hope with the pilot project was to find a middle ground between these two foci, addressing both. The pilot involved eight faculty and 40 student papers. We learned that it is preferred to develop a common rubric that can be used both in the course (for instance, to evaluate student work on classroom assignments) and in the assessment process. We learned, too, that norming is crucial to successfully linking these two contexts.

We will also be looking at how this process attends to equity and inclusion. Several writing faculty have been strong advocates for making sure that whatever assessment methods and rubrics are used will represent best practices for inclusion. In addition, we solicited the help of faculty, staff, and students who are deeply involved in equity and inclusion work at the College to review the proposed Intended Learning Outcomes for the new GE to eliminate potentially exclusive language.

3. **Assessing the co-curriculum:** Recognizing the importance of the out-of-class experience (and noting HLC's expectations in this regard), we recently formed a committee of representatives from the various co-curricular areas across the institution—student life, student employment, our career center, and areas that straddle the curriculum/co-curriculum, like the libraries, Student Support Services, and the Center for Advising and Academic Support. This group, coordinated by the Assistant Director of Assessment, began meeting in 2019. These are early days and there are questions about what that group's role should be and how to extend the assessment process into other co-curricular areas. A new vice president for student life has provided leadership for assessment in that arena, but other areas are moving more slowly. This is a work in progress but an important target for our next stage of work, building on the self-study and review.

4. **Goals and alignment:** In 2012, the faculty, under the leadership of the Curriculum Committee, developed a set of eight college-wide goals—dubbed STOGoals (for St. Olaf Goals): self-development, vocational discernment, critical thinking, the ability to integrate and apply learning, broad knowledge of the world, specialized knowledge within disciplines, communication and collaboration, and responsible engagement with one's community and the world. These goals reflected the College's vision of a liberal education, regardless of major, and were expected of all students. But as noted in the self-study, the STOGoals were not being comprehensively assessed; nor were they systematically linked to ILOs in other areas of the College. Addressing these two shortcomings, as stated in the self-study, "will be essential for drawing the assessment program more in line with the college's mission and goals."

   Today, as we write this update, the STOGoals are being used in a variety of ways. Every three years, we administer the Learning Goals Questionnaire, a locally-developed survey sent to first-year students and seniors asking them to self-report on their growth in each of the STOGoal areas. The results are shared in a report to faculty and with our Board of Regents. The STOGoals are also relevant, certainly, to the assessment of the co-curriculum, though they are not yet being used explicitly for that purpose. On the curricular front, we recently did a mapping exercise, looking at the STOGoals to see how they would map onto our general education outcomes. Meanwhile, however, the faculty voted on the new GE curriculum and the Academic Assessment Committee led a campus-wide effort to write Intended Learning Outcomes for each of the new GE requirements as mentioned above. We plan to implement the new GE curriculum in Fall 2021. At that point, it may make sense to redo the mapping exercise.

   The bottom line is that the status of the STOGoals is uncertain at this point. There's talk about whether we need to redefine them, review how we're using them, and think about whether we could use them in ways that would be more meaningful. The overall sense is that they're not really being used to their full potential.

5. **Restructuring:** Finally, the self-study and review pointed us in the direction of some restructuring (see figures below for more details). The major change is that assessment, technically speaking, doesn't report through the academic division any more. Although the institutional research and assessment functions had been co-located for decades and collaborated extensively on their work, they had always maintained separate reporting lines. The Director of Institutional Research & Effectiveness had reported to the Vice President for Mission for over ten years, while the assessment function had remained in the academic division. However, due to some restructuring in the academic division and the need for stability in supervision for the Assistant Director of Assessment, it made sense for that person (a full-time staff member) to report to the full-time staff director of what then became Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment (IE&A).

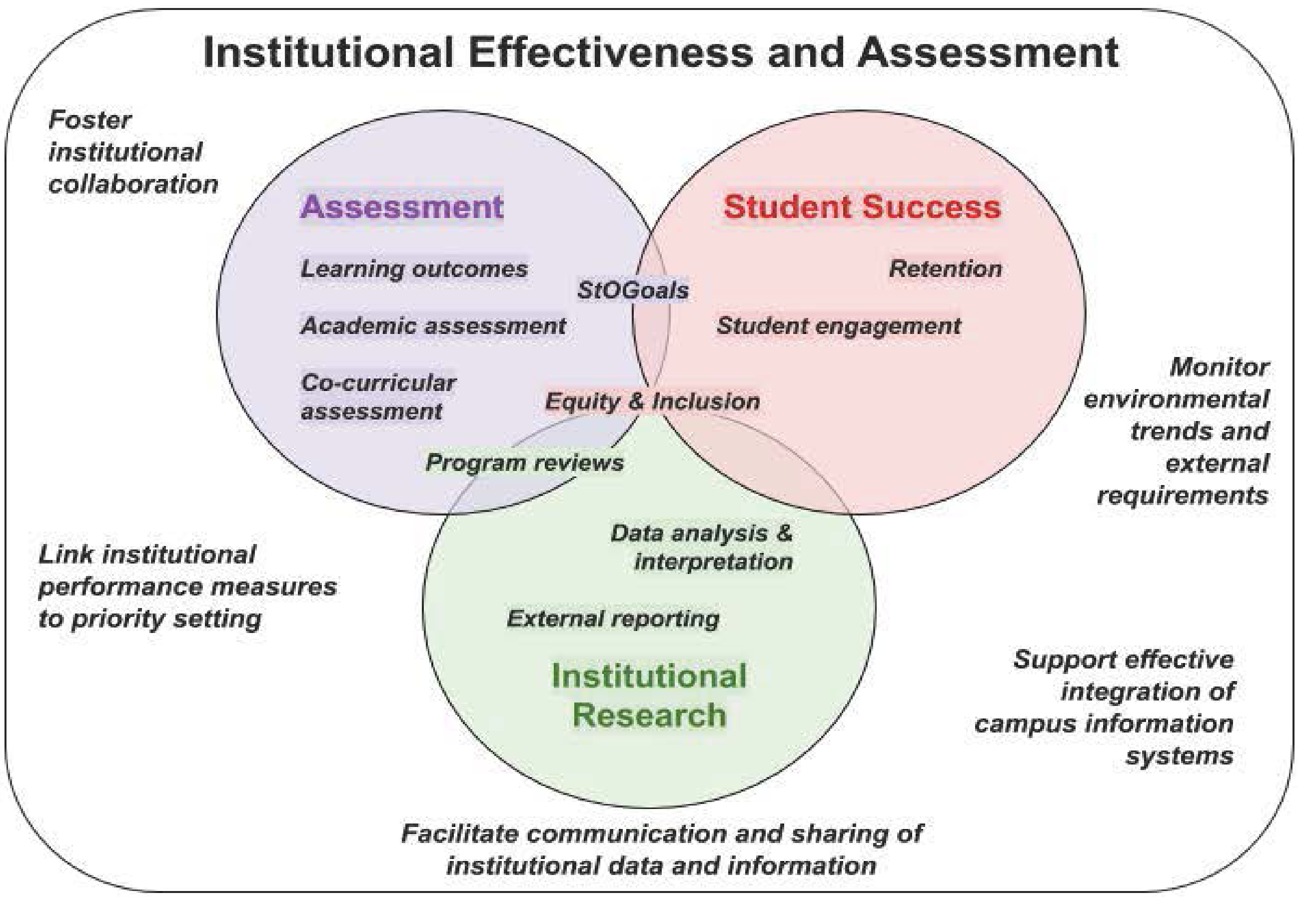

Figure 2. The diagram above shows the internal organization and key focus areas of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment

In order to maintain connection with the academic division we now have a faculty director of assessment, who has voting privileges on the Academic Assessment Committee and an audience with the Provost. This person works closely with the Assistant Director and attends regular IE&A staff meetings on a monthly basis. We will continue this structure for 2020-21, and will work to discern if we should continue the structure going forward.

There has been some restructuring in the area of student life as well. The Vice President for Student Life, in keeping with his interest in assessment, has created a position of Assistant Dean of Students for Programming and Assessment. That individual is part of the co-curricular assessment committee mentioned above.

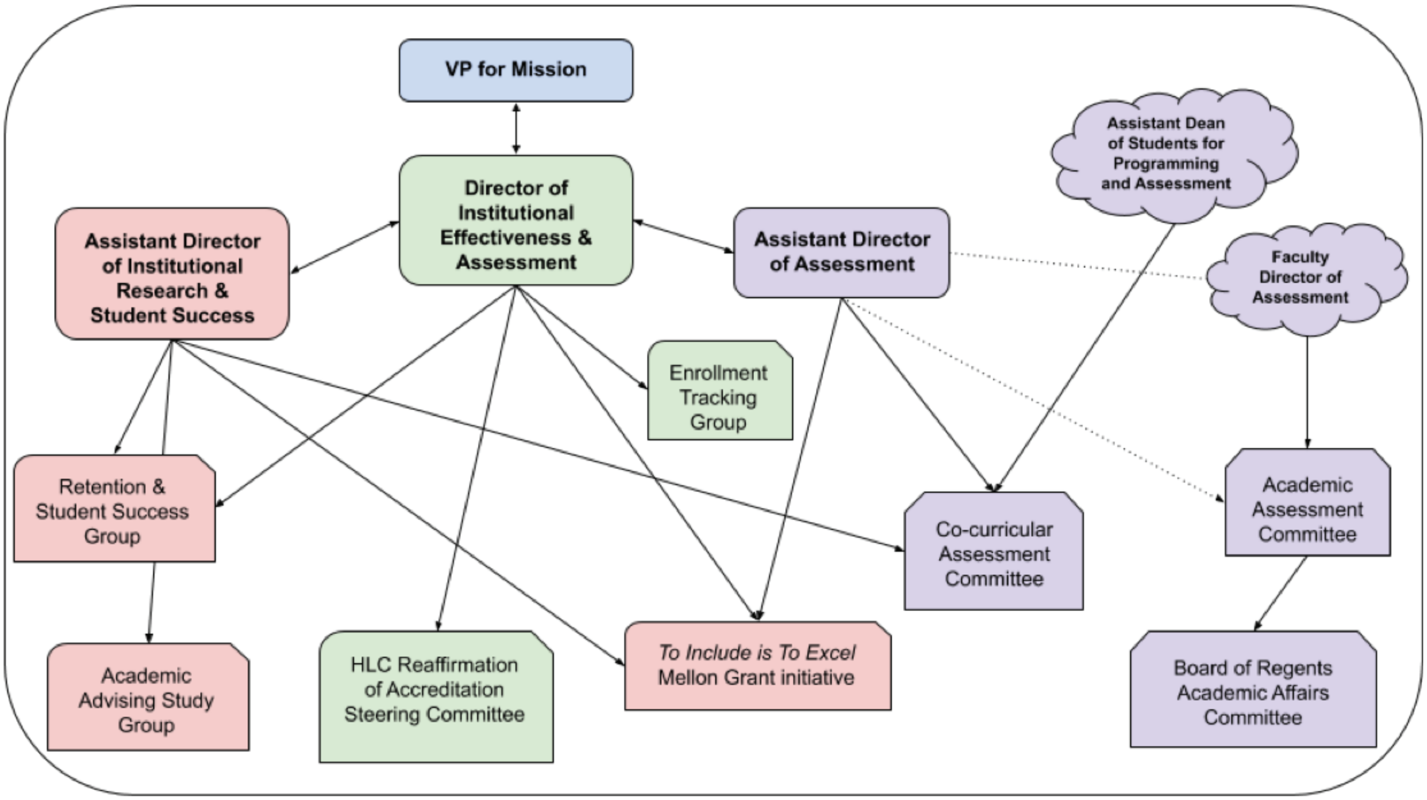

Figure 3. The diagram above illustrates the reporting structure and highlights key campus partners for Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment

Going Public

In addition to the principles of mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable, we also strive to make assessment at St. Olaf transparent. We make all programmatic learning outcomes and results from our institutional surveys publicly available on the IE&A website. The Academic Assessment Committee prepares two annual reports on assessment, which are shared with the faculty and the Academic Affairs Committee of St. Olaf's Board of Regents and posted on the Academic Assessment Committee website. We have also encouraged individual departments and programs to share their assessment results at regular lunch meetings hosted by the Center for Innovation in the Liberal Arts (St. Olaf's teaching and learning center). However, there are still many ways we could improve in communicating assessment results to the campus and broader community.

The steps we are taking to improve our assessment model, as described above, are aimed at generating greater involvement in assessment among faculty and staff, as well as greater ownership of the assessment process. This in turn will increase awareness of where assessment is happening on campus and deepen the investment in assessment findings. The College recently purchased a Tableau (data visualization software) license, and IE&A plans to transition much of our regular data reporting to this platform rather than presenting static tables and charts. This will allow members of the College to dynamically explore and ask their own questions about our student data. We are also considering additional ways to make survey and assessment results more actively available to the campus community, especially students, rather than passively posting them on a website. Some communication methods we've discussed include regular announcements in campus newsletters or quarterly informal presentations of recent survey/assessment results.

Assessment in Motion

As this report makes clear, assessment at St. Olaf College is very much a moving target, and particularly in light of challenges posed by the pandemic. This is a time of exploration, piloting new approaches, and candid conversation about how to ensure that assessment continues to be mission-driven, meaningful, and manageable.

Central to all of this activity is the challenge of closing the loop—using assessment results to make changes and improvements. As noted earlier, reports submitted by faculty often seemed to go into a black hole. The hope is that embedding the assessment of student learning in the program review cycle will make departments more interested and invested in closing the loop themselves. That connection cannot be imposed from the top. Tying assessment to program review will give departments and faculty members a more long-term view, seeing changes over time and building on those. Hopefully, a "closing the loop" mindset will continue to infuse our work in all areas of assessment at the College.

Lessons for Other Campuses

1. Broad faculty governance of and engagement with assessment is key to improvement. This has implications for language (assessment as inquiry), and for reporting and committee structures. See Reed (2011).

2. Assessment is strengthened by regular opportunities for reflection, which can productively be built into the assessment cycle itself but also catalyze a more comprehensive review of the overall process. Stepping back, evaluating what's working, what's not, and how to go forward is time well spent.

3. It's impossible to conduct meaningful, improvement-focused assessment without clear student learning goals. But the assessment process will, over time, very likely lead to rethinking, realignment, and refinement of those goals. Be open to that.

4. Integrating the co-curriculum into the assessment process is an important step, and it cannot be purely an add-on. What's needed is a more integrated model, reflected in and reinforced by institutional structures for the support of assessment.

5. Above all, assessment should catalyze improvements in the student learning experience. That means tapping into faculty's natural interest in the learning of their own students in their own classrooms but doing so in ways that allow for judgments about program effectiveness as well. Rubrics can be a crucial tool for making this connection.

References and Resources

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St. Olaf College, Assessment of Student Learning: https://wp.stolaf.edu/ir-e/assessment-of-student-learning-2

St. Olaf College, Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment: https://wp.stolaf.edu/ir-e

St. Olaf College, Statements of Intended Learning Outcomes: https://wp.stolaf.edu/ir-e/assessment-of-student-learning-2/statements-of-intended-learning-outcomes

NILOA Examples of Good Assessment Practice

With funding from several foundations, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) mission is to examine institutional practice and help institutions productively use assessment data to inform and strengthen undergraduate education as well as to communicate with policy makers, families, and other stakeholders. Documenting what students learn and can do is of growing interest both on campus and with accrediting groups, higher education associations, families, employers, and policy makers. And yet, we know far too little about what actually happens in assessment on campuses around the country. NILOA conducted several short case studies, titled *Examples of Good Assessment Practice,* of two- and four-year institutions in order to document institutional achievements in the assessment of student learning outcomes and highlight promising practices in using assessment data for improvement and decision-making. The data collection process included a thorough examination of the websites and relevant assessment documents (accreditation self-studies, assessment reports, program reviews, etc.) for selected institutions and interviews with key institutional representatives.

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free resources and can be found at **http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org**
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers..
- NILOA's Founding Director, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001. He served again as Interim President of the University of Illinois in 2010.

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