



**Strategy #10: Develop and Implement Program-Level Learning Outcomes Assessment**

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FR: Dr. David Hubert, Associate Provost for Learning Advancement  
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**Executive Summary**

Much work has been accomplished to set the stage for a new approach to program learning outcomes assessment. I posted a new LOA Director position, conducted a national search, and hired Dr. Chris Blankenship. He will officially come on board on June 1. We in the Provost's Office and SLOA have articulated a set of design principles and strategies to guide our assessment efforts going forward. Additional staff resources have been moved to the LOA Office, and Chris will fill the new Coordinator position this summer. We do still have some questions to be settled in Academics.

**Background and Charge**

This strategy is new to the 2021-22 academic year. It emerged from a growing need for more accountability and is in response to the NWCCU recommendation to "implement an effective system of assessment to evaluate the quality of learning in all its programs (Standard 1.C.5)." Learning outcomes assessment has historically been run by two offices housed in separate divisions, causing duplication and confusion among faculty. All learning outcomes assessment work has now been consolidated under the direction of the Associate Provost for Learning Advancement. The aims of this strategy are to: 1) streamline the process to minimize confusion and duplication, 2) strengthen and expand processes to address the evaluators' concerns, and 3) ensure that assessment data guides curricular and pedagogical improvement at the program level.

The charge asked me to accomplish the following items:

1. Hire a new staff member to lead the implementation of this work
2. Using the results of the recent Learning Outcomes Assessment [program review](#) and being mindful of accreditation standards ([1.C: Student Learning](#)), develop processes and practices to improve program-level learning outcomes assessment and focus it on improving teaching and learning.
3. Work with the office of Curriculum and Academic Systems to integrate learning outcomes assessment into instructional program review processes and program curriculum development
4. Engage internal and external stakeholders to ensure participation, collaboration, and clear communication.
5. Maintain internal communication with regular SharePoint updates on the work accomplished. This should include a minimum of three written updates per academic year.

## Approach

I have approached the specific elements of the charge as follows:

1. In consultation with others in the Provost's Office, I recast the existing Learning Outcomes Assessment (LOA) Coordinator VI as a Director. The new position description specifically emphasized program outcomes assessment and was written to appeal to potential applicants with classroom teaching experience in addition to assessment experience. A national search resulted in a smallish, but strong pool of applicants. The committee forwarded to me four quite strong finalists, and I chose to hire Dr. Chris Blankenship—a faculty in our English, Linguistics, and Writing Studies department—due to his extensive academic and practical experience in assessment, his leadership of our SLOA committee, and his ability to get faculty buy-in to our assessment efforts. He will assume his duties on June 1. In addition, I've treated SLCC's pivot away from credit CBE as an opportunity to reallocate resources to the advantage of the LOA Office and the ePortfolio Office. The LOA Director will be able to hire a Coordinator to assist him—at no additional cost to the institution.
2. In responding to the charge's request to "develop processes and practices to improve program-level learning outcomes assessment and focus it on improving teaching and learning," I have worked with SLOA to develop a set of design principles and strategies on which faculty and administration agree to guide our work going forward.

Our **Design Principles** are as follows:

- **Do No Harm:** Assessment should benefit students and faculty.
  - Assessment practices should not perpetuate cycles of disenfranchisement and achievement gaps. They should respond to educational barriers in ways that lead to equitable opportunities for all students.
  - Assessment practices should be easy for faculty to implement; they should not be so burdensome as to diminish faculty time and energy for teaching.
  - Assessment practices should be used as formative instruments to help the institution improve learning for students, not as punitive measures.
- **Address Purposes:** Assessment should primarily strive to improve the teaching and learning at the college while also speaking to external stakeholder needs.
- **Work Systematically:** Assessment practices should be a coordinated, networked effort of stakeholders from across the college sharing knowledge and resources that actively prevents duplication of data and effort.
- **Understand Context:** Assessment is a nuanced endeavor, with quantitative, qualitative, formative, summative, and reflective components operating within the context of faculty-student interaction.

Our **Strategies** are as follows:

- Start with **shared language**. (ILO's, GELO's, PLO's, and CLO's, oh my!)
- Create a **stackable assessment system that treats General Education assessment as foundational for program assessment**.
- Schedule **assessment cycles** to coordinate with course, **program**, institutional level review requirements.

- Use data from program assessment to inform institutional assessment requirements, including NWCCU Accreditation. **Institutional assessment should not require novel assessment work.**
  - Make **resources available for faculty involvement in a stackable assessment system.**
  - Prioritize the stackable assessment system process, but **also encourage innovative and field-specific assessment activities** that add nuance and depth to understanding how SLCC can increase equity in educational opportunities for students.
  - Establish a college-wide **Assessment Work Group** to ensure the Design Principles and Strategies continue to guide our assessment work.
3. I have had conversations with the Assistant Provost for Curriculum and Academic Systems regarding the connection between program learning outcomes assessment and instructional program review. We have agreed on the nature of the connection, but I don't want to get ahead of the incoming Director of LOA, especially with respect to meshing the scheduling of assessment with program review. The latter only happens once every 5 years while the former is an iterative process that doesn't really have a starting and stopping point—so the question is how best to synch two such disparate activities. We should get that question answered before the end of this calendar year.
  4. The primary form of engagement with stakeholders thus far has been through meetings with SLOA, as faculty are central to the success of any program assessment process we develop.
  5. I have written and submitted an update on the LOA program review, which was a bit difficult for me since I was not very involved in the creation of that document. I have kept you apprised of work on Strategy 10, written this report, and prepared a presentation on program assessment that I'm set to give to the College Planning Council next week. That presentation should probably be given to the Provost's staff and possibly the Associate Deans so they know the roadmap going forward.

## Challenges and Limitations

The first challenge has been what always seems to me to be the glacial speed at which things operate. I'm learning to be patient, as it is necessary for processes to unfold according to their nature to be effective. Since SLOA meets only once per month, it took months of discussions and revisions to get the design principles and strategies across the finish line. The hiring process took longer than I had hoped, and Dr. Blankenship needs to finish out his faculty responsibilities before starting his position.

Another challenge is the fear of the unknown. What does NWCCU expect of us? By when? For that matter, what does Cabinet expect in terms of progress on what I hope its members realize is a knotty problem. Will faculty, Deans, and AD's understand the need to move in a new direction on program learning outcomes assessment? I understand that we are at an inflection point with respect to learning outcomes assessment, but I (we) need to resist two temptations right now: one is the temptation to make the change too quickly; the other is the temptation to let the perfect be the enemy of the good, or we'll drive ourselves crazy with abstract intellectual conversations as we try to invent the perfect assessment system. Much of what we've been doing is good but needs to be

focused specifically on the kind of stackable assessment that is efficient, non-duplicative, and that provides us actionable data.

A final challenge to mention is the need to wrap up the assessment work begun in Tom Zane's last year. Shortly, through the efforts of Tiffany Barney, we will be giving schools two sets of assessment results: one is their most recent critical thinking data, and the other is an analysis of the assessment narratives that most departments completed. For those familiar with the NWCCU report, our accreditors stated that "the narrative approach of program assessment is not an effective instrument to systematically evaluate the quality of learning in its programs." Nevertheless, SLOA members felt it important to honor the work that has been done in that regard, and that programs will find a grounded theory analysis of the assessment narratives to be a useful launching point for their future assessment efforts.

## **Recommendations**

A charge centered on program learning outcomes assessment should focus on work that can be accomplished by the end of the 2022-23 academic year. The strategy leads—I suggest Chris and I work with Mike Young to cover the General Education and program assessment bases—should be able to report on the following sub-charges:

1. Pilot improvements to the General Education program's own assessment, based on the recently completed mapping project and predicated on the idea that General Education assessment will be partnered with program-specific assessment in all the other academic programs. (Note that the notion of stackable assessment depends on this)
2. Broaden General Education assessment to cover AAS students as well as students in AS/AA programs. (This is in direct response to concerns expressed by NWCCU accreditors)
3. Develop models of stackable assessment in several AS/AA as well as AAS programs. These models should show how General Education assessment is foundational to program learning outcomes assessment and should free up programs to concentrate on student learning that goes beyond General Education.
4. Finalize the relationship between program learning outcomes assessment and instructional program review.
5. Make recommendations in the form of IBP requests for resources needed for effective General Education and academic program learning outcomes assessment.
6. Conduct professional development trainings on program learning outcomes assessment.
7. Complete the transition to a shared assessment language, with the new terminology reflected in all forms and documents going forward.

As I look at the assessment landscape at SLCC over the next year, I want to emphasize two points:

1. Except for the General Education program, which will be piloting a new approach this year, it is unreasonable for us to expect the actual collection of learning outcomes assessment data in the 2022-23 academic year. I wish that it weren't so, but we have to realize that it makes little sense to expect programs to simultaneously learn a new approach (stackable assessment) and also collect data. The new approach requires programs to think through many important questions like:

- a. What aspects of student learning does the program add above and beyond General Education?
- b. Where does that learning take place? They need to identify this at the course level—presumably in major course requirements.
- c. What signature assignments will produce artifacts that address the program’s learning outcomes? Do those assignments need revision?
- d. How will the program gather the artifacts produced by signature assignments? The obvious choices here are ePortfolio or Canvas, but there might be other possibilities.
- e. Who will do the assessment and according to what schedule?
- f. What is the plan for responding to assessment data, improving teaching and learning, and making any curricular changes?
- g. How will program assessment reports blend General Education data with that gathered by the program’s faculty in its majors courses?

I hope that NWCCU and you will allow us this year to work out the answers to these questions.

2. The institution needs to be clear about faculty workload when it comes to learning outcomes assessment. The stackable assessment idea is designed to avoid the kind of duplication of efforts we’ve seen in the past, and it should create an efficient partnership between General Education assessment and the assessment of all other academic programs, but all assessment efforts require time and effort. Here are some questions to consider. Does program learning outcomes assessment work fall within the scope of full-time faculty contracts? In what cases should full-time faculty be compensated for assessment work? Should reassigned time be used to incentivize some assessment work? Do academic administrators support compensating adjunct faculty for assessment work to engage them more in the work of their departments? The answers to these questions are not clear to me, and yet they are essential to the work going forward. As Provost, you might take the position that learning outcomes assessment work fits entirely within the scope of existing faculty contracts and that extra compensation and reassigned time is not warranted. That’s a defensible position. So is a position that lays out specific situations in which extra compensation and reassigned time could be used for assessment work. But here’s the key thing from my point of view: *the position we take in Academics makes a huge difference in the design of our program assessment system going forward, so it is important that we reach a consensus on these matters now.* Doing so with clarity and finality will be more helpful to faculty morale than allowing separate deals to be made on a school or department level. The LOA Office can adjust its work to fit the path Academics chooses, but it would also benefit from clarity and consistency on this matter.