

Doing It Our Way: Outcomes Assessment at IUPUI

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Background

AS INDIANA'S URBAN RESEARCH university, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) was founded in 1969 with an explicit commitment to advancing educational achievement in our region. Our earliest mission documents spoke of basing teaching and learning ap-

proaches on evidence. Over nearly five decades of institutional growth, we have reaffirmed these promises in mission statements, strategic plans, and annual planning and reporting efforts. In our current strategic plan, *Our Commitment to Indiana and Beyond*, the institution's highest priority is to "promote student learning and success," with assessment explicitly identified as a strategy for achieving this goal.

Unfettered by state or trustee assessment mandates, outcomes assessment has thus developed organically from institutional mission and purposes at IUPUI. Assessment efforts aim as much for improvement as for accountability; we use assessment data to adapt curricula and instruction to the needs of our particular student population. Campus-wide commitment to assessment has

also been fostered by IUPUI's participation in a series of national projects focused on documenting and improving student learning, fostering student success, and demonstrating institutional effectiveness. These initiatives all left their mark on the campus. National recognition and awards for assessment have further validated the quality and

Approaches to Assessment

IUPUI's formal assessment efforts began in 1988, when a small faculty-led committee created an initial campus blueprint for learning outcomes assessment. In 1994, this Program Review and Assessment Committee (PRAC)—now enlarged to represent all academic units and administrative offices working directly with students—developed a campus-wide assessment plan that, with minor alterations, continues to serve us well and keep us focused on long-term goals.

By 1998, IUPUI faculty were early adopters of an outcomes-focused approach to general education. With occasional updates, our Principles of Under-

graduate Learning (PULs) have provided a foundation for general education and an enduring statement of the learning outcomes that all IUPUI graduates should achieve. The PULs serve as a campus-wide framework for assessing key collegiate outcomes in both general education courses and undergraduate degree programs, which incorporate the PULs into discipline-specific outcomes and assessment. Parallel sets of Principles of Co-Curricular Learning and Principles of Graduate and Professional Learning adapt the PULs to out-of-class learning experiences and graduate/professional programs.

An annual reporting process, whereby school- and unit-level committees supply information on assessment activities and outcomes to PRAC, enables the institution to track student learning of disciplinary and general education outcomes and to ensure that assessment and improvement are ongoing. We have learned to keep assessment activities manageable; not every outcome need be assessed, and not every strategy need be conducted every year; over a 5- to 10-year schedule, outcomes and strategies can be repeated sufficiently to gain credibility, assure actionable data, and identify warranted improvements.

With some 20 colleges and schools and various co-curricular units engaged in outcomes assessment, the campus does not prescribe specific assessment methods. Approaches include signature assignments, capstone projects,

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electronic portfolios, and field-specific credentialing exams, among many others. A family of surveys with a core of common items gathers data on student, alumni, faculty, and employer perceptions of learning to supplement direct measures. Comprehensive program review includes external peers and community members and examines student learning in addition to faculty and staff accomplishments. An annual campus-level assessment report synthesizes these information sources to support recommendations for unit- and campus-level improvements.

The Excellence in Assessment Application Process

Shortly after the EIA Designation was announced in November 2015, a small group of IUPUI assessment leaders met to discuss a strategy for engaging in self-study and developing an application. Each group member drafted an initial version of part of the application and an overall editor combined these into a single narrative to share with stakeholders. Simultaneously, the group asked PRAC members for noteworthy examples of assessment and improvement efforts related to the PULs. We also began contacting mem-

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The stakeholder meetings took place over several weeks in February 2016. As we incorporated the feedback we heard into successive drafts of our application, we shared what we were learning and

discussed the evolving drafts at monthly PRAC meetings. By April 1, the deadline originally announced for the inaugural year of the designation, our application was close to complete; we used the one-month extension to make additional refinements to our materials.

Our advice to institutions crafting EIA Designation applications can be summarized in three main points:

1. Start early. You will write more drafts than you expect.
2. Structure your application to tell your institution's assessment story, with institutional mission as your starting point.
3. Be aware that the word limit for the application narrative allows little room for detail or elaboration. Be strategic about what you choose to describe. Take advantage of other sections of the application to strengthen your case. Use your chancellor's or president's letter as an introduction. Use the sections on campus assessment groups and participants in the EIA application process to demonstrate the depth and breadth of institutional assessment activity and commitment. (In 2016, no word limits were stipulated for these two sections.)

What We Learned: Engaging with Stakeholders

The community members, alumni, and students we engaged with as part of the self-study taught us several important lessons. Students confirmed our suspicion that explicit emphasis on the PULs depends on discipline and instructor; they wanted to know specifically how course and curricular content maps to the PULs and how assessment results

feed into improvements. Members of IUPUI schools' community advisory boards, made up of local employers and alumni, were surprised by the scale of IUPUI's outcomes assessment. They quickly recognized that assessment findings supply valuable information on the IUPUI students they recruit. Each group encouraged us to share assessment activities and findings regularly with community stakeholders.

What We Learned: Strengths of Assessment at IUPUI

In addition to the structures and processes delineated in our description of campus approaches (above), we identified the following strengths:

- Remarkable continuity of upper administrative institutional leaders who have supported assessment and provided resources for professional development, information-gathering strategies, and assessment technologies.
- An ongoing representative campus-wide assessment committee. PRAC has played an essential role in leading the continued development of assessment at IUPUI. PRAC members act as liaisons between the committee and their academic and administrative units, offer expertise to others within their units, and cultivate faculty and staff support for assessment.
- Strong administrative, faculty, and staff leadership at the unit level. School-level committees are explicitly charged with overseeing assessment. Administrative units working directly with students include assessment specialists on staff.
- Strategic capacity building for assessment through PRAC grants and professional development programs offered through our Center for Teaching and Learning. These support mechanisms have deepened engagement in assessment, helped improve campus practices, and advanced the assessment field more broadly.

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little experience with assessment to become assessment leaders, CCBC is going to launch an Assessment Institute in 2017. The Institute will consist of 18 hours of intensive training that will prepare participants to serve as assessment ambassadors using a “train the trainer” methodology.

Conclusion

We undertook the challenge of completing the EIA designation applica-

tion in the way that we hope everyone conducts assessment—embracing the need for continuous improvement and with the goals of affirming what is going well, unearthing what needs further attention, and making a tangible plan to implement necessary changes. The exercise of applying the scoring rubric pushed us to examine all aspects of our assessment model. The rubric was a very helpful tool that guided the writ-

ing of the application, and reminded us of where to focus attention in the future. We were reminded that we should not get too comfortable with the status quo. The process reaffirmed the value of external review and reenergized our assessment efforts. ■

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- Dissemination of good practices and honing of assessment expertise through an annual PRAC-sponsored collegial peer review of unit assessment reports. This process has resulted in marked improvement of the annual reports.
- Empowerment of units to choose the assessment strategies they judge best suited to their purposes. This approach encourages faculty ownership of assessment and enables it to be rooted in school missions and disciplinary norms, thus supporting a sustainable assessment culture.
- IUPUI sponsorship of the annual Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, the oldest and largest assessment conference in the United States. The Institute enables IUPUI faculty and staff to learn from internationally recognized assessment leaders and to disseminate their own assessment work.

Areas for Improvement of Assessment at IUPUI

While assessment is well established at IUPUI, our self-study suggested that we need to improve communication about learning outcomes and assessment with students, community stakeholders, and one another. In particular:

- Our communication with undergraduate students about the PULs should be more consistent across the institution and

within programs, starting in the first-year seminar and continuing through the senior capstone experience.

- We should renew efforts to connect assessment findings to improvements in our annual reports and to use all of the assessment data we collect to identify and pursue improvement opportunities.

Feedback from EIA Reviewers

We were pleased to hear in July 2016 that IUPUI was one of four institutions selected for the Sustained Excellence Designation. Reviewers commended us for providing evidence of good assessment practices and use of student learning outcomes findings for improvement. They also observed that integration and alignment of outcomes between program and course levels and through undergraduate programs were difficult to discern, echoing some of the comments we had heard from students and reminding us of the need to clarify these relationships in our annual reporting. They further suggested that we consider instituting awards for faculty and staff who engage in exemplary assessment practice. These suggestions are on the PRAC agenda for the current academic year, with plans to bring recommendations to faculty governance groups and institutional leaders in spring 2017.

Final Thoughts

Engaging in the EIA Designation application process was a worthwhile exercise for IUPUI: we identified important strengths and areas for improvement in discussions with faculty/staff committees and with students and external stakeholders. Most gratifying for us was the way the latter two groups engaged with the materials we provided, reading them closely, asking thoughtful questions, and commending us on the efforts and results we reported. The self-study process thus yielded important lessons and helped us to craft a persuasive application. But an application can only be as strong as the assessment culture, structures, and practices it represents. Patience and persistence in building that culture and developing those structures and practices have been essential to creating and sustaining “Excellence in Assessment” at IUPUI. Strategically linking assessment to institutional mission and priorities helped this process to garner crucial support from administration, faculty, and staff, to be conducted in a manner that makes sense for our campus, and ultimately to thrive and endure. ■

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