Lake Superior State University
Impact Report on the Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning
April 22, 2016

Introduction

Lake Superior State University has benefited through our participation in the HLC Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning due to heightened institutional awareness of the value and importance of assessment *for* student learning as evidenced by increased participation, greater consistency, and greater engagement, in our institutional assessment activities. Assessment for student learning is increasingly understood as a higher good, moving us as an institution from a focus on compliance, or even continuous quality improvement for its own sake, to a commitment to put Student Learning First (the theme of our fall 2015 university convocation event).

1. Describe your Academy project(s) as developed at the first Roundtable. Be as detailed as possible about the issues it was intended to address as well as the content and strategies of the project itself.

The LSSU Academy Project was developed in a time of intensive institutional focus on assessment that converged around the October 2011 comprehensive evaluation visit, and development of the self-study, leading to the reaffirmation of our accreditation with the HLC.
At the time of our application for admission to the Academy, the university had just completed a comprehensive site visit which led the HLC review team to note in the assurance section report that:

> *"the team was unable to discern any demonstrable evidence regarding either the assembling, or the integration, of constituent assessment activities that were taking place on campus into an institutional database, or any locally preferred equivalent. Nor was the team shown evidence that whatever data that were either available to, or acquirable by, the institution were being analyzed to inform the planning and execution of academic, administrative, and support programs, and other activities that are important to LSSU's future."*
> (*http://www.lssu.edu/hlc/documents/Assurance_LSSU_112811a.pdf* p.14)

As a result, the university was responsible for a monitoring report that included the establishment of a "university assessment plan outlining a clear process for collecting, disseminating and implementing assessment results."

During the previous year the university had engaged in a comprehensive and immersive discussion related to our mission, vision and organizational model. Central to this discussion was a transition to a shared governance model that involved all members of the university community. The Assessment Committee, formed in the fall 2011 comprised of faculty, administrators, support staff and students, led a review of assessment database tools leading to the selection of Tracdat as our institutional database in the spring 2012. The Assessment Committee then assumed responsibility for the development and implementation of a multifaceted University Assessment Plan (UAP) which addressed academic and administrative assessment and introduced a common vocabulary and structure to the documentation of

assessment findings and actions. The UAP, through our assessment database, systematically set out to formalize the assessment of course and program student learning outcomes, accreditation requirements from external agencies, general education outcomes, assessment of the institutional strategic plan and the operational objectives of administrative and student support units. LSSU's participation in the Academy was not a requirement arising from the reaccreditation process, nor was the Academy used in lieu of monitoring. Rather, the university sought out the Academy as an opportunity to bring heightened institutional focus, and the support of the Academy community, to bear on the issues and challenges of strengthening our nascent culture of assessment and focus on student learning.

The LSSU Academy Project focused on promoting an institutional culture of assessment centered on student learning. The objective was to provide training and tools to assist faculty in the implementation of course and program assessment processes, as these processes are integral to institutional improvement and effectiveness. To reach this outcome we intended to utilize technology in the form of a university-wide system for collecting, disseminating, and implementing assessment results. We planned to build faculty participation through a staged faculty and staff development process with a dual focus. We planned to provide faculty training and feedback on developing and refining learning outcomes at both the course and program level. At the same time, we planned to work on shifting the ad-hoc and disparate assessment activities, then underway across the university, to a centralized location for the collection, aggregation, and dissemination of assessment data. As faculty and staff worked to formalize their existing assessment activities into the now-established university framework (outcomes – measures with targets – results – action planning), we believed that our institutional understanding and use of assessment data would become more refined and more robust. The explicit focus in Year 1 and 2 was planned to be on the refinement of course-level assessment, and in the latter two years we intended to expand to encompass program-level assessment. It was understood that assessment data alone would not be the end goal, but would become a tool for effective decision making and ultimately be used to improve student learning.

Through this project we intended to build a culture of assessment-based decision making that positively impacts student learning. We planned to standardize and systematize the collection of assessment data from across the university using assessment software (in our case in Tracdat). Building from the smallest component (and the one most relevant to the individual faculty member) we intended to begin our efforts by focusing on course-level assessment and then expand into program-level assessment. We hoped to develop a pattern for institutionalizing assessment which would be faculty and student focused, positioned in the context of meaningful change (relevant to both the faculty member's own instructional and research framework), and which would lead to improved student learning. To determine the success of this project we planned to use faculty surveys to determine satisfaction with the assessment system. We also proposed to obtain measures of project impact through the use of training records, audits of course and program activity, as well as attendance at meetings and conferences.

2. Describe any changes that you made to the project(s)—or that had to be made to it—other than personnel changes. What were the reasons for these changes? Did the changes improve the project?

There were no substantial changes to the Project goals, scope of work or design. Simply stated, our goal from the outset was to build an institutional database to document both our assessment findings and our use of assessment to impact student learning. We began this work from the perspective, reiterated in the site visit report, that "the disconnect with assessment has been the lack of university alignment, not with the gathering of assessment data" (p.13). The assessment database structure provided a commonality to all assessment practices requiring clear statements of the learning outcomes, the measures and activities by which those outcomes will be assessed, the assessment findings (either directly tied to the outcome, or findings related to the defined measures and activities), and actions based on those findings. These four components are the foundational elements of assessment, and they comprise the content of the standard assessment database four-column report.

As it turned out, in the beginning there was not a robust and pervasive understanding of the four components of assessment in many areas of the university. In the process of training on how to use the assessment database we found it necessary to cycle back to review the foundational concepts of measureable outcomes, meaningful measures, and actionable data as findings that can lead to impactful actions related to student learning. While there were forms of assessment occurring, the challenges went beyond the simple documentation process, but involved deeper challenges related to the role and value of assessment, the fundamental relationship of assessment to a focus on student learning, the necessity for all units to align their goals and activities to the mission, and the focus on evaluating their effectiveness in reaching those goals. Over time the university has shifted in its understanding of the preeminence of student learning as an institutional priority, much as accrediting bodies have made the shift from a review of institutional inputs (books, credentials, and square footage) to the outputs (student learning, employability, the public good and contributions to knowledge).

During the 2014-2015 academic year there was a substantive and beneficial change in the composition of the Academy Team. At the end of the spring semester 2014 the Academy Team recommended to the Provost that the Academy Project be formally integrated into the portfolio of the shared governance Assessment Committee. To provide some context for this recommendation, it may be helpful to review that in the fall 2011 the university established The Assessment Committee as a shared governance strategic committee with representation from academic administration, faculty, administrative professionals (AP), educational support personnel (ESP) and students. With our entry into the Academy for Student Learning in the spring 2012, a separate team comprised of four faculty members, each representing one of the four colleges, a dean and the associate provost were appointed to attend the Academy training in the summer of 2012. Through the past two to three years, the Academy project, and the work of The Assessment Committee have overlapped both in terms of their charge and to some extent their membership. During this same time frame, the Assessment Committee also petitioned the Shared Governance Oversight Committee to have the committee membership reformulated to include one representative from each of the twelve academic schools. The recommendation to merge the

Academy Team into the Assessment Committee was intended to expand the understanding and support for the Academy goals, and to streamline committee processes.

3. What have you achieved as a result of your work in the Academy? Consider the range of these achievements, from the very specific (development of a rubric) to the more general (outcomes-based curriculum approval processes). To what degree have these achievements been institutionalized?

Participation in the HLC Academy for the Assessment of Student Learning has been the catalyst for significant change at the university, much of which has become a part of the institutional fabric. The Academy website (http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/academy_project_home.php) was started as a way to document our Academy updates and resource files for periodic reports. The website quickly became the go-to place for the reports, analysis and public visibility related to all course and program assessment, as well as a model for the parallel website on general education assessment (http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/generaleducation.php). The infusion of assessment literacy and awareness has impacted many areas of campus and led to meaningful action. Examples include:

- The university Curriculum Committee incorporated new content requirements for all course and program proposals that directly address documentation of assessment, through Tracdat reports, and explicit discussion of outcome assessment that led to the proposed action. The tone and focus of curriculum committee has changed significantly to the point that all members are fluent in the language of assessment, and expect documentation of assessment as the basis for curriculum change. This commitment is evidenced through the new course proposal form: http://www.lssu.edu/provost/documents/FormB_New_Course_Proposal_S15.docx
- A formal process of program review has been initiated using an institutional template that requires a narrative on program assessment. Early submissions using this new template tended to focus solely on course-level outcomes, an important element but not equivalent to program outcomes. Feedback from the Deans was used to shift the assessment focus beyond courses to the program-specific outcomes. The university now publically reports the program review summaries, feedback and Tracdat-based assessment reports arising from this process. http://www.lssu.edu/sharedgovernance/assessment/SLOAP3.php Through the program review process, schools have been able to review and modify their program level outcomes, some of which had focused on inputs, or conditions the program would provide to students, rather than on the skills, abilities and knowledge the graduate would possess.
- The university has established a new Faculty Center for Teaching, supported through a Title III grant, which has become the centerpiece in our ongoing faculty development program. http://www.lssu.edu/fct/ The Faculty Center facilitated the fall 2015 Development Day programming which prominently focused on student learning and its assessment. http://www.lssu.edu/provost/documents/ProfessionalDevelopmentDaySchedule2015.pdf The Faculty Center has initiated a spring assessment event to encourage faculty to enter their assessment data before leaving for summer, and will provide assistance in navigating the assessment software.
- The Assessment Committee provides technical training and support on the assessment software

through their website: http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/trainingworkshops.php. Professional Development training and resource development has changed focus over time, become more streamlined, decreased face-to-face training in favor of providing asynchronous just-in-time resources, and focused on a narrow set of very short video training modules.

- The General Education Committee restructured the reporting format for the Outcome Task Committees to specifically address assessment findings related to the general education curriculum. These Task Committee reports, posted to the general education website (http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/generaleducation.php) present an integrated view of student learning from multiple perspectives: course assessment, ETS test results, and surveys of graduating seniors.
- Assessment outside academics has also been positively impacted by focus and attention associated with the Academy Project. Each organization unit represented on the organizational chart was provided a module to document their assessment, using the same basal template as used for academic affairs. Units documented activity related to internal goals and activity related specifically to the strategic plan. The shared governance Strategic Planning and Budget Committee has used Tracdat reports for institutional assessment, accountability and action. Professional development opportunities have been provided to area directors and managers through the university's Leadership Luncheon Series, including training on developing assessment measures related to unit goals.

The institution established at the outset of the Academy Project that our key metric would measure the documentation of course and program assessment evidence into our institutional database (Tracdat). To this end we set ambitious benchmarks which increased through the course of the Project. Goals were set for the number of courses/programs with outcomes, measures, findings and actions. The Project goals were set for the spring of each Project year. However, in actual practice the spring assessment results are not tabulated and entered in some cases until the pre-class fall professional development days. The net effect is that the status of assessment findings in mid-April, the time of this report, would be expected to fall between the Project goals set for spring 2015 and spring 2016. The Table below provides percentage values for each of the key metrics for Courses and Programs (course/program).

Percentage of courses/programs	Outcomes	Measures	Findings	Actions
Spring 2015 Goal	80/80	60/40	60/40	40/10
April 2016 Actual	92/100	74/100	66/43	55/33
Spring 2016 Goal	90/90	80/60	80/60	60/40

4. What effect has your time in the Academy had on institutional commitment to the assessment of learning on campus? How broad is that commitment? How has institutional capacity for assessing student learning changed?

The support and promotion of assessment, focused on student learning, has been exceedingly clear in the communications from our new president, and the impact is obvious. Immediately prior to the resumption of classes in 2015 the president distributed a relevant assessment article ["Does Assessment Make Colleges Better? Who Knows?"](#)) from the Chronicle of Higher Education to all faculty and staff, with a cover memo describing his own perspectives as a faculty member and administrator. Many faculty members, and even some staff, participated in a protracted electronic dialog about assessment practices, costs and the value to the individual faculty member and the institution. This represents the elevated level of institutional awareness and engagement in assessment, and while there is not unanimity or agreement on all aspects of assessment, the Academy Project has had a central role in bringing assessment to the forefront. While extrinsic motivation, i.e. pressure from the HLC, is not the best or most effective motivator of change it cannot be ignored as a significant factor. On a positive note the campus dialog on assessment has largely moved forward to focus appropriately on assessment *for* learning. Examples of institutional commitment to assessment of learning include the following:

- Frequent mention of assessment in the Provost's monthly newsletter
  http://www.lssu.edu/provost/
- Communications from the assessment committee under the heading: Assessment Matters
  http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/
- Assessment Committee actions, as evidenced through meeting minutes and reports, the ongoing updates to the assessment plan, and regular surveys used to gather and report on issues and concerns related to assessment
  http://www.lssu.edu/sharedgovernance/assessment/index.php
- Funding for the Targeted Assessment Project program – dedicated funds available to support schools in the development, implementation and advancement of assessment activities on campus https://sites.google.com/a/lssu.edu/sg-assessment-committee/tap-mini-grant
- Continued support of the assessment database, Tracdat, to provide continuity in approach, and effective reporting capability leading to institutional action http://lssu.tracdat.com
- Continued commitment through funding of travel to HLC conferences for faculty and administrators involved in assessment, support for assessment special projects, ongoing training on the assessment system software and its upgrades, and underwriting specialized accreditation cost.
- Increased size of The Assessment Committee to include a representative from each academic school to broaden institutional awareness, participation, and engagement in assessment discussions.

5. What effect has your Academy work had on student learning?

The Academy Project has catalyzed a campus dialog on the assessment of student learning, more specifically assessment *for* student learning. Through the assessment software, Tracdat, we have institutionalized a language and framework of assessment common to academics, student affairs,

strategic planning, and all other areas of campus. This framework, based on the four fundamental building blocks of outcomes-measures-findings-actions, provides a consistent understanding and expectation for our assessment activities. Within the common format there is flexibility for using a different vocabulary within specific units, tailored to the needs of outside accreditors, specific disciplines or professional preferences. The Academy Project has elevated campus discussions on the role of formative and summative assessment, evaluation and assessment, direct and indirect measures, and qualitative and quantitative tools.

Assessment *for* student learning has had a direct impact on our students, including these examples:

- Students in the Fisheries and Wildlife program need to be ready for work in the Department of Natural Resources, including development of a solid knowledge of Michigan game fish, their identification and scientific names. In assessing student's success in fish identification, and through direct conversations with student, the faculty found that students had spent a disproportionate amount of time memorizing the spelling of the fish names, needed to be successful on the exam, to the detriment of their ability to recognize the fish themselves. The faculty, realizing that Latin spelling was not an essential skill for field work, changed the course exam to include a word bank of Latin names for the students to pull from once they identified the fish. To recap, students in BIOL310 were required to learn to identify fishes and correctly spell their scientific names in 2014 for full credit on ID quizzes and lab exams, whereas students in 2015 were provided a word bank of scientific names to draw from. Student scores on ID quizzes increased from an average of 7.9 (out of 10) in 2014 to 8.5 in 2015, and scores on lab exams increased from 64.2 (out of 100) in 2014 to 76.4 in 2015. Of course these were different students in different years (two lab sections in both years), but it appears that students better learned how to ID fishes when they didn't have to dedicate as much of their time to learning how to spell scientific names.

- After years of assessing creative writing courses, English faculty met at the program level to discuss the bigger picture and reached a conclusion: creative writing students needed to spend more time in the capstone course and in courses that emphasized professional skills development. The Literature - Creative Writing degree was too heavily literature intensive, especially given that creative writing students also studied literature in the context of creative writing classes, in addition to traditional literature courses. The Program needed to do a better job balancing the needs of its students to be able to read and critically analyze literary texts with the need to have time to view literature from a writer's perspective and to create original works of literary merit. It also had to make room for high impact learning opportunities for creative writing students and make sure that it was fulfilling the university's mission to "launch students on paths to rewarding careers and productive, satisfying lives." These assessment findings became the rationale for changes to the B.A. Literature - Creative Writing program that were submitted to Curriculum Committee in January 2015. Pointing to evidence in Tracdat reports, the creative writing faculty was able to get approval for a reduction in total literature credits,

increase in creative writing and professional writing credits, and a doubling of the time creative writing students will spend on their capstone projects. The new curriculum will now enable the program to guide students toward writing career "pathways." The changed curriculum takes effect Fall 2015 and is expected to result in a significantly improved achievement of course and program learning outcomes.

- The Chemistry Department here at Lake Superior State University offers multiple degrees approved by the American Chemical Society (ACS). The majority of faculty teaching courses (General Chemistry, Organic Chemistry, Biochemistry, Analytical Chemistry and Physical Chemistry) offered by the department utilize an ACS exam as an assessment instrument for student learning. On numerous occasions, results from these examinations have been used to identify chemical concepts that students as a majority have struggled with. These concepts are then covered in additional detail the following course offering and targeted for discussion in our Structured Learning Assistance workshops. On a larger scale, program assessment in the chemistry department has recognized a need for coursework specific to forensic chemistry earlier in the forensic chemistry program. Currently, the only course specific to the field of forensics is CHEM 445 (Forensic Chemistry), which is taken by students in their junior or senior years (offered every other year). The addition of NSCI 110 (Investigations in Chemistry and Forensics) to the program will address this need and provide students with earlier exposure to a number of fundamental forensic chemistry concepts.

- The Lukenda School of Business administers the ETS Major Field Test in Business every semester to its senior students enrolled in BUSN466 – Business Policy. ETS annually publishes a comparative data guide that allows institutions to compare their students' results with those of test takers across the nation. The LSB has collected and analyzed MFT data every semester since fall 2010 primarily to assess the common professional component of its programs. The School's goal is that its students' mean percent correct will equal or exceed the national mean in each assessment indicator area.

    MFT results indicated that LSB students were weak in the Quantitative Business Analysis area. When a management instructor retired in 2012, the LSB hired a replacement with a strong quantitative background. The School also added MGMT371 – Operations and Business Analytics as a required course for all business students. The LSSU mean score in the Quanitative Business Analysis area has equaled or exceeded the national mean for the last six semesters.

    LSB students have also scored below the national mean in the Information Systems area in recent periods. Thus, the School added MGMT280 – Introduction to Management Information Systems as a required course for all business students during the fall 2013 semester. The LSSU mean score in the Information Systems area has steadily increased since then and exceeded the national mean in the most recent semester.

6. What concrete evidence do you have to demonstrate the effects you described in questions 3-5?

The LSSU Academy Project has promoted an institutional culture of assessment centered on student learning. We have committed to transparency in every aspect of our project, documenting each step on our Academy website (http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/academy_project_home.php). We provided training and implemented course and program assessment in every school and college. We have broad participation in the documentation of assessment activities through our university-wide assessment system. We brought varied and disparate assessment activities together in Tracdat as a centralized location for the collection, aggregation, and dissemination of assessment data. We have promoted a culture of assessment based decision making that positively impacted student learning as described above. We have monitored at every step the progressive increase in assessment activity, and attitudinal changes through faculty surveys conducted early in the project, and in the spring semester 2015. http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/documents/CourseAssessmentReportSpring2012.pdf and http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/documents/Assessment-perceptions-faculty2.pdf.

Reports generated from Tracdat tabulate by unit, course or goal each of the following: the outcomes, measures, findings, and actions. A uniform format for the documentation allows for consistent reports – useful for all members of the university community. Evidence is documented in the system and extractable directly by all users of the system through Tracdat reports as evidenced below and on our institutional website:

- Program Review includes the review of course and program assessment as documented in Tracdat. At the time of each program review cycle, a point-in-time report was generated for all courses related to the program, and for the program outcomes directly. These are tabulated on our assessment website: http://www.lssu.edu/sharedgovernance/assessment/SLOAP3.php
- Course-level assessment is the foundational element of all academic assessment. Assessment for courses associated with an academic program are presented with the program review data described above, however the status of assessment for all courses is also captured and presented on the assessment home page: http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/ Tracdat-based four-column Course Assessment Reports, documented as of April 2016, are listed below:

    - The Courses Arts & Humanities
    - The Courses Biological Sciences
    - The Courses Business
    - The Courses Communication
    - The Courses Criminal Justice
    - The Courses Education
    - The Courses Emergency Medical Services
    - The Courses Engineering & Technology
    - The Courses English
    - The Courses Fire Science
    - The Courses Language Studies
    - The Courses Liberal Studies
    - The Courses Mathematics Computer Science

- The Courses [Nursing](#)
- The Courses [Physical Science](#)
- The Courses [Provost](#) (Honors and Interdisciplinary)
- The Courses [Recreation Studies Exercise Science](#)
- The Courses [Social Science](#)

7. What do you see as the next logical steps for continuing the work you have begun in the Academy? In particular, what new student learning initiatives do you see developing from your Academy work, and how will you sustain the energy and momentum of your Academy work?

We acknowledge that, in spite of the tremendous gains since the inception of the Academy Project, our assessment initiatives continue to identify areas for improvement. We intend to continue to address various weaknesses and obstacles in a systematic and straightforward manner. Ongoing challenges include engaging some faculty in the assessment culture, and responding to faculty concerns about cost, time, and use of data once collected (ignored or used in evaluation) etc. We recognize that assessment plan improvement is an iterative process requiring time and energy and that incremental changes are indicators of long-term gains. We plan to ensure sustainability by building up intact structures, using the process that works within the culture of our institution, and the resources available. Tracdat has had a recent update that substantially improved the user interface, yet requires a short learning curve for faculty members just learning the older interface. The assessment committee has been expanded and this year we hope to see the final new members added to represent all academic schools to fill the six new vacancies. We believe that the next logical step is to ramp up the focus on co-curricular and student support assessment. The Assessment Committee needs to continue to grapple with its role in the assessment process as a supporter and advocate of assessment, providing feedback without crossing into evaluation. Other initiatives for the future include:

- Continue progress toward assessment for all taught courses and all programs
- Move the program review process beyond BA/BS programs to associates, certificates and minors
- Increase Assessment Committee role in program review with feedback, focus on program-level outcomes and expand beyond academic programs to co-curricular and student support programs.
- Provide support and feedback to the General Education committee

The university has institutionalized assessment as a valued process, important beyond the upcoming reaccreditation visit cycle. Sustaining the momentum in course and program assessment will be more difficult in one respect once the Assurance Argument is finalized, yet we believe we have developed an infrastructure for the ongoing documentation of assessment data and its integral connection to decision making. We are confident that our current focus will be sustained.

In conclusion, we affirm the importance of assessment *for* student learning, and assessment for the benefit of institutional effectiveness. The Academy Project has helped strengthen the culture of assessment at the university and provided an additional impetus to develop our consistent database of

assessment findings and actions. We have a terrific faculty and staff who "put Students First", who value student learning, and who want to make a difference in the lives of their students. Our school motto, visible on the historic East Gate, states "Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Serve." Assessment is critical to determining if our students have truly learned what we set out as our instructional and social goals, and if they are truly ready to serve as fully qualified and well prepared graduates.