

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Palo Alto College: Faculty and Student Engagement through Assignment Design

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Palo Alto College is one of five individually-accredited community colleges in San Antonio, Texas, which comprise the Alamo Colleges District. “PAC,” as the campus is affectionately called among the College community, was founded in 1985 on the south side of the city through the tenacious efforts of citizen advocates for education. PAC plays a valuable role in the community by providing access to high-quality educational programming in one of the areas of lowest educational attainment in Bexar County. The culture of the campus itself is one of family and “together-we-can” spirit.

Enrollment is now nearing 10,000 students with approximately 80% in part-time attendance. PAC is identified as a Hispanic Serving Institution with 80% of the students being Hispanic. Twenty percent of PAC students are first time in college. Due to the number of military bases in San Antonio, PAC has high enrollment of veterans. The number of Dual Credit and Early College High School students continues to grow with approximately 2,848 students enrolled through these programs in fall 2018.

PAC offers Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, and Associate of Arts in Teaching degrees and the Professional & Technical Education (PTE) Division offers Associate of Applied Science degrees and Certificates in twelve program areas. PAC currently employs 135 full-time faculty, 180 part-time adjunct faculty, as well as 200 staff.

PAC was selected as a National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) case study based on its successful efforts in adapting NILOA’s assignment design toolkit to engage faculty, staff, and students in assessment. Offering intimate workshops frequently throughout the academic calendar year has created a ground swell of faculty reinvesting themselves in the curriculum. In just over a year, PAC experienced a full 180-degree shift in how faculty viewed and engaged in assessment. This case study explores PAC’s focus on assignments from the perspective of faculty, staff, and students.

Institutional Context

Academic assessment at PAC began in an organized fashion at the program and institutional levels during the 2009-2010 academic year. A full-time consultant was hired to work with a faculty committee to establish assessment cycles and processes for educational programs and general education. The upcoming 2012 reaffirmation of accreditation by SACSCOC gave impetus to this work. Programs composed learning outcomes, determined measures, and began submitting assessment reports each fall.

At the same time PAC was working on establishing assessment processes, the state of Texas was finalizing revisions to the [Texas Core Curriculum](#) and established six Core Objectives that all

courses admitted to the revised core (general education) would have to teach and assess beginning in fall 2014. The six objectives included Communication, Critical Thinking, Empirical & Quantitative Skills, Personal Responsibility, Social Responsibility, and Teamwork.

PAC began assessing these six objectives in the fall of 2010 using “key assignments” and rubrics adapted from AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics and those of other institutions. Faculty were asked to create assignments designed to elicit student responses that could be evaluated using the common rubric criteria. In 2012, the assessment committee updated the original rubrics and made a significant adjustment to the assessment of the core objectives requiring all courses, not only those in the core curriculum, to teach and assess communication and critical thinking.

As can happen after an accreditation visit, the staff in charge of the QEP and academic assessment moved on to other roles. Assessment processes were sustained, but interest in building the value of assessment for student learning improvement waned. The processes were seen by faculty as a necessary burden to satisfy accreditors and the use of assessment results was rare. As described by an academic administrator, “For years we went with the mentality of, ‘We have to do this, SACS says we have to do it’...It would pop up, people would address it when it came up, then we’d forget about it.”¹

Building Campus-wide Awareness of Learning Outcomes

Up to this point, assessment activities had been prompted by and associated with accreditation cycles and requirements. Learning outcomes were measured by faculty on a sample of student work solely to serve accountability purposes. In general, expectations about teaching and assessing common outcomes were unclear to faculty. Though assessment results were shared publicly across campus, those being assessed, the students, were virtually unaware of expectations of their learning or their performance against those benchmarks.

In 2017-18 an initiative to broaden awareness of the core curriculum objectives (now called [the Institutional Learning Outcomes](#)) was launched under the direction of a new full-time staff person dedicated solely to coordinating academic assessment. The goal of this initiative was to engage students as active participants in their learning by increasing awareness, understanding, and appreciation of Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILOs). A mini-grant provided professional development for faculty and events for students illustrating real world application of ILOs. Probably the most enduring element of this initiative is framed posters (Figure 1) defining the ILOs prominently displayed in every classroom and common office space across campus.

As hoped, the increased visibility of the ILOs have created more uniformity of expectations among faculty and transparency for students. Though not the focus of this initiative, the benefits have been campus-wide, as illustrated by the recent efforts of the Student Success Division of the College to voluntarily align their unit assessments with these core objectives. The idea of shared ownership of outcomes is developing with the understanding that student learning on core competencies is not limited to certain courses or even contained within the classroom.

Assignments as a Ticket into the Curriculum

In the meantime, ongoing assessment of ILOs continued in accordance with the institutional assessment plan, with personal and social responsibility being assessed in 2016. As had been established, faculty were asked to submit the instructions to their key assignments to accompany the student work. In addition to scoring the student work against the appropriate rubric, faculty raters assessed whether or not the assignment instructions aligned with each rubric criterion. Faculty rated any criterion not addressed in the assignment as ‘NA’ or ‘Not Assessable.’

¹ Faculty, staff, and student quotes in this case study are from PAC Assignment Design Workgroup reflections and interviews conducted on campus in November 2018.

INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

Palo Alto College prepares students for success in work and life by embedding cross-disciplinary learning outcomes in academic courses and co-curricular initiatives.



Communication

PAC students develop and express ideas through effective written, oral, and visual communication for various academic and professional contexts.

Real-world examples: explain your thinking, design public art, write an Op-Ed



Critical Thinking

PAC students exhibit habits of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.

Real-world examples: discern real news from fake news, develop your unique opinion, show ambition



Empirical and Quantitative Skills

PAC students apply scientific and mathematical concepts to analyze and solve problems.

Real-world examples: build a house, save money on groceries, travel safely



Personal Responsibility

PAC students connect choices, actions, and consequences to ethical decision-making.

Real-world examples: fight fairly, be kind, develop your sense of right and wrong



Social Responsibility

PAC students demonstrate intercultural competency, civic knowledge, and the ability to engage effectively in regional, national, and global communities.

Real-world examples: appreciate art, vote, recycle, employ veterans



Teamwork

PAC students consider different points of view and work effectively with others to support a shared purpose or goal.

Real-world examples: bring your best to the table, support your partner, avoid aggression

For more information about Palo Alto College's Institutional Learning Outcomes and their assessment, contact the Office of Academic Assessment, 210-486-3735, or visit us on the web at alamo.edu/pac/assessment



ALAMO COLLEGES DISTRICT
Palo Alto College

The results of this round of assessments showed that thirty-three of the 243 pieces of work (also referred to as “artifacts”) were not assessable. The assignments associated with these artifacts did not align with any of the rubric criteria for the outcomes; a strong indication that the College needed to do some work aligning assignments with the rubrics.

In addition to this, there was a perennial complaint from faculty that they were unable to find a connection between the ILO assessment results and the work they were doing in their classrooms. They did not know how the results could be used to inform changes to their curriculum or instruction. Faculty compliance with the assessment process did little to improve student learning in these important learning outcomes.

Assignments promised a direct connection between assessment and the work of teachers in the classroom. An exploration of assignment design unearthed a network of professional development resources through NILOA, the work of the Multi-State Collaborative, VALUE, and LEAP Texas. NILOA’s Assignment Design Toolkit² provided concrete templates, advice and examples for implementing assignment design on one’s own campus. The LEAP Texas³ annual conference provided introductions to assessment professionals who had also been pursuing assignment work.

In June 2017, PAC’s first “key assignment design working group” was organized. The group was small, comprised of six faculty members each from a different discipline: Music, Mexican-American Studies, Accounting, Anatomy and Physiology, Philosophy, and College Algebra. The cross-disciplinary nature was not intentional for this inaugural group, rather a handful of faculty open to the collaborative peer review process were invited to participate.

The group met for two hours, three afternoons in a row, sharing and discussing two assignments each day. This schedule was considered to be most conducive to the summer schedules of the faculty. Lunch was provided and the faculty were paid a small stipend for their time from an available grant. The coordinator borrowed materials from the NILOA Toolkit making slight adaptations. The materials included the letter inviting the faculty to take part in the group, the introductory presentation, the agenda, the NILOA assignment charrette discussion protocol, the assignment feedback sheets, and questions for post-group reflective feedback.

In addition to the workshop conducted at PAC, later that month, three PAC faculty members (one that was part of the PAC group and two additional faculty members) participated in an inter-college “Signature Assignment Institute” organized and led by Dr. Jeanne Tunks of the University of North Texas as part of her work as a faculty fellow for LEAP Texas. Although the format of the LEAP groups was somewhat different, the discussion was also organized around the NILOA charrette model.

The reactions of the eight PAC faculty members to the assignment design experiences were very positive. They were inspired by each other’s assignments and excited about the insightful feedback they received that would improve their own assignments. Furthermore, they did not anticipate the collegiality that was built through the sharing session. An additional surprise was a realization of the relevance of the ILO assessment to their work in the classroom by way of the key assignment. They were each interested in the results of the assessment that the revised assignments would prompt. The faculty members presented these experiences during the August convocation week activities. Their testimonials enticed additional faculty to take part in assignment design groups that Fall, with promises that the work would be relevant and useful to the teacher, the student, and institutional assessment.

² National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (2018, February). “*Assignment Charrette Toolkit*.” Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, Author.

³ [LEAP Texas](#)

To date, PAC has hosted 13 assignment design groups with about one-third of full-time faculty and many adjunct faculty. The groups have remained small and faculty participation continues to be voluntary. The groups are offered frequently during the semester on Fridays, which are reserved for professional development activity. Rather than offering a large group session once a year, interested faculty members have multiple opportunities throughout the semester to participate. They do not have to wait very long for the next opportunity. Only four faculty members are invited to each group, each with one assignment. The assessment coordinator solicits participation through direct contact with those who have expressed interest. The voluntary nature aids with the positivity associated with the groups and the word of mouth nature of the initiative.

Vice President for Academic Success, Elizabeth Tanner, suggests that PAC has demonstrated a method that works for engaging faculty. First, interest is piqued through individual invitations to participate in a small experimental group. Energy comes from that group as they share their experience and convince the next layer of participants. Finally, the work becomes faculty-led, as early adopters become the facilitators for future groups. Thus, it has evolved to being entirely faculty-driven.

The impact of this work has been significant. Through these workshops faculty have invested a lot in these assignments. Participants reported that this professional development was “well worth my time.” Faculty saw value in taking something that they are already doing and refining it through guidance from colleagues. The groups allow them time and support for improving.

Many faculty credit the workshop with changes they have made in the classroom and their approach to teaching. One faculty member described her key takeaway from the workshop as,

a new way of teaching. Much more practical and directed. Also, I think the most important thing I got from these discussions is confidence to rethink about the way I’m using class time. Instead of lecturing as much, I want to focus on our student population, demographics, and needs. I will rethink my assignments and now have the tools and direction to reshape a course that has been taught the same way for years.

For PAC faculty, development on assignment design has proved to be a ticket into the curriculum.

Meeting Our Needs

Adaptations have been made to the organization of the assignment design groups to better fit PAC culture, facilitate faculty participation, and include more instruction on effective assignment design. The session time was adjusted to last three hours on one day. Faculty time is valuable and limited, and three hours accommodates a thorough review of each of the four assignments, as well as an introduction. During the first hour, the assessment coordinator presents the purpose and intended outcomes of the session. For the remaining two hours the faculty members each receive 30 minutes for group review of their assignment. The review follows the timed discussion protocol suggested by NILOA, which provides structure and keeps the discussion focused.

The one-hour workshop introduction includes a brief overview of the Transparency in Learning and Teaching (TILT) project and transparent assignment template. Mary-Ann Winkelmes’ TILT framework suggests that all assignments should include three critical elements: purpose (long-term relevance to students’ lives and connection to learning outcomes); task (what students’ will do and how to do it); and criteria for success (rubric in advance so students can self-evaluate).⁴ This seemingly simple framework detailed in Winkelmes’ *Guide to Implementing the Transparency Framework*⁵ has prompted valuable discussions in the subsequent two-hour round robin review of assignments.

⁴ Winkelmes, M. A. (2014). “*Transparency in teaching and learning in higher education*.” Accessed September 2, 2019.

⁵ Winkelmes, M. A., Boye, A., & Tapp, S. (2019). *Transparent design in higher education teaching and leadership: A guide to implementing the Transparency Framework institution-wide to improve learning and retention*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

While each of these changes to the workshop format have proven successful at PAC, the most notable change has been to the composition of the groups, which was expanded to include staff and students. Typically, one to two staff and one to two students take part in each group along with the four faculty members sharing an assignment. A wide variety of staff have participated, including librarians, advisors, tutoring center leaders, and student life employees. The assessment coordinator invites those that have expressed interest during campus-wide presentations of assessment results and other daily interactions. Involvement of students and staff from diverse units has broadened awareness of the ILOs across campus and enhanced the feedback to faculty on their assignments.

Bringing staff into the discussions reinforced the common goal of student success across all groups and increased respect for the work of faculty. The added perspective of support staff not only provides insights to faculty, but also helps these participants in their daily interactions with students. One advisor reported, “I gained insight as an advisor on what type of work these students are doing in the classroom. I can realistically share with students the instructor’s expectations and the qualities it takes to be successful in a course.” In addition, participation in the workshop provides a common focus on PAC’s Institutional Learning Outcomes for the entire campus, building cross-college collegiality, collaboration and understanding.

The final adaptation stemmed from the make-up of the inaugural group. This group discovered the power of fresh perspectives that comes from collaborating with those from other disciplines. Their report-outs made it clear that the cross-disciplinary nature of the group was very surprisingly helpful.

The workshops’ cross-disciplinary discussion was beneficial as it refocused the assignment critiques from the content of the assignment (which may be the focus within their department) to the assignment structure, outcomes, and assignment description. In this sense, everyone at the table had something to contribute to the faculty member presenting. This format also allows faculty members who aren’t regular collaborators to share ideas and practices that work within their own department, thus supporting the spread of best practices.

An added benefit might be the increase in respect across disciplines and opportunities for future collaborations. One participant reported, “It has given me so much insight into what other disciplines in our College are doing. It also made me find a common link that we all share in our teaching methods and even sometimes content. I came out of it with a greater appreciation for each and every colleague there and for their field of study/industry.”

Another faculty member recognized that the cross-disciplinary discussions might help faculty better connect the curriculum for students stating, “It’s important for students to see how content from other courses relate, so they don’t think that classes contain isolated material.” This participant sums up the value of the cross-disciplinary group well:

I really enjoyed learning about what and how other faculty teach in different disciplines because it reminds me of the holistic experience that we are and should be providing to our students. It also makes me feel like we are a “team,” a feeling that we often overlook as we focus on our specific disciplines/departments. It also supports discussion on how we can collaborate on academic and programming efforts across disciplines.

Though there are compelling arguments to creating groups based on discipline, PAC continues to design cross-disciplinary groups because of the effects on institutional culture.

The Power of Student Voice

As was mentioned, over time the workshops expanded to include input from students. While inviting the student perspective seemed the natural thing to do, the impact on both faculty and students was unexpected.

Students may not have anticipated their feedback would be welcome, but, in fact, faculty respected their insights and craved their point of view. Including students in the workshops helped faculty gain a greater appreciation for student feedback and they began to recognize the potential of this feedback to improve all aspects of the learning experience. At a minimum, the repeated questions they get about assignments hint at opportunities to improve their assignments to increase clarity for students.

A side benefit of including students in assignment design workshops is the increased appreciation on the part of students for the effort that goes into creating assignments. One student participant commented, “Creating an assignment definitely takes hard work...it might be difficult for them too, like it is for me to understand [the assignment] sometimes.” Students also appreciated seeing the collaborative efforts of faculty from different disciplines working together to improve student learning. From the perspective of a student participant, “this [collaboration] allows for more respect between faculty and students and more respect for different departments.” This interdisciplinary insight is a valuable learning experience in itself.

When students are taught the elements of an effective assignment they are prepared to self-advocate. While most students recognize a poorly designed or unclear assignment, student participants in the workshop now know the questions they should ask instructors to improve clarity and recognize the importance of sharing this clarity with their peers. Following participation in an assignment workshop, a student suggested, “Before I was too shy to ask, but now... I messaged the instructor and I told her that I didn’t understand what she was trying to say in the assignment. And that day, about 30 minutes after I messaged her, the assignment was changed and she had examples in there.” Typically, when a student asks a question of the instructor they get a response that helps them understand and complete the assignment, but there are 29 other students that did not hear the response and may still be confused, which is not equitable. Prompting the instructor to change the assignment creates success for all students, not just those who are willing to ask for clarification.

Student and faculty interaction in this setting removes the typical power differential. In fact, in the assignment workshops faculty work is being critiqued by students. This takes a good deal of humility on the part of faculty and grace from students. With perspective gained from the experience, faculty begin to better articulate assignment alignment to student learning outcomes and the importance of these outcomes. Students, in turn, are empowered and have gained a voice to partner with faculty to help improve their own success and the success of their peers.

Next Steps

The assignment design workshops initiated a positive shift in the culture of assessment at PAC. Very importantly, faculty began to see the ILOs and their assessment in a new light. Rather than an add-on that they did not have time for, they realized that a well thought out “key assignment” could be a meaningful part of the course curriculum that would help students accomplish the course learning outcomes. A clearer assignment that was better aligned to the ILOs both facilitated improved student performance and produced better assessment data for the College. Additionally, the ILOs came to be viewed as shared learning goals that unite disciplines as well as non-academic units across the College.

Several faculty shared the sentiments of one as she explained,

When Julie first started sending us the assessment stuff, I was one of the ones that would say to myself “please don’t let me be on the list!” ...I would do an assignment that was just for the kids that were on the list. And it was extra credit, and I didn’t put any thought into it...I was seeing her stuff as if it was this extra thing. It wasn’t part of my curriculum. But oh no, it is a part of my curriculum, you mesh it with your curriculum.... Not only has it helped me see that. But it’s also made me think, has really made me question the whole way we’re teaching...It has made me question a lot. It really has.

PAC's culture has always been one of together-we-can, now that culture is beginning to include a common focus on student attainment of Institutional Learning Outcomes. Though significant progress has been made, as one faculty member put it, "I learned that everyone struggles with assessment and how to truly demonstrate student learning, but that assessment is a process and we work to improve each time." PAC is continuing to make improvements to its assessment process and has identified the following next steps:

- **Expand student participation.** The selection of students for participation in the groups has been somewhat haphazard, finding students at the last minute through quick conversations. This year, the assessment coordinator will be more intentional by recruiting in advance from a wide range of student groups and academic programs to ensure more complete representation.
- **Share reworked assignments.** PAC is determining how best to share the assignments that have been revised by faculty as a result of their participation in the groups. Ideas include creating a Canvas course specifically for assessment or using an internal website or shared drive.
- **Bring others into the work.** Although a significant number of full-time and adjunct faculty have participated, the hope is that all faculty will take part in an assignment design group. Moreover, the desire is that full-time faculty will share their redesigned "key assignments" with adjuncts. As one faculty member commented, "I would hope that colleagues in my discipline will share key assignments with one another and with adjunct faculty."
- **Utilize the Teaching and Learning Center.** The Teaching and Learning Center is a brand new initiative launched in the fall of 2019 through support from the College President and the faculty senate. Academic assessment will be housed in the Center, which will facilitate collaboration with faculty developers for more opportunities and support to improve student learning.

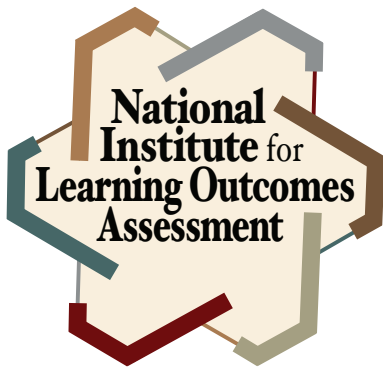
Takeaways for Practice

1. Increased awareness of learning outcomes is a natural consequence of aligning assignments to outcomes.
2. Maximize faculty engagement and drive organizational change by adapting assessment tools and best practices to fit your institutional culture.
3. Value faculty time by reframing assessment work as professional development. Do not ask faculty to do more, just refocus what they are already doing.
4. Student perception and insights can add significant value to the assessment process in general and assignment design specifically.
5. Interdisciplinary work on assignments creates a community of faculty and spawns integrated learning experiences.

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 <https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>
- NILOA supports institutions in designing learning experiences and assessment approaches that strengthen the experience of diverse learners within a variety of institutional contexts.
- NILOA works in partnership with a broad range of organizations and provides technical assistance and research support to various projects focused on learning throughout the U.S. and internationally.
- NILOA's Vision is to broaden the dialogue and conversation on meaningful and sustainable assessment practices that address issues of design and implementation, and position institutions, organizations, and individuals to achieve their goals.

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment



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