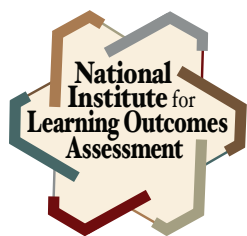


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Capella University: Equity and Transparency

Nancy Ackerman



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[Capella University](#), established in 1993, serves over 38,000 students through 53 degree programs and two online learning formats. The average age of a Capella University student is 39. The founders of Capella intended to utilize technology to improve quality education for adult students with full-time jobs, family, and life responsibilities. The two online learning formats are the Guided Path which provides a flexible structure with weekly deadlines and group discussions, while the Flexpath is a self-paced option for students to reach completion. With a [mission](#) to “extend access to high-quality bachelor’s, master’s, specialist, doctoral, and certificate programs for adults who seek to maximize their person and professional potential”, Capella serves to transform people’s lives through innovative competency-based education offerings. Information on student satisfaction, learning outcomes, and additional outcome reports are shared on <https://www.capellaresults.com>.

What we have found at Capella, is that it is often assumed that equality means everyone has the same opportunities; however, having the same opportunities through assessment practices does not necessarily ensure equality, or fairness, for everyone. Equitable assessment practice means that learners in courses have an equal and unbiased opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and achievements in every phase of the assessment process. Beginning with transparency, learners should know what is being assessed, how it is being assessed, as well as how they can achieve the assessment expectations.

Assessment practices must encompass differentiated method, transparency, accountability, and fairness from design to measurement to assessment improvements and adjustments. In fact, Gipps and Stobart (2009) explained that fairness should be addressed prior to assessment design in terms of consideration of access and resources, and after the assessment is complete, regarding interpreting the results of assessment.

At Capella University, our assessments are designed to ensure that our learners have opportunities to learn and practice career-relevant competencies. We ensure this connection by referencing external standards from specialized program accreditations, licensure boards, and industry standards in order to gain input from the field on knowledge, skills and dispositions that are relevant. These field relevant knowledge, skills, and dispositions are what are assessed, through an inter-rater reliability process that assists faculty with ensuring fair and equitable assessment.

Figure 1 on the next page shows the process of program curriculum creation from a high-level.

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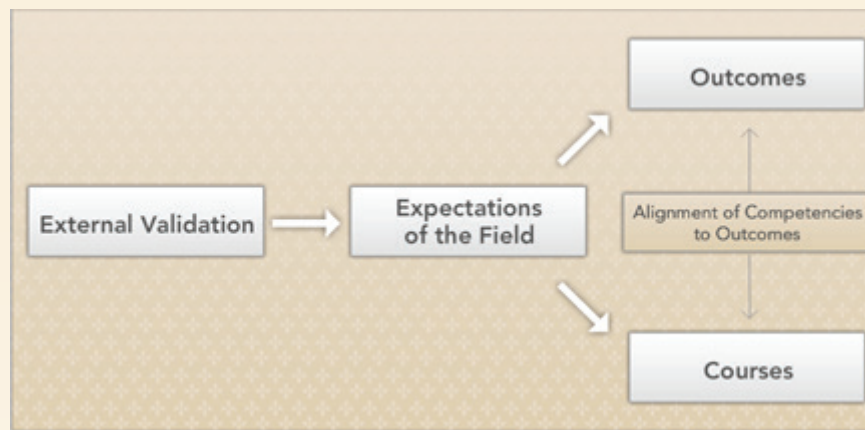


Figure 1. Program curriculum creation.

In order to deliver on the quality and fairness of these assessments, we ensure transparency for all learners in each course for each assessment, beginning with how the assessment criteria are aligned to the course competencies.

Furthermore, the description and specific instructions for assessments align with the stated assessment criteria. In addition to the transparency on alignment, our learners are provided with a rubric that has discreet and descriptive performance levels to guide them to understand how their performance on the assessments will be evaluated by their instructor. Instructors mark each learner's scoring guide rubric and provide the learner with additional feedback on ways to improve, as well as specific information about why his or her performance was judged in the way it was.

Learners have both a text and visual view of their progress on competency achievement through our Competency Maps. The Competency Map (Figure 2) is a course-based dashboard that visually indicates each student's status relative to specific assessed competencies. Competency Maps are populated when the course instructor completes the scoring guide rubric. Each scoring guide rubric is aligned to a competency in the course. When a learner completes an assessment and the instructor grades the assessment via the scoring guide, the Competency Map is populated in real time with the performance level selected from the competency's aligned criteria. As the learner proceeds through the course and completes the assessments, the dial on the competency moves and provides the learner an indication of progress on competency achievement.

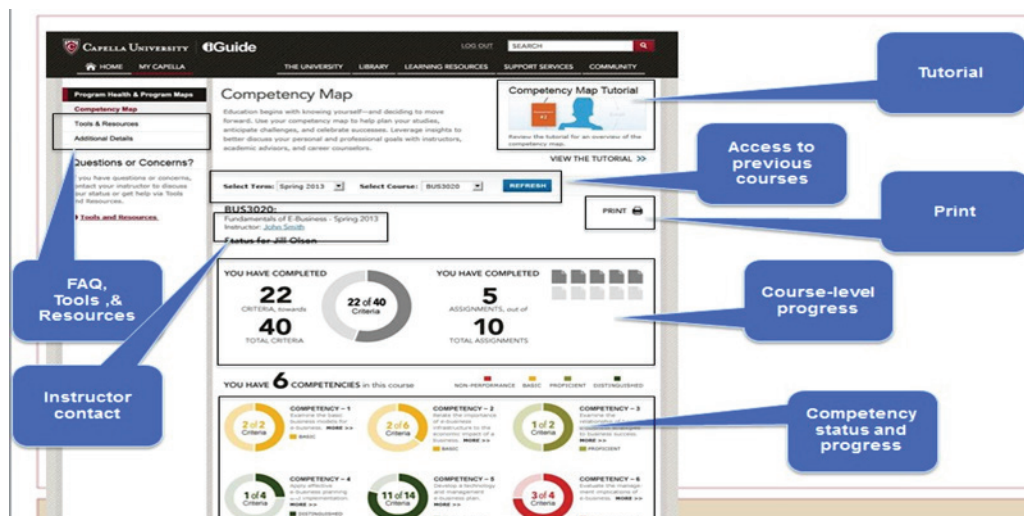


Figure 2. Example Competency Map.

Beyond the Competency Map, learners have multiple resources at their disposal (tutors, journal articles, exemplars, etc.). In addition, our assessments are designed to provide an authentic experience for our learners. In fact, many of our Counseling programs have a documented “Assessment Mix Map.” This map provides a visual display of the different types of assessments across the curriculum in the Counseling programs. Faculty chairs and leadership, with support from an assessment specialist, update these maps bi-annually to ensure fidelity to the diversity of the assessment plan and the overall appropriateness of the method to the skills to be assessed.

Finally, the assessment team developed an inter-rater reliability process for faculty chairs and faculty leadership to employ with their instructors to establish fairness in assessment evaluation. Equitable and fair assessments must produce consistent and trustworthy results. Therefore, the goals of the inter-rater reliability process are both to ensure consistency among instructors on the rating of learner work and to uncover the issues that may have resulted in inconsistent ratings due to no fault of the learner.

Practice Considerations

We hope that other institutions may consider some of the approaches to equitable assessment that we have addressed from our own experiences in assessment mentioned prior, but two considerations for practice are notable:

1. We recognized the importance of developing and documenting the diversity of assessments, so students and faculty have a clear picture of the variety and value of assessment methods. Other institutions can establish transparency through the alignment of assessment criteria with the assessment design and evaluation. Other institutions might gain from our experience the value and process of implementing authentic assessment.
2. We learned that while having well-designed rubrics was assumed, we could not truly claim that we had an equitable assessment practice with regard to evaluating learners’ work without establishing reliability. Through our inter-rater reliability process, we are learning how to resolve inconsistencies that often times result from what we believed to be a fair and unbiased assessment rubric.

We consider our assessment practices one of the most important aspects of our competency-based curriculum. As such, we are interested in attaining the highest quality in our assessment as well as ensuring they are fair and unbiased. We have taken particular interest in this topic and are excited about the opportunity to explore it further and learn what others are doing.

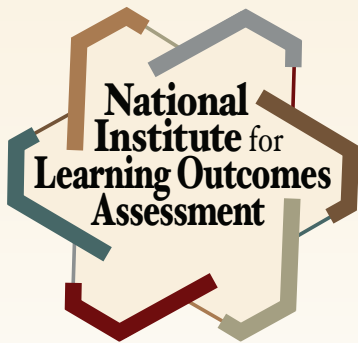
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Equity Case Studies

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), and Campus Labs, in collaboration with the field of assessment in higher education, have undertaken a series of case studies focused on providing short, instructive examples focused on equitable approaches to assess student learning. The cases provide lessons learned that are widely applicable, and emphasize collaboration across the institution, specifically between academic and student affairs.



NILOA is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning. 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. Learn more at www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.

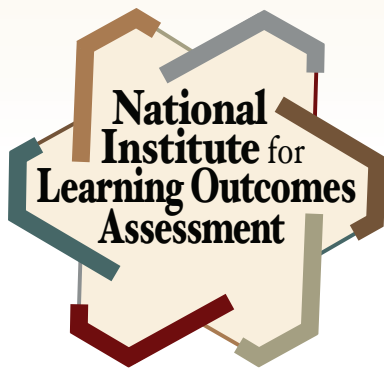


Leading the way for over 40 years, CAS is a consortium of professional associations in higher education that promotes the use of its professional standards for the development, assessment, and improvement of quality student learning, programs, and services. CAS reflects good practices and promotes intra-campus collaboration among its over 40 collaborating professional associations representing over 115,000 professionals in higher education. Learn more at www.cas.edu.



Campus Labs offers integrated software and cloud-based assessment tools for higher education. Their work focuses on empowering and transforming colleges and universities through the use of strategic data insights. Campus Labs offers a comprehensive set of solutions for over 1,400 Member Campuses. Learn more at www.campuslabs.com.

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Equity Case Study

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/equity