

Providing Evidence of Student Learning: A Transparency Framework



The NILOA Transparency Framework is intended to help institutions evaluate the extent to which they are making evidence of student accomplishment readily accessible and potentially useful and meaningful to various audiences.

Introduction

Gathering evidence of academic accomplishment – the knowledge, skills and competencies students gain as a result of their college experience – is a continuous process. It occurs at various levels and across many dimensions, and the findings are intended to enable institutions to make improvements, assess the impact of changes in academic programs and provide evidence of learning outcomes to those to whom they are accountable. The Transparency Framework addresses the question: How might these efforts be made more visible? One avenue adopted by many campuses is to share relevant information about student learning on the institutional website.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has developed a Transparency Framework to support institutions in sharing evidence of student learning on and off campus. The Framework is based on a review of institutional websites and identifies six key components of student learning assessment. Institutions may use the Framework to examine their institutional websites to gauge the extent to which evidence of student accomplishment is readily accessible and potentially useful and meaningful to the intended audience. Each section of the Framework suggests a component of student learning assessment that may be of interest to specific audiences and outlines opportunities to advance public understanding.

The Framework also incorporates basic premises about website communication. For instance, information placed on websites should be meaningful and understandable to multiple audiences. To effectively communicate with various audiences, the website should enable users to provide feedback or offer comments on the posted material. Just as making student learning outcomes more transparent is a work in progress, so is this Framework. As more institutions make their assessment efforts accessible and post meaningful evidence of student learning, we will update the Transparency Framework using experience from the field.

Overview

The Framework provides ideal components of a transparent institutional website in terms of student learning. Institutions should take into account the website's purpose, structure, intended audiences, capacity of technology staff and other available resources when reviewing the components. Information on student learning can and should be presented in language that is understandable by specific and multiple audiences, widely available across the website, updated regularly, receptive to feedback, and accessible by multiple Web browsers and in various Internet speeds. A fully transparent website might well contain information about the following six components:

- Student Learning Outcomes Statements
- Assessment Plans
- Assessment Resources
- Current Assessment Activities
- Evidence of Student Learning
- Use of Student Learning Evidence

Components

Student Learning Outcomes Statements

Student learning outcomes statements clearly state the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire at an institution of higher education.

Assessment Plans

Campus plans for gathering evidence of student learning might include institution-wide or program specific approaches that convey how student learning will be assessed, the data collection tools and approaches that will be used, and the timeline for implementation.

Assessment Resources

Assessment resources encompass information or training provided to faculty and staff to help them understand, develop, implement, communicate, and use evidence of student learning.

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. (2011). *Transparency Framework*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). Retrieved from: <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/TransparencyFramework.htm>



Current Assessment Activities

Current assessment activities include information on a full range of projects and activities recently completed or currently underway to gauge student learning, make improvements or respond to accountability interests.



Evidence of Student Learning

Evidence of student learning includes results of assessment activities. This may include evidence of indirect (e.g. surveys) and direct (e.g. portfolio) student learning as well as institutional performance indicators (e.g. licensure pass rate).



Use of Student Learning Evidence

This component represents the extent to which evidence of student learning is used to identify areas where changes in policies and practices may lead to improvement, inform institutional decision-making, problem identification, planning, goal setting, faculty development, course revision, program review, and accountability or accreditation self-study.

Definitions

Transparency

Making meaningful, understandable information about student learning and institutional performance readily available to internal and external audiences. Information is meaningful and understandable when it is contextualized and tied to institutional goals for student learning. Meaningful information may include disaggregated results, by major field, student level, gender, race and ethnicity, and by providing longitudinal analyses and perspectives and/or comparisons with national norms or peer institutions.

Audiences

Institutional websites have different audiences. Some web pages cater primarily to internal audiences such as academic affairs, institutional research, and faculty development, while other web pages are tailored to external audiences such as prospective students and alumni. Institutions may present different information as well as some of the same information on these various sites depending on the intended audience.

Not Transparent

An institutional website or student learning component that is not transparent means that information may be difficult if not impossible to find, even after extensive searching of the entire website (i.e., looking on multiple pages/links and using the website search engine). Some information may be password protected, embedded within large documents or buried within internal web pages. Still other information may be difficult to identify as related to student learning due to unclear placement or vague language.

Transparent

An institutional website that is transparent conveys information of student learning which addresses the six

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components outlined above. For instance, information on student learning can and should be presented in language that is understandable by specific and multiple audiences, widely available across the website, updated regularly, receptive to feedback, and accessible by multiple web browsers and in various internet speeds.

Using the Framework

The Framework is not a checklist to be followed but rather a guide to suggest priorities and possibilities with an eye toward communicating meaningful information about student learning that will be useful to various audiences. Our review of institutional website transparency suggests that the degree of transparency can be viewed as a continuum from not transparent to transparent.

At this point in time, few institutions have fully addressed the transparency challenge. For example, an institutional website may be transparent with specific components such as student learning outcomes statements and current assessment activities, but not transparent in others such as references to evidence of student learning and/or the uses of evidence. For these reasons, each component of the Framework should be considered individually when reviewing the entire institutional website to ensure that information related to student learning is prominently posted, clearly worded, and updated regularly.