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# EXPECTATIONS OF IMPROVED STUDENT LEARNING: GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT IN AQIP COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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NATIONAL LOUIS UNIVERSITY

EXPECTATIONS OF IMPROVED STUDENT LEARNING:  
GENERAL EDUCATION ASSESSMENT IN AQIP COMMUNITY COLLEGES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

IN

COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 2012

Community College Leadership Doctoral Program

Dissertation Notification of Completion

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Title of Dissertation: Expectations of Improved Student Learning: General  
Education Assessment in AQIP Community Colleges

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Final Approval Meeting: March 28, 2012

We certify this dissertation, submitted by the above named candidate, is fully adequate in scope and quality to satisfactorily meet the dissertation requirement for attaining the Doctor of Education degree in the Community College Leadership Doctoral Program.

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March 28, 2012

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March 28, 2012

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March 28, 2012

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This case study research was possible because three institutions and ten individuals gave of their time and expertise related to assessment. I appreciate that these community colleges graciously opened their doors to allow me an in-depth view of their assessment initiatives. They may not realize how much I learned that has already been applied to my own work.

To Dr. Martin Parks, I extend sincere thanks for serving as my chair and guiding me through the complicated world of a dissertation, especially across long distances. Your patience and belief that I would finish on time was steadfast and still astounds me. To the members of my committee, Dr. Rebecca Lake and Dr. Karen Stewart, your commitment to analyzing my research and providing feedback was invaluable. To members of Doc 4, our cohort remained a cohesive and supportive unit through the entire program and produced indelible friendships for which I am very grateful.

My professional support system spanned institutions and states. Thank you to Dr. DeRionne Pollard for answering my calls, Dr. Rich Haney for helping me re-prioritize three years worth of work, and many faculty and staff at College of Lake County who served as sounding boards for my research questions and checked in with me frequently to lend encouragement.

Being a wife, a mom, a friend, a community college administrator, and a doctoral student all at once presents a logistical web that is challenging to maneuver. It was only possible because of my amazing family and thoughtful friends. Mark, your

understanding that I needed to sit in the quiet, day after day tackling my research helped more than you can ever realize. My parents and in-laws stepped in countless times to remove mundane distractions, thereby eliminating excuses that can derail a doctoral student. To my friends, you surprised me on many occasions with your kind words, encouraging cards, and patience that someday I would be able to say yes to your generous invitations.

My mom, Jeannette, deserves special recognition as it is her passion and pursuit of learning that inspires me to find new challenges and set new goals. As she has demonstrated throughout her own life, education comes in many forms and we should not judge what others seek to learn.

During the writing of this dissertation, I watched my bright-eyed toddler grow into a whiz kid kindergartner. Sitting side by side doing our homework was all the motivation I needed to show her what is possible when you stay committed to your educational aspirations. Clara Jean, I can't wait to see what you make of this great big life ahead of you.

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative multi-case study identified institutional structures and assessment processes that support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives at three community colleges accredited by the Higher Learning Commission under the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). In support of this purpose, data collection involved semi-structured interviews with three types of positions – Chief Academic Officer, lead administrator for assessment, and faculty holding a leadership position in support of general education assessment. Documents related to assessment and accreditation status were also reviewed to allow for comprehensive collection of evidence and triangulation of data.

Primary topics within the five guiding questions for this study included (a) institutional structures that support assessment, (b) processes to accomplish assessment of general education learning outcomes, (c) ways senior leaders support assessment, (d) elements that allowed an institution to reach the results and implementation stages of assessment, and (e) steps taken to improve student learning based on assessment results. Upon analysis of the data gathered, four strategies emerged as ways community colleges could be better prepared to use assessment results, implement improvement efforts, and document subsequent changes in student learning. These strategies are to (a) spread and connect responsibilities for assessment to adjunct faculty and administrators across the institution, (b) locate where general education learning outcomes are present in the curriculum, (c) link resources invested in assessment efforts

to corresponding results to justify the investment, and (d) communicate assessment successes and challenges to the President and Board of Trustees to ensure active and authentic participation in local and national dialogues regarding student learning.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education are faced with serving multiple stakeholders at the federal, regional, state, and local levels. Simultaneously, the academic mission of individual institutions encompasses a broad range of characteristics to satisfy stakeholder expectations and demonstrates a commitment to student learning, the core of their existence. At the foundation of student learning in higher education is a strong general education program which affects all degree seeking students. The types of general education learning outcomes identified by colleges and universities often include critical thinking abilities, strong communication skills, and quantitative literacy. A convergence between compliance to stakeholders and advancement of student learning exists in assessment of general education learning outcomes. For community colleges, the complex nature of measuring and improving student learning affects how stakeholders view the effectiveness of the institution.

#### **Background and Context for the Study**

Accountability and student learning are key factors for consideration by community colleges as external stakeholders emphasize the importance of implementing, documenting, and sharing results of assessment efforts. Assessment of student learning occurs at multiple levels within community colleges and ranges from the course level, to the program level, to the institution level. At the institution level, general education learning outcomes express tangible ways all students can

demonstrate their general education knowledge and abilities. These institution level learning outcomes are not only significant to successfully completing an undergraduate education experience, but also are emphasized by stakeholders as being related to employer expectations. According to the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education convened by the U.S. Department of Education (2006), “employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today’s workplace” (p. 3).

How do community colleges address expectations of accountability and student learning? For many, the driving force begins with regional accreditation. As noted by Ewell (2009), “the primary exercise of the federal interest in quality assurance for the future. . .will increasingly be practiced indirectly through accreditation” (p. 12). It is through accreditation guidelines that accountability becomes more tangible to not only the regional accreditors, but also to the federal government, higher education professional associations, parents, and numerous other stakeholders. According to the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (herein referred to as the Higher Learning Commission or HLC), demonstrated evidence of student learning is central to ensuring an institution is transparent in how they are achieving their mission. The HLC (2007) maintains,

A focus on achieved student learning is critical not only to a higher education organization’s ability to promote and improve curricular and co-curricular learning experiences and to provide evidence of the quality of educational experiences and programs, but also to fulfill the most basic public expectations and needs of higher education. (p. 1)

## **The Higher Learning Commission and AQIP**

As one of six regional accreditors, the Higher Learning Commission provides member institutions an option to participate in an alternative accrediting program called the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). AQIP was founded on theories of continuous improvement and institutional principles of high performance. The AQIP model strives to “infuse the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities in order to assure and advance the quality of higher education” (HLC, 2003, p. 6.1-1). Despite the goal of AQIP to impart changes within the culture of higher education institutions to embody quality, a lack of progress with assessing general education learning outcomes continues to exist for community colleges today.

Demonstrating such deficiency, Provezis (2010) finds that seven out of ten schools in the Higher Learning Commission region have been cited for less than thorough assessment efforts. However, the HLC “expects that each organization can demonstrate a sustained effort to implement assessment processes that are workable, reasonable, meaningful, and useful in confirming and improving student learning and in assuring and advancing broader educational and organizational quality” (HLC, 2007, p. 2).

### **Assessment Levels**

According to Walvoord (2010), “assessment is the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decisions that affect student learning” (p. 2). As shown in

Table 1, assessment of student learning occurs at multiple levels throughout community colleges.

Table 1

*Overview of Assessment Levels*

Level of Assessment	Main Contributor(s) to Assessment Design	Type of Learning Outcomes to be Assessed
Course	Individual faculty	Course learning outcomes
Program	All faculty in department, professional organizations (where applicable)	Program learning outcomes
Institution	Faculty across all disciplines, administrators	General education learning outcomes

At the course level, individual students can be assessed by an instructor who has defined course learning objectives. At the program level, a collection of student work across multiple courses can be assessed based upon department or program criteria. At the institutional level, student work from multiple disciplines can be assessed according to institution learning outcomes, or what are commonly referred to as general education learning outcomes. Regardless of the level at which the assessment occurs, the results of assessment efforts are intended to be applied toward the improvement of student learning.

Course level assessment efforts are traditionally designed and delivered by the faculty member teaching the course. While the assessment may be informed by and contribute back to program or institution level learning outcomes, faculty members have discretion within their classrooms. Program level assessment efforts can be

dictated and clearly outlined by professional associations or industry specific accreditation bodies, while assessment of general education learning outcomes is left to the postsecondary institution to define. For community colleges, measuring common general education learning outcomes at the institution level poses a unique challenge. Curricula at most community colleges are wide ranging and can include such diverse offerings as basic adult education skills, transfer coursework, and career and technical education programs. Decisions need to be made by the individual community college to commit to a set of general education learning outcomes, determine when and where they can be assessed in the curriculum, and follow through in analyzing results of the assessment efforts to make improvements which impact student learning. This is a significant conversation and commitment for community colleges to undertake given their comprehensive nature in trying to serve a diverse student body. Banta (2004) asserts, "focusing on student learning is particularly difficult in community colleges because students enter with such diverse educational goals and are so likely to stop out, transfer, or drop out" (p. 4). Taken together, creating general education learning outcomes assessment efforts and addressing the diverse student body in community colleges contributes to the challenge in improving student learning at the institution level.

### **Significance of the Study**

Accountability and assessment of general education learning outcomes are firmly grounded in higher education discourse through policy and accreditation. Ewell (2009) concludes that "because of its peculiar position as an 'accountability' actor jointly



owned by the academy and the federal government, moreover, accreditation can buffer the assessment-for-accountability relationship in ways not available to governmental regulation and can simultaneously promote improvement” (p. 7). Community colleges have an obligation to adhere to legislation and maintain accreditation to demonstrate legitimacy and access federal student financial aid for their student population. As assessment of general education learning outcomes continues to play a crucial role in how community colleges meet the expectations of their stakeholders, those institutions that have had successful accreditation feedback reports with respect to assessment of general education learning outcomes are significant to the field.

HLC (2003) stresses that “an organization committed to understanding and improving the learning opportunities and environments it provides students will be able to document the relationship between assessment of and improvement in student learning” (p. 3.4-2). This type of documentation allows for transparency in evidence of student learning, as well as provides the field of community colleges access to best practices and an ability to learn from their peers.

Through this study, which concentrated on identifying institutional structures and assessment processes found in community colleges with documented efforts for assessment of general education learning outcomes, the body of research for community colleges will be expanded and have contemporary relevance to pressures these institutions are facing. By focusing on community colleges that have committed to AQIP, the continuous improvement principles embedded in the accreditation model provided a framework for studying assessment efforts at those institutions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Despite the complexity in addressing general education learning outcomes through assessment initiatives, the climate for community colleges clearly indicates a priority in doing so to meet stakeholder expectations and to improve student learning across the institution. As a result, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify institutional structures and assessment processes which support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives at select AQIP institutions. Successful assessment practices will contribute to a set of strategies intended to guide general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives that lead to improved student learning across the institution.

### **Guiding Questions**

Five guiding questions were developed in response to the purpose of this research focused on general education learning outcomes assessment. The questions sought to explore the institutional structures and assessment processes in place throughout the participating institutions which contribute to assessment efforts. The following five questions were posed to guide the research for this study:

1. What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?
2. What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?
3. How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?

4. What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?
5. What steps have been taken to make improvements to student learning based on the results of general education learning outcomes assessment?

### **Research Design**

The qualitative paradigm best matched the purpose of this study in order to explore multiple perspectives and sources of data related to the structures and processes in place to support general education learning outcomes assessment. In order to delve into the organizational characteristics and nuances of general education assessment programs, a multiple-case study methodology was employed and representative institutions were selected through purposeful sampling. Creswell (2007) emphasizes the comprehensive nature of case study methodology as an “approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a *case*). . .over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information*. . .and reports a case *description* and case-based themes” (p. 73). Data collection involved a series of semi-structured interviews at three participating institutions with three types of positions – Chief Academic Officer, lead administrator for assessment, and faculty holding a leadership position in support of general education assessment. In addition, documents related to assessment and accreditation status were reviewed to contribute to the resulting “product of a qualitative inquiry [which] is *richly descriptive*” (Merriam, 2009, p. 16).

### Limitations and Delimitations

Merriam (2009) highlights that the unique characteristics of qualitative “case study research that provide the rationale for its selection also present certain limitations in its usage” (p. 51). As such, several limitations to this study are noted.

1. Including only community colleges that have chosen the AQIP alternative accreditation model limits the sample size and the potential for transferability of concepts to non-AQIP institutions.
2. After the criteria for site selection were applied, it happened that only rural institutions remained eligible to participate. If different criteria were considered the resulting pool of eligible institutions may include institutions classified as suburban and/or urban.
3. Time constraints will not allow for study of institutions that have not yet started an assessment project related to general education learning outcomes. Only institutions that have a formal assessment project underway, or completed, and that is intended to affect student learning were considered for this study.
4. Qualitative researchers conducting a case study need to be highly sensitive to bias given the researcher as an instrument. The nature of qualitative research places a researcher in the position of personally collecting and analyzing subjective data. Steps can be taken to minimize the effects of bias and therefore contribute to neutralizing this limitation.

Leedy and Ormrod (2010) describe delimitations as the researcher's ability to "distinguish between what is relevant and what is not relevant to the problem. All irrelevancies to the problem must be firmly ruled out in the statement of delimitations" (p. 57). The delimitations for this study included four elements.

1. Course level and program level assessment efforts were not the focus of the proposed study. Institution level efforts to assess general education learning outcomes were the concentration for the research.
2. To address travel restrictions, the researcher limited the site selection to the U.S. Department of Education Federal Region V.
3. Only three participant types at each community college were interviewed during the data collection period.
4. The time-frame to complete the data collection for this study was limited by program design to no more than four months.

### **Assumptions**

Acknowledging assumptions related to the study provides an opportunity "to leave nothing to chance in order to prevent any misunderstandings" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 59). A major assumption in this study is that the individuals interviewed represented accurately the structures and processes associated with their general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives. In addition, it is assumed that given the emphasis on student learning by regional accreditors through their criteria for accreditation, the topic is relevant in the contemporary context of higher education. Based on the lack of empirical evidence that community colleges have successfully

implemented assessment efforts that have led to documented evidence of improved student learning, it is also assumed that the assessment of these outcomes is a challenging endeavor given the broad mission of community colleges.

### **Definition of Terms**

Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP). AQIP is an alternative accreditation model through the Higher Learning Commission. "AQIP's goal is to infuse the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities in order to assure and advance the quality of higher education" (HLC, 2003, p. 6.1-1).

Academy for Assessment of Student Learning. The Academy is offered by the Higher Learning Commission as a resource to focus work on assessment efforts to improve student learning. According to the HLC (2011), major phases of the Academy include (a) proposal of action projects through a portfolio and attendance at an Academy roundtable, (b) implementation of action projects and receipt of feedback through biannual progress analyses, and (c) creation of an impact report and attendance at an Academy results forum.

Assessment. Walvoord (2010) provides the following definition of assessment: "the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decisions that affect student learning" (p. 2).

Assessment Process. In the context of this study, Maki's (2010) description of collaborative assessment processes as "practices that enable [institutions] to sustain a culture of inquiry" (p. 5) will be applied.

General Education Learning Outcomes. For purposes of this study, general education learning outcomes will be referenced as, "benefits institutions want for all of their students regardless of major. These types of outcomes often relate to. . .the college-level competencies institutions want students to achieve" (Manning, 2011, p. 15).

Higher Learning Commission (HLC). The Higher Learning Commission is the "commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools that accredits degree-granting higher education organizations" (HLC, 2003, p. 9.1-2).

Institutional Structure. Related the context of this study, Maki (2010) describes institutional structures as roles and responsibilities affiliated with assessment as existing "among levels of constituencies across an institution" (p. 22).

### **Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters to represent the major components of the qualitative research effort. The first chapter provides context for the importance of the research in today's higher education environment. Chapter two presents a review of the literature for accreditation, assessment, general education learning outcomes, and three conceptual frameworks related to the purpose of the study. In the third chapter the research methodology is outlined and includes the research design, data collection and data analysis procedures, limitations and delimitations, an overview of the researcher as the instrument, and ethical

considerations given human subjects were interviewed. Chapter four presents the findings from semi-structured interviews and a review of institutional documents related to assessment of general education learning outcomes. Findings are categorized by guiding question, participant type, a priori theme, and emergent theme. The final chapter discusses the conclusions drawn from the findings and implications for further research in the field of general education learning outcomes assessment.

### **Chapter Summary**

The current climate for higher education clearly demonstrates that assessment of student learning is a significant expectation of stakeholders. In order to conduct assessment in a meaningful way that uses results to improve student learning, while also meeting stakeholder expectations, community colleges are challenged to work within the structures and processes created for their diverse student populations. Chapter one provided the background and context for general education learning outcomes assessment in community college, as well as the significance and purpose of the study. Five guiding questions for the study were outlined, followed by the assumptions held for this qualitative research effort. Completing the chapter were definitions for significant terms and an overview of how the dissertation is organized.

Chapter two will examine the relevant literature for accreditation, assessment, and general education learning outcomes. Three conceptual frameworks are also identified to lead the researcher in data collection and data analysis. The first is Astin's model of assessment which has three components – inputs, environment, and outputs (I-E-O). Dual purposes of assessment, for improvement and for accountability, are



encompassed by the second framework. The final conceptual framework is comprised of the AQIP Criteria and Principles of High Performance Organizations.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As higher education institutions face continued demands for accountability to stakeholders, evidence they are meeting the intentions of their academic missions is increasingly expected. Through assessment efforts and accreditation guidelines, community colleges can demonstrate how student learning is occurring and what they are doing to make improvements. A major challenge for community colleges is the assessment of general education learning outcomes which occurs at the institution level. This study explored assessment of general education learning outcomes at Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) community colleges to understand structures and processes which support assessment at the institution level.

Within this literature review, an exploration of the increasing pressure for higher education to be accountable and transparent to their stakeholders will set the stage. Next, an overview of accreditation of higher education institutions is offered through information on the evolution of accreditation practices; the Higher Learning Commission; and the relationship between accreditation, continuous improvement, and assessment. The emphasis placed on institution level and general education learning outcomes by professional associations and regional accreditors are presented. Strategies for assessing learning outcomes are outlined, as well as best practices defined by experts in the field. In particular, the challenges facing community colleges in the area of general education assessment are discussed. Following is information related to

the conceptual frameworks applied to this study. In conclusion, a summary of the literature review will complete the chapter.

### **Increasing Demands for Accountability and Transparency**

Multiple researchers have noted the demands for accountability of student learning outcomes from a variety of stakeholders – students and their parents, the federal government, state associations and governing boards, employers, taxpayers, legislators, and accreditors (Astin, 1991; Banta & Blaich, 2011; Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, & Halonen, 2011; Elfner, 2005; Ewell, 2009; New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning & Accountability, 2012; Nunley, Bers, & Manning, 2011, p. 6; Trapp & Cleaves, 2005; Yin & Volkwein, 2010). Ewell (2009) notes “relevant changes affecting the assessment movement that have occurred in higher education over the past two decades. . .include the demand by policy makers for better and more transparent information about student and institutional performance, [and] the press by accreditors on institutions to collect and use student learning outcomes data” (p. 3). For community colleges specifically, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) outlines expectations of transparency and accountability in their Position Statement on the Associate Degree. In the position statement, AACC (1998) stresses that individual institutions should be driving assessment programs for student learning, not state and federal regulating bodies. However, to ensure quality associate degree programs are maintained, AACC (1998) also advocates that “public demand for quality in postsecondary education obligates community colleges to establish

comprehensive systems and processes for outcomes assessment” (Guidelines for the Evaluation of Programs section, para. 1).

The Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education, convened by then Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, issued a final report in 2006 that outlines challenges facing higher education in the United States, findings around four key areas, and recommendations to stimulate significant change within postsecondary education. Of the four areas the commission concentrated on (access, affordability, quality, and accountability), quality and accountability both touched on the need for student learning outcomes to be assessed and the results shared. As one of the major recommendations resulting from the commission’s study, the report states “postsecondary education institutions should measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 23). Suggested avenues to accomplish this goal include using a standardized test such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment or the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress to measure student learning, state level reporting and sharing of data related to student learning to better inform policy makers, and transparent display of assessment results that connect directly to accreditation status. Specifically,

The results of student learning assessments, including value-added measurements that indicate how much students’ skills have improved over time, should be made available to students and reported in the aggregate publicly. Higher education institutions should make aggregate summary results of all postsecondary learning measures, e.g., test scores, certification and licensure attainment, time to degree, graduation rates, and other relevant measures, publicly available in a consumer-friendly form as a condition of accreditation. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 23)

Noted in the NILOA occasional paper number ten, Charlene Nunley served as a member of the Spellings Commission and,

Was surprised by the strength of opinion among some of the private sector commission members that 1) higher education is lax in accountability, 2) postsecondary educators do not know enough about what our graduates know or need to know, and 3) colleges do not openly share information about the learning achievements and job performance success of our graduates. (Nunley et al., 2011, p. 6)

Despite new leadership at the Department of Education, Nunley, Bers, and Manning (2011) expressed that “the Spellings Commission report escalated the demand for accountability and transparency to a new and higher level, and this demand has not lessened” (p. 6).

Student learning and accountability form the foundation of a 2012 report by the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability. Responsibility is placed on institutions of higher education to balance completion of a degree with achievement of student learning.

Those granting educational credentials must ensure that students have developed the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that prepare them for work, life, and responsible citizenship. U.S. higher education must focus on both quantity and quality – increasing graduation rates and the learning represented in the degree. (p. 3)

Transparency of student learning outcomes achievement can be achieved through the posting of information such as assessment results and accreditation reports on institutional websites. However, as outlined in a National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) report on what higher education websites indicate about assessment, authors Jankowski and Makela (2010) discovered that of 118

institutional websites scanned, “35% posted their self-studies and only 21% posted their accreditation letter” (p. 9). Upon further review of the posted accreditation letters, Jankowski and Makela (2010) noted that “90% of the time, [accreditors] requested additional information and follow-up institutional response...on student learning outcomes assessment. In addition, 75% of the accreditation letters posted asked for greater faculty involvement in student learning outcomes assessment” (p. 9). This is one demonstration of the significance accreditors are placing on assessment of student learning and their intention to hold higher education institutions accountable.

### **Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions**

Accreditation, as defined by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2008), “is a process of external quality review used by higher education to scrutinize colleges, universities and educational programs for quality assurance and quality improvement” (p. 1). The accreditation process serves as a guided model allowing institutions to document current efforts that support quality, as well as define what improvements are necessary. Having these records contributes to a culture of accountability and can allow for transparency to stakeholders. Ewell (2004) emphasizes that “our main ally in this public policy effort will be the accountability mechanism that remains most true to what we want to accomplish – regional accreditation” (p. 15).

### **Evolution of Accreditation Practices**

Institutions of higher education began to apply accreditation models in the early twentieth century and according to Cohen and Brawer (2003), “sought to establish minimum standards for student admission, faculty qualifications, and institutional

resources” (p. 119). Further, Cohen and Brawer contend that parallel to how community colleges started off as junior institutions to serve the freshmen/sophomore needs of four year universities and colleges, community colleges were also accredited by senior institutions. They conclude that early on the standards were not uniform and a regional organizational structure was adopted to exercise more consistent application of minimum standards for all higher education institutions within a geographic region. As noted by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2008), there are currently six regional accreditors that serve 3,025 higher education institutions (p. 1). An example of a regional accreditor is the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (HLC). Nineteen states are assigned to the North Central region of the United States for eligible membership in the Commission (HLC, 2003).

Regional accrediting associations function outside federal and state government; however, they inform the federal government as to which member institutions meet regional accreditation standards in order to qualify for distribution of federal financial aid to students (Eaton, 2006). Just as the awarding of federal financial aid was a turning point for community colleges in their history of access and growth, so too was federal financial aid a turning point for accreditation. The GI Bill of 1944 marked the beginning of the large growth of community colleges and the expanded audience they could then serve given financial resources available to individual students from wide ranging socio-economic and ethnic minority backgrounds (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Parallel with the growth of community colleges, accreditation shifted from a purely voluntary

activity to one that required higher education institutions to participate in order to access federal student financial aid (Brittingham, 2008; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Eaton, 2006). This link between accreditation and financial aid is a central component in the current discussions supporting and criticizing the role accreditation plays in U.S. higher education.

### **Higher Learning Commission (HLC)**

The evolution of accreditation standards and practices for the HLC demonstrates three significant shifts since the 1920's and is in the process of undergoing a new change announced in 2009. Originally under a narrowly structured standards format, accreditation simply provided order among higher education institutions (HLC, 2003). As reported by HLC (2003), the first shift moved away from this structure in 1934 when " 'standards' were replaced by 'criteria'; 'inspectors' became 'examiners'; and the basis for accreditation decisions became a comparison of data about an institution against a set of 'norms' derived from data accumulated from many institutions" (p.1.1-3). While consistency may be implied from such a structure, institutions were so varied that it was difficult to use the norms across all types of institutions.

The intention of the HLC was to encourage member institutions to declare a purpose against which both the institutions and the accreditor would measure progress during review periods (HLC, 2003). However, given the already prescriptive norms format assigned to all HLC institutions in 1934, the addition of a declared purpose by individual institutions presented a potential misalignment. It was difficult to hold an



institution accountable simultaneously against a set of HLC developed norms and a self-declared purpose.

The second shift for the HLC responded to the misalignment between externally developed norms and an institution-based purpose. Known commonly today as the self-study format, in 1958 this format was identified in the “Guide for the Evaluation of Institutions of Higher Education” (HLC, 2003). The guide directed the attention of institutions and Commission examiners to seven basic questions that were considered indicative of the areas that needed to be assessed in order to determine the quality of an educational institution. For example, the regional accreditor presented questions such as, “ ‘What is the educational task of the institution?’ ‘Are the necessary resources available for carrying out the task?’ ‘Is student life on campus relevant to the institution’s task?’ ” (HLC, 2003, p. 1.1-3 - 1.1-4). A blended model emerged that allowed for an institution to reflect more on their own purposes and practices within a context of data needed for accreditors to yield decisions about status.

The third major shift in practice for the HLC came in 2003 when two distinct models of accreditation were made available for institutions – one traditional model and one alternative model. As described by Cohen and Brawer (2003), the traditional accrediting model rests on a cycle of the accreditor setting the standards, a self-study by the institution to identify how they compare to the standards, and finally a visit to the institution by a team from the accreditor. For HLC, the Program to Evaluate and Advance Quality (PEAQ) is the framework assigned to the traditional model of accreditation (dependent upon the creation and submission of an institutional self-

study document) and the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) is an alternative model (dependent upon a series of focused annual quality improvement projects) (HLC, 2003).

In 2009 an announcement was made by the HLC (2010a) that the PEAQ framework would evolve into a new approach called the Open Pathways. This current shift represents yet another extension of how the regional accreditor is emphasizing quality improvement principles for higher education. While an ongoing process to collect feedback and pilot Open Pathways, the “new model proposes to separate. . . PEAQ into two components: the Assurance Process and the Improvement Process” (HLC, 2010a, p. 3). A major goal of the proposed new model is “to enhance institutional value by opening the Improvement Process for stable, healthy institutions so that they may choose Quality Initiatives to suit their current circumstances” (HLC, 2010a, p. 3).

Each major shift in accreditation models and practices designed by the Higher Learning Commission progressively built more and more upon principles of continuous quality improvement. A high point of this practice was the AQIP model which strives to “infuse the principles and benefits of continuous improvement into the culture of colleges and universities in order to assure and advance the quality of higher education” (HLC, 2003, p. 6.1-1). As institutions within the boundaries of the HLC consider regional accreditation or strive to maintain their current status, there is the opportunity to apply principles of continuous improvement through the accreditation model by committing to AQIP.

## **Accreditation, Assessment and Continuous Improvement**

Based on the literature, there is an interconnectedness demonstrated between accreditation, assessment, and continuous improvement practices. Accreditation models emphasize continuous improvement principles and focus on assessment through accreditation criteria, statements of responsibility, and special reports. In turn, assessment experts identify motivators and guidelines for conducting assessment of student learning as relating to accreditation systems. Underlying the structures and processes for accreditation and assessment efforts are continuous improvement principles that emphasize a cycle that continuously identifies areas of improvement and implementation of changes to affect student learning in a positive direction. Following is an overview of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), regional accreditation, and ways the HLC supports assessment for member institutions.

### **Council for Higher Education Accreditation**

At the national level, the Council for Higher Education Accreditation hosted a set of workshops in 2002 to support accrediting organizations to “further incorporate evidence of student learning outcomes in judgements about the quality of institutions and programs and their accredited status” (p. 1). Participants in the first workshop identified reasons for paying “greater attention to student learning outcomes in accreditation” (CHEA, 2002, p. 1). Reasons included meeting the expectations of stakeholders, upholding the legitimacy of accreditation by focusing on academic quality, and using student learning outcomes as a means to improve teaching and learning. In particular, CHEA (2002) reported:

For faculty, the primary value of evidence of student learning outcomes is to aid in the improvement of teaching and learning. Such a commitment to improvement is not only a key aspect of scholarship and intellectual responsibility, it is essential to claims of academic quality as well. Part of the task of accreditation is to help institutions, programs, and faculty substantiate their claims to quality. (p. 2)

Following the national workshops, CHEA (2003) released a "Statement of Mutual Responsibilities for Student Learning Outcomes: Accreditation, Institutions, and Programs." The purpose was to outline responsibilities of both the accrediting organizations and the institutions they accredit with respect to student learning outcomes. In addition, "it is intended to provide a common platform upon which to develop appropriate policies and review processes that use evidence of student learning to improve practice, to improve communication with important constituents, and to inform judgements about quality" (CHEA, 2003, p. 1). Highlights of the responsibilities for accrediting organizations include reporting in aggregate what students know and can do after participating in a program of study, and featuring evidence that students are meeting the identified learning outcomes and therefore contributing to institutional effectiveness (CHEA, 2003). CHEA (2003) described responsibilities of the institutions being accredited as creating systematic processes for the collection and interpretation of evidence of student learning outcomes in order to use the evidence to affect change in student performance and "overcome barriers to learning" (p. 2). Ultimately, the statement puts forth the expectation that accrediting organizations will "ensure that using evidence of student learning outcomes plays a central role in determining the accredited status of an institution or program" (CHEA, 2003, p. 2).

In a special report issued by CHEA in 2006, results of a 2005 survey on accreditation practices were summarized. With regard to student academic achievement, 15 of the 66 accreditors (23%) who responded indicated they “require institutions or programs to make public the information they compile about the institutional or program performance or student academic achievement” (CHEA, 2006, p. 4).

The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) and CHEA released a joint statement in 2008 related to student learning and accountability that included recommendations for assessing student learning “to demonstrate the value of [higher education’s] work to the public” (2008, p. 1). The two organizations stressed that the public should have access not only to fundamental statistics, but also to “an easily intelligible summary of conclusions drawn from evidence about student learning and a clear description of the process of continuous improvement on campus” (AAC&U & CHEA, 2008, p. 3). In addition, CHEA (2010) released a set of eight effective practices for accrediting bodies, such as regional accreditors, to follow in order for the “accrediting organizations [to be] successful in their efforts with student achievement, institutions and programs” (p. 2). The eight practices are partnership, clear accreditation standards and policies, peer/professional review, faculty participation, public accountability and informing the public, engagement in national initiatives, student attainment, and commitment to self-examination (CHEA, 2010). Of particular note within the set of effective practices are partnership and commitment to self-examination. Both practices relate to student learning and continuous improvement,

demonstrating a connection between accreditation and assessment. Following are descriptions of these two practices.

*(Partnership)* Accrediting organizations work with college and university academic leaders in establishing goals for student achievement, collecting evidence and making judgements about effectiveness in achieving these goals. . .  
*(Commitment to Self-Examination)* Accrediting organizations, working with institutions and programs, sustain an ongoing review of standards and policies as part of assuring appropriate rigor in expectations of student achievement.  
 (CHEA, 2010, p. 2)

Strong language regarding expectations appears in the CHEA statement outlining that “the federal government, in its oversight role of accrediting organizations (federal ‘recognition’), expects that accreditation will address student achievement” (CHEA, 2010, p. 1). Further, “the private sector (e.g., employers or foundations) expects accredited status to signal confidence in the work of an institution or program as this relates to what students learn” (CHEA, 2010, p. 1). Demands for transparency of how higher education achieves its mission of educating students are also seen at the regional accreditation level.

### **Regional Accreditation**

Regional accreditation provides community colleges an intentional, focused opportunity to study the challenges and opportunities facing the institution. The cycle of accreditation assumes a reflection stage, identification of improvements, implementation of improvements, and reporting on the entire sequence. Finding alternative ways for institutions to complete this cycle has been occurring within all the regional accreditors. Brittingham (2008) notes:

Regional accreditation has been deeply involved with assessment since the early 1990's. Accreditors have designed new and alternative accreditation processes that highlight the effectiveness of institutions in educating students: for example, the Quality Enhancement Plan by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) process by North Central's Higher Learning Commission and the capacity and effectiveness reviews by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). (p. 35)

The focus placed on continuous improvement in alternative accreditation models allows institutions to capitalize on existing activities and processes that are intended to improve the institution, while simultaneously meeting accreditation criteria.

Evolving over the last twenty years, Ewell (2009) describes that instead of state governments, regional accreditors have become the central player in encouraging (and even requiring) assessment of student learning efforts to be in place. Further, he notes that "the primary exercise of the federal interest in quality assurance for the future...will increasingly be practiced indirectly through accreditation" (Ewell, 2009, p.12). Therefore, federal and state expectations of accountability for student learning are being monitored and reported through regional accreditation efforts. Ewell (2009) notes that accreditors are in a "peculiar position as an 'accountability' actor jointly owned by the academy and the federal government" (p. 7). However, as Wright (2002) emphasizes,

The single most powerful contributor to assessment's staying power has been its championing by regional and professional accreditors. Accreditation has supported development of human capital in assessment – both directly, through its own training and literature, and indirectly, by motivating countless institutions to implement assessment. (p. 253)

As part of the federal government, the U.S. Department of Education issued a report in 2006 under the direction of Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings and an

appointed commission. A major thread throughout the report is a focus on assessing student learning, reporting the results, and being held accountable to make improvements based on those results. Under the recommendation on measurement of student learning, the commission writes,

Accreditation agencies should make performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning, the core of their assessment as a priority over inputs or processes. A framework that aligns and expands existing accreditation standards should be established to (i) allow comparisons among institutions regarding learning outcomes and other performance measures, (ii) encourage innovation and continuous improvement, and (iii) require institutions and programs to move toward world-class quality relative to specific missions and report measurable progress in relationship to their national and international peers. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 24)

Volkwein (2010b) also identifies assessment of student learning outcomes as having emerged as a major focus for accreditation at the national, regional and program levels. This shift placed emphasis on measurable student outcomes as a means of gauging educational effectiveness instead of strict expectations for prescriptive norms.

The timeline for this evolution,

Began in the 1980s and gathered strength during the 1990s as one accrediting group after another shifted away from bureaucratic checklist approaches that emphasized admissions selectivity, resources, curricular requirements, facilities, faculty credentials, and seat time, now focusing their reviews instead on attaining educational objectives. (Volkwein, 2010b, p. 8)

Wright (2002) echoes this shift by stating, “assessment allowed accreditation to zero in on the crux of the matter, student learning, after decades of fixation on surrogates: the resources and processes that were assumed to lead to quality education” (p. 251-252).

Allen (2006) shares that accreditors now “expect a climate of institutional reflection and continuing improvement based on empirical evidence. . .[and] this contrasts with earlier



models based on periodic reviews. . .focusing on inputs to the system. . .rather than outputs from the system” (p. 2).

Volkwein (2010b) suggests another major trend for accreditation is looking to continuous improvement methodologies as indicators that an institution is “healthy.” For example, demonstrating how assessment of student learning results are used to inform improvements is one way institutions can respond to pressures from external stakeholders about how they practice systematic continuous improvement. Ultimately, Volkwein (2010b) stresses,

The greater the evidence of congruence between organizational outcomes and the statements of mission, goals, and objectives, the more institutional effectiveness is demonstrated, and the more likely is reaccreditation. The accreditation process, then, may be thought of as an attempt to examine the connection between desired and actual outcomes, with the assessment process providing much of the evidence. (p. 11)

When reflecting on the historical role of accreditation and assessment of learning outcomes, Ewell (2009) points out that regional accreditors have “centered much more visibly on continuous improvement than on accountability” and as such set up “requirements regarding assessment [that] are, thus, largely about process” (p.12). More recently, as demonstrated by alternative review processes such as the HLC’s Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), Ewell (2009) sees a focus on letting the review inform the improvement of teaching and learning rather than simply demonstrating a continuous improvement process is in place.

Provezis (2010) researched the connection between regional accreditors and student learning outcomes assessment and found that accreditors were citing

institutions at a high level for incomplete assessment efforts. Common among all regional accreditors, Provezis notes they have set expectations that not only will student learning achievements be documented, but also that the evidence will be used to ultimately demonstrate improvements. The standards of regional accreditors further emphasize that institutions should “assess stated learning outcomes at all levels with *multiple measures* and to *use* the assessment information primarily for institutional improvement” (Provezis, 2010, p. 9). Are institutions meeting accreditors’ expectations of assessing learning outcomes? According to the NILOA occasional paper number six, Provezis (2010) found regional accreditors were requiring follow up due to shortcomings in assessment efforts at the following rates:

- two thirds of schools in the Middle States Commission on Higher Education;
- 80% of schools in the New England Association of Schools and Colleges;
- seven out of ten schools in the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Higher Learning Commission;
- more than half of all schools in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges;
- and “almost every action letter to institutions over the last five years has required additional attention to assessment” (p. 14) within the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities.

## Higher Learning Commission Assessment Support

As a regional accreditor, HLC emphasizes assessment of student learning through the Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components. In 2007, the HLC released a statement on student learning, assessment, and accreditation that outlined “six fundamental questions for conversations on student learning. . .[to] assist organizations and peer reviewers in discerning evidence for the Criteria and Core Components” (p. 1). Resulting conversations between HLC peer reviewers and higher education institutions intend to reveal evidence of student learning that contribute to accreditation-related judgements. This connection between evidence of student learning and accreditation serves as an example of how higher education institutions are expected to use assessment of student learning as a means of accountability to stakeholders.

In addition, HLC (2003) released a statement on assessment of student learning that is found within the “Handbook for Accreditation.” Presented within the statement are approaches to assessment that stem from expectations of accountability to the public, as well as improvement of student learning. HLC (2003) emphasizes the student learning improvement be approached in the following manner.

More than just an effective strategy for accountability or an effective management process for curriculum improvement, assessment of student achievement is essential for each higher learning organization that values its effect on the learning of its students. Therefore, an organization committed to understanding and improving the learning opportunities and environments it provides students will be able to document the relationship between assessment of and improvement in student learning. (p. 3.4-2)

HLC offers members the opportunity to be supported in assessment work through two programs. One resource is a workshop titled “Making a Difference in Student Learning: Assessment as a Core Strategy” that presents institutions with a combination of “interactive concurrent sessions with mentored teamwork to produce a portfolio of strategies for assessing and improving student learning directly related to the institution’s current needs and goals” (HLC, 2011b, p. 2). Six questions guide the conversation for workshop participants:

1. How are your stated student learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs, degrees, and students?
2. What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?
3. In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of student learning?
4. How do you ensure shared responsibility for student learning and for assessment of student learning?
5. How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your efforts to assess and improve student learning?
6. In what ways do you inform the public and other stakeholders about what and how well your students are learning? (HLC, 2011b, p. 2)

Deliverables which result from participation in the three day workshop include (a) developing a minimum of one plan with specific actions for assessing and improving student learning that will occur when the team returns to their campus, (b) designing a set of strategies or actions to support the institutional goals related to assessing and improving student learning, and (c) producing an evaluation of current assessment efforts.

The second assessment related program from HLC is the Academy for Assessment of Student Learning (herein referred to as the Assessment Academy) with participation spanning a four year period. Institutions can be asked to join the

Assessment Academy to fulfill accreditation requirements or mandates related to follow-up on assessment, or simply choose to participate as a sign of “increased institutional awareness of and commitment to assessing and improving student learning” (HLC, 2011a, p. 3). Selection criteria for participation is based on evidence of need and benefit to the institution, commitment and focus, potential impact on the institution, and the cohort mix to ensure a “cross-section or mix of institutions that best promotes interinstitutional learning” (HLC, 2011a, p. 11).

Major phases of the Assessment Academy include (a) proposal of action projects through a portfolio and attendance at an Assessment Academy roundtable, (b) implementation of action projects and receipt of feedback through biannual progress analyses, and (c) creation of an impact report and attendance at an Assessment Academy results forum (HLC, 2011a). Suggested action project portfolio topics consist of examples such as,

- General Education/Core Curricula: Assessing and improving general education/core curriculum or continued expansion and improvement of these efforts.
- Program/Departmental Review: Improve program and departmental level evaluation efforts through the use of learning and assessment evidence within Academic and non-Academic (e.g., Co-curricular) units.
- Using Assessment Data: Utilizing assessment data to improve curricula, teaching and learning environments, and inform institutional processes and decision-making structures.
- Measures, Tools, and Performance Criteria: Identifying and/or developing effective measures, tools, instruments, and approaches – as well as performance standards – to gather meaningful and effective data. (HLC, 2011a, p. 4)

HLC (2011a) notes benefits of Assessment Academy participation as a means to “impact and improve student learning”, as well as an “opportunity to compile, share, and

compare good practices (including learning outcomes, assessment models, instruments, and results) for assessing and improving student learning” (p. 3). Provezis (2010) recognizes the HLC for supporting assessment of student learning by hosting the Assessment Academy and notes that participation gives “institutional teams a chance to work on assessment projects they are trying to implement on their campuses and [connects] the teams with mentors who have led successful efforts on their own campuses” (p. 15).

### **General Education Learning Outcomes**

General education learning outcomes portray expectations of learning which exist at the broadest level of the organization and apply to all students who complete a program of study. In this section a review of general education learning outcomes is presented, followed by perspectives and goals for general education learning from the point of view of professional associations and regional accreditors.

#### **A Review of General Education Learning Outcomes**

Leskes and Wright (2005) encourage that general education learning “should serve as the keystone of an integrated and coherent arch of liberal learning” (p. 1). As described by Manning (2011), institutional outcomes are “benefits institutions want for all of their students regardless of major. These types of outcomes often relate to . . .the college-level competencies institutions want students to achieve” (p. 15). Another noted assessment specialist, Barbara Walvoord (2010), states that “general education goals may be the same as institution-wide goals, and they may be assessed not only within

the general education curriculum but also within the major, in student affairs, and in other areas” (p. 81).

Hart Research Associates (2009) surveyed members of AAC&U to determine trends and emerging practices in general education. Major findings demonstrate that of the respondents, “78% . . . have a common set of intended learning outcomes for all their undergraduate students” and “the majority of administrators (56%) say general education has increased as a priority for their institution” (p. 1). For those that employ a common set of outcomes, the outcomes “address a wide variety of skills and knowledge areas. The skills most widely included in institutions’ learning goals are writing, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and oral communication skills” (Hart, p. 4). While the learning goals may be well-defined, “less than half of member institutions feel that their general education programs are well integrated with students’ major requirements” (Hart, p. 11).

Ewell, writing for the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) publication “General Education and the Assessment Reform Agenda,” identifies four purposes of general education.

1. Development of prerequisite skills needed for later work (e.g., in communication or in math)
2. Development of abilities that cut across disciplines, like critical thinking or problem solving
3. Development of general knowledge about particular disciplines and experience with different modes of inquiry
4. Collegiate socialization – learning how to ‘do college’ by learning how to use a library (or the Web), or how to plan and carry out an independent intellectual project. (Ewell, 2004, p. 10)

Leskes and Wright (2005) stress that “no one part of the curriculum. . .can be solely responsible for developing such important and complex abilities as critical thinking, information literacy, intercultural communication, or teamwork skills; these capacities require reinforcement from all curricular and educational elements over an extended period of time” (p. 1). Hence, Leskes and Wright describe a view of learning that spans the institution and exists at the broadest level of the organization. Bresciani (2007) also suggests that “some general education values can be delivered in general education as well as the discipline or cocurricular program” (p. 10-11). Astin (1991) supports the multiplicity of origins for general education learning by stating “most cognitive outcomes in the area of general education cut across courses in such a way that it is difficult to assign responsibility to any particular course or department for particular general education outcomes” (p. 142).

### **Professional Associations’ and Regional Accreditors’ Emphasis on General Education Learning Outcomes**

National organizations emphasize general education student learning outcomes through large-scale projects such as the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) through the AAC&U. Albertine (2011) outlines the goals of the LEAP program as, “to articulate high expectations for student achievement of liberal education outcomes, connect educational practices and assessments to those outcomes, and ensure that all students reach high levels of achievement of a set of essential learning outcomes” (p. 4). As a result of these larger program goals, a set of essential learning outcomes was developed by the AAC&U’s LEAP National Leadership Council.



Figure 1 lists the essential learning outcomes and how they are most likely to be situated within the curriculum or demonstrated by students.

<b>THE ESSENTIAL LEARNING OUTCOMES</b>
<p>Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:</p> <p><b>KNOWLEDGE OF HUMAN CULTURES AND THE PHYSICAL AND NATURAL WORLD</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts</li> </ul> <p>Focused by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring</p> <p><b>INTELLECTUAL AND PRACTICAL SKILLS, INCLUDING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inquiry and analysis</li> <li>• Critical and creative thinking</li> <li>• Written and oral communication</li> <li>• Quantitative literacy</li> <li>• Information literacy</li> <li>• Teamwork and problem solving</li> </ul> <p>Practiced extensively, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance</p> <p><b>PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, INCLUDING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civic knowledge and engagement - local and global</li> <li>• Intercultural knowledge and competence</li> <li>• Ethical reasoning and action</li> <li>• Foundations and skills for lifelong learning</li> </ul> <p>Anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges</p> <p><b>INTEGRATIVE LEARNING, INCLUDING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies</li> </ul> <p>Demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems</p>

*Figure 1.* LEAP's Essential Learning Outcomes. Adopted from "College Learning for the New Global Century," by the Association for American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), 2007, p. 3. Copyright 2007 by AAC&U.

The intention is for these learning outcomes to span all types of higher education institutions, including community colleges, and "be fostered and developed across the

entire educational experience, and in the context of students' major fields" (AAC&U, 2007, p. 2). In other terms, these outcomes represent the institution level of learning outcomes that would be synonymous with a set of general education learning outcomes intended for all students to know and be able to demonstrate upon completion of their program of study.

The American Association for Community Colleges (AACC) includes recommendations for general education learning within their 1998 position statement on the associate degree. A point of emphasis in the statement is for community colleges to use an inclusive process of establishing institution level outcomes which ultimately reflect the diverse nature of the programs and curriculum at the institution. In addition to the specific courses and their progression which lead to the associate degree, AACC (1998) stresses the institution must also have "an evaluation procedure that assesses the outcomes of the learning process" (Organization of the Curriculum section, para. 2). Specific examples of general education learning areas are provided by AACC (1998).

A strong foundation general education curriculum. . .includes courses that enable the student (1) to understand and appreciate culture, one's own and others, society, and nature; (2) to develop personal values based on accepted ethics that lead to civic and social responsibility; and (3) to attain necessary competencies in analysis, communication, qualitative and quantitative methods, synthesis, and teamwork for further growth as a productive member of society and to develop the individual's and the public's good. (Organization of the Curriculum section, para. 2)

HLC (2003) summarizes the regional accreditor's expectations of general education in a "Commission Statement on General Education."

General education is intended to impart common knowledge and intellectual concepts to students and to develop in them the skills and attitudes that an

organization's faculty believe every educated person should possess. . . Moreover, effective general education helps students gain competence in the exercise of independent intellectual inquiry and also stimulates their examination and understanding of personal, social, and civic values. (p. 3.4-3)

### **Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes**

While a common topic in higher education today, assessment was not always at the forefront of the list of expectations for the higher education community. As described by Ewell (2002), "although no one has officially dated the birth of the assessment movement in higher education, it is probably safe to propose that date as the First National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education, . . . in the fall of 1985" (p. 7). The conference developed as a result of, and in response to, three influential items. First, the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education released a report in 1984 entitled "Involvement in Learning." Contained in the report were,

Three main recommendations, strongly informed by research in the student learning tradition. . . [and] it was recommended that high expectations be established for students, that students be involved in active learning environments, and that students be provided with prompt and useful feedback. But the report also observed that colleges and universities could "learn" from feedback on their own performance and that appropriate research tools were now available for them to do so. (Ewell, 2002, p. 7)

Another set of reports influenced the climate in which assessment gained momentum and serves as the second influential item. Ewell (2002) notes the American Association of Colleges report "Integrity in the College Curriculum" from 1985 and "To Reclaim a Legacy" by Bennett in 1984, as emerging from within the higher education community and focusing on "curriculum reform, especially in general education" (p. 7).

Lastly, external stakeholders at the state level became vocal in demanding accountability from both K-12 education and postsecondary education. Ewell (2002) provides an example of this call for accountability as seen in “A Nation at Risk,” the 1983 report issued by the U.S. Department of Education. Taken together, these three influential items provide context for how assessment dialogues rose to the national level through the first dedicated conference in 1985.

### **A Review of Learning Outcomes Assessment**

CHEA offers definitions of student learning outcomes, evidence of student learning outcomes, and assessment in their 2003 “Statement of Mutual Responsibilities for Student Learning Outcomes: Accreditation, Institutions, and Programs.” First, student learning outcomes are identified as “the knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of higher education experiences” (CHEA, 2003, p. 5). Next, evidence of student learning outcomes is described as “the kind of information about student learning outcomes that is most appropriate to accreditation settings” (CHEA, 2003, p. 5). Finally, assessment as related to student learning outcomes is defined by CHEA (2003) as “the many means that institutions and programs use to collect and interpret evidence of their educational effectiveness” and “the processes used. . .to apply what they learn about learning to make improvements in teaching and learning”(p. 6).

Evidence of learning through the documentation of student achievement is a key component to the CHEA’s definition of student learning outcomes assessment.

Documenting and sharing student learning results and efforts are also a

recommendation found in a 2012 report by the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability. The report, “Committing to Quality: Guidelines for Assessment and Accountability in Higher Education,” offers guidelines for institutions to follow which gauge “how effectively they are reporting evidence and results” of assessment of student learning (New Leadership Alliance, 2012, p. 9). The recommended guidelines state,

- Regular procedures are in place for sharing evidence of student learning with internal and external constituencies.
- Internal reporting includes regularly scheduled meetings, publications, and other mechanisms that are accessible to all relevant constituencies (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators, students, the governing body).
- Reporting to external constituencies via the institutional website includes evidence of learning. . .
- Reporting on student learning outcomes is both accessible to and appropriate for the relevant audience.
- The results of evidence-based changes in programs and practices are reported to appropriate internal and external constituencies. (New Leadership Alliance, 2012, p. 9)

However, as reported in the research by Jankowski and Makela (2010), few institutions share student learning information publicly on their institutional websites. The authors note, “although recognition of student achievement was found more often on private than on public institution websites, less than 5% of websites across the entire set of institutions had any evidence of such information” (Jankowski & Makela, 2010, p. 14).

Assessment of student learning is described by Maki (2010) as,

the systemic and systematic process of examining student work against our standards of judgement. . .to determine the fit between what we expect our students to be able to demonstrate or represent and what they actually do demonstrate or represent at points along their educational careers. (p. 3)

Leskes and Wright (2005) share a definition of assessment that also describes assessment as a process of inquiry and improvement. Their systematic process consists of,

- “setting goals and framing questions about student learning;
- gathering evidence to demonstrate how well the goals are achieved;
- interpreting the evidence and designing a plan to improve;
- [and] implementing changes for better learning” (p. 5).

Leskes and Wright (2005) identify the “ultimate aim of assessment is to enhance the positive effect of college practices on student learning and development” (p. 6).

With a similar perspective, Astin (1991) describes assessment as “a technology that educational practitioners can use to enhance the feedback concerning the impact of their educational practices and policies” (p. 130).

Three phases are outlined by Banta (2002) to support effective outcomes assessment – planning, implementation, and sustaining and improving. Within each phase there are elements to support quality efforts that can lead to effective results.

Figure 2 displays Banta’s three phases and 17 elements of effective outcomes assessment.

In phase one, planning, there are four elements which prepare the environment and establish the foundational elements required for an outcomes assessment effort to be conducted. Phase two, implementation, contains elements five through 12. This second phase only includes two elements directly related to the assessment effort itself – using multiple measures and evaluating the outcomes. The other six elements focus

on engagement, support, and communication. Improving and sustaining is the third phase of effective outcomes assessment described by Banta. Elements 13 through 17 emphasize continuous improvement and sharing the results.

<i>Phase I: Planning</i>	<i>Phase II: Implementation</i>	<i>Phase III: Improving &amp; Sustaining</i>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Involve stakeholders from beginning</li> <li>2. Provide ample time for developing the assessment</li> <li>3. Create a written plan that connects to goals</li> <li>4. Base assessments on clear objectives</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Ensure assessment efforts are supported with knowledgeable leadership</li> <li>6. Reinforce assessment is everyone's responsibility</li> <li>7. Provide professional development to prepare for using the findings</li> <li>8. Engage those at the department level</li> <li>9. To maximize reliability and validity, use multiple measures</li> <li>10. Evaluate processes and outcomes</li> <li>11. Create a consistently supportive environment</li> <li>12. Have a consistent communication effort in place to share activities and findings</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. Efforts must produce plausible evidence that students are learning</li> <li>14. Use data on a continuous basis to improve programs and services</li> <li>15. Take the opportunity to share results with internal and external stakeholders</li> <li>16. Create an expectation that efforts are ongoing</li> <li>17. Evaluate the assessment process and make improvements where needed</li> </ol>

Figure 2. Banta's Characteristics of Effective Outcomes Assessment. Adapted from *Building a Scholarship of Assessment*, 2002, by T. W. Banta and Associates, pp. 262-263. Copyright 2002 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

In "Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education," Walvoord (2010) provides a definition of assessment as "the systematic collection of information about student learning, using the time, knowledge, expertise, and resources available, in order to inform decisions that affect student learning" (p. 2). In Walvoord's (2010) approach to assessment, she identifies three steps:

1. *Goals*. What do we want students to be able to do when they complete our courses of study? (Goals may also be called "outcomes" or "objectives" . . .)

2. *Information*. How well are students achieving these goals, and what factors influence their learning? (Information may be called “measures” or “evidence.”)
3. *Action*. How can we use the information to improve student learning? (pp. 3-4)

In addition to these steps, Walvoord (2010) offers a philosophy of assessment that is intentionally straightforward. Recurrent themes identified by the author include (a) embedding assessment efforts within efforts that are valued by individuals and the institution, (b) capitalizing on work already underway to locate assessment efforts, and (c) moving beyond simply identifying strengths and weaknesses to gathering evidence about the root causes for the weaknesses.

Yin and Volkwein (2010) present five steps for assessment.

- “1. Specify the purposes, goals, and audiences.
2. Design methods and measures.
3. Carry out the data collection and analysis.
4. Communicate the findings to the audience.
5. Obtain feedback, follow-up, redesign, and improvement” (p. 84).

Of particular note, Yin and Volkwein (2010) highlight how the “feedback loop includes decisions about altering the mission statement, improving the assessment measures, clarifying institutional goals and program objectives, as well as altering programs and improving student outcomes” (p. 84).

Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, and Halonen (2011) identify four general principles for assessment processes. First is the idea that student learning outcomes exist at different levels within the organization – course level, department level, and institution level.



Next is the principle that assessment efforts both promote and evaluate learning outcomes. The third principle states that assessment take place throughout the curriculum (it is “inclusive”) and it progresses along a developmentally appropriate path. Finally, the fourth principle highlights that the assessment effort itself should be reviewed to respond to changing environmental factors (accreditation, industry certification revisions) and institutional priorities (strategic plan, resources).

Evidence of student learning gathered during assessment efforts is identified as either direct or indirect. Allen (2006) defines direct evidence as “student demonstrations of the extent of their learning” while “indirect evidence is based on opinions” (p. 14). While both types of evidence are valuable to the assessment process, direct evidence is most meaningful to demonstrating students have accomplished the objectives established and indirect evidence plays a supporting role (Allen, 2006; Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009).

Higher education institutions participate in many types of assessment efforts that contribute to institutional effectiveness. Surveys of student engagement, surveys of faculty engagement, and assessment of student learning play a role in how an institution determines where to make improvements. For processes and practices associated with assessment of student learning, both faculty and administration need to be involved in order to maximize the impact on students and their learning experiences. According to Hutchings (2010), assessment of student learning is about having the

Power to prompt collective faculty conversation about purposes. . .about discovering the need to be more explicit about goals for student learning; about

finding better ways to know whether those goals are being met; and about shaping and sharing feedback that can strengthen student learning. (p. 7)

Best practices for assessment of student learning outcomes stress the role of faculty. Ewell (2009) “suggests that involving faculty formally, and in detail, in exercises designed to craft a set of specific teaching-related questions that faculty want answered can yield substantial dividends” (p. 16). An example Ewell gives is to provide space and time for faculty to review disaggregated data with their peers and after an analysis of the results, regard the impact any changes may have on student learning and the institution. Echoing this call for faculty involvement is Banta and Blaich (2011) who share, “if faculty do not participate in making sense of and interpreting assessment evidence, they are much more likely to focus solely on finding fault with the conclusions than on considering ways that the evidence might be related to their teaching” (p. 24).

The HLC also emphasizes the role of faculty in student learning outcomes assessment through their “Commission Statement on Assessment of Student Learning.” HLC (2003) states, “faculty members, with meaningful input from students and strong support from the administration and governing board, should have the fundamental role in developing and sustaining systematic assessment of student learning” (p. 3.4-2).

Multiple stakeholders stand to benefit from understanding, participating in, and interpreting the results of learning outcomes assessment efforts. One set of stakeholders that plays a unique internal and external role for an institution is the Board of Trustees. While a part of the larger organization, the board is made up of individual

members who are not employees of the institution and who come from the surrounding community. The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) conducted a 2009 survey “of provosts and chairs of academic affairs committees. . .to develop a better understanding of how boards receive information on student learning, and what they do with the information they receive” (2010, p. IV). With board members coming from a variety of professional backgrounds, many of which are not related to education but instead are oriented to business and industry, AGB notes the tendency is for boards to focus on fiscal matters instead of academic quality and student learning. AGB (2010) explains,

Trustees’ lack of preparation and understanding of academic culture may be a reasonable explanation for the lack of involvement in discussions of educational quality, but in a period of increased public demand for accountability from higher education – and its governing boards – that excuse is no longer sufficient. (p. 2)

The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (2012) emphasizes the involvement by governing boards in student learning assessment by recommending they “should receive regular reports about the assessment of student learning and efforts to use evidence to improve programs” (p. 8).

AGB (2010) makes a connection between fiscal accountability and oversight of academic quality in the following statement.

When boards fail to ensure educational quality, they fail to fulfill their larger fiduciary responsibilities of ensuring that the institutional mission is met, the institution’s reputation is protected and enhanced, and its resources are wisely spent. By engaging in discussions of assessment of student learning outcomes and focusing on understanding the lessons of this assessment and their implications, boards deliver on their fiduciary ‘duty of care’ while also ensuring

that the important process of assessment is ongoing, accountable, and meaningful to the institution. (p. 3)

Despite this connection, AGB's (2010) survey findings demonstrate that only 31% of board members and 19% of administrators felt that boards use evidence of student learning and results of assessments to make budget decisions and allocations. Parallel to this finding, 79% of respondents stated that "more time is devoted to discussions of finance and budget than to academic matters" (AGB, 2010, p. 6).

Interestingly, Swing and Coogan (2010) studied the cost-benefit side to assessment of student learning outcomes and made a connection between such fiscal matters most important to boards and student learning outcomes assessment. In their report Swing and Coogan (2010) emphasize,

The irony of assessment cost-benefit calculations is that the area most controllable by an institution is the benefit side of the equation. Nothing negatively impacts the cost-benefit ratio more than collecting data that are never analyzed, failing to close the loop in implementing improvements, or engaging in "interesting questions" outside of the institution's control. (p. 12)

They go on to state "assessments whose results are not used have costs but not benefits, and the resulting ratio is still undesirable, regardless of whether the original 'investment' was inexpensive" (Swing & Coogan, 2010, p. 14).

Blaich and Wise (2011) emphasize that measurement of student learning through assessment efforts "is by far the easiest step in the assessment process. The real challenge begins once faculty, staff, administrators, and students at institutions try to use the evidence to improve student learning" (p. 3). They go on with a concerned tone in reporting,

The way we govern and structure our institutions means that the simple reporting of assessment data has little hope of generating the kind of “data-informed, continuous improvement” that many of us hope for. Assessment data has legs only if the evidence collected rises out of extended conversations across constituencies about (a) what people hunger to know about their teaching and learning environments and (b) how the assessment evidence speaks to those questions. (p. 12)

In the end, Blaich and Wise (2011) express that if done appropriately, assessment to improve student learning is transparent and involves a variety of internal stakeholders all progressing toward a common goal.

When good practices of assessment work were collected by Trudy Banta, Elizabeth Jones, and Karen Black, the ultimate goal of using assessment results to document improvements in student learning was found in only 6 percent of the 146 profiles received (Banta & Blaich, 2011). Banta and Blaich (2011) conclude,

One of the challenges of translating assessment evidence into improvement is for assessment leaders to know when gathering more information would help focus and clarify potential actions and when their knowledge is good enough to change a class or program. The goal of assessment is not just to gather evidence, after all, but to make evidence-informed changes. (p. 25)

The New Leadership Alliance (2012) offers a set of four guidelines an institution can follow “to determine how effectively they are using evidence to improve student learning” (p. 8). The guidelines are,

- Well-articulated policies and procedures are in place for using evidence to improve student learning at appropriate levels of the institution.
- Evidence is used to make recommendations for improvement of academic and cocurricular programs.
- There is an established process for discussing and analyzing these recommendations to action. Where feasible and appropriate, key recommendations for improvement are implemented.
- The impact of evidence-based changes in programs and practices is continuously reviewed and evaluated. (p. 8)

Recent writings by Banta and Blaich (2011) encourage the evaluation of assessment work given “assessment is a learning process – that is, it takes trial and error for institutions to figure out what and how to assess” (p. 26). The authors present three main questions to guide evaluating assessment work and progress.

1. Are institutions devoting an equal or greater amount of resources to analyzing assessment results as gathering data?
2. Are findings of assessment efforts readily identified or referenced by staff, faculty and students?
3. Are structures and resources available for faculty, staff and students to express interest in or ask questions about assessment efforts?

Relevancy to the institution, faculty, and stakeholders is a key component of an effective outcomes assessment program according to Banta, Jones, and Black (2009).

The authors stress,

Assessment will become relevant in the eyes of faculty and administrators when it becomes part of the following: strategic planning for programs and the institution; implementation of new academic and student affairs programs; making decisions about the competence of students; comprehensive program (peer) review; faculty and professional staff development; and/or faculty and staff reward and recognition systems. (Banta et al., 2009, p. 5)

As demonstrated in the literature reviewed for this section, student learning outcomes assessment is a comprehensive effort that is intertwined with numerous stakeholders, a process that begins with established learning outcomes, and is intended to end with action based on direct evidence of student learning.

## General Education Learning Outcomes Assessment

While many of the same principles of assessment apply whether at the level of student learning outcomes in a course, program, or institution, there are characteristics of assessing general education learning outcomes which warrant its own discussion.

As outlined in the overview of learning outcomes assessment, step one is almost always the identification of clear learning goals or objectives. For general education learning outcomes assessment, it is no different. Allen (2006) explains,

Goal and outcome statements should be clear to program administrators, faculty who staff general education courses, students and others. Program administrators use these statements to approve general education courses and plan general education assessment efforts, faculty use them to design courses, students use them to guide studying, and others use them to plan support services and the cocurricular environment. (p. 43)

Penn (2011a) offers examples of how general education assessment efforts contribute to meeting the needs and expectations of stakeholders by acknowledging,

First, it produces clear evidence on our students' achievement on learning outcomes that are most central to our institutions. Assessment of general education also facilitates a dialogue about what we expect students to learn in our institutions and identify core knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions that are important for all students. (p. 12)

Walvoord (2010) proposes three options for community colleges to take in assessing learning goals at the institution level for those completing an associate degree: (1) target a course or set of courses to assess student work without regard to the number of hours or courses completed by the enrolled students, (2) pull a sample of student work for students meeting particular criteria (for example, successful completion of an identified number of credit hours), or (3) "create a forum for faculty discussion and

action that includes members. . . from the various departments that offer courses within the associate's degree" (p. 73).

Ewell (2004) describes,

The assessment of general education is about examining the consequences not of any particular body of coursework that may be labeled as 'general education' but of the undergraduate experience as a whole. This conclusion has a real implication for practice. It's not enough to examine general education in the classroom based settings of core or distribution requirements, however embedded and authentic these assessments may be. We must also examine how these abilities infuse and inform expert practice. The assessment of general education, in short, must be integrally linked to the major. (pp. 5-6)

The purpose of general education assessment as defined by Yin and Volkwein (2010) "is not only to evaluate a student's knowledge, but also to provide feedback to improve the educational process for future students" (p. 91). They go on to emphasize that institutions have two approaches to general education assessment methods.

(1) Adopting a required curricular structure that ensures student attainment of the stated general education objectives or (2) collecting outcomes assessment evidence that students are achieving these things on graduation. In other words, we need to strengthen educational requirements on the front end or to develop a system for accumulating and reflecting on outcomes evidence on the back end of the student experience. (Yin and Volkwein, 2010, p. 86)

Among several characteristics of effective assessment efforts for general education learning outcomes, Allen (2006) emphasizes that a cross-functional dialogue should take place within the institution. General education learning outcomes span academic disciplines and can be found throughout the curricula. Included in the discussion would not only be representatives from academic affairs (faculty, administrators), but also student affairs staff (advisors, student life, etc.). Through an inclusive approach that spans the institution there is an increased likelihood to "create a more cohesive learning environment and increase learning" (Allen, 2006, p. 142).



In 2008 the AAC&U issued the second edition of a report entitled “Our Students’ Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of our Mission.” The report compels higher education to fill the void of student learning evidence by following ten recommendations that are intended to frame a new level of accountability. Setting the context for assessment of student learning are AAC&U’s Essential Learning Outcomes, also referred to as liberal education outcomes which occur at the institution level. In addition to meeting accountability standards for higher education, AAC&U connects student achievement of liberal education outcomes to employers’ expectations. Results of a survey of employers’ views on student learning in college yielded strong views on the preparation of college graduates. In particular, the following areas were identified by employers as skills and knowledge they would like higher education institutions to emphasize more.

- Teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings - 76%
- The ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing - 73%
- Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills - 73%
- The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources - 70%
- The ability to solve complex problems - 64% (AAC&U, 2008, p. 17)

In order to meet expectations of external stakeholders, such as employers, AAC&U (2008) encourages the assessment of liberal education outcomes through authentic student work which is “more directly useful to faculty as they seek to improve courses and programs and assess student growth and development over time” (p. 11).

Regardless of the approach taken by an institution to assess general education learning outcomes, there are both structures and processes associated with the efforts

which contribute to an overall assessment cycle. Allen (2006) reminds us that “general education programs and the associated cocurricular environment are complex systems, and virtually any complex system has aspects that are running well and flaws that can be identified and corrected” (p. 122).

**General education assessment structures.** General education assessment efforts exist within institutional structures. These structures range from the curriculum itself to where assessment is managed in the organization. Engaging in assessment means it “must usually be implemented across the grain of deeply embedded organizational structures” (Ewell, 2002, p. 23). In addition, Ewell (2009) stresses,

Far too many institutions have established learning outcomes in response to accreditation requirements and to drive assessments without ensuring that these goals are continuously mapped to, and reinforced by, the teaching and learning process *throughout* the curriculum as part of a systematic competency-based approach. (p. 19)

Similarly, Banta (2006) uses a general education example from the State University of New York (SUNY) to demonstrate a characteristic of her effective practices for assessment. This example focuses on how the general education learning outcomes are represented in the curriculum and clearly defined before conducting an assessment.

Banta (2006) describes,

First, the General Education Task Force appointed in 1999 developed ten knowledge and skills areas and two competences. Then the GEAR Group approved each campus’s general education program, based on coverage of these areas. Only then were appropriate assessment measures considered. This is important because assessment must be based on valid measures, and validity cannot be assessed until there are explicit descriptions of what is to be measured, as well as some assurance that desired concepts are actually being taught. (p. 15)

Nunley et al. (2011) support the notion of first identifying intended outcomes and their place in the curriculum, then choosing an assessment tool that is not based on convenience but instead addresses this question – “does this test measure what we value and are our faculty teaching what we value in their classrooms?” (p. 22).

Reinforcing the structural element of location of learning outcomes in the curriculum, the New Leadership Alliance (2012) encourages “the institution and its major academic and cocurricular programs [to] identify places in the curriculum or cocurriculum where students encounter or are expected or required to achieve the stated outcomes” (p. 6).

Elfner (2005) outlines three options for who can take responsibility for the assessment of general education learning outcomes within the structure of a higher education institution – 1) those also responsible for the creation of the general education curriculum, 2) an institution level assessment committee, and 3) a specific committee dedicated only to general education learning outcomes assessment. Of the three, Elfner (2005) purports that “a *separate general education assessment committee* is probably the best approach to coordination of this important activity” (p. 167). By having general education as its only charge, the committee can focus intently on assessment activities for the institution level learning outcomes.

Maki (2010) reinforces a committee framework to support general education learning outcomes assessment efforts by stating, “a campus-wide committee becomes both the structure that initiates and the engine that drives sustainable assessment of student learning across an institution” (p. 54). Responsibilities of such a committee are noted as potentially including peer reviews of assessment plans, influencing

professional development and faculty growth around assessment, and developing or maintaining the campus assessment website.

**General education assessment processes.** Established processes allow organizations to carry out the work of an assessment program, leading to the ultimate goal of using results to make changes which improve student learning. For general education assessment, processes include the timing and volume of assessment initiatives, the administration of an assessment instrument, and the steps the organization goes through to accomplish a cycle of assessment.

Maki (2010) identifies a “cycle of inquiry” as a series of tasks that take an institution through the collection of data to using the results. This cycle applies to institution level assessment efforts and begins with confirming the outcomes will produce evidence about what it is you wish to learn. Next comes identification of the sample size, followed by a determination of how and when evidence of student learning will be collected. Maki (2010) recommends both direct and indirect assessment methods be considered so one “can make inferences about students’ performance levels and answer [the] research or study question” (p. 256). The fourth task is administration of the scoring or standardized test instrument, which leads to the fifth task of analyzing the results. Maki (2010) emphasizes that analysis should be conducted “in ways that promote collective interpretation” (p. 256). The final task in the cycle of inquiry is taking action based on decisions which are arrived at through collective interpretation. These actions may include adding a new support service or revising curriculum.

Christensen (2006) describes the general education assessment program at Suffolk County Community College as “broad-based and collegial” (p. 6). The college assesses three to four general education learning outcomes each year for a three year period. Outcomes included areas such as basic communication, critical thinking, and natural sciences. Christensen (2006) notes that “faculty, especially in the first round of general education assessment, were assessing two things simultaneously: student performance on the outcome measures and the accuracy of the measures themselves” (p. 6). Upon completion of the process, best practices were identified and “with clearer articulation of program goals and objectives, the [assessment] committee formulated direct links from course-level SUNY assessment outcomes to program review” (Christensen, 2006, p. 7).

An example of “good practice” documented by Nunley et al. (2011) highlights work done at the Community College of Baltimore County which uses common assignments at the discipline level to assess general education learning outcomes. A rotating schedule for the disciplines is in place to disperse the assessment efforts; however, all general education courses are expected to assess the general education learning outcomes at some point during the schedule. Given assessment work completed to date, “concrete examples of changes based on results include changing the course textbook to a book that includes writings by authors from many different cultures, professional development for adjunct faculty, and many specific course revisions based on rubric item analysis” (Nunley et al., 2011, p. 8).

Introduced by Nichols and Nichols (2005), the five column model for assessment of student learning outcomes presents a layered approach to institution level assessment and is presented in Figure 3. Within the framework of a general education assessment program, Nichols and Nichols (2005) identify the beginning point as the institution's mission statement and the learning goals that exist for every student throughout the institution. An example of this type of learning goal may be critical thinking. Next in the sequence are the learning outcomes which express tangible ways students can demonstrate a learning goal, for example, by analyzing an argument and critiquing its position. How the learning outcome is assessed and the expected level of achievement follows as the second and third levels in the model. Finally, the results of the assessment and how the results were used to effect change are the last steps in the five point model.

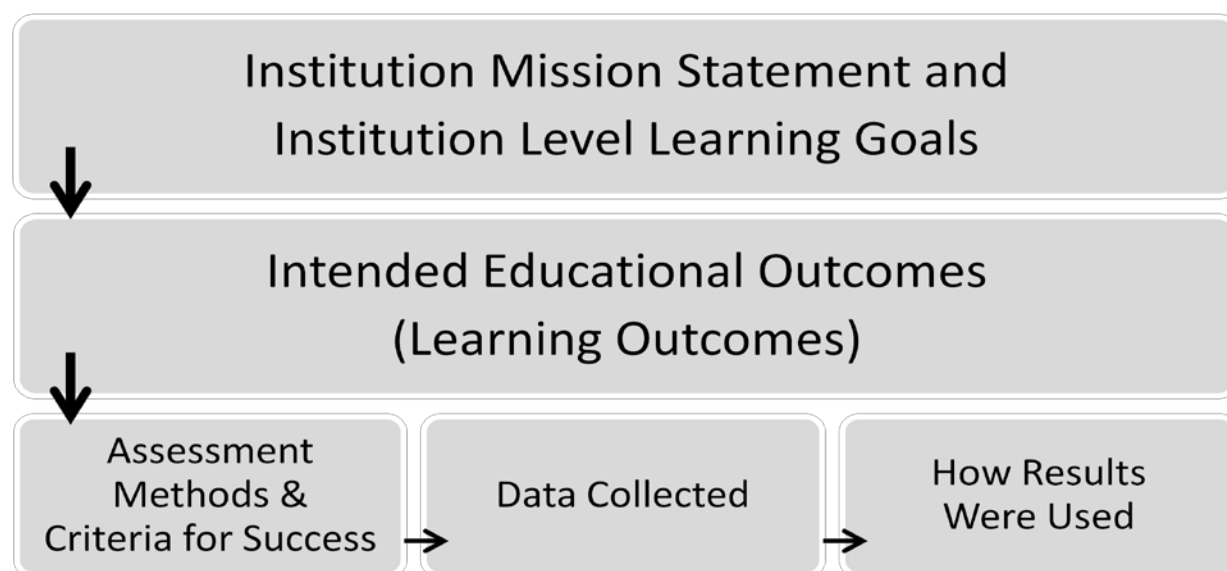


Figure 3. Nichols and Nichols Five Column Model for Assessment of Student Learning. Adapted from *A Road Map for Improvement of Student Learning and Support Services Through Assessment*, by J. O. Nichols and K. W. Nichols, 2005, pp. 21-24. Copyright 2005 by Agathon Press.

The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (2012) presents a four step process for institutions to follow in order to answer the essential question, “are our students learning?” (p. 4). The four steps are to, (a) set ambitious goals, (b) gather evidence of student learning, (c) use evidence to improve student learning, and (d) report evidence and results. Noted within each step are a set of guidelines to allow an institution the ability to evaluate to what degree they are accomplishing the step. For step two, gathering evidence, there is an emphasis on process.

Systematic processes for gathering evidence allow colleges and universities to discover how well students are progressing toward the institution’s overall and programmatic learning outcomes. Evidence-gathering efforts that are ongoing, sustainable, and integrated into the work of faculty and staff can suggest where the institution is succeeding and where improvement is needed. (New Leadership Alliance, 2012, p. 6)

Of the guidelines for step two, New Leadership Alliance (2012) encourages that “policies and procedures are in place that describe when, how, and how frequently learning outcomes will be assessed” (p. 7).

**Large-scale efforts and cautions.** As noted by Penn (2011a), “all six regional accreditors now require assessment of general education as a condition of accreditation, firmly establishing assessment of general education as a key element of institutional accountability and improvement” (p. 6). One of these regional accreditors, the HLC, included a Commission Statement on General Education within the “Handbook of Accreditation” that emphasizes assessment of general education.

Regardless of how a higher learning organization frames the general education necessary to fulfill its mission and goals, it clearly and publicly articulates the

purposes, content, and intended learning outcomes of the general education it provides for its students. . . .Moreover, the organization's faculty exercises oversight for general education and, working with the administration, regularly assesses its effectiveness against the organization's stated goals for student learning. (HLC, 2003, p. 3.4-3)

Hart Research Associates (2009) report that of AAC&U members who responded to a survey regarding trends in general education, "89% of institutions are in some stage of assessing or modifying their general education program" (p. 2). However, only 30% are actually "conducting assessments of learning outcomes in general education" (Hart, 2009, p. 2). A variety of approaches are used by AAC&U member institutions to assess general education learning outcomes – for example, approximately one-third assess using a sample of students, 24% look to department level assessments "for evidence of general education outcomes, and 17% of members use assessments that all students complete" (Hart, p. 15). With regard to assessment tools, Hart Research Associates (2009) report that rubrics are the most common (40%), followed by capstone projects (37%), and student surveys (35%). Only 16% indicate the use of "standardized national tests of general knowledge" (p. 16).

The Wabash National Study, a longitudinal research and assessment project focused on improving student learning in general education type outcomes, is run by the Center of Inquiry at Wabash College. Participating institutions in the study are now asked to "develop and implement detailed, three-year plans" (Blaich & Wise, 2011, p. 13) around assessment efforts that include data audits, a clear focus on no more than three outcomes, intentional communications, a commitment of resources (minimum \$10,000), and student involvement. Blaich and Wise (2011) recognize that "to be



successful, institutions must stop thinking about assessment as a process that begins with data gathering and ends with a report” (p. 14).

The ability for community colleges focused on assessment of student learning to benchmark outside their own organization is a characteristic of a national effort termed the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA). VFA is organized by AACC and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education. Launched in January 2011, the three primary measures making up the metrics portion of the project include college readiness measures; workforce, economic, and community development measures; and student learning outcomes assessment measures (Moltz, 2011). The development of student learning outcomes metrics will be informed by pilot institutions and a VFA working group to “meet criteria of relevance to community colleges and their unique student populations” (AACC, 2011b, para. 2). To begin, the working group will concentrate on defining metrics under eight main learning areas.

1. Analytical reasoning and critical thinking
2. Communication (ability to speak, read, write, and listen)
3. Innovative and creative thinking
4. Quantitative literacy
5. Information literacy
6. Teamwork and collaborative skills
7. Global Understanding and citizenship
8. Content/career specific skills and knowledge. (AACC, 2011b, para. 3)

Blaich and Wise (2011) emphasize a caution in approaching assessment at the institution level by using results to compare institutions and benchmark not at the individual student level, but only at the larger organization level. The authors note,

Although many discussions about assessment focus on the importance of creating measures by which to compare institutions, the underlying reality is that any overall institutional measure belies the complex range of student learning and experiences that occurs within our institutions (Blaich & Wise, 2011, p. 10).

They go on to highlight the core of good assessment work as, “learning what differentiates the students who learn substantially more or substantially less than their institution’s average score on an outcome” (Blaich and Wise, 2011, p. 10).

Others have scrutinized whether general education is assessable, including Penn (2011a) who lists five “common” critiques of general education assessment: 1) general education learning outcomes cannot be defined, 2) general education learning outcomes cannot be assessed, 3) general education learning outcomes cannot be taught; 4) general education assessment results are never used for anything; and 5) general education assessment efforts are a threat to academic freedom. The first challenge, being able to define general education learning outcomes, is addressed by Yin and Volkwein (2010) and Ewell (2002). Described by Yin and Volkwein (2010), “identifying and agreeing on general education goals” (p. 84) is a significant hurdle when embarking on assessment of general education. In addition, Yin and Volkwein caution that an assessment plan must be focused and have specific goals. Ewell (2002) states, “perhaps the most basic debate that arises as faculty face assessment is the extent to which educational outcomes can be specified and measured at all” (p. 17).

Astin (1991) points out two challenges associated with assessment of general education learning outcomes, the faculty and the curriculum. First, many faculty are focused on one specific discipline and therefore feel their content specialty is removed

from general education outcomes. Parallel to this discipline focus is the reality that general education learning outcomes, which exist at the institution level, span the entire undergraduate curriculum. Palomba (2002) reinforces the challenge of general education assessment by adding to the discourse saying, “overcoming challenges to assessment scholarship may be most difficult in general education when faculty must come together across several disciplines to decide on learning goals and objectives and agree on strategies for assessment” (p. 220). Given these challenges, questions arise such as where to focus assessment efforts within the curriculum. At what point does it make sense to conduct an assessment of general education learning outcomes? How can faculty make use of results if they first do not accept a connection to their discipline?

Another appraisal of general education assessment leads to the question of which approach provides a better measure for how well students are learning in their overall undergraduate education – assessment at the department level or at the institution level? Dunn et al. (2011) write, “the place to begin this important work is at the departmental or program level – the unit of analysis that has the most day-to-day as well as discipline-based impact on student learning” (p. 2). They go on to acknowledge,

Evaluating student learning in general education courses is certainly important, but we believe that the breadth and depth of discipline-based knowledge acquired within department-based majors is the more appropriate forum to capture assessment activities that reflect the true accomplishments of the baccalaureate program. (Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, and Halonen, 2011, p. 2)

Bresciani (2007) encourages us to think strategically about how the assessment results of general education learning can be interpreted to make improvements. Faculty

frustration may surface if they are “unable to identify opportunities to improve student learning based on the assessment results” (Bresciani, 2007, p. 12). Bresciani (2007) poses a question as to where the core learning principles are delivered and evaluated – “in the general education, the discipline, the cocurricular, or a combination of all of these areas?” (p. 13). Suskie (2010) frames the issue as one of higher education making promises to our students that they will leave the institution having achieved the general education learning outcomes. It is the responsibility of each member of the college community to contribute to the success of the whole student to meet this promise. Ownership should not be assigned within sectors of the institution if we are truly supporting the range of experiences that students encounter, which all contribute to achievement of general education learning outcomes. Therefore, one would argue the answer to Bresciani’s question is a combination of all three (general education, disciplines, and cocurricular) which serve as opportunities for delivering, achieving, and assessing “core learning principles.”

### **Community College Challenges in General Education Assessment**

Access, a hallmark of community colleges, has been a prominent characteristic to describe the unique nature of these organizations compared to the rest of higher education. All academic skill levels are accepted at community colleges and while a small set of programs have selective admission criteria (e.g., nursing), the large majority of academic programs promote an “accessible” pathway to postsecondary education. As noted by Nunley et al. (2011), a challenge for community colleges is to balance the access agenda (in place since their inception) with student success.

Regardless of the motivating factors driving assessment, we contend that affording access to learning without assuring that learning occurs constitutes an empty promise. The value-added learning achieved by America's community colleges must be documented and used to further improve student accomplishment and institutional excellence. (p. 10)

Nunley et al. (2011) acknowledge that all higher education institutions share common challenges with assessment of student learning; however, community colleges are confronted with a unique set of circumstances which add complexity to assessment initiatives at the institution level. Eleven challenges are presented by Nunley et al. (2011).

- multiple missions of community colleges
- student characteristics
- absence of programs in baccalaureate majors
- the de facto program designation
- alternative learning venues
- limited professional support, especially in institutional research
- costs of assessment
- low faculty interest and engagement in assessment
- large numbers of adjunct faculty
- faculty collective bargaining agreements
- community college governance.

Trapp and Cleaves (2005) describe four main features of community colleges that impact how they conduct assessments of student learning.

1. Stakeholders at a local level, such as state policy boards and locally elected governing boards. In addition, four year institutions where community college students are likely to transfer have an inherent interest in the student learning abilities of those entering their institutions.
2. Student characteristics in comparison to those at four year institutions. Community college students tend to work more outside of school, have family obligations, and are more ethnically diverse. These factors contribute to the erratic enrollment patterns maintained by community college students and their prolonged period to degree completion.
3. The variety of programs available. Assessing student learning outcomes requires an intentional definition of which program they relate to as community colleges provide a range of options such as career certificates, transfer degrees, general education, and developmental education.
4. Unique processes and people. Compared to four-year institutions, community colleges are more likely to engage in low-cost professional development experiences that involve all faculty. Simultaneously, community colleges “tend to document their curriculum and engage in broader peer reviews of that documentation” (Trapp & Cleaves, 2005, p. 192).

Echoing several of these challenges is Ewell (2011) who shares reasons why community colleges, which he calls “among the most distinctive types of institutions in American postsecondary education” (p. 27), are not suited for the common types of measurements imposed by external stakeholders. Three main challenges to fitting

typical indicators of institutional effectiveness are outlined by Ewell (2011): 1) the multiple missions of the community college, 2) the distinctive and diverse patterns of attendance, and 3) the broad range of student characteristics. Ewell (2011) urges, “it is important for both policy makers and institutional leaders to understand [the challenges] so they can argue for, and develop, more appropriate measures” (p. 27). With respect to student learning outcomes, Ewell (2011) emphasizes that community colleges have struggled with finding relevant assessment instruments and a way to administer them given the major challenges noted. Promising trends for community colleges have emerged due to the advances in technology allowing for a wide range of embedded, course level student work to be assessed and results “aggregated to yield interpretable indexes of performance aligned with learning outcomes statements” (Ewell, 2011, p. 33).

Penn (2011b) identifies the high numbers of adjunct and non-tenure track faculty positions within higher education as impacting general education assessment efforts. At the institution level, where general education assessment occurs, it is more difficult to have participation, engagement, and commitments from adjunct faculty because of the inherent nature of their role as part-time and focus on their contractual obligation to teach a course or small set of courses.

At this stage in the history of community college development, a surge of retirements and changes in leadership has taken place during the last decade. AACC (2011a) states, “many of those now retiring have worked at community colleges since the 1960s or 1970s, a time during which community colleges grew at the rate of almost

one a week” (para. 1). As a result, assessment programs have been susceptible to new leaders interpreting and prioritizing assessment efforts. Banta and Blaich (2011) state that “Banta, Jones, and Black found that 42 percent of the 146 assessment programs they studied were just two years old or less” and “one reason for this is that presidents and chief academic officers. . .generally do not stay long in these roles” (p. 25).

In a NILOA survey of chief academic officers at community colleges, various types of assessment efforts for undergraduate student learning outcomes were rated as to whether they were used at the department level, the institution level, or not at all. Of the 13 assessments, eight came in at 50% or higher for application at the departmental level. For the same list of assessment approaches, respondents declared whether the assessments were “used with valid samples to represent the whole institution” (Nunley et al., 2011, p. 10). Only one assessment was rated by more than 50% of chief academic officers as having an application at the institution level and it was national student surveys, such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). These survey results present one perspective on the lack of assessment efforts underway at community college to address learning which occurs across the institution/general education level.

In their research that scanned websites for information on assessment of student learning, Jankowski and Makela (2010) identified that “baccalaureate institutions were more likely than other Carnegie types to display information related to the assessment of general education” (p. 10). It’s not surprising that four year institutions demonstrated general education assessment efforts more often in a publicly accessible



environment since they have a built in advantage to assess students who are part of coordinated programs of study. These programs have a start (year 1) and end (year 4) with a defined pathway between. This is another indicator of the challenge community colleges face in assessing general education by the lack of displaying results, projects, and efforts around general education assessment. With a much more transient population of students who start and stop out sporadically given life challenges such as jobs, families, and financial strains, community colleges are in a position to conduct institutional assessment with an ever-changing population of students that are in very different places for their programs of study.

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

Three conceptual frameworks are presented for this study in order to guide the researcher in data collection and data analysis. As noted by Merriam (2009), “the framework of your study will draw upon the concepts, terms, definitions, models, and theories from a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation” (p. 67). For this research study the three conceptual frameworks presented are Astin’s Model of Assessment (I-E-O), Dual Purposes of Assessment, and AQIP Criteria and Principles of High Performance Organizations.

#### **Astin’s Model of Assessment (I-E-O)**

Alexander W. Astin wrote of a conceptual model of assessment in his 1991 book, “Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education,” that draws upon the premise that assessment “should be used primarily as an aid to educational decision making by providing information on the

likely impact of alternative courses of action” (p. 233). Astin (1991) begins with the foundation that like good research, good assessment is intended to inform decision making that ultimately improves student learning, educational programs, and the overall institution. He goes on to argue that making a decision to change an educational program or policy using assessment results includes causal reasoning based on having multiple options and choosing the one which is most likely to improve outcomes (choice A is more likely to have a positive impact on the outcome versus choice B).

The input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) conceptual model of assessment that Astin (1991) presents is described as best suited to “(a) yield maximum information on the possible causal connections between various educational practices and educational outcomes and (b) minimize the chances that our causal inferences will be wrong” (p. xii). This model is visually represented in Figure 4.

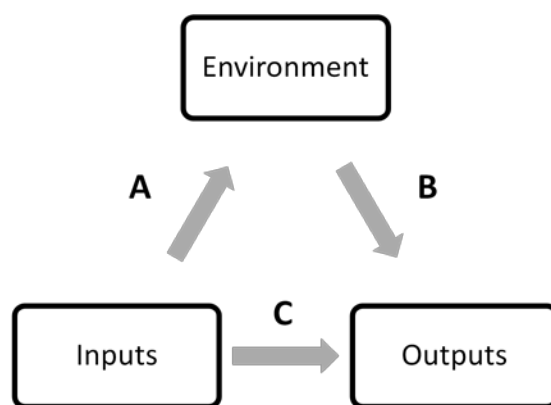


Figure 4. Astin's I-E-O Model of Assessment. Adapted from *Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, by A. W. Astin, 1991, p. 18. Copyright 1991 by American Council on Education and Macmillan Publishing Company, A Division of Macmillan, Inc.

Application of the I-E-O model for assessment efforts is intended to mirror the goal of higher education in general - “to enhance the educational and personal

development of its students" (Astin, 1991, p. 21). Breaking down the model, inputs are those characteristics and "talents" a student possesses at the onset of an educational program or educational experience. Talent development is described by Astin (1991) as the ability of an institution "to develop the talents of our students. . .to the fullest extent possible" and "enhance their intellectual and scholarly development, to make a positive difference in their lives" (p. 6-7). Each student enters the institution with a certain level of talent already developed and higher education organizations have the ability to impact this development further. Depending on the assessment initiative, the input may be defined at the beginning of their higher education career (entry to the institution) or at the beginning of a series of specialized courses (acceptance to a limited enrollment program, such as nursing).

Next in the I-E-O model is environment, which Astin (1991) contends is the one component more likely to be ignored within assessment initiatives. The environment is composed of elements such as student experiences, educational practices, and policies intended to influence the talent development of students. The third component to the model are outputs, or outcomes as Astin (1991) interchanges these two terms, and are related to the "characteristics of the student that the institution either does influence or attempts to influence" (p. 233). An outcome could be whether a student mastered a learning objective of the program or achieved proficiency in a set of technical skills. Astin (1991) summarizes the I-E-O model by declaring "the ultimate purpose. . .is to learn better how to structure educational environments so as to maximize talent development" (p. 233).

At the time of publication in 1991, outcome-only assessment was identified by Astin as the type of assessment methodology with the most momentum and popularity. The goal of an outcome-only assessment is to gauge if a learner has met the defined learning objectives of a program. While still popular today as an assessment approach in higher education, Astin (1991) found two major drawbacks with outcome-only assessment.

First, there is no way of knowing how much has actually been learned as a result of an educational program because there is no input information with which to compare the outcome assessment. Second, in the absence of information on how students performed under different environmental circumstances, there is no way to tell from the assessment data which educational programs and practices are likely to be most effective. (p. 32)

### **Dual Purposes of Assessment**

As a noted expert in student outcomes assessment through research at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems since 1981, Dr. Peter Ewell authored the first occasional paper in 2009 for NILOA on the tensions between the primary purposes of assessment of student learning. Ewell (2009) describes two paradigms for assessment of student learning at higher education institutions – one for improvement and a second for accountability. The premise is that these main purposes for conducting assessment of student learning outcomes have contrasting and at times, conflicting strategies and intentions. He first explains, “accountability requires the entity held accountable to demonstrate, with evidence, conformity with an established standard of process or outcome” (Ewell, 2009, p. 7). On the other end, “improvement...entails an opposite set of incentives...[since] deficiencies in

performance must be faithfully detected and reported so they can be acted upon” (Ewell, 2009, p. 7). These descriptions lead to the alignment of assessment purposes to stakeholders. When assessment is primarily conducted to satisfy an accountability initiative, it tends to originate from and serve an external stakeholder or audience. For assessment efforts intended to serve an improvement goal, the origins and application of results tend to align with an internal audience or stakeholder.

Table 2 organizes characteristics of each paradigm around “two sets of descriptors – the first, ‘Strategic Dimensions,’ addresses purpose and strategy while the second, ‘Application Choices,’ addresses method and implementation” (Ewell, 2009, p. 9). Characteristics of the improvement paradigm focus on variety and flexibility in

Table 2

*Ewell’s Two Paradigms of Assessment*

	<b>Assessment for Improvement Paradigm</b>	<b>Assessment for Accountability Paradigm</b>
<b>Strategic Dimensions</b>		
<b><i>Intent</i></b>	Formative (Improvement)	Summative (Judgement)
<b><i>Stance</i></b>	Internal	External
<b><i>Predominant Ethos</i></b>	Engagement	Compliance
<b>Application Choices</b>		
<b><i>Instrumentation</i></b>	Multiple/Triangulation	Standardized
<b><i>Nature of Evidence</i></b>	Quantitative and Qualitative	Quantitative
<b><i>Reference Points</i></b>	Over Time, Comparative, Established Goal	Comparative or Fixed Standard
<b><i>Communication of Results</i></b>	Multiple Internal Channels and Media	Public Communication
<b><i>Uses of Results</i></b>	Multiple Feedback Loops	Reporting

*Note.* Adapted from "Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the Tension," by P. Ewell, 2009, NILOA Occasional Paper No. 1, p. 8. Copyright 2009 by University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.

how an internally driven assessment effort can be carried out. Alternatively, the accountability paradigm of assessment has a more narrow scope in the application choices for how assessment efforts are conducted.

The dichotomy of these paradigms, improvement and accountability, leave institutions faced with pressure to approach assessment in a balanced manner in order to meet the needs of external stakeholders while preserving the internal priorities and processes for assessment of student learning. Ewell (2009) offers guidance in how an institution can be successful in handling such tension by presenting four principles: “(1) respond visibly to domains of legitimate external concern; (2) show action on the results of assessment; (3) emphasize assessment at the major transition points in a college career; and (4) embed assessment in the regular curriculum” (p. 3). An additional strategy identified by Ewell (2009) that balances the stress of these two paradigms of assessment is institutional accreditation. Ewell (2009) contends,

Giving too much attention to accountability risks losing faculty engagement – effectively suppressing the sustained, critical self-examination that continuous improvement demands. Devoting attention solely on the internal conversations needed for improvement, on the other hand, invites external actors to invent accountability measures that are inappropriate, unhelpful, or misleading. Managing this tension requires staking out a middle ground. One of the promises of using institutional accreditation as the primary vehicle for stimulating assessment and discharging accountability is that it tries to do just this. (p. 20)

In a piece from 1989 which still resonates today, Terenzini poses similar purposes for assessing student learning which are improvement of teaching and learning and “accountability to some organizationally higher authority” (p. 647). Going one step further, Terenzini (1989) associates these purposes with formative and

summative evaluation methods. Formative evaluation, as matched with improvement of teaching and learning, “is intended to guide program modification and improvement” (Terenzini, 1989, p. 647). In contrast, summative evaluation is paired with accountability efforts and “is undertaken to inform some final judgment about worth or value” (Terenzini, 1989, p. 647).

Volkwein (2010a) labels the dual purposes of institutional effectiveness, including assessment of programs and students, as inspirational and pragmatic. Fostering improvement based on internal motivations, the inspirational purpose of assessment relates to efforts developing from within the organization. Conversely, those assessment initiatives impacted most by calls for accountability from outside the organization are deemed pragmatic.

Blaich and Wise (2011) provide an alternative perspective to the duality of engaging in assessment – either for accountability or improvement of student learning. They assert, “the counterargument to this critique, of course, is that without accountability efforts a significant portion of colleges and universities would not serve their students as they should – bringing us back to the politically charged suspicions of the motives of the parties in higher education” (p. 6).

Suskie (2010) offers a critique of the dual purposes concept by first defining assessment for improvement as a way to identify problems (which need improvement) and assessment for accountability as a way to demonstrate compliance, therefore no improvement is needed. Instead Suskie (2010) seeks to focus on what is common to both accountability and improvement purposes – “everyone wants students to get the

best possible education. Everyone wants them to learn what's most important" (para. 7).

As reported by Nunley et al. (2011), results from a NILOA survey of community college chief academic officers indicate accountability to accreditors is the top way results of assessment of student learning outcomes are used. Nowhere in the top five responses were there uses that represented improving student learning, and less than half (48%) of respondents stated learning outcomes results were used for "improving instructional performance" (Nunley et al., 2011, p. 11).

Swing and Coogan (2010) discuss the cost-benefit realities of assessment efforts in the NILOA occasional paper number five titled "Valuing Assessment: Cost-Benefit Considerations." They conclude that,

The assessment focus of accrediting bodies has complicated the cost-benefit calculation. The huge benefit (avoiding a negative consequence can be a benefit) from gaining or renewing accreditation creates an artificially high value for any assessment conducted to meet accountability demands, even if it proves to have little or nothing to do with creating improvement. Resources spent on meeting accountability standards that do not also produce better learning and student success outcomes, however, are clearly missed opportunities and costly. (Swing & Coogan, 2010, p. 12-13)

Provezis (2010) notes, "while the accreditors may be major drivers for assessment, it would be far better for institutions themselves, as part of their cultures, to drive student learning outcomes assessment – to create a space for quality improvement independent of the pressures for accountability" (p. 18).



## AQIP Criteria and Principles of High Performance Organizations

The framework upon which AQIP was developed places an emphasis on “systems and processes both as the basis for quality assurance and as leverage for institutional improvement” (HLC, 2003, p. 6.2-1). As such, nine AQIP Criteria were established to allow institutions to answer questions about their systems and processes that would establish improvement opportunities and identify areas of strength. These nine criteria,

Analyze interrelationships among systems essential to all effective colleges and universities. To advance the core purpose of all higher education, the AQIP Criteria take a systemic view, defining and evaluating the key systems or processes within an organization as they relate to learning, and demanding concrete indicators that measure their effectiveness. (HLC, 2003, p. 6.2-2)

The nine AQIP Criteria are,

1. Helping Students Learn
2. Accomplishing Other Distinctive Objectives
3. Understanding Students’ and Other Stakeholders’ Needs
4. Valuing People
5. Leading and Communicating
6. Supporting Institutional Operations
7. Measuring Effectiveness
8. Planning Continuous Improvement
9. Building Collaborative Relationships (HLC, 2003).

With regard to the topic for this research study, assessment of general education learning outcomes, three of the nine AQIP Criteria examine processes and systems

closely related to assessment of student learning. They are Helping Students Learn (criterion one), Valuing People (criterion four), and Measuring Effectiveness (criterion seven). Under each criterion AQIP has developed focused questions to guide institutions in producing evidence that demonstrates they meet the criteria. Table 3 identifies the assessment related processes and systems connected to the three AQIP Criteria, as well as the questions relevant to assessment of student learning.

In addition to the AQIP Criteria, institutions participating in the AQIP model for accreditation are provided a set of ten principles that represent qualities held by high performance organizations. The principles are (a) Focus, (b) Involvement, (c) Leadership, (d) Learning, (e) People, (f) Collaboration, (g) Agility, (h) Foresight (i) Information, and (j) Integrity (HLC, 2010b). As presented by the Higher Learning Commission (2010b), “these qualities underlie all of the Academic Quality Improvement Program’s Categories, activities, processes, and services, and they represent the values to which AQIP itself aspires organizationally” (p. 1). Five of the Principles showcase characteristics related to assessment of student learning and are shared in Table 4.

The accreditors’ inclusion of assessment related characteristics further emphasizes the relationship between accountability to HLC as an external stakeholder and the need for an institution to focus on assessment of student learning. As AQIP institutions develop, implement, and improve programs to assess general education learning outcomes, the AQIP Criteria and AQIP Principles of High Performance

Table 3

*AQIP Criteria Related to Assessment of Student Learning*

AQIP Criteria	Processes and Systems Examined	Criterion Questions
1. Helping Students Learn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning objectives</li> <li>• Teaching and learning effectiveness</li> <li>• Student assessment</li> <li>• Measures</li> <li>• Analysis of results</li> <li>• Improvement efforts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1C1 – What common student learning objectives do you hold for all students (regardless of their status or program of study), and what pattern of knowledge and skills do you expect them to possess upon completion of their general and specialized studies?</li> <li>• 1P1 – How do you determine your common student learning objectives as well as specific program learning objectives? Who is involved in setting these objectives?</li> <li>• 1P11 – How do you determine the processes for student assessment?</li> <li>• 1P12 – How do you discover how well prepared the students who are completing programs, degrees, and certificates are for further education or employment?</li> <li>• 1P13 – What measures of student performance do you collect and analyze regularly?</li> <li>• 1R1 – What are your results for common student learning objectives as well as specific learning objectives?</li> <li>• 1I1 – How do you improve your current processes and systems for helping students learn and develop?</li> </ul>
4. Valuing People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Measures</li> <li>• Analysis of results</li> <li>• Improvement efforts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4C1 – In what distinctive ways do you organize your work environment, work activities, and job classifications to strengthen your focus on student learning and development?</li> <li>• 4P7 – How do you design your recognition, reward, and compensation systems to align with your objectives in Criterion One, Helping Students Learn...?</li> </ul>
7. Measuring Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collection, storage, management, and use of information and data at the institutional and department/unit levels</li> <li>• Analysis of information and data</li> <li>• Measures</li> <li>• Analysis of results</li> <li>• Improvement efforts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7P1 – How do you select, manage, and use information and data (including current performance information) to support student learning (Criterion One)...?</li> <li>• 7I2 – ...How do you communicate your current results and improvement priorities to students, faculty, staff, administration, and appropriate stakeholders?</li> </ul>

*Note.* Criterion questions formatted as criterion number, code for category, and question number. Codes for categories: C = context for analysis, P = processes, R = results, I = improvement. Adapted from “The Handbook of Accreditation,” by the Higher Learning Commission, 2003, pp. 6.4-1 – 6.4-10. Copyright 2003 by the Higher Learning Commission.

Organizations provide another framework to guide decisions about structures and processes for assessment of student learning.

Table 4

*AQIP Principles of High Performance Organizations and their Relationship to Assessment of Student Learning*

AQIP Principle	Characteristics Demonstrating Relationship to Assessment
Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involves broad-based faculty, staff, and administrators to encourage better decisions</li> <li>• Draws on the expertise and practical experience of those people closest to a situation</li> <li>• Helps initiate and implement improvements that better meet students' and other stakeholders' needs</li> <li>• Requires ongoing development of people's skills in making fact-based decisions</li> </ul>
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeks more effective ways to enhance student achievement through careful design and evaluation of programs, courses, and learning environments</li> <li>• Employs systems that can always improve through measurement, assessment of results, and feedback</li> <li>• Designs practical means for gauging its students' and its own progress toward clearly identified objectives</li> </ul>
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nourishes a sense of responsibility and ownership in which all individuals understand how their role contributes to the measurable success of the institution</li> <li>• Shares how individuals can become engaged as full participants in improvement processes</li> </ul>
Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supports the ability to assess current capacities and measure performance realistically</li> <li>• Develops and refines systems for gathering and assessing valuable feedback and data</li> <li>• Seeks better methods for obtaining the most useful information on which to base decisions and improvements</li> </ul>
Integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizes that education serves society</li> <li>• Examines its practices to make certain its effects and results actively contribute to the common good</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from "Principles for High Performance Organizations," by the Higher Learning Commission, 2010, pp. 1-2. Copyright 2010 by the Higher Learning Commission.

## Chapter Summary

Pressures exist for higher education institutions to be diligent in assessing student learning to demonstrate how, and if, they are meeting their academic missions. These expectations can be seen through criteria and reports produced by professional

associations such as the American Association for Community Colleges and the Association for American Colleges and Universities, as well as regional accreditors such as the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (HLC). Accreditation has evolved in the HLC region to allow institutions to focus on continuous quality improvement methods to maintain accreditation status. Within the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) accreditation option, student learning and assessment are core components.

Accreditation, assessment, and continuous improvement are linked in numerous ways. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) sets forth an agenda that demands evidence of student learning play a role in regional accreditors' assignment of accreditation status. In addition, CHEA stresses that results of student learning achievements be shared with external stakeholders, both formal (accreditors) and informal (general public), to be transparent about how students are accomplishing learning outcomes in the institution and what steps are being taken to improve based on the assessment results. Regional accreditors also link assessment and continuous improvement efforts, as seen through the Higher Learning Commission's Academy for Assessment of Student Learning.

General education learning outcomes exist at the institution level within a higher education organization and include those abilities or skills all students are expected to have accomplished when exiting the institution. Both professional associations and regional accreditors outline expectations that general education learning outcomes be defined, shared internally and externally, and assessed.

The assessment of student learning outcomes has emerged as a scholarly endeavor and much literature exists to share recommended strategies for accomplishing assessment initiatives. General principles across researchers conclude that student learning outcomes assessment should (a) begin with clearly defined goals or objectives for learning, (b) collect direct and indirect evidence for how students are meeting those goals, (c) conduct an analysis of the assessment results, (d) identify improvement plans, (e) implement actions, and (f) measure improvement in student learning.

General education learning outcomes assessment integrates unique characteristics above and beyond those of student learning outcomes assessment. These characteristics include the need for cross-disciplinary dialogues and at times, acknowledging competing interests with course and program level learning outcomes. At the institution level, general education learning outcomes apply to all students and are relevant across specialized programs. Also, general education learning outcomes are deemed critical to employers in order for graduates to enter the workplace prepared and ready to succeed. Structures to support general education learning outcomes assessment include identifying where in the broad curriculum these outcomes exist and creating committees with representation from across the institution to inform and maintain assessment initiatives. Processes that exist to carry out general education learning outcomes assessment were identified in the literature as recognizing when and where to conduct the assessment, choosing appropriate instruments to measure learning, analyzing the results, and having broad participation in the analysis and improvement efforts.

Several cautions related to general education learning outcomes assessment were presented in the literature. These include benchmarking outside the institution, determining if liberal education goals are truly assessable, and finding ways to engage faculty from across all disciplines. Community colleges face challenges specific to their sector of higher education when embarking on general education learning outcomes assessment. Given the priority of open access, community colleges enroll a diverse student body with characteristics such as entering the institution with very staggered learning levels and attending in sporadic patterns. Other challenges include dealing with the multiple missions of the community college; engaging adjunct faculty who are more transient, yet represent a significant portion of the teaching workforce; and establishing systematic ways of reporting the results internally and externally.

Three conceptual frameworks identified for this research study are Astin's Model of Assessment (I-E-O), Dual Purposes of Assessment, and AQIP Criteria and Principles of High Performance Organizations. Astin's model focuses on inputs, environment, and outputs of assessment. Taken together, this model of assessment is intended to acquire evidence to inform how an institution can best structure learning environments so student talents are maximized. The dual purposes of assessment, for improvement and for accountability, can be at odds with one another if not acknowledged and leveraged in a strategic manner. Finally, the AQIP Criteria and Principles of High Performance Organizations identify assessment of student learning as a critical focus for organizations in how they structure systems and processes. These guidelines

present a third framework to reference when implementing and improving assessment programs for general education learning outcomes.

Chapter three, methodology and procedures, will present the parameters for the research design of this study. Data collection and analysis procedures are described and include site and participant selection criteria, coding and triangulation techniques, and tests of quality. Considerations for limitations and delimitations are disclosed, as well as standards to ensure human subject participants are treated ethically.



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

Accountability and improvement of student learning are key factors for consideration by community colleges as external stakeholders emphasize the importance of documenting, implementing, and sharing results of assessment efforts. Regional accreditors play a significant role in how assessment efforts are accounted for and in the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), which uses a continuous improvement model to guide accreditation in the North Central region, coming full circle in assessment efforts is a way institutions demonstrate a healthy organization. In addition, finding ways to improve student learning has become a common topic in higher education discourse and allows internal stakeholders to participate and influence the accountability and assessment discussion. Creating general education learning outcomes assessment efforts and addressing the diverse student body in community colleges contribute to the challenges in improving student learning at the institution level.

#### **Purpose and Guiding Questions**

The purpose of this study is to identify structures and processes which support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives at select AQIP institutions. Successful assessment practices will contribute to a set of strategies intended to guide general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives that lead to improved student learning across the institution.

In an effort to address the purpose of this study, five guiding questions were posed. These questions were intended to direct the researcher in effective data collection and analysis methods so as to align with the goal of identifying structures and processes which support general education learning outcomes assessment. The five guiding questions are:

1. What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?
2. What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?
3. How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?
4. What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?
5. What evidence exists documenting that the actions taken have resulted in improved student learning?

### **Research Design**

The challenges associated with general education learning outcomes assessment are embedded in institutional structures and processes that either support or hinder assessment efforts. To study those structures and processes, a research design was needed to support a comprehensive collection of data, careful analysis, and ensuing results and recommendations. In this section, the qualitative paradigm is defined and

related to the study at hand. Next, case study methodology will be described and finally, multiple-case study design is outlined.

### **Qualitative Paradigm**

A qualitative approach was undertaken in this study in order to investigate multiple sources of information in naturalistic settings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Merriam, 2009). Following a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to explore complex and layered situations that otherwise do not lend themselves to objective criteria and controlled environments most often addressed in quantitative research efforts (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

The major characteristics of qualitative research, as identified by Merriam (2009), provided support for this research project. These characteristics include a focus on meaning and understanding; establishing the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection; following an inductive process of discovery and analysis; and including rich description as demonstrated through quotations, excerpts, and contextual accounts. Given the purpose of the study to determine *how* an institution supports general education assessment and *why* this is leading to using the results to improve student learning, the features of qualitative research best matched the research purpose and guiding questions which demonstrated a need for the researcher to draw upon numerous sources of information to interpret meaning.

### **Case Study Methodology**

The qualitative research paradigm allows for critical inquiry and analysis within an interpretive case study methodology. Yin (2009) defines a case study as “an

empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). Community colleges are challenged to reach a stage in general education learning outcomes assessment where improvement of student learning is clearly documented. In this research project a case study methodology allowed for investigation within the context of AQIP community colleges by focusing on the phenomenon of general education learning outcomes assessment.

Because this study intended to identify structures and processes related to general education learning outcomes assessment, an interpretive case study design within a qualitative paradigm allowed the researcher to become immersed in the complexity of those structures, systems, and processes at each institution. Creswell (2007) supports this approach by stating a major intention of qualitative research is to “understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue” (p. 40).

This study warranted an approach which allowed for extensive data collection to capture the varied documents, perspectives, and evidence of assessment efforts. A case study methodology allowed the participating community colleges to be studied “over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). Having varied sources of information is also noted by Yin (2009) as “the case study’s unique strength. . .to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations” (p. 11).

Another characteristic of the case study methodology that compliments the challenging nature of general education learning outcomes assessment for community colleges is the ability for the research to focus on a case that has practical implications for the field. As Merriam (2009) observes, “this specificity of focus makes [case study] an especially good design for practical problems – for questions, situations, or puzzling occurrences arising from everyday practice” (p. 43).

### **Multiple-Case Study Design**

Including three sites for this study allowed for the replication of the research design at each site, collecting case specific evidence for further analysis across all locations. An advantage noted by Johnson and Christensen (2008) of studying multiple sites is a greater likelihood to generalize results versus the single case design. By researching multiple community college general education learning outcomes assessment programs, there is an increased ability to see themes across institutions and provide opportunities for readers to draw upon elements most relevant to their situation.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The practice of collecting information during research provides evidence for the researcher to analyze and draw conclusions from in order to address the problem and purpose identified for the study. Data collection within a qualitative paradigm is reliant on the researcher as an instrument in identifying and accessing numerous pieces of information (Creswell, 2007; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). It is

the researcher that makes a connection between the problem and purpose of the study and determines the parameters for what type of data will be supportive to the study.

Three types of qualitative data collection techniques are stressed by Merriam (2009) and include interviews, observations, and document review. Of these methods, interviews and document review are appropriate to the proposed study in order to obtain rich, layered descriptions regarding general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives.

Next, site and participant selection will be reviewed. The interview protocol will be described, followed by an explanation of document review techniques. A review by experts and process pilot details will conclude the data collection strategies.

### **Site Selection**

Prior to conducting interviews and collecting institution specific evidence, the selection of sites and participants occurred according to criteria which meet the needs of the problem being studied. For qualitative case study research, this purposeful sampling approach first identifies the “case” to be studied, or the site, and from within that site the participants are then identified (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009).

Three community colleges were selected based on a purposeful sampling approach to include sites and participants that are in synch with the purpose of the study (Merriam, 2009). The four criteria for site selection were (1) participating in the AQIP alternative accreditation process; (2) participating in the HLC Academy for Assessment of Student Learning; (3) residing in the Federal Region V area which is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2010) as a six state region including

Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin; and, (4) having one or more active general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives in place that have produced results intended for improvement of student learning. These criteria limited the site selection for the proposed study and were informed by profile information from HLC. The research design included an option that if more than three sites were eligible for participation after applying all four criteria, the first three to respond positively to the request for participation would have been selected as interview sites.

The first site selection criterion established the selected community college as an active member of the AQIP alternative accreditation program. AQIP institutions have committed to working toward the achievement of the principles of high performing organizations and establishing a continuous improvement culture across the institution. Limiting the research to AQIP institutions allowed for a continuous improvement framework to analyze the evidence and data during the data analysis phase.

Site selection criterion two limited the site selection further by focusing on community colleges which have participated in the HLC Assessment Academy. As identified by HLC (n.d.), "the Academy experience is intended to develop institutional culture and increase institutional commitment to assessing and improving student learning" (para. 1). Institutions who have participated in the Academy are intently focused on an assessment project and function within a structured environment led by HLC. The work of Academy participants is guided by eight intended outcomes which include:

- Further establish institutional commitment to teaching, to student learning, and to assessing, confirming, and improving student learning
- Achieve intended results defined by student learning projects and action portfolio
- Accelerate efforts to assess, confirm, and improve student learning
- Improve institutional capacity to assess, confirm, and improve student learning
- Develop institutional leaders and mentors
- Test and document effective practices in assessing, confirming and improving student learning
- Interact with diverse institutions, building a collaborative network for ongoing comparison of efforts and results
- Establish and build a sustained, ongoing commitment around student learning. (HLC, n.d., Academy Outcomes section, para. 1)

As summarized in Table 5, three of the intended outcomes for Academy participants are related most closely to the purpose of the planned study. This relationship between Academy outcomes and the planned study supported the inclusion of Academy participation as a selection criterion.

Table 5

*Academy Outcomes Most Closely Related to Research Purpose Statement Components*

Academy Outcomes	Purpose Statement Component
Accelerate efforts to assess, confirm, and improve student learning	Identify implementation strategies shown as leading to improved student learning
Improve institutional capacity to assess, confirm, and improve student learning	Identify organizational structures and processes related to general education learning outcomes assessment
Test and document effective practices in assessing, confirming and improving student learning	Establish best practices for assessment of student learning

Residing within Federal Region V under the U.S. Department of Education was the third criterion in determining the sites selected for the study. To allow for research



access within the travel abilities of the researcher, Federal Region V was chosen based on regional proximity to the home state of the researcher. The states which belong to Federal Region V include Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin (US Department of Education, 2010).

The final point in selecting sites for this case study research deals with an institution having an active general education learning outcomes assessment initiative in place that has produced results used for improvement. This fourth criterion was met through a self-identification process by the institutions. The researcher made telephone and email contact with the Chief Academic Officer at each eligible institution to determine whether the institution met this criterion.

Upon application of the four site selection criteria, three participant types (the Chief Academic Officer, a Lead Faculty Member, and a Lead Administrator) from each of the resulting institutions were contacted by telephone and email to invite them to participate in the research study. Positive respondents were sent a consent form, as well as a copy of the National Louis University Institutional Research Review Board (IRRB) approval for the research project, to secure their formal participation.

### **Participant Selection**

Consistent for each of the three community colleges selected, three participant types were identified for a semi-structured interview (n = 10). First, the Chief Academic Officer (CAO), who has ultimate responsibility for student learning at the community college, served as a rich resource for how senior administration plays a role in assessment of student learning initiatives. The second participant type was a lead

administrator who participates in or is responsible for general education learning outcomes assessment. Finally, the third participant type was lead faculty who are central to general education learning outcomes assessment efforts. Taken together, the perspectives and insights of these three participant types helped to create a multi-dimensional view of the structures and processes in place at each community college.

### **Interview Protocol**

Interviews provided an opportunity to collect data directly from participants and obtain personal perspectives related to the issue being studied. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Chief Academic Officer, a lead administrator and lead faculty at three community colleges. The following basic steps were employed to prepare for and conduct the interviews (Creswell, 2007).

- Determine the type of interview that will ultimately produce the most relevant information for the study.
- Match appropriate recording instruments to the setting in which the interview will be conducted.
- Create an interview protocol, or guide, to provide consistency in what is asked of participants.
- Pilot test the interview instrument.
- Identify an interview location that is distraction-free.
- Obtain consent from the interviewee.

A semi-structured interview format was an appropriate fit for the study. This format followed “standard questions with one or more individually tailored questions

to get clarification or probe a person's reasoning" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 188). Flexibility is built into this approach which allows the researcher, acting as the instrument, to adjust during an interview and follow-up to an answer or explanation with additional probing questions (Merriam, 2009).

Interview questions employed in this study were derived from the study's guiding questions (see Appendix A). All interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded for later transcription, and took place at an agreed upon location at the participant's home institution. A National Louis University IRRB approved informed consent form (see Appendix B) was completed by each participant prior to engaging in the interviews.

Johnson and Christensen (2008) define qualitative observation as "observing all relevant phenomena and taking extensive field notes without specifying in advance exactly what is to be observed" (p. 212). In addition to recording the interview responses for later transcription, the researcher took field notes to capture reflective comments on the setting and tone of the interview. Combining the transcripts with field notes supported a comprehensive record of the interview experiences.

### **Document Review**

In addition to semi-structured interviews, numerous types of assessment related documents were reviewed to build the volume of data available for analysis. As described by Merriam (2009),

One of the greatest advantages in using documentary material is its stability. Unlike interviewing and observation, the presence of the investigator does not alter what is being studied. Documentary data are "objective" sources of data

compared to other forms. Such data have also been called “unobtrusive.” (p. 155)

Subsequently, the validity and reliability of the proposed study is strengthened through the opportunity to triangulate information from documents with interview results and the literature reviewed.

The types of documents reviewed from each community college included the AQIP Systems Portfolio; Assessment Academy reports; organizational charts relative to assessment responsibilities; assessment committee charters; annual assessment reports; college catalog; institutional strategic plan; college website; and, any other documents which address structures and processes related to general education learning outcomes assessment.

### **Expert Review**

As noted by Creswell (2007), one of the fundamental steps in conducting interviews is to invite expert review of the tool and offer feedback prior to the use of the tool(s) in the proposed research. Engaging in an expert review provided the opportunity to make changes necessary to elicit the most targeted responses which address the research questions. The expert review for this study was conducted with three individuals - a Dean and an institutional researcher from the researcher’s home institution and a member of a local professional assessment group who is a Director of Academic Assessment. The dean brought extensive experience in assessment of student learning and general education learning outcomes which includes leading internal assessment workshops for faculty on a consistent basis, serving as a long-standing

member of the institution's Assessment and Program Evaluation Committee, and completing their own dissertation on assessment of student learning. The institutional researcher held over 20 years experience in community colleges with an emphasis on continuous improvement, benchmarking, and accountability reporting. As a member of a local professional assessment group, the Director of Assessment was employed by a four year institution, but previously held an assessment position at a community college and had experience with qualitative research. Neither the expert reviewers nor their institutions were eligible to participate in the formal study.

Expert reviewers provided feedback that emphasized needing a greater focus on how the results from assessment efforts were being used. In addition, the reviewers requested that inquiry into the evidence that supported student learning was positively impacted be more fully represented in the interview questions. An overview of the recommended changes to the interview questions following the expert review process have been compiled (see Appendix C).

### **Process Pilot**

Prior to conducting the first interview, a pilot test was conducted with two individuals who have expertise in general education learning outcomes assessment in the community college, but who would not otherwise participate in the formal study. This provided a second opportunity to refine the interview questions to increase the relevancy of responses to the purpose of the study.

Pilot interviews took place at an agreed upon location, were recorded to allow the researcher to pilot test technology and set up strategies, and included time for the

pilot participants to offer feedback on the instrument and process. See Appendix C for a review of the recommended changes to the interview questions following the pilot interview process.

The first pilot interview was conducted with a Chief Academic Officer at a local community college not eligible as a participating institution in this study. A second pilot interview took place with the lead faculty for the general education assessment efforts at the same institution. This faculty member is full time, tenured, and receives release time from the classroom to lead the general education assessment program in conjunction with the Chief Academic Officer. Both of these positions are representative of the participant categories selected for the semi-structured interviews included in this study.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Simply stated by Merriam (2009), “data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data” (p. 175). This stage of the research process is the culmination of how the guiding questions will be addressed using the evidence collected. Three strategies are suggested by Creswell (2007) to accomplish the analysis phase.

1. Preparing and organizing the data;
2. coding the data, resulting in themes; and,
3. representing the data through narrative forms, tables, and figures.

Analysis occurred first by following a within-case analysis to capture the nuances of each site. This was followed by a cross-case analysis to draw out similarities and differences across each case studied (Merriam, 2009).

## **Coding Procedures**

In order to accomplish coding of data, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks identified in the literature review were used to develop categories. This practice of establishing categories taken from the framework(s) and relevant research and literature prior to the data analysis phase is known as the development of “*a priori* codes” or “pre-existing codes” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Supporting this position, Yin (2009) presents four strategies for analyzing data in a case study design. The first strategy presented, to adhere to the theoretical propositions that serve as the foundation of the study, parallels the development of *a priori* themes.

For this study, three conceptual frameworks were drawn upon to code the data obtained through interviews and document review. Contributing to the development of *a priori* themes was Astin’s I-E-O model of assessment (inputs – environment – outputs), dual purposes of assessment (for accountability and for improvement), and the AQIP Criteria and Principles of High Performance Organizations.

Following the inductive nature of qualitative research, a balance was struck with the development of what Johnson and Christensen (2008) term “inductive codes,” or those codes which emerge directly from the review of data. Applying both types of coding techniques built a comprehensive structure for data analysis that provided flexibility to build upon *a priori* codes during the analysis phase.

## **Theme Identification Techniques**

As themes are assigned to the data, Merriam (2009) stresses following certain criteria to ensure the categories are developed in a sound manner. These criteria

include being responsive to the purpose of the research, being exhaustive, being mutually exclusive, being sensitive to what exists within the data, and being conceptually congruent. To assist the researcher in coding and establishing themes, Microsoft Excel was utilized. A strength of employing a computer program at this stage is noted by Creswell (2007) as “build[ing] levels of analysis and see[ing] the relationship between the raw data and the broader themes” (p. 169).

### **Triangulation Process**

The process of triangulation, reviewing multiple sources of evidence against one another for confirmation or disassociation of themes, is a major strength of the case study methodology (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). Three major pieces of data were reviewed during the triangulation phase of the proposed study. They were the interview transcripts and field notes, documents, and the review of literature and existing research. As Yin (2009) stresses, “the use of multiple sources of evidence in case studies allows an investigator to address a broader range of. . .issues” through “the development of *converging lines of inquiry*” (p. 115). Triangulation allowed the researcher to determine which general education assessment processes and structures are common to the institutions and supported by existing research, thus contributing to a stronger set of best practices.

### **Tests of Quality**

Important steps were taken to apply strategies for ensuring a quality study was conducted. Yin (2009) encourages researchers to employ quality “tests” in each stage of the research project – from design to analysis. During the research design phase, Yin



recommends a test of external validity using certain tactics. Next, construct validity can be applied during the data collection and composition phases. These types of validity are explained below, followed by a section on reliability. Next, the researcher as an instrument is explored and finally, ethical considerations will be described.

**External Validity.** External validity looks to “whether a study’s findings are generalizable beyond the immediate case study” (Yin, 2009, p. 43). As described by Yin (2009), case studies have been incorrectly held to a standard that survey research is held to and instead should be looked to for “analytic generalizations” to demonstrate external validity. This concept means the results obtained from the case study research can be generalized to broader situations. Merriam (2009) supports this concept by stating, “every study, every case, every situation is theoretically an example of something else. The general lies in the particular; that is, what we learn in a particular situation we can transfer or generalize to similar situations subsequently encountered” (p. 225).

Another approach to external validity for qualitative case study research is a focus on the reader taking the results and applying the relevant components to their own situation. The description by Merriam (2009) states, “reader or user generalizability involves leaving the extent to which a study’s findings apply to other situations up to the people in those situations” (p. 226).

Common tests to demonstrate external validity include building replication logic into the research design when delivered at multiple sites, as in this study, and using rich, layered descriptions to represent the participant perspectives and setting details

(Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2009). Both of these tests were satisfied in this study by replicating the design framework at multiple sites and including detailed descriptions and quotes from participant interviews and document review within the findings and conclusions.

**Construct Validity.** A second type of validity in qualitative case study research addresses a criticism that “a case study investigator fails to develop a sufficiently operational set of measures and that ‘subjective’ judgements are used to collect data” (Yin, 2009, p. 41). Through several methods, Yin contests that this criticism can be managed. The three strategies recommended by Yin (2009) include to,

- “use multiple sources of evidence,
- establish chain of evidence, [and]
- have key informants review [the] draft case study report” (p. 41).

The technique of using multiple sources of evidence was met through interviews with participants at each site, document reviews of evidence related to the structures and processes for general education assessment, and contemporary literature and theory connected to the topic of general education assessment. A chain of evidence was established by disclosing the specific details of how information and data were collected based on the guiding questions for research, what data was ultimately collected, and how the results relate to the findings and conclusions for the study. Finally, participants had an opportunity to engage in member checking to allow for a review of their interview responses and suggest corrections to misrepresented or misinterpreted comments.

**Reliability.** Qualitative research emphasizes experiences and phenomenon unlikely to be studied in controlled, static environments. The natural settings in which case study research takes place continue to fluctuate over time; therefore, the case study is bound to a particular moment and perspective. Reliability seeks to replicate results in a consistent manner, yet this is not applicable in the strictest form for case study research. Instead, reliability can be approached as “*whether the results are consistent with the data collected*” (Merriam, 2009, p. 221).

Table 6

*Strategies to Ensure Reliability*

Merriam (2009)	Yin (2009)
Triangulation of multiple sources of data	Triangulation of multiple sources of data
Peer examination	Key informants review draft report
Consider the investigator’s position	Avoid bias
Create an audit trail	Create chain of evidence

Merriam (2009) and Yin (2009) suggest certain tactics for a researcher to follow in order to be as reliable as possible within the context of a qualitative study. This study employed their four main strategies to help ensure reliability as presented in Table 6. First, multiple sources of evidence related to the structures and processes supporting general education assessment were referenced against the others to demonstrate triangulation. Second, member checking occurred to allow interview participants to review the transcripts and suggest revisions or corrections. Third, the nuances of the researcher serving as the main instrument are addressed in the subsequent section of

this report titled "Subjectivity: The Researcher as Instrument." Fourth, an audit trail is demonstrated through transparent practices of disclosing the steps taken to collect and analyze all data.

### **Subjectivity: The Researcher as Instrument**

Qualitative research is susceptible to criticism since the researcher is seen as the primary instrument for data collection. Bias and assumptions need to be clearly acknowledged and monitored throughout the study to avoid conflicts between the interpretation of the evidence and the background and beliefs of the researcher. However, the advantage of the researcher as the primary instrument is a more flexible and adaptive style of research that can be adjusted to fit the needs of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). Johnson & Christensen (2008) state clearly that "the researcher is said to be the data-collection instrument because it is the researcher who must decide what is important and what data are to be recorded" (p. 212).

The researcher for the proposed study has served as an AQIP team leader for three AQIP projects over the last four years and participated on an additional two AQIP teams as a team member. Participation as a team member included a three year project on establishing and assessing general education learning outcomes. Additionally, the researcher is a community college administrator with the responsibility of supporting the general education learning outcomes assessment efforts and academic program level assessment efforts for the entire institution. This background information is shared to ensure full disclosure of past experiences which were monitored throughout the study to avoid bias.

### **Ethical Considerations: Protection of Human Subjects**

Interviews were conducted with participants who are considered human subjects. To ensure no harm was done to the participants, several steps were taken to abide by standard ethics protocol. Leedy and Ormrod (2010) describe four basic categories of ethical considerations: “protection from harm, informed consent, right to privacy, and honesty with professional colleagues” (p.101).

Study participants were not exposed to physical harm given the structure of a verbal, face to face interview. Consent to participate was voluntary and captured by each participant through signing an informed consent form. See Appendix B for a sample of the informed consent form. All interview questions were sent in advance via email to the participants for review prior to the interview. Participants also had the opportunity to review their interview responses through member checking of the transcripts. To ensure confidentiality, site and participant names were kept private by assigning pseudonyms throughout the entire report.

An important step in the research process was obtaining National Louis University IRRB approval to conduct research in the field. Application was made to the IRRB by sharing the purpose, site and participant details, and how consent would be obtained from each participant. A copy of the IRRB approval was provided to participants when they were invited to be interviewed.

### **Chapter Summary**

Community colleges are under pressure to be accountable to stakeholders to demonstrate student learning is occurring. Across the institution, learning manifests

through general education learning outcomes which are intended to give all degree seeking students a foundation of learning. By assessing general education learning outcomes, community colleges can demonstrate at what level students are performing and create evidence-based strategies that will improve learning. To do so, thorough assessment efforts are necessary to identify the results of student learning.

To address the purpose of the proposed study, a qualitative paradigm was employed and a multiple-case study design followed to capture varied sources of data and rich, thorough descriptions of the structures and processes in place to assess general education learning outcomes at the selected community colleges. Sites were selected according to four criteria which were maintaining accreditation through AQIP, participating in the HLC Assessment Academy, residing in Federal Region V, and using results of general education assessment efforts to improve student learning. At each community college selected and confirmed for participation, three participant types were interviewed (Chief Academic Officer, Lead Administrator, Lead Faculty).

Five guiding questions directed the collection of data that included semi-structured interviews with each participant (see Appendix C) and document reviews. After an expert review and process pilot of the questions, the participant interviews were conducted face to face, recorded and transcribed, and checked by the participants to ensure their comments were accurately reflected. Coding of the resulting data followed *a priori* themes identified through the review of literature and further coding occurred through inductive methods that emerged during the analysis phase. Themes were matched to the data and captured in Microsoft Excel. Taken together, the multiple

sources of data were triangulated to cross-check results across the interview data, documents, and literature reviewed.

Three tests of quality addressed by the research design were external validity, construct validity, and reliability. Addressing the implications of the researcher as the primary instrument and committing to the ethical treatment of participants were also important steps toward being transparent about the research design.

The findings of this research study are offered in chapter four and result from semi-structured interviews and a review of documents. The resulting discussion and recommendations for future research are presented in chapter five and will contribute to the contemporary environment of community colleges and their commitments to student learning.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

According to Merriam (2009), “findings are the outcome of the inquiry, what you, the investigator learned or came to understand about the phenomenon” (p. 247). This chapter will present the findings which resulted from the collection of data at three community colleges and a total of ten participants. After revisiting the purpose statement and guiding questions for the study, the characteristics of the institutions and participants will be shared. Findings are then presented by four major frameworks – guiding question, participant type, a priori theme, and emergent theme. The chapter concludes with a summary of each major framework.

#### **Purpose and Guiding Questions**

The purpose of this study was to identify structures and processes which support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives at select Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) institutions. To guide the data collection and analysis for this research effort, five questions were created.

1. What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?
2. What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?
3. How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?



4. What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?
5. What evidence exists documenting that the actions taken have resulted in improved student learning?

### **Site and Participant Characteristics**

To conduct the qualitative case study for this research topic, purposeful sampling occurred to select sites and participants. Site selection was based on four criteria that included (1) participating in the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) alternative accreditation process; (2) participating in the Higher Learning Commission's Academy for Assessment of Student Learning; (3) residing in the Federal Region V area which is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2010) as a six state region including Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin; and, (4) having one or more active general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives in place that have produced results used for improvement of student learning.

The first criterion for selection, maintaining accreditation through the alternative AQIP option available from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (HLC), demonstrates a connection to continuous improvement principles. AQIP institutions commit to a cycle of action projects that demonstrate both meeting the criteria for accreditation and maintaining continuous improvement across the entire institution. A hallmark of continuous improvement processes is the repetition of efforts to measure, analyze, and improve. This series of steps demonstrates the institution's recognition that there will always be ways to

improve. These same characteristics exist in an assessment cycle – measuring achievement of student learning, analyzing the results, and finding ways to improve so student learning is positively impacted. Given the similarity in processes between continuous improvement and assessment, choosing sites committed to AQIP was an indication they could be applying those same characteristics to assessment efforts.

Criterion two for site selection, being a member of HLC's Academy for Assessment of Student Learning (commonly referred to as the Assessment Academy), was an indicator the institution was investing multiple types of resources toward assessment of student learning. These resources include financial contributions, human resources, and time. If accepted into the academy there is a member fee required, hence a financial obligation. A team with multiple individuals is required to participate in the academy both onsite at HLC during trainings and at the home institution to run the assessment project. Lastly, a four year commitment is the model employed in the academy, with renewals available after the first wave of participation. Taken together, these elements signify assessment as a priority for the institution.

The third criterion, being located in Federal Region V, served as a limiting factor to ensure travel to the sites was within the ability of the researcher. By limiting travel distance, more than one site was able to be invited into the study thereby enhancing the ability to identify themes across institutions and provide readers the opportunity to draw upon those elements most relevant to their own situations.

Having a minimum of one general education learning outcomes assessment project in place that has netted results was the final criterion to qualify a site for an

invitation to participate. Because participation in the Assessment Academy was not contingent on the assessment focus being at the institution level, this criterion was necessary to ensure participating sites could contribute data to support the purpose and guiding questions for this study which centers on general education learning outcomes assessment.

After applying the site selection criteria and obtaining commitments, a total of three institutions participated in the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to the institutions and participants to maintain confidentiality. Table 7 identifies the pseudonym, Carnegie Classification, and size of the student population for each participating college.

Table 7

*Carnegie Classification and Size for Participating Colleges*

College Pseudonym	Carnegie Classification	Student Population
Prairie Community College (PCC)	Associate's, Public, Rural-Serving, Large	5,266
Rivers Community College (RCC)	Associate's, Public, Rural-Serving, Large	11,354
Stateline Community College (SCC)	Associate's, Public, Rural-Serving, Medium	3,348

At each institution, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a minimum of three participants. The three participant types sought from each institution included the Chief Academic Officer (CAO), an administrator with specific responsibilities for general education learning outcomes assessment (Lead Administrator), and faculty who assumed responsibility for assessment above and beyond their regularly assigned

teaching load (Lead Faculty). As shown in Table 8, Prairie Community College (PCC) included two faculty who participated in the same semi-structured interview.

Table 8

*Participant Type by College*

College	Participant
Prairie Community College (PCC)	Chief Academic Officer PCC
Prairie Community College (PCC)	Lead Administrator PCC
Prairie Community College (PCC)	Lead Faculty PCC-1
Prairie Community College (PCC)	Lead Faculty PCC-2
Rivers Community College (RCC)	Chief Academic Officer RCC
Rivers Community College (RCC)	Lead Administrator RCC
Rivers Community College (RCC)	Lead Faculty RCC
Stateline Community College (SCC)	Chief Academic Officer SCC
Stateline Community College (SCC)	Lead Administrator SCC
Stateline Community College (SCC)	Lead Faculty SCC

Each position is situated within the organization at a different hierarchy level and therefore has a unique vantage point from which to view assessment structures and processes. The CAO of an institution is placed in the executive level leadership role for instruction, curriculum, learning, and faculty development. Given that assessment of student learning has a connection to all of these elements, the CAO's input was critical to understand if and how assessment was supported by executive level leadership, what allowed assessment to be prioritized above and below other efforts, and if resource allocation was occurring at the institution level.

In a traditional academic framework, between the CAO and faculty there exist administrative positions to handle operational details, programmatic decisions, and leadership of the academic divisions or units. A lead administrator assigned to assessment of general education learning outcomes was chosen to represent the translation between executive level goals for student learning and the realities of integrating the work of assessment into academic units and faculty structures.

Finally, faculty ownership of assessment is a recommended approach found in the literature. One example that stresses the importance of faculty led assessment is seen in the HLC Statement on Assessment of Student Learning (2003) in which they emphasize, “faculty members, with meaningful input from students and strong support from the administration and governing board, should have the fundamental role in developing and sustaining systematic assessment of student learning” (p. 3.4-2). Given the intimate role faculty play in the teaching and learning cycle, the classroom, and the interpretation of assessment results, a faculty with leadership responsibilities for assessment of general education learning outcomes from each institution was invited to participate in this research study.

### **Findings by Guiding Question**

Within this section each of the five guiding questions are restated, followed by a breakdown of the findings by institution. Guiding question one presents data for Prairie Community College (PCC), then Rivers Community College (RCC), and finally Stateline Community College (SCC). Guiding questions two, three, four, and five follow this same pattern. Major assessment and accreditation documents were

requested from each institution to contribute toward multiple methods of data collection and allow for triangulation with interview responses and observations by the researcher. As acknowledged by Merriam (2009), triangulation is “probably the most well known strategy to shore up the internal validity of a study” (p. 215). Data relevant to the guiding questions were taken from the interview responses and documents reviewed for this study.

### **Guiding Question 1 - Structures**

*What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?*

Institutional structures related to assessment are defined by Maki (2010) as the roles and responsibilities affiliated with assessment as existing “among levels of constituencies across an institution” (p. 22). Examples may include an element in the organizational framework of a community college; where a process occurs in the organization; and/or, how the institution is organized to carry out assessment efforts. Common among the structures at each of the three participating institutions were defined general education learning outcomes; a committee or set of committees dedicated to general education assessment; and budgetary commitments to support faculty in assessment efforts.

**Prairie Community College (PCC).** PCC has four general education learning outcomes defined with a set of objectives enumerated under each outcome. The four broad general education outcomes are communication, diversity, problem solving, and critical thinking. The 20 objectives assigned across the general education outcomes

provide for measurable learning outcome statements that can be assessed. The general education statement included in the PCC College Catalog and Student Handbook (2010b) provided a foundation for the institution's approach and philosophy that parallels the general education learning outcomes.

General education is the foundation of learning which enables students to further their education, advance in their careers and make decisions in life. In addition to mastering the content of college courses, students need to develop the ability to apply what they learn. The responsibility for living and making decisions requires thinking & evaluation skills, which the general education courses seek to develop in each student. (p. 26, see Appendix D)

Responsibility to maintain and update the general education learning outcomes, which exist at the institution level, is part of the committee structure at the institution. As represented in the PCC By-Laws of the Assessment Committee (2005),

The committee meets on a regular basis throughout the year to provide leadership for the College's assessment efforts. In fulfillment of this role, the [Assessment Committee] is involved in the following actions. . . - Maintains the College's Learning Outcomes (LOs) in collaboration with [Curriculum and Academic Standards]. (p. 3, see Appendix D)

Assessment of the general education learning outcomes is the responsibility of two major entities at PCC. The first is the Assessment Committee and the second is a major project related to general education assessment. For purposes of this study a pseudonym of Core Learning Project has been assigned. Both entities report back to the Chief Academic Officer (CAO), who was identified as having the ultimate responsibility for general education assessment. However, the connection between the committee and project, back to the CAO, was loosely defined and not formally identified in documents. As described by the Lead Faculty PCC-1,

they certainly theoretically report to the [CAO], I mean, that's the person who is in charge of those committees. But it's not a direct line and there's not necessarily administrative oversight of what those committees are doing. It's just that they do what they do.

The Lead Administrator PCC also describes this informal relationship by stating,

I'm the leader of that [Core Learning Project] team, I of course report directly to the [CAO]. I would say that's a little less formal. I certainly update him on the progress of that project, but it's done typically when I'm doing my quarterly or annual reports to assessment or AQIP.

The Assessment Committee was described by CAO PCC as being composed of members "from across all the academic departments." Major responsibilities for those members are outlined in the By-Laws of the Assessment Committee (2005) and included,

- Advises faculty, departments and divisions about assessment goals, techniques and procedures
- Assists in the planning, development and implementation of assessment activities
- Reports the results of assessment efforts
- Provides a forum for meaningful discussions of assessment
- Provides assessment resources for faculty. (p. 3, see Appendix D)

In addition, the Assessment Committee undertakes syllabi review to ensure learning outcomes are clearly stated and measurable; provides professional development to faculty to ensure consistency in reporting results; and works closely with the Curriculum and Academic Standards Committee to monitor new and updated curriculum and courses.

A more targeted effort to oversee general education learning outcomes assessment exists in PCC's Core Learning Project. As described by Lead Administrator PCC, "in the last three years our move to get a better handle on general education



outcomes assessment has been through the [Core Learning Project] team, in conjunction with our Assessment Committee.” The Core Learning Project was described by CAO PCC as a course “redesign” effort to ensure general education learning outcomes were first identified in the high enrolled courses, and then common assessments employed across the course to gauge the level of accomplishment by enrolled students.

Extensive documentation exists for the Core Learning Project as it was the focus of PCC’s participation in the HLC Assessment Academy. Per the Core Learning Project Update (2010c),

The Project implements a systematic approach to the delivery and assessment of our General Education Program through a course development process which ensures that every course identified as “[Core Learning]” includes assessment of one level of each of the four main General Education Program outcomes, and through a program development process which ensures that across the General Education Program, each of the 20 levels of the General Education Program outcomes are taught and assessed. (p. 1, see Appendix D)

Structurally, the Core Learning Project has an administrative lead and faculty coordinators in each of the general education program areas (for example, English, Psychology, Political Science, etc.). According to a conference presentation titled “Building Instructional Community: The [PCC] Core Learning Project” (2010a, see Appendix D), the major elements that support the implementation of general education assessment include faculty guide books, review of syllabi, completion of assessment forms, and professional development/training for faculty in the general education disciplines. The Core Learning Project Faculty Guide Book for [Course] 101 (2009a) provides an explanation of how the course level learning outcomes relate to the general education, or institution level, learning outcomes.

[Course] 101 Outcomes and General Education Outcomes. The course outcomes are the learning goals related directly to [Course] 101. There are seven course outcomes for [Course] 101. The General Education outcomes are broader learning outcomes that have been established for all students who complete coursework at [Prairie] Community College. Any student completing coursework in [Course] 101 should be achieving the seven course outcomes while at the same time achieving some of the General Education outcomes. We have identified five General Education outcomes that relate very well to the [Course] 101 course outcomes. (p. 3, see Appendix D)

Within the assessment structure at PCC, there are budgetary commitments made by the CAO to support both the Assessment Committee and the Core Learning Project. Overall, each PCC participant responded positively that funding faculty release time or overload pay to serve as a committee chair and/or faculty program coordinator has been consistently allocated in the budget from year to year. While not a separate line item in a stand-alone assessment budget, the personnel costs are absorbed within the corresponding salary lines for the faculty. This budgetary commitment was described by the Lead Administrator PCC as essential to accomplishing the assessment work of the Core Learning Project.

The financial support has been wonderful, because. . .we can pay faculty one year to revise the course, but if we don't have coordinators for our gen ed courses that are beating the bushes on [assessment] every year, it's going to die on the vine. So the support has remained consistent. We have program course coordinators for our large gen ed courses. Their sole, number one responsibility is continued implementation of the [Core Learning] Project, to keep it alive.

**Rivers Community College (RCC).** At RCC, the general education learning outcomes are synonymous with institution level learning outcomes and contribute to the larger philosophy of general education at their institution. The foundation for general education learning outcomes is seen in the RCC Senate Handbook (2009).

[Rivers Community] College is committed to general education for our community college students. General education develops basic knowledge, critical thinking skills, and values that influence our behavior and motivate us as lifelong learners. [Rivers Community] College, along with area employers, transfer institutions, and the greater community, agrees that general education is key to personal and professional success. (p. 1.012, see Appendix D)

The AQIP Systems Portfolio, a compilation of how RCC meets the criteria for accreditation, highlights how the general education learning outcomes relate to the larger curriculum. “The general education outcomes define the learning goals for any associate degree offered by [Rivers Community] College and offer guidelines for other forms of certification” (RCC Systems Portfolio, 2010b, p. 12, see Appendix D).

RCC outlined three major general education outcomes that have multiple objectives defined under the larger outcome. They are Outcome 1: Literacy (Quantitative Literacy; Reading Effectively; Writing Effectively; Access, Analyze and Utilize Information and Technology Skills; Communication Skills; Personal Wellness; Cultural Literacy); Outcome 2: Critical Thinking (Interpreting, Questioning, Reasoning); and, Outcome 3: Application (Global Citizenship, Diversity, Civic Engagement).

The primary committee assigned with responsibility for defining and assessing the general education learning outcomes is called the General Education Curriculum Assessment Committee, or GECAC. Structurally, GECAC fits within the shared governance system at RCC and connects with an administrative entity. Per the RCC Systems Portfolio (2010b), “GECAC is chaired by a faculty member and has representation from the major academic areas as well as Student Services. GECAC

reports to both administrative committees (Dean’s Council) and Curriculum Council” (p. 4, see Appendix D).

As outlined in the Charge to the [Rivers Community College] General Education Curriculum and Assessment Committee (2010a, see Appendix D), the major duties of GECAC include (a) developing and implementing an assessment plan for general education, (b) promoting awareness of general education and the assessment efforts throughout the institution, (c) coordinating and delivering professional development opportunities for both faculty and staff, and (d) participating in the curriculum approval process. In addition, Lead Administrator RCC explained that GECAC will also “review...our gen ed outcomes” to ensure they are meeting the needs of the institution, students, and assessment efforts.

A sub-structure to GECAC exists in entities called general education resource groups. Per the Charge to the [Rivers Community College] General Education Curriculum and Assessment Committee (2010a), the resource groups hold specific responsibilities associated with general education assessment and,

1. Are considered the faculty experts in a specific area of general education.
2. Will provide leadership in teaching and assessing their learning objective across disciplines to:
  - a. Plan and lead the facilitation of their learning objectives assessment across disciplines.
  - b. Provide professional development. . .for faculty interested in the development of teaching their learning objectives. Provide professional development for a whole division.
  - c. Update, maintain, and create rubrics for assessing student work.
  - d. Act as a liaison and maintain active cooperation with GECAC. (p. 3, see Appendix D)

Essentially, the resource groups align with the general education learning outcome categories and then work on the specific objectives under each category. For example, the English resource group is responsible for the effective writing objective under the literacy outcome. This resource group then reports back to the GECAC.

RCC's budget for assessment efforts consists of allocating funds to faculty release time, participation in the Assessment Academy, and bringing in a nationally known consultant to work on general education assessment. As described by the CAO RCC,

It's something that we make a priority. Because we, in the Academic Office, make it a priority, it is something that we had to figure out how to carve out of the budgets that are given to us. . . priorities change, they shift a little bit, and so things move up and down in the pecking order. But again I will come back to, at least to the best of my knowledge, there have not been things that have been asked for or requested that we haven't been able to fund.

The Lead Faculty RCC shared a similar perspective when discussing the budget and noted the addition of a future faculty position solely dedicated to general education assessment. The position, general education director, is planned for 12 hours release time which is close to half of a full faculty load. Lead Faculty RCC described,

And even though I believe [budgets] are probably tightening, we still put a priority on assessment, and I think evidence of that is that this new person with general education responsibility having such a large amount of release time approved this year. So even with the cuts we've had from our sources, there is still a priority there, and we still are seeing that.

**Stateline Community College (SCC).** In support of general education learning at SCC, the institution has recognized learning outcomes at the institution level and assigned them a designation other than general education learning outcomes. In order to maintain confidentiality of the participating site, these learning outcomes will be

termed foundation learning abilities as a pseudonym throughout this report. A total of seven abilities are identified in the SCC Foundation Learning Abilities Overview (2007) document and are noted as,

crucial to success both during school and after graduation. [Foundation Learning] Abilities are skills and competencies that will enable students to be successful in the workforce. These essential skills are taught across programs and departments so that each [SCC] student can expect to work towards improving and applying these critical soft skills and [foundation learning] abilities regardless of their program of choice. (p. 1, see Appendix D)

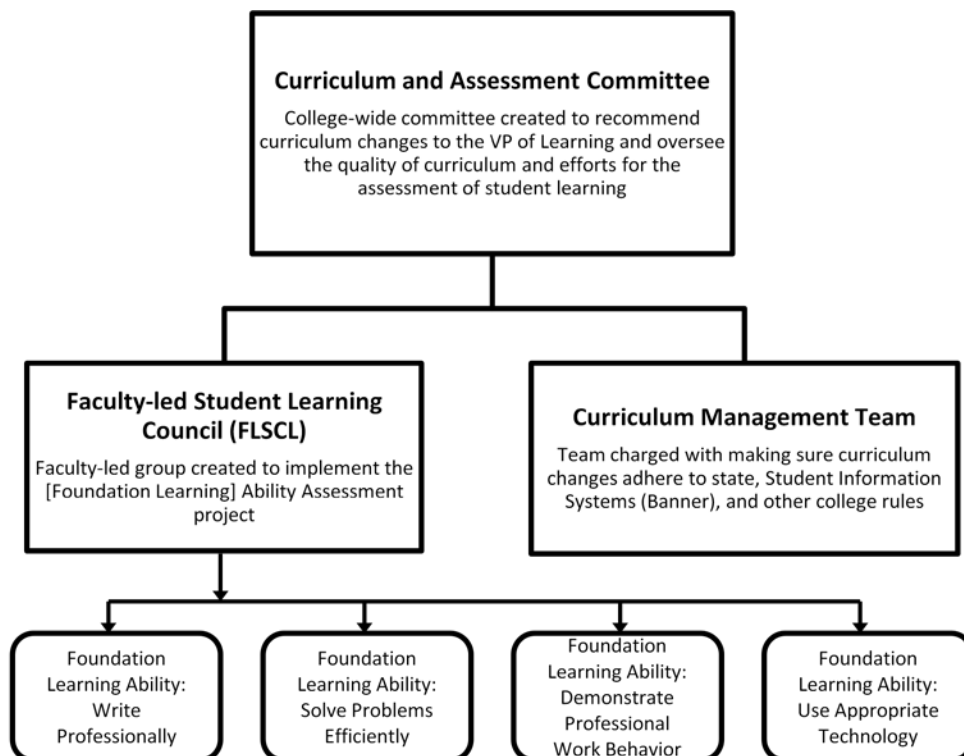
The seven abilities are to: communicate professionally, use appropriate technology, work effectively in teams, demonstrate professional work behaviour, show respect for diversity, solve problems efficiently, and lead by example. Attached to each ability are objectives that further delineate expectations the institution has of its' students.

As a result of participating in the HLC Assessment Academy, the SCC assessment structure was undergoing a change at the time of this study. Findings are reported per the new structure taking affect in Fall 2011. Within the college's governance system, two major assessment bodies exist as the Curriculum and Assessment Committee and the Faculty-led Student Learning Council (FLSLC). The Lead Administrator SCC described the relationship between these two bodies and assessment efforts.

It really is a body of two. . .because the . . .charge of that [FLSLC] council is [foundation learning] ability assessment. Not program outcome assessment. . ., our charge is really just institutional level. And we know that there's lots of other assessment that should be happening on campus, and it is. But that isn't part of this FLSLC. So this Curriculum and Assessment Committee is a group that would oversee all assessment at the program level, course level, and institutional level.

Lead Administrator SCC went on to emphasize the focus of the FLSLC in that “their mission makes it pretty plain that this committee was really created for, and about, this [foundation learning] ability project. And so it doesn’t have any other responsibilities.”

Per Figure 5, the two primary assessment entities are shown in relation to the college’s Curriculum Management Team, as well as the foundation learning abilities currently being assessed by the FLSLC. In contrast to the FLSLC’s focus on assessment of the foundation learning abilities, the Curriculum Management Team is tasked with the technical components of curriculum approvals. Figure 5 is intended to display the structural elements of the SCC assessment organization. Processes and communication efforts between the committees are expanded upon in the SCC section under findings by guiding question two – processes.



*Figure 5.* Stateline Community College’s Committee Structure. Adopted from Stateline Community College’s Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project Overview (document). Copyright 2011 by Stateline Community College (see Appendix D).

In support of assessment of foundation learning abilities, a separate budget exists as described by the Lead Administrator SCC.

I do have a budget for student outcome assessment. It's not huge, but there is a budget. . .with a number of line items and that's what we've used for both paying the people who are assessing the [foundation learning abilities] artifacts. . .and then when we go to the HLC, things like that, it pays for that. . . .As everybody, I'm sure we want more, but we're happy to have a budget.

Release time is also absorbed into department budgets as faculty leaders (e.g., committee chairs) step into roles that require them to be out of the classroom on an assessment assignment. Each participant acknowledged the challenging fiscal environment and how the CAO heavily advocated for not only continued funding, but an increase over the previous year. Lead Administrator SCC acknowledged, "certainly the budget part is something that [CAO SCC] has done, and that she has fought for us to keep for next year. And I know that probably was an effort. . .she probably had to spend some time doing that."

### **Guiding Question 2 - Processes**

*What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?*

For purposes of this study Maki's (2010) description of collaborative assessment processes, "practices that enable [institutions] to sustain a culture of inquiry" (p. 5), will be applied. Among the assessment processes at each institution, two elements were identified as similar across institutions. The first commonality was collecting data for general education learning outcomes assessment at the course level. Individual



instructors and individual courses were accessed to obtain assessment results. Second, each institution maintained a flexible cycle for which learning outcome was assessed during a particular time period. While a recommended calendar could be in place to cycle through the identified general education learning outcomes, each institution approached this cycle in a flexible manner and adjusted as processes were underway.

In contrast, each institution approached assessment methods and data analysis in a unique manner. A range of assessment methods were identified for how students demonstrated achievement of the general education learning outcomes and examples included standardized tests, embedded course assignments, and common writing prompts. Dependent on the institution, the process of data analysis was achieved at either the level of the individual instructor, with the assistance of administration, within the committee holding responsibility for general education learning outcomes assessment, and/or across all full time faculty.

**Prairie Community College (PCC).** Each participant from PCC conveyed processes associated with the assessment of general education learning outcomes as taking place through the structure of the Core Learning Project. Revolving around the course level, the institution started by ensuring the general education learning outcomes were present in the curriculum for individual courses and then moved into the phase of assessing those outcomes. Lead Administrator PCC described the evolution of the process.

The process that we embarked on, beginning three years ago, was an educational process about those [general education learning] outcomes - about what it means to assess, about how to assess, about developing assessments at the course

level. . . .What we've done in each of the first three years was to revise the course to infuse the outcome, to train faculty on how to assess the outcome, [and] to make sure that there was clear and consistent understanding of the outcomes.

Decisions about assessment strategies, the collection of student work, and the timeline for when a general education learning outcome will be assessed is all conducted at the course level and supported by the Core Learning Project. The beginning point of the process that occurs at the course level is described by the Lead Administrator PCC.

Basically what we did was we identified our highest-enrolled general education courses, and began a process of course redesign on those to infuse the general education outcomes into those courses. And so we identified a course team leader who would have sole responsibility for redesigning the course, holding faculty meetings, training faculty, talking to faculty about assessment, and infusing those general education outcomes.

Reinforcement of the process and an outline of the next steps that occur at the course level were found in the Core Learning Project Update (2010c).

[Core Learning] Team leaders develop strong assessments for each of the General Education programs for their own courses, then work with all faculty members teaching that same course to make sure implementation occurs in all sections at similar rigor level. A Guide Book for the teaching of each [Core Learning] course is generated, which is used to ensure a standard approach to outcomes assessment and rigor as new faculty are hired to teach sections of [Core Learning] courses. (p. 1, see Appendix D)

Determining the cycle for which general education learning outcome is assessed is the responsibility of the Core Learning Team Leader. Some disciplines allow each instructor to choose, while other departments implement a formal cycle that requires each instructor to assess a particular general education outcome during a particular semester. An example of the more prescriptive model is provided by Lead Faculty PCC-2.

In [Course] 101 we have five gen ed outcomes that we are committed to assessing in that class. So each semester we will just go down the line and do the next one in line. That way over the course of two and a half years, we've kind of gone through all of them.

A second example is provided by Lead Faculty PCC-1 that demonstrates an alternative approach based on the characteristics of their discipline.

I left it up to individual instructors to decide which particular outcome they wanted to do their assessment forms over. And they may or may not have selected a specific general education one. So different coordinators will see different needs based on where their faculty are in terms of doing assessment, how comfortable they are with it. . .so that's going to vary.

Through this process each discipline is accountable to assessment of general education learning outcomes, but on their own timeline so as to respond to unique curriculum delivery cycles and fluctuations in the faculty population.

Regardless of whether a particular general education learning outcome is assigned for assessment within a discipline at a prescribed time, the methods for assessing the outcome are left to faculty to determine, implement, and document the results. Through an assessment form, every faculty teaching a core learning course documents assessment results a minimum of one time per semester. Lead

Administrator PCC described the process as,

In that assessment form, the faculty identifies the outcome being assessed, so it might be the problem solving number two outcome, and they identify the instructional activity they use on that outcome, . . .then the particular assessment, and then they provide data for that assessment. So right now, it has really been through our assessment form that we've collected that [general education learning outcomes] data at the course level.

Direct methods of assessing student learning, such as common questions on a final, portfolios, or research papers are left to each faculty member based on the outcome they

have been assigned or have chosen to assess. Therefore, one general education learning outcome is not tied to being assessed through one instrument or one method across the institution. Indirect methods, such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, are given to a large sample of PCC students and demonstrate the use of one common instrument to gauge student perceptions of learning achievement. Lead Faculty PCC-1 shares the challenge and benefit associated with independent assessment method selection at the course level.

I don't think there's a single instrument. And that's an issue. It's an issue for aggregation. . .and it can be an issue for validity, but we're trying to make it flexible and we're trying to devolve it so that it's not top-down, that it's bottom-up, faculty doing what they think is important in their classrooms.

Analyzing the data collected through assessment methods at the course level is assigned to the individual instructor and in some departments the Core Learning Team Lead, along with the supervising Dean. Given that the assessment methods are fluid from one discipline and course to another, data analysis is heavily connected to the local classroom environment as well. Lead Faculty PCC-2 stated, "doing these [assessment] forms now, I pay close attention to *why* [emphasis added] they're getting it wrong." Through data analysis, the faculty distinguished between evaluation (a grade) and assessment (how students are or are not achieving the learning outcomes).

**Rivers Community College (RCC).** Assessment of general education learning outcomes at RCC is conducted at the course level, using either embedded assessment methods or a standardized test. Within the RCC Systems Portfolio (2010b) it stated, "yearly, academic divisions identify a single course offering as a site for general

education assessment” (p. 23, see Appendix D). The institution has strategically focused on high enrollment courses, and as shared by Lead Administrator RCC, the population assessed “wasn’t a selective sample, it was all students in those high enrollment classes.”

A pre-determined cycle for which general education learning outcome will be assessed in which year is yet to be established at RCC. To date, each division has been allowed to choose an outcome and the process was described in the RCC Systems Portfolio (2010b).

This last year, faculty participated in an institutional assessment of General Education skills. During this assessment process, six divisions assessed a general education skill of their choice. Four divisions chose “Reading Effectively”, one division chose “Access, Analyze and Use Information”, and one chose “Speaking Effectively”. (pp. 23-24, see Appendix D)

Two assessment methods have been implemented at RCC to collect results of student achievement of the general education learning outcomes. One method was to administer a standardized test and the other method was to use a rubric to score student artifacts. Lead Faculty RCC explained the administration of the standardized test.

We use \_\_\_\_\_ as an entry exam and [to level] students for entry into classes, etc. And they did some work with students who took this before. . .the comp sequence, and then they took it after the comp sequence and made some comparisons before and after. Which I think can be very useful and it [had] some very interesting outcomes.

A second assessment method in place at RCC is using a common rubric to score authentic artifacts collected from the course level and aggregating the results across the institution. Once sample student work related to the assigned general education

learning outcome is collected, the division in conjunction with the related GECAC resource group reviews and scores the artifacts. Lead Administrator RCC explained how expertise from the GECAC resource group, which in this example is comprised of English division faculty, is leveraged at this point in the process. Per Lead Administrator RCC, “[the division] worked with English division faculty who were reading specialists to norm and score that student work to have some kind of agreement about how well did this student read or not.”

Scoring student work with a common rubric was intended to serve the following purposes, as described in the RCC Systems Portfolio (2010b).

The first is to familiarize/refamiliarize faculty with the criteria used to support the general education skill being reviewed. The second is to develop a set of standards for general education skills. The third is to create a discussion between the faculty who teach students the general education skills and the faculty who require the students to apply that skill in a specific context. (p. 23, see Appendix D)

Analyzing the data is a shared venture with collaboration between the GECAC, the relevant GECAC resource group, and the division.

**Stateline Community College (SCC).** In terms of an assessment process at SCC, the CAO SCC described the overall relationship between the committee structure and administration. Per CAO SCC, “there’s a team of faculty that actually conduct the assessments and then my [Lead Administrator SCC] is the facilitator of the process, and then I, of course, as [CAO]. . .play the larger supervisory role of that entire process.” As a general education learning outcome is identified by the Faculty-led Student Learning

Council (FLSLC) for assessment, a smaller subgroup solicits participation from faculty at the course level. Lead Administrator SCC explains,

Right now, this is a voluntary thing. So the criteria of which class is going to be assessed is sort of 'would you do this for me?' And if you say yes, then we take your class. So it's not true random sampling, it's what teachers are saying yes.

Confirming the voluntary nature of contributing artifacts to the assessment project is Lead Faculty SCC who shared, "it really just boils down to who's willing to participate."

The cycle for which outcome is assessed first, second, etc. is impacted by decisions in the FLSLC, although per the SCC Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project Overview (2011), "the number of core ability assessment plans being actively developed [is] three or at most four at any one time" (pp. 3-4, see Appendix D). In practice, Stateline Community College is approaching which learning outcome to assess based on the interest and expertise found within the committee structure. CAO SCC acknowledged, "I don't think we've established a cycle...the faculty decided which of these [foundation learning abilities] they were going to start. They prioritized."

Of the seven foundation learning abilities, four have either collected data, are in the pilot process of testing the rubric to be used for scoring and analysis, or are getting started by forming their subgroup under the FLSLC. The other three are yet to begin a formal assessment process under SCC's structure. Once a foundation learning ability is identified for assessment, SCC undergoes a Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Process (displayed in Figure 6) to reach the improvement plan implementation stage.

Eight steps comprise the process and culminate in entering a “maintenance mode” that is intended to cycle through steps six through eight continuously.

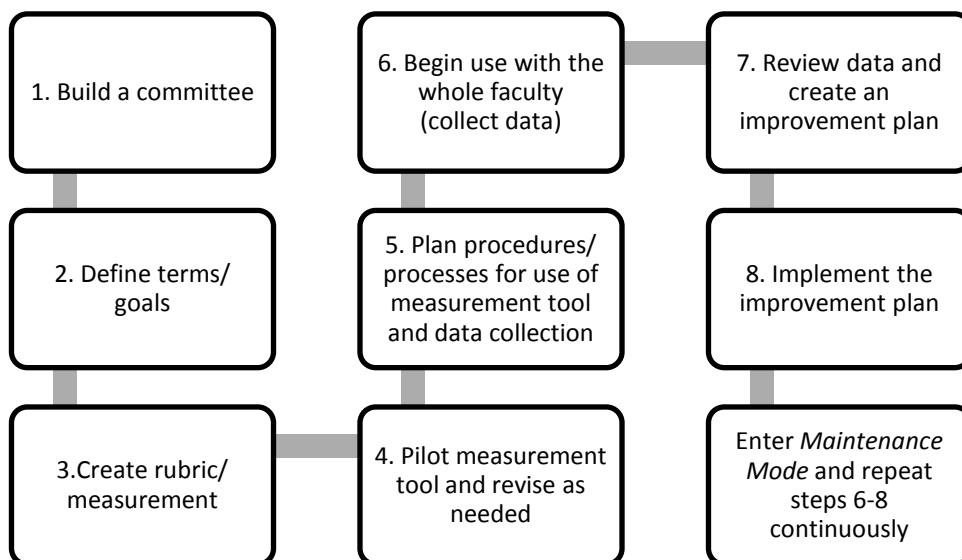


Figure 6. Stateline Community College’s Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Process. Adapted from Stateline Community College’s Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project Overview. (document). Copyright 2011 by Stateline Community College (see Appendix D).

Assessment methods at SCC are determined by the subgroups under the FLSLC in step three, “create rubric/measurement”, as demonstrated in Figure 6. Lead Faculty SCC described this step as,

The first year they start planning, they build their team, they meet, they get as many rubrics examples as they can, they start picking and choosing what they like about each one, they build their own rubric. We usually pilot the rubric with some volunteer programs, change the rubric as needed, and then start thinking about when and where to institute these rubrics.

Rubrics have been the primary assessment method to score artifacts from the volunteer courses and provide results of how well students are learning in the corresponding general education learning outcome.



Parallel to the rubric development, a pre/post-test model was implemented for the *write professionally* objective under foundation learning ability #1, *communicate professionally*. Where the student writing samples are being collected is described by Lead Administrator SCC.

The pre would be done in our student success class, and every student has to take that. And we very much suggest they take it their first semester, though we don't insist on that yet. And then the second writing sample would be taken in their Capstone course.

Membership on the FLSLC includes a faculty with expertise in statistics, which is leveraged during the data analysis phase. As results are aggregated across all participating courses, this faculty member calculates the overall scores. Analysis of the results occurs both within the FLSCL subgroup, and also during an assessment in-service day that includes all SCC full time faculty. The work conducted during the in-service began with sharing the results of the *write professionally* outcome assessment. According to Lead Faculty SCC, faculty were then asked two questions after reviewing the data - 1) what can you do in your program to help improve student writing and 2) what can the committees do to help?

### **Guiding Question 3 - Support**

*How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?*

When asked about the actions senior level leadership displayed to support general education learning outcomes assessment, each institution provided examples of how their CAO was directly involved in promoting the project. Additionally, the

support of deans and division heads was demonstrated through the approval of faculty release time to participate and lead assessment efforts. A variance across institutions existed in the level and type of presidential and Board of Trustees involvement with general education learning outcomes assessment. In some cases they approved new budget items related to assessment, were provided project updates, or were simply not yet informed of the initiative to assess general education learning.

**Prairie Community College (PCC).** Setting the tone for general education learning outcomes assessment, the CAO PCC described how, in his leadership role, he brought the expectation to the faculty.

It all started when I challenged our faculty in one of those fall sessions, how do we know that we're teaching our students how to think? . . . Let's develop a way of documenting that our students really are developing the ability to think more clearly.

From the perspective of the CAO PCC,

We try to stress the importance of assessment across all of our disciplines and across all of our faculty. We kind of harp on it routinely. I think that has helped to make assessment more a part of our institutional culture. If there's any one thing that has brought this improvement about, it is that kind of a drum beat of importance of . . . the work we do to improving our effectiveness.

When asked who has the ultimate responsibility for general education learning outcomes assessment, all PCC participants interviewed for this study identified the CAO PCC as primary on the administrative side and the committees carrying out the assessment work throughout the institution.

Below the CAO level at PCC, deans were supportive of assessment efforts for general education learning outcomes by absorbing faculty leadership costs into their

departmental budgets. The Lead Administrator PCC offered a description of dean involvement.

I would say the three Deans that run general education out of their areas are supportive of [general education assessment] to the extent that we privilege it as a value of the institution, they've given of their faculty through release time to lead the course revision process, they've instituted it as a main priority of the College, [and] it's done as an educational piece when we hire adjunct faculty. . . . But I think the main way being is that those of us who are Deans in general education programs understand that it's a priority of the institution, and that the courses that we run are viewed as kind of the delivery mechanism for the larger College goals.

With regard to presidential support/involvement, no mention of the president was made during the interviews at PCC or in the documents reviewed for this study.

From a communication standpoint, the Lead Administrator PCC gave an update to the Board of Trustees about the Core Learning Project and shared how she came to present at a meeting.

At our Board of Trustees meetings, the [CAO]. . .has a slot on every meeting to present what's happening at the College, and so I have done. . .a presentation to the Board on the [Core Learning] Project at the request of the [CAO]. So I talked to them about our general education program, our outcome goals, and what we we're doing to assess them. I don't think that that's called for on any kind of regularized basis, but certainly it occurred within the last year.

**Rivers Community College (RCC).** Lead Administrator RCC expressed how the CAO RCC prioritizes assessment of student learning. "You know, you hear it's not about compliance, but it's a commitment to student learning. Our [CAO] is so much about student success and that mantra. If it doesn't relate to student success, we're not on it." When asked who holds responsibility for general education learning outcomes assessment, all three participants first identified the Lead Administrator RCC, and then

mentioned the office of the CAO RCC as having ultimate administrative oversight.

Lead Faculty RCC identified the Lead Administrator RCC as having a high level of involvement in the work of assessment.

Now, most of the actual work is [Lead Administrator RCC's]. . . .She was my Division Chair prior to being in the position she's in now, and I know is very, very involved. . . .sees it as a very big priority to do assessment. So she has brought a lot into that since she has been in [Lead Administrator RCC] position.

During a recent professional development experience where RCC brought in a nationally recognized assessment consultant, all of the Division Chairs (who oversee the major divisions of the college) and the Vice President attended and participated in the workshops and sessions alongside faculty members.

Senior leaders maintain support of assessment through release time for faculty and advocate for increases as described by Lead Faculty RCC.

I would say there has been an increase this year coming up in the release time for some faculty members, one anyway in particular. . . .is. . . .a new person that has been brought into a leadership role for general education assessment. And actually got quite a large amount of release time, was approved for that for this coming year. So I think that's a good thing.

Two mentions of the president were made by the Lead Administrator RCC. One in a statement about providing the president a "major report" on assessment efforts and another when describing a recommendation to change the English composition course sequence as a result of the data gathered from the pre/post standardized test.

And I remember it came down to the Division Chair and I just going in one more time with a one-on-one with [the President] to explain to her the data that had been used and why it made sense from all the work the English Division faculty had done to continue to move this forward. And she supported us on that.

As a former board member himself, the CAO RCC outlined how the Board of Trustees is informed.

The topic of assessment is usually one that is reviewed annually. They are done at a dinner meeting before the formal Board Meeting. They are done generally with the panels of someone like [Lead Faculty RCC] and the [Lead Administrator RCC]. Generally with the [CAO, they] would kind of lay out reminding the Board. Because sometimes they're a little slow about what assessment is, why we do it, why it's important. Then [we] take them through what we've been able to learn, what the data mean, and then what we're going to do with those in terms of the improvement process. So it's really kind of starting at the very beginning and walking them through easily.

**Stateline Community College (SCC).** As the smallest of the three institutions, SCC participants provided multiple examples of how closely connected the administration and faculty are with regard to accomplishing the work of assessment. The CAO SCC shared how securing funding can translate into an important message of support.

You can't expect people to give of their own time for something that tedious. . . and laborious, so I went to the President at the time and told him that for the budget the following year, I was going to be putting in enough money hourly for 150 hours of assessment of student artifacts. And he was fine, and the budget committee approved that. And I think the faculty were very grateful. . .and somewhat surprised. But, I wanted them to know how important what they were doing was to the college community. And sometimes when you don't put your money where your mouth is, you may be saying one thing, but you're not really showing it. If you don't put, even in dire difficult financial times, if you're not putting money into assessment, then it isn't going to receive the kind of importance it has in the college community.

Lead Faculty SCC complimented the outward support provided by the CAO in the following statement.

[The CAO SCC] is very supportive of faculty and what we do in our classrooms. She honestly believes that we're doing the right thing. . .she's not super pushy with [assessment], so people aren't put off. She never gives the impression that

[assessment] is an administration thing, and you'd better do this or else. But she's always supportive, always keeps it on the agenda, always mentions how important it is, talks about how proud she is of [SCC], and people tend to buy into that. Like, well I want to be a part of that. I want to make her proud of the education.

Indirect costs related to faculty assignments for foundation learning abilities assessment were found in release time absorbed within division budgets. As explained by CAO SCC, "the release time that [faculty] are given [is]. . .pretty much up to the Deans depending on work load and enrollment needs. So the Deans support that, I never asked them to."

Participants acknowledged that details of the assessment efforts have not yet been shared with the entire President's Council or Board of Trustees. Per comments from the CAO SCC, the President did play a role in approving additional funds to support the foundation learning abilities project.

#### **Guiding Question 4 - Results and Implementation Stages**

*What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?*

Reaching the later stages of assessment processes, such as obtaining results and identifying implementation strategies to improve student learning, indicate an organization is progressing through an assessment cycle and is on track to have the ability to ultimately document improvements in student learning. The Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), an alternative accreditation model through the HLC, was identified by each institution as an element that initially fostered growth in assessment practices. Findings demonstrated AQIP continues to play a role with

assessment through required accreditation elements such as the self-study report titled the Systems Portfolio and new AQIP action projects. Action projects are a required activity under the AQIP model intended to “create a foundation for improvement initiatives and demonstrate the vitality of the organization’s commitment to quality” (HLC, 2003, 6.3-1).

Specific to the culture of the organization, each college shared a unique aspect which is moving assessment toward improved student learning. For PCC it was the value placed on individual instructors and how they are finding success at the classroom level. At RCC, an emphasis on understanding and using data has taken hold. The third institution in the study, SCC, acknowledged how the smaller size of the institution influences structures for assessment, moving it toward the final stages of implementation and improvement.

**Prairie Community College (PCC).** Acknowledged as a strength in their feedback report from the HLC to their AQIP Systems Portfolio, PCC’s process for assessment had allowed results to be documented. The PCC Systems Appraisal Feedback Report (2009b) states, “[PCC] has a system in place to assess student learning, with the opportunity to develop its ability to track and improve student mastery of outcomes . . . [PCC] annually captures key measures for student learning and development” (p. 15, see Appendix D). In the same feedback report, there is also acknowledgement of an opportunity for the institution to articulate a greater connection between the overall continuous improvement model and student learning.

Lead Faculty PCC-1 described the root connections between a culture of assessment and AQIP's continuous improvement process.

I think the institutional culture has a great deal of support for the assessment of gen ed outcomes. How that really started. . .it probably had something to do with our accreditation at some point, in deciding to work with AQIP and that process.

When asked if being an AQIP institution helps foster a culture of improvement, the CAO PCC shared, "I think it probably has helped. From the very beginning, we were involved in the AQIP Assessment Academy, and it was through the Assessment Academy that we developed the [Core Learning] Project." However, the CAO PCC went on to acknowledge the work underway in the Core Learning Project was no longer benefiting from the Assessment Academy enrollment now that a full, four year Academy cycle had been completed. Therefore, PCC would be continuing their assessment of general education learning outcomes independent of the HLC Assessment Academy.

Valuing the autonomy of how faculty make improvements in their own courses was a theme found throughout the interviews and documents reviewed for PCC. Starting with the CAO PCC, he shared the connection between one's own work and the ultimate goal of developing student learning.

I see [assessment] much more fundamentally as an effort to improve our own work. It's a value simply because we want to make sure that our students develop intellectually and that everybody's involved conscientiously with trying to bring that about.

For Lead Faculty PCC-2 the simple act of completing an assessment form, which identifies the results of student learning related to a particular learning outcome and



how the instructor will act upon those results (implementation), provides for critical self-analysis. According to Lead Faculty PCC-2,

It really forces me to think about and reflect on did this assignment really achieve the outcome that I thought it would? And what else could I do to improve it? And for me, that's been very valuable as an individual instructor.

Echoing this reflective component is Lead Faculty PCC-1.

If you were to ask any faculty member who has done one of those forms, they could give a story about improved learning, in a way that they might have had to reconstruct or think about it in a different way before they started doing those forms. And I think that's the advantage of those forms. . .it focuses us, and it does make us reflect. . .[which] is an incredibly key piece of this. And those faculty who really look at what they're doing and then reflect upon it, which this form forces them to do, that's what's going to make them better teachers and is going to make students learn more effectively.

The success found with the practice of having faculty complete assessment forms to document direct measures of student learning was also outlined in the PCC Systems Portfolio (2009c).

By completing the form each semester, the faculty were indeed reflecting on their practice and using their professional judgment to assess student learning. One primary goal was to have faculty link graded and non-graded assignments to the course outcomes. Another goal was to have faculty discuss their "findings" with another faculty member, an [instructional design] staff member or their [supervisor]. This goal was loosely based on the scholarship of teaching literature that advocates making classroom research public. (p. 27, see Appendix D)

**Rivers Community College (RCC).** A primary responsibility of the CAO RCC is handling processes associated with AQIP and continuous improvement. From the institutional perspective, he saw a re-birth of AQIP in the coming academic year.

With regard to AQIP, we're making a very conscious effort, actually, this year to go back and to make sure that everyone is on the bus. We've talked about AQIP for four years, we assume that everyone is on the bus. I'm pretty sure they're not all on the bus. We need everyone to understand that this isn't an option, this is

something that we, the college, have chosen to shape our culture and it is a function of our accreditation. And so we are being very, very willful to start at the beginning and to reintroduce AQIP, to reintroduce the principles and tenants of continuous process improvement, and then to use assessment as some of those examples in the re-education of faculty and staff. So that everybody has a clear line of sight as to how they make a difference in student success.

When asked if he perceived assessment becoming more prominent in the AQIP Systems Portfolio and the Strategic Plan, or maintaining the current level of representation, CAO RCC acknowledged,

No, it's increasing and it has to increase. It's so important, what we're learning from assessment, and it's such an important overall process for the college that it's one that requires focus. And with AQIP being dedicated to continuous process improvement, I really can't think of one better that really would demonstrate what we're doing, what we're trying to do, and I hope the successes we're having for students. I expect it to go up.

Lead Administrator RCC reinforced the CAO's commitment to AQIP by stating "he very much is about. . .AQIP, that's his responsibility. So he's really into looking at how all of this [assessment] intermeshes." With regard to how assessment results are connected to AQIP, the CAO RCC explained that "parts of those assessment data are used in AQIP in making sure that we're looking at our processes and demonstrating that we're finding the kinds of continuous improvement that is required for continued accreditation."

A theme found in the interview results and documents reviewed for RCC was one of being data-driven and infusing principles of using data throughout the organization. CAO RCC acknowledged the institution is working toward,

A culture that understands data and the importance of not just harvesting data, but to take the time to analyze those data to convert it to information, and eventually knowledge and understanding, and the ultimate wisdom that we

need to make decisions, to make sure that we're putting money in the right place. That we're actually achieving the kinds of things that we say we want to achieve for our students.

Another connection for assessment data and the institutional culture was described by the CAO RCC.

Because one of the things that we find is that assessment, although probably generally understood, isn't always completely embraced among faculty. Because there is some confusion as to why is it you need to do this assessment? And is it somehow a reflection on me, the instructor? And so it really begins with a culture of trust, that these data, this information, is going to be used in a way to help support student learning.

Holding a leadership position within the assessment structure at RCC, Lead Faculty RCC described how she sees working toward a culture of evidence.

One of the things that I know we're still struggling with is the sharing of data and making it more transparent, and that is one of our goals right now to figure out how to do that better. And I believe we'll be using some website resources to do that. But again, it's not quite in place right now.

Lead Administrator RCC connected the awarding of funding to ensuring data is collected and used effectively to demonstrate improvements. According to Lead Administrator RCC, the implementation of changes to the English composition course sequence and content "will be under scrutiny, but that's wonderful because that encourages us to use direct measures to see did it, or did it not make a difference. We cannot continue to rely on anecdotal data."

Another demonstration of how RCC is encouraging the use of data is through a home grown database that captures the results of assessment efforts. While the database system began for program level assessment, it was being expanded to intake results for general education learning outcomes assessment.

**Stateline Community College (SCC).** Lead Faculty SCC acknowledged the connection between AQIP, accreditation status, and how assessment gained prominence on the campus.

I think why we've gotten this far is because originally this started as an AQIP thing, and you know, quality improvement is an institutional-level idea. And for AQIP to place importance on curriculum and assessment gave us really the firepower to say, ok, this is something the Higher Learning Commission needs from us, this is what they want from us, and we need to make this happen. So that sort of started the ball rolling.

Feedback in the SCC Systems Appraisal Feedback Report acknowledged strengths and areas for opportunity in assessment of the foundation learning abilities which exist at the institution level. First, a strength was noted as “[SCC’s] system for collecting and analyzing student learning and development is multi-faceted at both the program and [foundation learning] ability level” (SCC Systems Appraisal Feedback Report, 2010, p. 14, see Appendix D). Conversely, an area for improvement was identified in how data is reported.

[SCC] has collected evidence for its performance results related to its common student learning and development objectives from one of its [foundation learning] abilities. The scores from this pilot application of the writing rubric suggest some trends in student performance on the various aspects of writing. It is difficult to determine what the data indicates since the n is not reported and the data is not clear. (SCC Systems Appraisals Feedback Report, 2010, pp. 14-15, see Appendix D)

Lead Administrator SCC described how assessment efforts embraced the plan-do-check-act cycle from the AQIP continuous improvement model. As each foundation learning ability enters the eight step assessment cycle (see Figure 6), the major steps correspond with the plan-do-check-act model.

SCC has made a unique commitment with a new AQIP action project that takes the foundation learning abilities and applies them outside of the academic context. As described in the SCC Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project Overview (2011) document,

With the ending of the AQIP [foundation learning] ability assessment project the college has chosen to create a new project which will keep the college's focus on the [foundation learning] abilities. The goal of this project is to integrate the [foundation learning] abilities into the functioning of the whole college, not just the academic part. (p. 5, see Appendix D)

Lead Administrator SCC described why the new AQIP action project is a demonstration of leading by example.

Our next project is to integrate these [foundation learning] abilities into the culture of the college as a whole. Because. . .if we feel this is important for the students, then it must be important to us also and for us to demonstrate. Because even one of our [foundation learning] abilities is to lead by example, so that's going to be sort of the thrust of [the new AQIP action project].  
Institution size was identified as impacting the ability to conduct assessments

and reach the final stages of obtaining results and implementing changes. As shared by the CAO SCC, "when you're at a small college,. . .I have one person. I don't have layers. . .[and] I don't think that a college our size is ever really going to get a full-time assessment person." Conversely, a positive impact of the smaller size was noted by the CAO SCC in that,

There is less social distance between the Vice President and the faculty. I couldn't figure out why I liked this college so much. That's what it is, that I have a relationship, I have a professional, and in some cases a personal, relationship with many of the faculty who are involved in [assessment].

Reinforcing the constructive nature of the small organization, CAO SCC shared "we have a committed group that doesn't have to go through layers of bureaucracy in order

to get approval.” Additionally, Lead Administrator SCC acknowledged, “the fact that we’re small makes it a little easier because we can get everybody in the room and we talk with everybody.”

### **Guiding Question 5 - Improved Student Learning**

*What evidence exists documenting that the actions taken have resulted in improved student learning?*

The definitive stage in assessment of student learning is an ability to document and share how assessment results led to changes which produced subsequent evidence that student learning improved. Despite active assessment efforts at all three participating institutions, none were able to provide evidence for how student learning had improved in general education learning outcomes at the institution level. Programmatic changes, intended to produce improvement, have occurred within each institution. However, the resulting impact on student learning had not yet been documented at the institution level. Course level improvements in student learning were noted at one institution. Findings related to this guiding question will focus on the challenges encountered and future plans to reach the stage of documented improvement in student learning.

**Prairie Community College (PCC).** For PCC, it was an intentional decision to begin efforts for general education learning outcomes assessment at the course level and build toward institution level collection and improvements. Lead Administrator PCC described the philosophy adopted at the institution.

We made a decision to not do this process by looking at an outcome and attempting to gather college-wide data on an outcome. Because when we looked at what we were doing in terms of our general education assessment at the course level, we saw that as being our entry point. We were not assessing, in any kind of consistent way, our outcomes at the course level. So we thought any data that we would gather centrally wouldn't be good data. We could have done it, we could have gathered it and said we did it, and made ourselves feel better. But we knew that those outcomes were not being assessed consistently by faculty, that there was no consistent understanding of the outcomes, and that there was a wide gap between our full-time faculty and our part-time faculty on our understanding of our general education outcomes.

CAO PCC emphasized characteristics in the organizational culture that support the philosophy of beginning with course revisions and course assessment efforts before embarking on institution level aggregation of results.

I wish I could say that we've obtained results at the program level, but actually I don't. Because I think that we're doing it the right way. So the biggest quality I would say is that there has been patience. There wasn't a demand for results and data and numbers at the outset to prove that we're doing something we weren't. There was more valuing of. . .[wanting] our results to be genuine. Because certainly. . .we could have devised, and this has been done here in the past, let's gather assignments and have a team grade them and a rate of reliability, but we knew all of that would be occurring at a macro level when the important work at the micro level wasn't happening.

The Core Learning Project phases are intended to build toward institution level assessment. The first three phases focused on "intensive course redesign" that (a) identified where general education learning outcomes were present in the curriculum, (b) created faculty guide books to ensure consistency across sections, and (c) collected assessment forms with results of student achievement levels and how the results would be used to implement improvements at the course level. Lead Administrator PCC explained "the way we will do [phase four] is we'll identify all of the courses assessing communication outcome number two, and we will. . .develop an approach for

gathering data on how that outcome's assessed. So we're just not there yet." Moving to phase four is described by Lead Faculty PCC-1 as attempting "to figure out a way to aggregate. And so, for example, those individual assessment forms, we need to figure out a way that's comfortable for faculty and usable for administrators that we can aggregate those forms" and determine if "students are hitting, or are managing these particular outcomes at this particular level. We're not there yet, but that's sort of the next step."

**Rivers Community College (RCC).** Turnover in administration was identified as having an impact on assessment efforts reaching the later stages of implementing changes and subsequently determining the level of improvement in student learning. Each RCC participant discussed how personnel changes in positions they currently hold, or witnessing changes in other areas of the institution (such as with Division Chairs), placed stress on assessment processes running continuously and receiving appropriate attention in the past. CAO RCC explained,

We've had a number of false starts, or starts that because of changes in administration have faltered, and although I think we have a couple of good sets of data that have come through that support learning. . . .I guess I don't feel that we've had a full valid cycle yet, is all.

Having appropriate technical systems for data collection, retrieval, and analysis was another challenge described by Lead Faculty RCC and Lead Administrator RCC. Both participants identified the home grown assessment database as challenging in terms of having data entered consistently across the institution and ensuring results meet the expectations of the Higher Learning Commission. Lead Administrator RCC shared,



[Data collection/analysis] is what's been a big part of our problem. We have an academic assessment database. Faculty in their areas are to be providing the information in the database through annual reports, and this is where part of the feedback we got from the higher learning commission is that we need to be using more direct measures. We need to establish those and then look at those results in terms of how well the students do or not.

**Stateline Community College (SCC).** As a result of participating in the HLC Assessment Academy, SCC documented the successes and challenges associated with their Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project. Among the challenges noted in the SCC Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project Overview (2011) document was "obtaining the buy in of all faculty and of administration" (p. 3, see Appendix D), which was reinforced by comments collected during the interviews. Lead Faculty SCC stated, "we're striving to get people from different divisions involved, and from different campuses. But we've really struggled with people stepping up...so I think the Deans know that this exists, but I'm not sure it's always promoted." It was also noted in the SCC Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project Overview (2011) document that "progress has been made in the attitude of both faculty and administration toward assessment of student learning", however "there remain issues finding volunteers to work on the committees and to assess the student artifacts" (p. 3, see Appendix D).

As a result of the volunteer nature to participate in the foundation learning ability assessment project, either in a leadership role to facilitate higher level decisions made at the committee level or in a contributory role to submit artifacts and help score, the lack of distributed participation was identified as a barrier to reaching the stage of having data at the institution level that could be analyzed for improvement purposes.

This concludes the section on findings by guiding question. Next, findings by participant type are presented.

### **Findings by Participant Type**

Participants were invited to take part in this research based on their position within their organization, involvement with general education learning outcomes assessment, and designated leadership role. Three major roles are represented from each institution and are the Chief Academic Officer, a lead administrator responsible for assessment of general education learning outcomes, and faculty holding a leadership position within the assessment structure and/or processes. Findings in this section are presented by participant type first and then organized according to the five guiding questions for the study. Presented first are the findings by Chief Academic Officer, then by Lead Administrator, and finally by Lead Faculty.

#### **Chief Academic Officer**

One Chief Academic Officer (CAO) from each of the three participating institutions was interviewed. Findings for the CAO participant type are presented using the five guiding questions for this study.

**Guiding Question 1 - Structures.** *What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?* Within the institutional structures for assessment, primary responsibility for assessment of general education learning outcomes was identified by each CAO as ultimately residing in their office and with their position. CAO SCC explained that assessment processes are facilitated by the lead administrator, carried out by faculty, and supervised by the CAO.

Reinforcing the team concept that contributes to assessment efforts was the CAO PCC who indicated more than just one individual is involved, but “if there is one individual you would identify it would be the [CAO]” who has the primary responsibility for assessment. A unique perspective was offered by the CAO from RCC who was a former Board member of the same institution. He explained “during the 10 years I served on the Board, that assessment was something that the Board looked at as being one of the principle responsibilities for the [CAO], and that office.” The CAO RCC went on to indicate that the Lead Faculty “reports through [the Lead Administrator], and then into my office for oversight for assessment.”

The primary accountability for the assessment budget was also identified as belonging with the CAO, even when prioritization of the funds occurred at a different level or with a different position within the institution. As described by CAO SCC,

I ultimately am responsible as the [CAO] for how the money is spent. My [lead administrator] would be the one to have the time sheets filled out, I mean she operational-wise is the budget, but [our] faculty-led committee decides basically how that money is going to be spent.

Echoing this approach was CAO RCC who stated the budgetary responsibility “ultimately...belongs to me. But we have a Dean that’s responsible for budgeting. So that Dean...works then in collaboration with [the Lead Administrator] to make sure that things are prioritized and spent.”

**Guiding Question 2 – Processes.** *What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?* Two of the three CAO’s provided brief overviews of the processes followed to assess general education learning outcomes,

which included the assessment instruments used and types of artifacts collected from students. As an example, CAO PCC explained the approach used in their Core Learning Project.

What we have done. . .is to identify those large enrollment general education courses. . . .We have tried to redesign so that common purposes are identified from across all those disciplines, common assessments or similar assessments of learning outcomes are employed across those courses.

How the redesign manifests itself was described by CAO PCC as faculty and the relevant committees “review[ing] syllabuses for new courses, or revised courses, to try to make sure that there is a coherent and intelligible assessment practice associated with the learning outcomes that are presented in the master syllabus.”

CAO RCC indicated that due to his newness in the position, he was unable to provide details about the processes and took “a pass because I’ll just confuse anything that [the lead faculty] and [the lead administrator] have given you with far greater authority than I’m going to be able to do.”

Hesitation over having an established, routine cycle of assessment processes was expressed by all three CAO’s. For CAO SCC she shared, “I don’t think we have really set up the cycle for assessment that’s going to work for *all* [emphasis added] programs.” For Rivers Community College, the CAO indicated that assessment of all the general education learning outcomes has not yet occurred. CAO RCC described, “it has been probably a little more spotty, if we. . .do a retrospective. Not everything has probably hit the four-year rotation, but it’s something that we would like to make sure is happening.” For CAO PCC the hesitation was around systematically reporting the

results of processes when he acknowledged, “we have not formalized the collection and analysis of data to the extent that we probably should and eventually will.”

**Guiding Question 3 – Support.** *How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?* CAO SCC described the actions taken by administration at their institution as manifesting in the allocation of time at in-services to discuss assessment, in the approval of release time for faculty, in the distribution of funds for faculty to score artifacts, and in the dedicated meeting time with faculty and administrators to tackle assessment efforts. Similarly, CAO RCC identified administrative participation in recent assessment professional development activities as a demonstration of support. CAO PCC described the actions of administrators as “encouraging” in the following statement.

There’s also the aspect of evaluation and promotion and tenure that depends somewhat on conscientious involvement of the faculty and the assessment work. But basically what we’ve tried to do is to encourage [assessment] as something that’s worth doing, is a value to you as an individual. You learn about your own teaching effectiveness in part through this kind of work. So it’s much better to use a carrot than a stick, I think, to expand involvement with it.

Following the theme of “encouragement,” the CAO SCC was hopeful the assessment team from their institution would offer presentations on their assessment efforts. She declared, “I want them to present, I want them to go outside of the state and they keep on telling me ‘we’re not ready’. But I think the structure they set up is very impressive.” In contrast, CAO RCC cautioned that a series of fits and starts with assessment projects make it difficult to describe the actions of senior leaders that support assessment of general education learning outcomes. CAO RCC commented

that without having completed a full cycle of assessment for general education learning outcomes, trying to describe such actions was challenging.

**Guiding Question 4 – Results and Implementation Stages.** *What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?* Each CAO described elements from the institutional culture that supported the assessment processes of collecting results and moving toward implementing change. At Prairie Community College, the CAO emphasized that all departments and all faculty need to be involved to impact student learning. CAO PCC noted that the consistent “drum beat of importance” of the assessment work underway was a significant contributor to “improving our effectiveness.” In order to reach the later stages of assessment, CAO RCC indicated that a priority at their institution is to create an atmosphere that relies on evidence – both quantitative and qualitative data. Building on a data-driven environment, facilitating a culture of trust was a second characteristic identified by CAO RCC as integral to reaching a stage in assessment that obtains and uses results. He stated,

It really begins with a culture of trust that these data, this information, is going to be used in a way to help support student learning, and not as some kind of retaliatory tool to go back and judge faculty or to meter some kind of change in the faculty.

For CAO SCC, building and maintaining relationships with the faculty is a critical step for the CAO to support assessment efforts reaching the results stage. She described the importance as, “building that community of relationships in order to . . . indicate that this is a priority for the college and . . . to be involved in all those activities

where you put your money.” CAO SCC also recognized that assessment work is “tedious, laborious. . .if you don’t have the infrastructure that’s emphasizing the importance of that work, I don’t actually think it gets done.”

**Guiding Question 5 - Improved Student Learning.** *What evidence exists documenting that the actions taken have resulted in improved student learning?* As identified in the findings by guiding question section, none of the participating institutions have reached a stage of documenting improvements in student learning based on changes initiated through assessment efforts. Thinking ahead, a challenge in using assessment data to inform changes was identified by CAO SCC this way,

Imagine putting four years in and showing no results in four years and \$35,000. I would never be proud to say there was no achievement, because I think the students themselves will tell you that they’re different people. That they have grown personally and professionally. I guess to some extent I would rely on anecdotal evidence from the students themselves. But I’d prefer something that’s. . .more reliable in terms of the data.

The ability for students to leave the institution having accomplished the general education learning outcomes was described by the CAO SCC as a primary responsibility of the Chief Academic Officer role in order to serve the workforce stakeholders in her district. She stated, “if I can’t tell [employers] that the students have these kind of [foundation learning] abilities when they graduate from here, I don’t think I’m doing a service to the community.”

For CAO PCC student learning and learning outcomes at the institution level is something all faculty should be involved in emphasizing to students. He said,

We talk about learning outcomes with our students, we’ve tried to encourage our faculty to say. . .you’re not here simply to take a course in psychology, we’re here

to foster and strengthen intellectual development in these areas of these [general education] learning outcomes.

Additional comments were made by CAO PCC that focused on the intellectual growth of students as a result of achieving the general education learning outcomes throughout the curriculum. He reiterated a goal of the PCC Core Learning Project was “to develop connections so that the students perceived, understood, and appreciated the connections between various academic disciplines even though they fit in different formal silos.”

CAO RCC contemplated the role of students in assessment structures and processes by summarizing,

Students. . .often get left out of the equation, which is unfortunate, because I think they need to know why it is that we’re so interested in what they know. Beyond the grade. Because we’re really talking about using assessment tools that are different than just a grade distribution. And I think that’s probably an area that we could spend a little more time actually thinking about in terms of the students’ role in overall assessment.

### **Lead Administrator**

A total of three Lead Administrators were interviewed for this study and represented each of the participating institutions. Findings are now presented using the study’s five guiding questions to organize responses from the Lead Administrators.

**Guiding Question 1 - Structures.** *What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?* For Lead Administrator PCC, who is also in charge of the Core Learning Project at Prairie Community College, there is an interrelated communication structure between the main assessment components at the institution. She stated,



Our Assessment Committee works very closely with our Curriculum and Academic Standards Committee on campus. So certainly anything that I do with [the Core Learning Project], I'm checking through the Curriculum and Academic Standards Committee, as well as the Assessment Committee.

Participation in general education learning outcomes assessment has involved the committees, as well as individual positions in the organization. Lead Administrator PCC acknowledged, "we have Deans and then we have [Faculty] Chairs. . .[who have] been involved through the collection and evaluation of the assessment tool."

Lead Administrator RCC emphasized that at Rivers Community College, "the infrastructure needs to be clarified. And that's part of what I'm working on to provide that clarity. . .we need to make it far more transparent that the [General Education Curriculum and Assessment] Committee. . .comes up through the curriculum process." An additional support was being added to the RCC structure at the time of this study and that was the hiring of an Associate Dean who Lead Administrator RCC indicated would have "some workload for assessment."

Within the committee structure at SCC, Lead Administrator SCC described the decision making responsibility for foundation learning ability assessment as residing with the faculty on the Faculty-led Student Learning Council (FLSLC), with a reporting line back the administration. She indicated that faculty are "the ones who are making the decisions on. . .which core ability to do next, how are they going to work on it, who are they choosing in [the] different subgroups. [Faculty] do that part." Lead Administrator SCC said a change in their structure would take the HLC Assessment Academy team members who were willing to continue working on assessment and

transition them on to the FLSLC. Concern was expressed by Lead Administrator SCC over burn-out for those who contributed time to the Academy. She stated, "I think there are a lot of people after the four years, which were pretty intense, who are ready to take a break and they'd like to see somebody else. . .move in and take some responsibility."

**Guiding Question 2 – Processes.** *What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?* As the overall Core Learning Project at PCC has evolved, a major redesign effort of high enrollment courses linked the general education learning outcomes to the course level, which is where assessment of those outcomes is being conducted. Lead Administrator PCC acknowledged that an assessment form is the tool for collecting information on what outcome was assessed, the instructional activity that embedded or conducted the assessment, and what the results were at the course level. Lead Administrator PCC noted,

Right now all full-time faculty are required to submit two assessment forms a year. Through the [Core Learning Project] process, we have asked that courses that have gone through the [Core Learning Project] process require assessment forms from every faculty member teaching the course.

At Rivers Community College, the general education learning outcomes assessment process pulled artifacts from all students enrolled in a particular high enrollment course. Moving forward, Lead Administrator RCC indicated,

I think it's better to have. . .a more selective sample. We've been told 50-80 is sufficient. And then to have those faculty with the expertise in that gen ed outcome actually look at that smaller number of student work. And then make a determination about how well did they [accomplish the outcome] or not, and if not, what are we going to do about it?

In order to compile the results of assessment efforts, Lead Administrator RCC indicated it would be a “shared responsibility” initiated out of the divisions by the Division Chair and worked on in conjunction with the corresponding resource group. Ultimately, reporting of the results, changes, and progress from assessment efforts are intended, as described by Lead Administrator RCC, “to come up through the Divisions...then it’s going to come through the Dean, and [to] the VP.”

Lead Administrator SCC succinctly summarized the cycle for assessment of foundation learning abilities at their institution as, “we’re going to collect data, review the data, make improvement plans, and then implement those improvement plans. And then we’ll just kind of keep that cycle going.” As stated by Lead Administrator SCC, responsibility for selecting the type of assessment instrument is connected to the FLSLC foundation learning abilities subgroups and is “really the big job of these small groups. I mean, that’s the first big job, and then they have to figure out how they’re going to administer [the instrument].”

**Guiding Question 3 – Support.** *How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?* PCC has a culture that values patience and according to Lead Administrator PCC, the institution is not “demanding. . .accountability and results now, but [does have] an understanding that to do it and do it right takes a lot of time.” The process at Prairie Community College relied on Division Deans and Division Faculty Chairs to be responsible for collecting assessment forms and reviewing the results on a systematic basis. According to Lead Administrator PCC, “we are not yet consistent on this.”

Lead Administrator RCC stated that institutional support is evident in assessment of general education learning outcomes appearing in their institutional strategic plan. She identified that general education assessment is “one of the institutional action plans under our strategic planning umbrella.” On a different note, Lead Administrator RCC noted that the president had expectations for a “major” assessment report and that CAO RCC demonstrated various actions of support by attending professional development activities associated with assessment and allocating resources to the efforts.

Lead Administrator SCC described the support by administration as,

The [CAO SCC] with the budget and with support, verbally telling people how important [assessment] is. Deans have also given financial support, because the amount in the budget is not enough to pay for some of the people who are running it. . . .So, some of the Deans have given [their faculty] release time to do [assessment].

The specific support from the CAO at Stateline Community College was noted as extending outside of the institution. Lead Administrator SCC indicated the CAO SCC had,

Shared [the assessment efforts] with. . .the people who are in her position at the other [state] colleges. She did have [the assessment leaders] speak to them at one point, because she has talked about [the assessment efforts] a lot. So she’s very supportive of it.

**Guiding Question 4 – Results and Implementation Stages.** *What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?* Prairie Community College took an intentional step in the direction of redesigning courses to make certain general education learning outcomes were present

and being assessed regularly at the course level. Lead Administrator PCC shared, “you kind of put the cart before the horse if you try to do system-wide assessment without first insuring that the assessment is occurring with any kind of consistency in the first place within a course.” Communication about the Core Learning Project is an important element to engaging faculty, as described by Lead Administrator PCC.

I’ve done so many presentations I can’t remember them all. I have certainly communicated. . .at multiple AQIP Coordinating meetings, at multiple Assessment Committee meetings, at Curriculum and Academic Standards meetings. I also gave a report. . .at a larger-attended Best Practices, which is the beginning of the semester activity attended widely by faculty members. . .and then of course the Board of Trustees presentation as well. I’ve also gone around to Division meetings. . . I would hope that you wouldn’t be able to walk down the hallways here and talk to any faculty, unless they were just newly hired, who doesn’t know what [the Core Learning Project] means.

Another major institutional characteristic for PCC, as noted by Lead Administrator PCC, is that assessment efforts are succeeding based on,

Our [Core Learning Project] team leaders, course coordinators, program coordinators. . .it has come through working hand-in-hand with our instructional development center, which has run numerous. . .training sessions on outcomes-based assessment, focusing on our general education outcomes. Sitting down with faculty, working through the assessment form with them. That’s been a huge process sitting down with your Chair or your Dean and walking through your assessments.

Rivers Community College reached an implementation stage that put in place enhancements for students based on the results of a reading assessment project in 2009.

Lead Administrator RCC described the changes that resulted based on,

Faculty generally agreeing our students don’t read well enough. That’s where we now have that WRIT center. . .and faculty specialists in reading have reassigned time to be presenting sessions for professional development for faculty who might want to understand better strategies for effective reading that they should share with their students. . . And a lot of the support for that, in this

really constrained budget year. . .was because of the results of the gen ed reading project.

Lead Administrator RCC emphasized the role of faculty in allowing assessment to reach the later stages in her statement, “certainly it goes right to the faculty. Increasingly I think people are appreciating the fact that this really isn’t an add-on.”

Consistent communication was noted by Lead Administrator SCC as bringing them to consensus on their writing rubric, which “has gone to the whole faculty several times so that they could look at it and make sure that there wasn’t anything that they felt needed to be changed, and for the most part, everyone’s happy with this one.”

Another communication effort leading the institution toward the later stages of assessment was worded by Lead Administrator SCC in this way,

In the beginning, it was kind of a struggle because there had been so many little things that had started and then stopped, and people just thought. . .this is going to be another one of those. I just won’t do anything and it will go away. But. . . as we continued to talk about it at each In-Service and explain how it fit in everything else we were doing. . .people have come to believe. . .that assessment is really important. And I think the fact that we’re small makes it a little easier because we can get everybody in the room and. . .talk.

**Guiding Question 5 - Improved Student Learning.** *What evidence exists*

*documenting that the actions taken have resulted in improved student learning?* Based on the approach at Prairie Community College to begin with course redesigns, then assessing at the course level, Lead Administrator PCC acknowledged the extended cycle to reach institution level assessment. She expressed,

It’s going to take us longer, no doubt about it. . . .But I think we’re doing [general education assessment]. . .the right way that will infuse it at the course level where it has to be. The instructors have to understand it. Full and part-time faculty have to have a consistent understanding of those [learning outcomes].

Looking ahead to their next steps, Lead Administrator PCC shared concern over institution level aggregation. She admitted, “that’s been kind of our struggle, to try to get at a way to disaggregate by course and then re-aggregate at the [general education] program level.” In addition, Lead Administrator described her personal motivation for moving ahead.

We don’t want to produce results for results sake. On the other hand, I’d really like to know how well as a College we’re doing at teaching our students to think critically, to communicate, to have an appreciation for diversity and to problem solve. And that is a good endeavor. We’re just not quite there yet.

Transparency and communication was a focus for Lead Administrator RCC who conveyed, “our stuff on the website unfortunately is not up to date.” A next step for Lead Administrator RCC is to deliver a presentation to all faculty during Learning Days,

Where we’re going to start the academic year with a clear...overview of where we are and where we’re going, how we’re building on what we’ve done before. How we’re creating...an umbrella over the work, and a clear line of sight from the program level outcomes to the course level outcomes.

Lead Administrator SCC stated multiple times a concern over having enough data to make informed changes. For example, “at this point we don’t feel like we have enough data to make any kind of decision at all. . .we feel like we need more.” Related to the storage of data, Lead Administrator SCC described,

Part of our hopes for the next couple of years is to figure out. . .a different way to store [the assessment data]. . .Right now this [database] is working, but that’s because we have one [foundation learning ability project] going. Another one is coming up, so that’s going to be a little more taxing for that system. But once we have like four of them going, I think that could be an issue.

## Lead Faculty

One faculty from Rivers Community College and one faculty from Stateline Community College were interviewed for this study. Two faculty from Prairie Community College participated in the interview at that institution, giving the faculty participant type a total of four individuals. Findings from the four faculty participants are outlined by the five guiding questions for this study.

**Guiding Question 1 - Structures.** *What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?* When asked who has responsibility for general education learning outcomes assessment, Lead Faculty PCC-1 indicated that,

I think, and this is a good thing, I think it's a number of places on campus that interact with each other that try to do general education assessment. The Assessment Committee, individual Deans who have been assigned that from [CAO PCC], and then individual faculty or faculty coordinators that we have in our [divisions].

Lead Faculty PCC-1 described that faculty play major roles on committees, such as convening and leading the Assessment Committee and the Curriculum and Academic Standards Committee. The committee chairs are "full-time faculty, and we each have Vice-Chairs who may or may not be full-time faculty. And then there are expectations of divisional representation. So everybody has to pony up." Expectations for faculty to contribute to assessment efforts is written into job descriptions for full time faculty at PCC and Lead Faculty PCC-1 reinforced, "it's clear, it's listed, it's right there."

For Lead Faculty RCC, the expectations associated with release time to serve in a leadership position for assessment efforts are "a little bit loose. I'm sure there are



documents around somewhere, but mostly we discuss. . .I just know what I am to do.

Although there is a charge for my committee.” In terms of holding major responsibility for general education learning outcomes assessment, Lead Faculty RCC shared,

The [CAO RCC], he is seen as the top academic officer. . .and we look at him and we say, from faculty’s view. . .does he support us? Does he advocate for us where he needs to? With the Board, with the President, in those arenas. So he. . . has ultimate responsibility for academic assessment being that that’s his position.

At Stateline Community College, Lead Faculty SCC described how responsibilities and expectations are evident from her faculty point of view.

At the [Faculty-led Student Learning] Council level, one of the first things I did when I became chair is wrote a mission and a vision. Just so that we would all be on the same page, and sort of know where we’re headed. . . .We don’t have job descriptions. At the Curriculum and Assessment Committee level, we have more of a . . .list of things that committee would be responsible for.

Financial resources were identified as recently entering the assessment structure, as Lead Faculty SCC indicated that during “the first three years of the project we all volunteered our time.” She went on to say, “last year was our first year really with any real financial resources. And it wasn’t a whole lot, but it was enough to get some people participating.”

**Guiding Question 2 – Processes.** *What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?* The Core Learning Project at PCC focused on general education courses and assessment of general education learning outcomes at the course level. Therefore, student participation and selection is based on course enrollment. As noted by Lead Faculty PCC-1, “we don’t necessarily have the institution saying, let’s pick every third person through the door and see what they’re doing and

how they do it.” The processes at PCC were described by both Lead Faculty as “flexible” and different from models which assign a learning outcome across the institution and then assess at the same time. Lead Faculty PCC-1 said,

We’d like to think, if the model is working, that it’s an ongoing process that happens in pockets. So [Lead Faculty PCC-2] may be doing [a particular outcome] this year, but then I’ll do [that outcome] next year, or some other program will do it another year.

Part of the process at the department level is to produce a faculty guide book for those general education courses that have been through the Core Learning Project. Lead Faculty PCC-2 indicated the guide book identifies both the course learning outcomes and the general education learning outcomes attached to that particular course. He explained,

You can assess course outcomes and gen ed outcomes at the same time. And [in the guide book] we. . .talk about how you can get to that, what kind of information in the textbook you could use, or outside of the textbook, and then ways to assess it. And then we have some sample assessments. And this is really helpful I think for new instructors especially.

The scoring process for student artifacts affiliated with the reading learning outcome assessment project at RCC was outlined by Lead Faculty RCC as, “all the instructors in \_\_\_\_\_ had to administer the assignment, collect the student work, pass them back to the upper resource group, GECAC, and then we went to the divisions where they were scored within that division.” After GECAC aggregates the results across the division, results are shared back with all faculty. To date, large samples of students were involved in the assessment, but in order to move forward Lead Faculty RCC declared, “we will probably try to choose a random sample. We will do fewer students, probably more like 75 to 100.”

Lead Faculty SCC outlined the major elements of the assessment process for foundation learning abilities and how the process is shared between two of the major committees. She stated,

The [Faculty-led Student Learning] Council is responsible for writing the tools which tend to rubrics, developing the process of where and when are we going to assess these [foundation learning] abilities, and what courses, at what level. [The Curriculum and Assessment Committee is] responsible for collecting all the data, and then reporting the data back to the college.

Each foundation learning ability is assigned to a subgroup that reports to the Faculty-led Student Learning Council (FLSLC). How those subgroups function is described by Lead Faculty SCC as,

The first year they start planning, they build their team, they meet, they get as many rubrics examples as they can, they start picking and choosing what they like about each one, they build their own rubric. We usually pilot the rubric with some volunteer programs, change the rubric as needed, and then start thinking about when and where to institute these rubrics. And then once that happens, we start collecting the data, and then reporting on the data.

**Guiding Question 3 – Support.** *How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?* In terms of senior leadership support for general education assessment, Lead Faculty PCC-1 stated there is “the general kind of support, funding support and resource support.” Beyond this, Lead Faculty PCC-1 recognized there is not a culture of dictating specific actions to accomplish the assessment cycle. He said, “I think it’s again the idea that the individual programs are working on it and the Deans who are in charge of those individual programs are the ones that are most involved, and the rest are just kind of saying we’re here if you need us, how’s it going?” Appreciation for the Lead Administrator PCC

was shown by Lead Faculty PCC-2 in stating that the general education assessment efforts are “really more of a growth model, promoting growth and awareness. [Lead Administrator PCC] I think does a really good job of that.”

For Lead Faculty RCC, the support from Lead Administrator RCC was evident in “her words, her actions, she is very committed and we see that, we know that.” An example is in the regular meeting patterns with faculty and committees held by Lead Administrator RCC. As explained by Lead Faculty RCC, Lead Administrator RCC works “with the assessment leadership gen ed program, and so a lot of her actions work through us and the committees that we work on. She and I have quite a lot of meetings. I know she meets with the general education quite often, at least a couple of times a month.”

Lead Faculty SCC described the CAO SCC’s support as having “been wonderful at our Assessment In-Service Days in stating that this is very important to her, and that she would really like participation. . . .She completely believes in what we’re doing, she loves to talk to me about what’s going on.” Accountability was emphasized by Lead Faculty SCC as something that she is “really big on”, but was not being seen “at the Dean level.” She shared, “if you were to ask the Deans do you believe in assessment, do you think it’s important, they do. But they’re not always as active in the accountability piece.”

**Guiding Question 4 – Results and Implementation Stages.** *What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?* Lead Faculty PCC-1 identified a major element at Prairie Community College

that has allowed the institution to reach the later stages of assessment as, “the guide books, certainly that’s impacted what’s going on.” Creating a culture that emphasizes leveraging existing efforts was another element identified by Lead Faculty PCC-1.

What we’re trying to do is get people to say alright, you do [assessment] in the classroom, and that [assessment] can be used as general education assessment. All we want you to do is think about it, organize it, report it, and then reflect and tell us what changes you may have made and haven’t made. So we’re trying to present this in way that says, we’re not making you change.

Achieving the results and implementation stages of assessment was acknowledged by Lead Faculty RCC as the product of having a faculty led initiative. She emphasized,

One of the nice things about assessment in general at [Rivers Community College], and I think this is one of the reasons that we’ve been very talked about, is that it’s been very faculty driven since the beginning here, and I think it makes a difference. We may lack some structure, but I think what we have done is more meaningful, or at least the effort has been for it to be meaningful.

At Stateline Community College, Lead Faculty SCC shared the formula leading their institution to the later stages of assessment. She stated, “I think a combination of . . . a very supportive VP, some authority and some accountability at some level, but then the real work being done by faculty has really worked for us.” In addition, Lead Faculty SCC emphasized the new faculty leadership component.

Because, in the past, there were always faculty involved, but it was more of an administration-led idea. . . and it was more of. . . ok, this is what administration is telling us we have to do, let’s just get it done. [And] there’s not a whole lot of buy-in that way. Whereas if it’s faculty-led, every Assessment Work-Day faculty are the ones that are standing up saying, hey, this is what I’m doing in my classroom, what are you guys doing? How can we make this happen? How can we improve students’ ability to write across the campus?

**Guiding Question 5 – Improved Student Learning.** *What evidence exists*

*documenting that the actions taken have resulted in improved student learning?* Aggregation of assessment results at the institution level was a challenge seen by Lead Faculty PCC-1. Rather than seeing improvements manifest across the entire institution, Lead Faculty PCC-1 noted that “instructor by instructor we’ve got these individual things that we’ve changed in our courses as a result of doing assessment forms.” For Lead Faculty PCC-2, another challenge is engaging students in general education assessment in order to reach a point where they are reflecting on their own learning and how they are improving.

We have a responsibility to get students excited about this. One of the things we’ve seen more of, and something I do for all of my assignments, is. . .letting students know which course outcome or gen ed outcome I’m assessing. . . I tell them at the beginning of the semester, everything we do in here has a purpose. There’s no such thing as busy work in this class. And I think that helps them to see. . .wow, this is measuring my ability to think critically and now they. . .know what the purpose of [the work] is. Maybe they take those things a little more seriously. . . So that’s still part of our growing process here, getting students informed about what we’re assessing with these quizzes or exams or assignments, and how that reflects on their learning as a student.

For Lead Faculty RCC, sharing the assessment data has also been challenging and efforts have gone through stages of beginning the documentation, but then have fallen to the wayside. Lead Faculty RCC stated, “we still struggle a little with our reporting mechanism, even the recording in the database. . .has been awkward, because it’s an internal, homegrown database.” Moving forward, Lead Faculty RCC indicated that “making [the data] more transparent. . .is one of our goals right now, to figure out how to do that better. And I believe we’ll be using some website resources to do that.”

Offering the faculty perspective of how general education assessment can impact student learning, Lead Faculty SCC stressed,

I have control over what I teach in my classroom to some extent. . .each course does have course competencies that must be covered, how I teach it, what's assessed. If I can get all of that down in my classroom, that's absolutely going to impact my program, and if all of our programs are sort of on the same page here, then our institution, our [foundation learning] abilities institution-wide would have to also be impacted.

This completes the presentation of findings by participant type. The next section arranges the findings by a priori theme.

### **Findings by A Priori Themes**

Three a priori themes were pulled from the literature and used as a framework for analyzing the findings in this study. The a priori themes are (a) having a faculty driven assessment program, (b) understanding the unique characteristics for a community college in assessing general education, and (c) externally communicating assessment results and improvements.

#### **Faculty Driven**

An important theme in the literature reviewed for general education learning outcomes assessment was the need for faculty to be significantly engaged in leading and growing the work of assessment. As a primary stakeholder in assessment of student learning, the HLC clearly identifies faculty as integral to conducting assessment and initiating improvements intended to impact student learning. An aspect of the Commission's Statement on Assessment of Student Learning, HLC (2003) singles out faculty as having "the fundamental role in developing and sustaining systematic

assessment of student learning” (p. 3.4-2). The role of faculty persists through the entire assessment cycle and researchers Ewell (2009) and Banta and Blaich (2011) emphasize faculty participation during the critical stages of analyzing assessment data, interpreting results, and finding improvement strategies.

Each institution and participant acknowledged that the overall assessment effort for general education is faculty-led, with administration supporting the work of the faculty. As outlined in the findings by guiding question one, each institution maintains a committee structure to conduct general education assessment. The faculty leadership roles on the committees and projects are presented in Table 9. The balance of faculty leading the work of assessment versus administration was described by Lead Faculty SCC as “tricky, because the thing with faculty is I can’t make anybody do anything. So you do need the support of administration.” Lead Administrator PCC shared how at their institution faculty initiate communication and best practice sharing, but are not responsible for evaluating each other’s work.

We really rely on those [Core Learning] Team Leaders to be the conduit of information, because they don’t have an evaluative role over faculty. They’re not the ones charged with looking at the assessment form and evaluating whether it was done appropriately. . . .But they’re the conduit of information to take that back to faculty and say, ok, last semester we all did the [communication two] outcome, let’s share the results of that and talk about where we are collectively on that outcome.

A distinction was made between an administrative idea with faculty leading the process and faculty ideas with faculty carrying out the work. Lead Faculty SCC acknowledged that full faculty participation may be challenging, but the faculty led environment is more encouraging than administration pushing assessment. “Not that



it's perfect, and not that we have 100% buy-in, but faculty tend to be more receptive to [other faculty] than administration saying 'by 4:00 this needs to be on my desk before you go home,' kind of thing."

Table 9

*Faculty Leadership Roles on Assessment Committees and Projects*

College	Assessment Committee/Project	Faculty Leadership Role(s)	Language Emphasizing Faculty Leadership
PCC	Assessment Committee	Chair of Committee is a full time faculty	"The [Assessment Committee] is primarily composed of faculty; the majority being fulltime, because of the College's belief that faculty should have principle ownership of the assessment process." (PCC By-Laws of the Assessment Committee, 2005, p. 4, see Appendix D)
PCC	Core Learning Project	Faculty Coordinators assigned in each general education program/ discipline	"The work of faculty leaders to mentor faculty and generate regular curricular conversations must continue." (PCC Core Learning Project Update, 2010c, p. 2, see Appendix D)
RCC	General Education Curriculum and Assessment Committee (GECAC)	Chair of Committee is a full time faculty who also serves as the general education director	"All members of GECAC are representatives and campus leaders in general education." (Charge to the RCC GECAC, 2010a, p. 2, see Appendix D)
SCC	Curriculum and Assessment Committee	Chair of Committee is a full time faculty	"The Faculty Led Student Learning Council (FLSLC) and its [foundation learning] ability sub-committees will continue to function and will now report to the new Curriculum and Assessment Committee. These groups remain the heart of [foundation learning] ability assessment so their continued existence is essential." (SCC Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project Overview, 2011, p. 5, see Appendix D)
SCC	Faculty-Led Student Learning Council (FLSLC)	Chair of Council is a full time faculty and all members are faculty	

Shared governance was another characteristic that placed faculty as the primary drivers for the assessment effort. By situating the committees within the governance

structure, there were both positive and negative elements. Lead Faculty RCC identified the slower pace to process decisions and ideas as a challenge in the shared governance structure. One quality of faculty culture at RCC as described by Lead Faculty RCC is, “feeling [faculty] should have input on most things that take place here. And if they don’t have input, there’s almost some resentment. . .it takes time. And it. . .has to be presented in many ways before we can. . .get that buy-in.” A second characteristic of the culture that demonstrated faculty participation and leadership in assessment initiatives, focusing on student success, was expressed by Lead Faculty RCC. “Because of what [governance] brings or includes from faculty is just such a passion for...student success, that structure has made [assessment] a bottom-up kind of effort. Faculty almost demand it.”

CAO SCC told of how she sets the tone for the faculty to work with assessment in a way that is supportive, but not authoritarian.

Part of the culture is that I give them a lot of leeway, I don’t dictate anything. This is faculty-led, that’s why it is successful, you don’t have an administrator telling them how to do it or what to do. . .it isn’t micromanaged. . .and they know they have support from me on a continuing basis.

Flexibility in how faculty approach assessment throughout the institution, and the resulting positive outcomes, was highlighted by Lead Faculty PCC-1.

I think the culture is one of decentralization and one of flexibility at the faculty level. And to be honest, I don’t think I’ve been at an institution where the faculty don’t think they have discretion and demand flexibility. How much of it they get is a different story. But I think here we do get a lot of flexibility and a lot of discretion in our individual classes. So that’s a good thing, because it means. . . [assessment] can evolve in different ways at different points. Faculty in my program might do this in ways that are very different from [Lead Faculty PCC-2], but perhaps no less valid in terms of getting assessment information out there.

And the most important thing [is] having individual faculty get that information and reflect upon it and make changes that are positive for student learning.

### **Community College Characteristics**

A variety of unique characteristics make community colleges stand out among higher education organizations. At the forefront of this list is a community college's goal of meeting the needs of the local community in which they operate. With a range of stakeholders residing in such a community, multiple missions arise for the organization to tackle. Noted in chapter two, the multiple missions of community colleges play a role in assessment of student learning and overall institutional effectiveness approaches (Ewell, 2011; Nunley et al., 2011; Trapp & Cleaves, 2005).

Another relevant characteristic affecting assessment efforts is the community college's reliance on adjunct faculty. Nunley et al. (2011) include adjunct faculty as one of eleven challenges facing community colleges in administering assessment at the institution level. Penn (2011b) describes the challenge as stemming from an adjunct's focus on their contractual obligation to teach a limited number of courses and their inherent part-time capacity to engage in efforts outside those courses.

As presented in this section on the a priori theme of community college characteristics, the third element which affects assessment of general education learning outcomes relates to maintaining an open door admissions policy that welcomes students with a range of learning levels and educational goals. Each of these elements affects patterns of attendance and time to degree for community college students.

Student characteristics of those attending community college are cited by Ewell (2009),

Nunley et al. (2011), and Trapp and Cleaves (2005) as significant to community colleges establishing assessment cycles that can produce relevant and useful results. Taken together, the three characteristics of multiple missions, high adjunct faculty populations, and student attributes frame the findings for this a priori theme.

When multiple missions of a community college are outlined, one can turn to the list of educational options available to see the complexity. For example, community colleges provide adult basic education, developmental education, career certificates, applied science degrees, transfer degrees, and general education. As identified in the following documents reviewed from each institution, general education learning outcomes are expected to apply to all students who exit the institution with a credential, be it a career and technical education certificate/degree, or a transfer degree.

- PCC Assessment of Student Learning Website (n.d.a) - “These outcome statements reflect what faculty as a whole at our College believe are the important skills and abilities that our students will achieve and need upon leaving our institution” (How is Assessment done at your College? section, para. 2, see Appendix D).
- RCC Systems Portfolio (2010b) - “The general education outcomes define the learning goals for any associate degree offered by [Rivers Community] College and offer guidelines for other forms of certification” (p. 12, see Appendix D).
- SCC Foundation Learning Abilities Overview (2007) - “These essential skills are taught across programs and departments so that each [SCC] student can

expect to work towards improving and applying these critical soft skills and [foundation learning] abilities regardless of their program of choice” (p. 1, see Appendix D).

The interconnectedness of general education learning outcomes and the career and technical program outcomes at Prairie Community College is described by CAO PCC.

I think it's fair to say that all the skills that the gen ed outcomes foster are manifested in some way or another in the technical programs. We want our students in technical programs to be able to read and write and problem solve, and to develop intellectual connections between various aspects of what they're asked to do. So I think there's an intimate connection between the technology programs or other career programs and the gen eds in this regard. I think of the gen ed as trying to provide some of the basic tools that are employed in the career and technical areas.

Among the multiple missions of a community college is the priority to serve the needs of the local community, including workforce demands. In order to do so effectively, a best practice in community colleges is to convene stakeholders as career advisory committees to inform discipline level decisions on curriculum, equipment, and assessment of student learning. CAO SCC pointed out that the committees also emphasize general education learning outcomes as a priority for graduates to enter the workforce prepared.

Not everybody understands the importance of assessment of core abilities, and yet our advisory committees will tell us how important those core abilities are, particularly writing and the four that [faculty] are working on now. These are all the ones that our advisory committees tell us they want to see in our graduates.

The next characteristic demonstrated through the findings for this study as having an effect on assessment of general education learning outcomes is the large numbers of adjunct faculty on staff. Lead Administrator PCC acknowledged the

continuous hiring practices that bring new adjuncts to the college creates a challenge for assessment efforts.

We just hired in a whole new cohort of adjunct faculty who are green at teaching, and nobody learns how to do assessment when you get your Ph.D or your Masters in History or Political Science. . .the only folks that have somewhat of a grasp on it are Education folks. So it's a new learning curve every year with it.

Along with the turnover in adjunct faculty can be an issue in representation across disciplines. At smaller institutions there can be a lack of full time faculty present in particular disciplines, leaving the teaching solely to the adjunct population. When the assessment structure requires full time faculty to play a prominent role, a void can be present in how assessment processes are carried out with solo adjunct departments. Lead Faculty PCC-1 shared that the void of a full time faculty in a department at PCC is filled by the supervising dean.

Communicating the importance of assessment, let alone the process the institution takes to assess student learning and how adjuncts need to be involved, is difficult given the multitude of efforts underway to meet the comprehensive mission for the institution. CAO RCC expressed that because of "so many other things [going] on at the same time," assessment "probably hasn't had the venue that has been required to really communicate effectively across the entire college and our stakeholders."

The third and final characteristic of community colleges that impacts general education learning outcomes assessment is student attributes. In particular, the sporadic course taking patterns displayed by community college student populations presents a challenge. Using an assessment methodology that pre and post tests the

same students, then aggregates the results to demonstrate rates of growth, is a difficult endeavor for community colleges. This is partially due to the irregular course taking patterns of their students that leads to an inability to define a start and end point for the assessments that would always capture the same student population. Lead Faculty SCC showed understanding of the challenge in their pre/post test model.

We assess their first semester. We assess their last semester. And we gather the data by student ID numbers, so there's no names tied to any of this. And if that student ID number is one that we gathered at the beginning and at the end, then we could report on some growth of that particular student. But that's not always true, because students start and don't finish, or maybe they just wanted one year, or they're here for a certificate and so they never get to the Capstone Course. So we don't have perfect data in that for every student we can say, "in these four criteria, you were here first semester, now look where you are, you're here."

### **External Communication**

Sharing the results of student learning outcomes assessment efforts is not a common occurrence in higher education. According to research conducted by Jankowski and Makela (2010), of the 118 college websites scanned for assessment related information, "less than 5% of websites across the entire set of institutions had any evidence of such information" (p. 14). Increased calls for accountability in higher education include requests for transparency of student learning achievements. In conjunction with this type of environment, Ewell (2009) developed a set of four guiding principles "to preserve and develop institutional capacity for evidence-based continuous improvement" (p. 14). The four principles are "1. Respond visibly to domains of legitimate external control. 2. Show action on the results of assessment. 3. Emphasize assessment at the major transition points in a college career. 4. Embed

assessment in the regular curriculum” (Ewell, 2009, p. 14). Principles one and two emphasize external communication of assessment efforts.

Institutions demonstrated hesitancy in communicating assessment efforts and results to external stakeholders. Phrases such as “the sharing of data is definitely something we have to work on,” “at some point we have to aggregate to tell external audiences,” and “we still don’t feel like we have enough data to really say this is what’s happening,” were found in different variations throughout the interview transcripts across all institutions. Excluding the HLC as a stakeholder for AQIP and the Assessment Academy, other external bodies were not systematically receiving reports of assessment results and the corresponding improvement plans. Several examples of isolated communications outside the organizations are displayed in Table 10.

Table 10

*External Communication of Assessment Efforts*

College	Content Shared	Audience(s)
PCC	Core Learning Project Overview – processes, structures	State Level Assessment Conference Attendees
PCC	Assessment Results	State Level Program Review Report
RCC	Assessment Results	Achieving the Dream
SCC	Foundation Learning Assessment Project Overview – processes, structures	State Level Meeting of CAO’s

In a review of documents available on each participating institution’s website, assessment processes or structures that were represented tended to be out of date and did not include assessment results or data in any instances.



Findings by the three a priori themes are now complete. Moving to the next section, findings by emergent theme are presented.

### **Findings by Emergent Themes**

Emerging from the data collected for the study were three themes –a single champion for assessment, expectation setting, and professional development. As assessment structures were described at each institution, the emergent theme of a single administrator champion demonstrated a focus on how one position was perceived as the leader of assessment work on the administrative side of the institution. Expectations of individuals and committees also emerged as a component of how the institution publicly demonstrated accountability for assessment. Finally, the last emergent theme which surfaced was professional development opportunities which exist at the institutions to support or conduct the work of assessment.

#### **Single Administrator Champion**

The faculty led nature of assessment efforts was outlined as part of the a priori themes and represented how faculty were placed throughout assessment structures to further the work and ensure it remained a collective emphasis across disciplines. However, findings did not demonstrate that administrators were spread throughout the structures or processes in the same manner. Instead, a single administrative champion emerged from the interviews and documents reviewed. This single administrator was a motivator for assessment efforts, as well as someone who produced significant work product such as assessment reports, presentations, and accreditation documents.

In each institution there was not a framework for systematically pulling administrative representation from across divisions or units into the various structures. A single administrator was identified by all study participants as someone with major responsibility to lead the assessment of general education learning outcomes, support faculty where necessary, and be a conduit back to the CAO. This “assignment” was outlined by CAO RCC in his statement, “the assessment responsibility belongs to my office, and falls to the [Lead Administrator RCC]. She does have a group that is very much committed to assessment, especially gen ed.” Similarly, the CAO SCC indicated that the Lead Administrator SCC was the main facilitator of assessment processes at the institution. Beyond the facilitator role, Lead Faculty SCC described the Lead Administrator SCC as someone who “fights for us” and represents faculty requests, such as budget needs.

From the single champion’s perspective, Lead Administrator PCC noted how participation from administrators throughout the organization was in need of improvement.

I will tell you, however, that the participation in [the Core Learning Project] has probably varied greatly by division. Because I’m the [Core Learning] Team Leader in my division it’s a priority. So every part-time faculty in our division is submitting two assessment forms a year, and the focus is on the general education outcomes. But that takes a lot to administer and to evaluate. Prior to this year we only had one Dean of the division trying to do all of that. We’ve since developed a little bit of a substructure that’s helping, so I think we’ll get more consistency across divisions.

Lead Faculty PCC-1 and Lead Faculty PCC-2 perceived administrators outside of their division as offering a “general kind of support” while their own dean, who is also the Core Learning Project administrative lead quoted above, is “very actively involved.”

All of the participating institutions maintained a single administrator champion who held multiple responsibilities outside of assessment of general education learning outcomes. Therefore, a full time administrator job with 100% of their responsibilities dedicated to assessment did not exist at any of the three institutions. CAO SCC acknowledged the challenge of a having a single administrative champion for assessment who holds other core responsibilities. “So we’re at a disadvantage sometimes because. . .[Lead Administrator SCC] doesn’t have a lot of time. It’s not a full-time position for her to be working with this [Foundation Learning Ability Assessment] group.” Lead Faculty SCC expressed concern over the lack of a fully dedicated administrator to move assessment efforts ahead. “We don’t have a full-time, which is hard, because. . .I’m really big on accountability. And for assessment to happen, we need to be held accountable [but] we don’t have that [full time] body here yet.” Despite the limited time available to Lead Administrator SCC for foundation learning ability assessment, the CAO SCC praised the work being accomplished within the limited organizational structure on the administrative side of the house.

For [Lead Administrator SCC] as a facilitator with a small group of faculty, I think what they accomplish is pretty remarkable given the fact that I don’t have Associate Deans. . . .And yet for [Lead Administrator SCC] to put something like this [Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project] together with the faculty I think is pretty impressive.

## Expectation Setting

When a responsibility is clearly identified in formal documents, such as a job description, there is less ambiguity surrounding the expectation to accomplish work associated with the responsibility. Expectations can also be set through institutional culture, using a collective force to hold individuals and teams throughout the organization accountable. The types of expectations associated with assessment of general education learning outcomes can come from within an organization or be imposed by external stakeholders. Emerging from the data collected for this study, internal expectations for the who, what, where and why of assessment were identified and are presented in this section.

Institutions varied on how formal the expectations for conducting assessment were documented versus simply holding a shared understanding among parties. Table 11 provides examples of where and how expectations for conducting assessment of student learning are documented in faculty contracts at each institution.

In a comment related to how expectations within the faculty culture at PCC have evolved, Lead Faculty PCC-2 acknowledged,

It's just become kind of the expectation that many years ago we had these gen ed outcomes. . . ,they were just kind of out there. This is what students should be accomplishing by the time they're done here. But when we started this [Core Learning] initiative several years ago, it. . . became part of our teaching, part of our responsibilities.

CAO PCC described how the expectation for faculty to be conducting assessment of student learning extends beyond the contract language and has become part of the faculty evaluation process as well.

Certainly it is part of the evaluation process of every faculty member. We ask each full-time faculty member, as part of their annual self-evaluation, to describe their assessment efforts and to bring forward one of the assessment forms. . .so that they can talk about what they have done in the way of assessment in their own self-evaluation and their formal evaluation review with the Dean.

Table 11

*Assessment Expectations in Faculty Contracts*

College	Full Time Faculty Contract	Adjunct Faculty Contract
PCC	Section 14.5. The essential functions and duties of a faculty member are to... (5) Develop, integrate and evaluate student learning outcomes within the framework of the [Prairie] Community College assessment protocols (PCC Full-Time Faculty Contract, n.d.b, section 14.5, see Appendix D).	Section 7.1. Purpose. The College has the following general, professional expectations of all Faculty... Integrate and evaluate student learning outcomes within the framework of [Prairie] Community College assessment protocols (PCC Part-Time Faculty Contract, n.d.c, section 7.1, see Appendix D).
RCC	None noted.	None noted.
SCC	Formalization of the annual assessment in-service anticipated within the agreement between the administration and the faculty union (SCC Foundation Learning Ability Assessment Project Presentation, n.d., slide 23, see Appendix D).	None noted.

PCC and RCC outlined individual faculty expectations in their committee documents (such as by-laws). These expectations related to the lead roles filled by faculty (e. g. chair, director, program coordinator) in assessment of general education learning outcomes. SCC did not lay out expectations at the individual level and instead represented what was expected of all committee members. An example from the

Charge to the [Rivers Community College] General Education Curriculum and Assessment Committee (2010a) presented the expectations for the general education director role, which is held by a faculty member.

The general education director is ultimately responsible for initiating and the implementation of GECAC's activities. At this time the duties of the director include:

- a. Serving a term of 3 to 5 years
- b. Effectively implementing GECAC's charge
- c. Representing the interests of [Rivers Community College] with regard to the quality of its general education program
- d. Chairing GECAC
- e. Meeting monthly with the [Lead Administrator RCC]
- f. Reporting to the [CAO RCC]
- g. Maintain published material relevant to GECAC
- h. Work with [RCC] regarding a succession plan. (p. 2, see Appendix D)

On the administrative side, SCC acknowledged broad assessment of student learning as being represented within one job description. While tentative, Lead Administrator SCC said "it's not completely clear in my job description, it's sort of, assessment initiatives. But yes, assessment of student learning is in my job description." However, with regard to assessment of foundation learning abilities in particular, CAO SCC stated with confidence that "there wouldn't be any job posting at this point for [Stateline Community College] that would have a specific delineation of assessing [foundation learning] abilities." For the future, CAO RCC explained that administrative job descriptions were under review and assessment of student learning would be included in both the Lead Administrator RCC and CAO RCC's job descriptions. At the time of this study, assessment of student learning was not noted as being included in any administrative job descriptions at PCC.

Assessment expectations for committee members, as well as all faculty teaching a particular course, appeared in documents and employed direct language indicating what type of responsibility was being placed on the committee members/faculty. As written in the PCC By-Laws of the Assessment Committee (2005),

The [Assessment Committee]. . .has the role of assuring that the course described by the syllabus is *successful*--that is, that the course fosters significant learning attainment, and that student learning outcomes are achieved both within the class and within the program overall. (p. 1, see Appendix D)

Within the same document, PCC represented a philosophy of how the entire institution is expected to approach assessment of student learning.

As educators, we at [Prairie] Community College believe that institutional success is measured by student success. Therefore, we are committed to improving student performance, and we believe that assessment provides perhaps the best tool for achieving that improvement by furnishing us feedback about the effectiveness of teaching and the quality of learning. Such assessment should be formative, occur on multiple levels, and uphold the integrity of teaching and learning at [Prairie] Community College. (By-Laws of the Assessment Committee, 2005, p. 3, see Appendix D)

A major component of the Core Learning Project at PCC is the faculty guide book. These guide books are course specific and demonstrate to faculty the expectations for assessment of course, program, and general education learning outcomes. As presented in the Core Learning Project Faculty Guide Book for [Course] 101 (2009a),

By mandating that all instructors assess the outcomes that have been established for this course, we are ensuring that all students who complete this course are being held to very similar standards and expectations, regardless of who is teaching the course. It also ensures that all of these students are getting exposed to similar terms, concepts, and theories. In addition, it also ensures that all students who pass this course are similarly prepared for subsequent \_\_\_\_\_

courses and that they are achieving the same General Education outcomes. (p. 3, see Appendix D)

Additionally, the guide books showcase sample assessments, assignments, and resources to support the expectation that every semester an assessment form be completed to document how students performed on a pre-identified or instructor-selected general education learning outcome. Overall, the language within the guide books set a tone that assessment is mandatory, yet faculty still have great latitude in their pedagogical style and approach. This expectation is seen in the Core Learning Project Faculty Guide Book for [Course] 101 (2009a) as follows,

The learning outcomes that have been developed for this course demonstrate our commitment to teach beyond the factual information, and to promote comprehension of the course material that will lead to a deeper level of understanding and thinking among our students. You have a lot of flexibility in how you accomplish this, but an understanding of your role in assessing student achievement of the course outcomes and General Education outcomes will be critical to ensure that students are in fact meeting the objectives of the course. (p. 103, see Appendix D)

### **Professional Development**

AQIP emphasizes professional development through their AQIP Criteria and the AQIP Principles for High Performance Organizations. Of the nine AQIP Criteria, “Valuing People” stands out as the criterion most focused on “the development of faculty, staff, and administrators, since the efforts of all are required for success” (HLC, 2003, p. 6.4-5). Principle ten on the list for High Performance Organizations, “People”, is the category emphasizing an investment in the development of talent and leadership among faculty and staff. A demonstration of such an investment at participating institutions emerged in the delivery of professional development opportunities related



to assessment of general education learning outcomes. As structures and processes for assessment efforts were reviewed at the selected colleges, making available professional development components both within the institution and external to the institution was another way institutions were investing in general education assessment.

Intentional development of assessment expertise and implementation presented itself in a variety of modes that included a credit class contributing toward salary advancement, a new faculty academy, and in-service days. Overall, having access to resources for professional development in assessment was a consistent theme found at each institution. Despite challenging fiscal environments, participants cited a culture that supported interests in learning more about assessment.

At RCC, credit classes are offered by the Education Department for faculty professional development and included in the offerings is a course dedicated to assessment strategies. Lead Administrator RCC explained,

We have a series of EDU 300 classes. . .that faculty, especially new faculty, coming into [RCC] are encouraged to take. They are wonderful opportunities for professional development. They range from one to two to three credits. We do have a structure for our compensation where every three credits equate to one unit. . .and you can accumulate up to 20 units and it's added on your base. So over time. . .there's a financial incentive.

In addition to gaining knowledge in assessment, RCC's goal included faculty understanding the "value" of assessment. The course was open to both full and part time faculty.

Engaging new faculty in assessment was a priority stated by participants from PCC and demonstrated in documents. Faculty benefited from an Academy that was

described in the AQIP Systems Portfolio as PCC's "best example of success" for an AQIP action project. Within the PCC Systems Portfolio (2009c), a description of the academy's focus and delivery was outlined, representing the inclusion of assessment of student learning.

Professional development for all faculty members is part of the mission of [PCC]. Therefore, a class/cohort approach for new faculty will help us with the professional development process and will also help with a variety of orientation issues for both new and adjunct faculty. Finally, a professionally developed faculty can enhance student learning. The team will organize a formal "class" for new college instructors about eight weeks in length delivered through the [professional development center]. The class will cover such topics as creating student learning outcomes, rubrics and grading, class presentations, class organization, syllabus construction, classroom assessment techniques, and an introduction to WebCT. (p. 22, see Appendix D)

PCC also acknowledged adjunct faculty work in the Core Learning Project by paying for meeting attendance related to assessment of general education learning outcomes.

In-service days were common to all institutions in order to share assessment processes, review assessment results, and discuss best practices among faculty throughout the institution. CAO SCC explained how setting aside time for an in-service can be challenging, yet placing assessment on the agenda demonstrates it is a priority.

When you only basically get together three times a year as a community, making sure that [assessment] is front and center is important, and the fact that we do it once or twice a year makes. . .the faculty as a group understand that it's an important activity.

As shown in Table 5, the assessment in-service day at SCC is now a dedicated activity per the union agreement for full time faculty.

PCC and RCC had less systematic in-service dedication to assessment; however, both demonstrated recent events that brought all faculty together around the topic of

assessment of student learning. Best Practice Sessions are held at PCC and as stated by Lead Faculty PCC-1, are “sessions where faculty talk about things that are working for them in their classroom, and a lot of times they’ll have data or supporting evidence that will say, these were the scores before, these are the scores now.” Held approximately twice per year, the sessions provide an avenue for faculty to faculty collaboration and professional development around assessment efforts underway across the institution. RCC dedicated time and resources to invite an assessment consultant in for a multi-day training/workshop on general education learning outcomes assessment. In addition to faculty participation, administrators were also present and included division chairs, Lead Administrator RCC, and CAO RCC. A summary statement made by Lead Faculty RCC demonstrated the value placed on this professional development experience. “We had some grant money. . .to bring in a consultant, and we got some really great stuff from there, it was so worthwhile. . .for everybody.”

Participation in the HLC Assessment Academy was noted as a way to deliver professional development opportunities to faculty and staff assigned to the Academy project. SCC assessment team members attended the HLC Assessment Academy workshops held off-campus. These off-campus experiences were noted by Lead Administrator SCC as a demonstration of their institution’s commitment to assessment. Also, Lead Administrator RCC identified an extension in the HLC Assessment Academy beyond the initial four year cycle as a demonstration by the organization to the professional development of those team members and the project itself. The

extension grants RCC access to expertise and resources at the Higher Learning Commission.

Accessing professional development opportunities was not a challenge according to study participants. All levels of participants made statements to the effect of feeling if they asked for resources to attend a professional development event related to assessment (conference, workshop, etc.), they would be granted the support. Lead Faculty PCC-1 expressed, “my personal experience is from year one that I walked on campus to now, whenever I want to do something associated with assessment there’s money or resources there for me.” Demonstrating a similar feeling of support, Lead Faculty PCC-2 explained that PCC has a faculty professional development program that allows faculty to choose how and when to spend a set amount of allocated funds toward individual professional development. Even when those funds are exhausted, Lead Faculty PCC-2 indicated there would likely still be support for assessment related professional development.

Some people do use those [professional development] dollars to go to improvement in teaching, or improvement in assessment. If there were some kind of special assessment thing that came up and I wanted to go and had used my dollars. . .I would almost bet that if I said. . .I want to go, that they would find the money. So I think Professional Development of individual faculty members is important here, and it’s been improving.

For CAO RCC, allocating funds to support professional development experiences in assessment is important for both internal and external opportunities. In the following statement, CAO RCC acknowledged individual professional growth occurring through

conference attendance, as well as the institution benefiting from external review and validation of work occurring on campus.

We do what we can in terms of making sure that we send people to the appropriate conferences, so that they feel trained and ready to engage. We do what we can to make sure that we bring experts in the field to campus to evaluate our materials and to help coach us through.

Three primary emergent themes were identified to organize and present findings. This completes the section on emergent themes and the following section summarizes the chapter and offers concluding remarks.

### **Chapter Summary**

Presented in this chapter were the findings which resulted from a series of ten interviews across three community colleges. In addition, documents from each institution were analyzed to ensure the researcher obtained a comprehensive view of general education learning outcomes assessment efforts. Four frameworks were employed to present the findings – by guiding question, by participant type, by a priori theme, and by emergent theme. In closing, the key findings are presented in Table 12 and through a narrative summary of findings for each of the four frameworks.

#### **Summary of Findings by Guiding Question**

Findings for each of the five guiding questions were broken down by institution. Beginning with guiding question one related to structures, each institution held in common a defined set of general education learning outcomes, a committee or set of committees structured to support general education learning outcomes assessment, and financial commitments to support the actual work of assessment. Processes was the focus for guiding question two and while each institution approached data collection at

Table 12

*Key Findings by Guiding Question Topic*

Guiding Question Topic	Key Findings
Institutional Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defined set of general education learning outcomes expected of each student exiting institution</li> <li>• Dedicated committee(s) for assessment of general education learning outcomes</li> <li>• Committed financial resources to support assessment; CAO's ultimately responsible while operational aspects handled by administration and lead faculty</li> <li>• Interrelated communication structures existed between committees and assessment positions</li> <li>• Concerned about long term participation in assessment projects causing burn out</li> <li>• Documented expectations for faculty involvement in assessment included job descriptions and union contracts; requirement as part of evaluation; committee leadership positions; and informal, volunteering</li> <li>• Lacked administrative job descriptions with explicit responsibilities for general education learning outcomes; when assessment was present, related to general efforts</li> <li>• Dedicated professional development funding and opportunities existed on a continuing basis</li> <li>• Lacked systematic and targeted involvement of adjunct faculty population in assessment efforts</li> </ul>
Assessment Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collected data at the course level</li> <li>• Lacked a set cycle for when a general education learning outcome is assessed; flexible approach</li> <li>• Included a variety of assessment methods such as embedded classroom assignments, pre/post test using writing assignment, and standardized tests</li> <li>• Included a variety of data analysis approaches such as by instructor only, by division with support from assessment committee, and by all faculty</li> <li>• Selection process and administration of assessment tools and instruments guided by faculty</li> <li>• Lack of systematic process to communicate assessment efforts, results, and student learning improvement to students and external stakeholders</li> </ul>
Support from Senior Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaged CAO and Lead Administrator demonstrated through participation in professional development, in-service days, and regular meetings with faculty leaders</li> <li>• Approved release time for faculty participation in assessment efforts occurred at the dean level</li> <li>• Varied levels of participation and information shared with Presidents and Boards of Trustees</li> <li>• Lacked a distributed effort to include administrators from across the institution leading to existence of a single administrative champion</li> <li>• Acknowledged culture of patience to see an entire assessment cycle occur</li> <li>• Lacked consistent accountability for role of dean</li> <li>• Cited key characteristics of administration was to remain flexible and supportive, but not assertive</li> </ul>

Reaching the Results and Implementation Stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivated by AQIP to commence larger scale assessment effort leading to results and implementation</li> <li>• Supported by structures which placed faculty in positions to lead assessment efforts</li> <li>• Valued efforts at classroom level by leveraging existing efforts</li> <li>• Identified data and trust as integral to grow in order to reach results and implementation stages</li> <li>• Identified smaller institution size as facilitating communication among all faculty</li> <li>• Identified communication as critical to engaging faculty</li> <li>• Acknowledged the consistent application of learning outcomes at the course level was best approach to inform usable assessment results</li> <li>• Used faculty guide books to spur progress through assessment cycle</li> </ul>
Documentation of Improved Student Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenged to document improvements; none of the participating institutions could demonstrate</li> <li>• Aggregated data sets at institution level a major hurdle</li> <li>• Identified it takes a significant investment of time to reach documentation stage</li> <li>• Acknowledged transparency in communicating assessment results necessary to reach improvement stage of assessment</li> <li>• Demonstrated it is difficult to identify when data saturation point is reached, allowing transition to making improvements and documenting a change in student learning</li> <li>• Identified student awareness of general education learning outcomes assessment results as key to fostering improved student learning</li> <li>• Needed robust data storage system for long term sustainability</li> <li>• Acknowledged faculty role could best influence student learning at the classroom level, thus contributing up to larger, institution learning outcomes</li> </ul>

the course level and maintained flexibility for the timing of assessing a specific learning outcome, there were differences in the type of assessment methods and data analysis conducted across institutions.

Guiding question three addressed the type and level of support from senior leadership to accomplish general education learning outcomes assessment. An emphasis from each institution was having an engaged CAO to promote assessment efforts, as well as using release time as a means to support faculty contributions. Differences were noted in the extent to which Presidents and Boards of Trustees were informed of, or involved with, assessment of general education learning outcomes.

Moving to guiding question four, reaching the results and implementation stages, the findings demonstrated that AQIP impacted each institution starting and growing assessment efforts. Unique elements of the institutional culture played a role in bringing an institution to the results and implementation stage. At Prairie Community College, value was placed on individual instructors conducting assessment at the classroom level. A culture of evidence and data had emerged at Rivers Community College and was seen as supporting the momentum of assessment efforts. Finally, Stateline Community College demonstrated how a smaller institution is impacted when moving toward the final goal of improvement of student learning.

The fifth guiding question asked what evidence was available to demonstrate improved student learning resulted from actions taken in the assessment process. While each institution had implemented course or programmatic changes with the intention of improving student learning, none had evidence to demonstrate improvement had occurred across the institution in general education learning outcomes. Instead, findings for this question showed the current challenges with institution level assessment, as well as future plans for reaching the stage of documenting student learning improvements in general education learning outcomes.

### **Summary of Findings by Participant Type**

The second framework employed to present findings was by participant type. The three types of positions secured to contribute to this study were the Chief Academic Officer (CAO), a Lead Administrator, and a Lead Faculty. Each position held significant leadership duties to carry out or guide assessment of general education



learning outcomes at their institution. Findings were organized by participant type and then reported through the five guiding questions.

For CAO's the institutional structures for assessment placed them in the position of supervising, while the work and implementation were carried out by faculty and key administrators. Budgetary responsibilities were noted as residing with the CAO; however, prioritization and operational aspects of the budget were also carried out elsewhere in the structure. Guiding question two focused on processes and two of the three CAO's conveyed in their responses the overall steps carried out to conduct general education learning outcomes assessment at their institution. None of the CAO's felt they had an established cycle to assess each general education learning outcome on a routine basis and that this element was still evolving.

The support demonstrated by senior leaders was explored in guiding question three. Examples of how the CAO's supported assessment through their actions and words were provided and included participating in professional development workshops and dedicating time to assessment at in-service days. Reaching the results and implementation stages was discussed in guiding question four and responses from the CAO's indicated that the culture of the institution facilitated reaching the later stages of assessment. Having consistent communication, creating trust among faculty, and maintaining close relationships were characteristics shared by the CAO's.

The final guiding question asked what evidence exists to document improved student learning based on assessment efforts. Given that none of the participating

institutions were at a point to share such documentation, the CAO's comments centered on future steps and focusing on student growth and learning.

Lead Administrators discussed the interrelated communication efforts that occurred throughout institutional structures, such as among committees and assessment positions. Additional contributions by Lead Administrators to the findings for guiding question one were the anticipated changes to the structure for assessment, the faculty's participation in decisions about assessment processes, and a concern over long term participation causing burn out. As Lead Administrators discussed assessment processes, the focus for guiding question two, the selection process for assessment tools and instruments was highlighted. In addition, the administration of the assessment tools by faculty and committees was stressed. For one Lead Administrator, making changes to the sample size for assessment projects was a key consideration for the future.

The third guiding question asked what support by senior leaders was evident in their institution. Lead Administrators discussed the value senior leaders placed on having patience to see the process evolve. Including assessment in the institutional strategic plan, providing a report to the President, and promoting general education learning outcomes assessment projects outside the institution were examples of assessment work being supported by senior leaders. Next, guiding question four prompted reflection on reaching the results and implementation stages of assessment. Lead Administrators shared communication strategies that were critical to engaging

faculty. Additionally, a focus on the consistency of outcomes and assessments at the course level, and using the results to make enhancements for students were described.

The final guiding question included findings from Lead Administrators that acknowledged the assessment cycle at the institution level took a significant investment of time over a longer period than desired. Aggregating assessment results at the institution level was noted as a challenge, along with maintaining transparency in communicating the results and changes. Having enough data to take action was an additional concern expressed by a Lead Administrator.

Lead Faculty served as the final participant type for this study. In reviewing guiding question one related to assessment structures, findings from Lead Faculty interviews contributed information related to the responsibilities held by committees, deans, and faculty. The expectations for faculty involvement and leadership were highlighted, as well as standard and evolving budget commitments to support assessment. The findings related to guiding question two focused on processes for general education learning outcomes assessment and included a discussion of the student sample coming from the course level. For the future, one school emphasized a goal of smaller sample sizes to manage the workload associated with scoring and aggregating the results. Lead Faculty shared their perspective on the flexible approach to tackling assessment and the goal of maintaining an “ongoing process.” Lastly, the major responsibilities for choosing and creating assessment instruments, administering the assessment, and aggregating results were noted as being spread out through the institutional structures.

Guiding question three asked about the types of support provided by senior leaders. Examples from Lead Faculty included promoting assessment through a “growth model” and building awareness through actions and words. A commitment to regular meetings between senior leadership and faculty was also noted. Concern was expressed by a Lead Faculty over the level of accountability among the deans at the institution. The fourth guiding question, reaching the results and implementation stages of assessment, brought about findings from Lead Faculty focused on creating a culture that leverages existing efforts. Using the guide books at one institution was seen as a positive contribution to moving assessment efforts forward. Lastly, maintaining a faculty led structure was key to ensuring faculty engagement throughout the institution.

The final guiding question related to documented improvements seen in student learning based on assessment efforts. Challenges in reaching this stage were shared by Lead Faculty, such as finding effective ways of aggregating assessment results at the institution level. Engaging students in why general education learning outcomes and their assessment results are important for their learning was another area of focus noted by Lead Faculty. A need for more transparency to share data and results, as well as establishing a more robust data storage system, were areas of emphasis for one Lead Faculty. Finally, Lead Faculty saw their role as making an impact in their classroom which would ultimately contribute to student achievement of general education learning outcomes at the institution level.

### **Summary of Findings by A Priori Theme**

A priori themes were the third framework under which the findings are organized. The first a priori theme was having an assessment program that is faculty driven. Characteristics that demonstrated faculty serving in leadership roles included holding the position of committee or council chair and leading a division or department in assessment efforts. The governance system also contributed to a structure which placed faculty in a position to drive assessment efforts and changes at the institution. A flexible and supportive, but not assertive, administration was an additional indicator of having a faculty driven general education learning outcomes assessment program in place.

Next, understanding the unique characteristics for a community college in assessing general education was noted in the literature as impacting how assessment programs can be carried out effectively. Three characteristics outlined in the findings from this study consisted of serving multiple stakeholders and missions, having a large adjunct faculty pool, and accepting students with a diverse range of learning abilities and goals. Findings demonstrated that each institution held an expectation that graduates, regardless of program, would achieve the institution level general education learning outcomes in order to meet stakeholder expectations, such as those held by local employers. Challenges in working with the high numbers of adjunct faculty were described in terms of the ongoing turnover and probability that many small, specialized departments only employ adjunct faculty. Subsequently, departments can be left without full time faculty leadership in assessment efforts. Lastly, student attributes

were identified as a challenge to conducting pre and post assessments for general education learning outcomes. Noted as having a significant impact was the sporadic course taking patterns of the community college students.

The third and final a priori theme emphasized through the literature and evident in the findings was externally communicating assessment results and improvements. Participating institutions displayed hesitation in externally reporting the findings of general education learning outcomes assessment. There were no systematic processes in place that took assessment reports or results and reported them on a regular and consistent basis to external stakeholders. The examples of where findings had been reported externally were isolated ones, such as state program reviews and Achieving the Dream reports. Finally, none of the websites for the participating institutions displayed data or results for general education assessment.

### **Summary of Findings by Emergent Theme**

Completing this chapter, three emergent themes served as the fourth and final framework for the presentation of findings. The first emergent theme of a single administrative champion demonstrated a less systematic effort than on the faculty side for engaging participants in assessment of general education learning outcomes. Instead, administrative responsibilities tended to be isolated with one individual who produced the majority of the assessment work product and was the primary communicator with faculty. This single administrative champion also held multiple responsibilities in their day-to-day position, therefore making assessment of general education learning outcomes one of many areas in which to accomplish objectives.

Next, how expectations were set for general education learning outcomes assessment was found throughout institutional documents and as a thread in participant interviews. Variations in the level of formality ranged from inclusion of expectations in faculty contracts to simply holding a shared understanding of responsibilities among parties. Job descriptions for administrators were not found to have explicit directives for managing or leading general education assessment; although, wording related to assessment in general was identified in some instances.

Lastly, the third emergent theme embodied professional development opportunities available to support and conduct the work of assessment throughout each organization. Examples of internal professional development efforts included a credit class on assessment, a new faculty academy that included training on assessment, and in-service days that dedicated significant time for all faculty to participate in assessment trainings and discussions. An investment was made by each institution to participate in the Higher Learning Commission's Academy for Assessment of Student Learning, which provided a venue for faculty and administrative teams to engage in professional development and growth. At each institution, access and funding for internal and external opportunities were evident and accessible.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A timely report by the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (2012) creates a call to action in order to address the fundamental mission of higher education – student learning.

Higher education has been entrusted with an important societal responsibility. This responsibility calls for a commitment to see that all students reach high standards and fulfill their potential. Doing so requires us to gather and report on evidence of student learning and use it to improve student learning outcomes. If colleges and universities focus on evidence-based improvement of student learning outcomes, they will be true to their societal responsibilities and serve the common good. Our students and our nation deserve nothing less. (p. 10)

Community colleges, as significant providers of undergraduate education, are faced with carrying out assessment of student learning at the institutional level through their general education learning outcomes. As such, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify institutional structures and processes which support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives at select AQIP institutions.

Resulting recommendations for practice should inform strategies at community colleges to prepare the institution to complete an assessment cycle that leads to documented improvement in student learning.

In an effort to understand the overall institutional structures and processes which support general education learning outcomes assessment for AQIP community colleges, the following five guiding questions were developed:



1. What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?
2. What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?
3. How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?
4. What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?
5. What steps have been taken to make improvements to student learning based on the results of general education learning outcomes assessment?

### **Discussion**

In the following discussion, the perspectives offered during semi-structured interviews, in conjunction with information obtained through a review of institutional documents, are contrasted with current literature. In addition, the relationship between the findings from this research and the conceptual frameworks identified for this study will be presented. The discussion is arranged by five categories which correspond with the study's guiding questions: institutional structures, assessment processes, support from senior leaders, reaching the results and implementation stages, and documentation of improved student learning.

#### **Institutional Structures**

The discussion of institutional structures will address common elements identified across the study's participating institutions and the relationship between

such structures and the study's conceptual frameworks. Three common structures associated with general education learning outcomes assessment were identified for each of the participating institutions: (a) a set of defined learning outcomes, (b) a committee configuration embedded within the larger organizational model, and (c) dedicated resources (direct and indirect) to support assessment efforts. Demonstrations of a relationship between institutional structures and the conceptual frameworks for this research study are offered next. First, the environment component of Astin's I-E-O (input, environment, output) model is contrasted with institutional structure findings from this study. Second, the accountability paradigm from the conceptual framework, dual purposes of assessment, is contrasted with institutional structures. Concluding the institutional structures discussion is the relationship of such structures to the AQIP Criteria and AQIP Principles of High Performance Organizations, which also serve as conceptual frameworks in this study.

**Defined learning outcomes.** Identification of clear learning goals is necessary to set a foundation for measurement and demonstrate commitment by an institution as to what their expectations are for students upon completion of a program of study (New Leadership Alliance, 2012; Walvoord, 2010; and Yin & Volkwein, 2010). All three participating institutions demonstrated they had defined general education learning outcomes in place.

In addition, research by Banta (2006), the New Leadership Alliance (2012), and Nunley et al. (2011) identifies the importance of knowing where and when the learning goals occur in the curriculum. These researchers recommend that after learning

outcomes are agreed upon, it is appropriate to identify where they are present in the curriculum so corresponding assessment measures can be designed and then implemented at an apt time in the student's learning career. Of the participating institutions for this research, only Prairie Community College (PCC) shared evidence of having an assessment structure for general education learning outcomes that identified where the learning outcomes were present throughout the curriculum. A course redesign effort allowed PCC to identify exactly which courses covered which general education learning outcomes, ultimately leading to assessment processes that were designed around where and when the outcomes were addressed in the curriculum.

Findings from this research demonstrated that each institution intended their institution level, general education learning outcomes to apply across disciplines and degrees so all exiting students would achieve the outcomes. This evidence was seen through PCC's Assessment of Student Learning website (n.d.), Rivers Community College's (RCC) Systems Portfolio (2010), and Stateline Community College's (SCC) Foundation Learning Abilities Overview (2007). Albertine (2011), AAC&U (2007), Astin (1991), Ewell (2004), and Leskes and Wright (2005) emphasize the ability of general education learning outcomes to transcend disciplines and departments to engage the entire student population. For community colleges, their multiple missions play a role in diversifying students among a variety of degree plans, certificate options, and non-credit experiences. As noted by Ewell (2011), Nunley et al. (2011), and Trapp and Cleaves (2005), this diversity of mission and programs presents a consideration for

community colleges to effectively structure general education learning outcomes assessment that pertains to such a broad spectrum.

**Committee configuration.** A second common institutional structure for the participating institutions was having a committee or set of committees dedicated to general education learning outcomes assessment efforts. Per Elfner (2005) and Maki (2010), having an assessment committee reside within an organizational structure is an effective approach to engaging people and resources across the institution. While each institution participating in this study met this characteristic and pointed to one or more committees as being involved with general education learning outcomes assessment, the reporting mechanisms across the governance structure and/or with administration varied.

For PCC, the responsibilities of the Assessment Committee and Core Learning Project were clearly outlined (planning assessment activities, reporting results, supporting professional development, etc.) in the committee By-Laws and AQIP Systems Portfolio; however, the channels and expectations for communication were described by the Lead Administrator at PCC as “a little less formal.” All interviewees at PCC shared that the committee and project team ultimately reported to and communicated with the CAO PCC despite there not being formal documentation of the relationship. At RCC and SCC, documents indicated a direct reporting relationship between the assessment committee focused on general education learning outcomes and another governance body and/or administrative group (i.e., Dean’s Council and Curriculum Council at RCC and the Curriculum and Assessment Committee at SCC).

**Dedicated resources.** Resource allocation was a third commonality related to general education learning outcomes assessment among institutional structures that was derived from the findings of this research study. Both direct budgeting for assessment (such as line items in the institutional budget for the HLC Assessment Academy participation fee or a set dollar amount to support scoring of student artifacts) and indirect budgeting for assessment (such as release time absorbed through departmental budgets) were identified by the participating institutions as dedicated institutional structures to support general education learning outcomes assessment. A caution in allocating resources appropriately was given by Swing and Coogan (2010) who connected the “investment” in assessment resources with the corresponding value of having used the results for improvement. The researchers argue that when institutions assign financial and human resources to assessment efforts, even when the dollars or time are small or inconsequential, there can still be a “resulting ratio [that] is. . .undesirable” (Swing & Coogan, 2010, p. 14) when the work products are not used for change or to inform subsequent efforts. Further, as noted by Swing and Coogan (p. 12), failing to analyze and use data, seeing things through to implementation of improvements, or foregoing discussions around changes when some factors are beyond their control, are key ways to “negatively [impact] the cost-benefit ratio.”

**Relationship to I-E-O assessment model.** One of the conceptual frameworks for this research was Astin’s (1991) I-E-O (inputs – environment – outputs) model of assessment. Astin formulated a schema of assessment which looked to an input and output model that mirrors a cost-benefit structure. The purpose of Astin’s I-E-O model

is to improve educational structures in order to yield the greatest impact on student learning, or “talent development” (p. 233). The inputs and environment therefore influence the outputs. Within the findings from this study, institutional structures are most aligned with the “E”, or environment, noted in Astin’s model. Astin identifies the environment as including elements such as student experiences, policies, and practices. In the three sites studied, institutional structures were designed primarily around assessment practices and policies. The student experience was noted in isolated examples relating to building student awareness of the importance of the learning outcomes; however, assessment committees were not structured in a way that engaged or involved students through regular membership or communication efforts of results and improvements.

**Relationship to dual purposes of assessment.** The dual purposes of assessment (accountability and improvement) represent another conceptual framework for this research study. A characteristic of the assessment for accountability paradigm is conducting assessment to meet external standards for compliance (Ewell, 2009; Suskie, 2010; Terenzini, 1989; Volkwein, 2010a). Based on the site selection criteria for this study, each institution selected had participated in the Higher Learning Commission’s Assessment Academy. Additionally, each site maintained accreditation through AQIP and reported to the HLC through action project updates and a systems portfolio. All three colleges acknowledged institutional structures supporting assessment (e.g., learning outcomes, committees) in their systems portfolio and had designated general education learning outcomes assessment for one or more action projects. Through the

Academy participation and reporting components to HLC, the institutions were working toward their assessment goals through an accountability perspective.

**Relationship to AQIP Criteria and AQIP Principles.** The AQIP Criteria and the AQIP Principles of High Performance Organizations account for the final conceptual framework assigned to this study. The institutional structures that support assessment of general education learning outcomes which emerged at the participating institutions are a demonstration of how their organizations meet particular accreditation criteria and align with one or more principles.

Under AQIP criterion one, Helping Students Learn, each institution demonstrated evidence of “common student learning objectives. . .for all students” (HLC, 2003, p. 6.4-2) through their defined general education learning outcomes. Valuing People, criterion four, asks organizations, “in what distinctive ways do you organize your work environment, work activities, and job classifications to strengthen your focus on student learning and development?” (HLC, 2003, p. 6.4-2). Structurally, each institution placed faculty in leadership roles for the committees affiliated with general education learning outcomes assessment (see Table 9). In addition, participating institutions portrayed a range of expectations for assessment through job descriptions, committee charters, and evaluation methods. As reported through the emergent theme of “expectation setting,” PCC embedded within their full time and adjunct faculty contracts expectations for faculty to be involved in improving student learning via assessment efforts. SCC was embarking on a change to identify their annual assessment in-service as an expectation within the full time faculty agreement;

however, assessment of student learning was not noted within the adjunct contract. RCC did not locate assessment expectations within either of their faculty contracts (see Table 11). PCC was the only institution that noted assessment of student learning as playing a role in faculty evaluations.

Through the institutional structure of committees and the emergent theme of professional development, several characteristics aligned to the AQIP Principle, People, are demonstrated. A primary characteristic of this AQIP Principle is that an organization “nourishes a sense of responsibility and ownership in which all individuals understand how their role contributes to the measurable success of the institution and how they can become engaged as full participants in improvement processes” (HLC, 2010b, p. 2). Through the designation of assessment committees within the governance and/or administrative structure, individuals are invited to become “engaged” in assessment processes and contribute to improved student learning efforts across the entire institution. Similarly, professional development opportunities intended to support growth in assessment knowledge and practices were evident at each college. All participant types noted the continued and accessible financial support for professional development related to general education learning outcomes assessment.

### **Assessment Processes**

Major processes to carry out assessment of general education learning outcomes were identified across the colleges and are discussed in this section. Collecting data at the course level and maintaining a flexible cycle for timing the assessment of a learning



outcome were two processes held in common by the three sites. Distinctive processes seen across participating institutions included a variety of assessment methods applied to collect results and a range in the way assessment results were analyzed. Next, a discussion of the lack of systematic efforts to share assessment related information (i.e., cycles, results, efforts for improvement) was offered. Finally, the relationship between assessment processes and the conceptual frameworks for this study conclude the discussion section on assessment processes.

**Collecting data at the course level.** As noted by Leskes and Wright (2005), Banta (2002), and Yin and Volkwein (2010), assessment processes include the collection of evidence of student learning experiences. This practice was conducted at the course level within each of the three institutions. As Walvoord (2010) highlights, embedding assessment efforts within areas that are already valued by faculty and the overall institution is a beneficial practice. The classroom is the primary focus for teaching and learning at the faculty level and by linking assessment of general education learning outcomes to this environment, a relationship between faculty and institution level assessment is established. Walvoord (2010) also encourages leveraging existing efforts to conduct assessment processes. The course level demonstrates how discipline specific assignments and coursework can be pulled to assess broader institution learning goals, thereby capitalizing on work already underway in the classroom.

**Maintaining a flexible cycle.** Defined cycles for timing assessment of general education learning outcomes were noted at Suffolk Community College (Christensen, 2006) and Community College of Baltimore County (Nunley et al., 2011) as examples of

“good practice.” However, through the findings of this research study there was hesitation reported by the CAO’s that their institutions had yet to fall into a consistent cycle of assessment with regular review of learning outcomes on a set schedule. Each institution was maintaining a flexible approach to the timing of assessment of general education learning outcomes, allowing faculty to drive this decision through their committee structures or at the division level.

**Variety of assessment methods.** Regardless of the assessment method employed, Allen (2006) and Banta et al. (2009) emphasize the critical nature of direct evidence being gathered when assessing student learning. Each institution did uphold this practice by designing assessment processes that collected artifacts which were direct demonstrations of student learning.

A variety of assessment methods were undertaken to conduct assessments at the course level. RCC was the only institution using a standardized test in a pre/post delivery format to assess a specific general education learning outcome. Small sample sizes were noted at PCC, as their assessment form was completed by individual faculty for a particular class, and at SCC, where participation in the assessment effort was voluntary and conducted at the course level. RCC engaged in the collection of direct evidence at the course level, but initially collected for a common general education learning outcome from a large sample across a division. Moving forward, the challenge of scoring and interpreting results from such a large sample will be reduced by instead targeting a smaller sample size that is more manageable. Supplemental indirect evidence, such as through the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, was

noted at PCC as one method that employed a single, common instrument to a large sample of PCC students to gauge their perceptions about learning.

Identified as challenges for community colleges, the sporadic course taking patterns and the diverse student populations (Ewell, 2011; Nunley et al., 2011; and, Trapp & Cleaves, 2005) present difficulty in conducting assessments using a traditional pre/post method where the same student is assessed using the same instrument. RCC used a standardized exam as both the pre and post test to assess written communication; however, the group of students who took the pre test was not the same group of students that took the post test. At SCC, a pre/post test model was in the implementation stages for all students to participate in a writing pre test during a Student Success course and a writing post test during a capstone course. Unlike RCC where engaging the same student is the challenge, a common rating instrument at SCC was described as difficult to administer given the pre and post assignments were contextualized to the learning environment in which they were delivered (broad student success course and discipline specific, career course).

**Analyzing assessment results.** Data analysis at the three sites ranged from being the responsibility of a solo instructor using their class results, to collaborating with a dean or division team, to taking place within the committee structure of the institution. The collective review and interpretation of assessment results by faculty is emphasized by Ewell (2009) and Banta and Blaich (2011). SCC demonstrated a commitment to engaging faculty from across the institution in reviewing and discussing assessment results by scheduling assessment in-services twice per year. All faculty

were presented with the results and participated in analyzing root causes and sharing successful teaching methods intended to improve student learning. RCC conducted analysis by involving faculty from the division which conducted the assessment, the General Education Curriculum and Assessment Committee (GECAC), and the corresponding GECAC resource group holding responsibility for the learning outcome that had been assessed. PCC had a less systematic way to review results with larger faculty audiences through Best Practice Sessions. When faculty discussed ways they were improving student learning, Lead Faculty PCC-1 indicated that “a lot of times they’ll have data or supporting evidence that will say, these were the scores before, these are the scores now.”

**Lack of systematic communication processes.** Systematic communication to external stakeholders of general education learning outcomes assessment efforts and corresponding results was limited to AQIP Systems Portfolios and reporting expectations related to participation in the HLC Assessment Academy. All three sites had isolated examples of sharing assessment processes or results outside the institution (see Table 10); however, none demonstrated a routine process to place current information on the institution’s website or announce assessment initiatives and results to students. This finding corresponds to research by Jankowski and Makela (2010) that states of the 118 college websites they reviewed for assessment information, “less than 5% of websites across the entire set of institutions had any evidence of such information” (p. 14).

Efforts to communicate to currently enrolled students about general education learning outcomes assessment was cited by CAO PCC and CAO SCC as a worthy goal. As endorsed by CAO PCC, students' intellectual growth could be enhanced by establishing "connections so that students perceived, understood, and appreciated the connections between various academic disciplines." CAO SCC shared a desire for students to be more involved with assessment and that one approach could be to communicate to them about "why it is we're so interested in what [students] know." These examples were grounded in a desire to see assessment efforts lead to improved student learning.

**Relationships between assessment processes and the conceptual frameworks supporting this research.** Each institution in this study crafted assessment processes around an outcomes based model. That is, a set of learning goals were identified and student learning attainment of the goals were measured through assessments. Related to the conceptual framework of the I-E-O model, Astin (1991) cites two shortcomings with an outcomes based framework. One is the lack of "input information" (p. 32) to contrast with the corresponding outcomes, and a second is the inability to isolate environmental factors, such as "educational programs and practices," to determine what actually impacted student learning on the identified learning goal.

AQIP Criteria, another conceptual framework for this study, target assessment processes through the questions related to criterion one, Helping Students Learn. Findings from this study demonstrated that the participating colleges have addressed the question of "how do you determine the processes for student assessment?" (HLC,

2003, p. 6.4-2), by assigning responsibility for assessment within committees and/or projects that have cross-functional representation and faculty leadership. Decisions about assessment processes are made within the institutional structures at each institution, thus fulfilling the accreditor's expectation of ensuring there is accountability in determining how student assessment will be conducted.

The next related AQIP criterion question is, "how do you discover how well prepared the students who are completing programs, degrees, and certificates are for further education or employment?" (HLC, 2003, p. 6.4-.2). As demonstrated in the findings from this study, each institution publicized that their general education learning outcomes related to all exiting students. Language included the expectation that through accomplishing the institution level outcomes, students would be well prepared for their next educational step or the workforce. Assessment processes related to general education learning outcomes were identified at each institution as a means to determine the level of achievement across all students.

Conducting assessment results in evidence, or information, that is analyzed to inform the improvement of student learning. The AQIP Principle, Information, encompasses characteristics which relate to assessment processes. For example, AQIP identifies that a high performance organization, "develops and refines systems for gathering and assessing valuable feedback and data, and continually seeks better methods for obtaining the most useful information on which to base decisions and improvements" (HLC, 2010b, p. 2). An example of adjusting assessment processes by using information is RCC's strategy to decrease the sample size of collected student

artifacts in order to realistically handle the volume as additional learning outcome assessment projects are released and begin running simultaneously across the organization. PCC has identified the next phase of the Core Learning Project as aggregating results across disciplines and divisions to create an institution wide learning profile of general education outcomes. At SCC, their assessment process for foundation learning abilities is structured to enter a “maintenance mode” upon completion of an initial assessment cycle. Within the maintenance approach, data collection, data analysis, and improvement implementation are cycled through to create a continuously running assessment effort and correspond with the continuous improvement characteristics identified in the AQIP Principle, Information.

### **Support from Senior Leaders**

Signs that senior leaders within the institution were supporting assessment efforts were seen through examples such as the Chief Academic Officer promoting the project and assigning resources, as well as the deans approving release time for faculty participation. When looking across participating institutions, the level and type of involvement by Presidents and Boards of Trustees varied. Each institution’s assessment framework identified a single administrative champion who carried the general education learning outcomes assessment efforts and held assessment as only one of many core job responsibilities.

**Examples of senior leader support.** Under the conceptual framework of AQIP Criteria, the questions related to Valuing People serve as a lens through which to view findings related to senior leader support. First, “in what distinctive ways do you

organize your work environment, work activities, and job classifications to strengthen your focus on student learning and development?" (HLC, 2003, p. 6.4-6). Each "work environment" related to assessment was described by the CAO's as having structures where faculty carried out the work of assessment, a dedicated senior leader oversaw operations related to assessment, and the ultimate responsibility for student learning and assessment rested with the CAO position. Promoting general education learning outcomes assessment was recognized by Lead Administrators and Lead Faculty as occurring through the CAO and manifested in elements such as dedicating time at mandatory faculty meetings to the topic of assessment and assigning resources to assessment projects and efforts. Second, "how do you design your recognition, reward, and compensation systems to align with your objectives in Criterion One, Helping Students Learn. . .?" (HLC, 2003, p. 6.4-6). Findings from this research study demonstrated that senior leaders, such as deans, were absorbing release time through departmental budgets in order to allow faculty time out of the classroom to participate in assessment or receive additional pay to compensate for the time dedicated to assessment work.

**Involvement of President and Board of Trustees.** Involvement by the President and Boards of Trustees was limited and varied across institutions. Two colleges, RCC and SCC, shared examples of their President being involved at the very high level of approving new resources (funds, support services) or expecting a major progress report on the assessment initiatives tied to general education learning outcomes. PCC did not make mention of the level of involvement by their President.



In the results from the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) survey in 2009, they highlighted the overwhelming focus (79% of respondents) by boards to concentrate on fiscal matters versus “academic matters” (2010, p. 6). Per the findings from this research study, two of the institutions (PCC and RCC) had initiated presentations regarding assessment of student learning to their Boards of Trustees. However, only RCC indicated the topic was a regular occurrence (annually) at the board table. CAO RCC acknowledged that this can be a “reminder” to the board about the major elements of assessment, the findings, and improvement steps. In his words, “it’s really kind of starting at the very beginning and walking them through easily.”

**Single administrative champion.** Each college identified a single administrative champion who led the general education learning outcomes assessment efforts for the administration and worked directly with faculty leaders on carrying out assessment. From the perspectives of SCC participants, their college’s size directly related to the administrative assignment residing with one person, and only accounted for a limited percentage of their job responsibilities. Interestingly, despite the varying institutional sizes, each of the participating institutions assigned administrative responsibilities for assessment to one person who also held a mix of other major job responsibilities.

The single administrative position was highly regarded by the Lead Faculty participants who shared comments about their Lead Administrators’ dedication and commitment to the assessment projects. However, the focus on one administrator left institutional structures without a systematic and distributed effort to engage other non-

faculty members on committees and project teams. Maki (2010) described the committee framework best suited for supporting general education learning outcomes assessment as, “a campus-wide committee. . .that drives sustainable assessment of student learning across an institution” (p. 54). The focus for participating institutions was for faculty from across the organization to be involved in official committees and projects, but not administrators or staff. Lead Faculty from PCC and SCC commented that deans from across all divisions would likely state that they support and believe in assessment efforts, but in reality are more reactive in addressing needs or ideas when they arise versus being proactive in dedicating their own time and effort to assessment of general education learning outcomes. Lead Faculty SCC expressed concern that accountability is a professional priority for her, but was not something being seen “at the Dean level.” The AQIP Principle of Involvement asserts that, “broad-based faculty, staff, and administrative involvement encourages better decisions and strengthens individual and group ownership of systems, activities, and initiatives” (HLC, 2010b, p. 1).

### **Reaching the Results and Implementation Stages**

This discussion of how and why institutions were able to reach the results and implementation stages for assessment of general education learning outcomes will include two common findings which emerged from this research study. The first relates to assessment efforts being led by faculty and the second is the growth of assessment structures and processes being motivated by AQIP and accreditation. In contrast, elements unique to the institutional cultures were noted by the participating

institutions and included valuing the instructor and classroom level at PCC, using data and creating a culture of trust around the data at RCC, and capitalizing on the smaller institution size to facilitate communication at SCC.

**Faculty led efforts.** Banta and Blaich (2011), CHEA (2002), Ewell (2009), HLC (2003), and Hutchings (2010) emphasize the critical role of faculty in leading and participating in assessment efforts for the institution. The AQIP Principle, Involvement, identifies high performance organizations as those that draw “on the expertise and practical experience of those people closest to a situation” (HLC, 2010b, p. 1). Faculty are most connected to student learning through their management and delivery of curriculum, and evaluation of student academic achievement. Assessment structures and processes which place them in key decision making and application roles honors their position within the organization and capitalizes on their expertise in both their discipline and in broader teaching strategies.

The challenge in a faculty led environment is the accountability aspect of peer to peer practices. As noted by Lead Faculty SCC, “the thing with faculty is I can’t make anybody do anything. So you need the support of administration.” Lead Administrator PCC also acknowledged that Core Learning Team Leaders, who are faculty, facilitate the sharing of assessment methods, results, and best practices, but are not charged with evaluating if assessment forms are being completed and to what extent they meet expectations for quality assessment. The evaluation and accountability components are assigned to administration at PCC.

Through findings from this study, the faculty led efforts at each of the participating institutions were identified as systematically involving full time faculty in leadership positions, being placed on committees, and being present during planned assessment conversations such as those which occurred at in-service days. There was a lack of a defined system for engaging adjunct faculty in these same experiences. Penn (2011b) acknowledges the large numbers of adjunct faculty teaching in community colleges as a challenge to implementing general education learning outcomes assessment. The author contends that the inherent nature of a part time role causes one to focus on the contractual obligation, which is to teach a specific course or set of courses.

Findings from this study demonstrated expectations for the involvement of adjunct faculty in assessment of general education learning outcomes were limited to volunteering on a committee or submitting student artifacts to be assessed as part of an assessment process. One example of a formal expectation for involvement by adjuncts can be seen in PCC's adjunct faculty contract that includes language directed at being involved in the assessment frameworks in place at the institution (see Table 11).

**Motivation to assess student learning.** The AQIP accreditation process and the HLC Assessment Academy were noted by participants as initially motivating their institution to focus on assessment of general education learning outcomes and generate momentum to reach the results and implementation stages of the assessment cycle. Forecasting beyond the time period when data was collected for this research study, the institutions differed on whether they would continue to leverage the accountability

mechanism within accreditation and the Assessment Academy. For PCC the four year commitment to the Assessment Academy had accomplished the goal of implementing their Core Learning Project; therefore, continued enrollment was not seen as necessary. CAO RCC emphasized the upcoming academic year would include a concerted effort to re-introduce AQIP and identify a “clear line of sight as to how [continuous improvement principles] make a difference in student success.” At SCC, the upcoming academic year included an AQIP action project to extend assessment of foundation learning abilities to the SCC faculty and staff populations as a demonstration that the entire organization is accountable to the abilities and should be leading by example.

**Institutional culture.** Elements of institutional culture supported the colleges reaching the results and implementation stages of assessment. For PCC, language and guidance included in their Core Learning Project Faculty Guide Books demonstrated expectations of how individual faculty contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment. Connections between autonomy in the classroom and an obligation to contribute to the institution’s overall learning goals were made evident in the guide books, as well as clear steps to be taken in order to complete required assessment forms. The PCC guide books are an example of a professional development tool, expectation setting vehicle, and communication system. The communication effort through the guide books occurs between faculty and administrators within the main assessment structures, and those carrying out assessment processes in the classroom. Posed in the criterion questions for the AQIP Criteria, Measuring Effectiveness is, “how do you select, manage, and use information and data (including current performance

information) to support student learning. . .?” (HLC, 2003, p. 6.4-10). At PCC, the guide books play a key role in demonstrating the college is fulfilling the continuous improvement characteristics laid out in this question.

Encouraging an environment that uses data and fostering a culture of trust were identified at RCC as helping move the institution toward the later stages in assessment cycles and processes. Evident in the AQIP Criteria and Principles, identifying and sharing results are central to continuous improvement practices upon which AQIP was founded. One of the criterion questions for Helping Students Learn explicitly asks, “what are your results for common student learning objectives. . .?” (HLC, 2003, p. 6.4-3) and the AQIP Principle of Information highlights the need to “[develop] and [refine] systems for gathering and assessing valuable feedback and data, and continually [seek] better methods for obtaining the most useful information on which to base decisions and improvements” (HLC, 2010b, p. 2). Indications that RCC would continue to focus on data collection and transparency include moving toward the dedication of website resources to share assessment results and a transition to using an assessment database to track and share results of not only program level assessment efforts, but also general education learning outcomes assessment.

For Stateline Community College, the smaller size of the institution was noted by participants as influencing the institutional culture around assessment. CAO SCC identified that her position is able to build closer ties with faculty since there is “less social distance,” allowing personal and professional relationships to be fostered across the entire institution. Not having as many layers of “bureaucracy” was noted as a

positive cultural element that encouraged expedited decision making. Size also influenced faculty conversations through their ability to bring all faculty together in one space and realistically have everyone engage in assessment discussions together, no matter the discipline they are assigned to teach. Allen (2006) supports these types of approaches to cross-functional dialogues in order to “create a more cohesive learning environment” (p. 142) and also notes the inclusion of student development and cocurricular personnel as advantageous.

### **Documentation of Improved Student Learning**

The intention of a general education learning outcomes assessment program is to use assessment results to inform changes that are intended to improve student attainment of such outcomes. After implementing changes, the institutions should document the resulting improvement or decline in student learning. The documentation stage of assessment was not reached by any of the participating institutions. In this discussion section, the challenges in reaching the documentation of improved student learning stage of assessment are offered. These challenges, as identified from the findings in this study, included (a) knowing when the data collection effort is complete, (b) aggregating assessment data at the institution level, (c) understanding effects of administrative turnover, and (d) dealing with the extended time commitment to conduct general education learning outcomes assessment.

**Challenge: data collection.** Taken from the literature reviewed, the documentation of improved student learning as a result of using assessment data is a rare occurrence. As reported by Banta and Blaich (2011),

Among 146 profiles of good practice submitted by colleagues at campuses from across the country for possible inclusion in a new book, Trudy Banta, Elizabeth Jones, and Karen Black found that only 6 percent of the profiles contained evidence that student learning had improved, no matter what measure had been used. (p. 22)

Banta and Blaich concluded that assessment leaders are faced with the challenge of knowing when the data collected is enough to inform improvements and when more evidence is warranted to “focus and clarify potential actions” (p. 25). SCC participants demonstrated this struggle through numerous comments such as,

- Communication to the board “hasn’t happened yet because we don’t have enough data. But we will” (CAO SCC).
- “Because at this point we don’t feel like we have enough data to make any kind of decision at all. So we feel like we need more” (Lead Administrator SCC).
- “We’re very early in this. We’re still not really confident about having enough data to make decisions” (Lead Administrator SCC)
- “To collect data, and make decisions from data, it’s not going to work forever for us to just rely on those that are willing to volunteer. Somewhere in the whole scheme of this, we are going to need data from each and every division from every program, in order to make some good decisions” (Lead Faculty SCC).

**Challenge: aggregation at the institutional level.** At PCC, the assessment results gathered in courses had yet to be aggregated at the institution level in order to analyze the data and inform larger scale improvements. For RCC, a challenge



associated with data collection and analysis was the consistent entry of results into their database by faculty from across the entire institution. Despite the recognition by Ewell (2011) of promising trends in technology to support community colleges in allowing a wide range of embedded, course level assessment results to be “aggregated to yield interpretable indexes of performance” (p. 33), either participating institutions had yet to amass results at the institution level (PCC) or determine a consistent structure and process for sharing results in order to analyze options for improvements (RCC and SCC). Measuring Effectiveness, one of the AQIP Criteria, asks the question, “how do you select, manage, and use information and data. . .to support student learning. . .?” (HLC, 2003, p. 6.4-10). For the participating colleges, the managing and using elements of this question have proven taxing when applied to general education learning outcomes assessment.

**Challenge: administrative turnover.** Turnover in administrative positions was identified by RCC as contributing to the challenge in being able to reach the documentation of improvement stage for assessment. Related to the impact administrative turnover has on assessment efforts, Banta and Blaich (2011) report:

Banta, Jones, and Black found that 42 percent of the 146 assessment programs they studied were just two years old or less. One reason for this is that presidents and chief academic officers. . .generally do not stay long in these roles. When they move on to other positions, their successors are likely to have different views of assessment and thus change directions. (p. 25)

**Challenge: extended timeline.** CAO PCC and Lead Administrator PCC emphasized a key component in their institutional culture as “patience.” This characteristic was connected to the Core Learning Project which intentionally began

with course redesigns, collected assessment results at the course level and analyzed locally within the departments, and is now building toward aggregation at the institution level. PCC participants acknowledged the extended cycle required multiple phases and years, but was a worthy model given it would yield more “genuine” results. These qualities at PCC align with a component of the improvement paradigm explained by Ewell (2009) as, “the predominant ethos [that] is a posture of engagement seeking continuous improvement and a ‘culture of evidence’ ” (p. 9).

## **Conclusions and Implications**

### **Institutional Structures: Conclusions**

The first guiding question for this study focused on what institutional structures are in place that contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives. Three conclusions were drawn after analyzing the literature, the findings from this study, and the resulting discussion. These conclusions relate to adjunct faculty participation in the assessment structure, location of learning outcomes throughout the curriculum, and consideration for resource allocations.

Community colleges rely heavily on adjunct faculty in order to support the variety of disciplines which emerge from the multiple missions of the organization. Despite commitments by adjuncts to teach throughout the institution, institutional structures identified in the findings from this study demonstrated leadership opportunities for full time faculty only. Participation in the assessment practices for general education learning outcomes did involve adjunct faculty who volunteered to have student artifacts scored or through the collection of assessment forms, and none of

the institutions formally excluded adjuncts from participating. However, systematic and defined efforts to involve adjuncts did not extend into the structures of the assessment committees.

Distinct general education learning outcomes were present at each institution and reflected a foundation component of the institutional structures that support assessment efforts. While institutions had articulated a list of general education learning outcomes, efforts to identify where and how the outcomes were being delivered in the curriculum was limited to one institution (Prairie Community College). As expectations for results and improvements based on assessment of student learning builds from external stakeholders, community colleges would benefit from knowing where institution level learning outcomes can be found throughout the curriculum. This identification of outcomes could afford an institution greater agility in responding more quickly to new mandates, as well as provide transparency to students and faculty for where and when the general education learning outcomes will be encountered.

Allocation of resources was found to occur within the institutional structures that support assessment of student learning. Budgeting increases and diversifying where funds were allocated seemed to occur in response to volume issues (more student artifacts to score, more release hours for faculty in leadership roles) and professional development needs (funding HLC Assessment Academy, bringing in outside expertise to consult). Based on the findings related to resources, allocations of funding and talent were put forward without consideration of how to analyze the resulting benefits or improvements.

### **Institutional Structures: Implications**

Institutional structures that support assessment lack formal involvement of adjunct faculty. However, adjunct faculty have a significant influence on students given their volume of teaching assignments in community colleges. If they are not involved systematically in the institutional structures that support assessment, a large portion of the teaching knowledge base in the institution will continue to be left out. This in turn will exclude many community college students from being recipients of the intentional, informed delivery and assessment of general education learning outcomes.

Confirming the general education learning outcomes a college expects all students to achieve is a critical foundation to the institutional structures that support assessment. Knowing the location of the learning outcomes throughout the curriculum is also integral in order to maximize assessment efforts. Such efforts can be futile if improvement measures are taken in courses, programs, or with groups of students who have not yet encountered the learning outcome and the associated content or experiences.

Transparency and justification of resources are timely endeavors given the current, strained financial climate in higher education. As scrutiny increases from the federal to the state to the local level, institutions need to be prepared to link resources to results. While an increase in funding and faculty release time can be critical supports to building assessment efforts, it is prudent for organizations to clearly define how those resources will be accountable to success measures.

### **Assessment Processes: Conclusions**

Assessment efforts for general education learning outcomes that originate from the course level provide a connection between a faculty's expertise in their discipline and the larger, institution level learning goals. The course level collection effort also contextualizes general education learning within a discipline for students and is intended to foster connections for such a learning outcome across the breadth of their undergraduate experience.

Assessment processes are influenced by the institutional structures that support assessment. Where responsibility is placed within the institutional structures impacts at what level analysis of assessment results occurs, the regularity with which assessment is conducted, and the extent of involvement by faculty throughout the institution.

Participating institutions shared assessment processes that took into consideration steps intended to foster improvements not only to student learning, but also to the assessment processes themselves. Flexibility and acknowledgement of areas to improve were demonstrated and represent a continuous improvement mindset at the institution.

### **Assessment Processes: Implications**

In order for learning outcomes assessment to be fully realized at the institution level, common methods and instruments are necessary to facilitate coordinated analysis and use of results that will impact the broad student population. When assessment processes allow faculty to individually design, deliver, and analyze results, aggregation of results at the institution level is not clearly practiced. However, it is important to

honor the course level approach in teaching and assessing general education learning outcomes, with the need for assessment results to be aggregated across the institution. Assessment processes should not compromise the worthwhile connection that emerges for faculty and students when general education learning outcomes assessment is contextualized within a discipline and delivered at the course level.

### **Support from Senior Leaders: Conclusions**

Boards of Trustees and Presidents engage the institution through relationships with external bodies, elected officials, and professional associations. They could be seen by internal and external stakeholders as the main lobbyists for institutions, yet they are not routinely well informed about assessment of student learning efforts, results, or corresponding improvements.

Formal systems were not in place to engage non-faculty positions to serve on assessment committees, projects, or play a role in defined steps of the assessment process. Institution size did not seem to affect the consistency across the three colleges to assign administrative assessment responsibilities to a single position which also included other major job duties.

### **Support from Senior Leaders: Implications**

Senior leaders would benefit from consistent updates on assessment efforts in order to represent the realistic challenges and successes community colleges have with general education learning outcomes assessment. These same senior leaders are most likely to be engaging with legislators, professional associations, and accreditors. Therefore, the public voices of the institution need to be well prepared to advocate for

or against standardized measures, benchmarking requirements, or resources that could assist in growing assessment efforts at the local level.

By having limited administrative participation in institutional structures and processes related to assessment, faculty are limited to seeing one or two senior leaders “walking the walk” of assessment and demonstrating it as a priority in how they are leading their unit(s). One might ask, if all the senior academic leaders are not engaged in assessment of general education learning outcomes, why would the faculty from across the organization choose to make it a priority?

### **Results and Implementation Stages: Conclusions**

A faculty led assessment environment was noted by participants in this study as contributing to their institution reaching the results and implementation stages of assessment. However, real concern over peer to peer accountability and involvement by the large adjunct population exists in this type of environment and heightens the need for balancing some element of administrative oversight to even out responsibilities and ensure all students are learning in a consistent and high quality learning environment.

Participants in this study identified involvement with AQIP and the HLC Assessment Academy as supporting their institution in reaching the results and implementation stages of general education learning outcomes assessment. The accountability through AQIP and the HLC Assessment Academy was identified as fostering initial momentum that led into an assessment cycle. It is difficult to know whether as much attention would have been paid to general education learning

outcomes assessment without the initial relationship to the accreditor. However, the continued connection to the systems portfolio, and in some cases AQIP action projects and Assessment Academy membership, demonstrates the institutions will continue to connect accountability and assessment in the future. Improvement practices are expected based on the accreditation criteria for AQIP and provide a platform for the improvement paradigm of assessment.

The Core Learning Project Faculty Guide Book from PCC was a successful tool in leading their institution toward the results and implementation stages of assessment. These guide books made an explicit connection between course level experiences and general education learning outcomes. In addition, they made concrete the expectation that assessment of the general education learning outcomes was the responsibility of all faculty teaching that course. Consequently, assessment results were turned in each semester and implementation of improvements at the course level occurred in formal and informal ways. It is important to acknowledge this tool was intended to effect general education learning outcome achievement, but did so using course level assessment results only. Currently there is not a mechanism in place to aggregate results across the entire institution to inform widespread changes intended to improve student learning for the broader student population.

### **Results and Implementation Stages: Implications**

It is critical to keep all faculty (full time and adjunct) at the forefront of the assessment effort to ensure decision making is close to those who are most impacted through teaching and learning (faculty and students). This was demonstrated by the



three participating institutions since all maintained a faculty led assessment environment. However, clear delineation of the assessment roles and responsibilities best suited for administrators across the institution would benefit colleges to balance out internal accountability and take on the evaluation component that is otherwise unattended to through the peer to peer structure in a faculty led assessment environment.

Accountability to accreditors can generate momentum for reaching the results and implementation stages of assessment. As such, institutions would be well served to leverage the continuous improvement platform embedded in AQIP Criteria for Accreditation and AQIP Principles of High Performance Organizations in order to maintain progress toward completing a full cycle of assessment.

The success by Prairie Community College in reaching the results and implementation stages of assessment at the course level was fostered by their faculty guide book. This model created clear expectations to conduct assessment and established a connection between course content and general education learning outcomes. The challenge remains to scale such an initiative up to the institution level in terms of aggregating results, informing change across the institution, and documenting resulting changes in student learning across a broader student population.

### **Documentation of Improved Student Learning: Conclusions**

Reaching the point where documented improvement of student learning has occurred as a result of general education learning outcomes assessment is a lengthy process that requires patience and stamina on the part of the institution, faculty, and

administration. Despite multi-year efforts to implement an assessment program that could yield usable results for making changes and documenting improvements at the institution level, participating institutions were challenged in completing a full assessment cycle. A critical juncture in the assessment process appears to be gauging when enough of the appropriate type of data is available to analyze and act upon. Additionally, planning for aggregation of assessment results at the institution level is a difficult but key component to ensure institutions have designed an assessment program that can impact the broader student population.

### **Documentation of Improved Student Learning: Implications**

Community colleges need to acknowledge the dedication of time and resources assessment programs take if they are to reach the point of documenting improved student learning at the institution level. Building in safeguards to account for administrative and faculty leadership turnover, changes in resource allocations, and checkpoints for data volume and integrity are ways to maximize the potential for actually reaching the point of impacting student learning on general education learning outcomes.

In order to proceed through an assessment cycle and reach the stage of documenting changes in student learning, assessment leaders need to be well informed about how data can be aggregated, analyzed, and used to make changes at the institution level. Gathering too much data can paralyze an institution from finding ways to improve among the masses of information, while compiling data that is

insubstantial in justifying changes has the potential to misguide the use of resources and impact students negatively.

### Summary of Conclusions and Implications

The conclusions and implications from this research have been presented according to the study's five guiding questions and a summary is provided in Table 13.

Table 13

#### *Conclusions and Implications by Guiding Question*

Guiding Question Topic	Conclusions	Implications
Institutional Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of systematic effort to involve adjuncts in institutional structures that support assessment</li> <li>• Only one institution defined where in the curriculum general education learning outcomes were located</li> <li>• Resource allocation was not tied to analysis of resulting benefits or improvements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large adjunct population has considerable influence on student learning and should be formally involved in assessment efforts</li> <li>• Improvement efforts are ineffective if not explicitly tied to where and when learning outcomes are encountered</li> <li>• Current financial climate dictates prudent use of resources and how they are accountable to success measures</li> </ul>
Assessment Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course level assessment efforts connect faculty expertise in a discipline to institution level learning outcomes</li> <li>• Institutional structures that support assessment influence processes for when assessment is conducted, how faculty are involved, and at what level results are analyzed</li> <li>• Continuous improvement mindset demonstrated through commitment to improve assessment processes themselves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty independence to design, deliver, and analyze assessment results at the course level challenges aggregation at the institution level</li> <li>• Assessment processes need to balance faculty expertise in the classroom with aggregation goals</li> </ul>

Guiding Question Topic	Conclusions	Implications
Support from Senior Leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Boards of Trustees and Presidents are not informed consistently about assessment efforts, results, or corresponding improvements</li> <li>Lack of systematic effort to engage non-faculty positions in assessment efforts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public voices of the institution need to be well prepared to advocate for resources to support assessment at the local level</li> <li>Distribution of administrative participation in assessment would signal to faculty it is a priority</li> </ul>
Reaching the Results and Implementation Stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Concern over peer to peer accountability framework and large adjunct population</li> <li>Balance of faculty leadership with administrative oversight would contribute to consistency and quality of learning environments</li> <li>Accountability through accreditor fostered momentum that led to results and implementation stages</li> <li>Accreditation components will continue to connect accountability and assessment</li> <li>Faculty guide book at PCC connected course level with general education learning outcomes and set expectations for faculty; did not establish system for institution level aggregation of results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Definition of roles and responsibilities for administrators across institution would establish internal accountability and evaluation of assessment efforts</li> <li>AQIP Criteria and Principles can be leveraged to maintain progress in completing a full cycle of assessment</li> <li>Faculty guide book model created clear expectations and connections in the curriculum</li> <li>Challenge exists in scaling up course level assessment of general education learning outcomes to the institution level</li> </ul>
Documentation of Improved Student Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Patience is necessary to see assessment through to the documentation of improved student learning stage</li> <li>Critical juncture in assessment cycle is determining when enough data has been collected to inform improvements</li> <li>Aggregation of results at the institution level needs to be planned for if broader student population is to be affected</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Safeguards necessary to account for turnover in assessment leadership, changes in resource allocation, and monitoring of data volume</li> <li>Assessment leaders need to be well informed about data aggregation at the institution level</li> </ul>

First, institutional structures demonstrate a lack of formal involvement by adjunct faculty, limited definition of where general education learning outcomes were present throughout the curriculum, and a disconnect between resource allocation and corresponding analysis of their impact. Implications of these conclusions include the influence adjunct faculty have on student learning and a need to involve them in assessment through systematic efforts. Another implication is the ability of improvement efforts to be more effective when the learning outcomes are explicitly identified throughout the curriculum. The final implication for institutional structures relates to accounting for how successful resources allocated to assessment have been in their intended application.

Assessment processes, the second guiding question topic, show that course level assessment efforts of general education learning outcomes form a connection between faculty expertise in a discipline and the larger, institution level learning goals for all students. Also, institutional structures for assessment influence where, how, and when assessment processes are carried out. Finally, undertaking continuous improvement of the assessment processes themselves was evident in the institutions studied. Therefore, corresponding implications include recognition that assessment efforts designed by individual faculty do not lend themselves to aggregation of results and improvement efforts across the broader student population. However, as aggregation of assessment data at the institution level is planned for, the meaningful connection to contextualized delivery and assessment of general education learning outcomes at the course level should not be compromised.

The third guiding question topic is senior leader support for assessment. Conclusions exemplify the lack of consistent reporting of assessment efforts and results to the Board of Trustees and President, as well as the lack of systematic efforts to include administrators from throughout the entire organization in institutional structures and assessment processes. As a result, the implications show that the most senior public voices for the organization are not well prepared to properly advocate for resources and practices at the local level. Also, more distributed involvement by administrators would signal to faculty the level of importance assessment holds for the institution.

Conclusions for reaching the results and implementation stages, the fourth guiding question topic, illustrate a peer to peer framework for faculty involved in assessment efforts that is not robust in accountability and evaluative oversight. Combined with a large adjunct faculty pool that is not readily involved in assessment projects or efforts, the student learning environment is susceptible to inconsistent levels of quality. Another conclusion from this study relates to reaching the results and implementation stages through the momentum gained by connecting assessment efforts to expectations of accreditors. The faculty guide books at PCC were seen as a successful tool to set expectations for assessing student learning and making explicit the relationship between general education learning outcomes and course level experiences; yet, this mechanism did not result in aggregation of assessment results and implementation of improvements at the institution level. The corresponding implications indicate a need to outline roles and responsibilities for administrators in

order to establish internal accountability and evaluation of assessment efforts; a need to leverage the continuous improvement principles from AQIP to maintain progress in completing a full assessment cycle; and a need for clear expectations and connections between general education learning outcomes and course level experiences, while accounting for ways to scale up to the institution level for aggregation and improvement efforts.

The final guiding question topic is documentation of improved student learning and primary conclusions include the acknowledgement that the assessment of general education learning outcomes is a lengthy process that requires patience and dedication. Also, two important considerations for reaching the documentation of improved student learning stage are determining when the data collection saturation point has been reached and having a plan for aggregation and analysis of results at the institution level. The related implications express having safeguards in place to best prepare for the long assessment cycle and ensuring assessment leaders are well versed in monitoring data collection and aggregation at the institution level.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Improvement of Practice**

Four main strategies comprise the recommendations for community colleges to be better prepared in reaching the final stages of general education learning outcomes assessment. See Figure 7 for a representation of these strategies.

Strategy 1: Spread and Connect. Extending the administrative responsibility for assessment of student learning throughout the organization and explicitly outlining the

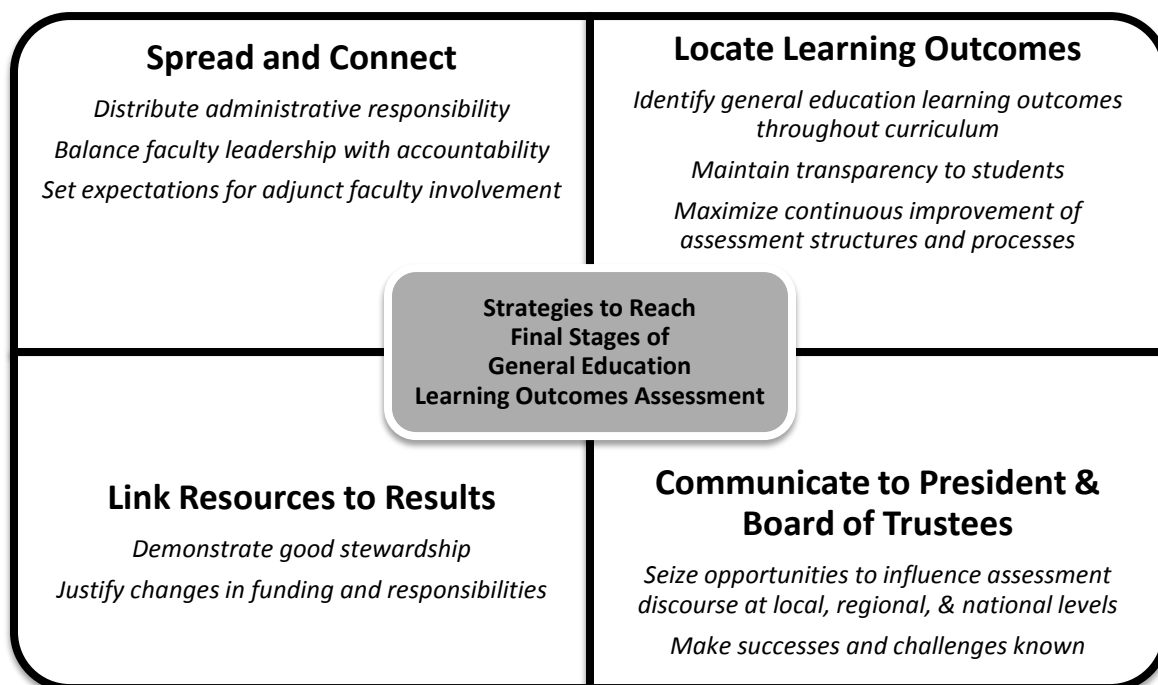


Figure 7. Strategies to Reach Final Stages of General Education Learning Outcomes Assessment.

administrative role and responsibility for general education learning outcomes assessment can aid in balancing faculty leadership with evaluation and accountability. Additionally, setting expectations for the involvement of adjunct faculty provides for a holistic approach that acknowledges the uniqueness of community colleges and signals a commitment to quality learning environments for all students at the institution.

Strategy 2: Locate Learning Outcomes. Institutions that clearly identify where and when general education learning outcomes appear in the curriculum can proceed with confidence that changes resulting from assessment efforts are best suited to impact student learning. These institutions also have a distinct advantage when evaluating and improving assessment structures and processes given the transparent documentation of where the learning outcomes are encountered by students.

Strategy 3: Link Resources to Results. Investing in assessment of student learning occurs through direct and indirect budgeting. Regardless of the ratio between



these allocations, having a clear line from resources to the results of assessment efforts is a signal of good stewardship and can provide a platform for faculty and administration to justify changes in funding and levels of responsibilities that have the greatest opportunity to impact student learning.

Strategy 4: Communicate to President and Board of Trustees. In order for a community college to maximize opportunities to benefit from, contribute to, and influence the assessment discourse at the local, regional, and national levels, the senior level voices of the institution need to be well informed about assessment successes and challenges at their organization. Even when the final stages of an assessment cycle are yet to be reached, status updates would benefit the President and Board of Trustees by intentionally creating connections between accountability measures and the realities of improving student learning within the organization.

### **Recommendations for Dissemination**

It is clear through accreditation guidelines, professional association actions, and the federal government's attention to student learning that community colleges will continue to face internal and external expectations that student learning be assessed and actions taken to foster improvement. The findings and recommendations resulting from this research study will benefit community colleges faced with implementing or improving their general education learning outcomes assessment efforts.

Dissemination of this study will occur through the following five avenues.

1. Sharing with institutions and participants who took part in the study. Copies of this study will be emailed to the participants as a means of fostering

- professional relationships with those who gave of their time and expertise to make this research possible. In addition, these sites will benefit from seeing their institution in the context of the larger body of research and alongside two other community college cases.
2. Submitting presentation proposals to assessment related conferences and events. Numerous local, regional, and national events are focused on assessment of student learning and provide an opportunity to present the findings of this study. In Illinois, the researcher's home state, the annual Community College Assessment Fair is one such event. The Annual Meeting of the Higher Learning Commission, AAC&U Meetings and Institutes, and the Assessment Institute hosted by IUPUI are additional forums that are regional and national in scope.
  3. Offering to present research results at the Higher Learning Commission Academy for Assessment of Student Learning. Given each of the participating institutions in this study were members of the Academy, sharing the results with other Academy participants could contribute to the discourse and action planning that occurs under the guidance of the Higher Learning Commission.
  4. Submitting article proposals to publications such as *Assessment Update*, *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, and *Journal of General Education*. These publications have potential to accept a submission for a

- written contribution since they focus on community colleges, assessment, and/or general education topics.
5. Placing in online forums. This study will be available through ProQuest and accessible on the National Louis University Community College Leadership website.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The intention of this research was to identify structures and processes in AQIP community colleges that support assessment of general education learning outcomes (see Table 12 for a summary of findings). As a result of the participating institutions not having completed a full cycle that documented improved student learning, the following are recommendations for further research.

- Expand the case study pool to create a greater potential to research community colleges that have documented improved student learning as a result of changes from assessment efforts. This could be done by broadening the geographic scope and reconfiguring the selection criteria. In-depth analysis of an institution that has such documentation would provide a rare look at systems that foster complete assessment cycles.
- Concentrate research efforts on engagement of community college adjunct faculty in general education learning outcomes assessment. This sector represents a significant portion of the teaching workforce and deserves attention to identify best practices for their realistic involvement in assessment efforts. Identification of strategies for adjunct involvement in the

- major stages of assessment would support a continuum of engagement necessary to support student learning throughout the entire institution.
- As noted by Penn (2011b), additional research is worthy “to inform policy, curricular, and pedagogical innovations that should be implemented to improve student achievement in particular general education student learning outcomes” (p. 114). Policy is of particular interest as higher education associations, accreditors, and the federal government continue to place attention on demonstration of student learning achievement.
  - Investigate data collection methods and data storage systems that are affiliated with successful assessment initiatives. Researching examples of institutions that took action after a clear “data saturation” point was identified would provide insight into institutional characteristics that support moving from data collection to data analysis. In addition, determining how assessment leaders and faculty participating in assessment efforts gained confidence and subject matter expertise in data collection and analysis could provide a foundation for professional development structures in other institutions.

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### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alyssa (Ali) O'Brien is a community college alumna having received an Associate in Arts degree from Kishwaukee Community College. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Art History from Northern Illinois University and a Master of Education degree in Curriculum Studies from DePaul University.

Ms. O'Brien is currently serving as the Assistant Vice President for Educational Affairs at the College of Lake County, where she has worked for 10 years. In her current role she co-chairs the Assessment and Program Evaluation Committee, serves on the leadership team for general education learning outcomes assessment, and manages the institution's major career and technical education grants. Previous accomplishments at the institution include chairing multiple AQIP action projects and serving on the institutional team that participated in the AQIP Strategy Forum.

## APPENDIX A

## Guiding/Interview Questions Matrix

Guiding Questions	Interview Questions
1. What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?	<p>A. Who has responsibility for general education assessment initiatives on a consistent basis?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How is the responsibility documented?</li> <li>- How long has the responsibility been in place at the institution?</li> </ul> <p>B. What types of committees exist to inform general education assessment efforts?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How long have the committees been functioning?</li> <li>- Do the committees function within a formal governance system and to what bodies do they report?</li> </ul> <p>C. What types of financial resources are available to support the assessment of general education learning outcomes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are budgetary lines consistent from fiscal year to fiscal year?</li> <li>- Who has budgetary authority over the spending of funds/priorities?</li> </ul>
2. What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?	<p>A. How often are general education learning outcomes assessed?</p> <p>B. What criteria are used to determine the student population who are assessed?</p> <p>C. What instruments are used to measure achievement of general education learning outcomes?</p> <p>D. How are the results of assessment efforts documented and shared?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who has responsibility to compile results?</li> <li>- With who are the results shared?</li> </ul>
3. How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?	<p>A. Which senior leaders (Deans and above) are involved in the assessment of general education learning outcomes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In what ways are they involved in the processes of general education assessment?</li> </ul> <p>B. Describe the actions senior leaders take to support general education learning outcomes assessment.</p> <p>C. What steps are taken to inform the Board of Trustees of the assessment results and implementation of improvement efforts?</p>
4. What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?	<p>A. Describe qualities of the institutional culture that have allowed the assessment process to reach a point of obtaining results and using the results to implement improvement efforts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What role has administration played in implementation? Faculty? Students? Board of Trustees?</li> </ul>
5. What evidence exists documenting that the actions taken have resulted in improved student learning?	<p>A. What levels of academic affairs have been impacted by the results of the assessments – course, program, institution?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In what ways have they been impacted?</li> </ul> <p>B. How have the improvements been communicated throughout the institution? To the students? To stakeholders?</p>

## APPENDIX B

**Informed Consent Form**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study that will take place from October 2010 to March 2012. This form outlines the purposes of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

I consent to participate in a research project conducted by Ali O'Brien, a doctoral student at National Louis University located in Chicago, Illinois.

I understand that this study is entitled *Using Results to Improve Student Learning: Successful Assessment Programs for General Education Learning Outcomes in AQIP Community Colleges*. The purpose of the study is identify organizational structures and processes which support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives at select AQIP institutions. Successful assessment practices will contribute to a set of best practices based on the community colleges studied. Furthermore, the study will establish implementation strategies for assessment efforts which have been identified as leading to improved student learning across the institution.

I understand that my participation will consist of one interview lasting 1 - 2 hours in length with a possible second, follow-up interview lasting 1 - 2 hours in length. I understand that I will receive a copy of my transcribed interview at which time I may clarify information.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without prejudice until the completion of the dissertation. Further, I understand that the results of this study may be published or otherwise reported to scientific bodies, but my identity will in no way be revealed.

I understand that only the researcher, Ali O'Brien, will have access to a secured file cabinet in which will be kept all transcripts, taped recordings, and field notes from the interview(s) in which I participated. I understand that the results of this study may be published or otherwise reported to scientific bodies, but my identity will in no way be revealed.

I understand that in the event I have questions or require additional information, I may contact the researcher: Ali O'Brien, [home address provided]. Phone: (847) 651-3381. Email address: aobrien@clcollinois.edu

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that you feel have not been addressed by me, you may contact my Primary Advisor and Dissertation Chair: Dr. Martin Parks, National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, 60603. Phone: (312) 261-3019. Email address: martin.parks@nl.edu

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

## Revisions to Interview Questions Post-Expert Review and Pilot Phases

Guiding Questions	Interview Questions (Prior to Panel and Pilot Input)	Final Interview Questions (Incorporating Panel and Pilot Input)
<p>1. What institutional structures are in place to contribute to general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?</p>	<p>A. Who has responsibility for general education assessment initiatives on a consistent basis?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How is the responsibility documented?</li> <li>- How long has the responsibility been in place at the institution?</li> </ul> <p>B. What types of committees exist to inform general education assessment efforts?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How long have the committees been functioning?</li> <li>- Do the committees function within a formal governance system and to what bodies do they report?</li> </ul> <p>C. What types of financial resources are available to support the assessment of general education learning outcomes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are budgetary lines consistent from fiscal year to fiscal year?</li> <li>- Who has budgetary authority over the spending of funds/priorities?</li> </ul>	<p>A. Who has responsibility for general education assessment initiatives on a consistent basis?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- For those responsible for general education assessment, are the responsibilities, expectations or guidelines documented in job descriptions or other institutional documents?</li> <li>- How long has the responsibility been in place at the institution?</li> </ul> <p>B. What types of committees exist to inform general education assessment efforts?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How long have the committees been functioning?</li> <li>- Do the committees function within a formal governance system and to what bodies do they report?</li> </ul> <p>C. What types of financial resources are available to support the assessment of general education learning outcomes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are budgetary lines consistent from fiscal year to fiscal year?</li> <li>- Who has budgetary authority over the spending of funds/priorities?</li> </ul>

Guiding Questions	Interview Questions (Prior to Panel and Pilot Input)	Final Interview Questions (Incorporating Panel and Pilot Input)
2. What processes exist to support general education learning outcomes assessment initiatives?	A. How often are general education learning outcomes assessed? B. What criteria are used to determine the student population who are assessed? C. What instruments are used to measure achievement of general education learning outcomes? D. How are the results of assessment efforts documented and shared? - Who has responsibility to compile results? - With who are the results shared?	A. How often are general education learning outcomes assessed? B. What criteria are used to determine the student population who are assessed? C. What instruments are used to measure achievement of general education learning outcomes? - Who is responsible for data collection using these instruments? D. How are the results of assessment efforts documented and shared? - Who has responsibility to compile results? - Who are the results shared with?
3. How does the senior leadership in select community colleges support assessment of general education learning outcomes?	A. Which senior leaders (Deans and above) are involved in the assessment of general education learning outcomes? - In what ways are they involved in the processes of general education assessment? B. Describe the actions senior leaders take to support general education learning outcomes assessment. C. What steps are taken to inform the Board of Trustees of the assessment results and implementation of improvement efforts?	A. Which senior leaders (Deans and above) are involved in the assessment of general education learning outcomes? B. Describe the actions senior leaders take to support general education learning outcomes assessment. C. What steps are taken to inform the Board of Trustees of the assessment results and implementation of improvement efforts?
4. What elements in the organization have allowed the assessment process to reach the results and implementation stages?	A. Describe qualities of the institutional culture that have allowed the assessment process to reach a point of obtaining results and using the results to implement improvement efforts. - What role has administration played in implementation? Faculty? Students? Board of Trustees?	A. Describe qualities of the institutional culture that have allowed the assessment process to reach a point of obtaining results and using the results to implement improvement efforts. - What role has administration played in implementation? Faculty? Students? Board of Trustees?

<b>Guiding Questions</b>	<b>Interview Questions (Prior to Panel and Pilot Input)</b>	<b>Final Interview Questions (Incorporating Panel and Pilot Input)</b>
5. What evidence exists documenting that the actions taken have resulted in improved student learning?	<p>A. What levels of academic affairs have been impacted by the results of the assessments – course, program, institution?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In what ways have they been impacted?</li> </ul> <p>B. How have the improvements been communicated throughout the institution? To the students? To stakeholders?</p>	<p>A. What steps have been taken to make improvements to student learning based on the results of general education learning outcomes assessment?</p> <p>B. What evidence has the institution relied on to demonstrate improvements to student learning?</p> <p>C. What levels of academic affairs have been impacted by the results of general education assessments – course, program, institution?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In what ways have they been impacted?</li> </ul> <p>D. How have the improvements been communicated throughout the institution? To the students? To stakeholders?</p>
		<p>A. Would you like to highlight any other general education assessment work you feel has supported the institution in improving student learning?</p>



## APPENDIX D

**References from Participating Institutions**

The three community colleges that participated in this study were assured that their institution and participants would remain anonymous, and documents provided to the researcher would be kept confidential. As such, pseudonyms were assigned to each institution: Prairie Community College, Rivers Community College, and Stateline Community College. The documents from participating institutions are therefore referenced in this study using their assigned college pseudonym.

Following is a list of documents provided by the participating institutions which have been cited in this research study. If there is an inquiry regarding any of these documents, the researcher can be contacted and if needed, subsequent permission will be sought from the originating institution to release the requested information.

Researcher's Contact Information: Ali O'Brien, College of Lake County, 19351 W. Washington St., Grayslake, IL 60030. aobrien@clcollinois.edu

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