HLC Assessment Academy Impact Report
New Mexico State University – Las Cruces

Our Academy Project

We joined the Academy following our institutional reaccreditation site visit in spring 2008. In response to our self-study and in preparation for the site visit, our institution crafted a comprehensive plan for revitalizing assessment on our campus. Members of the site visit team applauded our plans, and were encouraged by our vision. Our institution was granted unconditional reaccreditation – no follow-up or monitoring reports were required. Immediately following the site visit both our president and provost left the institution, which started a cycle of ongoing transition in our upper administration. In an effort to keep commitments made to the HLC regarding institutional revitalization of assessment, and to develop an institutional culture of assessment that would transcend administrative change, a proposal was made to send a team to the HLC Assessment Academy. We believed that making an institutional commitment to the Academy would ensure institutional support to move forward on our proposed plans for revitalization. Additionally, we believed this was an opportune time to create a grassroots movement that would make assessment appealing to all aspects of the campus community.

In summary, it was our desire to use the Academy venue as a channel through which to work toward realizing our vision of institutionalized integrated authentic assessment across all aspects of the academic and co-curricular life. By instigating grassroots engagement and support, it was our goal to move assessment from a compliance-driven commodity to an ongoing goal-oriented process for continuously improving teaching and learning.

In our proposal to the Academy we stated,

> "The opportunity for a dynamic integration of all levels of assessment is challenging but attainable. The vision of an institution where assessment is an assumed part of every component in the life of the institution – where evidence of student learning is not simply collected and filed, but transformed into *information* that is used to inform decision making from the classroom to the academic and co-curricular unit, from policy practices to budget allocations, and from hiring choices to annual performance reviews – is enticing."

While we recognized the complete vision would not likely be realized in four years, it was our intent to lay the groundwork and ensure a shift in paradigms would be in full swing by the end of our Academy participation. It was, and still is our belief that the realization of this vision will have tremendous impact on the quality of teaching and learning across our campus.

Our Academy team continues to operate under the presupposition that in order for the institution at large to embrace assessment as an integral to what we do, all parties (students, staff, faculty and administrators) must be cognizant about how assessment serves *their immediate concerns* (*their* students, *their* programs and *their* services). As faculty and staff envision how their individual efforts contribute to student acquisition of broad skills and behaviors, they will feel increasingly compelled to address concerns and collaborate for success, including across traditional lines of discipline, academia and student support. We further maintain that an inclusive vision held by faculty, administrators and staff will communicate an inclusive vision to students. For students to recognize learning as a collection of *interrelated*

experiences, faculty and staff must first establish it as such. By integrating student learning assessment practices, comprehensive views of student learning will result.

As our team completed our "Pre-Work" for the Academy roundtable, we identified a need to establish ways and means to support, sustain, and ensure the prosperity of assessment initiatives already in play. Solidification of an effective institutional structure was deemed necessary to demonstrate to the campus community that the practice of assessment within the institution would remain consistent, regardless of transitioning leadership. Finally, it seemed critical that shifting the perception of assessment by the campus community from compliance driven and meaningless to worthwhile, beneficial and contributing to the success of students and programs was a key component to our project.

With this goal in mind, the specific needs we identified as critical included 1) continued efforts in faculty and staff professional development in outcomes assessment; 2) increased understanding and contextualization of our state common core general education (GE) assessment; 3) alignment of learning objectives from the course/co-curricular unit up through the institutional mission, and 4) a clear vision for learning across the baccalaureate experience.

As our project emerged, the scope varied from sweeping cultural aspects of the institutional environment for assessment to implementing a specific assessment of learning across the institution. The first addressed the context of assessment within the institution, the latter included modeling how assessment could be done in comprehensive, yet varied ways and still have significant impact on student learning. Our position was and is, that students are the primary beneficiaries of integrated institutionalized outcomes-based learning and assessment. In this framework, focus is on the learner – all efforts are aimed at strengthening and increasing student learning and application of skills, knowledge and values. The result is a unified community whose clear expectations are communicated consistently and continuously to the student – all efforts are tied to common goals. Students are aware of and are active participants in the achievement of common goals; students, faculty and staff all understand the contribution each program, initiative or course makes toward achieving the goal; students view their curriculum as a series of interrelated experiences that contribute to the attainment of life and academic skills necessary for professional and personal success.

At the opening Roundtable in November 2009, we clarified the distinction in the two aspects of our project: "1) to develop an institutional structure to support integrated institutional assessment at all levels of the institution that communicates a unified vision of student success, and 2) a student learning project to cast a vision of student success and assess student learning across the baccalaureate experience."

1. The specific approach toward creating "an institutional structure and culture where evidence of student learning is the catalyst for realizing institutional excellence" included
   a. tying outcomes assessment to the institution's strategic plan
   b. creating an assessment website
   c. spotlighting campus assessment 'heroes'
   d. creating and disseminating a vision of the 'successful student'
   e. solidifying baccalaureate outcomes
   f. establishing a meaningful approach to general education assessment
   g. creating system-wide collaboration with community colleges

h. creating internships opportunities for students to participate in assessment development and processes
i. securing a permanent director and office of assessment (or comparable structure)

2. The specific approach toward the *student learning* aspect of our project included
   a. articulating comprehensive institutional student learning outcomes
   b. communicating comprehensive institutional student learning outcomes to all of our constituents, in meaningful ways
   c. measuring and assessing attainment of comprehensive institutional student learning outcomes (core knowledge, skills, behaviors and values) we, as an institution, believe are critical to the success of our graduates beyond their tenure at university

Degree to which we have dealt with the reasons we joined the Academy
Overall, we are satisfied with the degree to which we have dealt with our reasons for joining the Academy. The culture and attitude toward assessment has shifted significantly on our campus. We have integrated assessment taking place at multiple levels at our institution – in individual courses, by academic degree programs, at the GE core program level (lower-level GE outcomes), across the baccalaureate experience and in co-curriculum, administrative and operational offices. Perhaps most importantly (and most rewarding), we have included the student body in these conversations, and are continuing to develop that element of the conversation. Next on the horizon is to more fully engage employers of our students, and the local community.

Below we address the degree to which we have dealt with our reasons for joining the Academy, as they were specifically outlined above.

1. Create an institutional structure and culture for assessment
   a. We tied outcomes assessment (generally) to the institution's strategic plan. The visibility of our efforts to communicate how assessment, broadly defined, supports the specific goals found in our strategic plan is low. However, there is a growing awareness and understanding of the role of outcomes assessment across the institution, in multiple venues. More specifically, co-curricular, operation and administrative offices now align assessment efforts, as well as unit goals & objectives, directly to one or more of the seven goals of the institution's strategic plan *and* to the Baccalaureate Experience learning objectives.
   b. We created a comprehensive assessment website. Currently it is under revision, as the institution has moved to a new format. Revisions should be complete, or at least near complete by the time of the results forum. We are completing revisions with the NILOA Transparency Framework in mind, and are trying to make the site more interactive and informative. We anticipate increased staff support to maintain and update the website regularly – a problem we have struggled with since the development of the site.
   c. To date, we have not developed the "Spotlight on campus assessment heroes." It is not clear whether or not we will try to implement this at a later date.
   d. One of our most significant accomplishments is the development of our *Vision of the Baccalaureate Experience*, a rubric that encompasses our institutional student learning objectives. We have disseminated this vision of 'student success' broadly, and it is currently used by multiple audiences and constituents (e.g. advisors, academic departments, course instructors, introductory university courses, etc) Our student team is now working with offices on campus to create an app for documenting student

interaction with the rubric and developing learning across the objectives through academic, co-curricular and life-experiences. As students use the app, they develop a co-curricular transcript that, depending on whether or not they meet certain requirements, will be designated as either official or unofficial.

 e. The Baccalaureate Experience objectives were solidified through the creation of the *Vision for the Baccalaureate Experience* rubric. They have been officially adopted through appropriate administrative bodies, including the Office of the President, Office of the Executive Vice-President and Provost, University Executive Council, University Administrative Council, Academic Dean's Council, Associate Deans for Academics Council, University Outcomes Assessment Council, and all university outcomes assessment committees – CASL-BE, CASL-GE, AST and OAC-CAO.

 f. Since beginning the Academy, we have established an integrated, program-level assessment of general education (lower-level, as distinguished from the baccalaureate experience). We are in our second round of GE program-level assessment, and have an ongoing approach for implementing a 'full' assessment annually, while simultaneously piloting a new instrument for the ensuing year's cycle. A significant number of faculty are engaged in this process. Besides meeting state requirements for assessing core learning across lower-level GE courses, state articulated criteria (or outcomes) have been institutionalized into broader concepts for learning, and are aligned with institutional Baccalaureate Experience learning objectives.

 g. While there have been concerted efforts to create system-wide collaboration with our community colleges, our changing upper administration has varied significantly on their support of these efforts. Perspectives on the degree of independence of our community colleges vary with each new administration. After launching five, system-wide teams to address learning in common courses, support by upper administration was disbanded. More recently, interim administrators have made strides in creating a system-wide office for accreditation and assessment. It remains to be seen whether a new permanent administration (President & Provost) will maintain this effort.

 h. Beginning spring 2010 we implemented graduate internships in assessment. To date, we have provided graduate internships for 9 students (masters and doctorate). We are hoping to host an undergraduate intern this summer. This year we had one half of a graduate assistant position, and we have another intern who will begin this summer.

 i. A permanent position for a Director of Assessment was secured in June 2012. An appointment should be forthcoming in the very near future. The position will be housed under a new position, Associate Provost for Accreditation, Outcomes Assessment and Institutional Planning. By fall, the Office of Assessment will have the shared services of a program coordinator, and it is anticipated we will be adding 2 FTE student/graduate student positions.

2. Student learning project
 a. We articulated and defined comprehensive institutional student learning outcomes, as evidenced by the *Vision for the Baccalaureate Experience* rubric.
 b. Through the *Vision for the Baccalaureate Experience* rubric, we continue to communicate comprehensive institutional student learning outcomes to all constituents, including students, parents, faculty, staff, administrators, employers, and community members.
 c. Over the past 3 years we have attempted to measured student learning on identified learning objectives for the Baccalaureate Experience (BE). In spring 2011 we completed a pilot assessment of critical thinking. The locally developed process proved to be

ineffective, at best. Two things resulted from this: 1) we implemented the CLA in the fall/spring of 2011-12 as a standardized measure of critical thinking, 2) in an effort to get a better handle on how to assess broad institutional objectives across disciplines effectively, we decided to work with a learning objective that was a little more 'manageable,' and perhaps didn't have as much variability across disciplines – we selected self-awareness. Spring 2012 we implemented an assessment where graduating seniors self-evaluated (indirect assessment) on their development (from freshman to senior) across all learning objectives for the BE, using the *Vision for the Baccalaureate Experience* rubric. As a direct form of assessing self-awareness, we evaluated student responses to discussion prompts for evidence of self-awareness. Student responses were gathered in focus groups and mock interviews. Mock interviews were not included in our final results, as we did not end up having the desired population (graduating seniors) participate in the mock interviews. (We did have seniors participate, but we also had large numbers of freshmen, sophomores, and graduate students participate.) Focus group prompts did not ask students to discuss their self-awareness, but instead posed questions that required self-awareness if students were to answers them in meaningful ways. As indicated, responses were then mined for evidence of self-awareness, and levels of self-awareness were quantified using a rubric. Data from student self-evaluation on self-awareness and from evidence of self-awareness as found in student responses to prompts, indicated that while students self-report high levels of self-awareness, concrete evidence of self-awareness in student responses is much lower.

    i.   While we have been successful at measuring student performance on two of the Baccalaureate Experience learning objectives, (CLA results indicate our students are performing at a satisfactory level, based on comparison to like-institutions and student population; locally developed assessment indicates students are not performing as well as we would like them to in terms of self-awareness), we continued for some time to struggle with how to engage the campus community broadly in conversations about *results* of these assessments, and therefore instigating *institutional changes* that may be needed to improve results. More recently, we have been successful in getting results out to the campus community in a meaningful way by *going out to* departmental faculty meetings and other meetings to share results (as opposed to inviting the community to come to a particular meeting/open forum to hear results, or expecting them to go to a website to read results, and respond somehow). This seems to be successful in generating interest and investment in what we are assessing, how we are assessing it, and why. It also seems to relieve faculty concerns about use of their time, what the real purpose of assessment it, how this assessment impacts them directly, and how results will be used.

    ii.   In large part, rather than trying to focus specifically on what we as a campus want to do with the results of the assessment on self-awareness, we are using these discussions as a platform to show the campus community how we *can* assess broad institutional learning objectives, *and* engage the community at large. We are using meetings across campus as a place to "share" what we've done, invite feedback (and demonstrating our response to feedback to date), and then plant the seed for our next assessment at the institutional level – writing. Writing was chosen as the next focus for many reasons: 1) almost everyone has an opinion about student writing, so engagement is almost ensured, 2) our institution has long struggled with writing issues – they bubble up 'here and there' over time, but

have never been addressed comprehensively – all initiatives to make substantive changes have been subverted a some level and we believe that when "we," collectively as an institution, are of one and the same voice, change can be made, 3) over the past year a system-wide team has collected significant data about our entry writing requirements, and have comparative data from state institutions and across our system campuses , and 4) our English/Writing department has, this past year, used grant funding to explore writing and success of English Language Learners (ELL) on our campus, which has included broad participation across campus. (Located within 50 miles of the boarder of Mexico, we are a designated Hispanic Serving Institution. Many of our students are unidentified ELL, and we have nothing systematic on our campus to accommodate this student population).

Project Changes

We have made several changes in the details of our plan along the way. Some were changes in our target audience (e.g. we have not yet been able to gain an audience with our Board of Regents), some were changes to the actual assessments implemented (e.g. we planned to assess communication, and instead assessed self-awareness), and as might be expected, we made changes to our time frames. Some things were dropped completely, for any number of reasons. Others took longer than anticipated, went more quickly than expected, did not have the desired response, or had a much more significant effect than expected. In looking back at our original tasks and updated tasks along the way, we did not stray significantly from our initial plan or purpose – our tactics might have changed, but the end result was always in front of us. In essence, we simply adapted as we went. If one avenue was blocked, we found our way around it, took another avenue, or forged a new path.

Challenges to our Project

We experienced several challenges along the way. A major challenge has been securing significant visibility in and through our upper administration. While this gives credit to our grassroots approach, it has impacted our ability to gain the top-down credibility and power to exact institutional focus and impact decision-making. As a result, most efforts are grounded in motivating individuals through demonstration of the usefulness and potential impact of operating under a culture that makes useful information of data and grounds decisions in that information. Generating interest has not been unsuccessful, but securing investment has been a challenge as individuals are unsure of the 'payoff' for time invested in these efforts – the question always remains, "Is anyone going to do anything about this at the top level?" It is a good and appropriate question, but one which we have not been able to answer. So again, we continue to focus on how assessment information can transform the more 'immediate' circle of influence for those asking the question.

A related challenge, as mentioned above, has been getting information into the hands of the campus community – including those who can use the information in their immediate spheres of operation, and of those who can influence the long-reaching goals of the institution. Notably, we have found that sharing our experiences with BE assessment – failed assessment of critical thinking, results of self-awareness assessment, active response to feedback/suggestions, and vision for actually enacting changes based on the future focus on writing – have been the most powerful engines in opening doors for increased communication and investment.

Two specific challenges were the failed pilot of critical thinking and that we have not yet required academic programs to align their learning objectives with BE objectives. The latter will be instituted beginning fall 2013.

An ongoing challenge is our desperate need for assessment reporting software. We addressed this issue early on, but as our campus implemented a new LMS, there was speculation that assessment reporting could be rolled into ongoing development of the LMS. It is now clear that this will not happen in the immediate future. On the positive side, the delayed purchase of a software package does clarify that the software is a *tool to manage* what we are already doing in assessment, as opposed to *a solution* for assessment. We are aggressively pursing software at this time.

Summarily, our greatest institutional challenge is to take what we are learning about our students and their performance on desired learning, and use that information to make changes that improve student learning/performance on those same outcomes.

Specific Achievements
We have
- Established an Office of Assessment and a permanent Director of Assessment position
- Adopted institutional learning objectives for the Baccalaureate Experience (BE)
- Piloted a locally developed assessment, and then implemented the CLA as an assessment of critical thinking
- Aligned our BE learning objectives with the Degree Qualifications Profile
- Presented at multiple conferences & hosted multiple open forums for the campus community
- Implemented an assessment of self-awareness (one of our BE objectives)
- Aligned BE learning objectives with lower-level general education objectives & with our institutional strategic plan
- Hosted 9 graduate student internships in assessment
- Initiate an institutional focus on writing, which will become our institution's Quality Initiative
- Established a standing committee from our Academy team – the Committee for the Assessment of Student Learning across the Baccalaureate Experience (CASL-BE)
- Completed the *Vision for the BE* rubric that is being used in various venues across campus
- Started development of an app for students to engage with BE objectives
- Engaged the campus community with results from our assessment by going to various faculty and other meetings across campus
- Engaged students in multiple ways with the BE objectives: 1 undergraduate class is translating the *Vision for the BE* rubric into Spanish; a graduate statistics class helped run data and statistics for our assessment; student employees are meeting with student and staff groups across campus to share their experiences and vision for the BE, and are conducting researching on students' reactions/response to the rubric; students have presented on campus, and at state conferences on the BE
- Developed a service learning research methods course, and the "Provost's Research Scholars" to undertake assessment of learning across the BE
- Created, and are now revamping an assessment website
- Aligned co-curricular assessment with BE outcomes

- Secured campus endorsement of BE mission, goals, objectives & the *Vision for the BE* rubric
- Developed and secured campus adoption of the Institutional Statement on Assessment
- Developed structures and venues to support all levels of assessment, including students (Provost's Research Scholars), individual faculty staff and administrators (ChAMPION program and Peer Review Network), course-level (Advocates for Scholarly Teaching), general education (lower level) (Committee for the Assessment of Student Learning in General Education, Departmental Faculty Liaisons) academic program, co-curriculum, administration and operations (Outcomes Assessment Committee for Co-curriculum, Administration and Operations), and institution-wide baccalaureate assessment (Committee for the Assessment of Student Learning across the BE [outgrowth of the HLC AA team])

Effect of Academy Participation on Institutional Commitment to the Assessment of Learning

Our participation in the Academy has positively impacted the institution's commitment to the assessment of learning. While we have not yet 'arrived,' we are well on our way. We have been able to develop a broad understanding that assessment for learning is a necessity, and that institutional support is an absolute must. There is also a broader understanding of the need for a comprehensive reporting system for assessment activity. Simply the fact that we are engaged in campus-wide assessment of lower-level GE and the BE, are evidences that we have developed an institutional capacity to engage in the assessment of learning beyond the individual classroom and academic departments.

Specific evidence includes the creation of the Office of the Associate Provost for Accreditation, Assessment & Academic Planning, and the establishment of a permanent position for a Director of Assessment.

Effect of Academy Participation on Institutional Culture, Structures, and Processes

Our Academy participation became the venue through which we cultivated, vetted, articulated, clarified and engaged the campus community in developing broad, institutional learning objectives. We used this venue to inform various constituents about assessment generally, and to model an effective, collaborative and meaningful assessment process. Processes are becoming established mechanisms for assessing learning, and discussions are now focusing on the assessment and the information gained about students and their learning (rather than on rationale for 'why' we are doing this, or what is 'not going to work,' etc.). We are confident that the institutional climate, at the grassroots, has shifted enough that we will reach our tipping point for a dynamic culture of assessment about the same time we are addressing pressing needs in student writing. At the point where the institutional shift is most ready to roll, we will be positioned to provide valuable, comprehensive and reliable information to support difficult and critical institutional-level decisions that will significantly affect students and their learning.

Through this venue we also made our first attempts at measuring student learning across the baccalaureate experience, and are now developing ways and means of using findings to impact future practices for student learning, in and beyond the classroom – including through policies, practices and procedures. While still striving for the ideal, (where every decision made takes into account its potential impact on student learning), we are inspired that faculty are beginning to view the learning that occurs in their own courses beyond the end of the semester (as we want

our students to do), or the degree program. We have continued to hold that as faculty, staff and administrators intentionally adopt a more comprehensive view of learning that transcends discipline content and agendas, students will begin to view their own learning in increasingly comprehensive fashions that facilitate transfer of learning beyond the semester's edge.

The impact of our project on the institution has been positive. Individuals are beginning to invest in the idea of common baccalaureate outcomes, and they have opened the door to discussions based on overriding objectives such as critical thinking and diversity, (for example), rather than specific, course content oriented outcomes. The Baccalaureate Experience objectives and rubric are bringing a sense of shared purpose, and shared responsibility for learning, to the table. Alignment of course, GE, academic program and BE objectives, as well as co-curricular and operational objectives, are providing clarity about how each unit of the campus community contributes to realizing institutional goals for learning.

Evidence of the effect of Academy participation on institutional culture, structures, and processes includes
- Established process for lower-level GE assessment
- Establishment of Assessment Liaisons in each department
- Direct and indirect incorporation of faculty engagement in institutional assessment processes (e.g. faculty teaching upper-division GE courses are involved in facilitating assessment of lower-level GE courses; faculty teaching capstone courses are involved in facilitating BE assessment; students, through courses, are assisting assessment processes by analyzing data, implementing assessment, and translating the BE rubric into Spanish)
- Expanded participation on assessment committees, including extended work-groups to focus on special assessment projects such as developing tools for GE assessment, and advising existing committees on assessment efforts, and GE Liaisons
- Ongoing development of student awareness and involvement in assessment processes and specifically in taking ownership of their baccalaureate experience (e.g. development of student positions to facilitate student engagement; development of service learning course and Provost's Research Scholars)
- Ongoing faculty participation in our ChAMPION (CHampioning Assessment Mentors to Promote Institutional Outcomes Networks) program
- Launch of a staff/administrator cohort of our ChAMPION program
- Graduates from our faculty ChAMPION cohorts have presented on course-level assessment in our Teaching Academy and at state and regional conferences. Others have been recognized for their contributions to their respective departments in assessment. One was just awarded the "Innovative Teaching Award" for our campus, for his work in experiential learning *and assessment* of student learning.

Anecdotal evidence includes
- Increasing frequency of faculty/department head requests for data related to student learning, success and persistence
- The decision to focus on student writing across all levels of assessment at the institution was driven by a faculty team in the English department who wanted to examine writing across the institution
- Multiple unsolicited requests from faculty and staff to serve on assessment committees or to be involved in activities that promote assessment across campus

- Increased collaboration across the Offices of Assessment, Institutional Analysis and Compliance for increased understanding and clarity of relationships in research, assessment and the protection of human subjects.

Effect of Academy Participation on Student Learning

To date, we do not have concrete evidence that our Academy work has directly affected student learning. Anecdotally, we have increased focus on student learning across campus, and individuals freely share about how assessment has changed the way they teach and about improved student performance. There are also documented incidents of how individuals/programs have used assessment to guide curricular decisions, and the results show improvement in student learning. However, impact on learning is not institution-wide.

Next Steps

Our next steps will be to focus an institutional assessment of writing. In September we will be submitting a proposal to this effect as our Quality Initiative in the Open Pathways reaffirmation process.

Plans to Sustain Momentum of Our Academy Work

Our Quality Initiative is a natural outgrowth of our Academy experience, and will position us institutionally to sustain ongoing efforts in assessment. Virtually everything outlined in this report represents initiatives that have assumed a permanency in our institutional structure and/or climate (e.g. assessment committees, ChAMPION program, Director of Assessment position). Likewise, we have many initiatives also in the beginning stages (e.g. Provost's Research Scholars, Peer Review Network, Annual Assessment Retreat) that have widespread support and provide exciting opportunities to grow support and enthusiasm for exploring student learning, and making decisions based on evidence of student learning, in the future.