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From Compliance to Collaboration: Building a Holistic and Data-Informed Culture of Assessment for Learning Improvement

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Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

Early View

Abstract: Researchers examined two central questions about the transformation of assessment culture in higher education. First, what does a holistic culture of academic assessment look like in practice? Second, how can higher education institutions move from a compliance-driven assessment to one centered on improving student learning? The authors identified change management and collaboration frameworks that support the college’s transition from an assessment approach focused on accountability to one that advances student learning and continuous improvement. This shift was achieved through strengthened collaboration between academic program leads and assessment professionals, integrated guidance across the instruction life cycle, implementation of structured support mechanisms, intentional recognition and cultural reinforcement, and sustained engagement grounded in continuous improvement principles.

Keywords: *assessment, higher education, data-informed, compliance, collaboration, learning*

Introduction

In recent years, political, social, and economic upheavals have intensified debates about the value of higher education. Academic institutions experienced seismic changes due to the pandemic, social unrest, and the advent of generative artificial intelligence. Faculty, students, researchers, accreditors, and administrators reacted to these changes and to technological disruptions with uncertainty. Today, higher education assessment professionals are questioning the role of assessment in continuous improvement and the approaches and methodologies used in the assessment cycle. Innovations in accreditation, artificial intelligence, technology, and workforce development are impacting the higher education assessment process.

According to Eubanks and Fulcher (2021), efforts to balance accountability and improvement through accreditation and compliance have failed to deliver on either front. The authors pose a

critical question: How can we move toward a learning improvement framework in which assessment and related initiatives are strategically aligned and coordinated across structure, strategy, and professional development to enable improvement at scale? Checkbox-style reporting will never fulfill the core purpose of accreditation: ensuring true academic program quality. Elmore (2019) offers a completely different perspective on assessment: the role of assessment is to inform learning and growth, not to define worth, measure value, or bestow merit.

This article explores how a college assessment team within a large research University adopted a collaborative and change management approach in collaboration with academic program leads to enhance engagement, mitigate resistance, and avoid practices known to hinder success—ultimately aiming to balance the dual goals of accountability and improvement in assessment. The focus of the paper is to explore the following questions:

- What does a “holistic culture of assessment” in higher education look like in practice, and how does it differ from traditional compliance-based models?
- How do institutions transition from a compliance-driven approach to an assessment model focused on collaboration and learning improvement in higher education?

Cultural Context

The context for this exploration is a college (referred to hereafter as “college” or “the college”) within a large urban research university in the U.S. The college offers flexible academic programs at the undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral levels. The college offers three doctoral degrees, 11 bachelor’s degree completion programs, 20 master’s degrees, and numerous graduate certificates. As one of the University’s colleges dedicated to adult, professional, and lifelong education, the college plays a distinctive role in advancing the University’s mission to integrate academic inquiry with real-world application. The college is home to approximately 100 full-time, 20 half-time, and 1,000 active part-time faculty. The college is part of a larger university ecosystem grounded in experiential learning, innovation, and global engagement.

Decision Support and Academic Quality Assessment

One of the college’s central priorities is fostering a culture of data-informed decision-making. This effort is led by the Decision Support and Academic Quality Assessment (DS&AQA) unit, which advances strategic planning, institutional effectiveness, and continuous improvement by providing data strategies, tools, and insights. Its work promotes data literacy, operational efficiency, student success, and informed decision-making for faculty, staff, and leadership at the college. DS&AQA initiatives reflect a cultural shift from assessment as a compliance task to assessment as an opportunity for insight, collaboration, and learning.

Within DS&AQA, the academic quality and assessment (AQA) team partners with academic program leads to strengthen academic program evaluation, learning outcomes assessment, and faculty development. Guided by the belief that assessment is less about measurement and more about reflection and dialogue, AQA positions academic program leads as co-owners of

data and decisions while serving as a facilitator in the data exploration and reflection process. This involves designing tools, providing support, and helping teams interpret findings in context.

The college recognizes that this work is iterative, imperfect, and deeply human. Progress has not always been linear. Like many institutions, the college continues to wrestle with questions around data literacy, equitable outcomes, capacity building, and sustainable models for improvement. Not all academic programs are in the same place, and not all practices are fully scaled. However, what has taken root is a shared commitment to making assessment useful, and a growing recognition that data, when meaningfully interpreted and collaboratively discussed, can lead to better decisions and better learning.

Importantly, the college has also invested in relationship-building, culture change, and moments of fun. Through academic program lead consultation cycles, recognition awards, and transparent feedback structures, the college is learning how to keep improvement work visible, energizing, and sustainable. At the college, assessment is still very much a work in progress, but it is a collective effort marked by reflection, dialogue, and a consistent commitment to excellence.

This article tells part of the “work in progress” story—not as a model of perfection, but as an evolving example of what it looks like to build a culture of assessment, one cycle at a time.

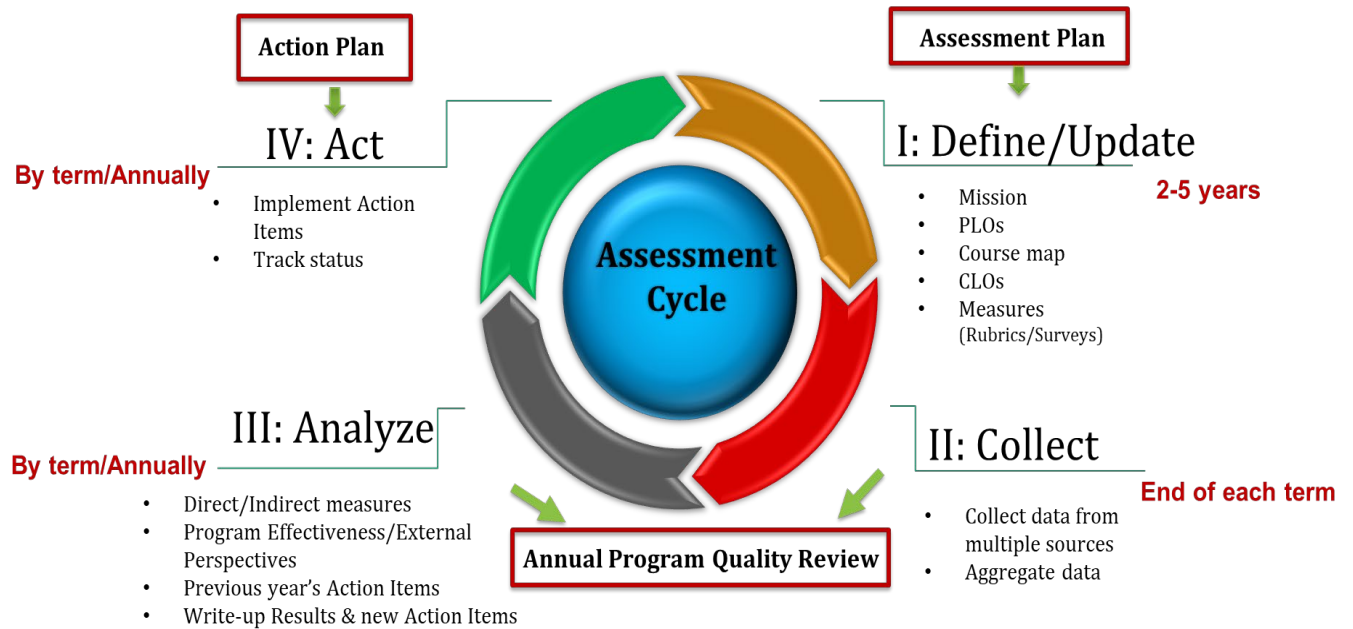
Assessment Framework

AQA is both a function and a unit with a philosophy and mission aligned with the University’s commitment to student success. Comprised of assessment professionals and data analysts, the AQA unit promotes a culture that values results-driven outcomes assessment as a key performance indicator of institutional effectiveness. It is a key driver for continuous curriculum improvement, including regular academic program evaluation as well as mapping, tracking, analyzing, and reporting academic program learning outcomes based on program competencies and VALUE Rubrics frameworks (American Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.). This process assists academic programs with quality oversight and continuous improvement processes.

The college implemented a plan for defining learning outcomes at the academic program level, selecting assessment measures, and establishing a formal, documented cycle for academic program review and revision in May 2012. The plan was supported by academic program leads. Today, academic programs continue to work with AQA on the annual program review process as depicted in Figure 1: Annual Assessment Cycle.

Figure 1

Annual Assessment Cycle



Assessment Implementation Support Structure

Academic program leads are faculty members responsible for creating and disseminating the program's assessment plan, strategy, best practices, annual report findings, and program revisions to other faculty. The academic program lead works with AQA to develop assessment-related workshops and implements the assessment plan to ensure a consistent and high-quality learner experience and accurate collection of learning evidence.

Annual reports provide current data to support decision-making and planning while also reinforcing best practices, program enhancement, and accreditation tracking. Academic program leads complete these reports in consultation with their faculty and other stakeholders including academic operations and academic advising. The college uses digital tools and platforms to collect and analyze data for reporting purposes and to generate actionable findings for addressing issues in real-time. However, these tools are only valid and reliable if:

1. The input data are high-quality, timely, and accurate.
2. Stakeholders review the output data for actionable findings on a regular basis.
3. Stakeholders take action to address issues promptly.

Along with academic program leads, principal instructors (PIs) play a key role in supporting high-quality teaching at the college. They advise academic program leads on teaching, learning, and curriculum development. PIs also mentor section instructors and ensure courses are current and aligned with college standards. Their focus—whether on mentoring, curriculum, or

both—is set by the academic program lead.

Typical principal instructor responsibilities include:

- Sharing updated course materials with section instructors before each term
- Orienting and mentoring section instructors
- Communicating quality expectations
- Overseeing course readiness
- Using data to improve course quality and the student experience

Academic program leads and principal instructors are key collaborators with the AQA team.

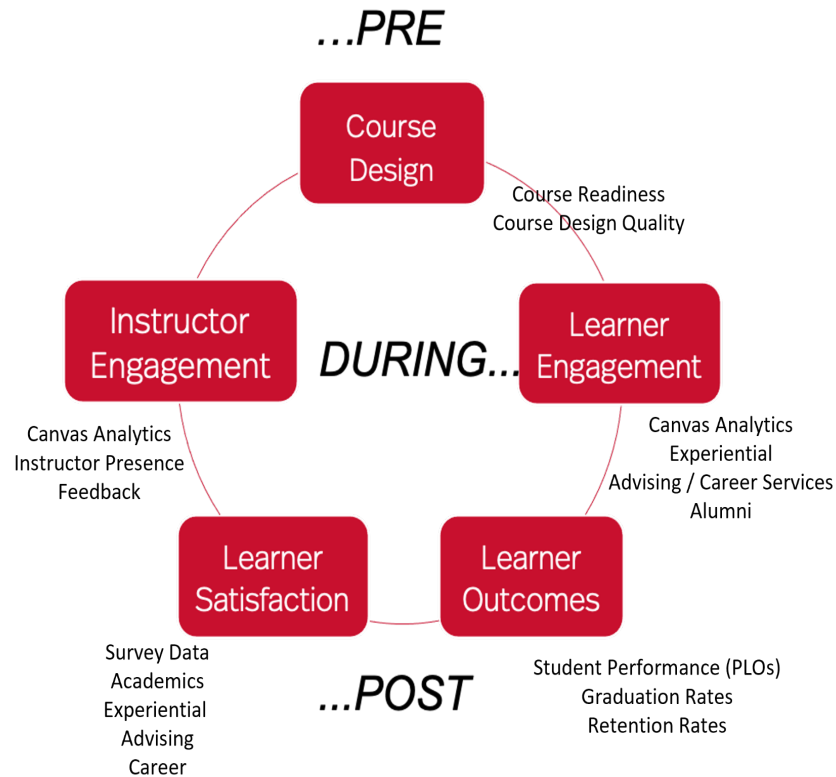
Holistic and Integrated Assessment Approach

Prior to 2023, the college's assessment efforts mainly centered on learner satisfaction and outcome data that primarily served reporting functions and the accountability paradigm. In 2023, AQA adopted a more holistic and integrated approach to assessment, aligning its goals with a comprehensive learning and assessment data analytics strategy. This strategy aimed to leverage both institutional and course-level data, making information accessible and actionable for college faculty and staff to drive continuous improvement. The focus expanded to include data on learners—not only after completion but also before entry and throughout their learning journey. AQA also created quality standards for course design, teaching, and revision, and invested in tools to track course readiness and instructor and learner engagement during each term. These metrics, shown in Figure 2, provided real-time insights into teaching and learning to support ongoing enhancement.

In 2023, the decision support and analytics functions were combined with AQA to foster a more holistic and integrated assessment approach. This resulted in the formation of the DS&AQA unit with the mission to sustain a more data-informed culture. The unit collaborated with faculty and analysts to create data inventories and personas for staff, faculty, and leadership. This enabled role-based access to data and the sharing of data literacy resources. Strategic collaboration across the college and with the university data units led to a more cohesive ecosystem for data-informed decision-making. This is a testament to how strategic collaboration can transform organizational data culture from reactive to proactive, from siloed to integrated, and from exclusive to accessible.

Figure 2

Holistic Data Analytics Strategy



Investing in a holistic, integrated assessment approach ensures institutions move beyond fragmented efforts toward a unified strategy that improves student learning, strengthens accountability, and enables large-scale, sustainable improvement (Baartman and Quinlan, 2023). To improve student learning at scale, Eubanks and Fulcher call for a “subordination under a larger learning systems framework” (2021, p. 8). Kester (2020) uses the analogy of constructing a building in that we may have skilled masons, electricians, and plumbers. Still, without an architect or contractor to unify the vision, the result is uncoordinated and fragmented. Similarly, in higher education, faculty, analysts, and administrators from different units often work in silos. Since learning happens everywhere, assessment must be approached holistically by bringing together faculty, administrators, and students.

The DS&AQA unit is dedicated to helping leadership and faculty engage in program evaluation and the assessment of academic quality. This work extends far beyond accreditation and compliance. By situating these efforts within data-informed perspectives on learner success and learning, DS&AQA’s influence spans analytics, marketing, operations, advising, instructional design, and instructional practice.

Assessment professionals—whether experienced or new to the field—play a pivotal role in defining a holistic and integrated approach to assessment. Survey findings on the role of assessment professionals in higher education by Nicholas and Slotnick (2018) revealed that assessment professionals must adapt to shifting campus cultures and structures while meeting the ever-changing reporting demands of external stakeholders. The survey suggests that the return on investment in assessment personnel will depend on how institutions use assessment results to inform efforts to improve student learning, student satisfaction, curriculum changes, institutional planning and effectiveness, and faculty involvement.

The AQA unit has experienced shifts in university and college culture and has been situated within multiple organizational units over time. Its integration with the instructional design team enabled assessment to be fully embedded within the curriculum and course design processes. When aligned with the strategic decision and analytics support unit, AQA benefited from a more comprehensive approach to data collection, analysis, and reporting, strengthening its capacity to inform continuous improvement. Being housed under DS&AQA created opportunities for AQA to connect, collaborate with, and inform institutional areas across the learner life cycle while aligning efforts toward the shared goals of learner success and high-quality learning. Whether intentionally or because of institutional evolution, AQA evolved to support the college in the meaningful use of assessment evidence to enhance learning and student outcomes.

Shifting from Compliance to Collaboration

Assessment in higher education, while a firmly established and academically grounded practice, continues to face resistance from faculty and skepticism from leadership regarding its return on investment. For many institutions, implementing assessment resembles a change management initiative—one that requires building stakeholder trust, demonstrating measurable impact on teaching and learning, and validating return on investment to institutional leadership. According to Emerson (2022), seven key factors contribute to the failure of change management strategies, several of which mirror the obstacles faced in assessment efforts:

- a. Poorly defined
- b. Rigid and inflexible
- c. Lack of effective communication
- d. Failing to identify and address resistance
- e. Disconnect between strategy and culture
- f. Setting unrealistic expectations
- g. Not creating and celebrating short-term wins

To overcome these obstacles, the attributes of institutional resilience proposed by Robert and Pelletier (2025) could be adopted by assessment units and professionals. The attributes include: be adaptive, data fluent, decisive, lead with courage, stay interconnected, be prepared, and be trustworthy.

Trust is a critical ingredient in any relationship that depends on cooperation, collaboration, and empathy. There are myriad collaboration frameworks, but one that resonates well with the current environment in higher education is RARE (Relate, Acknowledge, Reflect, Empower), a model proposed by Leaderman and Polychronopoulos (2022). The approach is grounded in humanistic and postmodern counseling theories that emphasize equity to reduce power imbalances and build meaningful partnerships across the higher education community. Another useful collaborative framework is ACE (Alliance, Collaboration, and Empowerment), originally developed in community-based autism research (Haine-Schlagel et al., 2016). ACE emphasizes cultivating strong relationships, offering meaningful encouragement, and fostering a sense of agency among partners, making it well-suited for faculty engagement in assessment initiatives.

Drawing on these approaches, AQA gradually adopted a multifaceted strategy to address resistance and skepticism, shift prevailing mindsets, and foster collaboration across units and with faculty. The examples that follow tell the story of the evolution and illustrate the specific approaches and mechanisms through which AQA moved assessment practice from a compliance-driven activity toward a collaborative, improvement-oriented process.

Collaboration Among Academic Program Leads and Assessment Professionals

The collaboration between academic program leads and assessment professionals within the college exemplifies a fundamental paradigm shift from assessment for accountability to assessment for improvement. This transformation reflects the college's commitment to formative, internally-driven assessment practices that prioritize engagement over compliance. Unlike traditional accountability-focused models that emphasize summative judgment and external reporting, the college's collaborative approach centers on multiple feedback loops, triangulated evidence, and continuous program refinement.

Academic program lead and assessment professional collaboration is structured around the college's four-stage assessment cycle: Define, Collect, Analyze, and Act. This cyclical approach ensures systematic collaboration at each phase while maintaining academic program lead ownership of disciplinary content and pedagogical decisions. This assessment cycle is further delineated below.

Define: Academic program leads and assessment professionals collaborate to establish academic program learning objectives, course mapping, assessment measures, benchmarks, and data collection strategies. This partnership ensures that assessment plans reflect both disciplinary standards and institutional quality assurance requirements.

Collect: The collaborative model facilitates ongoing data collection from multiple sources, with assessment professionals providing technical support for data aggregation while academic program leads maintain responsibility for contextual interpretation and disciplinary relevance.

Analyze: Joint analysis incorporates both direct and indirect measures, previous year's

goals, and collaborative interpretation that combines academic program lead expertise with assessment methodology. This stage exemplifies the bidirectional knowledge transfer between academic program leads and assessment professionals that is essential for meaningful assessment practice.

Act: Academic program leads and assessment professionals work together to develop and implement continuous improvement plans, ensuring that assessment findings translate into concrete academic program improvements aligned with both educational effectiveness and institutional accountability requirements.

To sustain collaboration and embed the “Define, Collect, Analyze, & Act” framework, AQA convened monthly meetings with academic program leads. These meetings functioned as structured listening sessions to address program leads’ concerns, questions, and feedback related to the assessment process. The monthly meetings also served as working sessions in which program leads engaged in activities such as assessment planning, assessment design, and data analysis. Many academic program leads reported that these consistent touchpoints fostered mutual understanding and accountability.

Data Life Cycle Integration

The Define, Collect, Analyze, Act collaborative framework spans the complete data life cycle, supporting academic program lead engagement across pre-instruction, instruction, and post-instruction phases. This comprehensive approach ensures continuous partnership rather than episodic consultation. During the pre-instruction phase, assessment professionals support faculty in course design quality assurance, course readiness evaluation, and instructional planning. This includes collaborative development of assessment rubrics, learning outcome alignment, and prerequisite analysis. In the instruction phase, assessment professionals support faculty with instructor engagement metrics, learner engagement analytics, and real-time learner satisfaction monitoring. Faculty can access learning data independently while maintaining consultation pathways with assessment professionals for interpretation and intervention strategies.

At the conclusion of instruction, collaborative evaluation encompasses myriad data sources such as student performance against program learning outcomes (PLOs), graduation rates, retention analysis, and long-term outcome assessment. Survey data for the student, instructor, and course are analyzed with a continuous improvement lens to identify opportunity areas for subsequent iterations of the course. Academic program leads collaborate with AQA to analyze student-level data including academic integrity, accessibility needs, experiential learning outcomes, and performance metrics. At the academic program lead level, partnership focuses on course engagement, course design quality, and professional development needs. Course-level collaboration addresses curriculum mapping, scheduling optimization, and student evaluation analysis. This partnership ensures comprehensive academic program evaluation that incorporates both quantitative metrics and qualitative insights.

The college's five-level data audit structure (student, instructor, course, program, college) provides a systematic organization for academic program lead and assessment professional collaboration. DS&AQA organizes the data, while academic program leads have self-service access and the responsibility to contextualize the data to make data-driven decisions regarding their academic program. This framework ensures comprehensive data coverage while clarifying roles and responsibilities across institutional levels.

Structured Support Mechanisms

The college has implemented multiple structured mechanisms to facilitate ongoing academic program lead and assessment professional collaboration as outlined below:

Data Literacy Development: Comprehensive data literacy initiatives include dedicated training days, persona-based learning modules, and ongoing professional development resources. These development opportunities build academic program lead capacity for independent data analysis while maintaining collaborative consultation opportunities. Recurring events like “Data Day” and “Assessment Hour” present opportunities for academic program leads to highlight their work and for guest speakers to educate faculty and staff on assessment- and data-related topics.

Monthly Consultation Cycles: Regular consultation meetings provide systematic opportunities for academic program leads to engage with assessment professionals on program-specific challenges, data interpretation questions, and improvement planning. These sessions ensure consistent support while respecting academic program lead autonomy in pedagogical decision-making.

Role-Based Reporting Infrastructure: Customized reporting systems enable academic program leads to access relevant data independently through self-service analytics platforms. DS&AQA website’s Data Connect section features a centralized directory linking to dashboards and reports spanning the student life cycle, from admissions to alumni outcomes. Separate reporting directories for senior leadership and academic program leads present role-specific metrics and action items related to program management, student support, and academic quality.

Information Dissemination: Data information sessions and video walk-through resources provide accessible entry points for academic program lead engagement with assessment data and collaborative interpretation processes. The college also manages a central repository of best practices, exemplar rubrics, and other resources that are accessible to all instructors. The AQA team played an active role in disseminating this information to academic program leads through a combination of emails, regular meetings, and data training. For senior leadership, AQA delivered executive summary presentations synthesizing annual reports and yearlong engagement with academic programs leads to highlight strengths, areas for improvement, and exemplary work.

Recognition and Cultural Reinforcement for Sustainability

The college's light-hearted recognition system celebrates exemplary academic program lead and assessment work. Sample awards from years past include the "Data Loop Luminary" for effective feedback loop implementation, "True [Inte]Grit[y] Award" for academic integrity leadership, "Data Narrator" for compelling data storytelling, and "I Don't Drive Without My Data" for academic program leads who demonstrate effective integration of data-driven decision-making in their practice. This recognition reinforces collaborative values while acknowledging diverse forms of assessment engagement.

The Define, Collect, Analyze, Act collaborative framework demonstrates that sustainable assessment culture emerges through genuine partnership rather than compliance mandates. By positioning academic program leads as collaborative partners rather than assessment subjects, the model creates conditions for meaningful engagement that serves both improvement and accountability purposes. This approach provides a replicable framework for institutions seeking to implement assessment for improvement paradigms while maintaining institutional effectiveness standards.

Engagement and Continuous Improvement

One of the major impacts of this collaborative work was the creation of a culture where faculty and staff collaborate across departments, breaking down silos to solve assessment challenges in partnership with a dedicated data analytics team. One illustrative example of this shift involved moving beyond the routine reporting of metrics—such as program learning outcomes, graduation, retention, and enrollment rates—and instead collaborating with cross-functional units and faculty to make data meaningful, accessible, and useful for understanding learning and learner success outside of compliance contexts. The process began by inviting academic program leads, along with leaders from operations, advising, and instructional design, to articulate the questions they most needed data to answer. Their input informed the development of a shared data-priority list grounded in end-user needs rather than reporting requirements. From there, DS&AQA drew on analytic expertise distributed across institutional teams, addressing one priority at a time and partnering with leadership to determine appropriate investments in third-party tools or in-house reporting solutions. These efforts enabled access to timely, actionable data—such as indicators of course readiness prior to the start of term and measures of learner engagement and instructor presence—supporting more proactive and informed decision-making.

In this environment, assessment work is approachable, available through a variety of intuitive tools, and embraced by faculty, staff, and administrators. The college has a mature assessment model that delivers timely, consistent, trusted, relevant, and actionable insights, driving assessment innovation and informed decision-making. Fostering a data-oriented culture is a journey that requires a concerted, iterative, and collaborative effort to leverage people, processes, and technology fully.

Another way to measure impact of collaboration is a strong assessment foundation allowing the

academic programs to be resilient to changes and challenges. All academic programs at the college today have well-defined assessment plans with program learning outcomes and measures defined that appropriately translate and reflect the academic program mission. Academic programs have intentional alignment of outcomes with course content, activities, and assignments that lead to learner-centered, high quality learning experiences. The college aspires to sustain implementation fidelity across courses and sections to yield strong evidence of learning that speaks to the academic quality of the academic programs. The process was neither quick nor without obstacles—from personnel and leadership changes to transition to a new learning management system, and, most recently, a move from a quarter system to a semester system. Below are some concrete examples of impact and engagement directly from academic program leads.

Academic Program Improvements

Assessment data serves many purposes and many stakeholders. Student success is at the heart of the process. To meet the growing needs of students and employers, academic programs need to continuously improve. Continuous improvement, often called “closing the loop” in assessment terms, refers to how courses, people, and processes can be strengthened and streamlined to achieve better outcomes. Even small tweaks can make a significant difference, and having the history of regular reporting allows academic program health to be accurately assessed over time. Knowing where academic programs have been and how they have improved helps them to keep innovating. Using assessment data as a leading indicator, diversifying what gets measured, and avoiding “check the box” mentality are concrete examples of strategies academic programs can use to improve and thrive.

Assessment Data as a Leading Indicator

As mentioned previously, the assessment cycle is iterative and focused on continuous improvement. Assessment data is a leading indicator for academic programs, a starting point for more conversations. For example, one program experienced a significant decline in the score of an academic program learning outcome measure. The academic program lead realized that the data was telling a story about the program - a story that led to conversations with instructors about the consistency and quality of the course and the specific assignment that was serving as a program learning outcome measure. The academic program was able to address the consistency issues and adjust the assignment to be more authentic and experiential while also aligning with what the academic program needed to know about student learning.

Diversifying What Gets Measured - and When

Historically, some academic programs embedded all measures of success in the final capstone course. From a summative perspective, data collected in a capstone experience provides valuable insight. However, collecting all program learning outcome measures in a single course does not provide insight at points along a student’s progress through the academic program. In other words, collecting assessment data only at the conclusion of a program was too late. Academic programs now embed assessment measures throughout the program to enable more formative programmatic adjustments in course learning outcomes, assignment strategies,

and/or instructional strategies.

Avoiding the “Check the Box” Annual Report

Interpretation and sensemaking should be the focus of any regular reporting exercise. The ability to contextualize the data and tell the story of the academic program is critical. Without context, it can be easy to miss the root cause of an issue that shows up in the data. The annual report process sparks conversations and engagement across teams about academic program health and continuous improvement.

Collaboration

Academic program leads meet regularly with assessment professionals and often collaborate on short-term assessment improvement projects and pilots. These relationships are invaluable, and they take time to develop. Through close collaboration, academic program leads and assessment professionals can focus on what really matters: nurturing and then demonstrating the success of students in the program.

Conclusion

Since 2017, the college has been on a journey of continuous improvement in partnership with academic program leads and cross-functional units within the college and the university. Assessment practices have evolved to value improvement-focused approaches, highlighting growth instead of compliance. Skepticism and resistance have transformed into trust and innovation. Nevertheless, the challenge persists in maintaining and fostering trust among new faculty, particularly during turbulent periods in higher education. These challenges can be exacerbated by technological shifts like artificial intelligence or rapidly evolving industry and employer demands. DS&AQA strives to earn and uphold the trust of all stakeholders involved in the assessment process. Despite the challenges, the DS&AQA unit achieved several important milestones over the past eight years:

- Served as a university-wide model for assessment approaches before centralized assessment functions were established.
- Enhanced senior leadership support in implementing the assessment cycle and hosting faculty development and training events.
- Increased engagement from academic program leads in assessment planning and consistent implementation of rubrics.
- Expanded access to program evaluation data, with academic program leads receiving training and support to encourage meaningful and higher-quality reporting practices.
- Fostered a network of assessment champions and mentors to guide and inspire faculty engagement.
- Advanced data literacy through the creation of role-based reporting inventories and data personas, along with accompanying resources, resulting in a more data-informed culture.

Meaningful change in assessment takes time, intentionality, collaboration, and patience. The

process and outcomes must be clearly defined yet flexible, with realistic expectations for all stakeholders. Transparent assessment communication fosters accountability, while collaboration ensures that all voices and perspectives are included. Celebrating successes adds joy and motivation to assessment work.

This article examined two central questions about assessment culture transformation. First, what does a holistic culture of assessment look like in practice? The college's experience points to three factors that foster this kind of culture:

- Integrated data systems that connect assessment to strategic planning
- Academic program lead ownership of improvement processes, supported by assessment professionals in facilitative roles.
- Transparent feedback mechanisms that visibly link evidence to programmatic decisions.

Second, how do institutions transition from compliance to learning improvement? Successfully navigating this transition depends on four conditions:

- Structural integration of assessment and decision support functions.
- Sustained investment in the relationships between academic program leads and assessment professionals.
- Realistic timelines that allow for iterative progress.
- Recognition of assessment as scholarly work rather than administrative burden.

These findings affirm that assessment transformation follows established principles of organizational change management while requiring adaptation to the unique dual mandate of accountability and improvement. The five principles that emerge from the college's experience align with existing frameworks, particularly the RARE model's emphasis on relating authentically, acknowledging expertise, reflecting collaboratively, and empowering stakeholders, while offering specific implementation guidance for assessment contexts (Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019).

First, **relationship building must precede structural change**. At the college, establishing regular consultation cycles and demonstrating value as collaborative partners created conditions for academic program lead receptivity to new processes. Assessment professionals positioned themselves as facilitators rather than auditors, meeting academic program leads at their current level of assessment engagement. Institutions planning similar transitions should allocate substantial time to relationship development before implementing new reporting requirements or process changes.

Second, **structural integration amplifies assessment impact**. The 2023 merger of decision support and assessment functions in the college created practical connections between academic program evaluation and institutional planning. This integration reflects Fulcher and

Prendergast's (2021) framework for improving student learning at scale through coordinated systems. Assessment findings informed resource allocation, strategic initiatives, and academic program lead development rather than existing as parallel compliance activities. Such integration requires executive commitment and careful attention to maintaining focus on improvement alongside accountability requirements.

Third, **accessible systems enable academic program lead autonomy**. Role-based data inventories, self-service analytics platforms, and targeted training reduced technical barriers to engagement. This approach operationalizes the empowerment component of collaborative frameworks by providing academic program leads with direct access to academic program evidence. However, maintaining accessible systems requires ongoing resource investment in infrastructure updates and user support.

Fourth, **recognition practices reinforce cultural values**. The DS&AQA awards program celebrates progress during extended organizational change (Emerson, 2022). Recognition counters narratives that frame assessment as an administrative burden and acknowledges its intellectual dimensions.

Fifth, **realistic expectations support sustainability**. The college transformation encountered obstacles including leadership transitions and competing institutional priorities. Academic programs advanced at different rates based on factors including program size, faculty stability, and disciplinary assessment traditions. Programs with established academic program leads and stable instructional teams typically demonstrated stronger engagement than those experiencing frequent personnel changes or serving highly distributed student populations. Setting multi-year timelines for culture change, rather than expecting transformation within single accreditation cycles, better matches the reality of organizational change.

This college case extends existing collaboration frameworks by demonstrating their application in assessment contexts where accountability and improvement goals coexist. The documented approach provides evidence that theoretical frameworks translate to sustained practice in complex institutional environments. However, limitations acknowledged throughout this paper suggest areas requiring continued attention. Connecting process improvements to student learning outcomes represents an ongoing challenge not unique to the college. Nicholas and Slotnick (2018) identified demonstrating return on investment as critical to university support for assessment, yet robust methodologies for documenting causal pathways from assessment practices to learning outcomes remain underdeveloped in the field.

Future scholarship should examine whether these principles apply across diverse institutional contexts, including smaller institutions with different academic program lead structures, academic programs serving primarily 18-24 year old students, and contexts with varying accreditation requirements. Research investigating how collaborative assessment practices affect student learning outcomes could address a critical gap in assessment literature. Additionally, examining how assessment approaches differ across student populations and delivery modalities would yield insights about tailoring practices to learner needs.

Assessment transformation is iterative rather than finite. The collaborative, data-informed approach at the college demonstrates that moving from compliance to meaningful improvement requires strategic structural decisions, consistent relationship investment, and patience with uneven progress. As institutions face intensifying pressure to demonstrate educational value, assessment must evolve beyond checkbox compliance toward practices that inform learning and institutional effectiveness. This college's experience contributes documentation of how theoretical frameworks translate to practice while acknowledging both achievements and persistent challenges in building sustainable assessment culture. As a college, we are excited to continue this journey together.

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FROM COMPLIANCE TO COLLABORATION: BUILDING A HOLISTIC AND DATA-INFORMED CULTURE OF ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING IMPROVEMENT

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