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## Accelerate To Make It Slow: Principles And The Pace Of Assessment

Donald H. Gaff

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Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning  
*Early View*

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**Abstract:** Assessment often feels like a race—administrative, accreditation, and legislative pressures push institutions toward quick fixes and a compliance mindset. Meaningful assessment requires slowing down to engage stakeholders, revise tools, and contemplate results. This case study details how the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) invested in structural change to “make it slow,” embedding ACCELERATE principles in assessment, especially in its innovative general education program, UNIFI. UNI’s NILOA-recognized assessment culture includes annual program reporting, seven-year Academic Program Reviews, and co-curricular assessment, reflecting Aligned Purposefully, Collaborative and Co-Creative, and Transparent & Trustworthy principles. UNIFI illustrates how accelerating reform enables deliberate improvement. Built on assessable outcomes, UNIFI uses faculty workshops to score authentic student artifacts, demonstrating UNI’s commitment to Learning-Centered, Responsiveness-Oriented, and Enduring and Evolving practices. By embedding assessment in strategic planning and leveraging data for improvement, UNI shows that accelerating structural change creates the time and space for deep learning improvement.

**Keywords:** *accelerate, assessment, general education, program revision*

## Introduction

Assessment in higher education has long been shaped by external pressures—calls for accountability, accreditation requirements, and demands for transparency. These forces, typically in the form of deadline-based policies, often create urgency, pushing institutions toward compliance rather than improvement. The heart of assessment, on the other hand, moves more deliberately and involves lengthy processes such as taking stock of where programs and institutions are, having insightful discussions, and making meaningful changes based on data. The resulting paradoxical tension is similar to Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle from quantum physics, which states that the more precisely you know a particle’s position, the less precisely you can know its momentum, and vice versa. The same holds true for assessment: the more focused on compliance, the less likely an institution is to do assessment of any long-lasting significance. While achieving a balance is admirable, significant assessment results from a more deliberate approach (Levy & Jankowski, 2026).

ACCELERATE principles, introduced in 2025 as a revision of AALHE’s foundational guidelines, represent ten principles of best practice for assessment. The principles offer a framework for slowing down the process to focus on intentionality (e.g., deliberate, data-driven decision-making), collaboration (e.g., including different parts of the campus community in assessment), and student learning (e.g.,

improvement via learning outcomes). Drawing inspiration from an R.E.M. song lyric—"Accelerate to make it slow"—this paper seeks to play on this idea and explore the space between "accelerate" as speeding to erect structures and produce results within a compliance approach and the idea of "slow" (similar to the Slow Food movement, a global grassroots effort poised as an antidote to fast life and monoculture by emphasizing local cuisine and sustainability, and the Slow Productivity movement derived from it which favors working at a natural pace and doing fewer things) of being intentional, deliberate, and purposeful to produce constructive results. The spotlight will be on how ACCELERATE provides the framework for shaping and understanding assessment in this context (Newport, 2026; R.E.M., 2008; Samuga\_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025; Slow Food 2026).

**Table 1.**

*ACCELERATE principles evident at the institutional level and within the general education program*

	<b>Institution</b>	<b>General Education</b>
Aligned Purposefully	Assessment linked to strategic goals	Program intentionally built on learning outcomes
Continuously Cultivating	Faculty development	Not closed, new classes and faculty added on rolling basis
Collaborative and Co-Creative	Shared governance, including Assessment Council	Faculty involvement in general education curriculum
Equity and Empowerment-Motivated	Predictive analytics and accessibility initiatives	Classes have no prerequisites
Learning-Centered	Direct assessment of authentic student work	Connect electives give students different pathways
Energized by Expertise	Leadership from Undergraduate Studies	Disciplinary knowledge informs rubric design
Responsiveness-Oriented	Data dashboards	Hiatus on artifact collection during revision
Action-Driven	Retention and Completion Council	Workshops used for rubric revision
Transparent & Trustworthy	Public reporting	Public reporting, representative general education committee
Enduring and Evolving	Closing the Loop reports	Draft rubrics followed by revisions

The University of Northern Iowa (UNI), Iowa's only public comprehensive university, provides a compelling case study of this paradox: putting in place structures to create space for deliberate improvement. UNI's integrated assessment culture demonstrates how principle-driven assessment can move beyond reporting to foster meaningful learning improvement while at the same time offering a framework to accomplish rapid changes when necessary, while also maintaining values. This article examines UNI's institution-wide approach to assessment and highlights UNIFI (UNI's general education program—UNI Foundational Inquiry), its innovative general education program, as an exemplar of ACCELERATE principles in action (see Table 1). This example will illustrate how these principles create structured room for slower, more contemplative assessment within UNIFI. Other institutions might use

this framework to enhance assessment work at their own schools. Whether colleges or universities are looking to install improvements or develop their own culture-specific processes, they will benefit from adopting an ACCELERATE approach, while case studies such as this provide an opportunity to field a spectrum of ideas that might be adapted to each institution's unique circumstances. By deliberately pacing early implementation, faculty are encouraged to collaboratively refine practices by pausing and reflecting rather than rushing to compliance (Samuga\_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025; Undergraduate Studies, 2025b).

## UNI's Assessment Culture

UNI strives to accomplish its institutional vision to “serve the public good through excellence in teaching and learning, scholarship, and service” through its strategic plan and mission. As a regional comprehensive institution, teaching and learning (which includes the assessment of students meeting outcomes) takes priority in this aspirational vision. The importance given to teaching by the university can also be seen in being first in UNI's Strategic Plan with Goal 1: “Innovate for Learner Success. Enhance access and support services for all learners through an innovative and relevant academic curriculum and out-of-class experiences.” Assessment-relevant portions of the plan include Strategy 1.2: “Develop intentional, timely, and adaptive processes that enable faculty to implement undergraduate and graduate curricular innovations that will meet learner, industry, and community needs” and Strategy 1.4: “Elevate high impact practices that focus on learner engagement, individualized education, and learner success and retention within courses and programs.” These aspects of the plan inform the instructional and pedagogical part of UNI's mission, which “creates, empowers, and innovates to enrich Iowa and beyond” (University of Northern Iowa, 2025b).

Deriving guidance from these goals, UNI embeds assessment and review activities throughout the university. One example is annual program-level assessment wherein each academic program uses authentic student work to measure student learning outcomes (SLOs) and proposes improvements. General education, as a multi-disciplinary program, crosscuts academic programs at UNI and is assessed separately. Assessment at UNI follows best practice by being a faculty-driven process with program level assessment carried out by faculty in their respective programs and general education assessment being done in multidisciplinary workshops. Recently, the institution adopted a metric known as Promise Score, an indicator developed to quantify the extent to which a program changes in response to assessment. When program assessment reports are received, they are rated on a scale from 0 to 4 based on self-reported descriptions of changes made in response to assessment findings. A score of 0 represents no changes being made or faculty reporting their students are meeting benchmarks, whereas a score of 4 represents major changes such as altering the curriculum (e.g., resequencing classes to scaffold learning better) to restructuring an entire course (e.g., redoing several assignments, adding or removing significant amounts of content, etc.). Ideally, UNI looks for an average score of 2 meaning some change is taking place, but not static (i.e., low score) or large-scale changes annually (i.e., high score). This overall approach shifts focus from mere compliance to an emphasis on faculty involvement and data-informed action. Assessment also feeds into larger processes at the university, such as Academic Program Reviews (APR). Conducted every seven years, APR synthesizes assessment data along with program vitality metrics, self-analysis, and external review into actionable

items and is used to inform strategic decision-making. Co-curricular assessment, led by Student Life units, aligns goals with divisional priorities, and those units also submit annual reports, ensuring that assessment extends beyond the classroom (Schilling & Schilling, 1998; Grunwald & Peterson 2003; Assessment UNI, 2025; Hong, 2018; Kuh et al., 2015).

UNI's commitment to transparency and continuous improvement along with an emphasis on the direct assessment of student work earned the university National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) Excellence in Assessment designation which recognizes the university's integration of assessment practices across academic and co-curricular contexts. Now defunct, NILOA used this recognition to highlight colleges and universities "for their commitment to the comprehensive assessment of student learning outcomes as a means to drive internal improvement and advance student success at the institution-level." In particular, UNI received notice for "intentional, integrated, and transparent assessment approach involves an extensive, layered assessment plan allowing for multiple points of involvement and collaborative opportunities for discussion among faculty and staff—an important part of assessment's value for learning." Along these same lines, UNI's accreditor recently found UNI to have "a robust and mature assessment infrastructure" (K. Moser, personal communication, April 22, 2026). These kinds of endorsement reflect the strong assessment culture instituted by UNI, an ongoing assessment culture which provides the framework through which ACCELERATE principles can be applied and operate (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2019; Skidmore et al. 2018).

## University of Northern Iowa as an ACCELERATE-ing Institution

As an institution with a mature assessment culture, recognized by NILOA and accreditation, it should be no surprise that UNI embodies and operationalizes ACCELERATE principles throughout systemic practices (see Table 1). ACCELERATE principles "are value-based commitments that guide the important work of any professional (within education and beyond) whose aim is to improve, innovate, and excel in any learning, planning, development, or improvement/efficacy context in service of learner and organizational success." ACCELERATE guides all who engage with or use assessment results. Furthermore, these principles and their practice can be seen interwoven throughout the University of Northern Iowa, providing an enduring framework for intentionality (Inside UNI, 2019; Samuga\_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025).

One ACCELERATE principle found within UNI's structure is that assessment is Aligned Purposefully with practices and processes linked directly to strategic goals and metrics, such as prioritizing learner success and setting measurable targets for first-year retention and graduation rates (e.g., Strategic Plan Goal 1 Innovate for Learner Success and Goal 2 Access for All). The Office of Institutional Effectiveness & Planning (IE&P) oversees data dashboards and annual reports from academic and co-curricular units, requiring each to align goals with retention objectives. Progress is reviewed biannually by committees such as the Academic Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness Committees, creating a feedback loop where assessment results inform resource allocation, high-impact practices, and policy adjustments (University of Northern Iowa, 2025b).

Another ACCELERATE principle is Continuously Cultivating. At UNI, there is a fully engaged Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) that provides a great deal of faculty development related to teaching through a variety of offerings ranging from full on pedagogical instruction to book groups. Assessment data is shared with CETL, helping to shape offerings such as the TEACH UNI certificate and a teaching academy for instructors in general education. Feedback for assessment is also used for improvement through the hosting of semi-annual assessment workshops as well as the recent creation of an Assessment Fellow position in IE&P, which also led to several changes in assessment processes (CETL, 2025).

Collaborative and Co-Creative is another principle evident at UNI, where numerous stakeholders are intentionally invested in assessment. Shared governance structures are at the heart of this, where just one example includes an Assessment Council made up of associated deans from every college, assessment specialists, and directors of IE&P and Undergraduate Studies (UGS), a structure that provides coverage and input both horizontally across the college and vertically through layers of administration. Assessment finds additional leadership in UGS because it crosscuts departments with its focus on undergraduate instruction and experiences (units housed within UGS include general education, academic advising, tutoring, honors program, community engagement, and study abroad among others). Even students are involved in assessment through surveys and exit interviews (both at departmental and university levels). UNI also has a new interdisciplinary general education program that fosters cross-unit dialogue both through a committee with cross-campus representation and a deliberate multidisciplinary structure that avoids silo-ing of instruction (Academic Assessment Council, 2025c; Undergraduate Studies, 2025b).

UNI uses predictive analytics for retention and other initiatives and therefore is Empowerment-Motivated. For example, the university's Early Intervention Model uses three factors (i.e., high school GPA, transfer credits, if any, and unmet financial need) to identify first-year students who may be at a higher risk of leaving the institution. The university has also been a leader in accessibility initiatives—in one instance, spending over \$100 million alone in upgrading facilities to make them ADA compliant in response to an accreditation report. Recently, the school also got ahead of a federal mandate concerning digital accessibility by holding numerous workshops for faculty and others to make the institution's digital resources compliant. UNI also uses programs such as Jump Start Scholars to support diverse learners for an approach that values equity and empowers individuals (Student Success & Retention, 2025).

An emphasis on direct assessment of authentic student work has informed UNI for years and now informs curricular and pedagogical improvements. One instance of this is the Chemistry program which, after assessing student presentations, introduced a requirement for students to present a recording of them reading a draft in order to provide feedback on presenting skills before giving the final presentation in class. Examples like this one of using results from looking at student work to improve instruction is how UNI meets the principle of being Learning-Centered (Assessment UNI, 2023; Assessment UNI, 2024).

UNI assessment is Energized by Expertise and is a strength at the school. UGS is the university's focal point for generating leaders with deep experience with assessment. The current executive director of UGS learned assessment in the previous general education program and the previous executive director is now interim associate provost for faculty affairs, taking that expertise to the highest level of administration. The author of this article, also trained and raised in the previous iteration of the general education program, began to participate in college-level assessment and contribute to accreditation reporting, followed by invitations to attend an AAC&U meeting as well as repeated attendance and eventual participation (Ophus et al. 2022) at the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis. In addition to these vertical pipelines, training is horizontal in terms of faculty being trained across campus in workshops and delegations with individuals in diverse campus roles (e.g., Student Life, Institutional Effectiveness, Deans' Offices, etc.) attending the Assessment Institute. This kind of in-house training and growth, along with faculty leadership in academic program review and program assessment, finds some of the university's teachers with the most experience in curriculum and assessment taking local leadership positions. Deep faculty involvement along these lines also helps to ensure disciplinary rigor.

IE&P provides up-to-date data dashboards (e.g., Program Vitality Metrics dashboard, APR dashboard) that help UNI live up to the principle of being Responsive-Oriented and Action-Driven. The APR dashboard, as one case, helps administrators evaluate and monitor enrollments and graduation rates. A Strategic Enrollment Management Plan informs the work of a Recruitment Council, Retention and Completion Council, and Transfer Council, enabling faculty and staff to act quickly, especially for at-risk students. As an example, members of Retention and Completion Council use dashboards to filter by demographic and engagement characteristics to tailor the Strategic Enrollment Management Plan and shape committees. Real-time reports in the university's CRM system also provide actionable student registration data that helps staff members and other campus partners to reach out individually to students who have not registered for classes within a few days of their scheduled enrollment appointments (Inside UNI, 2019; University of Northern Iowa, 2025a).

UNI maintains accountability by making sure assessment practices are both Transparent and Trustworthy. One main avenue for this is public reporting through IE&P who hosts reports and documents (e.g., the university's annual Closing the Loop report [University of Northern Iowa, 2024]). Behind the scenes are several archives housing reports, data, and materials going back years. Archives serve several purposes, such as helping guarantee continuity (i.e., allowing newer assessment professionals to learn from previous ones) and acting as a data resource for administrators and faculty on campus. The institution also makes resources available to oversight bodies ranging from accrediting bodies to the Iowa Board of Regents.

Lastly, UNI exhibits continuous improvement through several practices consistent with ACCELERATE's Enduring and Evolving principle. Examples of this include the aforementioned Closing the Loop reports, as well as strategic plan updates, which help keep the institution looking to the future. Even small-scale actions, such as the creation and award of "Assessment Ally" certificates to individuals who help move assessment forward (e.g., attending multiple assessment workshops, allowing assignments to pilot assessment projects, etc.), acknowledge potential. Having assessment embedded at different levels

and working through different parts of the university guarantees stability so that best practices can continue in the face of retirements, budget constraints, or departmental reorganizations. These kinds of efforts mean decisions are effective, traditions continue, and assessment work is sustainable long term (University of Northern Iowa, 2024).

As can be seen, a mature assessment program, like that found at UNI, helps ensure that assessment is not only useful, but also meaningful and enduring. Having such a structure in place—a large number of trained faculty, assessment professionals in different positions, as well as principles and policies that support assessment—leads to a durable aspect to assessment that certainly meets the time needs of accreditors, legislators, and other stakeholders. In a way, within a strong ACCELERATE-based structure, the compliance aspect of assessment is nearly automatic. Simply, data and results are generated without a need for enforcement, and reports are produced on time. Yet, those principles in the form of people and structures allow the space to do assessment in a thoughtful way. This means at an institution like UNI, a new program can be deployed quickly and operationalized immediately while also affording the breathing room to make sure assessment is done right.

## UNIFI A General Education Example

It was into this mature assessment culture that UNI developed and launched a new general education program, UNIFI (UNI Foundational Inquiry), in 2022. Replacing an old, distribution-based program, UNIFI emphasizes integrative learning and adaptability. The UNIFI development process demonstrates how the Continuously Cultivating, and Collaborative and Co-Creative principles support experimentation with reflective practice (see Table 1 for ACCELERATE principles evident in this new general education program). As will be seen, this slower, dialogue-based approach allowed faculty to surface nuanced concerns before launching the program. Importantly, this new general education program was built to be assessable; and given its birth at an institution with a deep commitment to assessment, it should be no surprise that continuous improvement is at the heart of UNIFI. This moment in UNIFI shows how the Empowerment-Motivated and Learning-Centered principles intentionally slow assessment cycles to allow faculty the time needed for pedagogical conversations. Such deliberate pacing reinforces that meaningful assessment requires space for conversation and for developing shared understanding (Hanstedt, 2024; Undergraduate Studies, 2025a; Inside UNI, 2022).

To begin with, a committee of faculty and administration took a charge from the provost to completely re-envision general education at UNI. This meant dismantling the old program and creating a whole new program. Development of the new program involved consultation with numerous constituencies both as a way to seek input as well as uphold principles of faculty governance via their responsibility for the curriculum.

Built on twelve assessable learning outcomes emphasizing observable skills instead of on academic disciplines means that UNIFI is inherently multidisciplinary because classes were added to the general education program by outcome, not content. Therefore, classes from across campus could be used to populate a learning area and its attendant outcomes. For example, the Quantitative Reasoning outcome can be satisfied with classes, not just from math, but also from economics, finance,

philosophy, and social science. In that way, a single department cannot “own” a learning area (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Undergraduate Studies, 2025c; Inside UNI, 2022).

The learning areas and their associated outcomes are then organized into three tiers—Engage, Discover, and Connect. The first tier—Engage—represents foundational skills and students’ first encounter with general education and thus includes Written Communication, Oral Communication, and Quantitative Reasoning. The Discover tier encourages deeper exploration with the following learning areas: Human Condition Domestic and Human Condition Global (primarily the social sciences and history courses), Scientific Reasoning, Human Expression (both the visual and performing arts), and Responsibility (best thought of as an “ethics” category where classes are primarily drawn from philosophy but does include classes that cover related topics such as environmentalism and sustainability). Collectively, these learning areas cover all dozen learning outcomes, accounting for 25 credits (Levine et al., 2008).

Remaining required general education credits come from UNIFI’s innovative third tier, Connect. Connect present students with one of two pathways. In the first pathway, students can opt to take any four additional UNIFI classes as electives. With the second pathway, they can receive a micro-credential in the form of a UNIFI certificate. Certificates are drawn from a specified set of UNIFI classes (or select non-UNIFI classes that meet the outcomes and serve to add coherence to the certificate). Examples of such certificates include Data Science, Career Success in Organizations, and THRIVE! (a self-care certificate built from UNIFI classes involving physical, mental, social and financial domains). Students are not restricted to just one certificate, potentially using free electives and major courses to obtain additional certificates.

The program’s unique certificate structure highlights ACCLERATE’s Collaborative and Co-Creative and Empowerment Motivated principles by giving departments time to thoughtfully craft clusters of interdisciplinary classes. So, rather than rushing to finalize a limited approach to certification, faculty engaged in extended dialogue to ensure coherence and relevance in a student-central design. This is also reflected in the fact that the UNIFI Committee accepts and evaluates courses and certificates on a rolling basis instead of having a fixed program that changes little. Additionally, UNIFI classes do not have prerequisites, which creates equity, opens opportunities, and encourages exploration. Even the certificates in the Connect tier are engineered to be horizontal (i.e., no prerequisite classes and taken in any sequence) and not vertical (i.e., requiring a sequence of courses starting with introductory classes and leading to a capstone or seminar experience). This structure of UNIFI reflects the university’s commitment to Learning-Centered and Equity-Motivated education (Assessment UNI, 2023; Assessment UNI, 2024).

UNI designed UNIFI with learning outcomes as its basis so that assessment could be faculty-driven and evidence-based. As the program readied for a launch in 2022, the university hired an Assessment Coordinator, purposefully drawn from the faculty to oversee assessment of the program. From there, development of an assessment plan centered on hosting faculty workshops—engaging instructors from across disciplines—to score authentic student work using rubrics. It is worth noting that these rubrics, derived from a variety of sources (AAC&U VALUE rubrics, national standards, or internal standards),

were shared with the faculty as “draft” rubrics, the idea being they would be revised with feedback after the first years of the program. Members of the general education committee at the time developed the rubrics in subcommittees made up of faculty with expertise in any given area. Some drafts came from AAC&U Value Rubrics, others like the arts drawn from national standards, and those for UNI’s human condition learning areas were designed from scratch as no good analogs could be found. These rubrics released just prior to the program’s launch, meaning they were not vetted; hence being considered “draft” rubrics that would be tested for reliability and validity after the first semester of classes finished and samples of student work could be collected. Arguably, UNIFI’s draft rubric phase exemplifies the Enduring and Evolving principle by creating protected space for thoughtful, data-informed revision rather than quick compliance. The deliberate choice to test, iterate, and refine rubrics demonstrates a commitment to sustained improvement rooted in reflective practice (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2009; Undergraduate Studies, 2025a).

Because of the draft nature of these rubrics, assessment of student work for all dozen learning outcomes included, in addition to quantitative scores, the collection of qualitative data related to rubric clarity and relevance of the rubric, as well as impressions regarding each of categories on the rubric, such as its clarity and relevance to learning outcomes. Launching a program with draft rubrics with the intent of revising them is not only a hallmark of a mature assessment culture but also is an example of the point being illustrated here: collecting data for compliance while at the same time allowing space for reflection and future change. UNIFI’s iterative redesign shows how ACCELERATE nurtures a culture of patient, not urgent, revision in order to sustain improvement through deliberate reflection. By engaging faculty in purposeful review, the program models how thoughtful assessment can be both rigorous and humane.

UNIFI’s conducted assessment workshops for all twelve learning outcomes. Multiple workshops were held, typically two workshops for each learning outcome. For each outcome, a call for faculty volunteers went out to campus with an emphasis on pulling faculty teaching in each particular learning area. Respondents filled out a scheduling poll, and the times with the greatest density of potential participants were selected. The result being that participants were drawn from across the faculty for each SLO with the collective result of a mix of faculty mirroring the multidisciplinary character of the program. Workshops lasted two hours and included “homework,” so the total workshop time across all involved faculty represents hundreds of hours of assessment work.

Early assessment results show students performing between “Emerging” and “Competent” over the general education curriculum. More specifically, considering subcategories on the rubrics, fifty-three categories scored between “Emerging” and “Competent,” with only three subcategories falling below “Emerging.” Analysis and reflection reveal that the mismatch between the rubric and assignments account for the few instances of falling short of “Emerging.” For example, the Quantitative Reasoning rubric has a category for “Assumptions” which works well for student work involving statistical models but works less well for other kinds of quantitative assignments. Overall, though, that students fall between “Emerging” and “Competent” is interpreted as an appropriate result for 1000 and 2000 level classes taken early in the college career.

The information from assessment is shared via detailed reports, summary PowerPoints, and various meetings in order for instructional adjustments to be made to strengthen targeted skills of students. Recipients of this information include deans and department heads, UNI's Assessment Council, the UNIFI Committee, workshop participants, and individual faculty. Data from this initial general education assessment round is also being used to refine the rubrics for clarity and consistency. Of note, in the context of this article, UNIFI put the collection of samples of student work on hiatus during an interregnum created from knowing the draft rubrics would be changed, but not wanting to burden faculty with submitting student work created under those old rubrics. This is another example of the kind of flexibility afforded by having a firm structure in place that remains sensitive to thoughtful consideration of how assessment is carried out. More specifically, this hiatus in the collection of student work reveals how ACCELERATE's Responsive-Oriented and Action-Drive principles include within them the capacity for reflective pauses to be built into assessment regimens. This intentional slowdown ensured that subsequent data collection would be more meaningful, aligned with revised standards, and respectful of faculty resources. Thoughtful pauses in assessment and iterative rubrics along with an open design that allows for easy introduction of new courses and certificates, especially as the program rolled out, allowing instructors and departments the space to pilot ideas which further demonstrates the Continuously Cultivating and Learning-Centered principles at work. By resisting a large-scale roll-out of a monolithic program, UNIFI helped instructors to experiment with pedagogical approaches, received feedback, and adjust their offerings to better achieve learning outcomes (Undergraduate Studies, 2025a).

A commitment to continuous improvement can be seen in that assessment results guide revisions to UNIFI outcomes and rubrics. The UNIFI Committee is currently investigating several changes in response to feedback obtained during assessment results gathered since the program's launch. Rubric revisions make up one set of changes under consideration—currently the complete set of rubrics has been re-evaluated and redrafted with some undergoing little to modest changes, such as cleaning up terminology and others being completed redeveloped from scratch. As of this writing, the UNIFI Committee has discussed and approved roughly half of the new rubrics. Another result of assessment data is that UNIFI Committee is currently considering adding a learning outcome for critical reading and changing the writing outcome. Finally, the committee is looking at enhancing faculty development for general education by co-hosting a Spring 2026 teaching academy that will address course design and the specific challenges and opportunities of teaching in UNIFI. A topic like Building from Outcomes demonstrates the foregrounding of assessment in the program (Undergraduate Studies, 2025b; UNI Faculty Senate 2026; Fink, 2013).

UNIFI aspires to carry out this work in a transparent and trustworthy manner. Results are shared through annual reports and PowerPoint summaries. UNI's commitment to transparency practices also comes through having a large, engaged UNIFI Committee with representation from across campus (e.g., faculty from each college, associate deans, library staff, and members of UGS). Critical to this effort is public reporting of UNIFI assessment results and involvement of faculty (Undergraduate Studies, 2025b;).

The success of these initiatives led UNIFI to be recognized by the Association of General and Liberal Studies as an exemplary program, in part, owing to how assessment was embedded in the program from the start with artifact scoring taking place shortly after launch. For example, the award letter highlights: “Excellent description of the research into the best practices of assessment. It was especially great to read about the multi-disciplinary certificate that was created within the structure of the general education program.” Elsewhere: “The new UNIFI program is new and initial data suggest positive learning outcomes. The institution is committed to its success by dedicating resources to assessment activities and investigating outlying results” (Undergraduate Studies, 2025b; Inside UNI, 2022).

The successful launch and recognition of UNIFI exemplify the argument of this article. Born into an institution with a mature assessment structure, the general education committee and administration put structures in place to support such a large, complex endeavor. Those structures, either external to the program or replicated within it, guaranteed it would work. Created around learning outcomes, the program embodies what it means to do good assessment, reporting, and results. At the same time, with a solid set of structures providing the foundation, there is space and time to make sure assessment is done to a high standard with useful and meaningful results. Launching a general education program with hundreds of classes with draft rubrics, knowing they would be tested and revised early in the program’s history, only comes from the confidence and experience of a university already living up to ACCELERATE principles (Undergraduate Studies, 2025b; Inside UNI, 2022).

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

It goes without saying that maintaining a mature assessment culture and changes on the magnitude of creating a new general education program from scratch faces challenges. It is in the face of pressure where having ACCELERATE principles, particularly, Enduring and Evolving, helps provide a firm framework for reacting quickly to changes by contextualizing and adapting to constraints and expectations from outside the institution. One challenge, faced by many public institutions of higher learning, is shifting legislative prerogatives and mandates. In the case of UNI, in 2024, Iowa passed several laws (SF 514, SF 2096, SF 2435) targeting DEI initiatives in state universities and banning non-legally required DEI positions. The Iowa Board of Regents responded, directing universities to update their strategic plans to comply with the new laws, with deadlines in early 2025. Because of UNI’s open, well-documented processes, the university pivoted quickly, releasing an updated strategic plan that retains an inclusive environment without DEI language in February 2025 (Iowa Legislature – SF 514, 2023; Iowa Legislature – SF 2435, 2024a; Iowa Legislature – SF 2096, 2024b).

While not coming to fruition in terms of being passed into law, UNIFI nearly faced extinction later in 2025, when Iowa's 2025 legislative session brought to life draft bills (e.g., HF 401 HSB 63) aiming to standardize general education requirements across Iowa’s public universities including mandating specific courses in English, Math, Sciences, Humanities, Western Heritage, and American Heritage, while banning content related to identity politics or inherent systemic oppression. These proposals, part of broader efforts to reshape higher education in the state, faced pushback as well as debates over curriculum control, DEI restrictions, and potential impacts on academic freedom. Had it passed,

this legislation would have dismantled UNIFI's unique structure in returning to a distribution model of general education. The proposed legislation would have certainly removed the microcredentials available via the UNIFI certificate path and removed learning areas for Oral Communication, Human Condition (the proposed legislation mandated courses in Humanities, Western Heritage, and American Heritage, which would have retained some, but not all, of UNIFI's Human Condition classes), Human Expression, and Responsibility. Proposed legislation would have severely hampered UNIFI offerings in prohibiting UNIFI classes focused on teaching identity politics or making claims of systemic racism, sexism, or privilege. Had these reforms been enacted, a firm ACCELERATE framework would have helped ensure continuity in many aspects of both general education and assessment, even if the course content or curriculum changed (Undergraduate Studies, 2025).

Another challenge comes from technology integration. Computer solutions to assessment abound ranging from portfolio programs to LMS with assessment components. At a regional comprehensive university, resources are limited. Despite that, there are often calls to adopt technological solutions. UNIFI, in its initial assessment of artifacts, utilized a trial of Blackboard's assessment tool to determine its utility. That exploration exposed the tool as not appropriate for UNI for reasons as varied as needing to create a support ticket to have IT release the data (as opposed to controlling it directly through UGS as is done currently) to a steep learning curve for some faculty in using the tool itself. Left unresolved were privacy and trust issues involved with giving others access to college classes where current practice is controlled by faculty who determine what assignments and student work to submit for assessment. While UNI did not opt to move ahead beyond the trial, inquiries and demands for more technology will only increase, especially with the rapid adoption of AI in higher education over the past few years. It goes without saying that having a strong assessment culture based on ACCELERATE principles, especially a culture that allows time for reflection and development of ideas, means there will be an architecture in place to evaluate and adopt changes, even radical technological ones (Undergraduate Studies, 2025c).

In addition to these challenges, several lessons have been learned from growth into a mature assessment culture relying on ACCELERATE principles. One of these is ensuring assessment is embedded throughout the institution, appearing in strategic planning and elsewhere.

Another lesson learned at UNI is the importance of faculty development. The university, notably through leadership in UGS and IE&P, works to develop in-house expertise in assessment. As an example, the author of this article, began in assessment over a decade ago through a committee and then received more training and experiences until taking an assessment leadership position. Another example, UNIFI workshops, in addition to generating assessment data, also serve as a training ground for assessment since the participants are introduced to the history, culture, and approach to assessment at UNI. That, along with the experience of doing hours of assessment in the workshops, allows those participants to go on and act as liaison between the home departments of those faculty participants and the assessment community on campus (Undergraduate Studies, 2025).

A final lesson learned is the importance of maintaining transparency and the role that plays in enduring success. Having assessment data and results available to faculty and administrators facilitates

continuous improvement. On the one hand, it helps ensure continuity and quality in that faculty and administration have access to what has been done successfully in the past. On the other, it provides the basis for a pivot or installation of new programs. For example, the long record of assessment of UNI contained the framework for quickly launching UNIFI and its assessment regimen. Transparency also comes about from not having assessment limited to small group of practitioners, but by having assessment embedded throughout the institution in a variety of ways ranging from multidisciplinary workshops scoring artifacts to representative committee composition (Undergraduate Studies, 2025b).

## Implications for Practice

Institutions seeking to operationalize ACCELERATE principles should consider adopting some of the following approaches.

First, emphasize and accelerate change to get assessment structures in place. Paradoxically, rapid adoption of structural change creates time and space for deep learning improvement. Getting organizations and policies in place fast sets the stage for assessment in a way that allows practitioners to take time for meaningful data collection and analysis. For example, UNI working from a mature assessment culture allowed for the quick implementation of an assessment plan for the general education program, which, once in place, allowed for a slower pace in considering initial assessment results and taking a longer time to reflect on and change rubrics to better fit the program.

Understanding which ACCELERATE principles are structural and which allow space for reflection would be a good start for discussion for programs wanting to move in this direction.

Second, prioritizing faculty development and shared governance undergirds the effect of getting away, at least to a certain extent, from a compliance mindset. Investing in faculty training helps create a roster of individuals with institutional knowledge, experience, and time-on-task to be able to meet deadlines, but more importantly control the process and slow it down for reflection or change as demanded by the learning needs of the institution. Then, having a core of faculty knowledgeable about assessment practices helps them to be spread across the institution in committees and to do assessment work at the departmental level. This not only helps ensure that assessment is part of a university's processes but also allows changes in assessment tempo to be understood and communicated clearly throughout an institution which is theme of the ACCELERATE principles (Academic Assessment Council, 2025).

Third, the use of data and data dashboards creates an opportunity for a high degree of responsiveness. Having data readily available empowers decisions makers at all levels (Institutional Effectiveness & Planning, 2025) It also permits accreditors, legislators, and stakeholders to see that an institution puts the information in place to improve student learning. At the same time, such data availability, along with its safeguards, slows implementation by permitting ethical reflection on its use.

Lastly, treat general education reform as an opportunity for principle-driven innovation. As seen with the University of Northern Iowa's adoption of the UNIFI general education program, starting with first principles and building a program around outcomes to be assessable helps a new program achieve

success early, while at the same time laying the groundwork to proceed slowly and deliberately with assessment in way that allows reflection and thoughtful consideration of data and results in the context of navigating future directions (Undergraduate Studies, 2025a).

A discussion of implications for practice and future directions would not be complete without a mention of leveraging AI for assessment analytics and adaptive learning systems. While relatively new, this technology is finding a place in assessment. UNI already started using AI for some summary reporting and idea generation in the past academic year. As an example, UNI personnel fed summaries from an accreditation argument into AI to generate innovative ideas for assessment (administrative assessment), innovation (e.g., development of new programs), and consolidation (e.g., identifying redundancies and private sector solutions). In this context, ACCELERATE principles will help install a framework in which to evaluate AI ideas and recommendations in a thoughtful way that makes sense for an institution's values and culture (Closing the Loop, 2024).

## Conclusion

UNI's approach demonstrates that accelerating reform can enable institutions to slow down for meaningful, sustainable assessment. By embedding ACCELERATE principles in both systemic processes and program-level innovations for general education, the University of Northern Iowa advances a culture of evidence-based learning improvement. Using these principles can help institutions of higher learning move towards a mature assessment culture where reflection and contemplation are as valued as compliance and deadlines.

In summary, this article shows how UNI's approach can enable other institutions to adopt ACCELERATE as a roadmap for institutions committed to responsiveness and continuous improvement. In this way, other institutions can ACCELERATE in order to slow down for meaningful, sustainable assessment.

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## About the Authors

Donald H. Gaff, Professor of Anthropology, University of Northern Iowa, [donald.gaff@uni.edu](mailto:donald.gaff@uni.edu)