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Aligned, Action-Driven, and Evolving: Embedding ACCELERATE Assessment Principles in a Reorganized College Structure

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Abstract: The College of Humanities, Social Sciences, and the Arts (CHSSA) at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) presents a case study illustrating how aspects of the ACCELERATE assessment framework strengthen meaningful continuous improvement. The university’s commitment to hiring experienced assessment professionals to work directly with College leadership as a team demonstrates how assessment can be “Energized by Expertise,” leveraging experience to provide direction for continuous improvement. The project highlights “Aligned Purposefully” practices by linking program goals, resources and trainings across CHSSA to academic program review. “Action-Driven” responses to assessment findings close the loop, prompting curricular refinements and targeted student supports aligned to College priorities. Finally, the initiative is “Enduring and Evolving,” developing patterns of support, resources and fostering a culture of collective ownership. This case study offers a model for institutions seeking assessment approaches that incorporate the best practices outlined in the ACCELERATE framework.

Keywords: *program assessment, program review, continuous improvement, ACCELERATE, best practices*

Introduction

This case study offers a model for institutions seeking to advance their assessment culture and create vital program buy-in by connecting concerns about program review to ACCELERATE best practices. Adoption of ACCELERATE principles at the University of North Carolina Wilmington’s College of Humanities, Social Sciences and the Arts (UNCW CHSSA) was driven by institutional changes in general and, also, specifically, to respond to rapidly evolving program review requirements. As the ACCELERATE framework notes, to thrive, assessment processes must empower and engage participants (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda, et al., 2025, pp. 2-3). In her foreword to the collection *Advancing Assessment for Student Success*, Maki (2021, p. xi) describes a healthy assessment culture as a continuous and shared process. She maintains that the challenge of assessment has always been to humanize it, and she believes the field is moving in that direction. Heeding Maki’s assertions and leaning into the new ACCELERATE framework creates opportunities to navigate a challenging change environment in ways that strengthen assessment culture.

Institutional Context

The University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) is a fast-growing R-2 (until recently a Comprehensive Masters Granting) institution with over 16,000 undergraduate and nearly 4,000 graduate students. Expanding enrollment, new programs, and diversifying modalities have characterized its last two decades. This has created a tremendous need to strengthen institutional capacity to reflect on growth and to develop new administrative structures and infrastructure. A major academic reorganization in 2023 split a larger College of Arts and Sciences (CAS). and the College of Humanities, Social Sciences, and the Arts (CHSSA) became the primary academic home for some 500 graduates and over 2,800 undergraduate students. This transition coincided with a university-wide plan to reinforce and centralize assessment support by hiring associate directors embedded within each college but reporting to a director of Institutional Effectiveness (IE). These newly appointed assessment experts became catalysts for redesigning processes, strengthening alignment, and promoting evidence-based decision-making.

The new College at UNCW offers an opportunity for a case study illustrating how aspects of the ACCELERATE assessment framework strengthen meaningful continuous improvement in a high-stakes, rapidly evolving assessment environment with new leadership and a system mandate for program review. With reference to Maki's ideal, the goal of this work with CHSSA was to harness ACCELERATE, with its ten thoughtfully developed principles of best practices, to provide structure for the ongoing professional development of a new cast of program level assessment coordinators and their new support team in the College. In providing a framework for continuous improvement, CHSSA encouraged the development of a shared vision for improving and evolving unit assessment while aligning it with program review requirements.

Review of Literature

Over the past decade, scholarship has reframed higher education assessment as a necessary driver of institutional effectiveness, organizational learning, and continuous improvement rather than a compliance model for measuring student learning. Although program assessment and program review developed separately, contemporary assessment professionals argue that they are most useful when integrated within a comprehensive institutional effectiveness framework (Bresciani Ludvik, 2025; Levy & Jankowski, 2026; Suskie, 2018). Assessment generates evidence of student learning and educational quality, while program review contextualizes that evidence alongside enrollment data, faculty productivity, resource allocation, and other institutional priorities to support evidence-informed decision making (Banta & Palomba, 2015). Levy and Jankowski (2026) contend that assessment should be designed to improve institutional capacity, emphasizing that meaningful evidence informs decisions that enhance quality and performance. Increasingly, program review is the driver of such decisions.

The relationship between assessment and program review has become a central question. Earlier models often treated assessment as an accreditation requirement and program review as an independent periodic evaluation. More recent scholarship challenges this, arguing that program review should synthesize assessment evidence with broader institutional indicators. Bresciani Ludvik (2025) advocates replacing episodic review with ongoing, data-informed processes that integrate assessment results with other metrics. Likewise, Petre et al. (2018) describe program review as an organizational

learning process, promoting collaborative interpretation of evidence and aligning departmental priorities with institutional goals. Together, these studies position assessment as the source of evidence and program review as the organizational process generating interpretation and action.

Recent scholarship further positions assessment as a change agent rather than an evaluation methodology. Levy and Jankowski (2026) argue that assessment is a leadership practice requiring collaboration, design, and commitment. Similarly, Pastore's (2026) meta-synthesis concludes that assessment improves educational quality only when evidence is routinely used for improvement rather than compliance. Crucially, this perspective is reinforced by research demonstrating that sustainable assessment systems depend on faculty engagement and cultures that support evidence use. Doria et al. (2026) identify faculty development as essential to effective assessment practice, while Turnip et al. (2026) emphasize leadership, governance, and institutional infrastructure as prerequisites for proper linkage of best practices in assessment and program review.

Collectively, this literature reflects a shift from viewing assessment and program review as discrete activities toward understanding their integration as essential for continuous improvement. Assessment provides the evidence, program review provides the context for interpretation and decision-making, and together they create a continuous improvement process that informs strategic planning, strengthens academic programs, and advances institutional mission (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Levy & Jankowski, 2026; Suskie, 2018).

The Case Study

The practical challenges presented by this theoretical link created new opportunities in CHSSA for reinventing practice in ways that would better align with changing ideas about the intersection of assessment and program review. This case study centers two research questions:

- How could deliberate application of ACCELERATE principles produce directed change and alignment with principles in a rapidly evolving assessment culture?
- How could necessary change in an assessment culture under considerable external pressure be better managed, explained, and understood by academic programs through the application of ACCELERATE principles?

The authors, the Associate Dean (AD) for Student Success and Policy in CHSSA and the Associate Director for Institutional Assessment (ADIA) assigned to CHSSA, having completed one assessment cycle, will share reflections on successes and challenges while describing future plans.

This case study evolved in a rapidly changing environment in the College and across the institution and system. Application and analysis constitute the primary methodology, with the design of the work of necessity evolving alongside efforts to apply the theory to the practice of building a more responsive assessment culture. The case study itself, with the application of the indicated principles chosen by the AD and ADIA, along with examples of successes and challenges, incorporating specific program data as example where applicable, serves as the evidence for the new system's effectiveness. The heart of the

case study is organized by framework principle, with context, approach, outcomes, and challenges presented for each.

ACCELERATE Principles

In CHSSA, experienced college leadership worked closely with the assessment professional to reshape continuous improvement efforts. This approach, hiring an experienced assessment professional to work directly with an assessment-focused College leader, is well aligned with ACCELERATE’s "Energized by Expertise" principle, leveraging knowledge and experience in partnership with unit-level experience.

The case study highlights "Aligned Purposefully" practices by demonstrating how program goals across CHSSA were linked to critical emergent academic program review processes and new College priorities by leaders who looked to energize change by harnessing expertise. "Action-Driven" responses to assessment findings encouraged programs to close the loop, prompting curricular refinements and targeted student supports. Finally, the collaboration embodies the "Enduring and Evolving" principle, better embedding continuous reflection and iterative refinement into College-wide decision-making and strategic planning while fostering a culture of collective ownership of assessment processes at program level. The table below outlines this process and its components. After, the authors will examine the application of these ACCELERATE principles in closer detail, and in relation to practical changes they were associated with.

Table 1

CHSSA’s Use of ACCELERATE Principles

ACCELERATE PRINCIPLE	DESCRIPTION	INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT	IMPACT/CONSEQUENCE
Energized by Expertise	Bringing Expertise to bear on assessment structures	Close collaboration between AD and ADIA	Clear direction and collaborative planning
Aligned Purposefully	Connect disparate processes and resources; operate intentionally	Connect new program review mandates to institutional processes/structures	Training revision and adoption of shared measures
Action Driven	Loop-closing and focus on development and implementation	Training focus on action development and reporting	Tangible progress towards aligned goals
Enduring and Evolving	Building a flexible shared assessment process	Focus on developing leaders, resources, and culture	Best practices documents, manual, and schedules

A Changing Environment

Prior to the formation of CHSSA, program assessment in the larger CAS was the responsibility of a single College assessment director who reported to the Dean and collaborated occasionally across the institution with other college/school directors and a Director of Institutional Assessment. The departure of that director in 2020, and a combination of profound institutional disruptions (two hurricanes in 2018 and 2019, including Hurricane Florence in 2018, which closed UNCW for nearly six weeks and the COVID 19 pandemic) and senior leadership transitions (four Deans served between 2019 and 2022, including two interims before the appointment of CHSSA's inaugural Dean in 2023) led to an erosion of follow up and consistent practices. From 2021-2023 in CAS, assessment was one responsibility among many for an Associate Dean and only 25% of an additional staff position. Program assessment was not an institutional or College priority in this period of transition and immediate crisis management.

Three important developments put pressure on this unsatisfactory situation. The first was a series of UNC-system reforms related to program review. Early in 2024, the North Carolina system completed a comprehensive Return on Investment (ROI) study authored by external consultants that challenged academic programs to develop and engage with new metrics around lifetime earnings of graduates and program cost. At the same time, the system mandated a revised and consequential program review process that began in 2024-25. This included a bi-annual program productivity review directed by the system and a seven-year campus-directed in-depth program review, with specific recommendations to be made for program cuts, continuation, or expansion. Several North Carolina system schools experienced significant program reviews that led to program closures and adjustments affecting humanities and arts programs that were not always well received by faculty, and that also generated extensive discussion about the program review policy and process at campus level (Atkinson, 2024) and (Van Nynatten, 2024).

Secondly, and at the same time, UNCW's wider assessment culture was undergoing a profound evolution under a new provost (appointed in July 2020) as noted above. Institutionally, program assessment was reinforced by the hiring of a new Director of Institutional Effectiveness, a transition to the Watermark Planning and Success platform, and an institutional commitment to support three new associate director positions in the campus Office of Institutional Research (IRP) dedicated to program assessment and specialized accreditation within the Colleges but reporting to the Director of Institutional Effectiveness. One of these roles was earmarked to support assessment in the former CAS, now split into CHSSA and another new entity, a college of science, computing, and engineering.

Thirdly, CHSSA's launch in 2023 came with a commitment from the inaugural dean to encourage continuous improvement of programs and better reporting under these new systems and structures. The strategic plan issued in the spring of 2025 committed the College to "support efforts to enhance enrollment growth and student success through assessment," (CHSSA, 2025). An associate dean with significant assessment experience was brought in with a clear expectation to collaborate with the associate director assigned to CHSSA in evolving, meaningful assessment processes that measured College and program priorities.

Previously, the assessment framework used by the university and by CHSSA was more of a compilation of various ideas. Program assessment was typically developed at the department level in collaboration with a thinly stretched Director of Institutional Effectiveness. While aligned with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) requirements, program assessment remained a localized process with little relationship to broader institutional standards, needs, or strategic assessment processes. Within CHSSA, at least one program relied entirely on the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics (AAC&U, 2009) which, modified by the faculty, were also the foundation for the assessment of general education on campus. Program assessment reports, especially in the period immediately preceding the College split, were not systematically reviewed or closely connected to College decision making, while at department level they were treated variously in relation to planning and improvement processes.

Over several years, the office of Institutional Effectiveness offered voluntary, intensive workshops in the summers. Many faculty and staff members at the university participated in the workshops which promoted best practices to attendees. These practices were curated from the training and expertise of various university staff members working in the assessment space. Influences included the work of foundational assessment leaders, including Linda Suskie and Natasha Jankowski, James Madison University (JMU) resources, the American Association of Higher Education's (AAHE) 9 Principles of Good Practice (1992), and best practices learned through professional development acquired by attendees of the annual Assessment Institute in Indianapolis and other conferences. Many sources of assessment best practices were compiled and in use without a reliance on just a single guiding framework. This unsystematic approach created pockets of good but also often inconsistent and uneven assessment practice, loosely connected to program development, rather than a shared and integrated culture of continuous improvement.

With the new demands on programs and the new software, as well as the centralization of assessment within IE, intensive summer assessment workshops were eliminated in favor of periodic topical sessions facilitated by the ADIAs. This shift to localized training, with support on issues of shared concern from IRP, prompted CHSSA to focus its new resources for assessment on teaching best practices to program coordinators internally. It also provided an opportunity for new approaches to assessment that might be expected to connect practice more directly with College concerns. The CHSSA goal, well connected to ACCELERATE's principles of "energized by expertise" and "aligned purposefully," became the provision of regular feedback to program assessors and a stronger focus on connecting program outcomes to College and institutional concerns about enrollments and program recruitment, student persistence and graduation, better accounting for service teaching, and curriculum development related to strategic concerns. This focus on developing coordinators and updating plans also positioned the new Institutional Effectiveness staff to be effective in developing collaborative structures for training and support.

Energized by expertise—The New Team

The authors of the ACCELERATE framework offer definitions, framing questions, and justifications for each of the ten principles. The Energized by Expertise principle calls for practitioners to be

conscientious about engaging in training and gaining additional expertise to lead to assessment that is “valuable, relevant, and maybe even joyous.” They call the justification “The Why.” Regarding this principle, they remind us that “For assessment to be meaningful, useful, and potentially transformative, it needs to be facilitated by experts who have robust and deep assessment expertise that is ever-growing,” (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda, et al., 2025, p. 5).

CHSSA embraced this principle and was supported in it at the institutional level. Collaboration and co-creation across the faculty, student, and unit administrative practice of assessment presents the best opportunities for leveraging experience towards continuous improvement. The CHSSA assessment leadership team was also designed by Academic Affairs to be a collaboration between the college and the IE office. Both the ADIA and the AD for CHSSA had extensive experience in building and sustaining assessment cultures rooted in such an approach. CHSSA’s new AD had been working to establish good assessment practices. His experience as a department undergraduate assessment coordinator, a former department chair in CAS, and then a five-year period as Undergraduate Dean responsible for new program development, SACSCOC reviews, general education assessment, and the development of UNCW’s Student Success initiatives involved him in university-level assessment coordination and close collaboration with the IRP office. He had also served on IRP’s Assessment Council, which had attempted to coordinate program assessment processes across colleges, and had a leadership role in developing two UNCW Quality Enhancement Plans (QEPs) closely connected to the assessment of High-Impact Practices (HIPs). In the first year of the new College, the work focused on clarifying responsibilities for program-level assessment, improving data availability and consistency, and making sure existing processes and the new Watermark system were properly implemented. College needs for responsiveness around new system level ROI reporting encouraged programs to strengthen their commitment to accountability. He instituted bi-annual review meetings (a Fall report review and a Spring planning and preparation session) between assessment coordinators and the Dean’s Office.

The new ADIA arrived at UNCW after a recruiting process CHSSA was closely involved with. She brought some 25 years of experience in academic assessment work from a variety of institution types, including RI, R2, and an art and design school, and immediate previous service at a system school as a Director of Assessment, Planning, and Accreditation in a similar college. This expertise and her considerable experience with system ROI reporting and the new program review guidelines could now be brought to bear on these needs. Still, there was a new software system, assessment culture, and policies and procedures to learn at UNCW. The AD was willing to put in the time to discuss the history and context of assessment at UNCW and in CHSSA and, more importantly, to discuss the assessment culture the Dean envisioned for CHSSA. While extensive assessment experience made collaboration easier, intentionality was the key to working effectively with program leadership to build a new, energized team approach to continuous improvement.

The Plan

When the new ACCELERATE framework was introduced in *Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning*, months of collaboration and planning came into greater focus and it became easier to approach coordinators with a plan after adopting the framework. The team could develop a roadmap which articulated what CHSSA had been working towards over the past year. For several

months, the new assessment leader was developing an understanding of the university and the College while working collaboratively with the AD. Pulling together personal experience with assessment, the needs of the College, and current best practices required careful discussion. Throughout the first year's new approach to assessment, they focused on providing support in moving towards the new criteria and developing the roadmap towards a shared understanding of what progress needed to look like and how to attain it.

Effectiveness of any approach depends on collaboration between faculty who understand program evolution and assessment professionals who are experienced in connecting that evolution to measures and metrics. This is in line with the way Levy and Jankowski (2026) describe the recent shift in assessment away from a sole focus on the assessment processes and towards a focus on the human elements. Practically, implementing this collaborative approach took many forms. To develop shared goals, the AD and ADIA made time to plan, conferencing at least weekly. Building and then acting from a shared sense of value and purpose was the best way to move the work forward. They communicated with program coordinators and often department chairs as well, especially where there seemed to be disconnect between assessment processes and program strategy. The focus was on both the "why" of plan adjustments but also the "how" of developing better aligned measures and better data. They included coordinators and chairs in the refinement of assessment plans, annual reporting, and program review processes. Operating this way helped to create shared understandings about alignment. When more clarity or better data was needed to guide program coordinators, or when program coordinators asked about better ways of documenting improvement, the team worked with IRP professionals. The collaboration was intentional but also became organic and iterative.

The Approach

Past experience led to this focus on professional development around plan improvement within CHSSA. They recognized that program coordinators were the experts in their programs, but they had varying knowledge bases in relation to program assessment and review, or institutional strategic priorities. Many inherited assessment plans that were not fully communicated to them during transitions. Others had plans in need of updating, revision, and mapping to institutional goals. Breaking the assessment process down into smaller tasks and making sure there were opportunities to both learn and practice various elements of assessment was the new model. This system required additional training sessions, which offered the opportunity to connect more directly with program assessors. Facilitators spent the first hour teaching a skill, concept, or process and answering broad questions from participants. They also had the important task of outlining the changing assessment environment and the need to develop outcomes at program level that were at the juncture of institutional and program needs and concerns. They added an additional "working hour" to these sessions, giving participants time to learn the system while workshop leaders were available for program level questions and other personalized support. They then provided follow up group and 1:1 opportunities for program leaders to develop assessment expertise and grow comfortable with feedback and questions about goals, targets, and measures. This new way of operating took time and required persistence but, when combined with genuine curiosity rather than judgement about program goals and increased levels of practical support, it made change easier and created a shared sense of purpose.

The Challenges

Despite success in developing a collaborative process, barriers and challenges were present and remain. As Miller and colleagues identified in their 2024 article, there are numerous threats to effective collaboration. Such barriers are part of the work, and, as the authors noted, they typically relate to organizational history, institutional policy, and power dynamics and norms. CHSSA faced all three as the College looked to energize processes in relation to expertise.

One such challenge was making the availability of expertise energizing rather than burdensome. For both the assessment leadership and the assessment coordinators in the programs, sustaining commitment given the volume of meetings was a concern since there are over 40 individual programs engaging in assessment in CHSSA. They attempted to combat this challenge by leaning into curiosity and storytelling, drawing on programs’ own interest in being appreciated. They encouraged faculty coordinators to be creative and make their assessment plans meaningful to their programs.

Aligned purposefully

The authors of the ACCELERATE framework describe this principle’s purpose as to “ensure that assessment practices are consistently aligned with values, mission, articulated outcomes, and/or objectives,” (page 4). The purpose expands to include alignment with relevant goals and policies which is very much in line with CHSSA’s approach. They go on to explain that failure to purposefully align assessment practices in this way leads to a failure to “capture an accurate state of being and can lead to missed opportunities and ill-informed decision making,” (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda, et al., 2025, p. 4). For CHSSA, the emphasis on purposeful alignment led to an increase from a completion rate of 63% in 2023-24 to a completion rate of 100% in 2024-25. It also led to the adoption of measures across these reports much more closely connected with the College strategic plan and program review metrics. For example, the following were developed as “suggested measures” and adopted by most programs as a consistent way of tracking program success:

Table 2
Representative CHSSA Suggested Measures

Measure	Method	Description	Target Guidance
Enrollment (Graduate Programs)	Number of Applications/ Acceptances/ Enrollments	Sustain enrollments at levels determined by program leadership; develop effective recruiting and welcoming strategies for major. Adopt and sustain appropriate recruitment/marketing strategies. Program will track annually.	Applications/Acceptances/ Enrollments within 5% of 3 year rolling averages. Or A 5% increase in applications/enrollments over 3 year rolling averages.
Curriculum Stewardship	Course Evaluations/ Other	Curriculum will be developed that is appropriate for program staffing structures, faculty expertise, and student needs. Curriculum will be developed to	100% of curricular actions reported and explained; major changes in scheduling or deploying curriculum will be

		serve both majors and department commitments to University Studies, minors, and other curricular needs. Classes will be made available to program students in appropriate modalities. Curricular actions will be tracked and explained in relation to program needs.	noted and explained in relation to program needs.
SCH Production to Non-Majors ("Service Teaching")	Counts	CHSSA/IR provided data on 1) SCH provided to non-majors and 2) as a % of program's department SCH production overall	Sustain both within 5% of a 3-year rolling average.
Student Satisfaction	Survey	Department administered exit survey that treats program satisfaction and likely next steps post-graduation.	80% completion 75%+ identifying program as high-quality 75% feeling well-prepared or better for "next step"

The Plan

Changes in training and support required consistent messaging from IRP and the College, that the university was making efforts to align the assessment process with program review and make practice more consistent. To this end, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) asked all programs across the university to incorporate two specific measures as part of their assessment plans and annual reports. These measures, straightforward enrollment and graduation data, were the two most basic data points required by the NC State System office as part of the program review policy. Most program outcomes across CHSSA were not previously rooted in broad student success data, but supporting programs in this transition helped to refocus them on broader questions of program and student success.

One of CHSSA's largest majors, Film Studies, had not been carefully tracking major numbers, in part because a pre-major category of students made it difficult to analyze major counts. The three-year trend in majors and pre-majors are shown in Table 3 below. More careful and regular reporting on both the major and pre-major category made it clear that major numbers were trending downwards even while pre-major numbers were increasing. This pointed to a problem, in early-stage curriculum, and in converting interested students into actual majors. Program level analysis of this trend and these numbers led to revisions in early curriculum structure and pedagogy, including an effort to adjust the previous approach of more graduate student taught sections.

Table 3

FILM BA Enrollment Data 3-Year Trends

	Fall 2022	Fall 2023	Fall 2024
Primary Majors	218	195	184
All Majors	244	215	203
Primary Pre-Majors	54	82	103
All Pre-Majors	57	84	106

The AD and ADIA led the process of incorporating these measures, writing targets that were appropriate for the needs of the individual program, accessing the data to report on these items, and, most importantly, supporting improvement-focused analysis of results. Some programs also developed actions around these data points if they were struggling with program success in either of these metrics. While other metrics were required by the system office, this first step the university took was an important one in purposefully aligning the program assessment with the new program review process.

The Approach

CHSSA took this alignment a step further by centering College priorities and the reporting needs of programs in the humanities, social sciences, and arts. After reviewing all the 2024-25 annual assessment reports for the College and beginning the early stages of working with programs in the first cohort writing program review self-studies, it became clear that more guidance about what CHSSA expected to see in terms of success outcome measures was necessary. 100% of programs adopted a new framework for program outcomes aligned to program review.

Development of the program review process led to further refinement of the suggested measures described above. They curated additional measures, particularly around student employment outcomes and program satisfaction, that multiple programs implemented and that were useful College-wide. To encourage more consistency and alignment across CHSSA annual reports, language was developed to help align these measures with the priorities of the College. It was also clear that programs needed guidance on how to set targets and analyze the results. The AD wrote a “best practices” document in December 2025 while simultaneously developing an in-person workshop with the ADIA for CHSSA assessment coordinators in January 2026 based on that document. Best practices guidance allowed targeted revisiting of the suite of suggested measures the AD had developed back in the spring, allowing their refinement based on additional knowledge of the program review process, Watermark software functionality, and the practical assessment experiences of CHSSA programs. The College was better aligning assessment guidance with program review requirements and CHSSA-identified priorities while also aligning the professional development process around this guidance. The overall goal was to align the annual assessment plans with future program review expectations in conversation with CHSSA coordinators’ program knowledge.

The Challenges

The primary challenge for this principle was attempting to align to processes that were still in development. CHSSA, as a new College, was still developing its strategic plan for much of this period. Meanwhile, the program review process was still evolving at the institutional level, including solidification of a template for writing self-studies. The challenge has been to accommodate this evolving strategic landscape with practical, aligned program level metrics.

Looking ahead, CHSSA has begun to focus on mapping – both curriculum mapping and outcomes mapping – in an effort to continue a focus on alignment. Connecting curriculum and its development to strategic program needs, as long as these are connected to institutional goals, will move alignment out of the realm of the abstract. CHSSA will help programs map their assessment plans to the university and College strategic plans while also focusing on the benefits of creating visual curriculum maps. In *Advancing Assessment for Student Success*, Driscoll (2021) posits that alignment and coherence together create visible connections to student learning. She believes curriculum mapping helps answer the question, “Will students experience the programs we’re analyzing as a meaningful whole?” (p. 78). By helping programs answer that question, CHSSA hopes to further alignment.

Action Driven

The explanation of the importance of the principle of action-driven states, “findings are meant to be used in a timely and meaningful way right away.” This stresses not only the importance of developing actions, but also the importance of implementing them. They further explain that without complex, action driven assessment, the process can lead to wasted effort and bad decisions that can erode trust (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda, et al, 2025, p. 6). The importance of purposeful actions cannot be underestimated.

Assessment literature recognizes the development of actions to close the loop on assessment as the most important part of the process. In *Improving Learning at Scale*, Fulcher and Prendergast (2023) discuss actions as the intervention stage of the assessment process. They describe this as a 2-step process (development and implementation), with each step being equally vital to the success of improving learning. They argue that the intervention stage is more challenging and more time-consuming than other stages of the assessment process, including designing assessments themselves. Their work reminds us of the relative value of outcomes in relation to process. As they explain it, “Interventions are the heart of learning improvement, and assessment processes play a supporting role by framing and evaluating those interventions,” (pp. 99-100). Similarly, Levy and Jankowski (2026) explain, “Taking actions with reports is a must. Data-informed action is a need as opposed to a want or a nice-to-have element of assessment activity,” (p 101).

The Plan

Given the importance of developing and implementing actions for learning improvement, CHSSA has focused on changes to this vital part of the assessment cycle. The Watermark software platform for assessment reporting, as well as specialized accreditation and program review self-studies, provided a new tool for managing actions developed through the closing the loop process of program assessment.

The previous system had encouraged programs to list an action for most measures, and this led to a large number of “throwaway” actions not rooted in data. For example, a common action in old assessment reports was “Maintain Assessment Strategy.” CHSSA has worked to make the new process action-driven with authentic actions based on data from assessment reporting. Encouraging program leaders to think about actions as directly connected to specific measures and associated data was met with some resistance, but assessment leadership continues to emphasize this new guidance. Figure 1 demonstrates how a measure, reported findings, and the associated action appear in our software system.

Figure 1
An Action and Corresponding Measure in a CHSSA Annual Report

MEASURES	RESULTS	ACTIONS
IDS Advisory Board An Advisory Board will be formed annually and will review program revisions, assessment processes, and provide guidance to the director Indirect - Other Target Fully staffed advisory board representative of all colleges IDS Faculty Advisory Council 23-24.docx	MET Summary Advisory Board Met 9/10 and 6/10. --reviewed SLO adjustments, curricular adjustments, and recieved program updates.	Modify Position / Personnel COMPLETE Add 1 representative for grad program with board approval. Recommended Due Date: 12/01/2025 Updates May 07, 2026 by Kristy Byrd Grad representative added to the board, approved by IDS board October 2025.

The Approach

The authors took numerous steps to encourage this new approach to actions, including leaning into the language of continuous improvement to encourage data-based actions. Additionally, CHSSA-specific assessment documents, including a description of best practices and an assessment glossary, described the updated approach to actions and continued to encourage the tracking of data directly connected to institutional priorities. Finally, individual feedback on assessment reports provided opportunities to align actions to data and measures. In the long run, there can be no continuous improvement process if there are no data-informed actions implemented. Closing the assessment loop is not a new idea, but, with the help of the other ACCELERATE principles described above, CHSSA was taking a more intentional and better aligned approach to this challenge. At the end of the first reporting cycle, CHSSA programs developed a total of 204 actions across 42 programs. The goal for the upcoming year is not more actions but better actions. The AD and ADIA have scheduled professional development sessions within CHSSA where one topic will be developing and writing actions to close out the assessment cycle and documenting connections between cycles to support program continuous improvement.

In addition to new ways of framing and developing actions, the Watermark platform provided a new way to report progress and update the status of the actions. No longer tied solely to annual reporting, the system provided a way to update progress on actions in real time. A status change from “not yet started” to “in progress” or “completed” could be made at any time. Similarly, notes could be entered to provide updates based on meeting schedules, events, curriculum changes, and more. These action updates could be provided at any time to capture the story of the work the program undertook. While actions could be updated as frequently as made sense for the program, CHSSA encouraged existing actions to be updated at least once every fall and every spring semester. The ADIA audits the system after these bi-annual deadlines to foster accountability. Follow up inquiries will feel less like punitive interruption and more like a continuation of a conversation about improvement. Frequent updates to existing actions were another reason the College focused on quality over quantity when writing actions. In addition to new ways to update the status of various actions across CHSSA, the software provides the ability to look at visual tools indicating progress.

The Challenges

The primary challenge around the action-driven principle is that expectations included a new layer of reporting on a cycle that faculty assessment coordinators were not accustomed to incorporating into end of year schedules. By asking faculty to report on progress on actions by May 1 of the spring semester, it added a new responsibility and a new reporting element, in fact, in this first cycle, only about half of CHSSA programs met the deadline. Given the end of year pressures faculty face and the newness of this request, the College made the decision not to be stringent about this during the first iteration. The AD and ADIA will revisit this expectation and discuss how to better achieve this new reporting ask, perhaps by adjusting its timing or using action review as a warmup exercise for coordinators when they return on contract in August.

Enduring and Evolving

The framework authors rightfully suggest that assessment work that isn’t enduring and evolving runs the risk of feeling pointless and unproductive. The work needs to be sustainable and possibly even expandable in order to be of use in long-term decision-making. Broadly, this principle is described as needing to “Ideate strategies and strengthen practices to meaningfully serve our communities,” and this includes the assertion that the strategies and practices should be adaptable (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025, p. 7).

The Plan

One recurring theme throughout this case study has been that long term progress requires ongoing efforts towards culture change. CHSSA’s goal for assessment is to continue to build on the foundation we’re establishing through the ACCELERATE framework. Longitudinal success requires procedures and approaches, and even systems, to change over time. It has already been established with program leaders that our assessment plans are evolving by continuing to update guidance based on new knowledge, and to think intentionally about how to manage future personnel changes. There is continuing work with College leadership to identify opportunities to better support assessment coordinators, and, using the resources of both the College and the IE office, to offer training, guidance,

on-boarding and support. More predictable and regular schedules of conferencing and training, and the development of better training materials are part of this plan.

The Approach

An example of the evolving nature of guidance is that programs already have a refined list of CHSSA-aligned measures after the close of just one assessment cycle. Additionally, with the new program review process completing its pilot year, annual reporting guidelines will continue to shift as that evolves over time with potential changes at both the university and system levels.

The AD and ADIA are thinking about how they can deliberately use language to manage an expectation that the process will continue to evolve. By thinking about scaffolding best practices guidance based on university-wide policy changes and developing CHSSA goals, they hope to build the intention that the assessment expectations are evolving organically and in connection with strategic developments. For example, as a newly formed College, CHSSA has a strategic plan that is only a few months old. By the end of the current cycle, program leaders will map their outcomes to the College's strategic plan. This is work that couldn't have been completed any sooner in CHSSA's lifecycle.

The Challenges

Through all of this, CHSSA is challenged to find a balance between setting up firm expectations about assessment work while also communicating that the process will need to change across cycles. Adding to this challenge is the usual turnover involved with those responsible for completing the work of assessment in their respective programs. Planned professional development as well as CHSSA-specific resources have aided in this task. For example, the 2026-27 assessment cycle will need to incorporate new learning outcomes related to CHSSA's career readiness curriculum.

A related concern—the iterative, interactive, curious approach the AD and ADIA have used, so important for establishing energy and alignment, can feel unscheduled. Frequent conversations, evolving questions and metrics, and fluid strategic situations all added to this challenge. They came to appreciate the advantages for sustainability of a more settled, regular and clearly mapped out schedule for the process. Now that the relationships are in place and a stronger shared understanding of alignments has been developed, the College is well positioned to bring more structure and predictability to this process.

Looking ahead

The value of the ACCELERATE framework to the work done in CHSSA is illustrated in three key areas. First, the framework provides a model for thinking about how to structure assessment-related professional development for the ever-changing program leadership shepherded through this work. Second, it provides clear language for use while communicating about best practices in continuous improvement. Finally, it provides room for a vision for assessment in CHSSA to develop while looking towards incorporating additional components of the model.

Progress will depend on continuing to move forward in ways that the ACCELERATE model suggests, particularly in the areas described above, but with a broadening of the circle of engagement with

assessment principles and practices that is necessary for fostering a real culture of assessment. That is, "purposeful alignment" has to keep IRP, College, program, and even system goals connected and transparent. Our "energized expertise" has to draw in and support faculty charged with program assessment (this is inseparable from offering effective training and one on one time); the "action driven" approach must involve a clear and shared sense of next steps and semester-to-semester planning; and any "enduring and evolving" approach in an environment like the one that exists at UNCW, and, indeed, across the higher ed landscape, has to build in and encourage through an environment where needs, tools, and people are all subject to a rapidly shifting landscape.

So far, the AD and ADIA have focused primarily on the four criteria covered in this case study while also relying on an intensely collaborative approach. Looking ahead to the next cycle, they see additional ACCELERATE criteria that will continue to both guide and support the work in CHSSA. These emerging criteria are:

- Transparent and trustworthy
- Learning-centered
- Continuously cultivating

For CHSSA programs in particular, the program review process produces concern about the future of programs, particularly if they have low ROI and/or declining enrollments. The approach thus far has been to be as honest as possible about what programs can expect from the process. Sometimes this means saying nobody has the answers to their questions yet. By being transparent and honest, the AD and ADIA hope to be seen as trustworthy partners in assessment. In particular, the ADIA technically works for IRP, not CHSSA. This could easily lead to a lack of trust from program leadership. So moving forward, they will have to keep a keen focus on being obvious about the transparent and trustworthy nature of all guidance.

Many of the programs in CHSSA have not reviewed student learning outcomes in recent years. With a focus on keeping the assessment process learning-centered, goals will include helping programs ensure their student learning outcomes are updated and follow best practices while helping them develop appropriate targets to evaluate achievement of these student learning outcomes. Part of this learning-centered process will include fostering a shift in the way program leaders think about these outcomes. Currently, CHSSA assessment leaders understand that some programs are satisfied with meeting the targets for all their student learning outcomes year after year, leaving no space for the continuous improvement process. They want to transform the process for programs caught in this cycle.

The authors have already mentioned some ways they are continuously cultivating the assessment process in CHSSA, but there is a need to expand the reach in this area. It is too easy for programs to fall into a cycle of only thinking about assessment once a year prior to submitting a report, and this will never foster authentic continuous improvement. This case study detailed earlier how a new approach to actions will help programs engage with this work more frequently. Another way they have already begun this approach is with professional development workshops and program-specific meetings with the AD and ADIA. Additionally, the AD and ADIA are writing a CHSSA Assessment Manual that they believe will be particularly useful when new assessment coordinators take over responsibility for a

program. The fluidity of some of the institutional processes had made it too soon to develop a manual thus far.

The authors hope this case study has illustrated the effectiveness of this new model and framework for continuous improvement while answering our central research questions. There is much potential for using ACCELERATE to build a robust assessment plan based on best practices. They advise focusing first on what strengths already exist within your assessment culture and developing those further while thinking about the elements of the model that could guide your next steps. Changes occur rapidly in the current higher education landscape, and that is all the more reason to continue efforts to enact a collaborative, responsive, and transparent approach, so that, amid all of the change, programs can continue to feel supported and empowered to tell the story of what they are doing for students and the University.

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