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A Proposed Framework for Assessing Interdisciplinary Programs

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Abstract: The increase in frequency and popularity of interdisciplinary programs at colleges and universities has led to an increased need for successful assessment models for these unique programs. While these programs are beneficial for institutions and students alike, they often involve several different academic departments and have a curriculum that is complicated, among other challenges. These factors make the design and implementation of a cohesive assessment plan difficult. This session at the 2026 AALHE Annual Conference presented a framework for creating an effective assessment plan for interdisciplinary programs that drew upon community-based learning and research best practice models. The resulting framework describes a four-step cycle: connect, assess, adapt, and construct. Utilizing this framework results in an assessment strategy that focuses on communication, relationship building, sustainability, cognizance of faculty workload, and iteration. This model was used as a basis for creating the assessment plan for the University of Rochester’s Latin American, Caribbean, and Latinx studies interdisciplinary major. The program was pulled together from existing courses in the history, Spanish, anthropology, and political science disciplines and was created because of faculty and student interest. The two-year process of creating the program used the “connect, assess, adapt, construct” framework to build and implement an assessment strategy that has successfully completed its first year of implementation and is already engaging in the iterative framework to learn and improve as the program grows.

Keywords: *interdisciplinary program, program assessment, assessment plan*

Introduction

Interdisciplinary programs are increasing in frequency and popularity in higher education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the number of multi/interdisciplinary studies degrees awarded by post-secondary institutions has more than doubled since 2000, with almost 53,000 degrees awarded in 2022 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This trend is supported by a recent survey of university leaders who report observing increases in interdisciplinary courses and programs and predict a continued increase in the coming years (Lyall et al., 2015).

This increase is likely driven by many factors. Interdisciplinary programs typically focus on a key set of elements, including knowledge of different disciplines, reflection, critical thinking,

problem solving, communication, and collaboration (Schijf et al., 2022). Today's workplace values these skills, along with the cross-disciplinary knowledge and approaches that interdisciplinary education provides (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2024; University of Pennsylvania, 2025). A 2023 study also reported an increased earnings post-graduation for students completing interdisciplinary programs (Han et al., 2023). With a focus on earning potential and job placement after graduation, this edge likely drives students to these majors, and institutions have followed suit, creating a plethora of new opportunities. With options varying from art therapy to digital forensics, green business to an entirely personalized degree, the options seem unlimited. Where disparate fields themselves are coming together to offer new solutions, a graduate with several competencies is an attractive addition to any team (University of Pennsylvania, 2025). Finally, enrollment and financial pressures at institutions have led to exploration of unique degree programs to attract students and the consolidation of lower-enrolling programs into their own integrated majors to manage limited resources (Alonso, 2025).

The definition and design of interdisciplinary programs differ greatly between schools, despite efforts to standardize (Han et al., 2023). From a practical standpoint, despite the variations in definition and application, coordinating and implementing assessment plans for these programs presents unique challenges. Results of an informal poll during the 2026 AALHE Annual Conference (n=45) indicate that despite 87% of respondents having interdisciplinary programs at their institution, only 15% felt that the programs had a strong assessment plan with adequate implementation. A majority, 57%, struggled with both creating and implementing assessment plans for these programs. This article, based on the presentation "Designing academic assessment strategies for interdisciplinary programs" at the 2026 AALHE Annual Conference, presents a framework for developing assessment strategies for interdisciplinary programs as well as a case study of its implementation.

Challenges with Assessing Interdisciplinary Programs

While interdisciplinary programs are valuable to both institutions and students, several challenges arise when trying to develop effective and realistic assessment plans. Prior to the conference session and through personal experience, several challenges stood out. Discussion during the conference session identified several additional challenges that likely depend on context-specific factors such as the size and type of institution, the specific disciplines involved in the program, and the culture and interpersonal relationships within the departments themselves.

The first group of challenges are related to the inherent design of interdisciplinary programs. The programs typically involve at least two different departments and faculty from varied fields. This often means that a program director is tasked with coordinating faculty from all areas and trying to create a single, cohesive plan. Relatedly, this can lead to confusion about who "owns" the program, who is responsible for the assessment, and where resources will be derived from or controlled. It may even lead to a lack of feeling of ownership by individual faculty.

Secondly, collaboration between departments can be challenging for interdisciplinary programs. Collaboration between faculty to reach consensus on an assessment plan process and priorities can be a challenge on its own, but this is compounded with multiple departments and a greater number of faculty. This can be an even greater challenge when the programs have been combined out of institutional or financial necessity and not through the voluntary collaboration of disciplines (Kramnick, 2018). Particularly when the disciplines involved are vastly different and use different assessment strategies (e.g., field that primarily relies on exams versus one that more frequently uses papers or presentations), arriving at a mutually agreeable plan requires additional strategies. For example, the shift in healthcare toward recognizing health and illness as products of “individual, social, and environment/ecosystemic interactions” invites interdisciplinary programs that bring together humanities and healthcare disciplines (Gülpinar & Tanriöver, 2025). The session discussion reinforced what a 22-member committee of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine found: arriving at unified outcomes, performance expectations, and assessment strategies can be especially challenging when one of the disciplines is accustomed to specialized accreditation requirements and when structures are set up in a rigid discipline-based manner (Skorton & Bear, 2018).

The third group of challenges revolve around the program courses themselves. The curricula for interdisciplinary programs are often unstructured, contain many course options and few required courses, and pull largely from existing courses. Since required courses are optimal ones to assess program learning outcomes (PLOs), the lack of structure makes assessment more difficult to organize. Instead of assessing a few core courses, many courses may need to be assessed, in which there may only be a few majors enrolled alongside a much larger number of students from other programs. The challenge here is three-fold. First, the course faculty may be asked to assess students from multiple programs with different PLOs within the same course. This can easily become complicated and difficult and impacts an already-high faculty workload. Second, and relatedly, faculty may question the value of assessing interdisciplinary students in their courses when there are a small number of students. Finally, even with faculty buy-in to assess a small number of interdisciplinary program students across many courses, available technology may limit the ability to easily differentiate the students who are meant to be assessed for one program versus another. Without a dedicated assessment platform that can automatically identify the correct students to assess, the manual work necessary becomes prohibitive.

The final group of challenges identified by session participants are similar to those found in the literature and are those that apply to all program types and represent a major barrier to higher education assessment in general: faculty buy-in, faculty time, infrastructure, and institutional or departmental resources (Charlton & West, 2024). These broad challenges were not a focus of this session but must be acknowledged and addressed for an interdisciplinary assessment framework to be effective. The framework presented below seeks to outline a process for creating a robust and sustainable assessment strategy that addresses these general assessment limitations in addition to those specific to interdisciplinary programs.

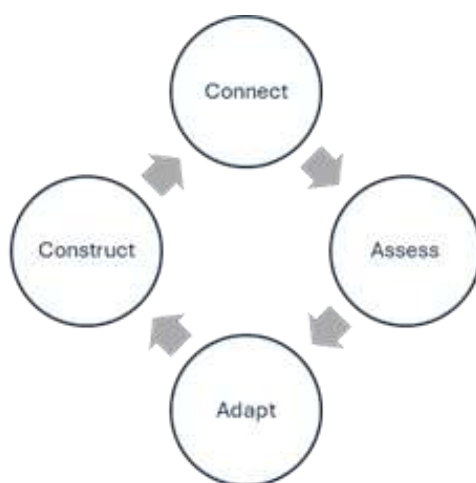
Proposed Framework for Developing Interdisciplinary Program Assessment Strategies

With the challenges listed above, the design and implementation of a cohesive assessment plan for interdisciplinary programs can be difficult. The lack of roadmaps to assist in creating interdisciplinary assessment plans makes the process even more daunting. This session presented strategies to create robust and sustainable assessments. It introduced the interplay of two practice models applicable to a broad spectrum of interdisciplinary programs, that can be implemented at any phase of a program and presented two strategies to implement the models.

The session introduced a feedback cycle that identified four steps: connect, assess, adapt, and construct (Figure 1). This cycle can be applied at the build, implementation, evaluation, and maintenance phases of the assessment process. It allows for new programs to be built, combined programs to be adapted, or existing programs to be reinforced across disciplinary frameworks. It ensures viable interactions that can adapt over time, as it prioritizes the current needs of the programs' stakeholders, which include students, faculty, and a range of staff.

Figure 1

Interdisciplinary Program Assessment Development Cycle



The session also introduced community-based learning (CBL) and research (CBR) best practice models to emphasize the value and effectiveness of relationship-centered interactions (Tryon et al, 2023). Mindful incorporation of these models is core to building connections and maintaining the functioning cycle (top circle of Figure 1). The CBL and CBR approaches, which work with identified stakeholders toward social change initiatives, may seem unlikely fits to help resolve assessment challenges. At the core, however, interdisciplinary programs are distinct “communities” within a university, and, as several problems delineated above suggest, they are often marginalized (Boyle et al., 2011). Thus, the collaborative, flexible, contextual, and multidimensional features that define CBL and CBR approaches can strengthen the

interdisciplinary community. Furthermore, centering affiliated persons' needs and listening with an open mind rather than imposing a rigid structure helps to alleviate some of the interpersonal and lack of ownership challenges identified (Marullo et al., 2003).

Given that faculty burnout compounds many of the challenges identified, the session also emphasized two effective strategies to facilitate the interplay of the two models. First was the use of open-ended questions. Rather than Likert scale questions, an open-ended model allows stakeholder needs, ideas, and expertise to become more readily visible, an important component of CBL and CBR models. This approach also allowed for identifying possible research, teaching, and administrative stressors contributing to faculty burnout. Studies have demonstrated a reduced sense of personal accomplishments, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and mental overload as contributing to faculty burnout (Fernández-Suárez et al., 2021; Xu & Wang, 2023). Therefore, surveys asking faculty to list accomplishments and needs should be distributed and collected at existing mandatory events or in one-on-one meetings scheduled during existing office hours.

A question from the session attendees about how to get all the different stakeholders to agree introduced the second strategy for effective interplay of the two models: understanding it is rare that everyone will agree. While an interdisciplinary program may be a distinct community, each contributor is a member of various communities, often with distinct goals. Thus, the collaborative model requires neither having everyone in the room at the same time nor always arriving at total consensus. What it does require is building relationships, often via individual outreach. Given the importance of relationship building, the speed with which interdisciplinary assessments can be created and adapted will be correlated with the administrative, and often personnel, resources available to the program (Patel, 2017).

Frameworks in Action

To demonstrate the interplay of the two models defined above, the session utilized the University of Rochester's Latin American, Caribbean, and Latinx studies (LACX) interdisciplinary major as a case study. LACX developed from an organic increase in affiliated faculty and student interest over ten years (2013-2023). An ad hoc curriculum committee was created in Fall 2020 to support the Latin American Studies minor and the process to build the new major began in Fall 2023. The New York State Education Department approved both the humanities and social sciences tracks of the new major in Spring 2025. Like many of the challenges highlighted by session participants and in the literature, rather than including new, core courses, LACX relied solely on existing coursework. This included courses from eleven program units represented across the social sciences and humanities.

Creating a cohesive learning assessment strategy began with connection (Table 1). This included 1) meeting with student leaders to understand what they hoped to learn with the new major and 2) holding collaborative work sessions with curriculum committee faculty to identify the major's goals and how those were distinct from existing majors. Next was an assessment of the PLOs for the four disciplines most represented by the major (history, Spanish, anthropology,

and political science) as well as interdisciplinary programs at the University of Rochester (gender sexuality and women's studies, digital media studies, and Black studies). The LACX PLOs (Table 2) identified in the collaborative curriculum committee and student sessions matched more closely with existing outcomes in the Black studies and gender sexuality and women's studies interdisciplinary majors than with single department majors. The LACX assessment plan, however, also adapted to incorporate digital media studies' emphasis on professional skills and Spanish's linguistic competency framing.

Table 1

Development Cycle in Action: Latin American, Caribbean, and Latinx Studies at University of Rochester Case Study

	PHASE 1 - BUILD	PHASE 2 - IMPLEMENT	PHASE 3 - EVALUATE	PHASE 4 - MAINTAIN
CONNECT	Collaborative work sessions.	Surveys at existing events and during office hours.	Blackboard Build Retreat.	<i>Blackboard Build & office hours.</i>
ASSESS	Existing university PLOs and course levels reviewed.	Faculty-led mapping of assignments to outcomes.	Identify existing Blackboard rubrics and assignments.	<i>Stakeholder surveys (student, faculty, assessment...)</i>
ADAPT	LACX curriculum committee evaluates and adapts five program outcomes.	Create assignment-level curriculum maps by developmental level for each learning outcome.	<i>Adjust assessment grading scales and proficiency evaluations based on professor input and insight.</i>	<i>Use assessment office hours to adapt assessment strategies</i>
CONSTRUCT	Faculty survey to build curriculum map.	Connect instructor surveys to Blackboard assignments.	<i>Refine assessment strategy to create relevant LACX rubrics for faculty</i>	<i>Consider designing a major portfolio and/or capstone project.</i>

Note. *Italicized lettering* denotes future plans.

To construct the curriculum map required identifying which courses provided introductory, reinforcement, and emphasis level focus on the five PLOs identified in previous steps. Here, the challenge of building a curriculum across disciplines with no new courses prevented one single metric or goal. Thus, an open-ended intake survey of affiliated faculty was used to identify the relevant courses and to identify existing course assignments that could map to the assessment plan. This survey closed the construction step of the build phase and initiated the second phase, implementation. The approach also neutralized the challenge of program "ownership." Faculty may not feel ownership of an interdisciplinary program, but they are the experts and, to a certain extent, "owners" of their own courses. As their courses are critical to effective assessments, this approach not only acknowledged, but also utilized that expertise.

Table 2*LACX Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs)*

PLO Name	PLO Text
Knowledge and Foundation	Students should demonstrate a well-rounded grasp of the diverse cultural experiences in Latin America and its diaspora population, as well as dominant economic, cultural, and political frameworks distinctive to the region.
Inquiring and Critical Analysis	Students should be able to apply theoretical frameworks and methodologies of constituent disciplines of LACX to critical analyses and interpretations of evidence and independent research.
Professional Development	Students will be prepared for diverse career paths that reflect the multidisciplinary foundations of Latin American Studies or to enter related graduate programs.
Linguistic Competency	Students should demonstrate competency in one of the target languages.
Communication	Be able to present and structure research, ideas, and theses clearly, concisely, and in a well-organized manner, both orally and in presentation form (either written or a comparable media form).

Instead of using online or email surveys, surveys were distributed and collected at two separate previously scheduled LACX events and in one-on-one faculty meetings coinciding with faculty office hours, when possible, to reduce the burden on faculty time. This connection served as the nexus of the build phase and implementation phases. The assessment-related portion, just one aspect of the survey, asked the following sets of assessment-related questions:

1. Do you use Blackboard®? Do you use assignments in Blackboard® that are graded utilizing the gradebook?
2. Do you have any graded assignments or activities in your LACX-related teaching that you feel best reflect any of the following PLOs (these can be assignments, discussion boards, Padlet (Padlet Marks) activities, midterms, presentations, etc.)? If so, what course and assignment come to mind? Do you grade that assignment in Blackboard®?

The first set of questions were logistical, to determine which instructors already used the learning management system (LMS) on campus. To minimize the workload and increase participation, assignments graded in the LMS could easily be imported into the Heliocampus® Assessment Management Platform that is utilized for program assessment. Heliocampus®, through integration with the LMS allows for entire assignments, portions of assignments, or specific rubric criteria scores to be linked to PLOs and used to create PLO and institutional level assessment reports. In this case, specific assignments or portions of the assignments relevant to the LACX program were individually selected, allowing for collection and analysis of the distinct LACX PLOs that may differ from the disciplinary framework outcomes. The Heliocampus® platform would also allow for inclusion data from only declared LACX majors in the mixed courses for program assessment.

The second set of questions listed each PLO identified during the build phase with four blank lines. The open-ended nature of the questions was generative. With ease and in a matter of ten minutes on average, professors identified existing course assignments that they felt mapped onto the identified PLOs. The initial event surveys yielded seven responses and identified introductory, reinforcement and emphasis-level assignments in each of the five PLO areas. To adapt and provide a complete framework required additional outreach to targeted professors during office hours and follow-up emails. From these efforts a complete program learning outcome assessment with linked assignments was created as follows:

- Knowledge and foundation – 5 introductory, 7 intermediate
- Inquiry and critical analysis – 17 intermediate, 4 emphasis
- Professional development – 2 introductory, 6 reinforcement
- Linguistic competency – 4 introductory, 4 emphasis
- Communication – 3 introductory, 8 reinforcement, 4 emphasis

This initial iteration of the assignment-level curriculum map likely contained more assessment points than necessary but allowed for future refinement and adaptation to meet the assessment needs of the program.

As conference session participants observed, not all interdisciplinary programs may have access to an assessment platform with the above capabilities. However, an open-ended survey to affiliated faculty to inventory existing assignments remains an effective strategy in the absence of specialized platforms. The effectiveness increases if faculty-identified needs are also addressed while creating and improving upon a robust assessment plan.

In the LACX case study, faculty identified a need for research and writing time. To address this need, LACX incorporated Blackboard® build sessions at the end of the fall and start of the spring semester (Table 1, column 3). Designating specific time and providing the physical space to address teaching stress freed up time for research and writing. Faculty gathered for two days, with breakfast and lunch provided, to prepare for the upcoming semester. Each attendee uploaded materials to Blackboard®, submitted course reserves, identified rubrics, and confirmed course calendars. Sessions such as these build community and can be used to gather information on specific or new assignments that can be incorporated into an assessment, or that can be identified to use in a student assessment portfolio.

Small group conference session discussions identified evaluating major portfolios or a capstone project as two alternative methods to evaluate PLOs (connect – phase 4 in Table 1). Both methods could complement a software platform-driven assessment but could also be a solution for programs that lack this technology. Student submission of either assignments would allow for evaluation by a committee and use of resulting data to complete the program assessment cycle. A portfolio built using professor-identified assignments could assess student growth over time, and a capstone could serve as a culminating evaluation. Both also help students to articulate what they have learned and gained in their program of study, a useful skill to secure future employment.

Conclusions

When designing an assessment strategy for interdisciplinary programs, no two programs will have the same needs and requirements. In other words, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. However, because of the unique qualities of these programs, the approach used for other, more traditional, programs may not be feasible either. These conference proceedings propose the use of CBL and CBR models to create a relationship-focused and workload-conscious method for designing an assessment strategy for interdisciplinary programs. Because this framework focuses on the model for developing the assessment strategy, and not a model for a specific assessment strategy, it is highly adaptable. This framework can meet the needs of unique programs and allow for varied solutions based on the faculty and disciplines involved. This is illustrated by the alternative solutions identified by conference session participants (e.g., using portfolios or capstones for program assessment) based on the needs and limitations of their own institutions.

To implement this framework, three key takeaways were presented. First, connection is key. The entire framework rests on personal connection with program faculty and staff. Taking the time to build relationships, listen, trust expertise, and provide feedback are essential to success. Not all connection strategies illustrated in the LACX case study will be possible for all institutions. For example, in person sessions may not be feasible, particularly if many faculty live at a distance or if many courses and meetings are online. However, open-ended questions and prioritizing connection allow for an interdisciplinary program to attune to specific needs. Assessment staff can offer online office hours and targeted support. Building good working relationships between faculty and individuals responsible for the program's assessment is critical to further improvement and adaptation. Similarly, the connection strategy may differ based on the disciplines involved, the circumstances surrounding program development, and even the physical proximity of program constituents.

The second key takeaway is to aim for sustainable design. Oftentimes, programs build an assessment strategy that is never fully implemented because it was too ambitious and time-consuming. Especially in a time of faculty burnout and increasing requirements, sustainability and impact on workload must be considered (Deep et.al., 2025). What is sustainable is likely to mean different things for different institutions and programs. In the LACX case study, both the Blackboard® LMS and Heliocampus® Assessment Management platforms were available, so the most sustainable process was to utilize these to their fullest. Without these technologies, a more straightforward assessment such as portfolios or capstones may be more sustainable. Additionally, programs with administrative staff or a course release for taking on program assessment responsibilities may have a higher capacity for data collection and/or analysis. For programs with minimal technology or personnel, the simplest effective strategy is better than no assessment strategy at all.

Which leads to the third and final key takeaway. Perfection should not be a barrier to implementing an assessment strategy. With the LACX assessment strategy, the initial plan included using assignments from courses that may not be considered ideal from an assessment

standpoint (e.g., utilizing an entire exam score that may contain more than one topic). But knowing that sustainability was a top priority, these still offer meaningful and informative assessments until more refined assessments (e.g., exam sub-scores or rubrics) can be implemented. They will also ensure that learning evidence from a majority of the enrolled students is collected from the start. A strength of the proposed framework is that iteration is directly built in. This allows for program assessment to begin with what is feasible, and the framework allows for adaptation and continued phases of construction. Now in its second year of implementation, the LACX assessment plan is already identifying the assessments that are most representative of student learning and capture data from the largest number of students. Using this framework and its inherent continual evaluation, reassessment, and iteration, this interdisciplinary program assessment strategy will support faculty buy-in and sustainability, while meeting the need for high-quality and informative assessment of student learning.

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