Introduction:  
Assessment is Not a Uniform Concept

In a recent New York Times Op-Ed (October 12, 2013), Frank Bruni examined American higher education’s current crisis of identity and its competing indicators (i.e., access, affordability, quality and success):

We’re in a tricky, troubling spot. At a time when our nation’s ability to tackle complicated policy problems is seriously in doubt, we must pull off a delicate balancing act. We must make college practical but not excessively so, lower its price without lowering its standards and increase the number of diplomas attained without diminishing not only their currency in the job market but also the fitness of the country’s work force in a cutthroat world.

While the nation has frequently looked to assessment to address these kinds of questions across the educational spectrum, it is hardly a uniform concept. In general, assessment refers to evidence presented in order to reach a judgment about an educational endeavor, but the context, topics, data, and use vary greatly, depending on those audiences. A graduation rate becomes one indicator of the work of an institution, without giving any indication of its quality. The salary of graduates is predominantly affected by the nature of degrees and the selection of the student body. An end-of-course survey can measure student satisfaction in one situation without revealing enough about student learning or curriculum. And if we accept that a central tenet within education is to optimize the learning of students and preparation of graduates then assessment must be part of complex operations that encompass institutional functions as well as department- and program-level outcomes, and class-level pedagogy. At the level of policy and public rhetoric, terms like data driven-decision making push against data-based analyses, and learner-centered program against learning-centered curriculum. This dizzying array of concerns can also obscure and distract from work that illuminates education and supports a context in which educators work to optimize student learning and from a clear appraisal of the quality and impact of their practices. At heart, assessment might be best thought of as a significant commitment to studying the outcomes of education in order to monitor and continually develop a mission-based institution; as such it involves a constellation of practices that are united by cycles of data collection and sense making and interpretation into practice.

Higher education assessment has been an explicit public concern for approximately three decades. Well before this time period, Portland State University had a continuing program dedicated to increasing the efficacy of higher education in an urban context, leading its combined efforts toward higher levels of learning, and using its programmatic resources to lead through research and evaluation of its own practice. In this context, the university identified assessment
as a particular concern and a continuing challenge as it introduced initiatives like innovations in its general education program; and PSU will continue to assess learning outcomes in future development. For accreditation and public accountability—and, equally important, its capacity to support continued development of educational practice—PSU needs to be able to direct its assessment practice toward organized implementation.

The purpose of the current document is to provide a developing picture of assessment practices at PSU, recognizing the diversity and complex challenges, identifying key aspects of the practices and the potential for further development in the current context. In preparing the report, as a consultant to the Office of Academic Innovation, I am drawing on more than 20 years of research and evaluation experience at Alverno College with additional service at USC Rossier School of Education, and additional collaborations with a range of community colleges and universities. My role has been to bring the lenses of my experience and access to resources of assessment practice and research—including vignettes of challenging encounters in implementation—to the analysis of PSU’s developing assessment practices and consider significant directions for next steps.

### Vignette 1

**An educational researcher walks into a room**

An educational researcher walks into a room. The group begins to talk about student assessment. The researcher says, *The definition of assessment seems to haunt so many of the discussions we have about the value of higher education. Maybe that’s good. The most stable interpretation seems to be that assessment is how we answer the question—How well are we doing our job? However, the problem is that the more attention that we pay to the implementation of assessment, the less we try to answer the question—how well are we doing?*
Approach and Perspective

The current report was developed as a critical history of assessment practice at PSU that would serve as a foundation for continuing and transformative work in the future. As such, it involves the use of a specific set of lenses for examining institutional, department and pedagogical practices. This involves some perspectives and principles that are inherent in the literature of higher education assessment, as well as select experiences in higher education research, evaluation, and assessment practice. It will be useful to review these briefly in order to frame the data collection and recognize their roles in the emerging observations and interpretations.

Assessment Definitions and the Foundations in Learning

Assessment definitions vary, entangling purposes and audiences, but the current focus is clearly on learning outcomes and the university’s orientation to these. Alverno College is frequently cited as one of the schools that made an early commitment to developing assessment as a critical element in its educational practices. However, it is important to understand that Alverno approached assessment because of its work in developing a new approach to curriculum-anchored, complex abilities implemented across disciplines and professions; it was their interest in abilities as more complicated and situated outcomes that led them to new approaches to assessment and even to studying the history and meaning of assessment (Mentkowski and Associates, 2000). They found its origins in the Latin assidere—to sit beside. This had an early judiciary use, referring to one who would “sit beside” those involved in a dispute to determine judgments. Also, formally, assessment developed a more material meaning in terms of a metric “to sit beside” a property, as an assessor judges the land holdings and the tax rate for citizens or an assayer determines the amount of a specific mineral in an ore sample—similarly, a test might be used to judge the extent of an intellectual property or content learning.

These distinctions have had important consequences in assessment practice as they have grown as different traditions—one focused on measurement and quantitative evidence and the other as judgment and interaction (literally “sitting beside”). Here, as Scriven (1991) wrote, the question is not whether measurement is more precise—because it demonstrably is—but whether in application we can tell the difference between good and bad judgment (p. 203). The key here becomes the evidence and the analysis, the efforts within a community of practitioners to examine and analyze—and maintain—the quality of judgment.

The power of this line of reasoning—that assessment can be implemented through diverse contexts and processes—derives from its foundation in the learning of a community. In Alverno’s case, the community invested extensively and continually in a shared understanding of its learning principles and commitments. In Portland State University’s case, the revision of learning outcomes in its introduction of University Studies stimulated more complex approaches to assessment. Similarly, educational innovations—like the use of electronic portfolios—need to be understood in terms of the learning theories that are being implemented (Rickards, 2008). Therefore, the role of learning principles and the orientation to learning becomes an important topic in examining assessment practices in an education community and in their continual development.
**Structural Approaches**

In higher education research and evaluation, it is typical to use a structural model of practice as a triangulation of *curriculum, faculty, and student*. While a particular focus may take precedence, this set of relationships provides a minimal analytic framework—that is, student performance can’t be examined in isolation of the structure and intentions of the curriculum or the specific pedagogical practices of the faculty. Nor can we look at the value of a curriculum without considering what is should—and does—produce in both student performance as well as how it is implemented in faculty practice. In each of these anchors, data sources can be generated which can be compared to one another but also need to be examined in relationship to the other two dimensions.

The significance of these relationships is mirrored in efforts to understand the implementation of an assessment practice. To what extent do judgments of student performance by faculty provide insight into the effectiveness of the curriculum? How do student performances look when seen through the lens of faculty and in relationship to the broader aspirations of the curriculum as well as its specified coursework? These relationships become important means for studying the implementation of learning practices, including those involving assessment.

**A Third Way**

In the development of educational practice, a number of easy dichotomies have seemed useful for communicating distinctions, while often making things more difficult. Qualitative-quantitative and measurement-judgment have some stable distinctions, while other comparisons may be more troubling. At various times and in different contexts, these have evoked very different mindsets. Coming out of the measurement traditions of the Cold War years, assessment was strongly identified with measurement and a need for high expectations based on precise evidence, while evaluation—in part influenced by Cronbach’s theses (1980)—was based on traditions of illumination and negotiation in which value and merit were examined.
systematically. At the end of the century, assessment emerged as a literal *sitting beside*—a reasoned judgment of authentic performance, better represented by rubrics than scaled metrics, more teacherly, less punitive than evaluation, and, potentially, more oriented to narrative feedback and consultation between teacher and student. Then, conceptually, the measurement version of *assessment* was further implemented and complicated by the formats of the No Child Left Behind administration, and federal funding was tied to select practices demonstrated under research protocols that favored quantitative applications. Evaluation inquiry continued to develop approaches to mixed methods designs (Greene, 2007) and interactive approaches that recognized the integrated role that evaluation played in organizational development (King & Stevahn, 2013; Patton, 2010; Preskill & Catsambas, 2006, Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 2004). This investigation of alternative approaches flourished in evaluation scholarship, although it seemed less vibrant overall in assessment communities.

As part of these debates, there was an underlying sense of the driving force of assessment as a dichotomy between accountability and improvement. While these are admirable goals, in either case, there was a sense of compliance, of working to satisfy expectations outside the institution or the department. Reducing intentions to this kind of dichotomy seemed to also reduce the engagement and the support of faculty. Data like graduation rates and graduate placement—often held up as indicators—seemed so confounded by multiple factors that faculty had difficulty using them as direct ingredients in planning.

But a third possibility emerged to potentially change this dynamic. Inquiry—as an organizing purpose—shifts the authorization of the activity from an external or institutional locus to a faculty’s questions. In Alverno’s case, this was an extended inquiry into the validity of their assumptions and propositions about ability-based education (Mentkowski & Associates, 2000); for example, would they see essential ability in the performance of their graduates five years after college? Would students and graduates continue to develop as learners and performers? Recently, Peck, Galluci and Sloan (2010) studied how teacher education faculty were able to make better use of high stakes data on their graduates—from their participation in the EdTPA (a nationally scored portfolio assessment completed in the final clinical experience)—by using these in an inquiry conducted by the faculty, shifting the nature of the work from compliance to faculty agency.

From a meta-evaluative perspective—in studying the implementation of assessment practices—the question then becomes: *How have various groups taken up assessments and assessment data as inquiries into their practices?* How have they approached the meaning making that can be done with the outcomes available? Which practices have been developed around the internal needs of different department communities and how have they been conducted?

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1 Even an improvement motive for implementing assessments is based on a presumption that faculty members were not actively involved in caring about their own practices until an external authority “made them use assessment.” This is a problematic foundation for the relationships between faculty and assessment specialists required in an assessment practice.
The Discourse of Practice

Individual fields, disciplines, and professional communities seem to develop distinct ways of talking about their practices. This can be recognized in how we use a phrase like: “This new perspective changed the way we talked about the subject” or “That law changed the discourse about social expectations.” And educational innovations enter into practice through the teaching discussions that faculty have, in halls, between classes, in formal meetings, and in workshops and retreats (Rickards, 2009). In formal discussions among educators, student performance samples can change a vague discussion about standards to a sharp analysis of practices. At the same time, educators from elementary to graduate levels can have difficulties dealing with data in summarized and decontextualized forms (e.g., graduation rates, exam scores, enrollment distributions, and other assessment outcomes) (Milwaukee National Education Association Foundation Action Research Fellows, 2011; Rickards, 2012). These may have superficial meaning, but they are difficult to interpret without an adequate analytic framework. Discussions about “closing the loop” often emphasize the importance of using results, but in practice this can sometimes end with reporting the results, followed by a formal discussion about the implications. This in itself can function as a kind of compliance with external drivers; an appetite for action and innovation will require a shift in agency so that faculty can take on the hard work of meaning-making.

Assessment analysts can work in a world of data possibilities but the meaning making and potential for innovation are located in the discourse within the faculty community. Understanding this discourse in particular communities of practice—within academic departments or in university-wide committees—seems critical to understanding how educators develop authentic agency in relation to the learning that can develop from assessment results and practices.

In terms of analyzing assessment activities and in their development, there are important questions to address about those conversations—how to support them and how to support the movement of assessment and evaluation findings into practice. Because the most effective assessment practices seem to be rooted in learning, where do conversations about curriculum and student learning occur? Who is involved in them? How can assessment results be formatted to fit within those norms and parameters? For analysts and faculty leaders, this suggests the value in auditing the discussions of a learning community and attempting to best use these formats to bring results into meaningful faculty discourse.

A critical corollary to this seems to be in investing faculty as co-investigators. From a workshop perspective this can mean developing the analytic frameworks that will be most helpful in this task, eliciting their perspectives and expertise. It can also mean an action template that might take faculty into the data to draw conclusions and interpretations while also drawing links to other data sources in curriculum materials (e.g., syllabus review). Some excellent examples of these applications and their theoretical foundations are available in the work of Bensimon and Dowd (Bensimon, Dowd, Loganecker, & Witham, 2012; Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Dowd, Malcom, Nakamoto, & Bensimon, 2012; Dowd, Sawatzky, Rall & Bensimon, 2012).
From this perspective, the interviews carried out for this document have asked faculty questions about the ways in which discussions about assessment practices and resulting data. This perspective—along with the others reviewed above—provided a foundation for reviewing various program documents, annual reports, accreditation reports, and occasional papers.

**From Data Collection to Collaborative Practice: Between the Unit and Department**

In most cases, educational institutions have used offices and committees with oversight and advisory and operational resources as part of assessment programs. Such a unit can function at an institutional level, as a committee across fields, as well as at the department level. Given their contexts—and the perspectives reviewed above—such units can increase their impact specifically in terms of how they build relationships with faculty: How do they extend their services to departments and, from this position of resource and service, share leadership?

- How do campus assessment leaders understand the discourse of practice at the department level and how to best serve those processes?
- How do they handle workshop and reporting activities to implement good pedagogical practices for continued learning and development?
- How do they examine the practices of individual faculty while using the same kinds of protocols employed to protect students when their work is used in more intense study and public review (e.g., confidentiality and informed consent)?
- To what extent is there collaborative study of practices, sharing good examples, recognizing the contributions of departments and faculty to connect learning across the community?
- How can the unit and the department use successes from existing practices and recently adopted procedures to build a sense of shared understanding and appreciation as well as building an appreciative perspective and an increasing appetite for action?

Although integrated with accountability and accreditation concerns, such a review of practice is very much a reflective and fundamental act for the assessment unit, coming back to the reflective question: How does the service of the unit advance the valued work of the department?

**Method**

The initial charge for this project involved three areas for data collection and action:

- A qualitative-observational approach was the primary method in examining the assessment practices and their history at Portland State. A set of basic questions was developed in consultation with the Vice Provost which could guide in the initial interviews. These are provided below. The initial interviews were conducted by phone; on campus, in-depth office interviews provided richer information on individual department experiences. In implementation—and particularly as the office interviews advanced—the focus was more on the elaborated experience in particular activities. A list of the participating faculty and staff and their offices and departments is provided in Table 1.
There were 8 phone interviews, and office interviews were conducted with 21 faculty members and administrative staff during campus visits. The interviews were recorded with the participants’ permission and transcribed.

- Various program documents, annual reports, accreditation reports, and occasional papers were reviewed with specific attention to how assessments were conducted, what kinds of data were being presented, with what results and so forth. Simultaneously, the reviews were shaped by concerns for how assessment practices were grounded in learning; for relationships between student performance, curriculum expectations, and faculty practice; and for opportunities for meaning making. Various Portland State University websites were similarly reviewed.

- During the visits to campus there were also opportunities for collaborative meetings and consultation with faculty and staff, including an opportunity to discuss preliminary observations with the Institutional Assessment Council.

**Vignette 2**

*A geographer walks into the room...*

A geographer walks into the room. She began her first studies 30 years ago on cultural dimensions of public space in a developing Asian city. For the last 20 years she has been a professor and a teacher. She is known for bringing innovative techniques into her classes, and frequently works with colleagues on teaching and learning practices and improving student experiences and outcomes. In this room, she and her department are introduced to a staff member who describes the university’s plan for student assessment. Over the next hour, they hear about the national importance of assessment and examples of practices that are being introduced at various other institutions, emphasizing how effective they have been. As he presents these things and describes the services his office can provide, she has the distinct impression that they are being told that they as experienced faculty are somehow behind the curve and really need to get with the program. The department members leave the room vaguely disquieted, feeling that they have been talked down to, and unsure of how to proceed from this introduction to student learning assessment.
Assessment Practices at PSU: An Historical Perspective through Multiple Lenses

Given the commitments and philosophies of Portland State. There has been a continuing concern for monitoring student learning, with conscious and reflective attention to student outcomes in relation to the university’s role.

From Mid-Century to 1990

Portland State University had its beginnings in Oregon’s most northern and populous city. The state’s two public institutions had dominated higher education there for some time; from its initial mandate, PSU was grounded in Portland’s post-World War II development. It did not seek the selectivity or liberal arts foundations of the other regional or private institutions, but found its mandate in service to the city. Over the next 40 years it followed the familiar paths of American higher education, but it had strong roots in environmental education and community service.

Questions of academic quality and student learning were embedded in the educational commitments of the departments. Accreditation efforts through those years were largely oriented to broad program ingredients: Were fiscal affairs in order? Was there an adequate stream of enrollment? Did the curriculum cover appropriate content in relation to discipline and professional standards? Nationally, approaching the 1990s, there was a shifting emphasis towards questions of student learning and outcomes. Accreditation agencies began to ask for documentation of processes—and then performance data—that could indicate that faculty were systematically addressing the student learning that was inherently promised in mission statements (e.g., Banta and Associates, 20002; Ewell, 2004). Accreditation agencies—namely WASC and SACS in the west and south—increased their specifications for undergraduate institutions to explain their plans for studying student learning and using the data to monitor and improve the curriculum. Various campuses worked to recast their conscious orientation from content- and teacher-centered (“what to learn”) to learning- and learner-centered (“how to learn”) (cf., Barr & Tagg, 1995).

The 1990s and University Studies

In the 1990s, against a national canvas of discussions about undergraduate education, a group of Portland State faculty took up the question of how to have its liberal education program—which was based on a traditional model of distribution requirements for arts and sciences—take up fewer credit hours, with better distribution across the baccalaureate years, and meet the needs of the students who were entering as freshmen, while best preparing them for the potential educational challenges of college and beyond. The University Studies Program was their proposal. The groups that shaped the original University Studies proposals and oversaw its implementation pointed to the need for assessment processes that would offer accountability for a program that predictably needed to present its credentials with meaningful data for continued program development. With considerable thought and energy, they developed a program of assessment processes, adding staff positions for an assessment unit that could provide research support. The structure of practices was built on the multidimensionality of the program,

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2 This section was based material from faculty-staff interviews and historical documents, as well as specific material prepared by Janelle Voegele, Interim Director of Office of Academic Innovation.
developing instruments and procedures that would allow for holistic judgments on the program in its complexity. University Studies developed its own instruments for data collection that would bring together the curriculum, student experience of courses and faculty practices, and student performance and faculty interpretations by faculty from samples from the student portfolios.

As the program was implemented, it encountered many challenges regarding its essential purpose, its use of resources, and its overall effect, which further required an effective assessment approach. These robust processes have been an important part of PSU’s developing identity and competitiveness for national attention.

Since 2003, University Studies has been preparing annual reports that look back at each cohort’s performance. These have changed in format and content as new measures have been added and practices have been changed. Most notably, in recent years, student IDs have been attached to the data storage so that it will be possible to develop longitudinal records of individual and group progress; this will enable more complex and longitudinal studies of student development in the program and after graduation. Additionally, a prior learning survey has been introduced to help students provide more systematic information on the experiences that have led to their entry to college; the survey also helps orient them to various learning behaviors and opportunities, while providing their instructors with valuable information about their potential needs.

This was a time characterized by an increase in faculty interest regarding new approaches to teaching and learning, with a range of informal and formal discussions around the campus. The University Studies program had established four outcomes for the PSU baccalaureate: communication, critical thinking, social and ethical responsibility, and appreciation of diversity. But the implementation of these as curriculum was conceptualized for broad faculty and department involvement through the development of rubrics that would (a) allow for implementation across multiple disciplines and professional departments, and (b) provide a developmental picture of student performance in the each outcome, based on best practices from the literature and on the campus.

This was also a time of national and local PSU-based studies of student learning and college success. Data from these efforts became foundational for rethinking student retention programs, as well as curriculum, pedagogy, and academic services.

From multiple perspectives, there were concerns for how students from varied backgrounds and levels of preparation would develop the abilities and intellectual capital to effectively participate in an undergraduate economy of learning. With effective preparation, students learn to deal with large quantities of knowledge; they acquire the organizational skills for storing, managing and retrieving material, and they learn to acquire and even construct knowledge as well as performances in increasingly complex contexts. For students who are not as effectively prepared, how can educators help them learn the operational norms of academic culture?

In this period, PSU participated in a number of federal and foundation-based programs of research on college learning, curriculum and technology, as well studies on the unique needs of first generation college students. This learning was combined in programs like PSU’s Students First Mentoring Program. But such efforts also introduce new questions for assessment-based studies. How can the learning that has fueled such programs help educators use assessment more
effectively to support continued development? How can assessments that track meaningful learning through coursework help with research that can support continuing program improvement? And how can what is learned improve the services for all students, including those who enter later in their academic careers (e.g., as sophomores and juniors)?

Center for Academic Excellence

At the time of the creation of University Studies, the Center for Academic Excellence was established with three program support areas: teaching and learning, community-based learning, and assessment. At that time course and program assessment resources were developed and shared with departments and colleges on a need basis; most activity was not tied to a specific institutional initiative. Much of the assessment activity was devoted to University Studies in its early years.

Vignette 3

_A university president spoke with a higher education researcher_

A university president spoke with a higher education researcher. The researcher wanted to pursue further the comments he had just made about the importance of assessment activities and how they were part of the overall responsibilities at the institution. Essentially, in one case, they were required to conduct a survey of student satisfaction. “Fortunately,” he said, we came out OK.” Because they “looked OK,” they were able to get on to other things.

The researcher was about to ask about how they might have used to the results to understand the student experience and how the results might have been used by the faculty to examine their program priorities, but the conversation had gone in other directions.
Into This Next Century: The President’s Commission on Campus Life and Climate

In hindsight, the next decade—“the aughts”—represented a time where higher education strands came together to emphasize an assessment agenda with a presumed, but not necessarily an operational definition. It was a context of “better learning through assessment” in which more data collection and faculty use were promoted without much clarity of what this should accomplish. New technologies like Blackboard, Live Text and Task Stream were presented as course management and data tools that enabled the collection of student work, as well as using new programs to monitor and manage records on outcomes achievement (Boyd & Vitzelio, nd). In the prior decade, while regional accrediting agencies had made their explicit demands for assessment planning and commitments—and national programs like the IUPUI Assessment Conference had flourished to serve a rising group of assessment practitioners emerging in the wake of these policies and standards—the agencies were now facing educators who had dealt with some of the more mechanical aspects of assessment, but who seemed to be just beginning to take on harder questions about how support faculty through the work of curriculum studies and local inquiries into teaching and learning.

Nationally, assessment practitioners could look over the work of the field and note that it was “a mile wide and an inch deep,” a statement—often made about curriculum standards in general—that emphasizes breadth of coverage over understanding. Broad indicators—like graduation rates and degrees awarded—increased in prominence with an emphasis on reporting through various venues, with apparently little attention to the denser work of making sense and meaning from such numbers or—even more—using more complicated data to explore questions of educational practice and learning. Administrators would often use available data in superficial ways, to suffice in the face of standards. But the effects were mixed—if the explicit expressions of assessment for accreditation and regulation were often minimal (e.g., completion rates, satisfaction surveys), there was also space for those who could pursue deeper studies of learning and pedagogy.

In this context, the PSU president initiated a study on the campus, and, in the resulting report, the Campus Climate Commission outlined recommendations in three areas: Diversity, Student Advising, and Assessment. The Center for Academic Excellence was a major partner in the commission’s effort to further program assessment goals. Under the center director, an Assessment Associate position was developed and housed in CAE. By 2002, the Assessment Associate coordinated the work of several graduate assistants (ASSIST Team) who consulted with ten departments on program assessment pilot projects. A campus-wide Assessment Resource Network (ARN) was also developed, made up of faculty and administrators from across campus. The ARN was charged with a leadership role to define institutional assessment processes and provide resources to programs. This was a very busy time for assessment, as teams of faculty learned more about program assessment and the campus anticipated the 2005/2007 accreditation visits. Although there was some stress associated with assessment expectations from NWCCU, it was also seen as an exciting time, with workshops on assessment and program showcases where faculty were genuinely excited by the results of their efforts and shared ideas across programs.

The ASSIST team undertook several projects aimed at developing themes from the assessment data across the ten pilot programs, and analysis revealed themes related to communication, critical thinking and to some extent social responsibility and diversity. This provided at least...
some indication that the four UNST goal areas were being realized campus-wide, and these themes were later part of the discussion on the adoption of the campus-wide learning outcomes.

In addition, PSU continued to participate in a number of federally funded grants and foundation projects that supported advanced studies in student learning, teaching and technology (e.g., research on first generation college students, research on electronic portfolios for student learning). The tools and structures that were refined in these efforts hold promise for further applications in assessment. For example, the learning portfolios studied for Freshman Inquiry in the University Studies Program have applications at a variety of levels as students make their ways across degree programs. Teacher education and social work exemplify professional programs that require students to demonstrate development of critical reflection, a dimension of learning that the electronic portfolios address well.

Specialized accreditations—that is, the efforts overseen by national professional organizations—made particular progress in the last decade in ways that strengthen the contributions of individual schools and departments to the common assessment conversation across the institution. They have increasingly placed content coverage in a context of graduate ability and professional learning (i.e., domain expertise integrated with critical analytic skills and problem solving). As will be discussed later, mechanical engineering at graduate and undergraduate levels has emphasized more complex learning outcomes which in turn suggest the need for more complex assessments, often with richer relationships with the external community (e.g., in PSU’s case, using industry-based panels as external assessors of student capstone projects). Similarly, various state and national policies can have demonstrable effects on curriculum and data collection practices that become challenges and opportunities for assessment scholarship (cf., the 2006 Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education).

In this same decade, the institutional accreditation through NWCCU pointed to some of the assessment concerns and practices that have emerged in PCU’s strategic planning and implementation. They cited the strength that developed in the coordinated assessment activities between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, but they also pointed to the need for more systematic development in the program review cycles and the means for implementing and communicating student achievement of learning outcomes. These will continue to be priorities in the coming accreditation studies and institutional planning and become coordination concerns as assessment policies and practices are debated.

It may also be useful to recognize how the diverse research and evaluation activities that have been integrated with the programmatic actions also raise concerns for continued study. For example, recent impetus for on-line delivery of courses and even programs raise difficult questions about how different pedagogical approaches interact with different student needs and learning behaviors, sometimes problematically. Assessment practices and policies at the class-level provide important perspectives for developing on-line pedagogy. How will the process of giving and learning from feedback best be implemented if all interactions are conducted outside of shared classroom space? If students and their faculty do not have shared contextual experience, how do they work around this in the digital environment? The potential effects complicate the shared understanding of teaching and learning. In this context, educators seem to be realizing that the disruptive effects of some innovations can have positive effects for some students while they may systematically widen the divide for students who are having problems engaging in learning environments. Recently, various educators have noted how the lack of
reliable assessment strategies diminishes the opportunities that may be inherent in on-line courses (e.g., Carter, 2013). Educators across programs have their own examples of how innovations have presented difficult challenges that take them back into their essential ideas about teaching and learning and how to bring these forward into the best practices for students.

Formation of the Institutional Assessment Council

As a result of the 2005/07 visits, the NWCCU accreditation report included the recommendations to further the centralization of assessment activity and leadership, and to develop more consistency across campus in learning outcomes. However, due to severe budget reductions, the Assessment Associate and ASSIST team positions had been eliminated, and the Assessment Resource Network disbanded. It had been difficult for ARN to continue without the coordination efforts provided by the Assessment Associate, and both the Provost's Office and the Center for Academic Excellence experienced leadership changes at this time. By 2008, the incoming CAE Director was committed to tying assessment efforts to teaching and learning initiatives. The Institutional Assessment Council was formed, with the following charge:

The IAC will promote and oversee the continued implementation of assessment across the campus, working closely with three offices: Instruction and Undergraduate Studies, Institutional Research and Planning, and the Center for Academic Excellence. It will create guidelines for assessment planning and implementation that reflect student learning at the program, department, and institutional level.

The Council will design a strategy for addressing assessment long term. It will oversee the implementation of key learning goals for institutional assessment. The IAC will serve as the review mechanism for assessment on campus and coordinate with the assistant and associate deans group the implementation of systemic annual reporting by schools and colleges. It will create an annual document on the status of assessment that will form the basis for institutional reports, such as those required by the PSU Faculty Senate and the regional accreditation body, NWCCU.

Over the meetings, the Council confronted several of the challenging questions that have emerged as the university undertakes a more comprehensive and effective program of assessment. They articulated specific concerns to be taken up in the Council’s emerging work:

- the impression many have that no one really cares about assessment or that assessment just means more external requirements;
- the lack of a common language of assessment;
- the need to share assessment models (e.g. GSE’s four slides requirement & assessment fair) and models for closing the feedback loop (alternative visions of education);
- the need to frame the goal of assessment as program improvement, not just fulfilling an accreditation requirement (program assessment data can be mined for accreditation data);
- the role of compliance as a step in the process of internalizing the value of assessment;
what the institutional accreditor requires (doesn’t specify any particular outcome, just want you to demonstrate that you are doing what is meaningful to your program)

Within the context of such challenge and with due consideration for the next accreditation cycle the Council arrived at four recommendations for the continuing work:

- Program assessment must be clearly communicated from the top as a priority, and this communication must be ongoing.
- The expectations need to be clear.
- There should be a reward structure for program assessment, keeping the focus on the program, not individual faculty.
- There should be a support system for those doing assessment work (e.g., information resources) and a way to share assessment news.

After a one year hiatus, in the fall of 2013, the Council was re-commissioned with members from a variety of departments, offices and programs who have a shared investment in assessment practices and policies. It is also a group that represents considerable depth of experience with assessment and with Portland State’s education practices.

**Creation of the Office of Academic Innovation**

In 2012, the Office for Academic Excellence and the Center for On-Line Learning were formally combined as an Office of Academic Innovation, with co-directors who were to bring together the prior missions. This became a means for responding to pedagogical needs as they emerged from the university community as well as a guiding source for faculty development. As an extension of the academic foundation of the provosts’ office, OAI would function in service to the faculty and would have the means to convene groups and create a problem solving space for teaching, learning and curriculum. It could also offer space and resources for faculty-in-residence who could pursue research agendas related to teaching and learning. It has an important potential for amplifying local, department-level activities in studying curriculum and student learning. Its placement and perspectives mean that it can support new efforts at program review over the next couple of years.

As the university looks toward its future, this office will have the potential—as a resource space and a set of collaborative relationships—to provide a means for the multiple discourses on learning across the university. The faculty have seen the office as particularly effective in the role of convener for multidisciplinary conversations around assessment concerns and as a medium for developing faculty leadership in this area. Each department—each program—will have those discussions in appropriate and specific ways, but the larger meaning to be drawn from those discussions can be investigated through the OAI. In this year, the Vice Provost for Academic Innovations has begun a relationship with the Education Advisory Board that will provide analytics that will allow the university to place its data in the statistical context of American universities; the numerical records available to the Board have enabled the means for making sense out of broad data on enrollments, achievement, and best practices. As potentially valuable as these statistics may be, the Office of Academic Innovation, in collaboration with the Institutional Assessment Council, provides a reflective framework for the depth of experience
and expertise of the university to address such findings, as well as the means to extend interpretive activities back into the larger faculty.

**Provost Challenge Projects**

In 2012 the PSU Provost challenged the university to fundamentally rethink the purposes and goals of the institution related to several issues, including student learning and success. As a part of this drive, a competitive grants program funded a significant number of initiatives to develop and implements new approaches to pedagogy and curriculum. Many of these have direct consequences for assessment practice—either by designing assessment procedures or by, in effect, introducing and evaluating revised assessments.

Some promising examples include:

- The use of eportfolios for collecting student performances in ways that support deepened learning and more complex sources of evidence instructional research
- The reframing of mathematics courses to enhance student achievement in ways that will also challenge and amplify the effective uses of assessments to support learning
- The further development of prior learning assessments to engage diverse faculty in conceptualizing the complex foundations of making judgments about learning from a range of experiences and transforming these perspectives into robust and credible processes to help students advance into academic programs according to demonstrable abilities

Here, too, the Office of Academic Innovation and the Assessment Council are well placed to help make meaning out of these opportunities and challenges, amplify the learning from individual projects and engage the larger university community in their review.

**Unique Examples and PSU Programming**

As the interviews explored practices and perspectives across the university, several departments demonstrated practices that illuminated the assessment perspectives mentioned above in the introduction, as well as amplifying the university’s positions and commitments.

- **Teacher Education: Implementing Assessment Practices Through a Standards-based Curriculum**

Teacher education programs nationally have long developed in a context of standards-based approval at the state-level. That is, in order to be certified as a program whose graduates will be available for certification and then employment in public schools, programs need to meet the standards within a state-regulated system. Many programs have begun to use NCATE, TEAC and now CAEP standards as a national means to certifying programs that produce graduates who can be certified. As programs develop on-line platforms for delivery and work across state lines, accreditation for national certification becomes more meaningful. Currently, PSU’s teacher education program is essentially a graduate program, but the practices that have developed for
reporting on learning outcome achievement for graduates represent good examples of the kind of structured, systematic dialogue that faculty undertake as they grapple with the meaning of candidate performance outcomes. Oregon’s education agency requires that all certified programs use a specified system that reports on the assessments used to demonstrate the teacher candidates’ readiness; this requires that each standard-based outcome be linked to courses and curriculum in the preparation program which are specifically linked to assignments or performance assessments. The outcomes of teacher candidate performance are reported in terms of distribution of student who demonstrate the different levels of outcomes.

The education agency then requires that these outcomes be reported to faculty and reviewed for use in continual planning. But assessment practitioners and educational evaluators have frequently noted that “these numbers do not speak for themselves.” Individually there are too many elements to presume direct interpretations of index numbers that are too low or even consistently high. To think of the numbers as “data that drive decisions” is to disregard the judgment and practical expertise that must go into interpretation and planning decisions. The PSU Teacher Education program has developed an elegant and workable system for bringing the summative statistics together annually and for structuring meetings in which faculty can grapple with the data, make links back into the curriculum and examine their relevant practices. The results of these discussion become foundations for continued internal action and study.

From this approach, the Teacher Education program is making use of planning days in the faculty calendar to structure a discourse of data-based review of their curriculum. They are structuring these conversations around a triangulation of candidate performance, curriculum aspirations, and pedagogical practice. And the results of these reflective inquiries become the basis for the continuing development of the program, as well as the material record that serves their accreditation processes. It is also worth noting that the program because of its size and scope has designated staff who provide the data management services; this individual works collaboratively to manage the data that scaffold high-quality discussions.

- **Business Administration: Mediated faculty conversations with student outcome data**

Business Administration made the decision to bring in a dedicated staff member to undertake the work of assessment and related discussions in a systematic and planful way. Their process is distinguished by (1) a specified intent to review the designated learning outcomes and their implementation and demonstration in coursework and student performance, (2) a direct study of student work samples by groups of faculty volunteers, and (3) an analytic process that documents and contributes to the robustness of the faculty judgments.

Here again, this departmental example implements a structural comparison between student performance, curriculum expectations and faculty perspectives. Although the emphasis in this case is on faculty judgment rather than pedagogical practice, it is still critical that faculty perspective is a key driver in the analysis. As structured, these sessions create a deliberative inquiry into curriculum (cf., Harris, 1991; Rickards et al., 2008); faculty are examining the curriculum and performance and clarifying their observations in order to increase the vitality of the program. It is a mediated discourse, structured by a facilitator and an analytic inquiry that produces recordable outcomes. These in turn contribute to the curriculum and provide a data
base for a conscious understanding of the curriculum’s development. In a sense, it is a kind of programmatic scholarship that builds a body of knowledge about the program.

Additionally, this approach has significant effects as faculty development for the participants. Working with smaller groups of faculty allows for more individual engagement and greater depth of analysis.

• **Anthropology Department: Systematic faculty deliberations on student performance and curriculum**

The Anthropology Department has located a deliberative inquiry on student learning and performance in their annual planning retreat at the end of spring semester. As the department thought about ways to further explore and understand student work and achievement in their programs, they designed a process that worked in the context of their curriculum practices and their particular faculty discourse. In general, they deal with one learning objective in each year. Over the terms, a faculty member who teaches a course with a particularly salient assessment for that outcome collects data on the distribution of grades for the assessment and organizes these for presentation to the department along with samples of student work—usually a paper. The work sample consists of one paper representative of work at each level of earned grade—that is, one at the upper end of an A, one that is clearly a B, and so on. The performance data is presented as a distribution of the students at different grades. This means that the faculty will have a sense of how students were distributed in relation to achievement levels and will be able to examine a representative example from each level. This array allows for a discussion that can go in at least two directions: How do students differ from one another in their performances? How well can our curriculum tools—for example, rubrics—address some of the characteristics that actually emerge across students? And, in deliberation, how much variability is there in the differences judgments that faculty apply?

This is a situation in which the work of faculty themselves is under open discussion. Explicit examples of how an individual faculty member has made judgments among grade levels are available for public discussion within the department. The participants will have the opportunity to debate the different criteria used in distinguishing levels, how clearly these match the given criteria, and how, individually, they may differ in the applications of standards, criteria or rubrics. And, ultimately, they will deliberate on what these observations may mean for their teaching practices and curriculum.

As an approach, this departmental practice does a good job of working within the norms of the department’s teaching discussion. They have the opportunity to examine student performance within the structure of their particular discipline and debate the applications of more general learning expectations with the special expertise of their field. The individual faculty presenters can also use the selection of examples to represent what they see as their own best practices and to bring forward the kinds of teaching and learning events that illumine the dynamic dimensions of practice.
• Mechanical Engineering: Using the capstone project and an external panel of review from industry

Mechanical engineering has taken productive advantage of the capstone project element in the University Studies program to implement a significant assessment. Through the last three semesters of the senior year, students work in teams to define a problem in collaboration within a community context, design a mechanical solution, and then assemble the prototype and present it in an open demonstration. The school has worked to develop a core of assessors from local industry who participate in the final demonstrations and give expert, practice-based feedback to the graduating students. The overall experience—and the final experience in particular—have functioned as an excellent way to, literally, see the elements of the mechanical engineering program come together.

In general, these final events have benefitted from the formative feedback in progressive design critiques through the prior terms and provide good examples of principles and practices of the program’s curriculum. However, there are occasional situations in which the final products do not demonstrate the levels of expertise and ability that the school has targeted. This presents particular challenges for those who oversee these critiques. Authentic, honest, sharp critique is critical to the experiential impact. But this is also an embedded pedagogical element. It is necessary for both the students and the faculty to recognize how to make optimal use of the learning in the event. A weak performance in the final project will typically be linked to select aspects of the curriculum where performances did not achieve the intended levels and those need to be examined carefully, with due regard for the faculty involved, while identifying the areas that need further attention. Did students underperform? Did they receive appropriate feedback? Were appropriate expectations being implemented? Were learning experiences appropriate? and so on. These may be smaller discussions—among the faculty members involved rather than the whole department—aimed at learning from these kinds of encounters and considering the consequences for the program.

• University Studies: Implementing models of learning and curriculum in assessment practice

The University Studies began with a conscious assessment ethic and instrumentation that was organized around an appreciation for the structure of the program and its intentions. Particular elements examined the student experience of the curriculum (through surveys) and integrated analyses of the feedback students received with in-depth analyses of student work sampled from the Freshman Inquiry Portfolios by small work groups of faculty. Over time, other instruments have been added (e.g., Prior Learning Survey) which increase the sources of data on the students.

Like some of the other examples here, University Studies has dedicated positions for staff who deal with assessment data and analyses. But while these individuals work in data management, they are also involved in analytic design and inquiry efforts. In this sense, assessment activities in University Studies are very much a matter of inquiry into the program, what the students are experiencing and how they grow as learners and performers. Since 2003, their annual reports
have modeled the reflective practice of the program and its intentions. They provide an analysis of the programs from multiple lenses and address more questions about how the students are developing (e.g., through the Junior Clusters and the Senior Capstones), and the procedures that bring mentors into the deliberations from these reports represent powerful means to using their observations and findings in further developing curriculum and pedagogy.

However, in these examples, it is also possible to find aspects that might increase overall effectiveness of assessment practice. In particular, formal reports have essentially been about the data; within this context, they can make some analytic comparisons among numerical outcomes and potential meanings. But evaluative observations and close analysis of related educational practices taken up by the faculty after the data reporting, and they have generally been absent from the reports. These perspectives might be usefully included in the reporting. In a related sense, faculty voice is also missing from the multiple assessment data in the sense that only students are surveyed about the experience or the faculty practices. It could be very useful potentially to know what faculty thought about their own performances as well as the particular character of that cohort of students. Would they agree with the students’ assessment of that specific experience? Did faculty get mediocre performances from students who should have done much better in order to prepare for their future classes? Did a cohort need intense effort to arrive at those demonstrated levels of performance?

- Enrollment Management and Student Services: Multiple survey and intervention strategies

Enrollment Management and Student Services were cited in the 2012 NWCCU Evaluation Report for using “assessment directly and effectively to inform its programs, strengthen staff, and drive resource allocations.” They also noted how EMSA “is creating a culture of assessment that links directly to academic affairs and thus is a notable contribution to the university’s efforts to effectively engage students in learning inside and outside the classroom.” However, it is critical to unpack the programmatic dimensions of EMSA’s actual practices. Their assessment plans involve multiple perspectives on student experience and the quality of their learning in their varied activities. EMSA has worked to identify and implement various survey instruments for these purposes. But they have also implemented transparent processes that consciously argue for programmatic decisions based on the outcomes of their assessment efforts. This is distinctly different from an assessment use that asks the question, Are we achieving our intended effects? It essentially turns the effort on its head and asks, What do we know about our students’ experience and learning that will help us provide better services? Their practices involve a conscious shift from asking accountability questions about the quality of the programs they have offered to inquire into how programs affect students and what will potentially lead to optimal learning.

As in other examples, EMSA has designated staff who address assessment activities.
A teacher educator walks out of a workshop where an evaluator has just spent time talking about the use of measurement and judgment in evaluations. He made the point that the tools so frequently used in assessments were based on judgment even though they were often treated as measurements, where rubric-based judgments were based on narrow rating levels (e.g., inadequate, developing, competent, exemplary) but averaged as scores. That sounds a lot like us, thought the educator, and those meetings where we discuss the clinical portfolios of our candidates. The average ratings were frequently lower than expected, but since they were overall minimally acceptable, faculty just lived with them and shared an interest in working on selected parts of the curriculum. But what if the faculty stopped thinking about the scores as measures—that is, as numbers rich in meaning? What if they approached this as a question of judgment? Then, they would be inquiring into the shared quality of their judgments and raising their own standards of practice. Instead of listening to statements about numbers, they would be looking at their students’ work and their own teaching practice.

That might be a very different meeting...
Overview of Principal Considerations

Looking across the faculty-staff interviews, the full range of available examples in diverse departments, and the documentation on assessment practices, there is a rich array of data and an appropriately complex depth of educational practice. Several observations that can be made regarding areas for action. Part of the larger problem—as introduced at the beginning of this document—is that assessment is not a uniform concept or practice although the university needs a comprehensive and integrated policy structure to accommodate the different and ultimately complementary ways that different units collect data on educational outcomes and use the analysis of these for programmatic purposes. In this spirit, the following observations are offered as principal considerations, anchored in the frameworks presented earlier.

- **Need for more student performance data and related evaluation**

  Much of the reporting that is available through reports on programs uses survey data, enrollment, and logistics data on program implementation to make a case for the quality of programs. But the weight of data on student performance seems light. Questions about how well students did, what they achieved, and their levels of learning in particular areas seem to not be sharply addressed. Where data are presented (e.g., the University Studies analysis of portfolios), there is little material on the faculty interpretation of these results and the authentic analysis of consequences for the programs. One learns that that data were presented for faculty review, but more about the substantive details of those analyses would greatly enrich this picture.

  This point of view is echoed to some extent in the commentary from the last NWCCU evaluation reports. Specifically, the last evaluation report recommended a close examination of how the educational mission was being met and at what levels; assessments and assessment reporting should be providing significant portions of the data and analyses to address these issues as they pertain to student performance.

- **Foundations of assessment practices in multiple, shared perspectives on learning**

  The faculty-staff interviews illustrate how much the departments and those who design and analyze assessments are concerned about learning, but this is seldom explicit in the design of practices or the language used in the discourse around these practices and their outcomes. There is a considerable instructional expertise evident in individual applications, but the sharing of this is less evident. And there is—predictably—a great deal of diversity in how individual faculty members approach similar situations, how they set priorities for learner behavior, and how they interpret similar performances. But there is little evidence that the learning foundations have been explicated in order to allow for productive discussions about the standards that should be applied in particular situations or about how differences in practice and perspective enhance rather than diminish an educational context. When faculty are collaborating around a clearer sense of shared as well as diverse perspectives on learning they can make more progress with their educational plans. This also means that a comprehensive structure—like the application of assessment policies—has a complex foundation that can accept the dynamic relationship of
valued outcomes that can also clash (e.g., equitable opportunity and high quality standards). But this relies on unpacking the educational positions around learning.

- **Mediated conversations with the faculty and staff educators**

Given the importance of faculty discourse in planning for the most effective assessment practices, the range of departmental examples described here have helped in understanding how these conversations move forward in individual departments. Across disciplines, faculty are not automatically prepared to make good use of student outcome data. As reported here, the examples in Anthropology and Business are distinct because of how the facilitators established structures to engage the faculty in specific and meaningful ways. In their deliberations, the participants are operating as co-investigators through their interpretations and their active roles in meaning-making. It is particularly useful here to consider the ways in which the Business School example involves the mediation of an external party who organizes the data, provides structured probes, and then provides an initial analysis that grounds—and stimulates—successive discussions. The body of literature on faculty development practice is helpful, but it seems useful for programs like those at PSU to study their own practices to build local expertise in this area, drawing on the successful experiences anchored in their unique contexts.

- **Faculty perspective on program outcomes**

From an external perspective, the various assessment reports provide a rich picture of the educational programs in operation in several areas, particularly through the lens of student experience and the conceptual links between program and mission. But in this context, faculty voice seems less visible. Presumably, programs emerge in ways that are consistent with the designs and priorities of planners, but faculty perspectives on implementation provide textured insights into program challenges and accomplishments that lead to better assessment of the depth and durability of innovations as well as their anticipated consequences. Without faculty perspective and interpretation, ratings of student achievement can often function as decontextualized statistics. In order to make meaning out of the numbers, audiences need the evaluative meaning that faculty supply.

Some of the existing practices at PSU exemplify how effective use can be made of well-placed student surveys; it is equally important to consider some use of faculty surveys in brief but complementary ways.

- **Use of interactive reporting strategies to support educator involvement**

The various reports and posted documents on PSU websites provide extensive evidence of an active data oriented culture at PSU. The lack of faculty voice, as noted above, is significant, but the interviews have shown how much energy is also placed on effective internal review. Another—and better informed—line of questioning concerns how to make the reporting more interactive and how to document this more complicated level of faculty involvement. In effect,
much of the reporting that gets disseminated is based on the first level of tabulation by the analysts; these are the reports that are presented to the faculty for their review. But this posting only recovers the practice up to the point where the faculty interpretation begins, not the activities of interpretation and challenge and sense-making that ensues—and also not the decisions and actions that are taken.

Three considerations emerge here. First, the use of reporting strategies with faculty that help them engage the outcomes—often as numerical data—in interpretive ways. That is, in presenting outcomes, faculty are making interpretations as part of the reporting. Second, in a form frequently used in workshops, the facilitators are also collecting data on faculty perspective and interpretation during the session. Third, the analyst data report can function as a first stage product, authored by the analysts; this has been the traditional form of evaluation reporting. But an emerging trend, explored in interactive and developmental evaluations, involves a second report which is co-authored with the faculty; this presents the data and initial tabulations, but then integrates the faculty interpretations and implications for continuing practice. This kind of reporting models and supports data interpretation and use, while helping faculty to become co-investigators and co-authors of the program assessment.

- **Potential for school- and department-based efforts (e.g., coordinated student success efforts, recurring program reviews to build a culture of data-oriented reflection on performance and progress)**

It was clear in the interviews how much important work is being carried on at the program and department levels. These are, after all, the contexts in which educational meaning is being forged on a continuing basis. These are the places where we see dedicated staff and faculty positions being effectively used to implement assessment activities that are targeted to student success and program development. The recent NWCCU reports have also cited how important it for PSU to elaborate these department-based activities in their self-study and development efforts. However, recognizing the apparent value of these approaches is not the same as implementing a strategy of department-based interventions to improve practices. It is critical to understand the effectiveness of these efforts in some depth and use this complex knowledge to inform continuing programs and policies.

- **Performance assessment, service projects and community relations**

Community relationships have been an embedded part of the PSU mission and curriculum, shaping its identity and resulting in significant recognition and awards. As the institution examines its assessment policies and practices, this is a particularly rich part of the institutions work that could receive more attention. The writing on curriculum applications for service projects seems to focus mostly on the need for good projects, how to structure them, and how theoretically they can be significant parameters for good practice. Educational programs with extensive histories of clinical aspects of preparation (e.g., education for social work, teaching, and nursing) also have specified learning outcomes that can be addressed in practice settings. But, more generally, the learner is held accountable primarily for completing the project not learning specifics. In PSU’s case, the senior capstone portion of University Studies has been an
Vignette 5

A dean describes the problem of the faculty

A dean from a campus in a state-wide college system is talking with a recent hire and describes the problem of the English faculty at his institution. In the last year, faculty across the state have been working without a contract, and in the current bargaining period they are particularly concerned with the terms regarding individual campus governance and their authority over working conditions. Negotiations have not been going well and times are tense. In this atmosphere, the system president has introduced a requirement that the faculty quickly agree on their departmental student learning outcomes and implement them in support of the state’s new initiative for learning outcomes assessment. He has emphasized to the press how, since the faculty are articulating their own learning outcomes, this is an example of the bottom-up approach he favors. He is seemingly unaware of any irony regarding this most recent addition; things have not been going well from a faculty perspective.

This, the dean describes, is part of the challenge facing the new assessment coordinator.
Next Steps

In the environment of accreditation and indeed public expectations for higher education, the streams of evidence are varied and complex, from enrollment to graduation, and involve ingredients like faculty and curriculum, financial resources, and good administration. But questions of educational outcomes will need to be addressed specifically through the university’s assessment programs and those must be developed to levels adequate for those purposes: How well are we achieving the broad general education outcomes that we expect for all students? How well are different departments doing in their individual degrees? How well are we addressing differences among students from differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including those who enter as first generation college attenders? How do the learning outcomes for students advance the university’s relationship with the urban region, an element that seems deeply embedded in the institution’s identity? These echo some of the evaluative dimensions cited in the recent NWCCU report (e.g., better evidence and analysis to demonstrate the evaluation of progress toward mission-based achievement and fuller demonstration of department-level achievements).

Analysis of the data collected over the last three months of interviews and document review suggests that many of the elements that would be required for these purposes are in place and functioning at sophisticated levels. Comparing PSU perspectives and practices with cited examples for a wide range of national programs helps to identify specific areas where improvements could be sought—several of which are identified above—but examining these as useful tactics might also distract from the organizational strength that is already inherent and authentic in PSU’s structure. What follows, then, is a preliminary proposal for work along selected key dimensions—three are discussed initially—and the strategies and tactics that will support the progress of a comprehensive assessment program that can serve the diverse and loosely coupled learning centered purposes of the university. These will be discussed as near, mid-term, and long range objectives in order to provide a more feasible vision of implementation.

Overall—and based on the intentions, perspectives and practices that emerged from these current inquiries—PSU’s comprehensive assessment program is understood as

- An assembly of principles, commitments, and policies that will ground the implementation of practices that serve the learning concerns of the university at institutional, department, and program levels;
- A structure that provides the means for integrating the assessment resources and products from general education, department and program level units, and co-curricular units into a coherent—if highly diverse—evaluation of learning-centered outcomes for the university;
- A resource that provides direct development service to faculty for assessment activities at the course and curriculum levels;
- An operational program that uses the Institutional Assessment Council and the Office of Academic Innovation to provide the means for implementing these services

The key dimensions that function as three lines of work and development would be:
• Building conceptual and operational relationships among the Institutional Assessment Council and the Office of Academic Innovation and the university
• Developing the means and practices for department and program level assessments to serve their curriculum and strategic needs; this would also include the co-curricular activities of the Office of Student Services
• Developing knowledge resources that would serve the overall practice by providing the means to store and share the scholarship from various activities, such a repository would anticipate and stimulate interaction around these, supporting PSU as a community of knowledge, practice, and action.

These represent endeavors that can build in stages over multiple years, interactively and progressively. Given this as a larger framework, the following activities and strategies are proposed as directions for implementation.

Immediate Priorities

In the next year, much of the focus will be on building the initial terms of the relations and will likely be centered in the Institutional Assessment Council. As described above, the council priority charge has been set:

The IAC will promote and oversee the continued implementation of assessment across the campus, working closely with three offices: Instruction and Undergraduate Studies, Institutional Research and Planning, and the Office of Academic Innovation. It will create guidelines for assessment planning and implementation that reflect student learning at the program, department, and institutional level.

The Council will design a strategy for addressing assessment long term. It will oversee the implementation of key learning goals for institutional assessment. The IAC will serve as the review mechanism for assessment on campus and coordinate with the assistant and associate deans group the implementation of systemic annual reporting by schools and colleges. It will create an annual document on the status of assessment that will form the basis for institutional reports, such as those required by the PSU Faculty Senate and the regional accreditation body, NWCCU.

• In terms of larger relationships, because of its placement and composition, the Institutional Assessment Council is well resourced to implement its development by:
  o Examining the fundamental commitments and principles of learning that will best guide PSU policies for assessment and related strategies
  o Building on the data collection efforts that are already in place and anchored in the culture and norms of the departments

• In terms of department- and program-level assessments, the next year would be a time to set the foundation for collecting data on the assessment programs at various departments and establishing a formal recording system for these that accommodate individual differences; these are activities that will proceed over time but that can be initiated in the next year:
Elaborating the foundations of assessment practices in learning principles in individual department (and simultaneously increasing faculty involvement in these discussions)

- Exploring assessment practices with specific curriculum content
- Preparing a map of the assessment program or practices
- Working in individual departments (with OAZI support) to develop
  
  - A program history that identifies significant changes over several years tables these in relation to (a) the source of the data that led to the change and (b) the process involved in implementing the change (cf., Rickards, Rogers, & Lake, 2004)
  - A discourse audit that looks at when and how faculty are involved in discussions of student learning and curriculum (Rickards, 2009)

- The Office of Academic Innovation will have a particular role in this period in relation to building knowledge resources. As it develops its roles as a convener for reflective and developmental activities, it can work on initial activities to establish protocols and formats for workshop and development activities and the principles and considerations that contribute to best practices in assessment. For example:
  
  - Recognizing how development workshops function as pedagogical activities
  - Emphasizing data from successful activities that amplify the agency and expertise in the departments (nb: these can be thought of as early wins; opportunities to communicate from successful experiences and build foundations for future discussions which may become more difficult)
  - Observing the same identity protections with faculty that would be expected with students (i.e., performances are not identified with individual faculty without their knowledge, no review of performance without the approval of the faculty member—identified or not; the focus in only on analysis of performances not critique of individuals; and so forth)
  - Recognizing the importance of mediated discussions with faculty to increase their involvement in meaning-making activities, integrated with data reporting
  - Maintaining a strategic commitment to engaging educators as co-investigators in assessment studies
  - Use of syllabus review to explore links between learning outcomes and educational practices (Dowd, Malcom, Nakamoto, & Bensimon, 2012; Dowd, Sawatzky, Rall & Bensimon, 2012)

Additionally, in this year, The OAI should develop the basic structure for a website that would serve as a communication medium for the assessment activities

- The website could accommodate overall activities at the institutional level as well as the work of individual departments and initiatives.
- The website would operate to support the departments in telling their own stories about the work they are doing as well as, in particular cases, providing support to specialized accreditation efforts
Given the lessons learned in various accreditation and accountability efforts, it is also critical to consider how such a website can be best structured to advance the educational work of departments and faculty.

**Mid-range Priorities and Objectives**

Over next 2-3 years the university will be in the midst of its NWCCU accreditation self-study and these relationships will be a critical foundation for documenting the continuing development of the educational program as well as providing the architecture for effective reflection.

- The relationships among the multiple units with overlapping assessment contexts will allow for the integration of multiple streams of data into an array of teaching, learning and curriculum. This becomes a foundation for a different level of inquiry into PSU educational practices and their outcomes. At this point, the relationship among these units become a medium for posing evaluative questions as well as investigating the program. In this context, the Institutional Assessment Council can offer additional leadership in reflective inquiries through its collaboration with participants and other faculty. It will be able to provide data and analyses to stimulate further questions and lines of inquiry just as it supports inquiry from various faculty and department perspectives.

- The individual Provost Challenge programs will have enough data on implementation to support a fuller critique in practice, with an integrated analysis of their varied assessment protocols, exploring applications for related practices.
- The further analysis of assessment approaches that serve senior capstones and community service projects can be prepared for the IAC for deliberation.
- The development and articulation of a research agenda for teaching, learning and curriculum can provide additional vision and structure.

- It might also be appropriate to anticipate collaborations between the Office of Academic Innovation and other university divisions to examine and increase the quality of PSU education during a time of great attention to expanding enrollment, supporting persistence to graduation, and increasing the number of graduates.
- In this period, with implementation and impact data, it would be important to find ways to further extend services through the Faculty Senate and to use the Senate as a forum for deeper deliberations on teaching, learning, and curriculum based on available data and relevance to faculty questions.
Activities in the prior phase will have resulted in stronger approaches to department-level assessments and a recognition of the role and expertise of these practices. The next phase is likely to involve building on these practices in programs across the university. It will also be possible to collect the lessons learned from varied specialized accreditations in this period (e.g., teacher education, social work, music education, architecture) to advance generalized knowledge about assessment and educational development.

- Embedded in these department-level activities is a developing role for the use of Program Review as a medium for—and beneficiary of—developmental assessment practices.
- The departments—given their individual needs and relationships with graduates—will need to strengthen their capacity to collect data from graduates on their learning and readiness for the challenges they find.

In terms of knowledge resources, OAI should now have a website and suite of other resources (e.g., occasional papers, presentations, workshop formats) regarding a number of assessment applications on campus. At this point, the role would be to consolidate a structure to advance the means to communicate among faculty around effective assessment practices; this should include a focus on increased website development, with video interviews, student work samples and faculty practice inquiry.

### Long-range priorities

Looking five years out, the anticipated questions for assessment are likely to be shaped by the policy and action structures that have been developed and the foreseeable concerns of scarce finances (particularly in higher education) and social equity. Additionally, current trends seem to suggest increasing future concerns for environmental sustainability and the quality of urban life in Northern Oregon. In the midst of this, Portland State University should continue to function as a source of social capital, and its assessment practices should be managed to serve this trajectory.

This would suggest

- The continued importance of leveraging relationships between OAI and the university’s educational units to assess the quality of impact and use these resources to offer leadership.
  - This will necessarily mean using the longitudinal data from assessments to raise reflective questions regarding the merit and efficacy of the principles and learning goals of the university and its programs; these need to be tested to maintain their currency and to critique the ability to meet the institution’s public obligations.
  - This could also mean using the longitudinal results of assessments to examine trends and anticipate new directions: Are outcomes drifting in systematic ways? Are new courses of study needed to address the world that graduates are encountering? How do assessment practices need to be developed to address such questions?

The continuing development of a research agenda for teaching, learning and curriculum will need to develop in responsive ways.
At the department-level, multiple resource should be sought to develop individualized research agendas for teaching, learning, and curriculum, with increased attention to graduate follow-up and external funding for selected projects
  
  o Strengthen the program of researchers in residence with the OAI to oversee select research initiatives

In terms of knowledge resources, the website and other media should seek broader regional and national relationships. Obviously, assessment practices have fairly specialized audiences to the extent that they are speaking to assessment practice. However, in operation, assessment practice is often a loop in the larger process of knowledge generation. That is, as new ideas are developed, they can be promoted as additions to curriculum, but the assessments are the only place where we finally address the question of what effects they have meant for learning. And that is the long range vision of assessment practice.
## Strategic Plan for PSU Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lines of Action</th>
<th>Immediate (Year 1-2)</th>
<th>Medium (Year 2-3)</th>
<th>Long Term (Year 4-5)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
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<td>relationships</td>
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|                 | Examine commitments and principles of learning Building on existing data collection efforts | IAC and OAI take up selected questions:  
• Data from Provost Challenges  
• Senior Capstones  
• Research agenda for teaching, learning and curriculum  
Collaborate across campus regarding increasing enrollment, persistence to graduation and number of graduates Relations between IAC, OAI and Senate | Leverage relationships across the institution to examine larger questions of educational impact, including  
• Use of longitudinal studies of learning outcomes after college  
• Examine trends in educational programming as they have develop  
• Review continuing agenda in teaching learning and curriculum |
| Developing      |                      |                   |                      |
| department      |                      |                   |                      |
| and program     |                      |                   |                      |
| level           |                      |                   |                      |
| assessments:    |                      |                   |                      |
| Resources,      |                      |                   |                      |
| means and       |                      |                   |                      |
| practices       |                      |                   |                      |
|                 | Elaborating foundations for assessment practices  
Exploring assessments with particular assessment content  
Map out departmental assessment programs and practices  
With OAI, develop  
• Program assessment history (i.e., program data/observations and related changes)  
• Audit of teaching-learning conversations (when do they occur, who is involved, to what end, etc) | Expand and refine use of recurring program review  
Develop and implement full studies of graduate follow-up | Implement individualized research agenda at the department and program levels  
• Strengthen the use of faculty in residence at the OAI |
| Developing      |                      |                   |                      |
| knowledge       |                      |                   |                      |
| resources:      |                      |                   |                      |
| Communicating   |                      |                   |                      |
| Best Practices  |                      |                   |                      |
|                 | Through OAI, explore formats and protocols to increase effective faculty development activities  
• Emphasize the agency and expertise in individual departments  
• Engage faculty as co-investigators in assessment studies  
• Consider use of syllabus review as a means of studying educational practice  
Establish initial structure for website dedicated to teaching, learning, and assessment | Expand use of Academic Innovation website to support knowledge creation resources re effective practices including on-line interviews, student performance samples, and faculty practice inquiry | Through the website and related resources seek external relations with regional and national groups |
References


