

**Final Report to the Planning & Priorities Committee (P&P)  
on the Current State of Assessment at St. Lawrence and  
Recommendations for the Development of an Assessment Process**

**Subcommittee on Institutional Research, Outcomes Assessment, and  
Strategic Planning - May 2005**

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In a memorandum dated September 27, 2004, President Sullivan communicated to St. Lawrence University faculty and staff the need for our institution to engage more systematically in outcomes assessment and asked the Planning and Priorities Committee to lead and guide these efforts.

The primary impetus for St. Lawrence to begin this process now is compliance with *external accountability*. Specifically, two new Middle States accreditation standards now require institutions to put into place formal assessment plans for institutional effectiveness and student learning outcomes. The ultimate benefit of outcomes assessment, however, lies in its *internal value*: outcomes assessment *is* a form of pedagogy to improve student learning. Assessment also builds on the institutional mission, aims and objectives, and thus it provides a vehicle for faculty and staff to hold each other accountable to standards of student learning they have defined for themselves.

In October, P&P charged a small “ad-hoc subcommittee” to carry out some initial research. The group already functioned last year as the institution’s retention task force and included membership from P&P. It was selected primarily because of its areas of expertise, representing both academic and co-curricular learning, and its insights into areas that the assessment plan will need to address. Kim Mooney, Director of the Center for Teaching & Learning, joined the subcommittee mid-way. The group began its task by reviewing some of the assessment literature and various assessment models, discussing the applicability of these models for assessment approaches at St. Lawrence, and reviewing internal documents<sup>1</sup>. It then created an inventory of existing sources of data for assessment. A first draft of this inventory was presented to P&P in early January; a (second) draft expanded on some of those ideas and provided a tentative time line for implementing assessment at St. Lawrence. This final document is intended to introduce the St. Lawrence community to the topic of assessment and to stimulate broader discussion among faculty and staff about our next steps.

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the Subcommittee Report on Aims of the 1997 Summer Curriculum Inventory Task Force and Faculty and Faculty Council minutes pertaining the discussion of revisions to the institution’s Aims and Objectives Statement (minutes from late fall 1997 through early spring 1998)

## 1. Definition of Outcomes Assessment

T. D. Erwin (1991) defines assessment as “The systematic process of determining educational objectives, gathering, using, and analyzing information about student learning outcomes to make decisions about programs, individual student progress, or accountability” (*Dictionary of Student Outcomes Assessment, James Madison Center for Assessment and Research Studies*, <http://www.jmu.edu/assessment/aresource.shtml>).

We begin this section with the definition to highlight some key aspects: Assessment is a “systematic process,” which means it is coordinated, developmental in nature, and unfolds over time. It focuses on “determining education objectives” – versus the achievement of individual students – and “decision making”, suggesting that resulting conclusions guide and revise future practice.

Over the last several years, no doubt, faculty and staff have heard of assessment as literature and workshops have flooded the higher education market. Although this initiative represents the first effort to formally incorporate systematic assessment into the SLU culture, many of the assessment tools are familiar to St. Lawrence faculty and staff (see also Appendix 2). At the institutional level, SLU regularly participates in benchmarking, trend analysis, student surveys and other evaluations of student learning. At the course level, faculty make use of many direct and indirect assessment measures to evaluate student learning and we know from the HERI Faculty Survey that SLU faculty use more best practice pedagogies than their peers. In terms of co-curricular assessment, student life has also made use of both direct and indirect measures to better understand student learning outside the classroom. Yet, the more formative and individual outcomes assessments in and out of the classroom also differ from the more summative, collective focus of assessment at the program and institutional level as explained further below. There is much the institution can build on. However, true assessment will also inevitably change some of the ways in which research has been conducted and how results have been used.

The main distinctions between our current analyses/institutional research practices and outcomes assessment, as expected by Middle States are, in our view, as follows:

- a) Outcomes assessment is “*mission-centered*,” which means that any assessment activity should start with, and be derived from, the institution’s mission and educational values.
- b) The focus of analysis is student *learning*. Assessment explores the process of learning rather than the inputs that faculty, staff, and students bring to their interaction. It answers questions of “what” and “how” students *learn*, not only what they *know*. This shifts the focus of our analysis away from the achievements of individual faculty members or departments to an interdisciplinary approach and blurs, at the macro level, the boundaries between academic affairs and student life. It further reduces our emphasis on specific

student characteristics or student cohorts, while maximizing our focus on program performance within the context of learning goals.<sup>2</sup>

c) Learning is multidimensional and developmental. As faculty and staff realize, good assessment cannot be validly condensed to a single number such as a grade (at the classroom level) or a retention rate (at the institutional level). It requires the use of *multiple* methods of analysis to provide a more reliable insight into the performance of complex learning goals. Middle States requires that methods must include direct and indirect, quantitative and qualitative measures.<sup>3</sup>

d) Assessment, when viewed as pedagogy, needs broad faculty and staff participation and ownership. Although support from a central office is absolutely necessary, sustainable and effective assessment needs to happen throughout the university. It cannot be planned and executed by just a small committee or an administrative assessment director.

e) Assessment does not stop with data analysis. Its purpose is to provide answers to the questions of whether the institution/particular program/course is attaining its goals and improving. Thus, it requires a feedback loop. The assessment plan needs to document how what we learn from assessment will have an impact on decision making, pedagogical practices, and, potentially, resource allocation. The final assessment plan will have to address how this will happen, but we wanted to emphasize here that assessment is not an end in itself. It is a means to the end of improving student learning by providing us with data and a process of feedback to change our practices as we decide is necessary.

f) Finally, the assessment process itself requires evaluation and needs to be flexible enough to allow for improvement.

## **2. Assessment from a Faculty Member's Perspective: What Do We Mean By Assessment and Why Is It Necessary?**

The recent focus on assessment, particularly “outcomes assessment,” in higher education often raises concerns and skepticism among faculty. There are at least three concerns that come to mind: The first is that the complex and often subtle work that faculty do will be condensed to a single measure – draining it of any meaning. Related to this, the *accountability* discussions of Congress regarding the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act have been alarming. A second concern is that “assessment” is a code word for corporate-style performance reviews of individual faculty or departments. Finally, a third important concern is that even a well-done and appropriate assessment process will become a black hole of time for faculty who are already over-committed as they struggle to maintain the quality of their teaching, scholarship and university service.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Presentation by Laura Palucki-Blake from Occidental College, HEDS Conference June 2004

<sup>3</sup> Direct measures assess the knowledge and skills students have learned by asking them to actively demonstrate their learning (e.g. solve a problem, write about a topic, etc.) Indirect measures gather opinions about student learning (e.g. self-ratings in student surveys, focus groups, etc.)

However, as assessment at SLU is discussed among the faculty, our hope is that these concerns can be addressed proactively and that our assessment will be designed to avoid pitfalls to which some other institutions may have fallen prey.

When we talk of “constructing a plan for institutional assessment” at SLU, we are envisioning a process to improve *student learning* and to evaluate the multiple experiences that contribute toward that learning. We are not talking about the sorts of performance reviews that focus on individual faculty or groups of faculty. What we are concerned about is answering the question “Are our students learning what we say we are teaching them?” That question embodies three key elements of assessment: statements of goals (“what we say we are teaching them”), a curriculum and pedagogy that addresses those goals, and some determination of the degree of student learning after having completed various elements of the curriculum. The assessment is a collective one: are we, as an institution, delivering the student learning outcomes that are promised by our aims and objectives? Once we begin to get answers to such questions, we move to the step in the assessment process that is perhaps most satisfying: when we apply what we learn from that assessment to our practices (e.g., the curriculum, the co-curriculum, our pedagogy) and consider changes that might better deliver on our goals.

The purpose is not to pass judgment on the quality of work that individuals or departments do, but to create a process by which we can learn where we do well and where we do not, so that we can find better ways to get our students to achieve the goals we have set for them.

This suggests a four-stage process for assessment:

1. Decide upon/clarify/make explicit goals and objectives.
2. Explore our curriculum and pedagogy for sites where student work in furtherance of those goals and objectives is most obvious.
3. Develop assessment instruments to determine the degree to which that student work demonstrates mastery of those goals and objectives.
4. Use the information produced by those instruments to consider changes in our practices that would help us better achieve our goals.

At some level, often tacitly, this is what faculty do with their own courses as they change and evolve over the semesters. We certainly assess our individual students a great deal and provide continuously formative feedback to them. We also frequently self-assess our individual work through peers in various venues both on and off campus. Faculty are intuitively and intimately familiar with the process of assessment. In most cases, faculty would say that a course without assessment lacks guts. However, we do not, as yet, do enough to assess our more collective ventures. Below are some examples on how we could address this.

Departments might engage in an assessment process for their majors that attempts to determine in a *systematic* way to what extent their graduating seniors have met the student learning goals that are implicit or explicit in their departmental curricula.

Academic Affairs as a division might attempt to determine whether graduating seniors have met the aims and objectives of our curriculum as a whole. SLU as an institution might attempt to determine whether our graduates have met our institution-wide goals, both those related to classroom learning and to the more general aspects of a liberal education.

Determining whether students have met our stated goals is not a matter of standardized testing or formulaic measurement. Other institutions have developed successful assessments that reflect their own local goals and objectives, and, as stated above, there are multiple techniques to choose from and apply. In order to develop and implement the best assessment, faculty must actively engage in this planning and decision process.

For example the First-Year Program, along with the University Writing Program, has decided on applying a portfolio process for the evaluation of writing and has used this process for about a decade now. The process started out with FYP faculty as a group, deciding upon the goals and objectives of the writing skills portion of the FYP, and then developing a 6-point qualitative rating scale (rubric) for determining the degree to which any particular writing portfolio meets those goals. Portfolios are chosen at random and anonymously reviewed by two faculty. The faculty apply the rubric to assign the portfolio a rating. Faculty also discuss the various strengths and weaknesses they find in these portfolios. The data that result (both the numeric rating and the common strengths and weaknesses noted) can then be used to *feed back into the work of the program*. Although the evaluation rubric generates a “number” or “score,” that number does not serve an evaluative function for either the FYP faculty or the program itself. It serves to generate conversation and only at a marginal level provides an indicator of how the writing skills of student classes have changed over time. It is the descriptive data that are most meaningful and bring *the real value for the feedback step in the process*.

The FYP’s experience with assessing writing is that this time spent has tremendous pay-offs and is not a black hole. Like any such endeavor, there are start-up costs, but the time needed for on-going assessment is manageable. Also, as a reminder, with assessment evaluating learning and not the individual, many assessment efforts rely on representative sampling. It will take time, as an institution, to go through the four stages of assessment, both at the institution-wide and departmental levels, but once such processes are in place, the time needed on an annual basis is significantly less. (For example, the FYP portfolio review process requires a good number of hours of clerical time each semester to copy and mask the materials, a few hours on the part of the University Writing Director to prepare and copy the assessment instruments, and then approximately 4 hours per semester from faculty to do the actual reading and commenting.) In recognition of the start-up costs, the plan laid out in what follows is envisioned to unfold over a period of at least 5-6 years.

Finally, why bother with assessment? The easy answer is that because Middle States accreditation requires that institutions at least have a plan for self-assessment in place, if not actually engaging in it. We have a choice on how to shape this process. If it is only

pro-forma, it then becomes a waste of everyone's time. On the other hand, if we put a process into place that is rigorous, honest and authentic, it will ultimately benefit our institution. The value to us internally becomes that we can improve on the work we do in ways that better serve students. The value to us externally becomes that we can say to the wider world that we are indeed doing what we promise. To the extent that the cost of a private liberal arts college education continues to climb, we are likely to see increased calls for some sort of "bottom-line" accountability. However, accountability will not drive what we do here, but be rather a "by-product" of our evaluation and efforts to improve student learning and enhance the unique values and experiences of our liberal education.

### **3. A Starting Point for St. Lawrence University's Assessment Plan**

Where do we begin? We identify learning goals. St. Lawrence University's Aims and Objectives (A&O) statement, combined with the mission statement, articulates our institutional values and learning goals. Both the A&O and the mission statement are found in the college catalog and on the institution's website: together, they frame our curriculum. Thus, the subcommittee recommends that we use the A&O statement as a foundation for our assessment.<sup>4</sup>

### **4. Articulated learning goals in the A&O and possibilities for assessment**

The A&O document includes several clearly articulated learning goals. In some cases, however, these goals are vague or might need further clarification by the institution. The A & O document, therefore, provides a foundation for us to begin the process of identifying learning goals for programs. Appendix 1 groups individual learning goals/aims into three areas: Aims that are clearly articulated and/or where we have multiple points of assessment available; those that will face a greater challenge for assessment; and last, aims/learning outcomes that are most difficult to assess and might need some further clarification.

### **5. Student learning goals and institutional strategic planning**

One of the elements we have elaborated very little thus far is the relationship between student outcomes assessment and overall institutional effectiveness. It is important that what we learn from the outcome assessment process influences overall institutional strategy as well as classroom and co-curricular activities. Achieving this will require that we establish mechanisms for evaluating institutional strategies in light of outcomes and for modifying those strategies in response in order to improve our ability to achieve the institutional mission, aims and objectives. The results of student learning assessment

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to institutional learning goals, Middle States requires the assessment of a list of specific competencies. Most of these competencies are covered in our Mission, Aims & Objectives statement; an exception is, e.g., information literacy. This will eventually have to be added to the assessment plan.

processes must get fed back into broader institutional planning processes that go beyond the curriculum and co-curriculum, narrowly conceived.

## 6. Inventory of existing assessment tools and data

In Appendices 1 and 2, we have listed examples of existing measures, possible areas of future assessments, and a larger general inventory of learning outcomes (mostly in the academic area). Both inventories show that we have quite a few assessments at the course level (to assist individual student learning), and also quite a bit of data for institutional planning. However, the assessment of student learning for improving *programs* is less well developed. These data show that we rely most heavily on indirect, quantitative data. We will need to consider expanding our research methodology toward more frequent use of direct, qualitative data sources. Two examples that are both direct and qualitative include portfolios and focus groups. Appendix 3 lists the scoring criteria used in the writing program/FYP portfolio project. Appendix 4 shows our current cycle for institutional surveys (in other words, at what points during students' academic careers we collect data and benchmarks), and Appendix 5 lists student life assessments in use.

### Student learning outcomes assessments already in place

- As we discussed above, the FYP program makes use of writing portfolios. The *fall portfolio review* focuses exclusively on struggling writers. These data provide a longitudinal sense of what our weakest writers look like and how they have changed. The *spring portfolio review* tries to get a general sense of first-year students' writing ability. Thus, it consists of a sample of one randomly drawn portfolio from each FYS. We have discovered that this sample might be too small and not informative enough. Thus, starting with spring 2005, data collection will be expanded to two portfolios per FYS with better documentation. While these reviews represent a good beginning, they are limited to introductory level writing courses. The next step for us will be to find a means of evaluating students' more advanced written work.
- The move toward systematic student self-reflection in Academic Advising is another example of assessment in which a somewhat different portfolio approach is being implemented to strengthen the advising process and to shift students toward becoming more engaged, intentional learners.
- At the departmental level, the biology department does some pre- and post-testing of 101/102 students, has revised its curriculum to build strategically on more sequencing, and might use BIO GRE questions as part of their evaluation of seniors' performance. In addition, the department, similar to the FYP, maintains an extensive database on student performance and course enrollment patterns.
- The Education department uses extensive goal setting rubrics, rating scales and comprehensive portfolio assessments. Many activities here, however, are driven by specific requirements for the New York State Teacher Certification. Thus, they fall more into the area of accountability than contributing to the broader learning goals of the institution. In particular, the link between assessment and specific state-driven accountability requirements/standards limits the degree to which assessment data can

be used to change the broader practices and rearticulate aims and objectives the institution pursues.

- Student life has in place several assessments to evaluate student learning (see Appendix 5. For example, Career Services & Leadership Education, The Leadership Academy and the Wellness Initiative have assessment programs to help them make programmatic decisions. Nonetheless, great potential remains for assessing student learning from co-curricular activities, events, programs, and leadership.

#### “Sites” that could be used as opportunities for assessments

AAC&U’s 2004 publication “Our Students’ Best Work: A Framework for Accountability Worthy of Our Mission”<sup>5</sup> is a call “for the academy to take responsibility for assessing the quality of student learning in college” (Peer Review, 2004, p. 25). Providing a framework for assessment, the report emphasizes that institutions need to set standards for basic, proficient, and advanced performance, to create milestone assessments across the curriculum and to evaluate students’ most advanced, culminating work.

Based on this framework, we envision the following serving as sites for our assessment efforts:

- The SYE -- The *SYE* could readily become a focus for assessment to evaluate student performance (not only related to the major, but also to achieving general education goals such as writing or critical thinking) “on the way out.” Several departments, including Biology, History and Economics to a degree, maybe also English and Speech & Theatre, are talking about how their curricula are structured so that they make sense in leading up to the SYE. However, none of the departments are actually looking at individual SYE projects to see if they are achieving the goals that they have outlined for their majors, or that the institution has as a whole. A random selection of 1 to 2 senior projects in each department/program could provide a sense of student learning outcomes over time.
- The *Festival of Science* or *SLU Summer Research Fellow reports* – Both of these represent the work of some of our best students. Despite the given selection bias they should provide some additional insights into the depth and breadth of student learning.
- *Sophomore seminars and research methods courses* – Several departments have process-oriented courses targeted to sophomores (e.g. History and Government, or research methods courses in Psychology, Sociology and Economics). Looking at *random* student work from these courses might supplement the Festival of Science and Summer Fellow work by getting to a broader range of students across multiple disciplines. These courses could serve as milestone assessments.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Fall 4004 issue of *peerReview* and, for an excerpt, the AAC&U website <http://www.aacu-edu.org/issues/liberaleducation/index.cfm>

## Other requirements

- Articulation of departmental goals that are derived from/connected to the University's A&O statement. The University catalog and departmental websites might be a good start.
- Development of standards and appropriate assessment techniques in each department or program area that follow the framework as outlined by AAC&U. Sites may include the SYE, the Festival of Science, etc.
- Use of institutional survey findings with an eye toward learning goals. We will expand the traditional use of survey instruments (as institutional effectiveness tool) by documenting more thoroughly, specific learning goals. One recommendation we have is to develop some standard categories under which related survey items that describe student learning and engagement would be grouped. Also, some "aggregate factors" (similar to the 5 NSSE benchmarks<sup>6</sup>) could be created that would summarize an average "score" or "strength" and could be compared across survey instruments or subgroups of students.<sup>7</sup>

## **7. How should departments be included?**

Clearly, faculty and administrative staff need to play a central role in assessment, and departments themselves need to articulate and provide evidence for the learning goals they have for their students. Departments will be asked, in a first phase, to articulate the specific goals they have for their students and majors. In tandem with the goals they identify, departments will also develop the tools that are most suitable for the assessment of student work. Overall, a "bottom up" approach to assessment, with assessment taking place at the most "local" level possible, will be the most desirable. Wide faculty and student life involvement and communication will be essential, so that the "assessment plan" does not reflect just the thoughts of a department chair/director or a small committee.

Student Life has already established a committee that includes representation from many of the individual departments. The committee is charged with determining the current state of assessment in the division and then serving as consultants to the individual student life departments in the development of comprehensive assessment plans. All departmental student life assessments will be linked to the university and division mission and include a method for assessment to affect decision making.

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<sup>6</sup> The National Survey of Student Engagement aggregates several items to 5 "benchmarks" that describe effective educational practice, these being "level of academic challenge", "active and collaborative learning", "student-faculty interaction", "enriching educational experiences", and "supportive campus environment".

<sup>7</sup> A first attempt has been made with the senior survey, requiring further refinement.

## 8. What are new things we could initiate?

Assessment is a big area and could easily take up a lot of faculty and staff time. We need to be careful and intentional in our approach to maximize its benefit. Putting well thought-out assessments into place also does not happen overnight. We envision the process unfolding in several stages over the next 5-6 years. We anticipate that we will be fully engaged in assessment activities at all levels of the institution within 7-10 years.

A first step is agreement on goals and assessment methods we deem appropriate for St. Lawrence University. Although we are opposed, for example, to standardized testing, we believe that many direct, qualitative approaches offer helpful insights into the advancement of student learning. They must, therefore, be added to the indirect, quantitative approaches (e.g. surveys, enrollment patterns, etc.) that are most frequently used right now. Furthermore, to accomplish this ambitious program, we will need leadership. Several tasks that will be charged to this leadership include the selection of course sites that would be appropriate for such assessments, assistance with training, and the establishment of a review cycle. Before we are able to write a complete assessment plan, questions of where assessments take place, how and when they occur and how they feed back into the assessment loop need to be answered. The cultivation of faculty and staff understanding and commitment to the process is just as important, because a learning-centered assessment process ultimately needs to be driven by those who are directly responsible for student education. However, we recognize that this process also needs time to develop and grow. We envision this happening in several steps:

### Year 1 (Calendar Year 2005) :

a) The first year should be set aside for conversations and communication about the institution's goals and objectives. All assessment literature emphasizes how important it is to articulate locally-owned goals for student learning and to set standards in each area that help to evaluate whether these standards have been met.

- This communication should happen with *students*. The FYP is planning to build such discussion into next summer's orientation by asking students to read the A&O statement before the process of course selection begins, and by making the A&O statement the basis of discussion during on-campus Orientation in August. Other central places for such discussion are during later stages of the advising process and/or at the point of declaration of a major.
- The institution should also have these discussions with *faculty and staff*. Suggested sites for such conversations include department chairs meetings, the new faculty orientation in August, and the May Faculty College.

- b) First steps will be made to involve faculty in the articulation of learning goals.
- At the departmental level: Academic departments will be asked this coming fall to review their catalog and web descriptions with an eye toward clarifying departmental goals and explicitly including goals statements in those descriptions.
  - At the course level: The CTL will find development opportunities to assist interested faculty with the design of learning outcome oriented course syllabi.
  - The institution will attempt to bring in a major speaker to talk about assessment.
- c) Continue our progress in institutional/academic support/co-curricular assessment. This will include:
- The conversion of longitudinal institutional survey assessments into outcome-oriented survey summaries; the review of the current survey cycle, survey instruments, and gaps in assessments.
  - The broader sharing of these and other examples of assessment – in committees, through “brownbag luncheons,” etc.
  - A team of St. Lawrence faculty and staff attending a major assessment conference or assessment workshop, sponsored by AAC&U or another organization, in 2005.
  - Like academic departments, co-curricular departments will be asked this spring to review their missions and to develop specific departmental aims and objectives.
  - The development of the co-curricular assessment plan and the discussion of the assessment plan with other constituencies.
  - Similar to the approach taken by co-curricular education, academic support offices (e.g., ACPAS, HEOP, Brush Gallery, Outdoor Program, Athletics, the instructional technology branch of IT) will need to be engaged in the assessment process.

**Years 2-4 (2006-2008):**

- a) The A&O will be used to inform the assessment of institution-wide learning goals:
- Suggestions are to look at first-year student portfolios, sophomore research summaries and some SYE projects (the submission process would be on a random basis for 1 or 2 SYEs per department).
  - Appropriate assessment tools (e.g. for writing or critical thinking) will be developed.
  - Training will be provided to the team(s) that will conduct the assessments.
- b) Milestone and capstone assessments for departments/programs will be developed in departments that already do some kind of assessment and are ready to expand their efforts.
- Starting points could be the writing program or a department that recently underwent a curriculum review and which could serve as examples for other departments.

c) Databases and knowledge management will be expanded:

- “Databases” for portfolio and other assessments will be developed that are currently on paper – often not even formally documented as it has, thus far, been used for formative assessment only.
- Materials that help academic and co-curricular departments in their planning and evaluation will be made more broadly available – maybe via the web or a shared drive. This may include strategic information on enrollment trends/grades/class size/ budgetary information or the like that are frequently requested on an ad-hoc basis from administrative offices.
- Analyses that contribute to the overall assessment will be more centrally archived (maybe via the Web).
- The development of a co-curricular transcript and/or portfolio will be pursued to capture and assess better the learning that occurs outside the classroom experience.

d) The CTL will assist in the area of faculty development

- Invite nationally known authors and speakers to facilitate assessment workshops with St. Lawrence faculty
- Facilitate follow-up meetings and conversations after these formal workshops
- Work with interested departments as they develop their assessment plans
- Fund faculty attendance at conferences and workshops addressing assessment practices

e) By February 2007, the institution’s assessment plan will be formulated in writing.<sup>8</sup>

**Years 4-6 (2008-2010) (note a one-year overlap to assessment activities above):**

a) Departments will now be fully involved in assessment:

- The team responsible for the development of general education outcomes assessments will provide training for departments.
- Templates will be developed for departments to use in their articulation of how the curriculum will lead to the desired outcomes, what specific departmental goals and objectives are, and what the department’s relationship to general education outcomes is.  
(Several institutions, such as Bucknell, have developed templates for departments to facilitate such a process – this is something we could develop here, too.)

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<sup>8</sup> At this point, we should have a good handle on the various elements of our assessment plan. The February 2007 deadline is necessary, given that the self-study report will need to be mailed to Middle States early Fall 2007. If interested, what elements an assessment plan should include, one recommended resource is Catherine A. Palomba/Trudy W. Banta’s chapter on Assessment Planning. See: Palomba/Trudy W. Banta (1999): *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp 37-52

b) An action plan will be developed, and assessments will be used in the decision making process, for example:

- In making changes to the curriculum – the question is whether the Academic Affairs committee could take on an authoritative role here.
- For budgeting and strategic planning purposes.

c) Academic affairs and student life will collaborate closely in the area of student learning.

d) The institution may join an assessment consortium or other assessment initiatives as resources deem appropriate.

All of these time frames are, of course, somewhat flexible, and will depend on resources and other opportunities that may open. For example, foundations have started to support collaborative assessment projects across institutions. Most grants now expect comprehensive assessment plans for funded projects. All of these opportunities may shape some specific assessment projects at St. Lawrence as well. Nevertheless, we hope that our outline will serve as a guide and assure that we will “stay on track”.

#### Recommendations on how to proceed:

As outlined above, we are envisioning the development of the assessment process occurring in several stages. We recommend proceeding in the following ways:

#### **1. At the department/program assessment level:**

- Interview each department/program about goals and assessment
- Charge each department/program with the development and execution of its own assessment plan
- Provide resources (e.g. templates, sample surveys, examples of rubrics, etc.) and ensure that training opportunities and technical assistance exist
- Periodically review the assessments that have taken place

#### **2. At the institutional level:**

- Initiate/prioritize discussions on goals
- Initiate/discuss training opportunities (potentially charge the CTL with these responsibilities)
- Discuss the structure of oversight over assessment efforts, in particular the role of the Academic Affairs division.
- Review the existing inventory, identify gaps, initiate new assessments as needed
- Set the assessment schedule
- Discuss how/when/for which audience assessment results will be disseminated and how findings will be used in decision-making

## **APPENDIX 1 – Aims and Objectives**

*While St. Lawrence’s mission statement provides the framework for our overall work, the institution’s “Aims and Objectives” articulate specific learning goals for our students and could serve as the starting point for our assessment work.*

### **Aims and Objectives:**

#### **EASIEST TO ASSESS**

#### **Students’ Learning:**

- “1. A depth of understanding in at least one field of study”

Done best at the departmental level. We can assess this generally by looking at students’ gpa in their major field, the number of advanced courses taken and research completed; looking at SYE projects; reviewing requirements for the major and asking departments how they assess students’ depth of knowledge in the major field. Also, where available, we could look at the performance in the GRE subject tests, MCAT and/or New York State Teacher Certification Exams.

- “2. The ability to read, write, speak and listen well”

In general, most assignments in classes ask students to use at least one and often a combination of these intellectual skills. The FYP collects portfolios to evaluate students’ writing skills; other places of assessment could be the writing center, OCI, the SYE (or other courses at the advanced level that are writing-intensive), and Career Services. We don’t see any overarching way to assess this (e.g. a skill set at which all students must demonstrate proficiency). However, institutional surveys include student self-assessments as indirect (benchmark) measures.

- “3. The ability to conduct research and to think critically”

Again, any number of classes have assignments that ask students to do this, specifically FYS, research method courses like GOVT 290 or HIST 400, or an SYE or senior thesis project. We could look at random student work in these courses. Also, Festival of the Sciences, University Fellows, etc. as assessment sites.

- “4. An understanding of diverse cultures”

We have two Diversity requirements - passing those should indicate that students have some understanding of diversity. In addition, several co-curricular programs are aimed at accomplishing this learning outcome. Direct assessment of student learning from these programs could give additional support to the accomplishment of this goal. Indirect measures (such as student self assessments in NSSE or senior survey, study abroad participation rates, pre-departure/post-departure results) provide additional insight.

- “5. An understanding of scientific principles and methods”

Like DIV, passing the two science distribution requirements (NSC-L and NSC/SST) should indicate that students have sufficient understanding of scientific principles and methods. Other places of assessment could be the Festival of the Sciences, SLU Fellows, SYE, etc. We could also look how competitive students are at interviews.

**Faculty:**

- “...excellent teaching in its faculty and assisting its members to realize their full potential as teachers.”

Tenure and promotion ought to do this! Also, the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) sponsors many events and workshops - we imagine that we could look at attendance, subjects, etc. We also have benchmarks from the HERI faculty survey to assess teaching and faculty development.

- “Active Scholarship is strongly encouraged...”

Tenure and promotion, research grants (both internal and external), papers presented, publications. Annual reports to the Dean’s office include some of these measures, and so does the HERI Faculty survey.

**MORE CHALLENGING TO ASSESS**

**Students’ Learning:**

- “7. An expansion of aesthetic sensibilities and capacities”

The AEX distribution? We could draw some random samples and review student performances, etc., similar to research, but overall this might be difficult...

- “6. An understanding of the natural environment”

We need broader interpretation of what was meant here. Possible places then: Environmental studies – environmental teaching in English – the Outdoor program – the Adirondack semester?

**MOST DIFFICULT TO ASSESS**

**Students’ Learning:**

- From the opening paragraph: “...seeks to provide an education that fosters in students an open, inquired, and disciplined mind, well informed through broad exposure to basic areas of knowledge; an enthusiasm for life-long learning; self-confidence and self-knowledge; a respect for differing opinions and for free discussion of those opinions; and an ability to use information logically and to evaluate alternative points

of view.”

We have some indirect survey measures – mostly self assessments from Senior and Alumni surveys – that could assist. Also: graduate school continuation rates and competitiveness? FYS and the Festival of Science as other sites of assessment. Student conversations with the advisor on the kind of experiences that have contributed to students’ growth could be another place of (more formative) assessment. This is also an area where co-curricular learning assessment can be helpful. Participation in campus leadership and activities can accomplish many of these learning outcomes, and self-assessment by students of their learning could provide additional insight. For many of these characteristics such as self-confidence and self-knowledge, the student will be the best judge of their own learning.

- “8. A personal ethic of considered values”
- “Moral, social, religious, and aesthetic growth, and encourages an expanding sense of responsibility for and service to humanity”

Both items challenging to assess and might mostly rely on indirect measures such as self assessments (e.g. Senior Survey), participation rates from the Center for Volunteerism or the Chaplain’s Office (e.g., participation in BYOB), bias-related incidences, or student misconducts related to the academic honor code. A recent issue of *New Directions for Institutional Research* focused on the assessment of character outcomes in college<sup>9</sup>. It provides measures and assessment ideas that might be helpful for our assessment as well.

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<sup>9</sup> Dalton, J.C., Russell, T.R., Kline, S. (2004): Assessing Character Outcomes in College. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 122, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

## APPENDIX 2 – Assessment Methods

### Learning outcomes assessment at the institutional level

#### AVAILABLE

##### **INDIRECT MEASURES/ASSESSMENT METHODS**

1. **Surveys of student perceptions or self-report of activities:**
  - Frequent participation in national surveys that have a strong emphasis on student outcomes and institutional effectiveness. We use these surveys to benchmark our performance against other selected institutions. Examples include the CIRP-HERI Freshman survey, the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium senior and alumni surveys, the National Survey of Student Engagement, the CORE Alcohol and Other Drugs survey, and the HERI faculty survey.
  - Regular administration of other in-house surveys, such as a library survey to study the information literacy of our seniors; a “college success” questionnaire for second-semester freshmen and sophomores to address, proactively, academic and co-curricular areas of student discontent and need; and a 6-month out career survey to track graduate school enrollment and job placement rates for graduating seniors.
  - Longitudinal study of survey results for trend analysis.
  - Integration of survey results with existing institutional databases (these include demographics, SAT scores, grade point average, student status, declared major, etc.) to maximize the richness of information we have available for assessment; controlling where possible for “input” and identifying “value-added” learning.
2. Duplication of **national outcomes assessment studies** on our campus – an example includes the review of the role of athletics at St. Lawrence in the spring of 2001-02, based on Shulman and Bowen’s book *The Game of Life*, and in the fall of 2003-04 based on Bowen and Levin’s *Reclaiming the Game*.
3. Comprehensive **benchmarking and use of “performance indicators”** in the areas of admissions, retention (and finance).
4. Mandatory exit interviews for students withdrawing from St. Lawrence.
5. **Actuarial data** such as majors, course enrollments, student-faculty ratio, student research, study abroad participation, baccalaureate origins, etc.
6. Use of **standing and ad-hoc committees to study institutional effectiveness**, such as Academic Affairs, the Retention Task Force, the Diversity Task Force, and the Greek Engagement Project.

#### NOT AVAILABLE/NOT BEING USED AT SLU

##### **INDIRECT MEASURES**

- More regular use of focus groups
- Transcript analysis

##### **DIRECT MEASURES**

- Performance on achievement tests (GRE, etc.)
- Explicit self-reflection on what students have learned related to institutional programs (advising portfolio or reflection as seniors...)
- Portfolio assessment/rubric scores for class assignments in General Education, interdisciplinary core courses, or other courses required of all students

## Learning outcomes assessment at the departmental/program level

### AVAILABLE

#### **INDIRECT MEASURES**

- Registration or course enrollment information
- Tenure and promotion
- New York State Teacher Certification Exams (education)
- Grade reports
- Annual reports of departments

### NOT AVAILABLE/NOT BEING USED AT SLU

#### **INDIRECT MEASURES**

- Broader use of pre-/post tests and control groups for academic programs (currently done only on a few occasions, such as Study Abroad, Oral Communication Institute, etc.)
- Aggregate course evaluations
- Catalog descriptions and course syllabi for major
- Departmental reviews (done only occasionally)
- Graduate school placement rates
- Employer or alumni surveys

#### **DIRECT MEASURES**

- Capstone projects, senior theses, honors
- Festival of the Sciences or other student research (Univ. fellows) and performances
- Student performances/exhibitions
- Student teaching (education department)
- Employer and internship supervisor ratings of student performance
- Portfolio assessment (beyond the FY)

## **Learning outcomes assessment at the course level or used for other data sources for formative feedback to students**

### AVAILABLE

#### **DIRECT MEASURES**

- Classroom assessment techniques such as minute papers, quizzes, student presentations, demonstrations, student critiques, multiple drafts of papers, etc.
- Performances/debates (in the arts)
- Research projects

#### **INDIRECT MEASURES**

- Grades (not explicitly criteria based)
- Mid-term grades
- University-wide course evaluations at the end of each semester
- Course-specific evaluations (e.g. in Biology and the First-Year Program)

#### **Other data sources (indirect)**

- Standardized test instruments such as the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) given occasionally to students during college orientation
- Tests in the Career Services Office, such as Myers Briggs Kaplan courses and other graduate school test preparations available through Career Services

### NOT AVAILABLE/NOT USED AT SLU

#### **DIRECT MEASURES**

- Portfolios for writing, oral presentations, and performances (at the advanced course level)
- Grades that are based on explicit criteria related to learning goals

#### **INDIRECT MEASURES**

- Percent of class time spent in active learning/community-based learning
- Hours spent on homework/ on class related tasks outside of class, etc.

## **APPENDIX 3**

### **WRITING PROGRAM/FYP ASSESSMENT PROJECT PROGRAM ASSESSMENT FALL 2002**

#### **SCORING GUIDE**

*Taking into account the stated aims and objectives of the FYP, the following list represents the positive features of student writing and learning we would expect to see in a portfolio.*

- A. The amount of writing assigned and completed is substantial. There are at least three formal writing projects, with revisions, and varied forms of informal writing.
- B. Evidence that the writer has revised the prose beyond mere editing and beyond the instructor's suggestions or comments.
- C. To guide that revision, there is evidence of sufficient commentary or response to the writing, provided by the instructor and/or mentors and peers. The commentary is sufficiently detailed and constructive to guide further revision.
- D. The formal writing, especially in the final drafts, is focused, logical, and has a clear central idea. The logical organization and the development of ideas or arguments make the writing easy to follow.
- E. The writing uses appropriate detail to illustrate and support points.
- F. The portfolio offers evidence that the student understands how to use informal writing to promote critical thinking and reading. The informal writing shows effort and thought.
- G. The formal writing shows evidence of mature prose. The prose is not overly simple, is not choppy or tilted.
- H. Most of the writing in the portfolio is free of major surface errors.

#### **SCORING SCALE**

- |         |  |
|---------|--|
| 6 Range | An excellent portfolio. The portfolio has numerous strengths; demonstrates all of the positive elements listed above.                                |
| 5 Range | A very good portfolio. The portfolio's strengths far outweigh its weaknesses. Demonstrates almost all of the positive features identified above.     |
| 4 Range | A good portfolio. Strengths outweigh weaknesses, though not dramatically. Demonstrates positive features in most but not all areas identified above. |
| 3 Range | An adequate or competent portfolio. The portfolio's strengths and weaknesses are evenly balanced.  |
| 2 Range | A fair portfolio. The portfolio's weaknesses outweigh its strengths. Fails to demonstrate positive features in many of the areas identified above.   |
| 1 Range | A poor portfolio. The portfolio has many weaknesses and few strengths.   |

## **APPENDIX 4– Survey Instruments and Current Assessment Cycle**

Class Year	1996	1997	1998	199	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
<b>First-Year</b>														
Admitted Student Questionnaire (pre-enrl)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
CIRP (HERI/HEDS)					x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
FYP evaluations, Fall					x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
FYP evaluations, Spr					x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
NSSE, Spring								50%		x				
CSQ, Fall										x				
CSQ, Spring									x	x	x	x	x	x
CORE NORMS SHORT, Fall									x	x				
CORE NORMS SHORT, Spr (Sample)									x	x				
CORE NORMS LONG, Spr (Sample)								x		x	Fall		?	
WI Program Evaluation, Spr (online)												x		x
<b>SophomoreYear</b>														
CSQ, Spring (Sample)								x	x	x	x	x	x	x
NSSE (Sample)								50%						
CORE NORMS LONG, Spr (Sample)							x		x	Fall		?		?
WI Program Evaluation, Spr (online)											x		x	
<b>Junior Year</b>														
NSSE (Sample)								50%						
CORE NORMS LONG, Spr (Sample)						x		x	Fall		?		?	
WI Program Evaluation, Spr (online)										x		x		x
<b>Senior Year</b>														
HEDS Senior Survey					x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Library Literacy survey							x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
NSSE					50%		x							
CORE NORMS LONG, Spr (Sample)					x		x	Fall		?		?		?
WI Program Evaluation, Spr (online)									x		x		x	
<b>Alumni</b>														
Career-Services 6-mo out study	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
HEDS Alumni, 5 yrs out (15-20%)		x	x	x										
HEDS Alumni, 10 yrs out (1989/1990 entering, 15% response rate)														

	AY 1997	AY 1998	AY 1999	AY 2000	AY 2001	AY 2002	AY 2003	AY 2004	AY 2005
<b>Surveys, Tied to a Calendar Year</b>									
<b>International Education</b>									
Pre-departure questionnaire							x	x	x
Post-departure evaluation									
<b>Other Academic</b>									
Summerterm survey	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
OCI questionnaire						x	x		
HERI Faculty Survey (HERI/HEDS)			x			x			x
<b>Misc. Student Life Assessments</b>									
(see inventory Appendix 5)									
<u>WI-Surveys</u>									
WI Program Evaluation								Spr	
CA surveys						x	x	x	
CA focus groups									x
Quick Evaluations								x	x
<b>Universal Measures</b>									
End-of-semester course evaluations									
Grades/mid-term warnings									
Course taking patterns									
Honors									
Research participation									
Student performances									
Science Festival									
Student performances/exhibitions									
Study abroad participation									
<b>Other</b>									
GRADUATE SCHOOL ENTRY (National Student Clearinghouse data)									
GEP Project									
Game of Life Analysis				x		x	x		

## **APPENDIX 5– Student Life Assessment**

Although several other assessments including assessments of needs, satisfaction, and outcomes are completed in various student life areas, the following assessments in particular assess student learning:

### ***Career Services & Leadership Education***

Survey of New Graduates (6-9 months after graduation)  
Workshop and Event Evaluations  
Intern Self-Evaluation (Fellows Only)  
Peer Advisor Training Evaluations  
Peer Advisor Learning Goals Survey (end of each semester)  
Career Class Learning Goals Evaluation

### ***Co-Curricular Education and Programming***

Orientation Leader Training Evaluation  
Leadership Development Institute Learning Goals Post-Assessment  
Panhellenic/IFC Officer Evaluations (end of term)

### ***Counseling Center***

Counseling Client Survey (each semester)  
Termination Summary  
Advocate Training Evaluation  
Alcohol EDU Assessment

### ***Leadership Academy/Center of Volunteerism***

SLICE of Leadership Learning Goals Evaluations  
Habitat for Humanity & Circle K Training Learning Goals Evaluations  
First Year Council Mid-Year Learning Goals Assessment

### ***Residential Learning Communities***

Theme Coordinator Meeting Evaluations  
Group Interview Self-Evaluation

### ***Judicial Affairs***

Community Service Learning Assessment

### ***Chaplain's Office***

Program assessments for Build Your Own Beliefs Series and Labyrinth