

**What are some strengths of this project/Academy work? Why are these strengths?**

**LSSU RESPONSE**

Sandra Harris notes the following strengths:

1. *Implementation of Tracdat as part of the assessment process.* This tool could be quite valuable in terms of collecting data related to student learning outcomes. It will be interesting to see what the initial results look like. It will also be interesting to hear of lessons learned from the first implementation.
2. *Providing faculty training on the technology used in the assessment process.* It is crucial that faculty be provided training on the tools that will be used in the assessment process. This would go a long way in terms of promoting a culture of assessment.
3. *Other sources of training and information provided for faculty with regard to assessment.* The development of these materials indicates that the university is committed to provide a variety of training resources and material for faculty.
4. *Development of the various assessment related sites.* These websites can be used to provide transparency to the assessment processes at LSSU. The sites could also be used to report results from assessment efforts.
5. *Comprehensive plan for including all courses in the assessment reporting process.* LSSU has a tangible, measurable goal of including 25% of courses in Tracdat for each of the coming years.

Jim Sherohman agrees with the project strengths identified by Sandra. The website contains a lot of useful information, faculty and staff are provided substantial assistance, the professional development/training methods appear to be quite sophisticated, and the SGAC has developed rubrics to provide feedback to programs and academic support units on assessment practices. In addition, the team's detailed responses to reviewer feedback on the previous version of the project were quite helpful to the reviewers.

This document represents prompts given to the Academy Review Team as they read our Version 2 submission.

The reviewers noted appreciation for our careful consideration and response to their last comments – This column contains the LSSU narrative responses for our Version 3 submission due in August, 2013.

No response appears necessary to this section, comments are generally positive.

**What remains unclear or what questions do you still have about this work to assess and improve student learning?**

**LSSU RESPONSE**

Sandra asks these questions:

1. It is unclear how LSSU plans to link course-level and program-level data on student performance on learning outcomes to the university's mission/goals. Does the university have a set of learning outcomes? How does LSSU plan to measure those outcomes? How will LSSU determine the link between the university learning outcomes and the course-level and program-level learning outcomes?

2. It is not clear how LSSU plans to assess and report at the university level student performance on learning outcomes. The Assessment Plan Guide indicates the following:

*Programs are NOT required to follow a prescribed format for the collection and storage of their unique assessment data. Program assessment data, based on the PA-plan, should be maintained by the school for each program in any format which they choose, but it is strongly recommended to store data*

1. The institution continues to have an active, if not ardent, discussion on the subject of institutional learning outcomes. For the moment, the institutional general education (GE) outcomes (below) define these cross-disciplinary goals. There is some recognition that our system of addressing the general education outcomes distributional electives, a cafeteria plan where all-but-one category can be satisfied with a 100-level course, does not define student learning gains at the program or institutional level.

LSSU graduates will be able to:

(<http://www.lssu.edu/cmscatalog1213/gen-ed-requirements.php>)

- Analyze, develop, and produce rhetorically complex texts
- Communicate competently in a variety of contexts (Communication Outcomes)
- Analyze, evaluate, and explain human aesthetics and its historical development (Humanities Outcomes)
- View the world from cultural perspectives other than their own (Diversity Outcomes)
- Incorporate empirical evidence in the analysis of the causes and consequences of natural phenomena (Natural Science Outcomes)
- Think critically and analytically about the causes and consequences of human behavior (Social Science Outcomes)
- Analyze situations symbolically and quantitatively in order to make decisions and solve problems (Mathematics Outcomes)

We have been collecting and reporting on assessment data related to the general education outcomes:

(<http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/generaleducation.php>)

The committee has preliminary discussions on the Essential Learning Outcomes, Value Rubrics and the LEAP initiatives – but we are not close to any decisions or restructuring of the GE at this time.

We do have structures in place for the collection and reporting of general education outcomes through Tracdat. GE approved courses list the GE student learning

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*electronically on secure server, e.g. the O:/ drive or a Google website for each program.*

Without some consistency across the university in terms of data collection and storage, how will LSSU determine if students in the various programs meet the learning outcomes for the program? How will LSSU demonstrate student performance on learning outcomes? How will LSSU aggregate and report data on student performance on learning outcomes?

Jim adds this question:

In your response to the reviews of the previous version, you mention that, in using TracDat, faculty members often experience “discrepant events” that lead to moments of self-realization and enlightenment. Do you see growing acceptance or embracement of TracDat by the faculty as a result? Have you asked faculty members to evaluate how useful TracDat has been to them or their programs? If so, have

outcome(s) in addition to course-specific outcomes. Faculty were directed to make a priority of course-level assessment reporting on the GE outcomes from courses they taught during this first year of Tracdat implementation. Course-level assessment data is aggregated and combined with outcome-specific data through a Tracdat Assessment Unit for the General Education Program. GE Task Committees then compiled and reported on assessment findings from the courses, from student surveys and from the ETS proficiency profile tests. Furthermore, in Tracdat each program has a list of affiliated courses and the program-level reports aggregate course-level findings with other program-level assessments (graduate placement, etc).

To be frank, having the structures doesn't yet mean it is getting done across campus. Some GE Task Committees continue to issue reports which highlight either glaring discrepancy in student performance, or indicate that the assessments aren't aligned with the outcomes – without taking actions to address the issue. A frequent refrain in these reports is the need to collect additional data, and the belief that once we have longitudinal data from a single cohort of students (freshman-senior) that the data will be more meaningful and actionable. Reports from the GE task groups have been tabulated at:

<http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/generaleducation.php>

2. The Assessment Planning Guidelines circa early 2012 are indeed in contradiction with the University Assessment Plan submitted to the HLC in early 2013. (<http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/UniversityAssessmentPlan.php>). The nascent guidelines represented a transitional document which predates our implementation of Tracdat. The structure of Tracdat provides a common and consistently formatted platform which allows us to aggregate assessment findings and actions across groups of courses, across courses by category (e.g. General Education), within programs and across groups of programs (e.g. college level reporting), and to aggregate

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you noticed any trends in the data?

institutional assessment activities related to strategic planning and the functions of the administrative divisions. The reports are consistent and provide clear evidence of our use of assessment data to advance student learning and institutional effectiveness, or not. Assessment reports from Tracdat will be attached to our August update providing examples of the effective use of the system, and how the system can be used to highlight areas where greater attention and focus are needed.

3. The most effective faculty and staff interactions have been those with direct personal and contextually informed discussions. When someone is willing to discuss their course or unit assessment in a context arising through their own perceived need, they are open and receptive to the benefits both of an assessment focus, and to how the tools can make assessment documentation simpler. Frequently the barriers to engagement stem from a misconception brought to the assessment process – for example the social scientist’s compulsion for research quality data validation, or a scientist’s skepticism that the data isn’t quantitative enough to avoid manipulation. We continue to highlight discrepancies as the entry point into discussion. For example, 2010 ETS proficiency tests suggest that among students tested only 17% were proficient or marginally proficient in critical thinking – something completely discrepant with faculty perceptions of graduate readiness for employment and advanced study. The GE committee has not addressed these discrepant events.

**What are some critical things to which the institution should pay attention as it plans its work for the next six months?**

**LSSU RESPONSE**

Sandra notes that the overall Assessment Plan is off to a good start. As LSSU continues to develop this living document, here are some additional questions that should be considered and addressed:

1. How do you differentiate between outcomes and objectives?
2. What is the process for developing learning outcomes?
3. What is the process for approving learning outcomes?
4. What will be the plan for ongoing assessment beyond the initial data collection for your programs?

1. We have made our institutional focus to be the development of student learning outcomes and assessment methods. We have not spent much time in differentiating between the terms outcomes vs. objectives, and it has not come up as an issue in the last two years.
2. Course level learning outcomes are developed by the course instructors, and program level outcomes by the school faculty either as assessment teams or as a whole.
3. We agree in principle that there should be broad review and approval of all outcomes, methods, findings and actions by the faculty as a whole but we are not at that point yet in all our academic units. For the moment we have conveyed our commitment to the defining collection of any assessment data as more important than a specific process for vetting the outcomes.
4. We see that the point of collecting assessment data is to gather actionable evidence useful to guide student learning, and institutional effectiveness for administrative areas. To that end we continually stress that we must be generating evidence of our having used our assessment findings in these ways. Changes to curriculum review forms, and the level of scrutiny applied by the deans in approving those forms, has raised expectations. Schools are being asked for evidence to inform and guide their curriculum changes, and to expand on their assessment of the course as separate from how they will assess (evaluate) students in the course.

We recognize that we still have far to go in this. Our finance department implemented new software for budgeting which has no direct connection to or association with the strategic plan activities. Extensive and repeated discussion stressed the important connection between the two areas, but we are not yet seeing the assessment work of the academic divisions linked to their budget requests/allocations in a way that builds evidence of the use of assessment data.

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5. What are the guidelines for developing learning outcomes?  
The SMART approach is identified on the Assessment Plan Guide. It would be a good idea to include in the assessment plan.
6. Will there be allowances for specialized accreditation needs?
7. What will be the procedures for involving stakeholders both internal and external to the organization?
8. How will the data be reported?
9. How will results be communicated to faculty and other

5. We will continue to make available useful tools such as the SMART approach, but we are cautious in not wanting any specific tool or acronym to distract from the primary focus that is actually starting the assessment of student learning
6. Tracdat is very flexible in allowing nearly any field or term to be renamed or relabeled to fit accreditation specific language. We are working with each school individually, through the academic deans, to streamline the reporting requirements in Tracdat by maximizing overlap with the reporting requirements of the accrediting bodies. However, we hold that it is necessary that Tracdat be the institutional repository and central warehouse for assessment reporting, including strategic plan reporting, and as such accreditation reports are not a substitute for Tracdat reporting.
7. Schools and programs are individually responsible to identify, engage, and report with their respective stakeholders. These interactions should be reported, and the resulting actions documented, alongside all other program or school activities within Tracdat. Academic deans will have supervisory responsibility to monitor and assess this progress.
8. We have made a commitment to transparency in our assessment processes. We have developed public web pages to present the findings of our assessment activities to date, and anticipate refining and expanding these as additional data becomes available.
9. An example of our efforts to share assessment findings includes activities in the spring as we conducted a digital photo assessment project. Focused on institutional effectiveness and areas of pride (as compared to direct measures of student learning) randomly selected individuals were asked to contribute photos of what the university was doing well and doing less well.  
<http://www.lssu.edu/provost/documents/DigitalPhotoAssessmentProjectSpring2013.pdf> The results of this were presented at a campus forum and posted to the assessment web site. Other examples include program outcomes and assessment plans (<http://www.lssu.edu/sharedgovernance/assessment/SLOAP3.php>), general education assessment

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- stakeholders?
10. How will data be used to make improvements or changes?
11. How will you assess learning outcomes relative to the university mission/goals?

Jim agrees that these are important questions to consider at this stage of the project. Most likely, you already are considering some of them. Jim also adds this comment:

You mention that have worked with schools, programs, and units to modify TracDat structures to suit the assessment needs of the unit. Have your efforts been uniformly successful, or have

- (<http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/generaleducation.php>) and administrative unit assessment <http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/>.
10. There is some early limited evidence of the use of assessment data to inform and guide changes related to student learning outcomes. Examples, in the form of Tracdat reports, will be provided in the links and on our Academy web page: [http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/academy\\_project\\_home.php](http://www.lssu.edu/assessment/academy_project_home.php)
11. There is room for refinement in our institutional mission/vision and core value statements if the expectation is for them to be framed in the context of student learning outcomes. The current mission is so broadly defined that we face a challenge assessing learning outcomes relative to the mission/goals. The Provost is working with the Cabinet to develop a clearer institutional commitment to measureable learning outcomes.

Our mission at Lake Superior State University is to help students develop their full potential. We launch students on paths to rewarding careers and productive, satisfying lives. We serve the regional, state, national and global communities by contributing to the growth, dissemination, and application of knowledge.

We are quite sensitive to the potential pitfalls of having Tracdat become the focus of institutional assessment. With this in mind we frame all our discussions, especially with units which have external accreditation requirements, in terms of how the focus must be on student learning, and that to assist them in the reporting and collection of their own assessment data we are providing tools, training and other resources, including Tracdat. Now certainly our last accreditation visit made it clear that we need a centralized repository to hold evidence of institutional use of assessment data. Therefore, we are not allowing units to opt out of Tracdat reporting (irrespective of any evidence of passive resistance), but working with them to tailor Tracdat structures to streamline and comingle with the reporting needs of their accrediting bodies. Pockets of resistance, sometimes big cargo pockets, do exist particularly as faculty balance the increasing demands which come from across campus (new budgeting software (BudgetPAK), new financial aid reporting requirements (SAP), new student advising tracking software (MAP-works), along with Tracdat,

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you noticed pockets of resistance? Have programs with specialized accreditation concluded that their assessment needs can best be handled through TracDat? If your efforts are going smoothly, congratulations! Other institutions may be interested in learning how you accomplished this. If there have been some rough spots, where have they been, why have they occurred, how did you respond, and how effective were these responses? In general, I encourage you keep track of what is working, what is not, and why.

MathCAD updates, etc, add to the faculty load outside of classroom, lab and research.

**What are some other possibilities or resources that might contribute to the success of this project? For instance, can you suggest resources such as books, benchmarks, instruments, models, and processes?**

**LSSU RESPONSE**

Sandra has no additional comments here. Jim offers this suggestion:

You believe that it may be difficult to maintain the energy and commitment of the faculty due to the building of assessment responsibilities at the course and program levels. This will be easier to accomplish if faculty members see the work they are doing in assessment as benefiting themselves and their programs, not just as something they do for the institution. Your description of what you do at faculty development workshops and training events indicates that you are on the right track in this regard. Perhaps you have observed some success stories that you could use to energize the faculty. On a broader level, you may want to consider whether it would be feasible to make changes in the institutional reward system that would provide incentives for faculty members to allocate more of their scarce time to assessment work.

Faculty from the School of Physical Sciences have been using assessment data to evaluate changes to programs in their area. The implementation of an applied geographic information sciences (AGIS) program in 2008 was expected to generate much student interest, based on the assessment of student learning and interest in the GIS courses that were offered at the university at that time. Evaluation of the program this spring 2013 by the school faculty indicated that, while there was still student interest in the specific GIS courses and the GIS skills, very few students were enrolled in the specific AGIS program and some of the upper level GIS courses that were specifically created for the new program. Further assessment showed that most students were taking specific GIS courses to gain skills that are useful to other disciplines. For example, fisheries and wildlife students were taking GIS classes to help them with mapping fish and wildlife populations; biology (ecology) students were taking GIS classes to help with tracking land use; and environmental science students were utilizing GIS classes to map storm water and sewage systems. The students were not particularly interested in majoring in the AGIS program, but were utilizing the GIS skills within other majors. Faculty realized through this assessment that the resources that were going into maintaining the AGIS program were resources that could be shifted and used in the other successful programs. The AGIS degree was deleted through curriculum change this spring 2013.

