Introduction

Gathering evidence of academic accomplishment—the knowledge, skills, and competencies students gain as a result of their college experience—is a continuous process. It occurs at various levels and across many dimensions, and the findings are intended to enable institutions to make improvements, assess the impact of changes in academic programs, and provide evidence of learning outcomes to those to whom they are accountable. The Transparency Framework addresses the question: How might these efforts be made more visible? One avenue adopted by many campuses is to share relevant information about student learning on the institutional website.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has developed a Transparency Framework to support institutions in sharing evidence of student learning on and off campus. The Framework is based on a review of institutional websites and identifies six key components of student learning assessment. Institutions may use the Framework to examine their institutional websites to gauge the extent to which evidence of student accomplishment is readily accessible and potentially useful and meaningful to the intended audience. Each section of the Framework suggests a component of student learning assessment that may be of interest to specific audiences and outlines opportunities to advance public understanding.

The Framework also incorporates basic premises about website communication. For instance, information placed on websites should be meaningful and understandable to multiple audiences. To effectively communicate with various audiences, the website should enable users to provide feedback or offer comments on the posted material. Just as making student learning outcomes more transparent is a work in progress, so is this Framework. As more institutions make their assessment efforts accessible and post meaningful evidence of student learning, we will update the Transparency Framework using experience from the field.

Transparency Framework

The Framework outlines components of a transparent institutional website in terms of student learning. Institutions should take into account the website’s purpose, structure, intended audiences, capacity of technology staff, and other available resources when reviewing the components. Information on student learning can and should be presented in language that is understandable by specific and multiple audiences, widely available across the website, updated regularly, receptive to feedback, and accessible by multiple web browsers and in various Internet speeds. A fully transparent website might well contain information about the following six components:

- Student learning outcomes statements
- Assessment plans
- Assessment resources
- Current assessment activities
- Evidence of student learning
- Use of student learning evidence

How to use the Transparency Framework

The Framework is not a checklist to be followed, but rather a guide to suggest priorities and possibilities with an eye toward communicating meaningful information about student learning that will be useful to various audiences. Our review of institutional website transparency suggests that the degree of transparency can be viewed as a continuum from not transparent to transparent.

Issues of transparency can be found in the following NILOA reports:


See the NILOA website for clear definitions of Transparency, Audiences, Not Transparent, and Transparent.

2 See the NILOA website for clear definitions of Transparency, Audiences, Not Transparent, and Transparent.
Transparency Framework: Components of Student Learning Assessment

**Student Learning Outcomes Statements**

Student learning outcomes statements clearly state the expected knowledge, skills, attributes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire at an institution of higher education.3

Transparent student learning outcomes statements are:
- Specific to institutional level and/or program level
- Clearly expressed and understandable by multiple audiences, including students
- Prominently posted or linked to multiple places across the website
- Updated regularly to reflect current outcomes
- Receptive to feedback or comments on the quality and utility of the information provided

**Assessment Plans**

Campus plans for gathering evidence of student learning might include institution-wide or program specific approaches that convey how student learning will be assessed, the data collection tools and approaches that will be used, and the timeline for implementation.

Transparent assessment plans are:
- Will be used, and the timeline for collection tools and approaches that convey how student learning will be assessed, the data
- Inclusive of assessment measures
- Downloaded or accessed in a timely fashion by multiple web browsers and Internet download speeds
- Updated regularly to reflect current outcomes
- Receptive to feedback or comments on the quality and utility of the information provided

**Current Assessment Activities**

Current assessment activities include information on a full range of projects and activities recently completed or currently underway to gauge student learning, make improvements, or respond to accountability interests.

Transparent current assessment activities are:
- Described and illustrated to clarify how a particular assessment activity is used and how it relates to the institutional mission and vision
- Downloaded or accessed in a timely fashion by multiple web browsers
- Updated regularly to reflect current activities
- Focused on improvement of student performance and institutional processes through the use of evidence
- Inclusive of next steps
- Clearly stated in language that is understandable for specific and multiple audiences
- Inclusive of examples of documented use of assessment results and information
- Prominently posted or linked to in multiple places across the website
- Updated regularly to reflect current activities
- Receptive to feedback on selected courses of action by having a person’s contact information or a form to send feedback

**Use of Student Learning Evidence**

This component represents the extent to which evidence of student learning is used to identify areas where changes in policies and practices may need to be made.

Transparent use of student learning evidence are:
- Targeted to a particular audience such as faculty, staff, administrators, students, families or governing board members
- Inclusive of examples of documented use of assessment results and information
- Prominently posted or linked to in multiple places across the website
- Updated regularly to reflect current activities
- Receptive to feedback on selected courses of action by having a person’s contact information or a form to send feedback

**Evidence of Student Learning**

Evidence of student learning includes results of assessment activities. This may include evidence of indirect (e.g. surveys) and direct (e.g. portfolio) student learning as well as institutional performance indicators (e.g. licensure pass rate).

Transparent evidence of student learning is:
- Explained, analyzed, and interpreted in lay person’s language
- Contextualized to clarify what the results mean to the institution and to student learning
- Presented using both text and graphics when appropriate
- Disseminated and summarized for different groups, cohorts of students, and compared with peer institutions or programs if appropriate
- Prominently posted or linked to in multiple places across the website
- Updated regularly to reflect current results
- Receptive to feedback on the meaning and interpretation of the evidence