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Assessment *in* Practice

Bringing the Student Voice to Transparency: One Model and Three Tools

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May 2020

THE CENTRALITY OF THE STUDENT VOICE TO THE BSU TRANSPARENCY PROJECT INITIATIVE

The Bridgewater State University (BSU) Transparency Project started in 2017 with the purpose of promoting and enhancing transparency¹ of program learning outcomes for current and prospective students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Led by the graduate assistant in the Office of Assessment, each of the three graduate assistants who participated in the Transparency Project started by knowing very little, if anything, about learning outcomes, including the learning outcomes for their own programs.² While our current graduate assistant was learning about the work of the Office of Assessment at BSU, she looked at her own learning outcomes for her master's program and pinned them above her desk to remind and guide her in her learning. In her second of three semesters, she realized that one of the learning outcomes is not applicable for her area of concentration within her program of study, although, there is no indication that it does not apply. This realization helped her discover the importance and urgency of program learning outcomes transparency in empowering the student to take charge of their own learning and success. During her time as a graduate assistant in the BSU Office of Assessment, she has leveraged her voice as a student with deans, the Academic Affairs Assessment Council, on-campus presentations, and poster presentations at regional conferences to share the importance and value of program learning outcomes for students. Her audience is listening and acting. She has been integral in developing the BSU Transparency Project model from which we share three tools for other campuses to use and adapt.

¹ BSU's definition of transparency: Clearly visible to current and prospective students, faculty, staff, and external stakeholders. Transparency = Findable!

² Bridgewater State University is a large comprehensive state university located in southeastern Massachusetts. All three of our graduate students are pursuing careers in education or allied health studies and are not preparing for careers as assessment professionals.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE BSU TRANSPARENCY PROJECT INITIATIVE

Two things stimulated the jumpstart of the BSU Transparency Project. During the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) ten-year accreditation review of BSU in 2011-2012, it became evident that there was a lack of transparency of program learning outcomes except for programs with specialized accreditation that either used the accrediting body's already transparent outcomes, or were required to have external transparency of their learning outcomes as a component for reaccreditation (e.g., Social Work). This deficiency generated a campus mandate in 2012 that all programs must develop learning outcomes if there were none. The assessment field was also rapidly growing and ramping up the need for transparency with the emergence of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) Transparency Framework in 2011. Other campuses were further ahead; we were not.

The student voice grounds the work as an indisputable messenger to the institution and to the assessment staff in guiding the direction of transparency.

As a result, the BSU Transparency Project began in 2015 as an outgrowth of the Office of Assessment review of annual assessment reports. The current two staff members, Director and Assistant Director, developed a systematic review process for each degree program, including a checklist for learning outcomes:

- Do they exist?
- Are they on the program's internal and external facing websites?
- Can prospective students see them?
- Are they in department materials, such as advising guides and newsletters?

This data would be used as evidence in the 2017 interim report for NECHE in response to the 2012 deficiency in transparency of program learning outcomes.

In 2017, the first student to work in the Office of Assessment contributed to the Transparency Project by assisting in the development of a web page for the office to create a centralized database in which all learning outcomes were visible by program. This page was (and still is) only visible to those affiliated with the institution. The next student developed campus-wide strategies for increasing visibility of learning outcomes and shared these strategies with our Academic Affairs Assessment Council and at a regional assessment conference. In collaboration with the Director and Assistant Director, the current graduate assistant developed the work into a model that she has presented on campus, at regional assessment conferences, and at the December 2019 NECHE annual meeting. The BSU Transparency Project is aligned to meet NECHE Standards as we prepare for our 10-year review in fall 2022. We are now making great strides in having program learning outcomes visible to all.

REFLECTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Student Voice: The student voice makes the need for transparency real. Institutional staff can design and implement ways to reach faculty and administrators on a variety of issues, but when the student asks, "Where are the learning outcomes for my program and why can't I find them?" the reaction is action. The three student graduate assistants for the office have also learned the importance of assessment in general, and the value of knowing the learning outcomes for their own programs. One commented, "I didn't know what I needed

to know because no one told me.” The student voice grounds the work as an indisputable messenger to the institution and to the assessment staff in guiding the direction of transparency. The current student assistant found the hot spot in her work directly with the college deans who have the power and influence to promote and mandate increased visibility and transparency of outcomes. The student is not simply a voice for assessment, but the voice of equity.

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“CHEQUITY” POINTS FOR EMPOWERING THE STUDENT VOICE: KEY TRANSITION POINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Faculty and staff often rely on their own assumptions about what students know, how they learn, connections they make from the outcomes to their major, how they navigate college, and where to get resources. Institutions can empower the student voice by making outcomes visible everywhere connections can be made. We see these “chequity” points, which we consider check points for equity, as places where students can not only review program learning outcomes to verify that their degree program is a good match but also a place where others can reinforce the integration and application of the program learning outcomes with the student.

- Program learning outcomes added to recruiting materials for all academic degree programs
- Learning outcomes reinforced during orientation for first-year and transfer students
- Learning outcomes incorporated during initial advising upon beginning at the institution
- Learning outcomes included in syllabi and assignments in required courses for the major
- Learning outcomes incorporated during regular advising
- Learning outcomes included where relevant in high-impact practices and co-curricular programs

“Chequity” points provide repeated exposure for students to converse on and engage with the learning outcomes, especially for those who may not have the language or privilege to navigate programmatic learning on their own.

The Staff: The assessment staff inherently understand the value of student learning outcomes transparency for degree programs, but often use assessment jargon that is part of their daily language. In the development of the BSU Transparency Project, it became clear that assessment jargon was one of many potential barriers to increasing transparency. What is visibility? How is it different from transparency? In addition, there needs to be a multi-tiered and multiple exposure approach to the work: a teaching relationship to the campus. The assessment staff have witnessed a gradual awakening of the deans’ own attunement to the importance of visibility for increased student success through the student voice.

Collaboration: In the development of the Transparency Project model and related resources, the collaboration with deans and other administrative units was and remains essential. In the summer of 2019, with the cooperation of the BSU Registrar's Office, all degree program learning outcomes were added to the **University Catalog**, making the outcomes public. Student presentations at senior level academic affairs meetings helped clarify the need for transparency of student learning outcomes in marketing and admissions work for programs, and in student support areas such as academic advising and new student orientation. As a direct result of the student voice in promoting transparency of learning outcomes as an issue of equity, the deans have learned to advocate for transparency as a college-level initiative and in cross-campus collaborations where applicable (e.g., graduate level educational programs and the Core Curriculum Steering Committee). Using a data-informed approach resulting from the Office of Assessment's annual review of learning outcomes, collaboration across campus has increased the urgency of promoting and mandating visibility of program learning outcomes, especially for students.

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TOOLS

1. **Bridgewater State University (BSU)'s Transparency Framework**, an adaptation of the NILOA Transparency Framework (2011), outlines the steps within a pyramid upon which to build in achieving full transparency and saturation across and beyond campus (see Figure 1).

BSU Transparency Framework

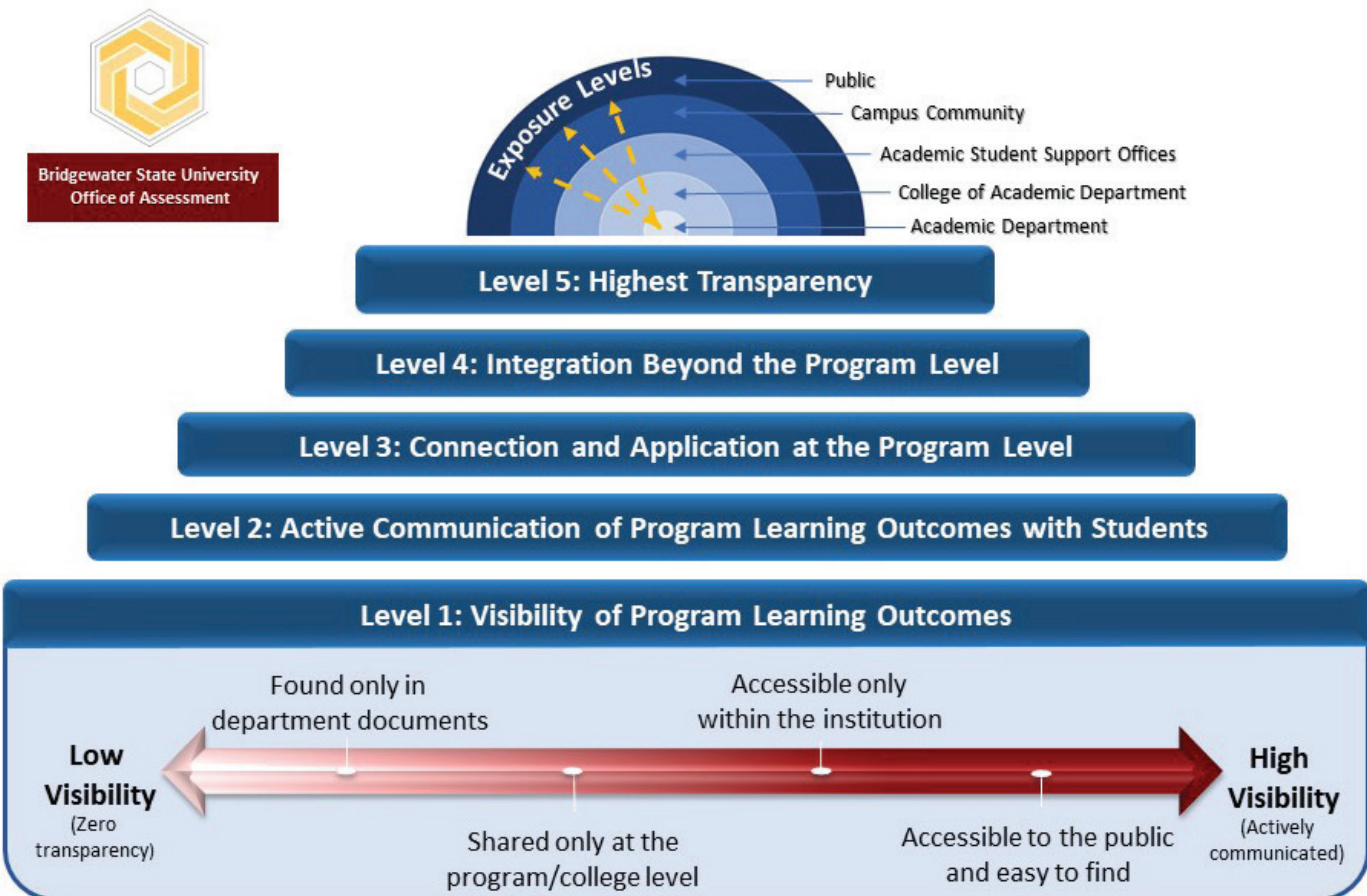


Figure 1. Bridgewater State University's Transparency Framework

We encourage campuses to locate where they are on the visibility continuum and identify campus barriers to transparency before using the next two tools that identify strategies for promoting transparency. Click [here](#) for a list of potential barriers.

We also encourage you to take our national survey found [here](#) to contribute to research pertaining to perceptions of the visibility and understandability of learning outcomes on higher education campuses and help identify steps you can take to increase transparency on your campus.

- 2. Campus-Wide Strategies for Promoting Transparency of Program Learning Outcomes.** As a result of our BSU transparency work, we developed a list of campus-wide strategies by institutional role ([Appendix A](#)). This tool helps academic and other institutional leaders identify where they can promote transparency of program learning outcomes through their campus lens at their particular level. Everyone, beginning with the President, who can underscore the importance of stating program learning outcomes as an institutional priority, to the student who can advocate for their own learning by asking for clarification of outcomes when the connection to current learning and future career is unclear, can contribute toward promoting transparency.
- 3. Departmental Strategies for Increasing Transparency of Program Learning Outcomes** is a tool we designed specifically for academic departmental use by program chairs and faculty individually and in collaboration with other academic and co-curricular support systems ([Appendix B](#)). For example, individual departments can collaborate with academic support offices such as transfer services to ensure program learning outcomes are included in transfer student orientation materials.

As we continue to expand our transparency work, students remain critical team members to ensure the focus is on student learning. We are fortunate to have had students as part of our staff. We also thank NILOA for the inspiration to use their Transparency Framework model which, along with the resources we have provided above, we hope others will use, modify, and share to increase equity using the student voice.

REFERENCES

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (2011). *Transparency framework*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

Ouellette, C., Boeing Bratton, J., & Slotnick, R. C., (2020). Improving academic learning and success through transparency: A student's perspective. In *BSU transparency project reports and publications*. Paper 1. Retrieved from <https://vc.bridgew.edu/trans-proj/1>

Supported by a data-informed approach, collaboration across campus has increased the urgency of promoting and mandating visibility of program learning outcomes, especially for students.

Appendix A: Bridgewater State University's Campus-Wide Strategies for Promoting Transparency of Program Learning Outcomes



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CAMPUS-WIDE STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING TRANSPARENCY OF PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES (PLOs)

BSU Office of Assessment

President

- Underscore importance of stating PLOs as an institutional priority
- Liaise with board of trustees or governing body regarding the importance of making PLOs visible to students

Provost/Chief Academic Officer

- Set the campus policy on making PLOs publicly available
- Reinforce importance of program learning outcomes with all campus stakeholders whenever possible

Dean

- Develop college expectations and policies for transparency; make college PLOs publicly available
- Review annual assessment reports & note where departments publish PLOs; acknowledge best-practice models
- Support department work on linking PLOs with course-level outcomes
- Encourage students to connect PLOs to their own career goals at student orientations and campus events

Department (Chair, Curriculum Committee, Assessment Committee)

- Prioritize development and adoption of PLOs; make public on syllabi and department websites
- Align PLOs with skills and careers; advertise alumni/student success stories on marketing materials
- Work with faculty in department meetings and with part-time faculty to ensure they know the PLOs
- Involve students in publicizing PLOs, e.g., newsletters and other department marketing materials with students
- Survey current students and alumni and invite them to share usefulness of PLOs
- Consider feedback from the institution's office of assessment on how to improve PLO transparency

Faculty

- Include relevant PLOs and course outcomes on syllabi; explicitly reinforce in assignments and grading rubric
- Connect PLOs to life beyond classroom; place relevant program outcomes on advising sheets
- Empower and invite students to question PLOs in the context of classroom learning activities
- Connect assessment activities in discipline to a faculty research presentation or scholarly publication

Student

- Request PLOs when not provided; ask for clarification of outcomes when connection to assignment is unclear
- Ask department chairs and professors for examples of what students can do with careers in their program of study
- Have student government association advocate for PLO transparency for all students in academic programs

Academic Affairs Assessment Advisory Council or Committee

- Set institutional definition of PLO transparency; advocate for faculty support and action
- Provide key talking points on PLO transparency for President, Provost/Chief Academic Officer, and Deans

Assessment Office

- Develop transparency resources for faculty, staff, and students
- Continue to ask for evidence of transparency
- Provide feedback to campus on progress in institutional transparency
- Support the faculty, deans, and provost in advancing PLO transparency goals related to the BSU strategic plan

Who else?

- Consider academic support centers and services to ensure that PLO's are on relevant program materials

Appendix B: Bridgewater State University's Departmental Strategies for Increasing Transparency of Program Learning Outcomes



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DEPARTMENTAL STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING TRANSPARENCY OF PROGRAM LEARNING OUTCOMES (PLOs)

BSU Office of Assessment (OA)

Department/Program

- Discuss the importance and value of PLOs for students at department meetings
- Provide opportunities for students to give feedback on clarity and relevance of PLOs
- Post learning outcomes prominently on the department intranet site
- Review PLOs annually for accuracy; update on sites as necessary
- Collaborate and communicate with other departments and offices to increase transparency
- Communicate with departmental advisory boards where applicable

Faculty

- Align PLOs with course outcomes
- Include PLOs on syllabi
- Reinforce PLO connection in key assignments and grading rubrics
- Include PLOs in advising materials and clarify relevance to degree during advising sessions

In Collaboration with the Library

- Partner with library to increase PLO transparency

In Collaboration with Academic Support Services/Academic Advisors

- Encourage advisors to link PLOs to the career goals of students
- Outreach to ensure that PLOs are included on advising materials and discussed during meetings

In Collaboration with Transfer Service Offices

- Collaborate to confirm PLOs are included in transfer student orientation materials

In Collaboration with New Student and Family Programs

- Collaborate to confirm PLOs are included in first year and transfer student orientation materials

In Collaboration with Career Services

- Collaborate to encourage PLO inclusion in career services materials involving discussions on choice of a major, potential career, graduate school planning, and job search strategies

In Collaboration with Marketing and Communications

- Partner to have outcomes posted on the extranet site if necessary
- Manage branding of department for consistent, clear, and current messaging
- Review prospective student marketing materials to ensure inclusion of PLOs
- Collaborate to highlight student success stories

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008, and is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.

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