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# Portland State University: General Education and Equitable Assessment

Rowanna L. Carpenter  
*Portland State University, carpenterr@pdx.edu*

Vicki Reitenauer  
*Portland State University, vicr@pdx.edu*

Aimee Shattuck  
*Portland State University*

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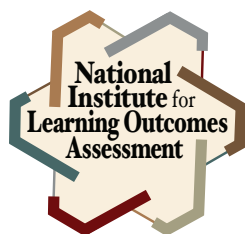
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June 2020

# Portland State University: General Education and Equitable Assessment

Rowanna Carpenter, Vicki Reitenauer,  
& Aimee Shattuck



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[Portland State University](#) is not only Portland, Oregon’s public research university, but a place of innovation and engagement. Portland State offers over 200 degree programs, and is very engaged in community development as it sits in the heart of downtown. Originally founded in 1946 to serve returning World War II veterans, Portland State has “[grown into Oregon’s most diverse urban public research university with 26,000 students.](#)” Of the [students served](#), 25% are students with children, 37% are first-generation, 45% receive Pell grants, and 48% are students of color. [Espoused values](#) of the university include the promotion of access, inclusion, and equity as pillars of excellence alongside a commitment to curiosity, collaboration, stewardship, and sustainability.

For Portland State University, equitable assessment practice includes space for all students and faculty to participate in ways that are meaningful to them and that are grounded in an appreciation of their strengths and in the understanding that it is assessment’s job to find ways to support them in improvement.

Equitable assessment practice means that students have the opportunity to show their learning in multiple ways, not just through high stakes standardized tests. At its best, equitable assessment processes consider multiple pieces of evidence of student learning, ideally curated by the student so that their understanding of their learning is part of the assessment process. Equitable assessment seeks to understand whether there are groups of students who may be underserved by the institution and takes into account multiple intersecting identities whenever possible.

Equitable assessment practices invite all faculty, regardless of rank, into conversation about student learning and educational practices, and values those perspectives as equally relevant to improvement. At the heart of equitable assessment is the practice of critical reflection, on the part of students, faculty, and educational programs.

We have to be open at an individual and institutional level to conversations that point out places where we need to do a better job of educating and serving all our students. Sometimes that means adopting principles of universal design, because not all students are able to show their learning in the same way. Sometimes that means finding ways to support students who are struggling. Sometimes it means changing assessment practices to be more open and inclusive of faculty or student populations.

## General Education

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In University Studies at Portland State University, we have made a very intentional effort to pair assessment and faculty support efforts so that faculty are willing to engage in critical reflection about

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their own practice and in conversation about who our students are and how we can best serve them. As the signature general education program at Portland State, we serve almost all undergraduates at the university. We employ a wide range of assessment efforts in order to understand our students' learning and experiences as they move through our program. Our current assessment practices do not entirely fulfill our vision of equitable assessment, but we do exemplify these practices in a number of ways. For example, within general education program assessment at both freshmen and senior levels, students are invited to demonstrate their learning in activities that move them beyond the classroom. We incorporate community-based learning into all of those courses, which, while not strictly co-curricular, encourages students to make connections across the classroom and community spaces. In addition, all students in our freshmen and sophomore general education courses are supported by a peer mentor, a co-curricular aspect of our program. The mentors are critical to our students' development and to their exploration and growth related to our learning goals. Several examples of how equitable assessment is implemented in general education include the following:

- In our year-long freshman course, students assemble and produce electronic portfolios which includes a reflection on the year and a set of assignments related to our learning goals. Students can include any of their assignments from the course as evidence of their learning, and, during review of the freshman eportfolios, academic advisers are invited to participate. Results from this assessment can be disaggregated by student subgroup in order to reveal specific areas we may need to improve. Student choice in evidence selection and disaggregation support equitable assessment efforts.
- In our freshmen eportfolios, many instructors invite students to include evidence external to the classroom related to the learning goals of the program. For example, students have provided information about involvement in our Student Community Engagement Center as evidence of their learning and growth related to our general education goal of “Ethics, Agency, and Community.” In this way we are blurring the lines between academic and student affairs, recognizing that powerful learning experiences happen in both spaces and that students should be encouraged to see the links across the two.
- At the sophomore and senior levels of our program, we use a course eportfolio assessment process, engaging faculty in collegial conversations and review of course portfolios which include syllabi, assignment instructions, and student responses to the assignment. This process includes faculty across ranks and statuses providing feedback to each other and the program. A critical component of this process is the faculty conversation, which allows for student work to be read within the context of the overall course. Materials are still reviewed using a rubric, providing summative programmatic feedback, but the process is equitable for the faculty involved, valuing their contributions and providing feedback and support regardless of rank.
- The Student Activities and Leadership Program at Portland State has adapted the University Studies' eportfolio approach in order to assess student learning in their student leadership fellows program. During the year-long program, students reflect on their leadership experiences and create an eportfolio which represents those experiences relative to the program's learning outcomes. Students of color represent a larger proportion of student leaders compared to the overall undergraduate population at Portland State.

- University Studies partners with the Think College Inclusion Oregon grant which supports students experiencing intellectual disabilities to enroll and participate in college coursework leading to a pre-baccalaureate certificate. Their work with our faculty has enhanced our understanding of Universal Design for Learning and has meant that our assessment is more inclusive as a result.

## **Future Directions**

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The [general education learning goal](#) formerly known as “Appreciation of the Diversity of the Human Experience” was revised in 2017 into our new “Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice” goal. This revision has given our program and our assessment efforts new urgency around equity in assessment. Not only are we assessing our students’ learning related to our new learning goal, we are taking this opportunity to examine our assessment and other practices more closely to be sure they are also within the spirit of the new goal.

We started a program in which undergraduate students are trained to do focus groups with other undergraduates, so that we are adding authentic student feedback to our assessment conversations. For example, this year, we convened focus groups to investigate student experiences with our “Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice” learning goal. We will include that focus group feedback alongside our review of student portfolios for the same learning goal when we present the data back to faculty. This has meant a new focus on student voices and involvement in assessment as well as a renewed attention to processes in which faculty are invited to, participate in, and benefit from, our assessment and faculty support efforts.

## **Lessons Learned That Can Inform Practice at Other Institutions**

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In order for faculty to have meaningful conversations about their students and their practice in the classroom, which often involve being vulnerable and naming challenges, we are explicit about drawing a line between assessment for learning and improvement and faculty evaluation related to employment. In practice this means that we share data in the aggregate so that individual courses are not identifiable. This is particularly critical with course portfolio reviews. We also offer faculty an invitation rather than a mandate to participate in assessment conversations.

Because adjunct faculty teach the majority of our courses at some levels of the program, assessment conversations will not be meaningful and improvement will be unlikely if we do not include them. In order to be as inclusive and equitable as possible, we pay adjuncts for their participation as reviewers in our assessment processes. When we convene for faculty conversations about assessment findings, we invite and welcome faculty of all ranks and create spaces that value the variety of skills and expertise that our faculty bring.

University Studies has used student portfolios to assess student learning since its founding 25 years ago and moved to eportfolios in the early 2000s. These artifacts, where students reflect on and curate evidence of their learning, can be difficult for reviewers to rate (i.e., how do you consider a podcast in relation to an artist’s statement in relation to a research paper?), but they allow for the broadest range of student expressions of learning. Eportfolio review, then, is a learning experience for reviewers, who often find examples of assignments and approaches to our learning goals that they had never thought of, further expanding the inclusiveness of our curriculum. The eportfolio review process, like all aspects of assessment in University Studies, both draws from and reinforces the culture of genuine collaboration

among faculty, allowing us to actively build a resilient learning community of practitioners who are willing to take the risks to engage in assessment as an authentic, equitable endeavor.

In order to understand our students, we collect survey data along with reviews of student work and are able to connect those data to each other and to institutional data to gather a complex picture of our students' experiences and learning outcomes. We can then disaggregate the data to determine whether there are particular students who may be underserved. Because we serve 90% of the institution's undergraduates, we have a broad view of our students, and we share data and collaborate with many other areas on campus, including Residence Life, the School of Business, Institutional Research, and the student success initiative [Students First](#).

### **Institutional Resources**

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University Studies Assessment Reports: <https://www.pdx.edu/unst/university-studies-assessment-reports>

University Studies Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice Rubric: <https://www.pdx.edu/unst/sites/www.pdx.edu.unst/files/Media%20Root/University%20Studies%20Diversity%2C%20Equity%2C%20and%20Social%20Justice%20Rubric%20-%206.12.2019-%20Google%20Docs.pdf>

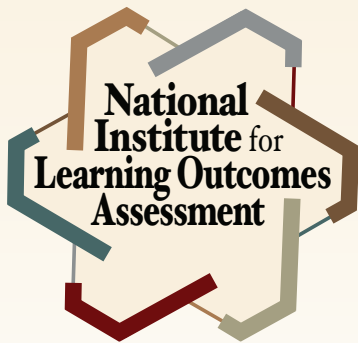
Student Affairs and Leadership Programs Social Justice Rubric: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gxA30Is1BNabdIDaisnPKtH3HBvYrykdzTcYPk9HAQo/edit?usp=sharing>

Leadership Fellows Assessment Report: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1I17hxouCJpYUW9aWmDzMzQjNByjCBpUD/view?usp=sharing>

Student Affairs and Leadership Programs Assessment and Reports: <https://www.pdx.edu/student-leadership/assessments-and-reports>

## Equity Case Studies

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), and Campus Labs, in collaboration with the field of assessment in higher education, have undertaken a series of case studies focused on providing short, instructive examples focused on equitable approaches to assess student learning. The cases provide lessons learned that are widely applicable, and emphasize collaboration across the institution, specifically between academic and student affairs.



NILOA is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning. NILOA supports institutions in designing learning experiences and assessment approaches that strengthen the experience of diverse learners within a variety of institutional contexts. NILOA works in partnership with a broad range of organizations and provides technical assistance and research support to various projects focused on learning throughout the U.S. and internationally. Learn more at [www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org).



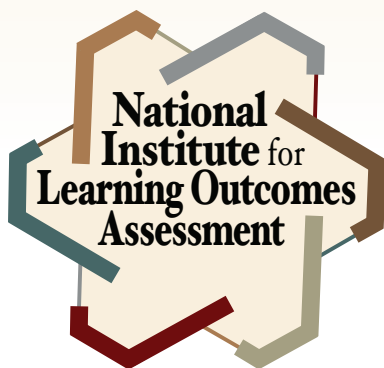
Leading the way for over 40 years, CAS is a consortium of professional associations in higher education that promotes the use of its professional standards for the development, assessment, and improvement of quality student learning, programs, and services. CAS reflects good practices and promotes intra-campus collaboration among its over 40 collaborating professional associations representing over 115,000 professionals in higher education. Learn more at [www.cas.edu](http://www.cas.edu).



Campus Labs offers integrated software and cloud-based assessment tools for higher education. Their work focuses on empowering and transforming colleges and universities through the use of strategic data insights. Campus Labs offers a comprehensive set of solutions for over 1,400 Member Campuses. Learn more at [www.campuslabs.com](http://www.campuslabs.com).

## National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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**For more information, please contact:**

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
51 Gerty Drive,  
Suite 196 CRC, MC-672  
Champaign, IL 61820

[learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://learningoutcomesassessment.org)  
[niloa@education.illinois.edu](mailto:niloa@education.illinois.edu)

# Equity Case Study

[www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/equity](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/equity)