

Northwestern University's Strategic Framework for Assessment: 2025–2035

Mission

Anchored in Northwestern University's core values, assessment is a catalyst for educational transformation and innovation. Our faculty- and student-centered approach to assessment honors the local cultures within our schools, colleges, and co-curricular units, with processes guided by the leadership of the Assessment and Accreditation Council and the expertise of the Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching.

We leverage the strength of Northwestern's thriving culture of inquiry and interdisciplinary collaboration by engaging faculty, staff, and administrators in systematized and sustainable assessment practices that draw evidence from multiple perspectives to illuminate student learning and drive continuous improvement. Through this collective effort, assessment advances Northwestern's institutional priority to deliver an outstanding educational experience for all students.

Vision

Assessment serves as a tool for elevating the excellence of Northwestern's curricular and co-curricular programs, empowering every student with learning experiences to achieve lasting success.

Core Values

The Searle Center has developed, and the Council has endorsed, a scholarly approach to assessment rooted in shared curiosity and grounded in a set of core values.

Together, we build capacity for educators to elevate student learning across curricular and co-curricular programs with assessment practices that are:

- **Student-Centered:** Assessment begins with a deep respect for students' individual identities, backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations. We seek to understand how students learn and use those insights to create inclusive, engaging, and transformative learning environments.
- **Equitable:** Equitable assessment practices broaden the range of perspectives considered in the assessment process, removing barriers to student success. We promote accessible learning opportunities for *all* students.
- **Authentic:** Assessment is meaningful, relevant, and reflects real-world learning. We embrace a wide range of methods that align with disciplinary approaches and provide actionable insights for educators and students alike.

And we build capacity for colleagues to advance Northwestern University's Strategic Framework for Assessment with assessment processes that are:

- **Reflective:** Our assessment processes are based on a continuous improvement cycle where evidence drives action for ongoing learning and meaningful change. We actively invest in professional development, collaborative learning communities, and reflective processes.
- **Localized:** Our assessment processes embrace a decentralized model that allows programs and schools to tailor assessment strategies to their unique teaching and learning contexts. We encourage flexibility and innovation while maintaining coherence through shared institutional goals and support.
- **Empathetic:** Our assessment processes are grounded in trust—built through non-judgmental listening and understanding throughout the assessment process. We are committed to being relational, holistic, context-aware, and supportive of meaningful growth.

Together, these values contribute to fostering a culture of assessment that empowers educators, supports students, and strengthens the University's mission.

Timelines and Targets

The commitments expressed in our mission, vision, and values align with Criterion 3.E. from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) standards: "The institution improves the quality of educational programs based on its assessment of student learning." As we move toward our next comprehensive evaluation for accreditation in 2034-35, we have built structured opportunities for reflection in years 4 and 10.

To advance systematized assessment of student learning, we will leverage the [Assessment Gallery](#) as a public-facing online platform for tracking and amplifying the intentional, iterative work of curricular and co-curricular programs across Northwestern. Each year, we invite programs (majors, minors, certificates, graduate and professional degrees, and co-curricular initiatives) to share updates on their stage in the assessment cycle, the artifacts they have developed or revised to support assessment, what they have learned about students' achievement of program learning outcomes, and how those insights are informing curricular or programmatic change. By making this work visible and searchable, the Assessment Gallery promotes transparency, shared learning, and accountability, while serving as a rich source of inspiration and practical examples of effective, evidence-based assessment practices that strengthen student learning across the institution.

Our baseline as we enter the next ten years of assessment work consists of 41 Assessment Gallery submissions received, with 46% of the participating programs engaged in the most advanced stage of the assessment cycle, where they are actively using assessment data to identify and implement curricular changes.



Our Assessment Cycle is iterative and values-driven. It is a continuous process designed to systematically identify, measure, and improve student learning outcomes, consisting of five interconnected stages that guide meaningful curricular improvements:

1. (Re)define learning outcomes
2. (Re)design learning outcome assessment methods
3. Map learning outcomes to curriculum
4. Gather & analyze evidence
5. Identify & implement changes

The Council has set differentiated targets for Year 4 and Year 10 that recognize the scope of this work and the need for a phased, sustainable approach to assessment with intentional capacity-building. Progress toward these targets will be demonstrated through evidence of student learning submitted to the Assessment Gallery.

By Year 4 (2028–29)

- **Target 1:** Majority of programs—including majors, minors, certificates, graduate and professional degrees, and co-curricular initiatives—will have clearly defined learning outcomes.
- **Target 2:** Programs that have completed a full assessment cycle will have implemented curricular or programmatic changes.

By year 10 (2034-35)

- **Target 3:** All programs will have completed at least one full assessment cycle: (re)defining learning outcomes, (re)designing assessment methods, mapping outcomes to curriculum, gathering and analyzing evidence, and identifying and implementing changes.
- **Target 4:** All schools/colleges/units will have clearly defined learning outcomes and will have mapped program-level outcomes to school/college/unit-level outcomes.

Together, these targets promote shared responsibility for student learning, support evidence-informed decision-making, and ensure consistent, high-quality assessment practices that drive institutional improvement over time.

Implementation

Each year, the Council partners with the Searle Center to operationalize Northwestern University’s Strategic Framework for Assessment by identifying which programs are ready to begin or build upon their previous work at any stage of the assessment cycle. This coordinated process is grounded in collaboration with schools, academic programs, and co-curricular units, ensuring steady institutional movement toward the Framework’s Year 4 and Year 10 targets.

The Searle Center serves as a thought partner throughout this work by listening closely to each program’s context, language, expertise, and goals and supporting the development of authentic accounts of student learning. By documenting this evidence in the Assessment Gallery, we move beyond compliance to elevate and share authentic practices of continuous improvement.

Our consistent annual implementation sequence balances centralized coordination with respect for the localized nature of assessment. Council meetings follow a quarterly cadence, with adjustments as needed for emerging priorities along with the following implementation touchpoints:

- **Fall:** Engaging schools and programs through the call for Assessment Gallery submissions and targeted outreach
- **Winter:** Supporting program capacity across all stages of the assessment cycle
- **Spring:** Reviewing Assessment Gallery submissions and providing Council feedback
- **Summer:** Planning for the coming year by identifying curricular and co-curricular programs that are ready to begin, deepen, or extend assessment work at any point in the cycle

Annual Assessment Gallery submissions provide a clear picture of each program's progress and needs, enabling responsive and targeted support. When slowdowns or gaps are observed, messaging is adjusted, outreach is deepened, and professional development offerings are refined. This approach allows the Council and the Searle Center to move at a sustainable pace while ensuring that each program is positioned to advance.

Background

The AAC was started in 2008 as a group of academic and administrative leaders appointed by the provost and charged with facilitating a faculty-driven, University-wide effort to assess student learning outcomes in the undergraduate and graduate curricula and co-curricula. It created the 2016–2018 University Strategic Framework for Assessment, which aimed to increase engagement and capacity for meaningful, evidence-based improvements in student learning. Guided by this framework, Northwestern strengthened assessment practices and showcased promising practices through a university-wide reporting infrastructure and interdisciplinary campus forums.

In 2022, with the aim of expanding assessment activities across the University, a strategy was adopted to build faculty capacity for assessment of student learning, supporting systematization of assessment, and showcasing best practices across schools. Educational developers at the Searle Center collaborated with AAC representatives from all 12 schools and co-curricular units to implement the program [assessment cycle](#) and develop “effective processes” and “good practices.” In August of 2025 the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) reaffirmed the

accreditation of Northwestern University through 2034-35 with a recognition of the significant progress Northwestern has made in fostering a culture of assessment and supporting faculty to see themselves as active participants in the process, contributing meaningfully to both course-level and program-level assessment.

HLC reviewers highlighted the institution's success in moving to a more systematized approach. The report noted that "Northwestern has built a well-articulated and mature assessment ecosystem, characterized by decentralized coordination with centralized support." HLC reviewers praised the Assessment Gallery as "an innovative and promising tool for transparency and cross-unit learning," demonstrating "meaningful uptake of assessment practices and a culture of continuous improvement" and "a national model for transparency and faculty engagement."