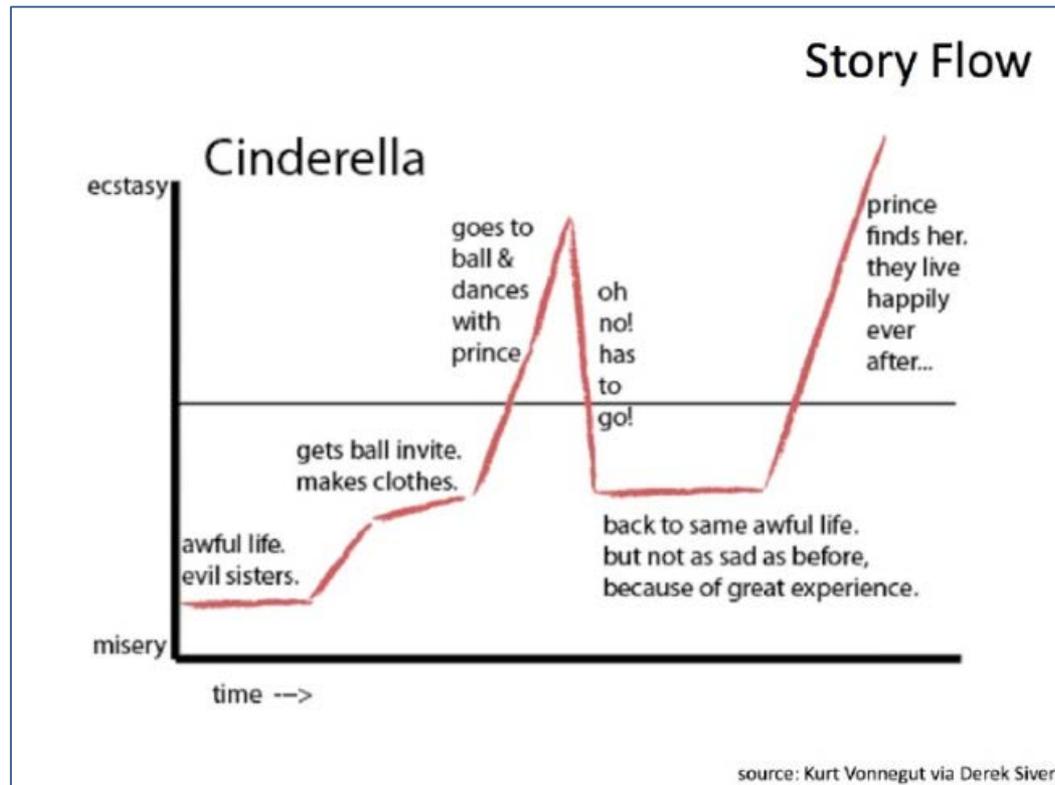


# Writing Effective Reports



Ellen Meents-DeCaigny

Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs, DePaul University

<https://visage.co/kurt-vonnegut-shows-us-shapes-stories>

# Assessment Certificate Program

# Assessment Certificate Program (ACP)

Collaboration between DePaul and Loyola, Academic Affairs and Student Affairs

Workshops:

- Core content focused on the assessment cycle
- Don't have to sign up for ACP to participate in workshops
- Can take a few workshops and decide to sign up for the ACP!
- We will be adding more workshops

# Assessment Certificate Program

## Requirements:

- Attendance at 6 workshops:
  - Intro to Assessment (at home campus) \*does not have to be taken first\*
  - Four workshops that you select (at DePaul or Loyola)
  - Final Workshop (at home campus)
- Completion of a culminating project of your choice

Visit <http://acp.depaultla.org/> to:

- Sign up for the ACP
- Sign up for individual workshops
- Suggest future workshop topics
- Volunteer to present/co-present
- Get more information about or propose a culminating project

# Today's Topics

- Assessment and the Communication Flow
- Breaking Down the Assessment Report
- Constructing a Usable Report

# Why assess?



**Alexander W. Astin,  
Ph.D.**

Allan M. Cartter Professor  
Emeritus of Higher  
Education

*University of California, Los  
Angeles*      2014 NASPA

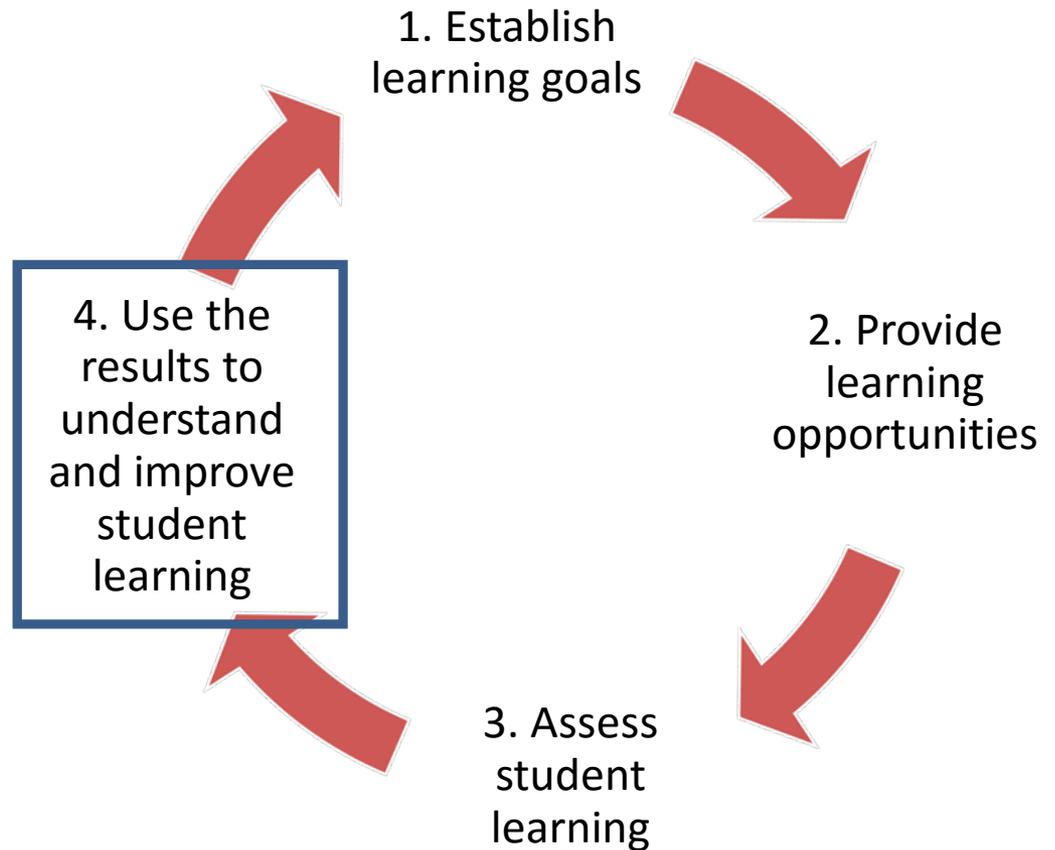
- Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public\*
- To provide information about the ways in which our students meet goals and expectations
- Continuous improvement

\*A. Astin, T. W. Banta, K. P. Cross, E. El-Khawas, P. T. Ewell, P. Hutchings, T. J. Marchese, K.M. McClenney, M. Mentkowski, M. A. Miller, E. T. Moran & B. D. Wright. 1992, <http://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan-center/teaching-learning/assessing-student-learning/nine-principles>

# The Assessment Loop

“All assessment is a perpetual work in progress.”

**Linda Suskie, Vice President,  
Middle States Commission  
on Higher Education**



# Planning Communication

**What** do you want to accomplish by sharing the information?

**Who** will be your audience? Do you have more than one audience?

**What** do your audiences need and/or need to understand?

**How** will your audience use the information?

**How** can you best communicate the information?

# Planning Communication

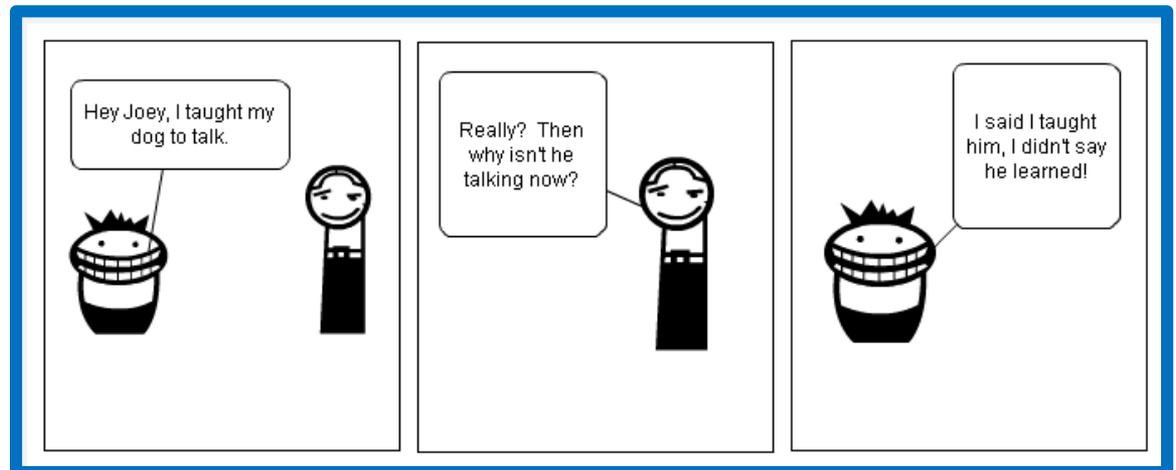
**What** do you want to accomplish by sharing the information?

- Demonstrate unanticipated **program benefits**
- **Share plans** to strengthen and improve the program
- Demonstrate how the program **supports the university learning goals**
- **Build partnerships** with faculty in areas that relate to my program
- Present assessment as research with colleagues from another institution
- Get the Assessment Director off my back!

# Planning Communication

## Purposes of Reporting

- Historical reports
- Support for planning and decision-making improvements
- Public Relations
- Information Dissemination
- Document your contributions to the learning environment
- To see how your efforts mattered



Pair off with the person next to you . . .

Based on a past assessment project you helped lead or facilitate, what did you find and how did you communicate the findings?

OR

Based on a project report you have reviewed, how were the findings communicated? And to whom?



# Planning Communication

**What** do you want to accomplish by sharing the information?

**Who** is your audience? Do you have more than one audience?

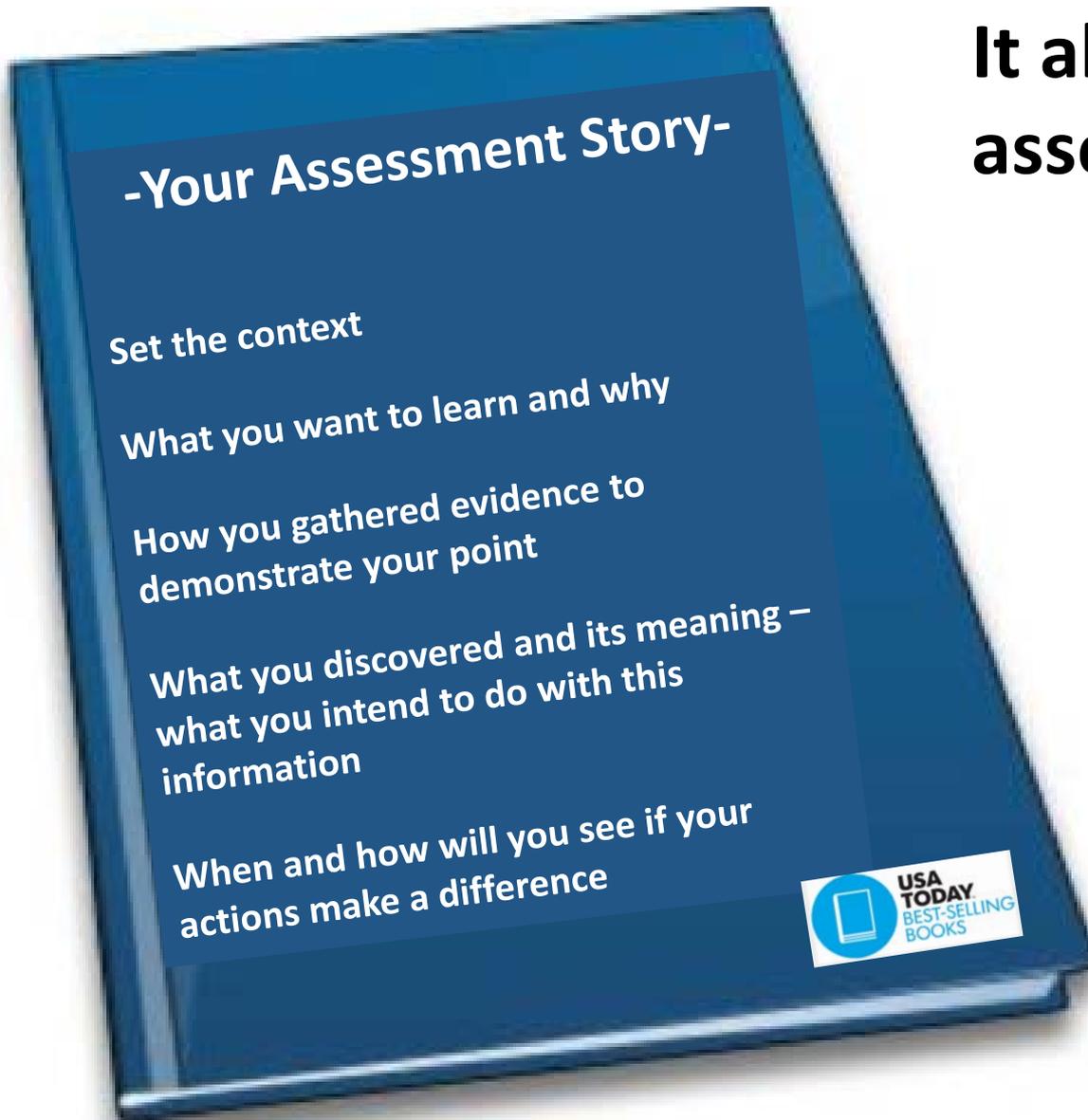
**What** do your audiences need and/or need to understand?

**How** will your audience use the information?

**How** can you best communicate information?

**How** can you help insure that they use it and use it to do what you hope to accomplish?

# It all begins with the assessment report



# Follow the Format – All Formats are Different

## DePaul Report Guide

- Follow-Up from Last Year
- Abstract
- Learning Outcome Assessed
- Introduction and Context
- Data Collection & Methodology
- Results
- Analysis and Interpretation of Results
- Recommendations & Plans for Action

## Loyola Assessment Report

- Overview
- Learning Outcomes
- Data Collection
- Analysis
- Results
- Reflection
- Future Assistance

## Regardless of Format:

- ✓ Write clearly and concisely
- ✓ use active language
- ✓ limit jargon
- ✓ explain acronyms
- ✓ Write in sections with headings.
- ✓ Know your intended audience *but* write for a reader unfamiliar with your work
- ✓ Give reader enough detail to understand what was **done**, what you **discovered**, what is **next**
- ✓ Get feedback and copy-editing



## A clear summary: motivation, methods, findings, implications

### Sample Abstract (113 words)

The **purpose** of this study was to add to our understanding of the motivations toward service among college students, to get a clearer sense of how students choose their service involvements, and to better understand the learning outcomes from service involvement during college.

*The **methodology** consisted of focus groups, individual interviews and a survey.*

**Findings** indicated differences in how students spoke about their service and learning outcomes based on gender, hours of service, and year in college.

**Implications** of research findings include recommendations for marketing of service opportunities to students, involving students in service early in their college years, and expanding and centralizing service as a core mission of the college or university.

Chesbrough, R.D. (2011). College Students and Service: A mixed methods exploration of motivations, choices, and learning outcomes. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(6), 687-705.

## ABSTRACT

The **purpose** of this study was to discover effective ways to instill the Catholic Vincentian approach to leadership, prayer, and hospitality in our peer ministers, particularly in their work in CCM. To do so, we began a year-long formation program for peer ministers that focused on key figures and virtues of the Vincentian heritage, and evaluated the peer ministers' responses to that program periodically throughout the year.

The **methodology** consisted of a pre- and post-test tool, as well as reflection questions administered quarterly.

**Findings** indicated that participants in the program generally expanded their personal practice of prayer, gained a greater specific understanding of Vincentian history, and developed a sense of community and cohort among one another that helped empower them in their particular roles. There were fewer indications that the peer ministers were able to articulate the connection between their particular work and the Vincentian approach to hospitality and leadership.

**Implications** of these findings suggest that the formation program should continue, with a greater emphasis on practical application and personal experience of the peer ministers themselves.

## Clarify the Learning Outcome You Are Assessing

- Your outcome should be tied to higher outcomes
- Your learning outcome shapes your assessment question
- Be clear and articulate what it is you are studying and why
- Is their existing data related to your project



# Describe Data Collection

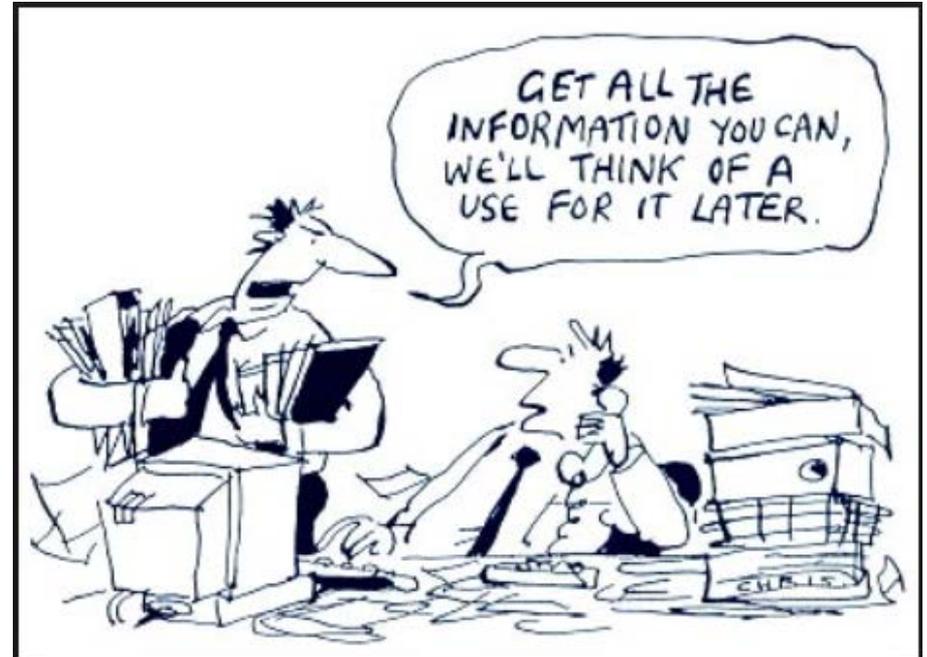
- How was the data collected ?
  - Focus groups: how were students recruited? Who facilitated? Was there an incentive?
  - Survey: paper/pencil or online?
  - Interview: how did you recruit?
  - Observation: how structured? Who observed?
  - Work sample comparison/journal analysis?
- What was the study design?
  - One-time survey, pre/post-test, multiple assessments over the term?
  - Direct and/or indirect assessment?
  - When was it collected?
- Who were the participants?
  - Which students were assessed, why, when?
  - Comparison group?



## Contract with Participants

How did you . . .

- ensure consent of participants
- keep your assessment data confidential
- handle anonymous or identifiable data
- keep data secure
- handle sensitive topics
- secure IRB approval (if needed)



**How do you ensure that you use the data you collect to improve your program for the students' benefit?**

# Explain Data Analysis

- Describe how you aggregated your data into meaningful results
  - statistics to summarize or compare groups
  - rubric to categorize responses
- Basic summary statistics effective: mean, frequency, percentages
- Criteria for successfully meeting the learning goal
  - Determined before data are collected





## Describe What You Found

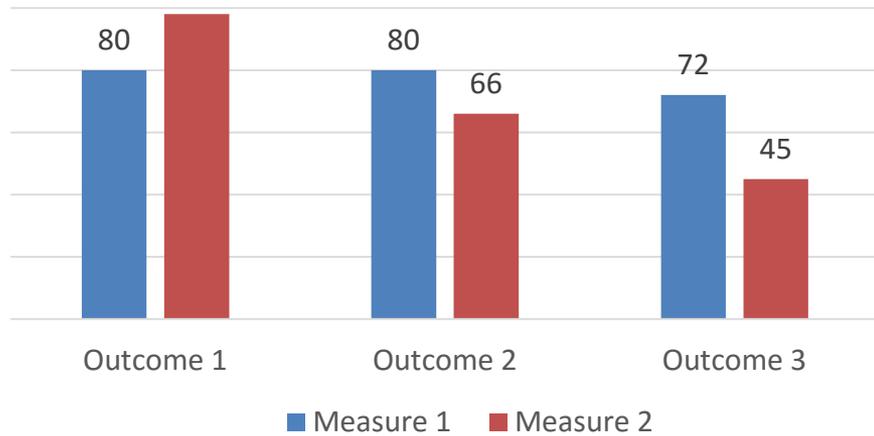
- Who participated?
  - Participated/invited to participate? (the response rate, number of focus group participants, etc.)
  - Important characteristics of participants (male/female, residence, etc)
- What does the data tell you?
  - Things that work and didn't work
  - Summarize findings in tables, graphs, quotes
  - Keep it simple and clear
  - Remember your audience

Learning Outcome	Number of Students assessed	Number of students with acceptable/better performance

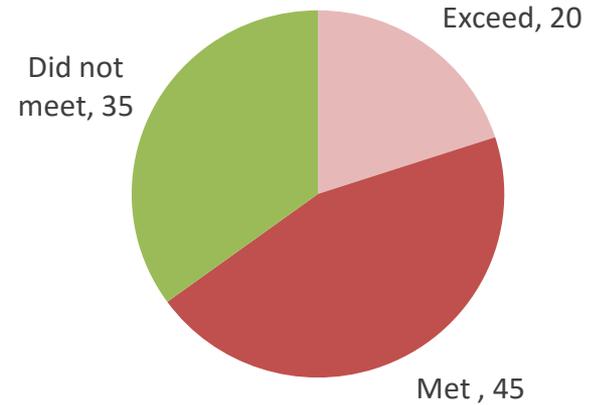


# Results - Using Graphs and Tables

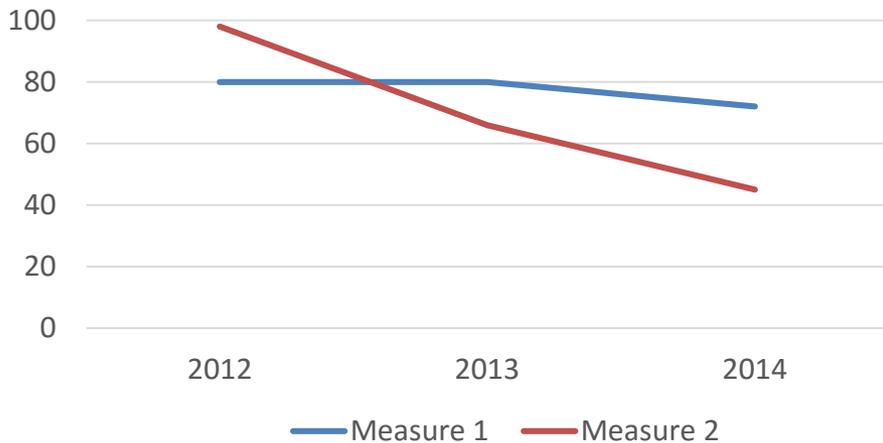
Percent of Students Meeting Criteria  
98



Percent of Students Meeting Criteria



Percent Meeting Criteria Over Time



	Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3
Measure 1	80%	80%	72%

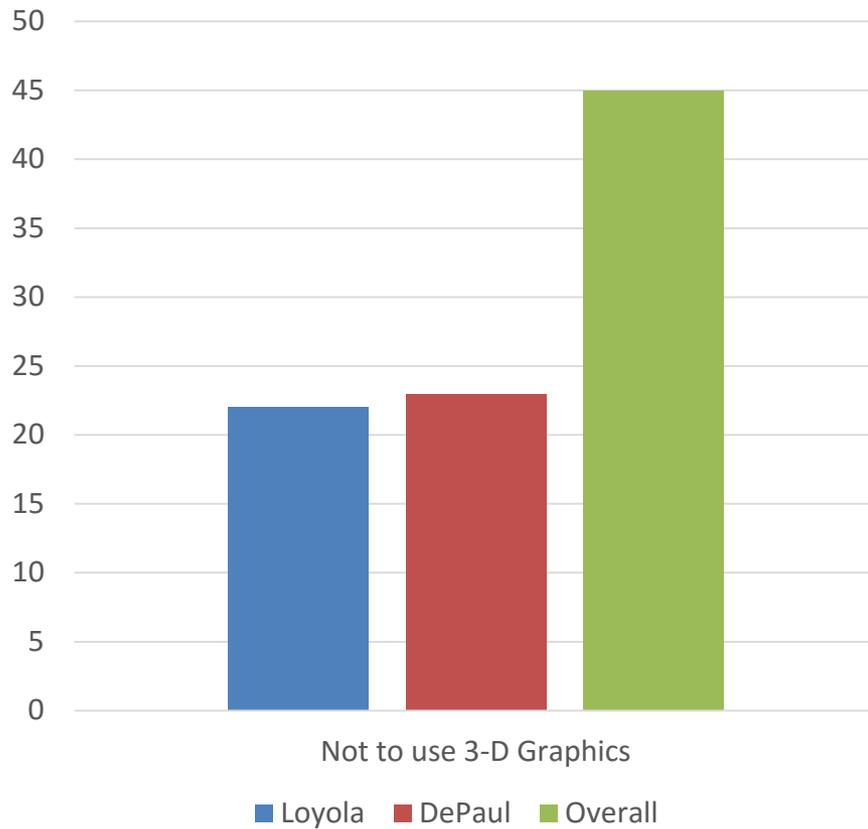
Use tables when you want to be exact or when you don't have a lot of data



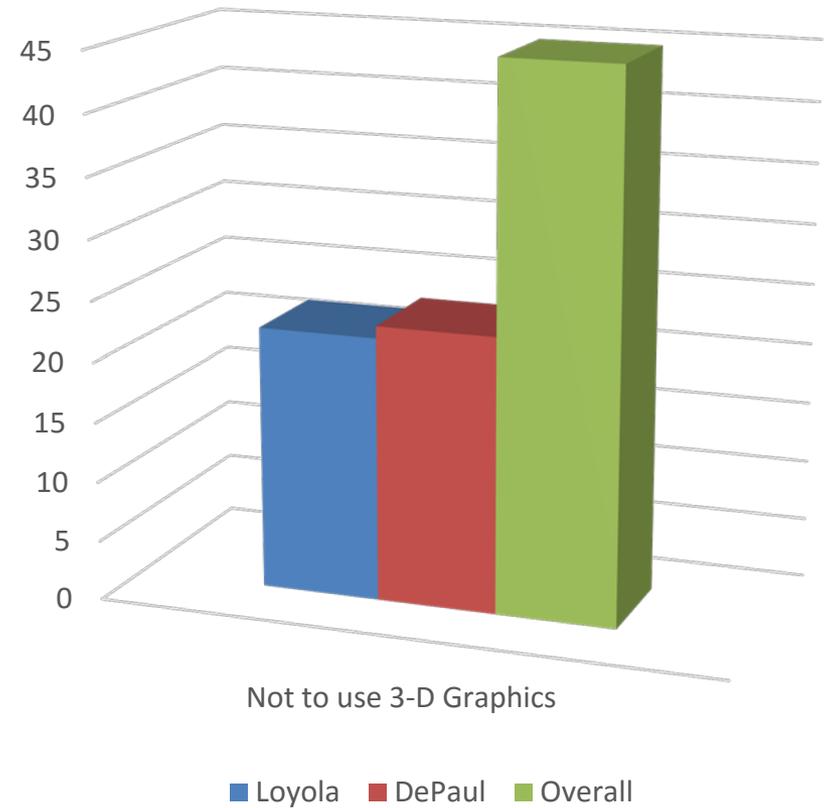
# Results – Avoid Using Default Settings and NO 3D

**NO!**

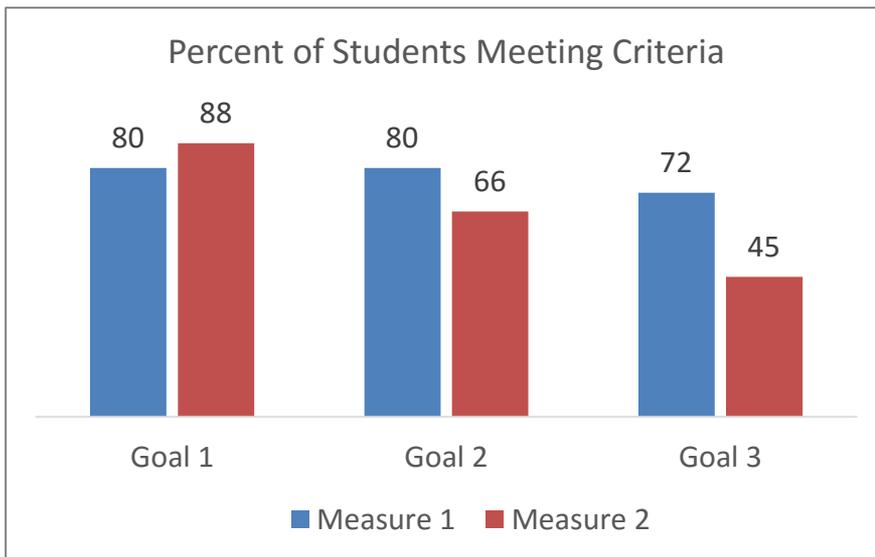
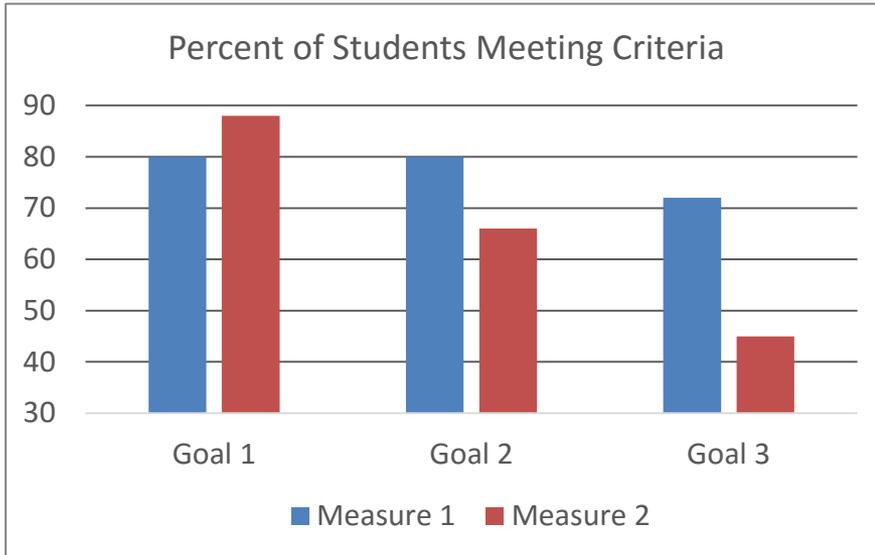
### Learning Outcomes from Reporting Session



### Learning Outcomes from Reporting Session



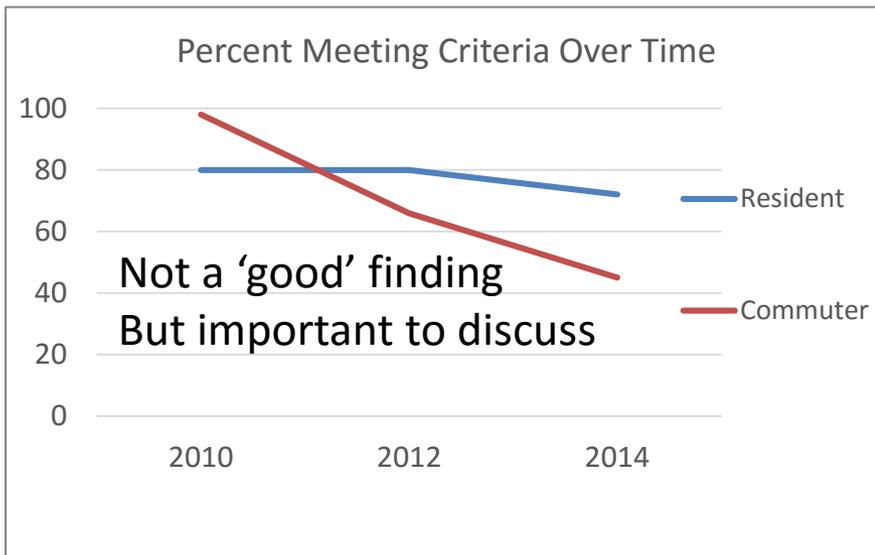
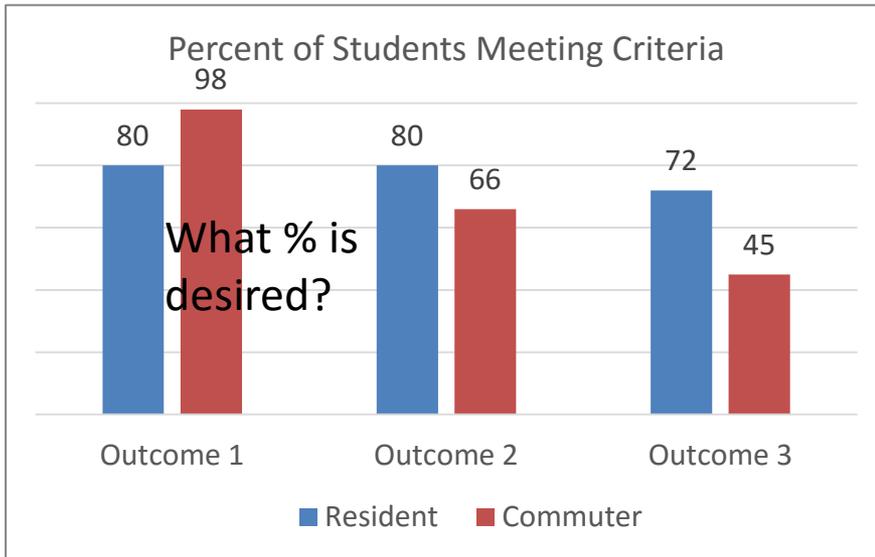
# Results – Graphs Should “Show” the Data



## Things to consider when showing data

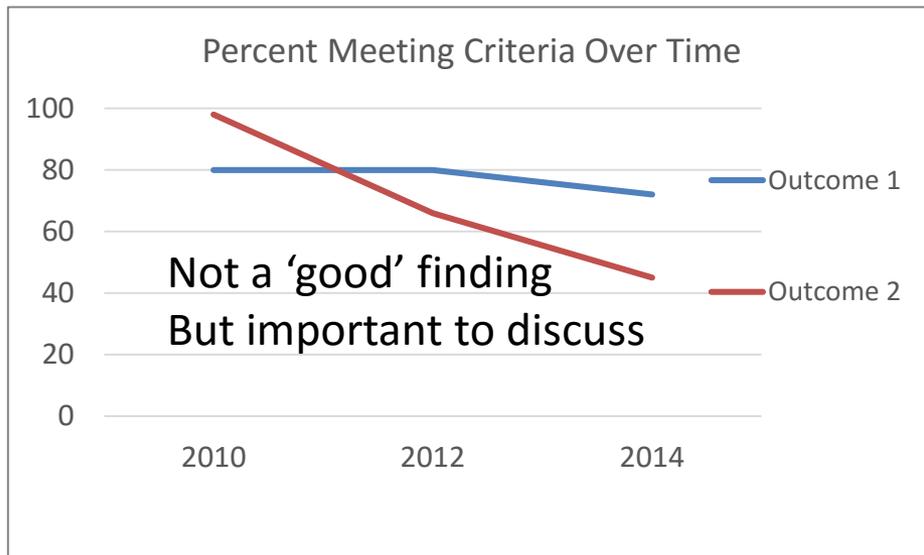
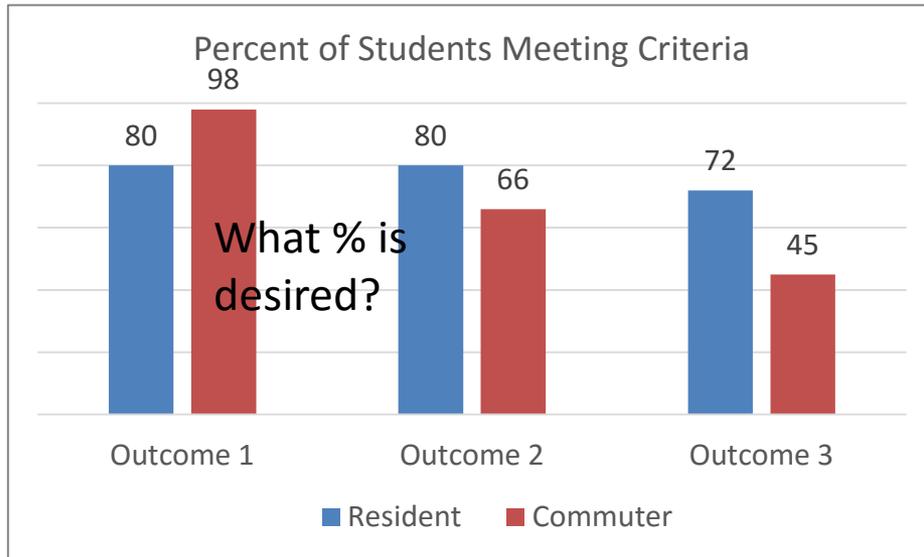
- Tell the data story accurately
- Focus on showing the data
- Sort data in a meaningful way
- Include needed charts/graphs in report and append additional information – focus on learning goal

# Reflection/Discussion - Explains What Your Findings Mean



- What are the key findings
  - Finding 1
  - Finding 2
  - Etc..
- What did you learn? What surprised you?
- Study's limitations?
- How will you use your results to improve your program?
  - Recommendations?
  - Improvement plan/Timeline?
  - Barriers/resources needed?
- Follow-up projects/questions?

# Reflection/Discussion - explains what your findings mean



- State finding and related data point together.
- Link your discussion back to original question and context outlined earlier – not just in order of survey items.
- Use section headers



# Bringing Your Report Writing to a Close

## DePaul Report Guide

- Follow-up From Last Year
- Abstract
- Learning Outcome Assessed
  
- Data Collection & Methodology
- Results
- Interpretation of Results
- Recommendations & Plans for Action

## Loyola Assessment Report

- Overview
- Learning Outcomes
  
- Data Collection
- Analysis
- Results
  
- Reflection
- Future Assistance

Back to the communication plan:

- Does your abstract accurately and concisely summarize your report?
- What do you want readers to understand?
- Are the results appropriate for your audience?



# Back to the Communication Plan

## Share results with different constituents

What works/what needs improvement  
Full report

Conclusions and how you came to these conclusions  
Abstract as executive summary, report

Student-focused, findings and benefits  
Reshaped abstract, quotes to bring to life



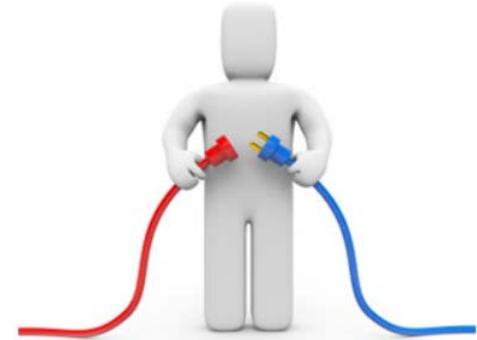
The Residents, Commuters, and Dining Committee

DePaul Transition Leaders The Division of Student Affairs

## Be an advocate for your findings

### Connect the information to users

- Build interest in project – talk about it
- Share draft findings – get constituents involved
- Develop multi-faceted communication plan – remember learning style differences
  - Multiple audiences: Program leaders, division, assessment group
  - Multiple methods: Report, summary, website post, campus paper, group discussion, infographic
  - Multiple points in time: During project, when report is final, during follow-up



## Be an advocate for your findings

### Make it easy for readers to use

- Prepare a well-written report
  - Write clearly for a reader who is unfamiliar
  - No jargon, explain acronyms
  - Peer review and copy-edit
  - Keep it short and to the point
- Distribute report with concise abstract/summary
- Consider an infographic to capture all findings on one page
- Put your project and findings in context
  - Explain how learning outcome link to department, division, university learning goals
  - Explain project implications



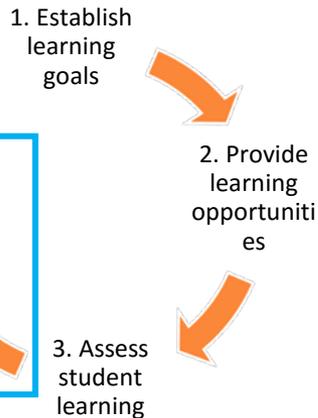
## Tips from Readers

- Choose a learning outcome that is included in the catalogue
- Fill out the learning goals table in the template, and use whole numbers
- Make sure you clearly state your question or learning outcome
- Discuss at the end the questions you stated at the beginning
- Include a specific timeline for your plan of action
- Take time to explain why you chose the methodology you used to answer your question

# Questions?

# Appendix

# Quick Reference Guide – Planning and Writing Assessment Report



## Build a Communication Plan

- What** do you want to accomplish with sharing the information?
- Who** do you want to communicate this to?
- What** do your audiences need, need to understand?
- How** will your audience use the information?
- How** can you best communicate information?

## Be an Advocate for your Findings

### **Connect the information to users**

- Build interest in project – talk about it
- Share draft findings – get constituents involved
- Develop multi-faceted communication plan
  - Multiple audiences: Program leaders, division, assessment group
  - Multiple methods: Report, summary, website post, campus paper, group discussion, infographic
  - Multiple points in time: During project, when report is final, during follow-up

### **Make it easy for readers to use**

- Prepare a well-written report
  - Write clearly for a reader who is unfamiliar with what you do
  - No jargon, explain acronyms
  - Peer review and copy-edit
  - Keep it short and to the point (Loyola reports 2-5 pages; DePaul reports 5-10)
- Distribute report with concise abstract
- Consider an infographic for 1-page summary
- Put your project and findings in context
  - Explain how learning outcome link to department, division, university learning goals
  - Explain project implications (Assessment workshop, May 2015, Sanders)

## DePaul Assessment Report Sections

Follow-Up on Last Year's Project

Abstract

Learning Outcome Assessed

Data Collection & Methodology

Results

Analysis and Interpretation of Results

Recommendations and Plans for Action

## Assessing Student Learning: Nine Principles of Good Practice

**The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.** Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement. Its effective practice, then, begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for students and strive to help them achieve. Educational values should drive not only what we choose to assess but also how we do so. Where questions about educational mission and values are skipped over, assessment threatens to be an exercise in measuring what's easy, rather than a process of improving what we really care about.

- **Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.** Learning is a complex process. It entails not only what students know but what they can do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes, and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom. Assessment should reflect these understandings by employing a diverse array of methods, including those that call for actual performance, using them over time so as to reveal change, growth, and increasing degrees of integration. Such an approach aims for a more complete and accurate picture of learning, and therefore firmer bases for improving our students' educational experience. Department/division
- **Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.** Assessment is a goal-oriented process. It entails comparing educational performance with educational purposes and expectations -- those derived from the institution's mission, from faculty intentions in program and course design, and from knowledge of students' own goals. Where program purposes lack specificity or agreement, assessment as a process pushes a campus toward clarity about where to aim and what standards to apply; assessment also prompts attention to where and how program goals will be taught and learned. Clear, shared, implementable goals are the cornerstone for assessment that is focused and useful. University
- **Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.** Information about outcomes is of high importance; where students "end up" matters greatly. But to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way -- about the curricula, teaching, and kind of student effort that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment can help us understand which students learn best under what conditions; with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve the whole of their learning.
- **Assessment works best when it is ongoing not episodic.** Assessment is a process whose power is cumulative. Though isolated, "one-shot" assessment can be better than none, improvement is best fostered when assessment entails a linked series of activities undertaken over time. This may mean tracking the process of individual students, or of cohorts of students; it may mean collecting the same examples of student performance or using the same instrument semester after semester. The point is to monitor progress toward intended goals in a spirit of continuous improvement. Along the way, the assessment process itself should be

evaluated and refined in light of emerging insights.

- **Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.** Student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility. Thus, while assessment efforts may start small, the aim over time is to involve people from across the educational community. Faculty play an especially important role, but assessment's questions can't be fully addressed without participation by student-affairs educators, librarians, administrators, and students. Assessment may also involve individuals from beyond the campus (alumni/ae, trustees, employers) whose experience can enrich the sense of appropriate aims and standards for learning. Thus understood, assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement.
- **Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.** Assessment recognizes the value of information in the process of improvement. But to be useful, information must be connected to issues or questions that people really care about. This implies assessment approaches that produce evidence that relevant parties will find credible, suggestive, and applicable to decisions that need to be made. It means thinking in advance about how the information will be used, and by whom. The point of assessment is not to gather data and return "results"; it is a process that starts with the questions of decision-makers, that involves them in the gathering and interpreting of data, and that informs and helps guide continuous improvement.
- **Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.** Assessment alone changes little. Its greatest contribution comes on campuses where the quality of teaching and learning is visibly valued and worked at. On such campuses, the push to improve educational performance is a visible and primary goal of leadership; improving the quality of undergraduate education is central to the institution's planning, budgeting, and personnel decisions. On such campuses, information about learning outcomes is seen as an integral part of decision making, and avidly sought.
- **Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.** There is a compelling public stake in education. As educators, we have a responsibility to the publics that support or depend on us to provide information about the ways in which our students meet goals and expectations. But that responsibility goes beyond the reporting of such information; our deeper obligation -- to ourselves, our students, and society -- is to improve. Those to whom educators are accountable have a corresponding obligation to support such attempts at improvement.

A. Astin, T. W. Banta, K. P. Cross, E. El-Khawas, P. T. Ewell, P. Hutchings, T. J. Marchese, K.M. McClenney, M. Mentkowski, M. A. Miller, E. T. Moran & B. D. Wright 1992; <http://www.brown.edu/about/administration/sheridan35center/teaching-learning/assessing-student-learning/nine-principles>