

Epsilen: Assessment Portal

Greater Accountability While Realizing Institutional Effectiveness



Although the concept has been around for years, institutional assessment is gaining increasingly significant value and importance among educational institutions. State boards of education and accrediting organizations are demanding greater accountability, and government agencies and funding institutions want proof that learning objectives are being realized.

“There’s a strong push for institutions to quantify their effectiveness of teaching,” said Evan Nisonson, Epsilen’s chief executive officer. “Accreditation has always been a strong driver for that. But now, in this age of enhanced accountability, it’s even more important for institutions to be evidencing success, and being able to align that success to a set of established standards. It’s not good enough to quantify success internally. They must be able to align the success they are realizing as an institution around the question of ‘how well are our students learning?’”



In 2011, Epsilen introduced the Institutional Assessment Portal, a comprehensive repository and reporting tool that enables colleges and universities to organize assessment data efficiently in order for faculty and administrators to evaluate the effectiveness of courses, programs, and even the institutions themselves. Tightly integrated with Epsilen’s other solutions, and building on its Learning Matrix platform, which provides students evidence on the success of their individual learning outcomes, the Institutional Assessment Portal is an extension of that knowledge, enabling administrators to make data-driven decisions.

“This offering really is at the heart of our core theme,” said Nisonson. “As we focus on learners and keeping them engaged, institutional success is a vital part of that because it helps institutions more accurately measure the success of the learning

outcomes it adopts. Whereas traditional institutional effectiveness tools have focused rather abstractly on the programs, ours uses as its primary building block unit student success. It is providing evidence that assessors can review. It properly puts learners at the center of any institutional effectiveness initiative.”

“We looked at a lot of vendors before we went with Epsilen to meet our assessment needs. None of them provided all of the functionality of Epsilen at the cost that they were willing to provide it for.”

—Ronald Opp,
Chair, Assessment Committee, University of Toledo

Assessing Success at the University of Toledo

Established in 1872, the University of Toledo is one of 13 state universities in Ohio. With an enrollment of about 23,000 students, its nationally ranked programs include business, engineering, law, and occupational therapy. Faculty at the university have been using Epsilen’s Learning Matrix for several years in order to engage their students and help them assess their individual learning outcomes. When Epsilen first communicated the plan to introduce its institutional assessment tool in summer 2010, Assistant Professor Ronald Opp, who chaired the university’s Assessment Steering Committee, suggested they could use the portal as a repository for assessment reports that were beginning to flow in from the various departments and colleges. “It wasn’t what Epsilen had designed the portal to do, but it was our immediate need and so they looked at what they could do to help us.”

Epsilen and the University’s steering committee began working together in fall 2010 to build a beta version of the portal that would serve as a repository for all the assessment reports that each, of the more than a hundred, Arts and Sciences departments were required to submit.

“I was calling Epsilen pretty much every day, trying to figure out how to make this work for our purposes, and they were really very responsive. We ended up creating a matrix for each college—I think we had maybe 10 at the time; we have two or three more now—and we had just finished the process of identifying all of our degree and certificate programs for every college. We had five or six categories for each college to respond to, such as whether or not they had outside accreditation, what were their student learning outcomes,



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what changes had they made in student services and curriculum, pedagogy, and what changes did they intend to make to their future assessment planning? We had a rubric assigned to each one so they knew exactly what we were looking for in each one of those categories.”

Accountability Chief Decision Makers Are Looking For

Matrix Assessment Summary Report March 30, 2010

Matrix Name
Institution
School/Dept./Program

	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Row Summary
Critical Thinking The ability of students to engage in a process of disciplined thinking that informs beliefs and actions. A student who demonstrates critical thinking applies the process of disciplined thinking by remaining open-minded, reconsidering previous beliefs and actions, and adjusting his or her thinking, beliefs and actions based on new information.	Students: 12 Objects: 23 Assessments: 10 Assessors: 2 High: 3 Low: 1 Avg: 2.2 StdDev: 0.788811 Cell Score (Avg of Cell Assessments): 2.2	Students: 8 Objects: 10 Assessments: 6 Assessors: 3 High: 4 Low: 1 Avg: 2.67 StdDev: 1.21106	Students: 24 Objects: 24 Assessments: 16 Assessors: 7 High: 5 Low: 2 Avg: 3.63 StdDev: 1.204159	Students: 28 Objects: 54 Assessments: 32 Assessors: 8 High: 5 Low: 1 Avg: 2.83 StdDev: 1.06801
Values and Ethics The ability of students to make sound decisions with respect to individual conduct, citizenship, and aesthetics.	Students: 4 Objects: 5 Assessments: 5 Assessors: 2 High: 4 Low: 1 Avg: 2.4 StdDev: 1.140175 Cell Score (Avg of Cell Assessments): 2.4	Students: 10 Objects: 10 Assessments: 6 Assessors: 4 High: 4 Low: 2 Avg: 3.17 StdDev: 0.983192 Cell Score (Avg of Cell Assessments): 3.17	Students: 16 Objects: 16 Assessments: 16 Assessors: 8 High: 5 Low: 3 Avg: 4.06 StdDev: 0.771902 Cell Score (Avg of Cell Assessments): 4.06	Students: 22 Objects: 31 Assessments: 27 Assessors: 10 High: 5 Low: 1 Avg: 3.21 StdDev: 1.086042 Row Score (Avg of Cell Scores): 3.21
Column Summary	Students: 14 Objects: 17 Assessments: 15 Assessors: 2 High: 5 Low: 2 Avg: 2.3 StdDev: 0.964493 Category Score (Avg of Category Assessments): 2.3	Students: 12 Objects: 20 Assessments: 12 Assessors: 4 High: 5 Low: 2 Avg: 2.92 StdDev: 1.097126 Category Score (Avg of Category Assessments): 2.92	Students: 20 Objects: 57 Assessments: 41 Assessors: 8 High: 5 Low: 2 Avg: 3.85 StdDev: 0.9880305 Category Score (Avg of Category Assessments): 3.85	Students: 28 Objects: 94 Assessments: 68 Assessors: 11 High: 5 Low: 1 Avg: 3.02 StdDev: 1.077026 Matrix Score (Avg of Row Assessments): 3.02

Opp said a primary driver for creating the Epsilon assessment repository was to have the data readily available for the University’s accrediting body, the Higher Education Commission, which will make its 10-year visit to campus in February 2012. “A sub-text in all of this is that Epsilon has allowed us, for the first time, to get a visual picture of what degree programs are complying and participating in assessment reports and which ones aren’t. It becomes apparent very quickly if you’ve got a row in the assessment matrix and there’s nothing in your row for your degree program. We never really had the ability before to call out a program like that. This has allowed everything to be quite transparent.”

Going forward, the University intends to use Epsilon’s institutional assessment platform to measure the effectiveness of the institution’s general education curriculum. Although they have primarily used the assessment tool to meet faculty and institutional needs, Opp said he

Epsilon’s Assessment Portal: Advantages

- Provides institutional decision makers with true evidence of achievement of overarching standards
- Flexible workflow enables multiple assessors at program, department, school, and institution
- Built upon the same easy to use architecture and design of Epsilon
- SaaS hosted technology makes it easy and affordable for an institution to implement and get up and running quickly

appreciates Epsilon’s approach to designing its products around the needs of the students.

Although the university primarily has used the institutional assessment platform on a macro level, Opp said composition faculty have used the Learning Matrix for several years now, requiring their students to upload some of their artifacts. The faculty, he added, are on a quest to try and do longitudinal assessments of writing development over the four or five years that students matriculate at the institution.

“I like the comprehensive functionality of Epsilon,” said Opp. “I think they have been responsive to our needs. And I really like the open design and architecture of Epsilon. It was just so immediately intuitive and appealing to me. This is where I think Epsilon stands head and shoulders above everyone else, their philosophy behind the open architecture and the product. It’s the thing that’s most appealing to me.”

About Epsilon, LLC

Serving educators and students in over 600 institutions in over 130 countries, the Epsilon Environment is a hosted online eLearning solution that focuses on learner engagement and the teaching and learning experience. It situates a robust set of learning tools within a learning community, offering the advantages of both. Additionally, Epsilon offers clients access to The New York Times Knowledge Network Content Repository, a rich collection of digital resources and learning objects. Epsilon is majority owned by The New York Times Company.



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