

THE PROCESS OF STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT: CASE STUDIES OF THREE UNIVERSITIES

DALTON, ROBERT

School of Design, South Dakota State University, robert.dalton@sdstate.edu

ACKERMAN, AIDAN

Department of Landscape Architecture, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry,
acackerm@esf.edu

BURGER, DON

School of Design, South Dakota State University, donald.burger@sdstate.edu

SLEIPNESS, OLE

Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning, Utah State University, ole.sleipness@usu.edu

TOFTE, ELIZABETH

School of Design, South Dakota State University, elizabeth.tofte@sdstate.edu

ABSTRACT

The Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board (LAAB) and universities require an assessment of student learning outcomes. These two bodies define outcomes using different rubrics for student learning assessment and acceptable methods of measurement for student success. These three case studies present distinctive approaches, successes, and lessons learned. USU-LAEP employs a multi-pronged assessment approach (internal and external data points). These include continued self-assessments required for maintaining LAAB accreditation, completion of institutional assessment of learning outcomes, and job placement for the program's graduates. Pre-matriculation portfolios, letters of interest, studio products, theses, internship placement, and jury awards provide assessment data. Informal assessment data gleaned from alumni, advancement board members, and colleague feedback add value for ongoing assessment of the program's progress. SUNY ESF recently implemented a structured assessment plan for BLA/MLA programs. Multiple measures of assessment apply across course sequences tracking Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) as they are introduced, developed, and mastered. The new approach moves away from previous models that relied on final student work products like portfolios. The new plan operates on a three-year cycle bringing critical attention to all stages of the learning process delivered through core curriculum. Faculty working groups refine rubrics to improve alignment between student performance and program goals. This process aims to ensure PLO assessment remains responsive and helps guide curriculum over time. SDSU assesses landscape architecture students' performance as one of five design majors within the School of Design. Using Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Values Rubrics, three learning outcomes applicable to all majors have been identified. First-year and seniors' Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, and Teamwork skills are evaluated annually.

This comparative analysis of diverse assessment approaches provides an analytical framework on which to build an effective process in preparing the next generation of landscape architects.

Keywords

Program Assessment Strategies, Learning Outcomes

1 INTRODUCTION

“The mission of the Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board (LAAB) is to evaluate, advance, and advocate for the quality of professional landscape architectural education” (LAAB, 2025). LAAB is a collaborative organization comprised of educators and practitioners, working with allied organizations and experts in the public to achieve its values of diversity, leadership, innovation, and stewardship (LAAB, 2025). The organization offers core knowledge, including but not limited to design, theory, ecosystems, resilience, legality, and professional practice, as well as 8 skills (9 for graduate degrees) and competencies a landscape architecture program should offer to prepare students for professional practice. (LAAB, 2025). In landscape architecture, many of these topics can be explored qualitatively, requiring creative assessment and clear communication to reach the broad audience of the profession and higher education administrators.

The LAAB reviews and rewrites its standards to guide landscape architecture programs as they educate their students in response to the ever-evolving needs of the profession. Academic programs must apply for accreditation and be vetted. The accreditation process requires that a landscape architecture program invite LAAB to assemble a Roster of Visiting Evaluators (ROVE) to visit and analyze their program’s Self-Evaluation Report. This evaluation happens once every six years, as needed, to maintain good standing. During the evaluation process, the ROVE team faces the task of understanding the complexity of a program’s curriculum, how its mission and goals fit into its university’s culture, and which learning outcomes are identified as being essential. The ROVE team then provides a report of the findings that can guide the growth of the academic program and makes suggestions for sustaining accreditation.

This paper discusses three assessment methods used by landscape architecture programs at Utah State University, SUNY-ESF, and South Dakota State University to prepare students for entry into the profession. Each program adopts methods in fitting with their university culture and landscape architecture, collectively using both quantitative and qualitative methods. With university administration requiring more evidence of academic rigor and students needing a broad set of technical and soft skills (communication, self-management, teamwork, creative thinking), assessment should be performed regularly. We do not seek out to promote one method, but to discuss the range of styles in assessment methods.

1.1 Literature Review

There are many assessment strategies. Some are aligned at the individual project level, some at the course level, others assess the whole academic program or view assessment broadly from the institutional level. Over the years, learner-centered assessments have been used to better understand how faculty may create positive and conducive environments that support students’ lifelong learning goals. In 2015, Sayani wrote, “by knowing that each learner has different strengths with different learning needs, it is the responsibility of a teacher to facilitate students in gaining knowledge, skills, and critical thinking by implementing various innovative strategies” (Sayani, 2015). As assessment methods shifted from teaching to learning, academic disciplines including landscape architecture benefited from these positive changes. In 2000, Huba and Freed introduced a variety of rubrics used to provide feedback to students: diagnostic, formative, and summative. Their recommendation “to shift the focus from individual change to organizational reform, creating an institutional mindset that values learner-centered constructivist teaching” impacted the way in which student learning was assessed from the individual student to the program level (Huba and Freed, 2000). Broader support came from the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). They provided a comprehensive list of sixteen essential learning outcomes based on common characteristics “which provide a framework to guide students’ cumulative progress” (AAC&U, 2024). These assessment methods are discussed.

1.2 Assessment Value

Utah State University, SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry, and South Dakota State University have each benefited from LAAB’s flexible approach toward assessing standards at their universities. A flexible approach to assessment is advantageous because each university enjoys specific strengths and encounters discrete constraints. These universities were chosen for their diverse approaches, various accreditation years, program sizes, degrees offered, and differing university climates. Each university uses an assessment method in line with their institutional culture and resources.

Utah State University, embedded in a department allied with Environmental Planning, uses assessment and accreditation to stand out for the voice of landscape architecture.

SUNY ESF, having access to the resources of a major comprehensive institution, uses its state and college-oriented standards to help shape landscape architecture culture within a larger state-wide university system.

South Dakota State University, located in a rural setting, uses accreditation to enhance regional credibility for recruitment, engagement, and identity of its new landscape architecture program.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objective of this paper is to explore the strengths and weaknesses of different landscape architecture programs reported through case studies. We offer three alternatives that explore the differences and opportunities for each unit, and identify opportunities for each program to assess their programs differently. The authors are members of their respective universities and each is actively involved in assessment for both LAAB and within the home universities.

2 METHODS

Using a three university case study approach, we identified valuable lessons learned during the Self-Evaluation Reporting process as well as anecdotal evidence regarding each program's strengths and constraints. With the guidance of an active ROVE team member as faculty representative, we met regularly to share our approaches and compare our evaluation methods. As authors, we contextualized our programs within our different academic contexts. We looked for similarities as well as differences then considered nuanced schemes for enhancing each program's assessment procedures. A workshop to present our findings was held at the CELA 2025 Conference in Portland, Oregon. The conference theme was Process + Impacts.

Utah State University, a Research 1 university, houses Landscape Architecture in a department with Environmental Planning, within the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences. This LA program is one of the United States' oldest landscape architecture programs. USU offers a BLA, MLA, B+MLA, as well as a PhD in Landscape Architecture.

SUNY ESF, a Research 2 university, began its landscape architecture program in 1911. This program is a stand-alone department within a college that specializes in stewardship and management of the environment. ESF offers a BLA, MSLA, MLA, and a PhD.

South Dakota State University's BLA is one of the youngest in the United States and is housed with four other majors in the School of Design embedded in the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Without a graduate research component, the faculty are challenged by the University's mission to find ways to reach a Research 1 status in the coming years.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Utah State University

Utah State University's LAEP department utilizes a multi-pronged approach for assessing its landscape architecture programs first, within a framework of assessment activities executed internally within the department, then, externally by other entities within the university, external organizations, and community partners. Motivation for these assessment activities is generated externally by organizations and entities and internally by the LAEP department and its teaching faculty. Assessment activities range from participation in very formalized processes following regular cadences, such as preparation of the accreditation's Self Report, program reviews by ROVE team members, and analysis of the LAAB report. Informal and ad-hoc reflections and discussions are held among the program's faculty, staff, and students. These reflections and discussions focus on teaching and learning activities, as well as the teaching effectiveness of individual faculty members. Often assessment activities are determined by the faculty members' assigned roles that take place within Teaching, Research, Service, and in some instances, Extension. See Table 1: Motivation and Internal/External Assessment Framework, for a complete array of assessment activities, their placement within a motivational framework, and internal/external execution.

Table 1. Motivation and Internal/External Assessment Framework

Internal to LAEP/Externally Motivated	External to LAEP/Externally Motivated
Accreditation Self Report	ROVE Team visit and report LAAB
Faculty Annual Self-Assessment	
Department Head Annual Review	College Department Review
TAC/PAC	External Reviewers
Student Teaching Evaluations	
Faculty Peer Teaching Evaluations	
Assessment Rubrics for University Assessment	
Carnegie Community Engagement Assessment	
Internal to LAEP/Internally Motivated	External to LAEP/Internally Motivated
Matriculation Portfolio Review	
Internal Surveys of Students	ASLA, APA, Utah Real Estate Competitions, and Awards
Internal Surveys of Student Internship Placement	Student Research Symposia, Conferences
Internal Surveys of Graduating Students Job Placement and Salaries	Research at the State Capitol
Exit Interviews of Graduation Students	
Surveys of Alumni Licensure Rates	Annual LAEP Advancement Board Feedback Utah ASLA Juries External Design Juries, Community Partners
Internal to LAEP/Individually Motivated	
Internal Surveys of Core Competencies and Teaching Capacity	
Studies of Studio Outputs, Outcomes, Impacts	
Faculty Teaching-based Research Studies	
Informal and Ad-Hoc Reflection and Discussions among faculty, staff, and students	Informal and Ad-Hoc Reflection and Discussions among faculty and alumni, practitioners, and community partners

Prior to matriculation into the BLA program, undergraduate students submit a digital matriculation portfolio containing representations from their landscape architecture coursework and a personal letter of intent. A committee of faculty members assesses the missions to determine acceptance into the program. Following matriculation into the program, assessment of program-specific learning outcomes is performed in design studios situated in the junior and senior years, using key project submissions within each studio as units of analysis. These assessments cover core competencies of knowledge, skills, and values. Knowledge is assessed using two areas. First, Understanding of Complex Issues and Problems, is measured by demonstrating an understanding of complex human/environment issues across contexts and/or scales. Secondly, the Problem-Solving Process is measured by demonstrating an application of appropriate planning and/or design process. Skills are assessed in three areas. The first, Technologies and Techniques, is assessed through the use of appropriate technologies and tools. Second, Communication is assessed through use of appropriate written, oral, and graphic communication. Third, the Value of Collaboration is assessed through demonstrated ability to collaborate with professionals, stakeholders, and peers. Assessment across these core areas is measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from mastery (5), proficient (4), developing (3), emerging (2), lacking (1), not applicable (0).

- Mastery is defined as demonstrating a sophisticated understanding or mastery of the concepts and competencies.
- Proficient is defined as demonstrating a complete or proficient understanding of the concepts and competencies.
- Developing is defined as demonstrating a partial or developing understanding of the concepts and competencies.
- Emerging is defined as demonstrating an initial or emerging awareness of the concepts and competencies.
- Lacking is defined as demonstrating a lack of awareness of the concepts and competencies.
- Not applicable is defined as not intended as part of the activity or project's scope.

These formalized assessments augment additional activities that are undertaken by the department, including internal surveys of student internship placement, exit interviews of graduating students related to their experiences within the department, job placement, and starting salary data. However, perhaps most useful is the informal and ad-hoc reflection and discussion among faculty, students, alumni, practitioners, and community partners—particularly when identifying needs for adjustment quickly—as well as for identifying causes for celebration.

3.2 SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry

The assessment strategy adopted by the Department of Landscape Architecture at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF) represents a multi-year, evolving effort to align program evaluation with both institutional goals and the expectations of the Landscape Architecture Accreditation Board (LAAB). Developed in response to both internal curricular reflection and external accreditation pressures, this plan offers a holistic model for understanding and improving learning outcomes within design-based education.

This strategy is derived from the structure, complexity, and sequence of the curriculum itself. Rather than relying on a singular, high-stakes assessment artifact—such as a student portfolio or capstone project—the department has built a distributed system of evaluation that identifies where learning outcomes are introduced, developed, and mastered throughout the curriculum. This model allows faculty to assess the ways students express their understanding across different contexts and over time.

The Bachelor's and Master's of Landscape Architecture programs at ESF each articulate a set of Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) that serve as the backbone of this assessment framework. These PLOs were recently revised and streamlined to better align with LAAB's 2022 accreditation standards and the six College-Wide Learning Outcomes (CWLOs) defined by SUNY ESF. By reducing the number of PLOs—from more than a dozen in previous versions to seven for the undergraduate and eight for the graduate program—the department created a more manageable and focused structure for assessment. Each outcome captures a broad domain of competence, including scientific and quantitative reasoning, intercultural knowledge, communication, ethics, and critical thinking. In the MLA program, an additional outcome addressing independent research reflects the scholarly emphasis of graduate education.

These learning outcomes are not assessed in isolation, but in relation to specific courses where they are most meaningfully engaged. The department mapped each PLO to two or more courses in the curriculum, ensuring that learning is tracked from its earliest introduction and development to advanced application. For example, a student's capacity to integrate ecological systems into design processes is first developed in an intermediate design studio and then assessed for mastery in an advanced studio. Similarly, skills in communication and representation—critical to design practice—are introduced through early coursework all the way to the final-year studios and capstones, where students present their work through written, graphic, and oral formats.

The department's assessment cycle spans three years, with each year focusing on a thematic cluster of courses in the curriculum. In the first assessment, the emphasis is placed on the studio sequence, which includes the integration of research, design thinking, and representational strategies. The second assessment focuses on ecology and technology courses, where students engage with environmental

systems, materials, construction methods, and geospatial tools. The third assessment centers on courses in history, theory, and professional practice, which develop students' ethical reasoning and contextual awareness. This cycle culminates in a comprehensive assessment in year four that offers a broad view of the program's effectiveness and areas for growth.

Implementation of this plan involves careful coordination among faculty. For each PLO under review, instructors identify an assignment in a designated course that is representative of the skills or knowledge being developed. A small faculty working group then evaluates a sample of student work using rubrics based on the VALUE framework developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). These rubrics provide clear criteria across four performance levels—benchmark, developing, proficient, and advanced—allowing faculty to evaluate work with consistency while also identifying where students are falling short of or exceeding expectations.

Rubrics are not treated as static instruments. Instead, they are continuously refined through each assessment cycle. As faculty engage with student work, they identify ambiguities or gaps in the evaluation tools and propose changes to improve clarity and alignment. This iterative process ensures that the rubrics remain responsive to both pedagogical goals and student learning patterns. Assessment findings are shared with individual instructors, who use this feedback to adjust assignments, course content, or instructional methods. Where necessary, student learning outcomes at the course level are revised to better reflect program-level expectations.

While earlier versions of assessment within the department relied heavily on summative evaluations such as portfolios, the current strategy emphasizes multiple formative measures distributed across the curriculum. This change reflects an important shift in philosophy. It acknowledges that students express their learning in different ways across different contexts, and that an accurate picture of program success requires a diverse array of evidence. It also ensures that assessment becomes part of the fabric of teaching and learning, rather than a separate evaluative burden.

This new system was piloted during the fall 2023 semester. Since then, faculty discussions about student work have begun to shift from anecdotal impressions to data-informed analysis. The process has opened new space for reflective teaching practice, allowing faculty to see how their individual courses contribute to the broader trajectory of student learning.

By the end of spring 2025, the department expects to have completed a full round of implementation, with a refined set of rubrics and curricular mappings in place. At that point, the assessment plan will be fully integrated into departmental governance structures informing not only accreditation reports but also annual curriculum planning and faculty development initiatives. Ultimately, this approach to assessment demonstrates how a cyclical, participatory, and curriculum-driven process can serve as a tool for advancing the mission of design education.

3.3 South Dakota State University

In 2015, SDSU formed the School of Design, comprised then of Landscape Architecture, Graphic Design, Interior Design, Studio Arts, and the Department of Architecture. Previously, Landscape Architecture was a department housed with Horticulture in the College of Agriculture, Food, and Environmental Science. On March 16, 2020, the LAAB offered South Dakota State its initial accreditation period for six (6) years. In 2021, the School removed departmental titles and became the five majors. Once integrated, the School began rewriting its vision and faculty standards highlighting the need for core competencies within each major. The School of Design's visions and standards require the development of strong interdisciplinary soft skills to achieve the School's mission: Inspire Creative Communities.

Students are required to develop skills and competencies outside their major. To achieve this goal, first-year students in all five majors are required to participate in two interdisciplinary active-learning courses: Design121 (2D Design) and Design110 (Creative Thinking). These courses are assessed annually by faculty leading the courses. Additionally, each student must enroll in electives outside of their most closely allied major. In other words, students majoring in the built environment professions (architecture, interior design, and landscape architecture) must enroll in studio arts or graphic design courses (and vice-versa) to prepare them to be more well-rounded professionals. In their fourth year, School students enroll in Design452 (Design Capstone) in sections of 10-15 to work with faculty from two different majors to

explore an interdisciplinary design problem. All students in the School have additional interdisciplinary and professional development opportunities. These include School-wide travel studies allowing students the opportunity to explore design outside the Midwest, and special topics courses encouraging student participation in interdisciplinary service-learning or design competitions. In the landscape architecture program, students are required to either (1) participate in a three-credit travel studies opportunity, (2) intern under a licensed landscape architect for both pay and a three-credit course, or (3) enroll in an independent study or research project under the guidance of a faculty member.

The University requires an annual assessment of each major's status, including the student and faculty make-up and the achievement of technical learning skills. In 2023, as this curriculum was in its inception, the Provost's office and the School Director invited the faculty to design a means of assessing the liberal learning and soft skills across the School's five majors as a base-point measurement. Using the AAC&U VALUES Rubrics (AAC&U, 2009), the faculty selected three of the 16 rubrics that pertain to each of the five design majors: Creative Thinking, Critical Thinking, and Teamwork.

Beginning in the spring of 2024, all students enrolled in the Design110 AND Design452 participated in an online (Qualtrics, 2025) assessment during required class time. Students provided demographic information, including their name, sex, age, major, and year in their program (freshman-senior). This survey asked students to respond to questions set by other research teams regarding their critical and creative thinking skills, and their priorities according to the AAC&U rubrics. Students also participated in a preference survey based on Tuckman's Stages of Group Development (Tuckman, 1965) and completed figural components of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT), which "assess students' ability to create work that is original, conceptual, and elaborate" (Torrance, 1966). Perry's Scheme (of Intellectual and Ethical Development) was used to assess students' growth in critical thinking beginning in the fundamentals of the Dualism stages and advancing through Multiplicity and Relativism to achieve Commitment. Assessment concluded with Batement and Donald's (1987) 20 statements regarding each phase of cognitive development.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Institutional Culture

This paper offers unique approaches to assessment in accordance with the values of each institution discussed. Each university demands a different degree of rigor, purports a different mission statement, and has different allied partners. These variables determine each institution's approach to assessment, as culture is linked to the accepted methods it employs. The three universities vary in terms of their culture: a department at USU, a technical science college at ESF, and a program at SDSU. Culture and expectations influence the means of assessment.

Each university has a culture that permits different processes. For example, USU and SUNY-ESF emphasize both internal and external assessment. SDSU, as a growing university, is still in need of establishing external review processes beyond the university.

4.2 Culture, Assessment, and Rigor

As the cultures vary, so do the assessment strategies. ESF, for example, maintains a rigorous and cyclical assessment strategy. USU and SDSU maintain their assessment rigor by chronicling positive formative assessment strategies as they occur. USU documents successful learning opportunities to better promote personal motivation and as a means of meeting the LAAB requirements. Successes are also shared through social media and at student retention and recruiting events.

Unlike USU and ESF, SDSU has no graduate program. SDSU faculty must complete their research work without the assistance of graduate students. Though not an LAAB requirement, undergraduates at SDSU have an opportunity to participate in scholarly activities when hired as undergraduate research assistants. While not explicitly measured at this time, it is understood by faculty that research opportunities influence students' cognitive development in positive ways building students' confidence and preparing them for practice. This is a unique learning outcome.

4.3 Experiential Learning and Soft Skills

LAAB highlights technical skills needed by students in our profession, as well as inherent soft skills including interdisciplinary design collaboration, values and ethics, and the ability to critically think through analysis. ESF and SDSU highlight these soft skills through the VALUES rubrics. These offer a means to organize measurements and use a nationwide standard. As ESF and SDSU are in different stages of development of their programs, their approach varies as well.

Each university offers learning opportunities off campus based on its own need. ESF offers partnerships with other universities as well as the undergraduate, “off-campus capstone.” In this process, students are encouraged to learn independently a topic of their choosing. SDSU and USU provide more traditional experiences, such as study abroad and paid internships for credit, with required learning reflections. With such different pedagogies, the assessment varies as well.

5 CONCLUSION

We do not conclude that one university offers a better approach to assessment than another. Rather, we acknowledge the value in LAAB’s flexible approach to assessing standards for student learning and skill outcomes. Over the years, learner-centered assessments have provided multiple opportunities for feedback, self-reflection, and real-world applications. They have set clear learning goals and criteria for success. They have assured active participation in the assessment process where students are not just passively receiving information but are actively engaged in their learning as a way to better understand how faculty may create positive and conducive environments that support students’ lifelong learning goals. By allowing landscape architecture programs to develop their own set of rubrics for identifying and discussing their program’s specific strengths and discrete constraints, the LAAB assures a thoughtful and robust response to change.

Each landscape architecture program or department may begin with a self-assessment of the values of their university, college, and school/department. Such a direction can aid the program to understand how it can fit into the larger system, be it within the university or within the profession. As clearly shown in the case studies, universities should be careful to emphasize both the technical and soft skills needed in the profession.

Moving forward, there could be three options: standardization, standards, or randomization. Standardization aims to create consistency by establishing and enforcing uniform procedures, while standards are the established norms or expectations. Randomization is a process of assigning subjects or objects to groups randomly to reduce bias. Standards define what’s expected, and randomization helps ensure fairness in experiments or studies (Tomberg, 2023). Standardization can create a one-size-fits-all mentality across institutions and not allow each program to flourish in its own institution. A randomization of assessment would allow each program to have its own autonomy, but lack the structure needed by the profession. As we move forward, it is incumbent upon multiple bodies to shape our curriculum and assessment process: faculty, staff, students, administration, alumni, and practitioners. It is critical we maintain an open mind to new ideas, allowing each institution to select its leaders and to gather consensus. Those of us not in leadership in our institution’s assessment strategies should still offer support and guidance to promote our team and the profession.

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