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Strategic Assessment of Institutional Learning (SAIL): Findings and Recommendations

July 22, 2021

Submitted by

SAIL Pilot Project Team

On behalf of

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Taskforce

July 22, 2021

Note: *The SAIL Findings and Recommendations are a living document; as the research project evolves, new findings and recommendations will emerge.*

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Executive Summary

In 2019, Senate approved changes to policy ED 16-0 *Types of Undergraduate and Graduate Credentials*, which incorporates eight Institutional Learning Outcomes (ILO) into all baccalaureate degrees: Communication, Teamwork, Lifelong Learning, Social Responsibility, Knowledge, Critical Thinking and Investigation, Intercultural Awareness, and Indigenous Knowledges and Ways. ILOs are created to inspire and articulate a shared vision of knowledge, skills, and abilities students are expected to develop during their studies.

Between November 2020 and June 2021, TRU undertook the Strategic Assessment of Institutional Learning (SAIL) project to pilot a model for assessing the degree of student achievement of ILOs in ILO-approved courses. The pilot was conducted on behalf of the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Taskforce, under the guidance of the Teaching and Learning Committee of Senate and General Education Taskforce. The SAIL pilot project sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the efficacy of institutional rubrics for assessing and demonstrating the degree of student achievement of ILOs in ILO-approved courses at TRU?
2. To what degree can the assessment results be used to inform learning support planning and practices to continuously improve student learning outcomes?

Findings from the pilot will inform recommendations for a regular process whereby program faculty collect, reflect on, and act as appropriate on meaningful data regarding student learning and the achievement of institutional learning outcomes.

Twelve faculty members representing six disciplines—tourism management, social work, education, communication, sociology, and cooperative education—participated in a community of practice of co-investigators planning, discussing, and learning about assessment of ILOs. Using faculty-developed institutional rubrics, data was collected to evaluate the extent to which students are achieving Critical Thinking and Investigation, Social Responsibility, and Lifelong Learning in ILO-approved courses based on course-embedded assignments.

Based on the findings of the SAIL pilot project, we recommend that TRU adopt a community of practice approach, via interdisciplinary ILO pods, to assess the degree of student achievement of ILOs in ILO-approved courses.

> **Recommendation 1: TRU should create an interdisciplinary ILO pod, a community of practice, for each of TRU's eight institutional learning outcomes. In addition, ILO pods should be coordinated through the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching and supported by educational developers. Faculty members who teach ILO-approved courses should be encouraged to participate in the ILO pods to foster peer-to-peer learning and support student learning.**
>
> **Recommendation 2: Faculty participating in an ILO pod will measure student achievement of an ILO in an ILO-approved course using an institutional rubric. Using the institutional rubric, two faculty members will peer assess, compare ratings, and reflect on and act as appropriate regarding student learning.**

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Note, where faculty identify highly sensitive student reflections or topics, or the institutional rubrics require adaptation, two additional options may be considered by faculty and their ILO pods, including: (a) using the institutional rubric as part of course-embedded assessment, a faculty member measures student achievement of the ILO; or (b) using a conventional course-embedded assessment method aligned to the ILO foci, a faculty member measures student achievement of the ILO. In both (a) and (b), peer assessment does not occur.

Formative, collaborative peer feedback and opportunities for peer-to-peer learning were identified as the greatest strengths of the SAIL pilot project. A developmental, faculty-led approach that fostered trust, collaboration, and cross-disciplinary conversations facilitated a reflexive approach to learning. Therefore, we recommend that TRU adopt a community of practice approach that fosters cross-disciplinary and generative conversations as part of a regular process whereby program faculty collect, reflect on, and act as appropriate on meaningful data regarding student learning.

Quality Assurance

TRU strives to build a quality culture though high standards of excellence and continuous quality improvement, which are informed by two quality assurance frameworks: (1) Quality Assurance Process Audit (QAPA), and (b) Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

In 2019 - 2020, TRU underwent a QAPA—a process intended to ascertain whether TRU continues to meet the program review policy requirements outlined in the Degree Quality Assessment Board's *Exempt Status Criteria and Guidelines* and *Degree Program Review Criteria and Guidelines*. Recommendations from the review included the need for TRU to "develop policies and procedures for institutional-wide curriculum review…" and the modification of "program review procedures [to] include an assessment of program learning outcomes" (pp. 3-4).

In 2019, TRU achieved accreditation with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), effective September 1, 2018, with the requirement that by the Spring 2022 mid-cycle evaluation, TRU will have implemented approaches for assessing institutional and program learning outcomes, as well as an assessment plan for the general education model.

Since 2014, TRU has been making consistent progress towards the development of institutional, program, and course level learning outcomes. Progress includes:

- Senate approved eight ILOs and ILO-courses;
- Learning Outcomes and Assessment Taskforce drafted of *Principles and Procedures for Learning Outcomes and Assessment*;
- Learning Outcomes and Assessment Taskforce piloted the SAIL research project to determine utility of institutional rubrics for assessing student achievement of ILOs in ILO-approved courses; and,
- Office of Quality Assurance revised the program review Self-Study Report template to include methods for documenting assessments of student achievement of program learning outcomes and ILOs.

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The Learning Outcomes and Assessment Taskforce is in the second year of its two-year mandate to establish an approach for the regular review of learning outcomes and assessment. One key area of work remains, as per its terms of reference: "Recommend a model of continuous learning outcomes assessment and curriculum review which would fit within structures and processes that are already established." In the following section we will describe a research project designed to determine the validity of a model of continuous learning outcomes and assessment at TRU.

Project Methodology

To address institutional goals of assurance of learning through ILO assessment, as well as meeting QAPA and NWCCU recommendations, TRU undertook the Strategic Assessment of Institutional Learning (SAIL) research pilot in November 2020 to June 2021. Twelve faculty members participated in the SAIL pilot to explore whether selected course-embedded assignments provided students with the opportunity to achieve the qualities and learning intended by the ILOs. Courses at TRU are identified as meeting the criteria for one or more ILOs based on ILO foci tools. The criteria reflect research-informed practice, accommodate diversity in disciplinary techniques and theory, and are meaningful to the institutional context.

After robust discussion of learning outcomes and assessment options and with the aim of improving student learning, the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Taskforce decided to pilot rubric-based assessment of student assignments, which builds upon the ILO criteria. Curcio (2018) suggests that the use of rubrics is an accepted method in assessing learning outcomes in undergraduate education.

The project was coordinated through the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT), co-led by a faculty learning and development coordinator and quality assurance officer, and managed by an office coordinator within CELT. The SAIL pilot was submitted to the research ethics board for review and was approved in February 2021.

Considering the university's comprehensive programming, we purposefully sought out faculty representatives from a diversity of disciplines. The pilot included twelve faculty members representing six disciplines: tourism management, social work, education, communication, sociology, cooperative education.

During the SAIL pilot project, faculty collaboratively developed rubrics, sought student consent, and assessed anonymized students' assignments to determine the degree of student achievement of three ILOs: Critical Thinking and Investigation, Social Responsibility, and Lifelong Learning. Piloting three ILOs is adequate for testing as demonstrated by Norman's (2017) use of three VALUE rubrics: critical thinking, quantitative literacy, and written communication. For each ILO, a rubric was developed by faculty in facilitated sessions. The rubrics included consideration of theoretical principles, knowledge, reflection, application, and other skills that align with assessable knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Stassen, Doherty, Poe, 2004). In addition, each course instructor identified a relevant course-embedded assignment. This use of direct (e.g., Allen, 2008) and authentic task assessments and rubrics reflects established practices in the United States (e.g., NILOA, 2016; Nunley, Bers & Manning, 2011), though is still relatively uncommon in Canadian contexts outside HECQO and OCAV funded projects in one Canadian province (e.g., Simpler, Frank, Scott, & Kaupp, 2018).

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The SAIL process aligned with the six guiding *Principles for Learning Outcomes and Assessment* drafted by the Learning Outcomes and Assessment Taskfoce with the intent to guide a values-based and research-informed learning outcomes and assessment practice at TRU. The six principles are listed below:

- Equitable and Learner-Centred
- Growth and Learning-Oriented
- Purposeful and Holistic Design
- Rigorous, Ongoing Cyclical Improvement
- Faculty-designed for Learning
- Reflexive Approach to Learning

A breakdown of the timeline and associated activities is provided in **Table 1**. The duration of the SAIL pilot project was 6 months (January to June).

Table 1 *SAIL Timeline and Activities*

Date	Task
Nov. 2020	• Received approval for SAIL pilot project from Associate Vice President Academic
Dec. - Jan. 2020	• Recruited 12 faculty members across six disciplines (sociology, communications, co-op, education, social work, tourism management). • Selected three ILOs for assessment: Social Responsibility, Lifelong Learning, Critical Thinking and Investigation
Jan. - Feb. 2021	• Received Research Ethics Board approval • Developed institutional rubrics • Sought student consent
Mar. - Apr. 2021	• Anonymized student assignments • Conducted assessor training
May 2021	• Assessed student assignments
Jun. 2021	• Debriefed with faculty members
Jun. 2021	• Disseminated research findings • Reported on research findings

Below is a summary of the activities that faculty engaged in during the pilot project:

1. Determined the ILO and ILO-approved courses for assessment.
2. Co-created a useful and relevant rubric with colleagues based on ILO foci and disciplinary program learning outcomes. The institutional rubrics built upon existing foci tools for ILOs developed by the General Education Taskforce.
3. Identified relevant student artifacts (course-embedded assessments).
4. Assessed two sets of artifacts with the faculty-developed institutional rubric.

Faculty members who participated in the SAIL pilot project received $250 professional development supplements in addition to assessor training, which is detailed below.

Faculty met in their ILO pods for assessor training in the last week of April. The two-hour sessions included a brief overview of the SAIL process, a review of the rubric developed in January and the rating sheet, practice and calibration time where faculty assessed the sample provided (a publicly available sample assignment from an institutional website) and then shared and discussed their ratings. Minor clarifications were made to the rubrics. Faculty members were then provided with a package via Microsoft Teams that contained:

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- ILO rubric (Appendices A, B, C)
- Assessor Instructions (Appendix D)
- Assessor rating sheet to record scores and brief comments (Appendix E)
- Anonymized assignments

The approach followed the classic curriculum improvement principles of being faculty-driven, educational developer supported, and data informed (Wolf, 2007), and built upon prior work undertaken by LOATF and the General Education Taskforce.

Results and Discussion

Twelve faculty members representative of six disciplines and three ILOs participated in the inaugural SAIL research pilot project. At the end of the project, faculty participated in a facilitated debrief session to discuss their perspectives regarding the strengths and opportunities to inform improvement and address the initial research questions:

1. What is the efficacy of institutional rubrics for assessing and demonstrating the degree of student achievement of ILOs in ILO-approved courses?
2. To what degree can the assessment results be used to inform learning support planning and practices to continuously improve student learning outcomes?

Below is a summary of faculty members' feedback.

Interdisciplinary Community of Practice Approach

When faculty members were asked what the greatest strength of the research pilot was, they agreed that the opportunity to collaborate across disciplines with colleagues was the most valuable aspect of the pilot. Faculty participants valued the ILO pod format—small group feedback—used to collectively assess student learning. Faculty described collaboratively designing the rubric and reflecting upon assessment as highlights of the experience. Furthermore, faculty said it was helpful to have other faculty colleagues grade their students' assignments and to receive feedback. For faculty participants, it was useful to see how their colleagues had interpreted the ILO and how the ILO was assessed in other courses; therefore, the interdisciplinary design of the ILO pods was an asset. Faculty appreciated the "collaborative adventure" as part of the co-creation of rubrics and missed the community when assessing assignments individually.

While faculty members enjoyed the opportunity for peer-feedback, some noted during the debrief that they had a desire to assess their own students' work using the institutional rubric. As a result, it was proposed that several options be made available to faculty, such as: (a) peer assessment using the institutional rubric, or (b) faculty assessment of their own students using the institutional rubric. Faculty were also interested in piloting the use of their own assignment rubrics with more specific criteria and then connecting their results with course outcomes and ILO foci—in this approach faculty would assess their own students.

However, the faculty members' feedback also highlighted the sensitive nature of teaching. This past year was noted as an especially challenging time, as participants reflected upon feeling vulnerable—this applied both to faculty and students—which potentially impacted the student consent rate. It also highlighted for faculty the need to build trust within the ILO pods. Therefore,

faculty members recommended that the process for learning outcomes and assessment be built on trust, reciprocity, and collaboration.

Implementing a community of practice approach will need to be done carefully, with significant attention to building an environment in which faculty feel safe to share with their colleagues. Being able to "ease in" through the ILO pod approach to sharing with peers about their assessment was seen as valuable. Duration of the time spent in the ILO pods is critical to success, as such, consideration should be given to running the ILO pods on a two-year cycle of building trust, planning, assessing, revising, and re-assessing, with regular and frequent opportunities to connect (e.g., roughly two to three times a semester over a span of two years).

Efficacy of Institutional Rubrics

The relevance and efficacy of the faculty-developed institutional rubrics (Appendices A, B, and C) was dependent upon the alignment of the rubric with the course assignments selected. When assignments were well-matched to the rubric, they were easy to assess; however, if the assignments were not, then it was challenging for faculty to assess them using the rubric. Faculty participants suggested that course assignments should be designed more purposefully with the rubric in mind to increase the utility of the rubric. Therefore, we recommend that future pilot projects be conducted over two semesters to allow faculty to build the rubric in advance of course delivery.

Faculty participants also cautioned that the ILO rubrics should be general enough to allow for disciplinary diversity. Two of the three ILO pods—Social Responsibility and Critical Thinking and Investigation—allowed for testing across three disciplines; however, the third pod—Lifelong Learning—was limited to one discipline. Therefore, we recommend that future pilot projects encourage greater disciplinary diversity when testing the validity of the rubrics.

A third consideration raised by faculty participants was the relevance of the ILO foci for their assignments. It would have been helpful if faculty participants identified the rubric rows that were relevant for their course assignment in advance. Furthermore, it was suggested that faculty members share their assignment criteria with their peers prior to engaging in the peer assessment.

Finally, too few students consented to participate in this pilot to draw conclusions about student achievement of ILOs based on the use of institutional rubrics. Future pilots need to consider methods for increasing student consent, or models in which student consent is not required. We discuss this further below under the heading *Student Consent Rate.*

Utility of Assessment Process: Challenges and Limitations

The most significant challenge for faculty members during the assessment process was navigating the platform (Microsoft Teams) and juggling three documents (student assignment, rubric, and rating sheet). This added unnecessary time and frustration to the assessment process. Several faculty members noted that navigating several documents was cumbersome, and that they needed multiple computer screens to complete the process. It was suggested that future SAIL projects should test a different platform, such as Moodle, and model practices used in Open Learning, such as fillable rubrics. Faculty agreed that, for this to be scalable to a larger number of student assignments, the platform and process will need to be more efficient.

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Another concern raised by faculty participants was the utility of the rubric for non-written assignments. Future pilots should test the rubric for alternate assignment modes, such as presentations, posters, group projects, or practicum observations, just to name a few. This approach should also consider how to incorporate peer assessment by other faculty members so that students do not have to present twice, for example.

Faculty also raised concerns about increased workload, particularly when engaging in peer assessment and marking another faculty members' assignments. Consideration should be given to the length of time it takes to assess students' work using the rubric, and whether a representative sample—as opposed to the entire class—is a more viable option. In addition, consideration should be given for staff time to anonymize student assignments as a part of the peer assessment process, and whether recruiting teaching assistants is a possibility.

Finally, timing and assignment choice was particularly critical for determining student achievement of the ILOs. For example, the timing of the SAIL pilot project—January to June—did not align well with timing for cooperative education (COOP). As a result, the assignment selected for assessment was not a good match for the rubric. Future pilots should adjust timing to allow for the diversity of programming offered at TRU, including Open Learning courses.

Student Consent Rate

In this first SAIL pilot, students enrolled in the participating courses were invited to consent (see Appendix F for copy of student consent form) to have one assignment assessed by a faculty member who was not their instructor. Student consent was sought within an ethics and privacy reviewed protocol to collect, anonymize, and assess one assignment for the pilot project. Students' consenting was kept confidential, and assignments anonymized. In addition, students' instructors did not know which students consented. Having the invitation convey that TRU was seeking student assignments regardless of quality was seen as important. Being anonymous and voluntary was also seen as valuable for students according to discussions with faculty participants.

The overall student consent rate was 14.6 percent (46 out of 316 enrolled students). Response rates ranged from 2.4 to 50 percent across the nine courses out of a total possible 11. Two courses were not assessed. Of the two courses, one course had a high consent rate; however, the assignments were not sufficiently completed to be assessed. The second course was not assessed as one of the faculty members retired during the SAIL pilot project and consequently her course was removed from the pilot.

A key issue discussed by faculty was the low student consent rates. Faculty hypothesized that trust was an important factor when students choose whether to consent. Initially, faculty were surprised by the low student consent rate; however, upon further reflection, several factors were suggested as impacting the student consent rate. Firstly, shifting to remote learning stimulated by the pandemic may have impacted the ability for faculty to foster trust with their students. As a result, students were not as open to sharing their work (anecdotal evidence of higher consent rate during face-to-face, which was in line with response rates to course evaluations). Faculty hypothesized that students might have felt more vulnerable this year as some students have never met their instructor in person.

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A second reason the student consent rate was low, hypothesized faculty participants, may be that the personal nature of assessments varied across courses. For example, assignments for COOP students were frequently designed to encourage reflection. It was suggested that more personal assignments might be best assessed by the instructor who has established trust with their students. Alternatively, students may be more hesitant to consent to having other faculty assess their written work if they feel it is personal. This seemed to be relevant across several of the courses participating in the pilot project. Therefore, we recommend the consideration of two models to accommodate assignments with personal reflections: (1) the faculty member is the only assessor, which does not require student consent, or (2) the faculty member is not the assessor and therefore requires student consent.

It is important for TRU to be transparent with. Ideally, consent should be sought from a source that the student feels typically hears them, and the student has a constructive/positive relationship with. It also needs to seem that those who will have the authority to facilitate change are on board, so perhaps an initial email from the institution/faculty/school would lend credibility and weight to the project. Additional possibilities for increasing student consent rate include attending class to request consent when students are on campus rather than solely electronic surveys, adapting the language so that it is accessible to a wider audience, approaching students earlier with information, and emphasizing the benefit for students. The SAIL project coordinators noted that this initial pilot did not have student feedback or focus group options, it may be useful to have greater engagement with students in the future.

Finally, one reason the student consent rate was low, hypothesized faculty participants, may be that students have a limited understanding or immediate connection with TRU's ILOs, as such the benefit of the SAIL pilot project in terms of student success was not easily evident for students. Because ILOs are a relatively new concept at TRU, we anticipate that their value will become more apparent over time.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the SAIL pilot project, we recommend that TRU adopt a community of practice approach, via interdisciplinary ILO pods, to assess institutional learning outcomes in ILO-approved courses. A community of practice is formed when a group of people want to share common experiences and knowledge that are related to a particular area of expertise. Communities of practice are organized around what matters to people (Wenger, 1998). The three main characteristics are: a shared domain of interest or competence that is distinct from other domains; the community engages in shared activity that supports relationship building; and the practice of the practitioners is the focal point of that activity (Wenger et al., 2002).

> **Recommendation 1: TRU should create an interdisciplinary ILO pod, a community of practice, for each of TRU's eight institutional learning outcomes. In addition, ILO pods should be coordinated through the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching and supported by educational developers. Faculty members who teach ILO-approved courses should be encouraged to participate in the ILO pods to foster peer-to-peer learning and support student learning.**

Additional findings from the pilot project suggest that the use of a standardized institutional rubric for measuring achievement of an ILO within an ILO-approved course shows promise.

Recommendation 2: Faculty participating in an ILO pod will measure student achievement of an ILO in an ILO-approved course using an institutional rubric. Using the institutional rubric, two faculty members will peer assess, compare ratings, and reflect on and act as appropriate regarding student learning.

Note, where faculty identify highly sensitive student reflections or topics, or the institutional rubrics require adaptation, two additional options may be considered by faculty and their ILO pods, including: (a) using the institutional rubric as part of course-embedded assessment, a faculty member measures student achievement of the ILO; or (b) using a conventional course-embedded assessment method aligned to the ILO foci, a faculty member measures student achievement of the ILO. In both (a) and (b), peer assessment does not occur.

It is important to note that the faculty members participating in the research project and members of the SAIL pilot project team recognize that this process may involve a cultural shift at TRU. Teaching is an intensely personal endeavor and opening oneself up to critique and peer feedback requires an approach grounded in an ethic of care and collegiality.

To sustain the integrity of the pilot project, we recommend the continued level of resourcing in terms of project management and rubric development and assessment facilitation for the duration of the pilots.

Next Steps and Future Considerations

To support TRU in the establishment of a regular process whereby program faculty collect, reflect on, and act as appropriate on meaningful data regarding student learning and the achievement of ILOs, we recommend the continuation of the SAIL research project in slightly modified forms:

1. **Revise and Re-test:** In Winter 2022, revise the institutional rubrics for Social Responsibility, Lifelong Learning, and Critical Thinking and Investigation ILOs with the first faculty cohort.
2. **Build ILO Rubrics for Remaining ILOs:** Within the next two years, replicate the SAIL research project to complete the development of the five remaining ILO rubrics with several new cohorts of faculty prior to the start of the term they are teaching in and distributed over the next two to three years, for example:
    - In Winter 2022, develop rubrics for Communication, Teamwork, and Knowledge
    - In Fall 2022 to Winter 2023, implement ILO pods for Communication, Teamwork, and Knowledge.
    - Between 2022 and 2024, develop rubrics for Intercultural Awareness and Indigenous Knowledges & Ways and assess student achievement of the ILOs in 2024-2025 and 2025-2026.

Once the eight institutional rubrics have been developed and tested, consideration should be given for a cycle of ILO assessment at TRU. For example, we may consider assessment of ILOs on a two-year or four-year cycle as shown below (**Table 3** and **Table 4**):

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Table 3: *Two-year cycle of assessing four ILOs*

	Connection		Engagement		Exploration		Local-to-Global	
	Communication	Teamwork	Lifelong Learning	Social Responsibility	Knowledge	Critical Thinking & Investigation	Indigenous Knowledges & Ways	Intercultural Awareness
Year 1								
Year 2								
Year 3								
Year 4								
Year 5								
Year 6								
Year 7								
Year 8								

Table 4: *Four-year cycle of assessing two ILOs*

	Connection		Engagement		Exploration		Local-to-Global	
	Communication	Teamwork	Lifelong Learning	Social Responsibility	Knowledge	Critical Thinking & Investigation	Indigenous Knowledges & Ways	Intercultural Awareness
Year 1								
Year 2								
Year 3								
Year 4								
Year 5								
Year 6								
Year 7								
Year 8								

We recommend that the cycle of assessment be built into the work of the ILO pods, hosted by CELT, and facilitated by educational developers. Further, we recommend that the assessment cycles occur in two-year blocks, with the first year attending to planning and assessing, and the second year attending to revising and re-assessing. In addition, the ILO rubrics should be made available to all faculty members for use in their courses, regardless of whether they are part of an ILO pod.

Additional future considerations should explore opportunities for embedding the ILO pods within existing TRU processes, such as peer review or cyclical program review. Finally, TRU should explore avenues for engaging students throughout the cycle of assessment. For example, students could provide feedback on the rubric or be taught how to use the rubric and engage in peer assessment thus supporting scalability of the project.

Conclusion

The SAIL project, with its aim to inform improvements to courses and student learning at TRU, reflects growing consensus that “harnessing evidence of student learning, making it consequential in the improvement of student success and strengthened institutional performance is what matters” (Kuh et al., 2015, p. 4). Findings from the inaugural SAIL pilot project suggest that TRU has the capacity, both structurally and culturally, to foster a collaborative approach to learning outcomes and assessment that will lead to continuous quality improvement and student success. Formative, collaborative peer feedback and opportunities for peer-to-peer learning were identified as the greatest strengths of the SAIL pilot project. Therefore, we recommend that TRU adopt a community of practice approach that fosters interdisciplinary and generative conversations as part of a regular process whereby program faculty collect, reflect on, and act as appropriate on meaningful data regarding student learning.

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Appendices