ACE LEARNER SUCCESS LAB
SELF-STUDY ASSESSMENT, PART 1

Rapid economic, technological, and social changes demand resilient higher education institutions that can adapt and innovate. ACE’s Model for Comprehensive Learner Success illustrates a strategic, coordinated process to align policies, practices, and resources to position colleges and universities to better facilitate learner success. This approach has a broadened definition of learner success at its core, and includes six interconnected target areas and three strategic lenses through which each of these areas should be examined:

ABOUT THE SELF-STUDY ASSESSMENT

The Self-Study Assessment (SSA) tool, which is structured around the LSL model, is designed to guide an on-campus review process by institutions participating in ACE’s Learner Success Lab (LSL). The SSA consists of two parts. Part 1 focuses on defining learner success and exploring the three strategic lenses, within your particular institutional context. Part 2 examines the six target areas of the ACE Model for Comprehensive Learner Success, and applies the strategic lenses to each.

This document—Part 1—is a data-supported thought exercise through which your institution can create shared meaning around learner success. It is intended for use by your entire learner success committee and its subcommittees, and in combination with the Lab activities located in the online learning modules in ACE Engage®. (Part 2 is forthcoming, and will facilitate the subcommittees in conducting an in-depth examination of their respective target areas.)

USING THE TOOL

The questions included in the SSA tool provide the basis for an assessment of existing initiatives and notable gaps in institutional policies and practices. These questions, while thorough, are by no means exhaustive: institutions should feel free to eliminate questions and/or identify other relevant questions and key data as part of the review process.

In addition to a category-by-category analysis, your institution may choose to incorporate a cross-category SWOC analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges) into your review. This approach may help identify the most critical findings of the review and can be a useful step in formulating the committee’s recommendations and final deliverable.
THE CORE: DEFINING LEARNER SUCCESS

The term “student” connotes a traditional learner (18–24, full-time student, single, no dependents) that attends (often a four-year) college or university directly after graduating high school (and is academically prepared to do so). New economic realities, demographic changes in postsecondary student populations, and a broader educational paradigm shift from an instruction model to a learning model create the need to make a corresponding shift in our language, as well.

Learner—as opposed to student—is a more inclusive term, intentionally employed to recognize demographic changes, shifts toward learner-centered models of program delivery, and lifelong learning experiences that may occur outside of traditional credit programming on postsecondary campuses.

The U.S. system of higher education was initially created to educate a student population that was predominantly full-time, White, male, direct from high school, and had college-educated parents. This document focuses on the new majority of learners, which includes post-traditional learners (working adults, student parents, student veterans), students of color, first-generation students, and students from low-income backgrounds.

**LEARNER PROFILE**

- What are the **current demographics** of your learners?
- What **changes** has your institution experienced in learner demographics over time?
- Does your institution’s **enrollment strategy** include a focus on any particular groups?
DEFINING SUCCESS

In the context of higher education, success often equates to degree completion. However, an increasingly diverse population of learners and variety of learning experiences yield additional outcomes that may add overall value for learners:

- Course completion
- Completion of an alternative credential (certificate, certification, badges)
- Employment (career exploration, internship, new job, career advancement)
- Skills development and the ability to identify and articulate relevant workforce skills
- Transfer
- Personal enrichment
- Social/civic engagement
- Academic and personal planning
- Personal and professional identity development
- Increased learner agency

REFLECT

Reflect on how these concepts are operationalized at your institution, and weigh the availability of current data (and systems of data collection) and the validity of your current measures.

- Which of these outcomes does your institution measure?
- How are they measured?
**THE CORE: BROADENING THE FOCUS**

An institution focused on learner success partners with its students and community to produce environments conducive to learning in all its forms, and develops learners who demonstrate the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and agency necessary to navigate their life course, achieve personal fulfillment, and contribute to civil society. In order to do so, institutions must take a holistic view of learner success, beyond traditional notions of persistence, to integrate robust supports for life design and career exploration, as well as workforce skills development.

**COMPLETION**

Completion (coupled with persistence) constitute a learner’s ability to remain enrolled in an educational program and make measurable progress toward their educational goal(s), ultimately concluding in the completion of a postsecondary credential.

**LIFE DESIGN**

Life design is a broad term that integrates a variety of approaches, strategies, and programs that postsecondary institutions can employ to help learners develop a life and career plan. Specifically, these strategies and programs focus on helping learners better understand the world and work, explore career options, choose a major or concentration, and reflect on the purpose of postsecondary education. When learners get involved in life-design programs, they take an active role in their own learning by engaging in self-reflection and exploration around life, academic, and career decisions. Life-design planning activities can help learners chart a course for their future and positively impact academic and professional choices, success, and well-being.

**CAREER READINESS**

The changing dynamics of today’s economy and fast-evolving technologies require workers to perform increasingly complex tasks and solve new challenges in the workplace. To succeed, employees must have career-ready skills, which are usually broken down into hard skills, such as critical thinking and the ability to solve real-world problems using specialized knowledge, and soft skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork, time management, and interpersonal skills.
PREPARING FOR THE SELF-STUDY ASSESSMENT, PART 2

STRATEGIC LENSES: FRAMING LEARNER SUCCESS

The three strategic lenses in ACE’s Model for Comprehensive Learner Success help institutions align and focus the work undertaken in each of the model’s six target areas. (Self-Study Assessment Part 2 focuses on the six target areas and the application of these lenses to those sections.) As you prepare for this work, please consider the following descriptions of each of the three lenses. The guiding questions included below may help frame (or reframe) your institution’s approach to learner success.

LENS: DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION (DEI)

This lens addresses the role of institutions and individuals in racial, economic, and social justice. Within the institution, it is imperative to go beyond numerical diversity to ensure that learners, faculty, and staff of all backgrounds feel that the institutional setting is equitable, welcoming, inclusive, and supportive. Inclusive and equitable campus climates have a meaningful, positive effect on persistence and success, as well as faculty and staff engagement. This critically self-reflective approach plays a key role in realizing higher education’s potential to address education and social equity gaps beyond the institution. It recognizes the vital importance of an educated citizenry to driving innovation and delivering on the democratic promise. It asserts that all learners deserve access to higher education that prepares them to succeed personally and professionally in an increasingly diverse and connected society.

This approach requires institutional leaders at all levels to actively consider who is part of planning and decision-making (and who is not). Whether through teaching, research, or civic engagement, equitable institutions promote historical and global understanding of systemic discrimination and injustice. They and their leaders account for national, economic, demographic, sexual, sociopolitical, gender, physical, and linguistic diversity, alongside neurodiversity. Overall, they recognize their institution and its constituents as agents in the broader social, economic, and political context.

APPLYING THE LENS: DEI

- Are these data disaggregated to identify and address equity gaps?
- How does your institution account for invisible aspects of diversity that are not easily measured?
- What structures or mechanisms are in place to ensure that marginalized voices are heard?
LENS: DATA-INFORMED DECISION-MAKING (DIDM)

A data-informed approach to decision-making ensures that learner success goals, progress, and outcomes are developed from a foundation of institutional self-study, measurement, and ongoing assessment. Following from articulated goals, progress and outcomes of learner success are formally measured and assessed. Being data-informed means building metrics into initiatives and goals from the beginning and thoughtfully asking, “How will we know?”

Institutional research or decision support staff are involved in helping academic leaders identify barriers to, and opportunities to improve, student persistence and completion across the institution. Metrics and collective reflection provide a qualitative and quantitative way to take stock, analyze, and make sense of actual strengths and barriers to learner and organizational success—moving beyond perceptions and assumed narratives. Data-informed strategies include careful, inclusive listening across a broad spectrum of institutional stakeholders and a focus on growth-mindset learning and development for students, faculty, and staff.

**APPLYING THE LENS: DIDM**

- To what extent does your institution employ **data-driven analysis** of existing assets, needs, capabilities, and opportunities?
- Are there systems in place to glean insights and make data actionable?
- Are these tools widely accessible to faculty and staff?

LENS: AGILITY & TRANSFORMATION (A&T)

Agility signifies an institution’s willingness and capacity to evolve structures and practices in response to or, ideally, in anticipation of disruptive forces. Institutions that are comprehensive, mission-driven, strategic, and adaptable demonstrate core stability and capacity to not only be resilient, but to grow—to transform—in adverse situations. They leverage current resources along with innovative, entrepreneurial thinking to explore creative solutions in times of crisis.

This lens encourages a strategic, coordinated, intentional process through which higher education institutions align and integrate policies, programs, initiatives, and individuals. This process enhances the institution’s value proposition and empowers it to better serve its mission and increasingly diverse learners, faculty, and staff. This frame emphasizes that centering learner success is not static, but an ongoing journey of transformation, discernment, and growth.

**APPLYING THE LENS: A&T**

- Does your institution use its mission and values as the framework for change?
- Is the process strategic and coordinated?
- How does your institution work to align and integrate policies, programs, and initiatives to enhance the institutional value proposition and better serve learners?

Now that you have worked to create a shared definition of learner success and explored the three strategic lenses within your particular institutional context, use Part 2 of the SSA to examine each of the six target areas of the ACE Model for Comprehensive Learner Success in depth.