CASE STUDY

Transforming Campus Culture with a Flexible Approach to Assessment

THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA

Founded in 1831 as the state's first public college, The University of Alabama (UA) in Tuscaloosa is a senior, comprehensive, doctoral-level institution dedicated to advancing the intellectual and social condition of the people of the state through excellence in teaching, research, and service. UA is the fastest growing flagship institution in the country and has been listed among the top 60 public universities in the nation in U.S. News & World Report's annual college rankings for more than a decade.

The Challenge

As a large, leading public university offering more than 220 undergraduate and graduate-level programs, The University of Alabama is the fastest growing flagship institution in the country. Between 2009 and 2017, the student population at UA nearly doubled in size, reaching 38,563 students enrolled in the fall. As student enrollment continually increased, so did the exponential demand on resources throughout the institution.

In the face of such unprecedented growth, UA's collection of homegrown tools for capturing and organizing data across campus quickly became an unsustainable way to track student learning and institutional outcomes. For example, the "off-the-shelf" data management system used in the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) wasn't customized for UA's needs, and technical issues were not resolved efficiently. The Google Docs system created by UA's IT team worked reasonably well for program review, but did not integrate with other systems or enable broad administrative access. And the bulky 3-ring-binders used for student portfolios had become antiquated and overly burdensome.

Having outgrown their disparate processes and assortment of tools, UA realized an urgent need to find a streamlined solution that would enable them to more effectively manage assessment efforts and prepare for SACSCOC.

The Solution

The University Assessment Council engaged in an in-depth discovery process, identifying needs and scoping out requirements on behalf of its many campus stakeholders. The results of that exercise drove UA's search for a centralized assessment management system with the following criteria:

• Flexibility to meet the unique needs of individual units
• Ability to integrate with other systems across campus
• Usability to accommodate a wide range of end-users
• Scalability to support the evolving needs of a growing institution

After rigorously evaluating several potential platforms against these requirements, UA decided to partner with Taskstream by Watermark and began gradual implementation of its assessment platforms. Working together, the OIE supported the initial launch with formalized, in-depth training opportunities for faculty and staff, as well as a variety of additional training options for users across campus.

Today, the OIE applies Taskstream by Watermark throughout the institution in a variety of ways to support a thoughtful, intentional approach to assessment, accreditation, annual reporting, program review, and student success initiatives.

Engaging Students in High-Impact Practices

College of Commerce and Business Administration students use ePortfolios as a self-reflection tool to evaluate co-curricular experiences from their financial literacy outreach program. Other faculty on campus use personal portfolios in capstone courses to instruct students on building their own professional development portfolios.

Simplifying Regional & Specialized Accreditation

UA's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) leverages the assessment capabilities of both Aqua by Watermark and Taskstream by Watermark platforms to continually monitor and improve on this institution-wide initiative for SACSCOC. In the School of Social Work, faculty collaborate in a centralized workspace specifically designed in Taskstream by Watermark to manage their Self-Study for CSWE accreditation.

Promoting Meaningful Assessment in Every Corner of Campus

The OIE works closely with academic programs and non-instructional departments to customize unique workspaces for defining learning outcomes, generating curriculum maps, and housing assessment plans, findings, and status reports. Their office has also added a custom rubric for meta-assessment of program outcomes with evaluator feedback. These systems serve as a central home for improvement processes.

The Win

Purposefully shifting to a centralized assessment management system has cultivated a new, growing culture of assessment throughout the university. A process once driven by compliance-based actions with limited perceived value has been transformed into one of meaningful, measurable, and manageable quality improvements driven by better data.

"We're changing the culture to make it about doing things that are useful and measurable, and we have seen a gradual shift in the way people talk about how we assess things. Now they ask, 'How is this impacting students and the community?'"

Ginger Bishop
Director of Institutional Effectiveness
The University of Alabama

Centralizing efforts and access to more valuable data has naturally bolstered transparency, trust, and engagement among those involved in assessment at UA. The positive results have encouraged greater adoption and more innovative use of Taskstream by Watermark across the institution and have highlighted the value of the OIE as an essential resource on campus supporting rigorous evaluation and continuous improvement.

"From small projects to large institutional initiatives, everyone comes to our office to explore ways to evaluate their programs. It's been very rewarding for us. The message is out on campus that what you do has value, but it needs to be evaluated in order to learn and grow."

Mary Anne Connors
Assistant Director of Institutional Effectiveness
The University of Alabama

Looking Ahead

Maintaining the momentum from its recent successes, the OIE is expanding its work with academic departments and administrative offices to align efforts in support of institutional goals.

• In the coming year, the OIE will support the Financial Affairs Office as it embarks on new plans for long-term strategic and assessment planning, curriculum mapping, and alignment of institutional objectives with budget allocations.
• The OIE is adding campus-wide faculty development opportunities in both design and use of ePortfolios as a high impact practice for deeper learning. The newly accredited Early Childhood Ed Program plans to leverage online portfolios to observe teacher prep candidates and collect artifacts for edTPA® certification.
• At the institutional level, UA is developing a task force to pursue a comprehensive review of the general education requirements and core curriculum, with plans to expand their use of Taskstream by Watermark to support this large-scale initiative.

With their 5th-Year Interim Report and SACSCOC reaffirmation on the horizon, the OIE is using Taskstream by Watermark's collaborative reporting and descriptive analytics capabilities to prepare. Having developed a strong culture of assessment and implemented robust assessment processes at nearly every level of the institution, UA feels confident it will be highly successful in this rigorous undertaking.