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Improving Academic Learning and Success Through Transparency: A Student’s Perspective

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Improving Academic Learning and Success Through Transparency: A Student’s Perspective
Christina Ouellette, Graduate Assistant, Joanna Boeing Bratton, Assistant Director, Ruth Slotnick, Director, Office of Assessment, Bridgewater State University

BSU Institutional Profile
- **Mission:** Comprehensive teaching university of Southeastern Massachusetts using its resources to support and advance the economic and cultural life of the region and the state
- **Enrollment:** 9,500 undergraduate/1,400 graduate students
- **Degrees:** 97 academic degrees offered

Purpose of the Transparency Project
- The BSU Transparency Project is led by the Graduate Assistant in the Office of Assessment
- Aims to make all program learning outcomes easily visible and understandable to current and prospective faculty, staff, and students
- Vital for students’ understanding of their academic learning and success
- National calls for transparency by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment and the Association of American Colleges and Universities
- Required evidence of transparency of student learning outcomes by NECHE

Project Research Methods
- Conducted two sets of semi-structured interviews with college deans (n=8) in spring and fall of 2019
- Comparative analysis of interview transcripts
- Validated emerging themes with assessment colleagues
- Review of the literature on transparency of learning outcomes
- Field notes, including lived experiences as a BSU graduate and undergraduate student

BSU’s Transparency Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1: Visibility and Understandability (Continuum)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Visibility (Zero transparency)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes only in department documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes shared only at the college level (Deans, Assessment Office, Faculty, Staff, et. al.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes internally posted within the university</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes accessible to the public and may or may not be easily understandable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Visibility (Actively communicated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes accessible to the public and are clear and easily understandable</td>
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<td>Outcomes internally posted within the university and are easily understandable</td>
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<tr>
<th>Level 2: Active Communication of Program Learning Outcomes with Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 3: Integration in Academic and Student Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4: Connected and Applied for Student Understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level 5: Complete Transparency</td>
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</tbody>
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Identified Barriers to Transparency of Learning Outcomes at BSU

- **Academic Freedom**
  - Prevents assigned incorporation of transparency into course material and structure; need faculty buy-in
- **Limited Institutional Procedures**
  - Lack of campus-wide guidelines on visibility at BSU pertaining to program learning outcomes
- **Perceived Lack of Value for Students**
  - Perceptions by faculty, deans, and staff that learning outcomes have little or no value for students
- **Uncertainty about who has Influence**
  - Misunderstandings about who has influence in making learning outcomes visible
- **Assessment Jargon**
  - Assessment vocabulary and practices may be confusing, feel disconnected from teaching, or simply unfamiliar