Leadership Education as Character Development: Best Practices from 21 Years of Helping Graduates Live Purposeful Lives

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Abstract

Developing character, ethical values, social responsibility, and productive citizenship is identified in the mission of many colleges and universities. However, accomplishing and measuring such growth in students is often questionable. This article describes Northern Michigan University’s Student Leader Fellowship Program, discusses development and implementation of the program, identifies several of the program’s learning objectives, presents quantitative and qualitative outcomes assessment data demonstrating the program’s impact on students, and discusses factors key to the twenty-plus years of program success.

For over twenty years, the Student Leader Fellowship Program (SLFP) at Northern Michigan University (NMU) has helped students explore their values, develop a sense of purpose based on those values, and improve leadership skills necessary to initiate socially responsible action at the community level. The SLFP provides committed students with an intensive, two-year experience that has been transforming for most of the 816 students who have completed it, and it promises to be the same for the 100-plus students currently engaged. It is clear that the values of social responsibility, servant leadership, citizen engagement, and ethical living in everyday life have become central to the lives of most SLFP students.

Just as important as the experience of student fellows has been the impact that this program has had on the rest of the NMU campus. We have often described the SLFP as a circle of students with a shared

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bond—but with the circle facing outward as our purpose is community leadership. Student fellows have
been involved with transforming many of the 300-plus student organizations at NMU, bringing an ethos of
responsible leadership and community service to them. As a result, a sense of civic engagement now perme-
ates much of the NMU campus, which has recently achieved the Carnegie classification as a Community
Engaged Campus.

Similarly, hundreds of relationships have been developed with leaders in the Marquette community
who have involved themselves with the SLFP as mentors and service internship advisors. The shared
values behind this campus-community partnership have resulted in over 90,000 hours of leadership
by student fellows in service of developing and improving various community enrichment programs.
SLFP students are known throughout our community as dependable, ethical, and valuable citizens of
Marquette.

To be sure, the SLFP is a staff- and resource-intensive university program. Therefore, it requires
strong administrative support, which is obtainable through generating measurable outcomes that are of
value to the institution on multiple levels. Accordingly, the program has clearly demonstrated its ability to
provide life lessons emphasizing community engagement, social responsibility, ethics education, and lead-
ership skill development for college students across two decades.

Program Description

The SLFP is a two-year, cocurricular leadership development program formed in 1991 with the goal of
fostering citizen leadership in college students. It was primarily based on the concepts of servant leader-
ship (Greenleaf, 1977), ethics in leadership (Burns, 1978), and the practice of learning through experience
(Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984). At the time of its development, there were very few cocurricular leadership
development programs in existence around the country. Nonetheless, the SLFP planning committee re-
searched what was going on at other institutions and combined many smaller elements (e.g., workshop
series, mentoring, curricular instruction, off-campus retreat, and community service projects) into a com-
prehensive, two-year leadership development initiative aimed at developing students into social change
agents. Shortly after the creation of the SLFP, likely affected by the same social milieu of the time, com-
mittee members produced A Social Change Model of Leadership Development (Higher Education Research
Institute, 1996). Overlap between the goals, levels of impact, and values explicated in A Social Change
Model of Leadership Development and those of the SLFP are tremendous.

The SLFP is set up to teach leadership theories and skills through guided practice with progressively
reduced oversight from program staff throughout the two-year experience. Every step of the way, values
such as integrity, excellence, service, courage, and lifelong learning are emphasized and modeled for stu-
dent participants with the vision of them carrying those values with them beyond college life to their ca-
reers, families, and other socially responsible community involvements.

Between 50 and 60 students are selected each March to begin the following fall semester. Typically
we receive around 100 applications. Selections are based on leadership potential, interest in service, and a
student’s ability to make a considerable commitment in terms of time and effort. The structure of students’
SLFP experience consists primarily of the following components:

• **Fall retreat.** Conducted overnight at an off-campus location, the fall retreat involves both the first-
and second-year student fellows (100-plus in total). The fall retreat introduces student fellows to
the program, builds commitment, fosters fellowship, introduces core program values, and energizes students for the year. Students experience a fall retreat each September during their two years in the SLFP.

- **Leadership Theory and Practice course.** During their first semester in the SLFP, program participants take this highly interactive course. Students gain an overview of various leadership theories. They have opportunities to explore different leadership styles and identify their preferred style. A considerable amount of class time is dedicated to giving students the chance to gain self-understanding and to become aware of the values and beliefs of others. Development of core democratic values permeates lessons throughout the entire course; however, one two-hour class session is devoted entirely to identifying personal core values and exploring how values and ethics are essential for effective leadership. A number of campus and community guest speakers and presenters discuss topics such as personal goal setting, ethics, diversity, women and leadership, and leadership as a service. A highlight for many students in the course is the academic service learning project. Students research and propose various projects, democratically select one to implement, carry out all project logistics through committees, perform the service, and reflect on their community impact and how what they learned relates to course objectives. Additionally, all students individually compose a leadership vision and establish three to four leadership development goals and objectives for themselves accordingly.

- **Leadership mentoring.** Right at the start of the program student fellows are matched, based upon common interests, with community leadership mentors who act as role models, advisers, and teachers. An overarching goal of the mentoring component is for student fellows to see how adults who are busy with careers and families are still able to find time to act in accordance with their values and positively influence their community. Activities, which are encouraged to take place approximately every two weeks throughout the entire first year, typically include attending community organization meetings, volunteering together, going to conferences, participating in workshops, or simply conversing over coffee or lunch. Program staff coordinate workshops each semester where students and mentors set goals and work toward organizing their schedules. Mentors provide students with feedback on their student organization or leadership class activities and introduce them to becoming a significant part of the local community. A great side effect is that many student fellows maintain a relationship with their mentors long after the one-year commitment.

- **Skill Builders! leadership workshops.** Each student fellow is required to participate in a minimum of 15 Skill Builders! leadership workshops of their choosing. Every semester 25 to 30 of these interactive workshops, which are open to the general public, are offered by staff, faculty, students, and community members. Topics include public speaking, diversity issues, working with youth, assertiveness, teambuilding, communication, and many more. Several of our Skill Builders! also deal with attitude, motivation, ethics, self-respect, and other factors involved in leading a successful values-driven life.

- **Community service internships.** During their second year in the SLFP, as a culminating experience, student fellows put their leadership skills into action. The community service internships give
students the opportunity to provide 100-plus hours of leadership to a socially responsible community improvement project that fits with their personal values and interests. Students design their own internships, choosing from previous internship sites or an endless variety of new possibilities. Over the past twenty years students have served in Big Brothers Big Sisters, been mentors for youth involved in the court system, assisted teachers in classrooms, and have tutored students individually and in small groups after school. Student fellows have helped direct youth theatre, assisted with middle school and high school bands, and coached hockey, football, soccer, track and field, and cross country teams. They have championed environmental causes and assisted with environmental education. They have worked with nonprofit organizations like the Alzheimer’s Foundation and worked with Home Hospice agencies. Students have helped provide healthcare for the uninsured through the Medical Care Access Coalition, and they have assisted with an array of youth activities and organizations including Youth Social Services, the Upper Peninsula Children’s Museum, Girl Scouts, and local Youth Advisory Councils. The list could go on and on—in fact, SLFP students have partnered with over 350 local internship sites. Each internship is required to have a site adviser, who is a member of the community connected with the organization or project that the student serves. Site advisers help shape the proposed project initially, communicate with the student throughout the project, and provide written feedback twice during the year.

Through shared values, interests, and experiences, SLFP students develop a strong sense of fellowship that results in teamwork and a shared sense of commitment to live a values-based lifestyle. For many student fellows, the friends they make with other SLFP participants become lifelong relationships. Upon successful completion of the SLFP, students write a reflection paper on their experiences and are recognized at a graduation ceremony. Communication is then maintained through an annual SLFP alumni newsletter and reunion events.

Development and Implementation

In the fall of 1990, a steering committee for the Center for Excellence in Leadership and Personal Development, which was comprised of faculty, staff, students, and community members, began a series of meetings to answer an exciting question: If we could put forth a leadership development program that was everything we wanted it to be, what would it include and what would be the outcome? The SLFP, launched in the fall of 1991, was the result. At the vanguard of a civic engagement movement that would occur over the coming years, the SLFP (n.d.) was built to “develop competent, ethical and community-centered leaders.” Since its inception, 816 NMU students have completed the two-year SLFP, and in the process they have donated over 90,000 hours of leadership and service at over 350 community service internship sites. To date, 629 community members have served as leadership mentors, many more than once.

As described more thoroughly in the program description section, the SLFP takes over 100 students on a highly structured, off-campus overnight retreat. It provides a one-semester course of instruction to 60 first-year students split into two course sections of 30 students. It involves those same 60 first-year students in one-on-one relationships with mentors in the community. It engages about 50 second-year participants in community service internship sites at 25 to 30 different locations (some of them work in teams). At the same time it offers 25 to 30 leadership skill development workshops each semester, organizes semester social activities, holds monthly fellowship meetings for the participants each of the three semesters after the course has been completed, and every one of the 100-plus students are met with individually by a program
administrator for a half hour near the end of each semester to discuss their unique progress and leadership development.

Accomplishing all this requires significant staff time and financial resources. Specifically, the SLFP has the full attention of one administrative professional, half of the attention of another administrative professional, one full-time clerical position, one graduate assistant, and two undergraduate student employees. In addition to staff compensation, it currently requires an annual operations budget of approximately $35,000.

Originally, the Kellogg Foundation provided a three-year start-up grant and then a two-year bridge grant to close the gap as it became institutionalized. When those grants ran out, the university added the staff positions to make the program sustainable; however, the annual operations money has continued to be acquired through various fundraisers, generous community members, program alumni donations, and some small grants. We are also in the process of growing an endowment account to secure the program funding indefinitely.

Clearly, committing all of this energy, time, and money obligates accountability through clearly defined and well-measured learning objectives and program goals. Accordingly, extensive data are collected on each individual component and the overall SLFP experience. Specifically, evaluations are collected for the fall retreat, Leadership Theory and Practice course, and each Skill Builders! workshop. Both mentors and student fellows provide feedback and evaluate the mentoring component. Both site advisers and student fellows provide feedback and evaluate the community service internship component. Student fellows complete pre- and post-individual profiles and a personal reflection paper upon completion of the program as well. In addition to doing summative outcomes reporting, the SLFP staff regularly reviews all program data with the formative assessment purpose of keeping the SLFP experience as meaningful and beneficial as possible for all of the stakeholders.

Learning Objectives and Assessment Methods

The SLFP has as its core mission to develop NMU students into competent, ethical, community-centered leaders. To measure how well the program accomplishes this, competent, ethical, community-centered, leadership had to be operationally defined. Acknowledging that such leadership could be defined in a multitude of ways with none being the most correct, the competencies most directly measured in our outcomes assessment can be divided into the subcategories of leadership knowledge, leadership skills/abilities, and leadership values/attitudes.

Before outlining the knowledge, skill, and values objectives in detail, it is important to discuss the mixed methods approach to outcomes assessment used. Both quantitative and qualitative data are important and useful. We use the “pragmatic approach,” which focuses on the value of each method as determined by the practical consequences of using it. Different situations and different research questions make it more appropriate to focus on quantitative or qualitative—but, almost always, insights from both procedures lead to the best assessment product. We allow the strengths and weaknesses of each approach to guide our decisions of which data to utilize under different circumstances (see Johnson & Onwegbuzie, 2004, for a summary of the many strengths and weaknesses of each approach).

• Pre- and post-program inventory. Our primary source of data measuring student learning across the full course of the program comes from our pre- and post-program inventory. Students complete the inventory once selected for admission into the program during the semester prior to experiencing
any program components. The students then respond to the same inventory items after successfully completing all program components. The inventory measures the following leadership knowledge learning objectives:

- awareness of a diversity of leadership roles and styles,
- the process of assessing situations to determine an appropriate leadership style,
- the process of assessing individuals and groups to determine an appropriate leadership role,
- knowledge of self,
- understanding the variety of leadership theories, and
- knowing the relationship between the situation and useful leadership styles.

The inventory measures the following leadership ability objectives:

- organizing others,
- empowering others,
- communicating effectively,
- facilitating a group to take action,
- performing reflective analysis,
- demonstrating persuasion abilities, and
- assessing the needs of a community.

The inventory also measures the following attitudes and values-related objectives:

- public speaking efficacy,
- empathy for others,
- social responsibility,
- commitment to volunteerism,
- flexibility of opinions, and
- confidence in self as a role model.

- Final reflection papers. Upon successfully completing all the program components, students are required to compose a three- to four-page open-ended response to questions such as the following:

- Which component(s) of the program were most influential to you and why?
- What skills and abilities have you developed or fine tuned over the past two years?
- What have you learned about yourself?
- Where does the entire experience leave you?
- What changes could you suggest to improve this experience for future student fellows?

Program administrators read through all of these papers and look for insights, recommendations, and themes. In 2010 we also developed a rubric of categories for coding responses, which allows quantitative analysis of outcomes reported by students in these reflections. To accomplish this, two administrators and three research assistants read the same ten papers, randomly selected from across all the years. Readers highlighted perceived outcomes statements from each paper, compiled a collective list of all the outcomes statements from each reader, individually sorted the statements into categories, compared categories and discussed until reaching consensus, developed a first draft of a rubric for
scoring new papers, used the rubric to score six new papers, compared scores for inter-rater reliability and discussed clarifications for new rubric draft, repeated the scoring with six more papers and found that the second draft was acceptable. Two administrators have since used the final draft to score all of the reflection papers from 2010 onward. Inter-rater reliability has been good (alpha = .82). Following is a list of the outcome categories in the final draft of our rubric.

- Increased self-confidence
- Worked outside comfort zone
- Learned there is always more to learn
- Learned personal weaknesses
- Learned personal strengths
- Deepened personal beliefs/values
- Explored personal leadership style
- Made lots of new friends
- Gained deeper, more meaningful relationships
- Will keep in touch with mentor
- Enjoyed getting to know other motivated students
- Realized importance/value of community involvement
- Experienced enjoyment/satisfaction/pride from service
- Will continue community involvement in the future
- Improved commitment/responsibility/accountability
- Improved personal time management
- Improved public speaking
- Learned about assertiveness
- Learned about delegation
- Gained program/event/meeting coordinating skills
- Improved listening skills
- Understand more about leadership theory
- Realize that there are many different styles of leadership
- Gained experience relevant to future career
- Affirmed or redirect career choice
- Got job, internship, or grad school acceptance because of SLFP

**Outcomes Data**

To give a quick overview of the educational impact this program has had, presented here are aggregated data from all years of measurement using the pre- and post-program inventory, a small sampling of final reflection paper statements, and aggregate data from the categorical analysis of the final reflection paper statements since 2010.

- **Pre- and post-program inventory.** Cohen’s d effect size coefficients are used to report changes in students’ leadership knowledge, abilities, and attitudes. Effect sizes are calculated for each cohort of program graduates for inclusion in annual reports. Because we have twenty-one years of data, we examine means and effect sizes longitudinally to evaluate what situational or programmatic variables relate to significant fluctuations in program outcomes as well. Reported in Figure 1, to provide an
overall picture of the program’s educational impact since its inception, are effect size score averages for each outcome measured by the program inventory across all years of measurement.

Using the standard effect size interpretation of $d = 0.8$ or greater indicating a large effect, it is clear that our students have changed significantly during their time in the program. Although our current research methodology does not allow direct affirmations of causality, the data suggest that this program changes students in all of the areas measured by this instrument. With a program as intensive and lengthy as the SLFP, these results are not entirely surprising, yet they are encouraging. The qualitative data reported next help explain why this program has the impact that it does.

- **Final reflection papers.** Outcomes recorded from student’s post-program reflection papers are presented first in Table 1 as anecdotes highlighting the enthusiasm, pride, insights, and growth students experience through the program. The statements selected for Table 1 are intended to provide a taste of students’ freely reported perceptions of a wide variety of program components and experiences. Names are made up, but the years are accurate. Typically, each of the 40 to 45 graduates provides about five or six great quotes like the ones below, in addition to loads of other positive feedback. Some give a little constructive criticism of the program, and every other year or so there is one student who reports disliking some aspect of the program.

![Figure 1. Average effect size for ability, knowledge, and attitude outcome variables across all years of measurement.](image-url)
Table 1

A Selection of Quotes From Students’ Post-Program Reflection Papers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years in Program</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>2010–2012</td>
<td>My SLFP mentor is an invaluable source of opportunities that allow me to put the leadership ethics and techniques I have learned in the classroom to use in the real world. SLFP has built my confidence and abilities for the future, allowing the program to continue with me even as I graduate from it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>2009–2011</td>
<td>I did not have nearly the same magnitude of confidence that I have now. Engaging in the intensive hands-on activities early on prepared me for the rest of the program. Those activities pushed me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to evaluate my strengths as a leader and the things I needed to work on. This entire experience has shown me what I am truly capable of.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>2008–2010</td>
<td>The SLFP leaves me knowing what type of leader I want to be and how to utilize my strengths in order to accomplish goals and lead others who believe in the same purpose. From learning what different styles of leadership are available, I was able to pick things I liked along the way and integrate them with my personality to make them my own.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>2007–2009</td>
<td>The SLFP has allowed me to become a better human being by doing something out of my comfort zone to help individuals that otherwise I wouldn’t have helped. I am sad to be graduating from the SLFP, but I look forward to involving community service in the rest of my career as a Northern student and as an adult in society.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>2006–2008</td>
<td>This program has allowed me to re-evaluate my values. I have discovered that self-sacrifice (leadership) is very important to me. My desire to volunteer and to give back to my community has been rekindled. I want to be a positive role model in the lives of others. The SLFP has made me a better leader, but more importantly, it has made me a better person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shay</td>
<td>2005–2007</td>
<td>I’ve taken very few classes in my college career that have impacted me in as many capacities as the SLFP class has. I bet everyone who has taken this course realizes how different it is compared to a normal lecture class . . . I would not trade my time in the SLFP for any other time in the world. You truly get out of it what you put in. My hope is that I can continue to apply what I’ve learned in this program for the rest of my life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>2004–2006</td>
<td>I have become more aware of what is important to me and what I am most passionate about. This experience leaves me at the foot of the path towards my future. I know more of how to be a leader and play a key role in my community, where ever I may be.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Next, Figure 2 presents the results from our categorical coding of outcome statements from all of the 2010 and 2011 graduates’ reflection papers. These results are presented in terms of what percentage of students freely made such a statement when reflecting on their time in the program.

Figure 2. Percentage of students reporting each categorically coded outcome in their post-program reflection papers.

Statements from students’ post-program reflections provide a powerful tool for gathering rich, detailed qualitative data from program participants’ own perceptual experiences. From the small sample of direct quotes provided, we can see how important each of the program components is to different individuals. This small selection of statements also gives evidence that students are developing greater self-understanding, strengthening their values, learning about leadership, gaining confidence, and becoming committed to serving others in their communities and careers. The categorical coding analysis allows us to reduce the whole of this qualitative data set to a more easily digestible summary of outcomes authentically reported by students. From a two-year sample of 80 students’ reflection papers, we observe clear growth trends in confidence, self-awareness, development of interpersonal relationships, commitment to serving their community, and a variety of leadership ability and knowledge areas.

Our students are clearly developing the skills and confidence needed to be effective leaders by interacting with the local community in many capacities. Our evaluation data highlight the program’s effectiveness in accomplishing its goals and achieving educational objectives with the students. Moreover, the data suggest these same students are carrying this growth into community settings long after SLFP graduation.
Factors Key to Our Success

Whereas the factors important to SLFP success are many, a brief discussion of three very important factors is presented here. First, the program would not exist without our collaborative relationship with members of the local community who embrace the SLFP and contribute their time and talent to it. It is remarkable that we have successfully found 50 to 60 community leaders to serve as mentors annually for twenty-one years. They voluntarily commit to being matched in one-on-one relationships with our students for a year with bi-weekly meetings. Marquette is a small, rural community of 23,000, which includes 9,400 students. Similarly, every year we have 30 to 40 internship site advisors voluntarily provide guidance to our second-year students at their internship sites. Granted, these individuals get the 100-plus hours of high-level service provided to their organization as a benefit. However, interns should also demonstrate a level of effort that is equal to that of what they receive from their mentors. The leadership class component also requires community involvement for the academic service learning project, as well as a panel session on local community strengths, needs, and challenges during the final class period as a kick off to begin thinking about internship possibilities. To achieve this level of community involvement, two ingredients seem important to our success: (a) the unique “small-town” atmosphere where people tend to pitch-in and help others succeed regardless of the need and (b) our efforts to provide as much recognition and gratitude as we can. Changing the sociological climate of a town is not typically feasible. However, providing recognition and thanks can be done by inviting volunteers to special receptions, publishing their names with thanks in the local newspaper, giving them a program T-shirt to wear at the gym, and writing an official letter of thanks for their professional records.

Fellowship is an essential factor in our success as well. For us, the word *fellowship* represents our circle of highly motivated students who develop lasting relationships through collaborative action with shared purpose. The program is primarily about leadership, which requires that the circle be outwardly facing, focusing efforts and energies not on each other but rather on advancing the socially responsible community changes they are passionate about. We build the fellowship at the retreats, during the leadership course, at social events, and through participating in shared traditions. Some such traditions include having each annual cohort democratically select a color to represent their group at the first program orientation session (e.g., Class of 1997–1999 Burgundy Block), distributing the coveted SLFP T-shirts and sweatshirts that are widely recognized both on campus and in the community, and encouraging the “woo-hoo” shout-outs from student participants every time the SLFP is mentioned by university administrators at public events. The relationships built through this program are important to our students as indicated by the data displayed in Figure 2. It may actually be one of the driving motivational forces for students as they receive no tangible compensation for their efforts aside from the two course credits that typically fit nowhere in students course requirements for their major anyway. These students are obviously in it for self-development and post-graduation marketability. Yet, once they are admitted to the program, the fellowship we grow quickly gains significance. As a side note, we have been highly successful in maintaining contact with our graduates for sharing stories through our “Still Connected” alumni newsletter and follow-up surveying largely as a result of making fellowship a program priority.

Finally, using a variety of assessment methods and tools has been critically important to the SLFP since the beginning. Being a Kellogg grant-funded program, outside evaluation was a required part of initial operations. Accordingly, program evaluation and outcomes assessment are included in the program director’s job description. SLFP has formative evaluations with each program component for continuous quality improvement. We find out what is working well, what needs adjustment, and if we are staying relevant
regarding students’ needs. We use summative assessment to examine our effectiveness in reaching program outcome goals related to students’ knowledge, values, and ability development as well as for administrative reporting requirements related to accreditation and cost-benefit analyses. In both formative and summative evaluation efforts, we use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data gathering and analyses. These data are compiled into summary sheets that are distributed and discussed at staff meetings as well as component planning committee meetings. Over the years, the fall retreat evaluations, mentor relationship evaluations, leadership course evaluations, Skill Builders! workshop evaluations, and community internship evaluations have all led to a multitude of meaningful changes in communication strategies, facilitator training, curriculum content, logistical adjustments, and technological improvements.

Even though assessment is a high point for the SLFP, there remains more to do. Some next steps include

- using our categorical coding rubric to perform historical data analysis of our final reflections from the eighteen years prior to 2010,
- collaborating with our Institutional Research office to study retention, academic performance, matriculation, and job placement rates using matched sample comparison groups,
- perusing higher level statistical analyses for theory development and hypothesis testing with predictor and outcome variables in our data sets, and
- collaborating with the NMU Foundation to study correlations between participating in the SLFP and alumni giving.

As always, we struggle with the most precious resource—time. However, with ongoing budgetary challenges in higher education, we must all make the case for supporting our programs, and outcomes assessment is a key tool in this.

References