

## University Learning Outcomes (UniLOA) Explained

### Introduction

Mark Frederick, Ph. D. and Will Barratt, Ph. D.

In the seven years since the University Learning Outcomes (UniLOA) project has begun collecting, analyzing, and making data-based recommendations, we have been able to make some broad observations. First and foremost is our finding of the positive behaviors exhibited by fraternity and sorority members and intercollegiate athletes, as measured by the UniLOA. It appears as though engagement in formal, long-lasting, relationship-rich, and structured extracurricular activities promotes the highest levels of student growth, learning, and development. We have also found that many students in general are not particularly goal-oriented, exhibit low levels of behaviors consistent with good citizenship, and need to improve their oral communications skills. Overall, our findings are both a cause for celebration and a cause for concern.

The critical event that led to our developing the UniLOA was a conversation with a student who, on the eve of his college graduation, stated he had done little more than earn a 2.4 grade point average (on a 4.0 scale) and accumulated a sufficient number of credit hours to graduate. He seemed to have no concept of the value of doing anything except going to class (most of the time) and meeting the basic requirements of his academic major. He had never engaged in the sort of activities that would lead to broader learning, help him learn to better manage his life after college, or improve his chances for employment. When asked why he thought a potential employer would hire him, he responded, "because I'm good, man. I'm good!"

We had to ask ourselves how this happened. We set out on a journey to discover what the people outside and inside the field of student affairs and/or higher education felt the college experience should be and what outcomes should define a successful college student. We asked hundreds of business and educational leaders across the nation, "What should successful college students be able to do by the time they graduate? What qualities, skills, and attributes should they possess?" Sifting through their responses we identified seven critical aspects of student success: critical thinking, self-awareness, communication, diversity, citizenship, membership and leadership, and relationships.

Identifying and articulating behaviors related to success in each of the seven domains led to the development of the 70 UniLOA items. The addition of key demographic questions allows us to report aggregate scores as well as scores for subpopulations of college students. Overall, the UniLOA's Cronbach's Standardized Alpha internal reliability is computed at just over .80. Patterns and trends in scores remain consistent from year to year supporting the instrument's external reliability. The sensitivity of the UniLOA in identifying differences between campuses, between different fraternal organizations and between chapters within an organization has been demonstrated time after time.

The challenge now is for institutions and organizations to create services, supports, interventions, and programs that will focus on demonstrated student need, in hopes of exploiting existing strengths and bolstering areas of need. In doing so, we can expect students to attain the highest levels of student success.

## Questions Asked by AFA Members Answered By:

Gentry McCreary, University of West Florida  
Michael Wilson, Kappa Alpha Order

*My office doesn't use a lot of assessment data and UniLOA is overwhelming. Where can I start?*

### **Gentry:**

When putting together an assessment plan, the first question any student affairs professional should ask themselves is: "What do I want to know?" If your goal is to assess the learning outcomes of your educational programs, then an instrument like UniLOA may be helpful to you, particularly if your learning outcomes match up with those measured by the instrument. In order to fully understand the effect of your programming, you should set up a true experimental design, with an experimental group that receives a treatment (i.e. participants in a leadership development program) and a control group (i.e. a randomly selected group of fraternity/sorority members who did not complete the leadership development program). All participants would receive the survey before the intervention (the leadership development program) and again at a pre-determined time after the intervention (six weeks after the program, for example). The differences between the two groups should be measured to determine if your program had any significant impact on the participants, as measured by the UniLOA instrument. This sounds laborious, but it really is not as bad as it sounds – and it is the only way to truly assess whether or not your programs are achieving the desired outcomes.

### **Michael:**

The first suggestion I have is to review the information in the full report of the assessment, which can be accessed at <http://www.measuringbehaviors.com>. Second, I would recommend you reach out to Dr. Mark Frederick to discuss the assessment and its findings. He does an excellent job explaining both the assessment and how you can use the information collected. Last, reach out to peers who have participated in the assessment to inquire about what they learned and how they have applied the data. This may help you grasp the robust nature of the assessment and allow you to make a determination on how it can be used to evaluate your students as well as inform your work.

*I work at a culturally based organization's headquarters. My organization is fairly small and resource conscious. UniLOA seems to be for institutions and not to mention pricey. How can my organization utilize it?*

### **Gentry:**

Unless you are prepared to conduct experimental or longitudinal studies using the instrument, then UniLOA may not be the best way for you to get the most out of a tight assessment budget. Some organizations have utilized UniLOA data as a dashboard indicator, an assessment tool that gives them general data related to their membership over time. In my opinion, this is a misuse of the instrument and a misallocation of resources. Membership retention, academic performance, risk management infractions, and other easily accessible data are much easier to gather, are available for free or nearly free and can tell national organizations just as much in terms of the overall health of the organization. Unless UniLOA is being used to assess specific outcomes or to track the growth of members over time, then the information gathered is of limited utility. If, however, you want to assess the effectiveness of a program as it relates to one or more of the domains measured by UniLOA, or if you are interested in tracking individual development over time, then UniLOA, or any number of other assessment instruments, may be a worthy investment of your time and resources.

**Michael:**

Many fraternal organizations have engaged in the assessment; it is not singularly beneficial for institutions. Many of these organizations, including Kappa Alpha Order, have engaged students in the assessment to collect data about their members. Each organization must weigh the benefits of participating to decide if they will apply the resources. If your organization chooses to participate, it will gain valuable data about your students based on the seven critical domains the assessment measures. We all strive to develop better students and to prepare our members for life after college; this data can be used to identify the areas we need to continue to develop in order to provide our members the best experience possible.

*The UniLOA data indicates student learning occurs through student engagement activities across the seven domains it measures as an instrument. How can this data be utilized to potentially validate the fraternity and sorority experience?*

**Gentry:**

The only way that UniLOA can be used to “validate” the fraternity/sorority experience is to conduct a longitudinal study, using the domains measured by the UniLOA instrument, to compare fraternity/sorority members to non-affiliated students at distinct points both before and throughout their membership. The only data we currently have available is cross-sectional data that show that fraternity/sorority members measure higher than non-members on most of the domains. These data, however, do not control for any demographic variables or self-selection criteria. For example, does fraternity membership cause students to develop leadership skills or are students with certain leadership skills naturally more attracted to fraternity membership, thus measuring higher on that UniLOA domain? Until we conduct a longitudinal study that controls for demographic variables and measures students before and during their fraternity/sorority membership, we cannot “validate” the fraternity/sorority experience by saying that membership leads to, or is even related to, these outcomes.

**Michael:**

“Validating” the fraternal experience must take into account many factors including those which may or may not be anchored in fact. So, I do not believe there is any one study, assessment, or other supporting literature that inherently validates the experience. That being said, the assessment does show that fraternity men and sorority women consistently score higher within the seven critical domains it measures. It supports the belief that our members, when compared to non-Greek students, are gaining meaningful development during their experience.

*My office is already using the CAS Standards. How can UniLOA and CAS complement one another?*

**Gentry:**

UniLOA and CAS Standards measure two completely different things. CAS is all about internal office operations and the services provided by a fraternity/sorority office, and the standards are derived by a panel of experts in our field. UniLOA measures student learning outcomes across the seven domains. Each one is unique and could make up a piece of any office’s assessment plan, but they measure two different things and the data would be independent of one another.

**Michael:**

If you have access to both you may be able to better evaluate and develop how you use your resources. Both assessment tools can help you better identify the needs of your students and how you prepare to aid them in their development as students and citizens. As you gain more knowledge about your students and your community, you are better able to meet their needs.

*How should we use the data derived from this instrument to further the fraternal movement?*

**Gentry:**

The most important element of using *any* data to further the fraternal movement is to first ensure that we are using that data correctly. Interfraternal partners have made the decision to use some of the data derived from the UniLOA instrument in various ways; some controversial. The NIC has made UniLOA data the centerpiece in its “case for fraternity rights” and in doing so, has presented some misleading information regarding the data. The data they most often cite are cross-sectional snapshots showing that fraternity men measure higher on some of the domains measured by the instrument. They NIC also refers to the “freshman bump” in which freshman fraternity members measure significantly higher than their non-affiliated counterparts. Unfortunately, the data to which they refer are not gathered from a longitudinal study (i.e. change is not measured over time), nor does it control for demographic variables (socioeconomic status, involvement in high school, etc.). If we want to use any data as the centerpiece for advancing the fraternal movement, we should do so in a serious and scientifically rigorous manner, with data from measurements that have been validated both internally and externally. Misusing data, whether intentionally or unintentionally, or using data that are not from a reliable or validated instrument, jeopardizes our credibility within the larger context of higher education and should be avoided. When we see our interfraternal partners engaging in this behavior, we have a responsibility to engage them in dialogue regarding the harm they cause to the fraternal movement by using data in a misleading or misinformed manner.

**Michael:**

As stated above, the assessment supports the belief that our members, when compared to non-affiliated students, are gaining meaningful development during their fraternal experience. I believe it is important to tie the results of the study to performance on your campus. Likely, your students are performing above average in many of the critical domains. By showing the statistics along with tangible performance, you can help to validate the assessment on your campus. This may aid you in seeking continued and/or additional support of the fraternity and sorority community at your institution. Globally, we should all be examining this and other studies to help drive our curriculum and our focus as we hope to continue to improve our students on campus and in the community.

*What are the strengths of the UniLOA assessment in your opinion? The draw backs?*

**Gentry:**

Like any instrument, UniLOA has its strengths and weaknesses. As far as strengths are concerned, the instrument is very useful to the fraternal movement in that it measures a broad spectrum of domains, all of which *should* be the outcomes associated with the fraternal experience. As such, it is a low-cost way to measure a wide variety of outcomes. The instrument also demonstrates strong internal reliability, with the Chronbach’s Alpha coefficient for each of the seven domains being at or above .80, which is widely regarded as the cutoff for acceptable scale reliability. On the downside, what the instrument boasts in internal reliability, it lacks in external validity. As I wrote last year in *Perspectives*, no

studies have correlated UniLOA data with other established measurements of student learning or engagement. No longitudinal studies using UniLOA have examined development or change over time. No “fakability” studies have been conducted. In fact, not a single scholarly article has been published using data from UniLOA. There is a great deal more research that needs to be conducted to ensure the validity of the UniLOA assessment and to confirm its usefulness as a measurement tool.

**Michael:**

The strengths of the assessment lie in the integrity of the research and the methodology applied to the assessment. It was conducted by credible researchers who are able to scientifically defend the assessment. The drawbacks, in my opinion, are that the research and assessment have not been published enough to gain the credibility and noteworthiness that I believe it deserves and will gain. Once the researchers are able to get the information more widely distributed, they can better defend the assessment.