In 2007-08, the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment (OIRPA) conducted a Gap Analysis to determine the institutional effectiveness of NOVA’s educational programs, administrative support services, and educational support services (campuses and administrative units). In order to accomplish a Gap Analysis, the OIRPA staff reviewed the Annual Planning and Evaluation Reports dating back to 2002 and examined specific components of institutional effectiveness therein. Based on this Gap Analysis, the following areas of interest were given special focus: assessment of student learning outcomes, using WEAVEonline software to track assessments, modifying the general education measurement process, linking budget items to planning protocol, and performing an Institutional Effectiveness Audit.

1. Student Learning Outcome (SLO) Focus
While NOVA’s educational programs have often included the assessment of student learning outcomes (SLOs) in their annual planning and evaluation processes, the College determined that a more focused and systematic approach to SLOs was necessary for continual improvement. An early step in this process was developing a structure for programs to ensure they assess SLOs; part of this structure was selecting SLO Lead Faculty. Each degree-awarding program and select certificates named a faculty member who would oversee that program’s assessment efforts across the College’s campuses. This structure was expanded to SLO Teams, so that each program has campus representation and more faculty are involved with the planning and evaluation process.

Another modification initiated to increase improvement at the institution was the development of an assessment training program for faculty and staff. OIRPA conducted a series of workshops designed to address all stages of the assessment loop, from identifying student learning outcomes, to assessing outcomes and goals, to reporting the use of results for improvement. Workshops were offered across campuses, in-person, and online to increase opportunities for faculty and staff to attend. Workshops are also offered at college-wide events, such as the “Power Up Your Pedagogy” professional development day, new faculty orientation, and student services convocation. PowerPoint files and handouts from the workshops are also posted online.
To further build on the foundation laid by the training workshops, a system of follow-up and feedback has been established. This includes materials to provide guidance for faculty and staff throughout the planning and evaluation process, such as sample SLOs and program goals, a sample curriculum map, and sample Annual Planning and Evaluation Reports. Checklists and rubrics were created for effectively writing student learning outcomes and completing detailed and well-aligned Annual Planning and Evaluation Reports. Moreover, while materials for preparing and implementing assessments have been developed, feedback is provided on a regular basis to faculty and staff, supplemented with extensive follow-up communications. By communicating to faculty and staff the College’s expectations regarding planning and evaluation, NOVA is able to promote an efficient and effective system for continual improvement.

2. WEAVEonline Introduction
During the review of its planning and evaluation process, NOVA recognized the need for a more efficient system of documentation. To address this area, NOVA now uses the online management tool, WEAVEonline, to help document the annual planning and evaluation process. WEAVEonline is widely used throughout the SACS accrediting region and has proven to be an effective tool for programs and units submitting and reviewing Annual Planning and Evaluation Reports. With its Detailed Assessment Reports, WEAVEonline provides NOVA the ability to oversee and ensure that planning, assessment, and reporting activities are integrated throughout the school and systematically completed.

The structure for WEAVEonline has also allowed NOVA to make certain components of the planning and evaluation process more explicit. For instance, in order to enter results into WEAVEonline, units must first determine their achievement targets and if these targets were met. WEAVEonline also provides an opportunity to document budgetary needs and requests.

3. Modifications in the General Education Measurement Process
The College’s review of planning and evaluation processes also included the assessment of general education goals. As part of the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), NOVA takes part in the system-mandated assessments of general education core competencies conducted on an approximately six-year cycle. In order to gather information on its students’ abilities regarding general education competencies, NOVA has increased the frequency with which it assesses these institution-level goals. For continuity and comparison, NOVA uses the same tools as those chosen by VCCS. NOVA currently assesses two general education goals in addition to the goal VCCS has scheduled for a given academic year. This change allows NOVA to assess general education goals on a three-year cycle.

In addition to shortening the assessment cycle, NOVA also decided to collect evidence of achievement from more students. For instance, VCCS required a total of 100 essays to be collected for the 2009-2010 assessment of written communication; NOVA collected over 300 essays and, using the same evaluation rubric developed by VCCS, has been able to gather more evidence to review how its assessment processes are supporting the school’s mission, strategic plan, and goals.
Another enhancement relates to assessments developed by NOVA independently of VCCS. Although VCCS requires personal development and cultural and social understanding as general education competencies, VCCS has not yet determined the most appropriate methods for assessing these competencies for the entire state-wide system. Rather than wait for VCCS to choose tools for and then schedule assessments of personal development and cultural and social understanding, NOVA has chosen to assess these two general education competencies on its own. To gather information on its students’ attainment of these two skills, NOVA analyzes competency-specific items from its regularly-conducted graduate surveys and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). For personal development, NOVA also analyzes information gathered from surveys conducted in courses commonly taken by students in their last semester before graduation (physical education, health, and student development courses) and items from pre- and post-tests in student development courses.

4. Linking Budget to Planning Protocol

The budget planning process at NOVA is closely integrated with the College’s annual planning cycle. The executive administrative unit of the College is in charge of the planning process and related budget decisions. NOVA’s executive administrative unit is the Administrative Council. The Council as a whole is the planning committee. The President of the College leads the Administrative Council in its planning with assistance from OIRPA.

Every year in the Spring semester, the Administrative Council develops the annual planning outcomes for the upcoming fiscal year based on the College’s strategic plan, NOVA 2015: Gateway to the American Dream and the VCCS Chancellor’s annual goals. The budget and planning discussions begin in April and extend till July every year. The planning task is accomplished at several Administrative Council meetings after looking at the preliminary outcome results for the current year and estimating the resources available in the upcoming year. By July, the Administrative Council drafts the college-wide goals and outcomes for the upcoming year.

Besides college-level planning procedures, the annual planning and budgeting process also includes unit-level planning. As part of this process, units and subunits submit Annual Planning and Evaluation Reports, which are used by the Administrative Council to track the unit’s progress and make related budgetary decisions.

Although the first and foremost focus of the budgetary process is to ensure enough resources for the operational costs of the College, the budget planning also includes provisions for other non-operational undertakings. Specifically, after examining the revenues and expenditures for the upcoming year, the funds in excess of the regular operational costs (and discretionary funds) are used for special projects, i.e., the projects that are important, but may not be imperative for the College to function.

5. Conducting an Institutional Effectiveness Audit

A major project undertaken by OIRPA in 2009 was an Institutional Effectiveness Audit. NOVA developed and completed an institutional effectiveness audit (based on that of the University of Mississippi) to provide a research-based examination of planning and evaluation practices at the College. The complete report is available at the OIRPA website. The Institutional Effectiveness Audit has four steps:
1) Verifying that all educational programs and administrative and educational support units are regularly participating in assessment activities by submitting Annual Planning and Evaluation Reports for each year between 2002 and 2010;

2) Evaluating the alignment of unit goals with expected outcomes, assessment methods, results, and use of results for continuous improvement;

3) Confirming that educational programs are not using course grades to assess student outcomes, identifying any educational programs that are using grades, and advising them to reanalyze their data to eliminate grades and submit revised reports; and

4) Providing a systematic analysis of the extent to which programs and units are using assessment results to make improvements. This was done by reading, interpreting, and categorizing “use of results” sections from planning and evaluation reports dating back to the previous SACS review.

Phase 1 of the IE Audit provides summary data for the period of 2002 to 2010 on the systematic nature of the planning and evaluation process that is ongoing and college-wide. Over this period, on average around 88% of educational programs and 100% of administrative and educational support services submitted Annual Planning and Evaluation Reports. Based on the results, NOVA is able to document reasons for the years that diverged from this pattern, in addition to determining which units need more extensive follow-up. Over the past three years, submission rates have increased, culminating in 100% submission in 2009-10 for all three types of units. The IE Audit and the resulting trend data have provided evidence that the planning and evaluation process is systematic, college-wide, and integrated throughout NOVA.

Phase 2 of the IE Audit is devoted to evaluating how effectively units have aligned goals and outcomes with methods, results, and use of results for continuous improvement. For the audit, OIRPA evaluated alignment by recording the extent to which programs linked major components of institutional effectiveness to each other. Auditors rated alignment based on the ratio of aligned report entries. The scale used to report alignment is as follows:

- None = No alignment
- Few = Less than 50% of report entries demonstrate alignment
- Some = 50-75% of report entries demonstrate alignment
- Most = More than 75% of entries demonstrate alignment

For the educational programs, a rubric was developed to assess the quality of alignment. As can be seen in the complete report, the average rubric scores demonstrate that the quality of alignment has increased over the past several years, and especially since OIRPA’s Gap Analysis in 2007-08 highlighted areas to improve upon. This increase in quality took place after NOVA increased its focus on student learning outcomes, as outlined above. During this time NOVA provided more faculty/staff training, enhanced its feedback and follow-up processes, and began using WEAVEonline and incorporating elements of that software into its planning and evaluation processes. Based on the evaluation of the Annual Planning and Evaluations Reports, it is clear that the increased resources resulted in an improved assessment process.
Phase 3 of the IE Audit includes evaluating use of results for continuous improvement. For educational programs, results were used for implementing curriculum-specific changes, resource allocation, institution-level adjustments, co-curricular modifications, and changes in assessment processes. For administrative and educational support services, results were used in many instances to make changes in processes/procedures; policy changes; enhancements to services; resources, and efforts to increase collaborations, among others. Each of the changes from these categories contributes to NOVA’s overarching goal of better accomplishing its mission. As a result of the IE Audit, NOVA is better able to determine the types of changes that have been made to improve student learning in the individual educational programs and throughout support services at the College.

The IE Audit has been an opportunity for NOVA to not only review and assess how systematic its planning and evaluation process is, but it has also provided strong evidence regarding changes NOVA has made in its processes and how these changes have brought improved effectiveness.