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From Gathering to Using Assessment Results:
Lessons from the Wabash National Study

Charles Blaich and Kathleen Wise

Foreword by George D. Kuh

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"In this paper, Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise share their candid, field-tested insights into the obstacles that institutions must address in order to go beyond collecting evidence of student learning to actually using the results effectively."

George Kuh

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Abstract

From Gathering to Using Assessment Results

The Wabash Study is a longitudinal research and assessment project designed to provide participating institutions with extensive evidence about the teaching practices, student experiences, and institutional conditions that promote student growth across multiple outcomes. Despite the abundant information they receive from the study, most Wabash Study institutions have had difficulty identifying and implementing changes in response to study data. Although much of the national conversation about assessment and accountability focuses on the pros and cons of different approaches to measuring student learning and experience, we have learned from the Wabash Study that measuring student learning and experience is by far the easiest step in the assessment process. The real challenge begins once faculty, staff, administrators, and students at institutions try to use the evidence to improve student learning.

In this paper, we review faulty assumptions we made about assessment in creating the Wabash Study, including our initial thoughts about the primary obstacles to good assessment, the importance of assessment reports, and the benefit of connecting assessment with faculty habits of disciplinary inquiry. As the study progressed and we saw how institutions struggled to use the evidence they had collected, we revised the study to focus more on disseminating and using data. We have distilled the lessons learned from our experience into five practical steps that campuses should consider implementing as they develop assessment projects to increase the likelihood that the evidence they collect will benefit student learning:

1) Perform thorough audits of useful information about student learning and experience that your institution has already collected.
2) Set aside resources for faculty, student, and staff responses to the assessment information before assessment evidence is distributed around campus.
3) Develop careful communication plans so that a wide range of campus representatives have an opportunity to engage in discussions about the data.
4) Use these conversations to identify one, or at most two, outcomes on which to focus improvement efforts.
5) Be sure to engage students in helping you make sense of and form responses to assessment evidence.

Foreword

How Close Are We to "Closing the Loop?"

The title of NILOA's first national report, More Than You Think, Less Than We Need (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009), captured the current state of affairs in higher education with regard to collecting and using evidence of student learning. That is, most colleges and universities were using multiple measures to determine student learning outcomes. At the same time, relatively few schools were "closing the loop," or using the information in any material way to intentionally modify policy and practice. Rarer still were colleges or universities where changes in policies or practices made a positive difference in student attainment. Why is this so? Why is it so hard to convert data about student and institutional performance into action that can make a difference?

These were among the questions that spawned NILOA two years ago and continue to animate our work. No one knows more about the myriad issues with which faculty, staff, and institutional leaders must deal in this regard than Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise at the Center for Inquiry at Wabash College. For several years, they have been working on the ground with dozens of institutions to help them collect, understand, and use evidence of student learning obtained through various means to improve the quality of the undergraduate experience. We were delighted when they accepted our invitation to share what they are learning about using student learning outcomes with an eye toward helping other institutions work through challenges similar to those they are encountering at colleges and universities participating in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education.

The Wabash National Study is a multi-institutional longitudinal project originally designed to document the impact of liberal arts educational practices on desired outcomes of college. Longitudinal studies in higher education are far from common place, especially ones that obtain quantitative and qualitative data about a range of cognitive and affective dimensions directly from students at dozens of different types of institutions. The Wabash Study has become distinctive for another reason in that Blaich, Wise, and other colleagues well-versed in assessment approaches provide assistance in helping schools understand and use evidence of student learning to figure out what the findings mean and what can be done to improve.

As you shall see, the story line of their report is at once sobering and optimistic. For example, student learning and personal development in the early years of college are nowhere near desired levels. In terms of the improvement agenda, even in instances when valid, reliable instruments over time produce multiple rounds of findings pointing to unacceptable

Foreword (cont.)

outcomes, institutions are not always certain what to do. As Blaich and Wise explain, there are a variety of reasons for what seems to be a reluctance or inability to take action. Many of these reasons are familiar – not enough respondents to be confident of the findings, faculty skepticism of the outcome measures, changes in institutional or department leadership that portend different priorities, and so on. After fleshing out the subtexts associated with these failures and other challenges, Blaich and Wise suggest how they must be countered to stimulate the kinds of desired changes that promise to enhance student learning and demonstrate institutional effectiveness.

We are grateful to Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise for sharing their candid, field-tested insights into the obstacles that institutions must address in order to go beyond collecting evidence of student learning to actually using the results effectively. Fortunately, their work with campuses continues and we look forward to a future report from the Wabash National Study that will – hopefully – contain more than a few examples of institutions that have "closed the loop" with demonstrable success.

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From Gathering to Using Assessment Results: Lessons from the Wabash National Study

Charles Blaich & Kathleen Wise

The Accountability Movement: Common Assumptions and Practices

The fact that the word "accountability" runs through much of the national conversation about assessment in higher education says a lot about the presumed motives and responsibilities of the parties in this discussion. The implication, of course, is that unless they are held accountable by an outside authority, some colleges and universities at least would not make good on their commitment to students.

accountable (ac·count·a·ble) – adjective (of a person, organization, or institution) required or expected to justify actions or decisions; responsible.

It is both reasonable and necessary for public entities, such as the federal government or regional accreditors, to hold colleges and universities accountable for educating students consistent with basic standards and institutional missions (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). At the same time we cannot ignore the fact that quality assurance efforts take place in the midst of a broader public discourse in which politicians and pundits wag their fingers at Wall Street bankers, their political opponents, government agencies, teachers, and other alleged evildoers—demanding they be held accountable. The not-too-subtle subtext here is that those who make these calls for accountability are acting for the public good while those expected to respond to them most definitely are not. As anyone who reads the higher education trade papers knows, the accountability movement is as much about politics as it is about student learning.

Due in part to these political realities, accountability efforts in higher education—even when applied carefully and with good intentions—shift how institutions do their work. In a recent survey by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), provosts and chief academic officers from over 1,500 institutions across the U.S. reported that assessment data at their institutions was most commonly used to prepare for accreditation (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Institutions have to invest enormous resources to meet accountability requirements. Yet, as Peter Ewell (2009) has pointed out, institutions' engagement in assessment for the purposes of accountability—focusing on gathering evidence to prove that student learning has occurred—is different from their engagement in assessment to improve student learning. The counterargument to this critique, of course, is that without accountability efforts a significant portion of colleges and universities would not serve their students as they should—bringing us back to the politically charged suspicions of the motives of the parties in higher education.

An Alternative Approach to Accountability

One can, however, think of accountability from a different, higher standpoint: not in terms of the standards an outside authority holds us to but, rather, in terms of the responsibility we, as staff, faculty, and administrators, assume as teachers and as professionals. As Lee Shulman (2003, para. 4) has stated,

> My point is that excellent teaching, like excellent medical care, is not simply a matter of knowing the latest techniques and technolo-

> gies. Excellence also entails an ethical and moral commitment—what I might call the "pedagogical imperative." Teachers with this kind of integrity…inquire into the consequences of their work with students. This is an obligation that devolves on individual faculty members, on programs, on institutions, and even on disciplinary communities. A professional actively takes responsibility; she does not wait to be held accountable.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (2008) have also called for the higher education community to take on this pedagogical imperative:

> Finally, and perhaps most important, higher education has an obligation to our democracy as well as our economy. A college degree should ensure that graduates are well prepared to contribute to society as knowledgeable, engaged, and active citizens. In order to meet these challenges, we in the higher education community must continually seek, and find, better ways to reach our common goal of helping all the students we serve realize their full potential. We need to make clear, for ourselves and our various constituencies, what our aims are, how we seek to achieve them, and how well we do so. This requires continuing efforts in many quarters to make higher education a challenging and rigorous experience for all students—for their benefit and society's as well. To do so, we in higher education must constantly monitor the quality of student learning and development, and use the results both to improve achievement and to demonstrate the value of our work to the public. We must not settle for anything less. (p. 1)

Yet accountability for improving student learning as an enactment of the moral and professional commitments of faculty, staff, and institutions, rather than as a reaction to externally imposed obligations, is an idea that rarely surfaces in the public discussion about assessment and accountability.

The Wabash College Center of Inquiry and the Wabash National Study

The Center of Inquiry at Wabash College collaborates with institutions across the country to collect and use evidence to improve student learning. At times, our experience working with colleges and universities has shown the necessary role of external authorities in holding institutions accountable for promoting student learning. But hundreds of staff, faculty, students, and administrators we have worked with across the country—rather than joining the strident fray over assessment and accountability—have taken Shulman's admonition to heart. In working with these committed professionals, we have discovered common assumptions about and practices in assessment that inhibit their efforts and that have implications for the accountability movement. This paper describes the important lessons we have learned in the Wabash National Study about structuring and implementing assessment programs to advance the work of these "improvement agents."

The Wabash National Study, the primary means by which the Center of Inquiry collaborates with institutions for assessment, is a longitudinal research and assessment project designed to deepen our understanding of the teaching practices, student experiences, and institutional conditions that promote the development of students' critical thinking, moral reasoning, leadership towards social justice, well-being, interest in and engagement with diversity, and interest in deep intellectual work (Table 1). Since its pilot version in 2005, over 17,000 students from 49 colleges and universities have

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Table 1. Wabash National Study Outcome Measures

- Academic Motivation Scale
- ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency Critical Thinking Test
- Contribution to the Arts and Humanities Scale
- Contribution to the Sciences Scale
- Defining Issues Test of Moral Reasoning (Version 2)
- Miville-Guzman Universality-Diversity Scale (Short Form)
- Need for Cognition Scale
- Openness to Diversity and Challenge Scale
- Political and Social Involvement Scale
- Positive Attitude toward Literacy Scale
- Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-Being
- Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (Revision 2)
- More information about these scales can be found at http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-instruments/

joined the Wabash Study. The study is still in progress, and 30 institutions joined a new version of the study in fall 2010. The first institutions to join the Wabash Study did so in response to the national conversation about accountability. In some cases this response was driven directly by impending accreditation review and in others by initiatives from foundations or higher education organizations.

The Wabash Study was collaboratively designed by researchers from the University of Iowa, the University of Michigan, Miami University, ACT Inc., and the Center of Inquiry. Our goal was to create a "gold-standard" longitudinal study that included measures of what students brought to college, what they experienced during college, and a wide range of learning outcomes.

In designing the Wabash Study, we made three core assumptions about what helps and what hinders effective assessment. First, we believed that a lack of high-quality data was the primary obstacle that institutions faced in using assessment evidence to promote improvements in student learning. Second, we thought that providing detailed reports describing study findings would be the key mechanism for kicking off a sequence of events on campus that would culminate in evidence-based improvements. Finally, we assumed that the intellectual approach that faculty and staff took in their scholarship would facilitate their work on assessment projects to produce improvements in student learning.

These assumptions account for the extensive range of measures we adopted, the long and detailed reports about study findings we developed for institutions, and the mechanisms we added to help institutions merge Wabash National Study data with institutional data. They also led us to focus our data analyses, so that we provided institutions with information on the practices and conditions that promoted growth on the outcomes that we measured. In creating the study, we thought that once faculty and staff had "good" data from a high-quality research project, they would use it to improve student learning. In essence, we designed the Wabash Study to solve a "lack of quality data" problem. Insofar as we, as well as our institutional partners, assumed that study data would inevitably lead to improvements in student learning, we spent most of our time and energy on building mechanisms to gather data. We did not ask our institutional partners to consider what they would do with our detailed reports once they landed on their collective desks.

Findings from the Wabash National Study

To date, four principal findings have emerged from the Wabash Study. A discussion of each follows.

First, as Arum and Roska (in press) have reported, students do not always grow as much as we hope or in the directions that we expect in college. As shown in Figures 1–3, during four years of the Wabash Study, students grew on some of the outcomes we measured, such as critical thinking and moral reasoning, and declined on others, including academic motivation and openness to diversity.

Second, students still benefit from the good practices and conditions that Chickering and Gamson (1987) highlighted over 20 years ago (Pascarella, Cruce, Wolniak, & Blaich, 2004; Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010; Pascarella, Wolniak, Seifert, Cruce, & Blaich, 2005; Seifert, Goodman, Lindsay, Jorgensen, Wolniak, Pascarella, et al., 2008; Seifert, Pascarella, Goodman, Salisbury, & Blaich, 2010). These good practices and conditions, which are easily and well measured by surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Higher Education Research Institute's Your First College Year and College Senior Survey, have an impact on almost every

The good practices and conditions, highlighted over 20 years ago by Chickering and Gamson (1987), are easily and well measured by surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Higher Education Research Institute's Your First College Year and College Senior Survey, and they have an impact on almost every outcome we measured.

Figure 1.

Four-Year Change in Moral Reasoning, Critical Thinking, Socially Responsible Leadership, and Need for Cognition Among Four-Year Institutions in the 2006 Cohort (in Standard Deviations)

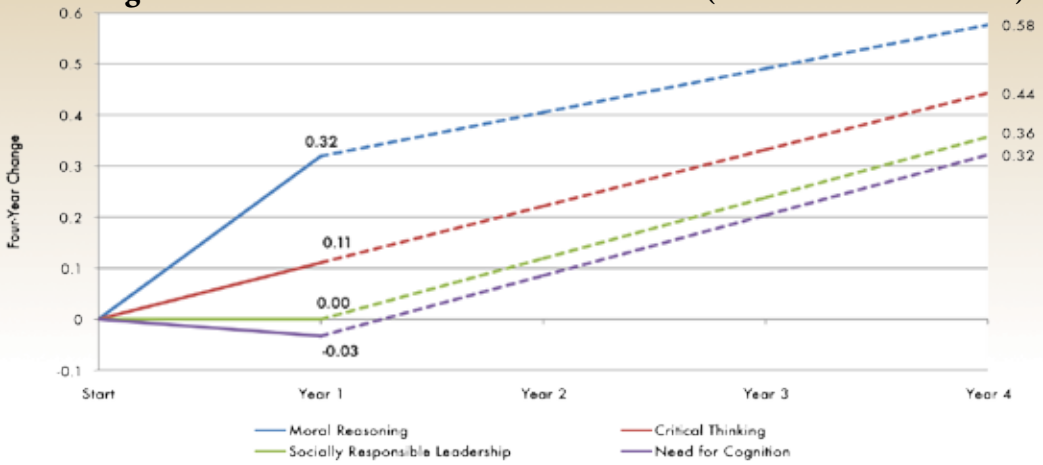


Figure 2.

Four-Year Change in Psychological Well-Being, Universality-Diversity Awareness, Political and Social Involvement, and Openness to Diversity and Challenge Among Four-Year Institutions in the 2006 Cohort (in Standard Deviations)

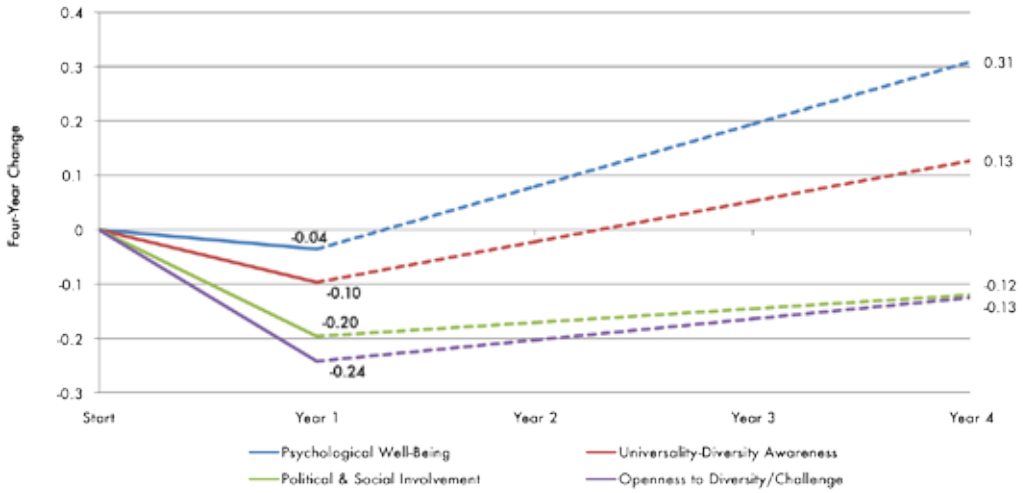
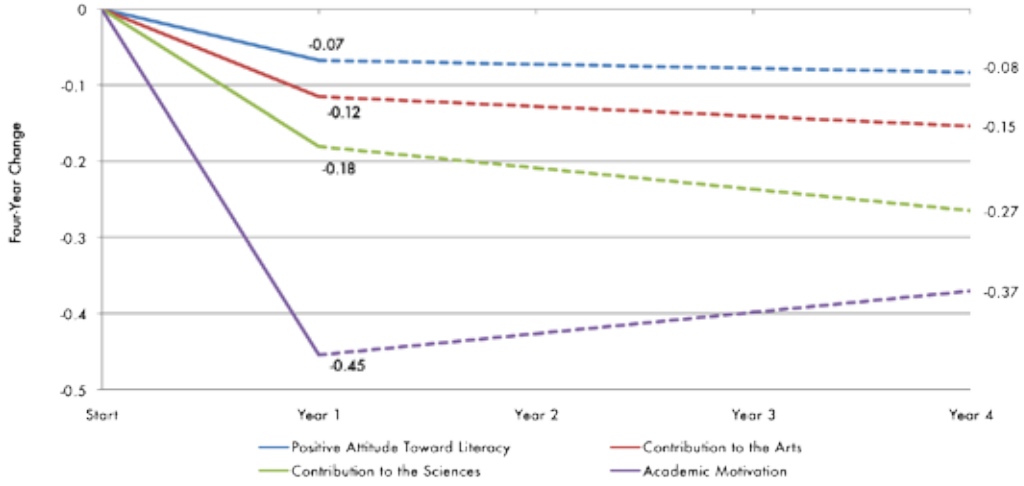


Figure 3.

Four-Year Change in Positive Attitude Toward Literacy, Contribution to the Arts, Contribution to the Sciences, and Academic Motivation Among Four-Year Institutions in the 2006 Cohort (in Standard Deviations)



outcome we measured. Our research highlighted four dimensions of these good practices and conditions (see Table 2 for examples):

1. Good Teaching and High-Quality Interactions with Faculty
2. Academic Challenge and High Expectations
3. Diversity Experiences
4. Higher-Order, Integrative, and Reflective Learning

Third, as Kuh (2003) described, the variability within our institutions—both in terms of growth on the outcomes and the level of good practices and conditions experienced by students—dwarfs the differences between institutions on these variables (see also the NSSE 2008 Annual Report at http://nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2008_Results/). Although many discussions about assessment focus on the importance of creating measures by which to compare institutions, the underlying reality is that any overall institutional measure belies the complex range of student learning and experiences that occurs within our institutions. As depicted in Figures 4 and 5, the variation among students within Wabash National Study institutions is vastly larger than the median differences between institutions. Even if a school has greater average growth on critical thinking or some other outcome than its peer institutions, it is likely that many of its students will not have grown or may even have declined on these outcomes. The comparatively high average growth of the institution does not matter for these students. Learning what differentiates the students who learn substantially more or substantially less than their institution's average score on an outcome is the grist for good assessment work. Faculty, staff, and administrators at almost every Wabash Study institution have been surprised and concerned that their students seem to experience small growth or even declines on outcomes in the study. Nonetheless, we were optimistic about the possible benefits of the study because we found evidence at every participating institution about the good practices and conditions that played a role in how their students were, or were not, changing in college. In other words, every Wabash Study institution could address their concerns about students' growth by responding to specific evidence about the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching and learning environments.

Figure 4.

Within-Institution Variation at Small Colleges (S) and Large Universities (L) in Four-Year Change in Academic Motivation

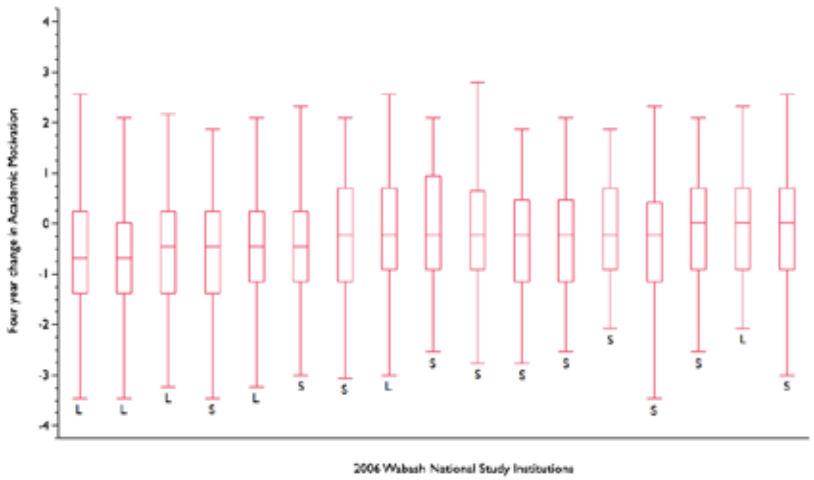


Table 2. Examples of Good Practices and Conditions from the Wabash National Study

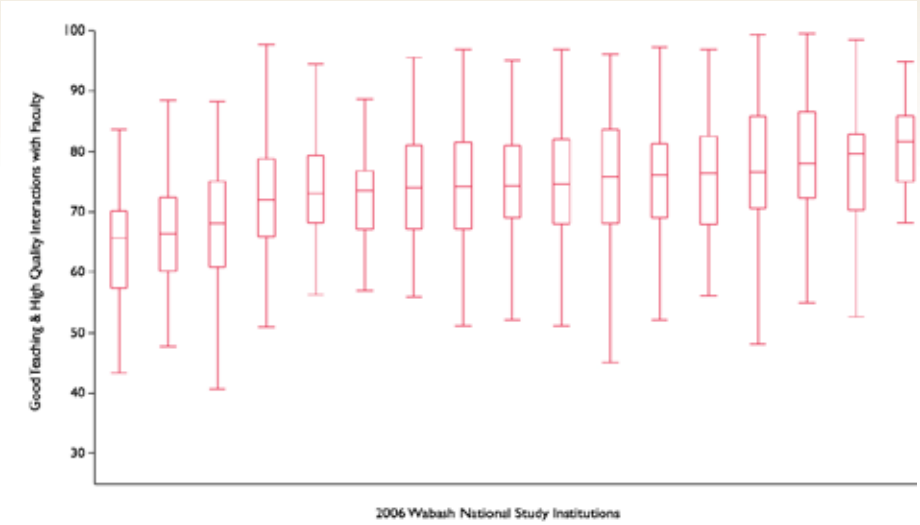
Having faculty and staff who

- Have a genuine interest in teaching and are interested in helping students grow in more than just academic areas
- Provide timely feedback
- Check to see if students learned the material before moving on to new material
- Design clear explanations of their course or program goals and requirements
- Develop organized classes and presentations
- Provide clear explanations of course goals and requirements
- Engage in high-quality nonclassroom interactions that influence students' growth, values, career aspirations, and interest in ideas
- Ensure that students work hard to prepare for their classes and are required to read and write a substantial amount of material
- Challenge students to analyze and synthesize information and make judgments about ideas, experiences, and theories
- Ask students to integrate ideas and information from different sources and to include diverse perspectives in their work
- Ask students to examine the strengths and weakness of their ideas and to understand someone else's view by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective

These examples are based on questions from the Wabash National Study Student Experiences Survey and the National Survey of Student Engagement. For a complete list of the effective practices and conditions see http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-research/

Figure 5.

Within-Institution Variation at Small Colleges (S) and Large Universities (L) in Levels of Good Teaching and High-Quality Interactions with Faculty



The fourth primary finding from the study: It is incredibly difficult to translate assessment evidence into improvements in student learning.

This brings us to the fourth primary finding from the study: It is incredibly difficult to translate assessment evidence into improvements in student learning. Unfortunately, we learned early on that gathering data, even with the complicated longitudinal methodology employed in the Wabash Study, is much easier than using the information to improve student learning. As we monitored how institutions were using the information from the Wabash Study through numerous follow-up phone calls, meetings, and site visits—and even by tracking how often institutions downloaded our reports—we learned that evidence from the study was having little impact. Although all 19 institutions from the first cohort of the Wabash National Study in 2006 worked extraordinarily hard to collect data multiple times from students, nearly 40% of the institutions have yet to communicate the findings of the study to their campus communities, and only about a quarter of the institutions have engaged in any active response to the data.

Why So Little Action?

As we worked with institutions in the first version of the study, our assumptions concerning the importance of gathering additional high-quality data; of creating long, detailed reports; and of engaging the scholarly energies of faculty and staff proved to be completely wrong. We had focused too much on gathering, analyzing, and reporting assessment evidence and not enough on helping institutions use it.

In our work with the Wabash Study, we learned that most institutions already had more than enough actionable assessment evidence—not only in terms of national surveys and standardized outcome measures but also from information in institutional databases, student interviews, reports from external reviewers, and many other sources of information about student learning. A typical and somewhat disappointing experience in working with institutions was that many of the actionable findings we thought we had discovered in the Wabash Study—for example, evidence about changes in

student attitudes about diversity, the quality of student-faculty interactions, the level of binge drinking, or the amount of time students spent working off campus—were either already well known by a couple of people on campus or were tucked away unnoticed among assessment data collected previously.

Why so much collection—but so little utilization—of data? Most institutions have routinized data collection, but they have little experience in reviewing and making sense of data. It is far easier to sign up for a survey offered by an outside entity or to have an associate dean interview exiting students than to orchestrate a series of complex conversations with different groups on campus about what the findings from these data mean and what actions might follow. The norm for many institutions is to gather data, to circulate the resulting reports among a small group of people, and then to just shelve them if nothing horrible jumps out—and sometimes even if it does! In recent years of the Wabash Study, we posted reports of institutional data on a website, allowing us to get an idea of how many people at each campus actually opened and either read or downloaded the reports. The extent to which the reports were opened varied dramatically across campuses. At several institutions only a handful of people opened the report, while faculty and staff at one small institution viewed the report over 150 times.

Most institutions have routinized data collection, but they have little experience in reviewing and making sense of data.

Even when assessment reports are disseminated widely, most of us behave as though the data in the reports will speak loudly enough to prompt action. We tend to believe that interesting findings will naturally prompt discussions and ultimately revisions in our courses and programs. But this denies the reality on most of our campuses—that the current state of affairs in our departments, curricular structures, and programs is usually a compromise carefully negotiated among numerous parties over the course of years. Unless the findings are truly devastating, assessment data has little impact on this tightly constrained arrangement.

General reports about outcome changes or student experiences that are not embedded into an ongoing campus conversation about student learning are just quickly filed away and forgotten, sometimes without even being read. Implicitly, we are relying on people's curiosity as the mechanism to generate discussion and, ultimately, action about data. For the most part, faculty, staff, and students are curious about their institutions, but in the busy, multitasking environments in which we all work, general curiosity does not compete well against the classes we need to prepare, the papers we need to write or grade, and the programs we need to implement. The way we govern and structure our institutions means that the simple reporting of assessment data has little hope of generating the kind of "data-informed, continuous improvement" that many of us hope for. Assessment data has legs only if the evidence collected rises out of extended conversations across constituencies about (a) what people hunger to know about their teaching and learning environments and (b) how the assessment evidence speaks to those questions.

The kinds of community processes necessary for identifying assessment questions and for making sense of assessment evidence, furthermore, are different from the individual or small-team interactions that typically lead to the identification of a research question and the analysis of texts or quantitative data in our scholarly work. Scholarship is mostly a solitary endeavor, and its few communal interactions are generally among people who share similar intellectual training and backgrounds. Done correctly, using assessment to improve student learning is an entirely public process in which people with different levels of experience and different intellectual backgrounds must work together toward a common end.

As Upcraft and Schuh (2002) have pointed out, research and assessment also have different goals. Although research practice varies by discipline, most researchers focus on discovering or identifying something and communi-

cating this finding with others within their discipline. The actions entailed by good research are communication with colleagues via presentations and publications and, ultimately, more research. The goal of assessment, on the other hand, is to create changes that improve student learning. Assessment also entails communication with colleagues, but the communication must at some point move from talking about the data to talking about, and then enacting, changes. Research and assessment are not just different processes; at some point the goals of each process are in opposition. For scholars, it is hard to imagine reaching too deep a level of understanding about one's subject. One way of inviting faculty to engage in assessment is to frame it as a form of inquiry. The challenge then is to engage faculty's interest in inquiry without engaging the other familiar scholarly skills that will lead them to gather more data and write reports rather than taking concrete actions. Not only does constantly gathering and analyzing additional data fit neatly into faculty's intellectual wheelhouse, it also allows faculty and administrators to avoid expending their political capital by advocating for change. It's far less risky and complicated to analyze data than it is to act.

For assessment to be successful, it is necessary to put aside the question, "What's the best possible knowledge?" and instead to ask, "Do we have good enough knowledge to try something different that might benefit our students?" Ultimately, the most fruitful way to learn if the conclusions that we have drawn from assessment data are correct is to try to change something and see what happens.

For assessment to be successful, it is necessary to put aside the question, "What's the best possible knowledge?" and instead to ask, "Do we have good enough knowledge to try something different that might benefit our students?"

Designing Assessment for Improvement

Fortunately, we observed the trends described above early enough in the study that we could adjust course. We have continually revised the way we work with institutions to use evidence from the Wabash Study and other forms of evidence to promote improvements in student learning. The revisions are based on our new understanding that "closing the loop" and using evidence to promote improvements is as much a political and sociocultural process as it is an evidence-driven process (Blaich & Wise, in press). We now encourage institutions that enter the Wabash Study to pay as much attention to creating and sustaining processes by which faculty, staff, and students reflect on and consider responses to the evidence as they do to developing processes for collecting assessment evidence. Specifically, we work with institutions to develop and implement detailed, three-year plans that include the following components:

Data audits. To ensure that institutions entering the Wabash Study are aware of and use the evidence they already have, we ask that they complete a data audit survey—listing all of the assessment data they already possess along with data they plan to collect on what students bring to college, what they experience in college, and what they learn in college (see http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/storage/Institutional-Assessment-Portfolio-Data-Survey.pdf). This prompts institutions to consider not only standardized surveys and tests but also ways they could use student work and data from their student information systems.

A clear focus. We strongly encourage institutions to focus their plans on no more than two or, at most, three outcomes, but our preference is that they focus on only one. In our experience, institutions that try to engage in too many initiatives wind up accomplishing none of them. With assessment projects prioritized on one, two, or maybe three specific outcomes, institutions can then sift through

their typically vast piles of assessment evidence to focus on specific elements that relate to their chosen outcomes.

Communication. Creating sustained conversations about assessment data and engaging in sense-making activities is akin to a campaign—not a series of reports posted on a website. We ask institutions to list the individuals, constituencies, and governance structures that need to be engaged in their discussions of assessment evidence and then to develop plans for how they will engage these constituencies in conversations for both making sense of as well as developing responses to the data. Even before these groups get data, it is important to consider engaging them in planning for what different findings might imply. Creating effective plans for structuring conversations and activities under various "good news" and "bad news" scenarios may happen more productively through a series of "what if" exercises than with the actual evidence, and all that it implies, sitting in front of you.

Resources. We ask institutions to set aside $10,000 to devote to activities designed to encourage institutional conversations about and responses to the data. We also ask them to develop plans for obtaining any additional resources and support they will require from institutional leaders to promote these conversations and to consider when visits from outside consultants might help their work on campus.

Student involvement. Finally, we encourage institutions to engage students to help them make sense of assessment data. One of the most important lessons we learned from the first version of the Wabash Study is how much you can learn by sitting informally with groups of students and asking them to reflect on some of your institutional data or to respond to simple questions like, "What things have faculty and staff done that have made a difference in what you have learned this year?", "What classes are hardest for you and what makes them hard?", or "What surprised you when you first came to college?" We have found that these conversations are a critical way of linking assessment data with specific qualities of students' experience to get a richer sense of the data. (For more information about the plans institutions develop in the new version of the Wabash Study, see the plan template at http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/storage/Wabash-Study-Plan-template-final.docx and a description of the institutional assessment portfolio at http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/storage/Institutional-Assessment-Portfolio-description.pdf.)

Of course, even the most carefully thought-out plan will shift and require revision as soon as it is implemented. The point of planning is not to create a rigid procedure that institutions will follow regardless of what happens on campus but to help campuses frame assessment from the start as a many-step process that culminates in improvements. To be successful, institutions must stop thinking about assessment as a process that begins with data-gathering and ends with a report.

To be successful, institutions must stop thinking about assessment as a process that begins with data-gathering and ends with a report.

Enhancing Institutions' Engagement in Assessment and Improvement Efforts

To help institutions keep on track as they revise their plans in response to unforeseen events as well as to ensure that the Center's support actually benefits institutions, we continually assess both the progress of institutions and

our work with them. Like any other complex social project, it is important to "iterate," enhancing an institution's engagement with assessment evidence on the fly. Banta and Blaich (in press) have described a number of questions to consider when evaluating the progress of assessment projects and determining whether the projects need to be revised:

Resources. Are institutions devoting as many resources—in terms of time, money, personnel, and effort—to creating mechanisms for making sense of and developing responses to assessment evidence (workshops, meetings, faculty and staff development opportunities, small grant programs, conversations with students, etc.) as they are to gathering the evidence? If not, the process needs to be revised. If all of an assessment program's resources are devoted to gathering evidence and none toward making sense of and using evidence, no change is likely to occur.

Communication of assessment results. If asked, can faculty, staff, and students readily identify the outcomes, measures, and recent findings of their institution's assessment program? If asked, would all faculty members in a department be able to cite the same two or three things that their department is doing well and the same two or three areas for improvement along with evidence that supports their assertions? If the answer to these questions is "no," then it is time for the institution, department, or program to revise how it communicates about assessment.

Getting evidence to potential users. Assessment evidence will have no impact if it is not widely shared and discussed on campus. Hiding data because they are too controversial, sending out a report via email, or posting information on a website without creating opportunities for people to come together to reflect on and make sense of the findings will ensure that assessment evidence has little long-term impact. Institutions also need to create structures and resources to take advantage of faculty and staff interest that emerges in response to assessment evidence. For example, do faculty, staff, and students know where to go to find assessment evidence to address questions about their programs, departments, or majors? Is there someone they can contact if they have questions about the information? If they do contact that individual, will they get a timely response? The key is getting evidence into the hands of people who are able and interested in using it to improve student learning and student experience and then supporting their efforts to understand and use the data.

Institutions will take at least three to four years to make sense of and act on assessment evidence on one or two learning outcomes. Yet we suspect this plan is overly ambitious.

Conclusion

Patience is an important virtue for those engaged in assessing student learning and using the findings to improve student and institutional performance. In our current work, we plan that institutions will take at least three to four years to make sense of and act on assessment evidence on one or two learning outcomes. Yet we suspect this plan is overly ambitious.

Where does the time go? The vast majority of our work with institutions focuses on the politics and procedures of using evidence, not on collecting it. For all of the challenges we face trying to gauge student growth on our institutional outcomes, it is far easier to collect data measuring student learning and experiences than it is to use these data. One reason for this difference is

that there are many nationally known standardized tests, surveys, predesigned rubrics, or e-portfolio systems that institutions can adopt to collect assessment data, and in some cases, to deliver detailed reports. We have sometimes heard these assessment options referred to as "assessment in a box" or "plug in and play assessment." This way of gathering assessment evidence is still not easy, but it cuts down on the things that institutions have to design from scratch.

Unfortunately, there is no "plug in and play" system for using assessment data to change our institutions. The messy processes that inevitably follow once the data has been collected cannot be outsourced in the same way that we can outsource components of evidence-gathering for assessment. There are many wonderful books and papers about how to use assessment evidence, including works by Banta (1999), Woolvard (2004), Patton (2008), and Suskie (2009). But the leap from reading good advice about working formatively with assessment data to applying that advice in the academic polis is far greater than that between reading about and implementing concrete suggestions for gathering a better research sample of students. We believe the next step in developing the necessary scholarship and expertise for assessment is to create mechanisms to systematically train campus assessment leaders in the political skills and organizational knowledge they need to more fully utilize their assessment data. To effectively promote improvements in student learning, it is just as important for assessment leaders to be able to draw on the work of, for example, Kezar (2001) and Kezar and Lester (2009) on facilitating institutional change as it is for them to know the reliability of assessment measures or how to create an e-portfolio.

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We began this paper with references to the national discourse on accountability in higher education. Our collaborative work with colleges and universities over the last five years on the Wabash National Study has led us to wonder whether the advocates for accountability and improvement have a realistic sense—both in terms of student learning as well as in terms of institutional change—of what kind of change is possible over a four- or five-year period. The research on institutional change suggests that "institutional transformation" is rare and that, if anything, incremental change is what is best and what is possible (Kezar, 2001). The question we are left with, then, is whether any institution—even the colleges and universities most committed to being accountable and to improving student learning—can meet the standards set by the discourse.

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NILOA's primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

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NILOA Occasional Papers are commissioned to examine contemporary issues that will inform the academic community of the current state-of-the art of assessing learning outcomes in American higher education. The authors are asked to write for a general audience in order to provide comprehensive, accurate information about how institutions and other organizations can become more proficient at assessing and reporting student learning outcomes for the purposes of improving student learning and responsibly fulfilling expectations for transparency and accountability to policy makers and other external audiences.

Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to sprovez2@illinois.edu.

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA web site went live on February 11, 2009. www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and 2009 to 2010. He also served as president of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.
- Peter Ewell joined NILOA as a senior scholar in November 2009.

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