National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

May 2016

Higher Education Quality: Why Documenting Learning Matters

A Policy Statement from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Policy Statement

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

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NILOA Mission

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) primary objective is to discover and disseminate the 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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Introduction

The importance of assessing student learning in college has yet to capture the attention of policy makers or the public. Indeed, few outside the academy know what the phrase, student learning outcomes assessment, means. And yet the information outcomes assessment produces—when done well—is foundational to addressing some of the greatest challenges the country currently faces.

Thirty years ago the assessment bandwagon began rolling across the landscape of American higher education. The movement was prompted in large part by the highly publicized 1983 federal report, *A Nation at Risk*, which argued American education needed to improve. This document was followed by a spate of others focused more squarely on higher education and the quality of the undergraduate experience. For three decades, institutions, accreditors, blue ribbon commissions, faculty, staff and others have invested considerable time and energy advancing efforts to document and enhance what students know and can do as a result of their studies.

What do we have to show for all this activity? Well, more than many realize, but not nearly enough.

Why Documenting Student Learning Matters

Virtually everyone agrees that what students learn in college is central to subsequent success and satisfaction in life, to the nation's economic competitiveness and productivity, and to building healthy and civically engaged communities. For this and many other reasons, the stakes have never been higher in terms of making sure college graduates acquire the knowledge and proficiencies needed to be self-sufficient and civically responsible.

More recently a whole host of concerns has pushed questions about collegiate quality higher on the national agenda. Large numbers of students grapple with troubling levels of debt. Has their investment been well placed? Institutions themselves—both public and private—are stressed by financial problems, forcing cuts in the programs and services students need, especially those historically underserved by colleges and universities. What is the impact on learning? In addition, the spike in the number of new providers of higher learning along with accelerating technological advances make it possible for students to acquire postsecondary credentials without ever meeting their instructors in person or setting foot on a campus--a prospect that can raise questions about academic quality and integrity.

These circumstances make educational quality a national priority. With so much in play, we should expect a groundswell of interest by faculty and staff as well as policy makers in assessing what students gain from their studies and using that information to enhance student attainment. But this is not the case.

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"Employers recently have been asking for more than just a transcript in order to determine if students have learned what they need to know and do to function effectively."

~George P. Pernsteiner, President, State Higher Education Executive Officers

True enough, there has been some progress. Multiple studies indicate that the vast majority of colleges and universities publish statements about the intended learning outcomes of their degree programs. Where they take the next step—generating and using evidence of those outcomes—the results are often salutary. But some institutions—among them those perceived as the most prestigious—have yet to publicly specify their expectations for student learning or report assessment results. And many rank and file faculty members resist the specification and assessment of learning goals as reductionist and demeaning.

Some of this resistance may be justified, including the worry that the very process of explicitly defining and systematically examining student learning can unintentionally reduce a complex and creative process to a list of mindless, elementary tasks. Effective teaching and learning is not about getting students to master facts; it is about engaging them in ways that foster a genuine love of inquiry and a facility with analytical reasoning and other higher order proficiencies. The challenge is to represent and gather evidence of those proficiencies in concrete ways that preserve their complexity. Another common criticism is that relying on assessment tools and processes developed by external vendors implies that faculty members are not trusted or competent to do this on their own.

To these and other reservations and hazards we say, *Amen!*

Documenting learning and using that evidence to improve student and institutional performance is a challenging, complicated process. But acknowledging the difficulty of the work in no way diminishes the urgency of doing it. Indeed, student learning outcomes assessment—done well—is not just a powerful, potentially effective means to improve student success; it is an *essential strategy* for the higher education enterprise to respond successfully to the many challenges it faces.

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"The assessment movement is poised to drive a sea change in what actually counts as meaningful, actionable evidence by putting students' authentic work at the center of the assessment inquiry."

~Carol Geary Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges and Universities

What We Know About Effective Assessment Work

Since 2008 the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has been tracking what colleges and universities are doing to document and improve student performance and institutional effectiveness. Over this period three trends are evident:

- Institutions are clearer about what they expect their students to know and be able to do and they are more willing to make these expectations public;
- A wider range of assessment tools and approaches is available; and
- Most institutions are using multiple approaches to evaluate student accomplishment.

In addition, many accrediting groups—especially program-specific entities—are encouraging more nuanced, thoughtful ways to assess student learning.

From our work in the field, NILOA has distilled five principles that if enacted in mission-relevant ways can spread and accelerate assessment work worthy of the promises colleges and universities make to their students, policy-makers, and the public.

1. Develop specific, actionable learning outcomes statements.

Learning outcome statements are most useful when they are crafted to inform effective educational policies and practices, not to meet compliance demands by external groups. When they are concrete and clear about the proficiencies students are to achieve, such statements provide reference points for student performance, not just for individual courses but the cumulative effects of a program of study. Doing this demands active, operational verbs to guide the design of assignments that motivate students to demonstrate the desired outcomes in a way that can be verified. Clear, specific statements describing desired outcomes also make it possible for faculty to align curriculum and pedagogy with intended proficiencies, which is essential to ensuring that a program is, indeed, achieving its purposes. Such statements also make it easier for students to understand and appreciate institutional and program expectations for their performance and how their learning will equip them to handle what they encounter after college.

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"NILOA's five principles for effective learning assessment should be central to every institution's efforts to better understand what and how students are learning and using that information to further strengthen student and institutional outcomes."

~ Brian K. Bridges, Vice President, Research and Member Engagement, United Negro College Fund

2. Connect learning goals with actual student assignments and work.

Provosts tell us that the most meaningful, actionable evidence of student learning comes from course-based assessments embedded in regular assignments. Indeed, our NILOA surveys show that faculty-designed assignments are the *primary* vehicle through which students demonstrate that they know and can do what the institution or program specifies; they are used far more frequently than standardized tests. To underscore the critical role of assignments, NILOA has conducted a series of "charrettes" in which faculty from different fields discuss how to improve their assignments in ways that more accurately align with one or more intended proficiencies. The products of that process are now available in an online assignment library [www.assignmentlibrary.org] that illustrates how degree-level proficiencies such as those identified in the Degree Qualifications Profile can be both fostered and assessed through papers, projects, demonstrations, reports and other tasks that faculty require of students. The Association of American Colleges and Universities, drawing on its Essential Learning Outcomes, is sponsoring parallel work on "signature assignments" and its partnership with the State Higher Education Executive Officers coordinating the Multi-State Collaborative (MSC). Faculty participating in such efforts design assignments for individual courses and also work to sequence assignments and incorporate high-impact practices across a program of study and across transfer pathways. An essential feature of these approaches is a systematic examination of artifacts of authentic student learning.

3. Collaborate with the relevant stakeholders, beginning with the faculty.

Faculty engagement and ownership are essential if assessment and improvement efforts are to be effective. And here, too, significant challenges exist. Relatively few faculty members have experience designing clear, explicit course and program outcomes or assignments that directly elicit those outcomes. Not surprisingly, campuses that have made the most progress have invested in serious, sustained professional development and have hosted venues where faculty can come together to formulate and explore questions about their students' learning. When undertaken collaboratively with others who work with students—such as student affairs staff and advisors—this

kind of inquiry can move outcomes assessment from an "add on" to a process that is part and parcel to effective teaching and learning. That shift is critical to fostering a sense of collective responsibility for learning among all those who have a role in the educational process and to establishing systematic assessment as a shared professional norm.

4. Design assessment approaches that generate actionable evidence about student learning that key stakeholders can understand and use to improve student and institutional performance.

Colleges and universities have more information about students and their learning than ever before. But too few institutions use productively what they have in hand. In large part, this is because the evidence available is not translated into actions to enhance student accomplishment. The good news is that we have learned how some institutions do this well.

- They ask questions about student performance to which faculty and others want answers. This means involving the right stakeholders—faculty, staff, students, governing board members, and others as appropriate—at the *beginning* of any assessment project to determine the questions it needs to answer.
- They build interest and momentum by creating occasions for people to work together to raise issues and questions they care and need to know more about in order to improve student engagement and learning. And they bring these same people back together to make sense of the findings and tease out their implications for action.
- They present assessment results in transparent, understandable forms to the people who have a need to know and act on them.

5. Focus on *improvement* and *compliance* will take care of itself.

Assessment that comports with the four previous principles—employing integrated, stakeholder-responsive, action-oriented approaches—has the added, salutary effect of obviating the compliance mentality that often blunts the prospects for effective assessment efforts. Many schools trapped in this "culture of compliance" have either out-sourced the assessment process or hired professional staff to respond to what are often ambiguous and conflicting demands from accreditors and other external actors. And too often the results of compliance-driven assessment—which frequently take the form of standardized tests—are unconnected to policies and practices that matter to desired outcomes. In contrast, assessment motivated by genuine institutional needs and faculty priorities for improving teaching typically yields evidence that is valued and more likely to be used. When college and universities do this right, assessment becomes embedded in the regular daily work of the academy and external actors like regional accreditors are more than satisfied.

Final Thoughts

Clarifying and documenting what students know and can do and using this information to improve student and institutional performance are essential because students need a postsecondary education that will prepare them to meet the challenges of the 21st century. In addition, educators have work to

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"NILOA's five principles are clear, practical, and useful. As to the fifth principle, 'Focus on improvement and compliance will take care of itself,' this accreditor says 'Amen'!"

~Mary Ellen Petrisko, President, WASC Senior College and University Commission

do in building and maintaining public trust and demonstrating institutional integrity. It is no longer beyond the capacity of a college or university to articulate expectations for learning, to document student progress toward these expectations, and to use the resulting evidence to improve student success. Doing this job and doing it well is within our grasp. Failing to do so shortchanges our students and the many others who have a major stake in the quality of higher education. Equally important, we in the academy owe it to ourselves.

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NILOA Mission

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.

NILOA Occasional Paper Series

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 njankow2@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 website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://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 of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.

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