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Minority Serving Institutions are learning what their students are learning

A new report released today shows that Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), which educate about 40% of students historically underserved in postsecondary education are actively engaged in determining how well their students are learning. The report, *Focused on What Matters: Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes at Minority Serving Institutions*, written by Erick Montenegro and Natasha Jankowski, illustrates that Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions and other colleges and universities enrolling large numbers of students of color are similar to Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in terms of the kinds of measures they use to document how much students learn and benefit from college. But one important way MSIs differ from PWIs is their emphasis on using the results to improve student and institutional performance.

Although MSIs are less likely to use relatively expensive nationally benchmarked surveys, they are more likely to use locally developed tools to measure the student experience in classrooms. Such an approach is often more revealing to identify where changes in teaching and learning approaches may be needed. Belle Wheelan, president of the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges, said, “Whether driven by faculty or mandated by external agencies, MSIs recognize the importance of assessment and are focused on using the results to ensure that all students succeed.”

Indeed, according to Marybeth Gasman, director of the Center for Minority Serving Institutions at the University of Pennsylvania, “Other institutions can learn from MSIs about how assessment can be a lever for institutional change.” Equally important, for a host of economic and social reasons it is imperative that students attending MSIs earn high quality degrees and credentials. William Serrata, president of El Paso Community College, said, “Student learning outcomes will play an increasingly important role in facilitating student success at MSIs, which is essential to achieving the national educational attainment goal.”

Focused on What Matters is based on a national survey of provosts at 147 MSI and 765 PWI accredited two- and four-year colleges and universities conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). According to George Kuh, NILOA director, “Understandably, policy makers and others want more people to complete college. But degrees and credentials are hollow achievements if graduates do not attain the knowledge, proficiencies, and dispositions that help them to be economically self-sufficient and civically responsible after college. There is much to admire in the way MSIs concentrate on using data to enhance these critical outcomes.”

Other major findings from the report include:

- More than four fifths of MSIs (82 percent) have established learning outcome statements for all their undergraduates.
- MSIs are more likely than PWIs to use placement exams to determine incoming student pre-college achievement levels and to use classroom-based assessments or in class assignments such as simulations, comprehensive exams, and critiques.
- MSIs are similar to PWIs in using assessment results to meet accreditation requirements and respond to external accountability demands.
- MSIs are more likely than PWIs to use assessment results for strategic planning, resource allocation and budgeting, and prospective student/family communications.
- Compared with PWIs, MSIs are more likely to share the results of assessment with alumni.
- While similar in terms of their overall approach, some types of MSIs opt for different approaches to measure student learning outcomes.

According to Natasha Jankowski, NILOA associate director and one of the report's authors, "The only legitimate way of determining educational quality is to regularly collect evidence of student accomplishment and to use that evidence to improve teaching and learning. To their credit, MSIs by and large have made this a priority." Mildred Garcia, president of California State University, Fullerton, said, "This report is important because it brings into the national conversation the good work being done assessing the learning outcomes of a student population that will become the nation's majority."

NILOA is a collaboration between the University of Illinois and Indiana University. Its mission 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.

The Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions brings together researchers and practitioners to document the educational contributions of MSIs, communicate their vital role in the nation's economy, promote administrative and academic reform initiatives, and strengthen efforts to close educational achievement gaps.

The NILOA-Penn MSI Center report, *Focused on What Matters: Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes at Minority Serving Institutions*, may be retrieved in pdf form at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/msireport.html>. For more information, contact Natasha Jankowski, njankow2@illinois.edu.

NILOA: www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
Penn MSI Center: www.gse.upenn.edu/cms