

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE
May 10, 2016

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Why Documenting Student Learning Matters

The importance of assessing student learning in college has yet to capture the attention of policy makers or the public. But according to a new statement from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), what educators call the “assessment movement” and the information it generates are foundational to addressing some of the greatest challenges the country currently faces.

About thirty years ago the American public began to hear, and many of them began to believe, that education needed to improve. The first alarm was sounded in the 1983 federal report, *A Nation at Risk*. A steady stream of calls for reform followed about how to respond to the challenges presented by the expanding knowledge economy, the disappearance of well-paying low-skill jobs, and the growing complexity of life in the 21st century.

Among the hundreds of efforts to increase the quality of student learning and expand the number of well-educated people in the United States, the assessment movement in higher education is among the most durable. The logic is compelling: define the desirable educational outcomes, determine the extent to which students demonstrate the intended proficiencies, and use this information to help foster greater levels of student accomplishment.

However, this seemingly straightforward process is far more complicated and time consuming than it first appears. For these and other reasons, consequential assessment work in U.S. colleges and universities is far from universal. In *Higher Education Quality: Why Documenting Student Learning Matters*, NILOA argues that improving student and institutional performance must be a national priority. Fortunately, more than a few institutions are doing the potentially transformative work of learning outcomes assessment well, but the number is well short of what is needed to markedly improve the educational quality of the nation’s postsecondary system.

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, says “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.”

The NILOA statement outlines the warrant for multiple, systematic approaches to obtain evidence of authentic student achievement and addresses some well-reasoned concerns that poorly designed assessment efforts can distract from rather than enhance the quality of teaching and learning. George Kuh, NILOA director, observed that, “Many of the reservations about the value of student learning outcomes assessment are

because the findings do not speak to issues that faculty and staff find relevant for their work with students or yield information that they or others can use to be more effective.”

Recognizing that much remains to be done, a succinct summary is offered of what the assessment movement has achieved thus far, drawing on NILOA’s work in the field over the past decade along with that of other organizations. The statement concludes with five principles that when adapted appropriately to an institution’s educational purposes and programs can spread and accelerate assessment work worthy of the promises colleges and universities make to their students, policy makers, and the public.

According to Mary Ellen Petrisko, president of WASC’s Senior College and University Commission, “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!’”

Brian K. Bridges, Vice President for Research and Member Engagement at the United Negro College Fund agrees: “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.”

The NILOA project is a collaborative effort between the University of Illinois and Indiana University, with support from Lumina Foundation for Education and the University of Illinois. Since 2008, NILOA’s mission has been to advance assessment and improvement efforts that enhance student learning and institutional effectiveness.

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The NILOA policy statement, *Higher Education Quality: Why Documenting Student Learning Matters*, may be retrieved in pdf form at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/NILOA_statement.html

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NILOA web site: www.learningoutcomesassessment.org