National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

June 2010

Exploring the Landscape:

What Institutional Websites Reveal About Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Activities

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Abridged Report

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Introduction

College and university websites are an increasingly popular medium to present information about institution and student performance to faculty and staff as well as to potential students, their families and policy makers. One way institutions can respond to persistent calls to be more forthcoming about students' gain from attending college is to make this information accessible via their institution website. Toward this end, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) examined institution-wide content on the websites of several hundred colleges and universities across the U.S. to determine the extent to which these institutions have made available information about student learning outcomes assessment. This complements other NILOA inquiries such as the NILOA 2009 National Survey (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009)[1], which recorded what chief academic officers *reported* their institutions were doing with regard to student learning outcomes assessment. Examining institution websites *shows* us what colleges and universities are communicating about those activities via their websites, thus providing an estimate of institutional transparency.

Web Scan Study

The NILOA web scan documented *what institutions portrayed* in regard to student learning outcomes assessment on their institution-wide web pages (as opposed to department or program-based web pages). The web scan sought to answer the following questions:

- What does the institution display on its website regarding student learning outcomes assessment?
- On which web pages is information about assessment of student learning outcomes located?
- Does the institution use specific student learning outcomes assessment language on its website?

To address these questions, a team of six researchers systematically reviewed 725 institution websites from March 2009 to August 2009. Institutions were randomly selected from a group of all regionally accredited under-graduate-degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the U.S. This web scan did not attempt to determine whether the institution reported the *results* of assessment efforts; that will be the focus of a subsequent web scan. More detailed information on the sample selection and web scan procedure is provided in the full report, posted on the NILOA website: http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.

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1 Kuh, G., & Ikenberry, S. (2009, October). *More than you think, less than we need: Learning outcomes assessment in American higher education*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment. Retrieved from: http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/NILOAsurveyresults09.htm

Web Scan Terminology

Evidence of institution-wide student learning outcomes assessment was organized into four categories.

Direct evidence of learning. An assessment approach that documents what students have learned in a concrete way. Direct evidence includes capstone experiences, portfolios, e-portfolios, standardized tests, and local tests.

Indirect evidence of learning. An assessment approach that represents or approximates what students have learned without providing a concrete demonstration of that learning. Included in this category are national student surveys, local student surveys, graduating student surveys, alumni surveys, and other similar instruments.

Capacity building efforts. Institution-wide activities focusing on developing staff expertise in conducting student learning outcomes assessment as well as financial resources available to support these efforts. Capacity building efforts include awards for assessment, faculty or staff development efforts, and events recognizing student achievement.

Assessment purposes. The animating reason for assessing learning, such as to guide and inform processes and instruction. Assessment purposes include accreditation, institutional membership initiatives, and general education.

Major Findings

> ## 1. More assessment activity was reported by chief academic officers than was available on institution websites.

The NILOA 2009 National Survey found frequent reported use of such institution-level student learning outcomes assessment activities as standardized tests, national student surveys, and capstone experiences. The web scan results, in contrast, showed that information about such activities appeared much less frequently on institution websites (Figure 1). This contrast is particularly stark with regard to national student surveys and alumni surveys.

Figure 1. Percentage of institutions providing information on specific student learning outcomes assessment items by NILOA study.
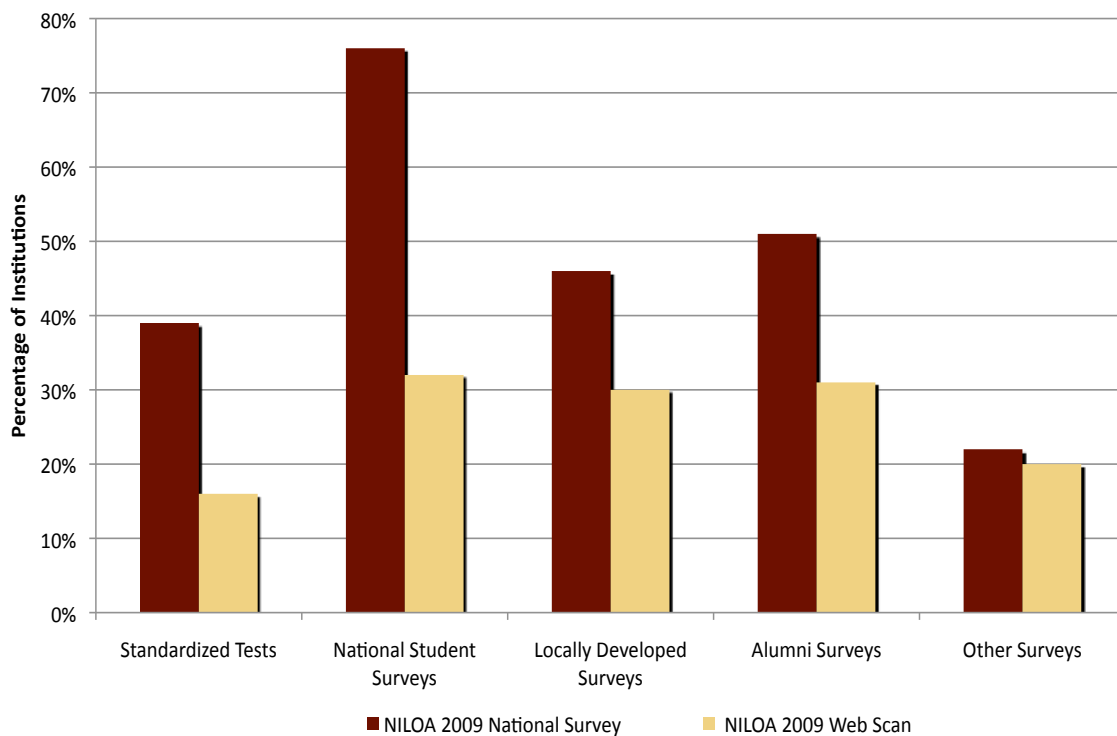
Learning outcome(s), outcome(s) assessment, and *institutional assessment* were entered as search terms on institution website search engines to see whether information on student learning outcomes assessment could be found by searching the website. Using these terms, institutional website search engines produced returns at only about one third of the websites. The terms *learning outcomes* and *outcomes assessment* produced the greatest number of search returns on both public and private institution websites, with website search engines of public institutions more likely than those of private institutions to produce information for each search term (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of search engines producing information by institutional control.
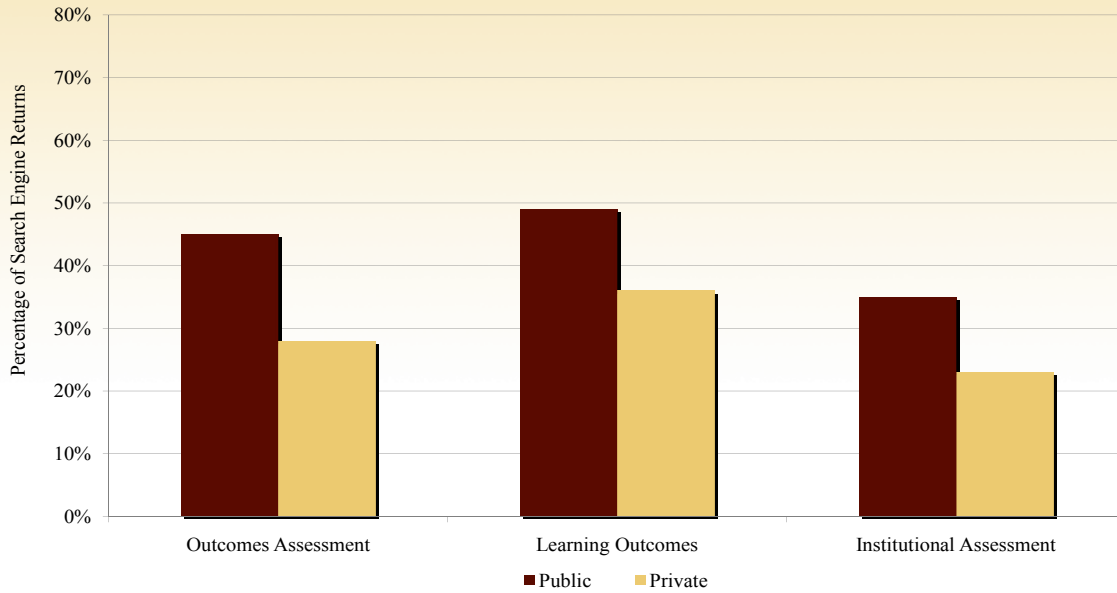
2. The typical institution represented two student learning outcomes assessment activities on its website.

Many different types of assessment activities were represented on institution websites, such as surveys, capstone experiences, and portfolios; however, institutions typically posted information on only two of these, with the most frequently posted—by at least 30% of all institutions—being information on national student surveys, alumni surveys, and local student surveys. Doctoral and public institutions tended to feature more indirect evidence of student learning (e.g., surveys) as compared to other institutional types. Baccalaureate and private institutions presented information on direct evidence of student learning (e.g., portfolios) more frequently than other institutional types (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of institutions whose websites included direct and indirect evidence by Carnegie type.
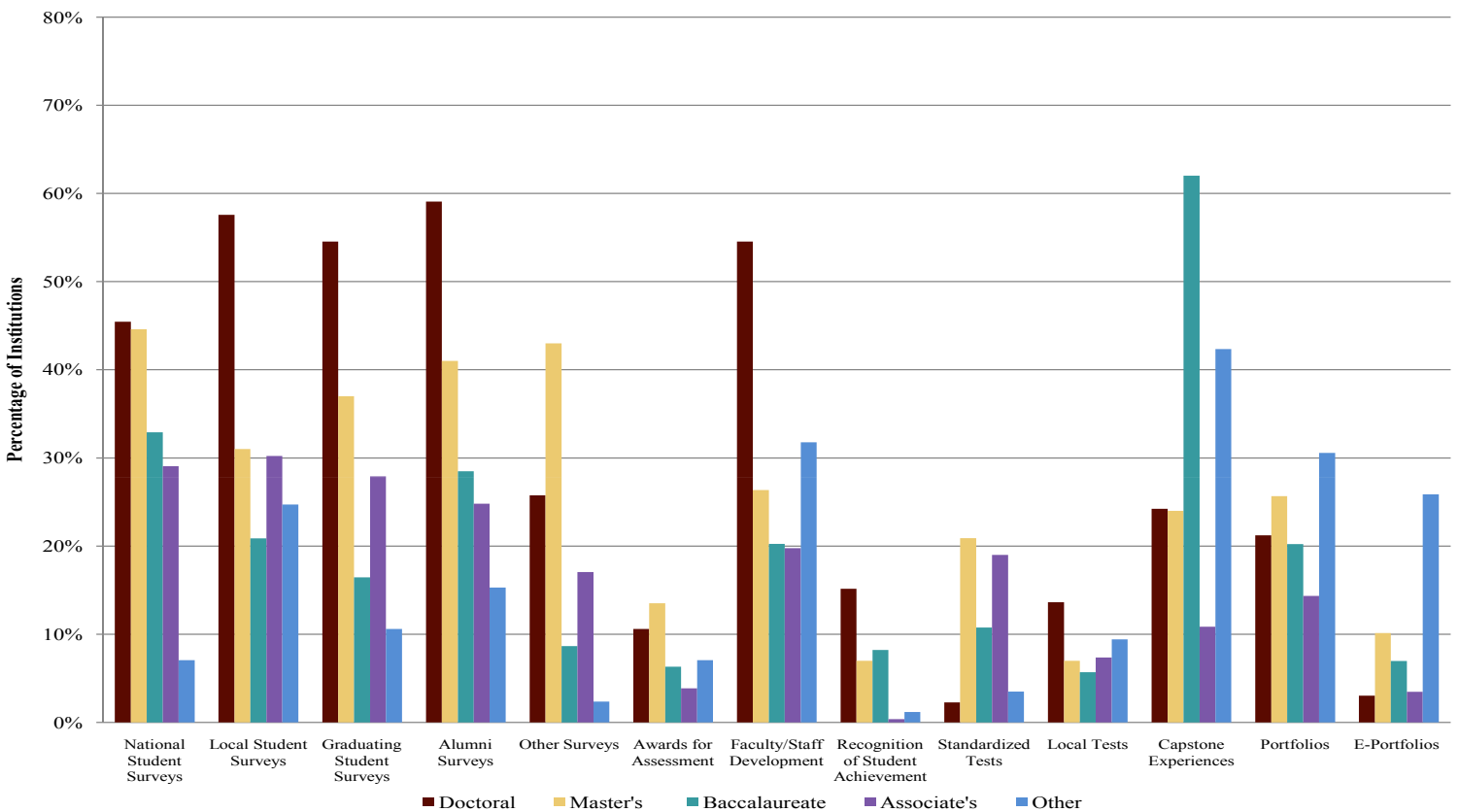
3. Student learning outcomes assessment information was most often available on web pages targeting internal audiences.

The home and admissions pages generally are designed for external audiences, such as prospective students and their families, and the web scan rarely found information on student learning outcomes assessment on these web pages (Figure 4). The web pages where the majority of student learning outcomes assessment information was posted—those of the provost/chief academic officer and institutional research—target internal audiences, such as faculty and staff.

Figure 4. Percentage of web pages which included direct and indirect evidence of learning
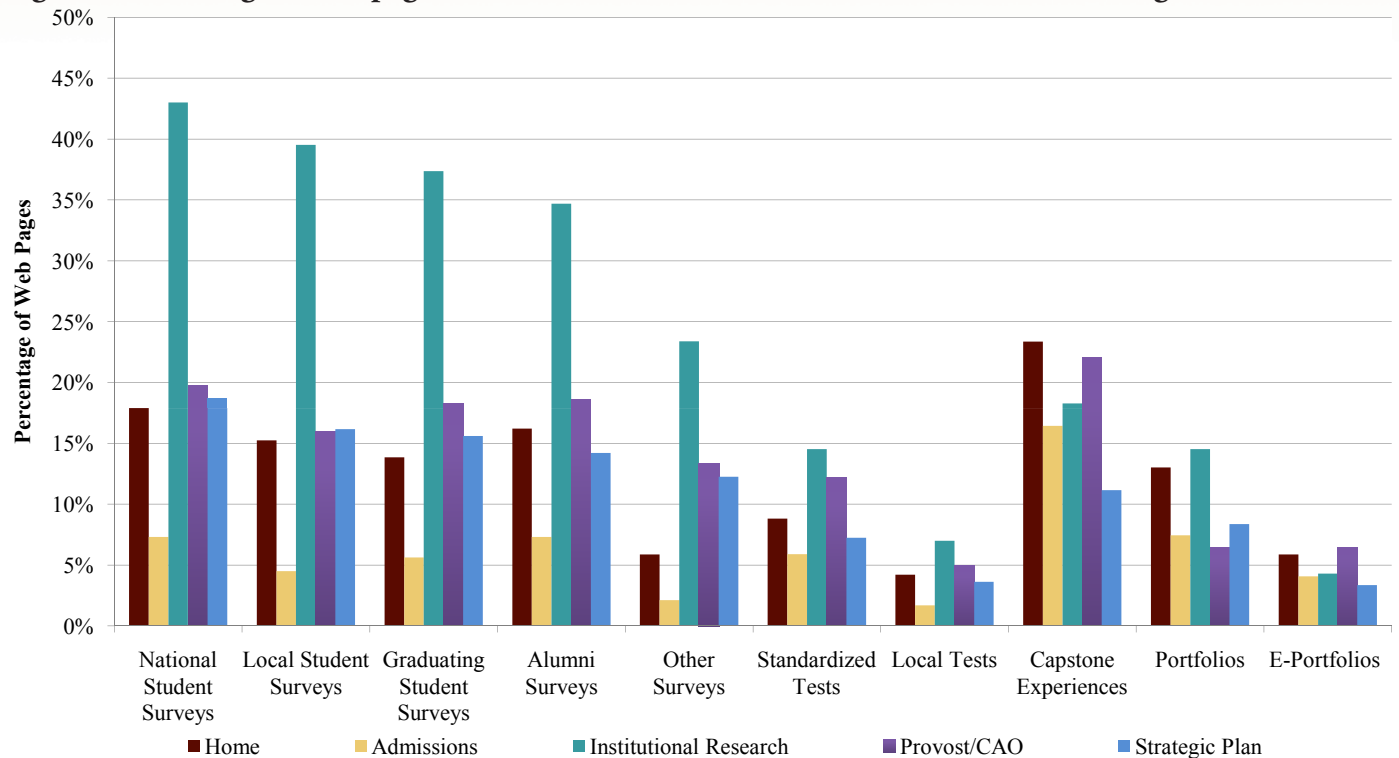
Conclusion and Recommendations

Institutions have more student learning outcomes assessment activities underway than they report on their websites. To meet transparency obligations and responsibilities, institutions should make more information about student and institutional performance accessible via their websites. Care should also be taken to help multiple audiences interpret and understand the information posted. Toward this end, colleges and universities are recommended to take the following steps:

• Prominently post student learning outcomes statements and resources in multiple places on the institution's website and update those postings regularly.

• State the institution's current activities related to student learning outcomes assessment on the institution's website.

• Provide examples and descriptions of institutional assessment activities to help multiple audiences develop an understanding of the outcomes specific to the institution.

• Explain the meaning and use of results of student learning outcomes assessments on the institution's website in layperson's language for multiple internal and external audiences.

• Minimize the need on the institution's website for password protection of student learning outcomes assessment resources, information, and results.

• Enable ease of access to information on the institution's website by making text and non-graphic versions of the web pages available and by providing clear ways to navigate the site.

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 went live on February 11, 2009. www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- 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. He is currently serving as Interim President of the University of Illinois.

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National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (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.

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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