

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.

The information expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie Corporation of New York, Lumina Foundation for Education, or The Teagle Foundation.

Contents

Why Assessment, Why Now?

Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education

What We Learned

Outcomes Assessment: A Work in Progress

Recommendations and Potential Actions

Last Word

NILOA National Advisory Panel

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More Than You Think, Less Than We Need

“Colleges... do so little to measure what students learn between freshman and senior years. So doubt lurks: how much does a college education – the actual teaching and learning that happens on campus – really matter?”

D. Leonhardt*

The present moment is sobering: How can higher education reduce expenditures, maintain the gains achieved in past years in access, improve graduation rates, and remain affordable while at the same time ensuring that students acquire the skills, competencies, and dispositions that prepare them for a lifetime of learning in an increasingly competitive global marketplace?

The challenges are unprecedented in their severity and urgency. To effectively address them, faculty members, provosts, and presidents in higher education need good information about what undergraduate students learn to make informed decisions about instructional approaches, staffing, resource allocation, and other policies and practices that will help students attain the desired outcomes.

Why Assessment, Why Now?

Access to and *success in* college are substantially influenced by prior academic achievement. Learning is a continuum; gaps and weaknesses at one point—whether in high school or college—create barriers to successful performance at the next level. Student learning outcomes data are essential to better understand what is working and what is not, to identify curricular and pedagogical weaknesses, and to use this information to improve performance.

The recent economic downturn has made ensuring educational *affordability* and sustaining educational *quality* more difficult. Reductions in public and private support in the face of rising enrollments make it especially challenging for institutions to enhance student learning and overall institutional effectiveness.

Ultimately, access and affordability are empty gestures in the absence of evidence of accomplishment.

When campuses spend money on programs and services that do not achieve the intended results, those resources could instead be invested in things that make a real difference to student learning and success. Simply put, colleges and universities must become smarter and better at assessing student learning outcomes, at using the data to inform resource allocation and other decisions, and at communicating these responsible, mission-relevant actions to their constituents.

Ultimately, access and affordability are empty gestures in the absence of evidence of *accomplishment*. Courses, credits, certificates, and degrees are important proxies for student accomplishment, but they are only proxies. It’s the broad range of intended outcomes that students accomplish during college that yields the personal, economic, and societal benefits promised by higher education.

What is the higher education enterprise doing to assure the public that it is delivering on this promise?

* Leonhardt, D. (2009, September 27). The college calculation: How much does higher education matter? *New York Times Magazine*, pp.13-14, 16.

“Now, more than ever, we must understand how well our students are learning so we can target efforts to help students succeed. NILOA has come on the scene at just the right moment.”

Molly Corbett Broad, President
American Council on Education

“Assessment of learning is growing, but much more rapid and complete progress needs to be made to better understand and describe what students should know, understand, and be able to do with a college degree.”

Jamie Merisotis, President and Chief
Executive Officer
Lumina Foundation for Education

Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education

To answer this question, in spring 2009 we asked provosts or chief academic officers at all regionally accredited, undergraduate-degree-granting, two- and four-year public, private, and for-profit institutions in the U.S. (n=2,809) about the assessment activities underway at their institutions and how assessment results are being used. The NILOA questionnaire is organized around four broad questions:

1. What learning outcomes are you measuring at your institution?
2. How are you assessing these outcomes and using the results?
3. What are the major factors prompting assessment at your institution?
4. What do you need to further learning outcomes assessment at your institution?

All told, 1,518 institutions (53%) of those invited responded. The characteristics of these participating institutions reflect the national profile in their institutional sectors, Carnegie classifications, and geographic regions.

What We Learned

Eight observations summarize the current state of outcomes assessment and suggest more assessment activity may be underway in American higher education than some have assumed.

1. Most institutions have identified a common set of learning outcomes that apply to all students.

About three-quarters of all institutions said they have adopted common learning outcomes for all undergraduate students, an essential first step in guiding campus-wide efforts to assess learning outcomes. Variation among institutions, however, was apparent. Larger research-intensive institutions, for example, were less likely to have common learning outcomes for all undergraduate students than were colleges that award primarily baccalaureate or associate's degrees.

Three-quarters of all institutions have adopted common learning outcomes for all undergraduate students.

2. Most institutions use a combination of institution-level and program-level assessment approaches.

We asked provosts what approaches were used by their institutions to assess learning outcomes, such as nationally normed measures of general knowledge and skills (e.g., CLA, CAAP, MAPP, WorkKeys, etc.), portfolios, national or locally developed surveys, and alumni and employer surveys and interviews. We also asked if the tools or approaches were used with institutionally valid samples so that claims could be made about overall institutional performance or if the assessment approach focused at the program level. Assessment tools and approaches understandably vary depending on what the data are intended to represent.

- The vast majority (92%) of all colleges and universities use at least one assessment approach or tool with institutionally valid samples; two thirds of all schools use three or more (not tabled).
- Nine of ten schools use at least one institutional-level and one program-level assessment approach; 77% use two or more of each type and 58% use three or more of each (not tabled).

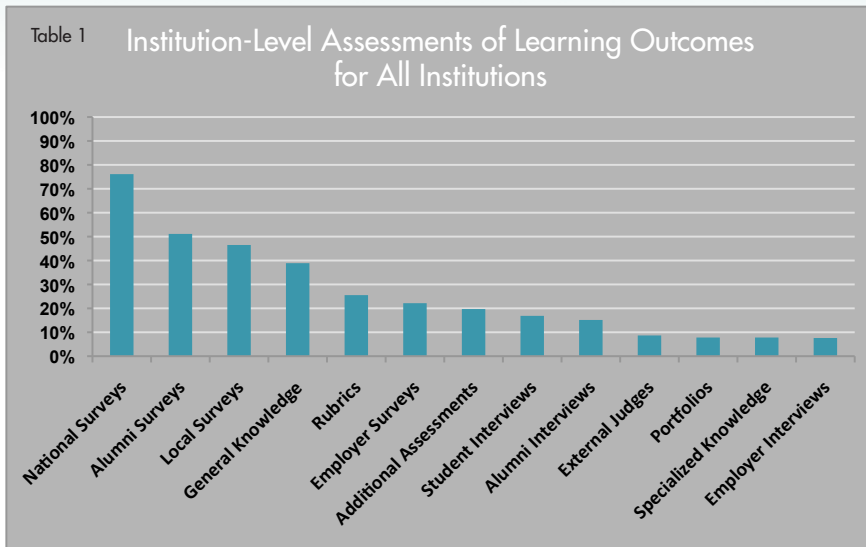
“Measuring educational outcomes is of crucial importance and we know too little about how it’s done. NILOA is lifting the veil on learning outcomes measurement and will help us better document and improve student learning.”

David Shulenburg, Vice President for Academic Affairs
Association of Public and Land-grant Universities

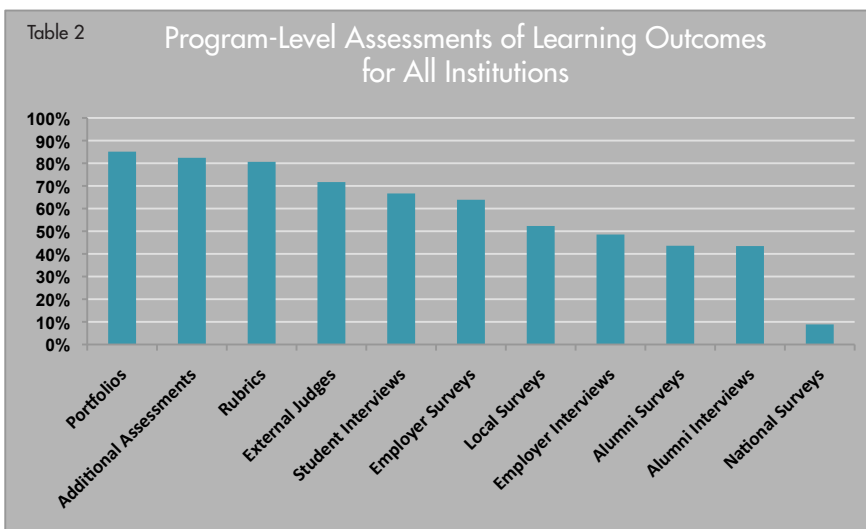
“NILOA is helping take stock of our educational capital—the skills and knowledge college graduates are acquiring—by giving us a comprehensive picture of higher education’s efforts to assess student accomplishment.”

Margaret Miller, Professor
University of Virginia

- The most frequent approach used with an institutionally valid sample was a national survey. More than three-quarters (76%) of all schools reported using surveys at the institution-wide level.
- Two-fifths (39%) of all campuses reported using a standardized measure of general knowledge and skills (e.g., CLA, CAAP, MAPP, WorkKeys).
- Far less common uses with institutionally valid samples were external expert judgments of student work (9%), tests of specialized knowledge (8%), student portfolios (8%), and employer interviews (8%) (Table 1)



- At the program level the most popular approaches to assessing learning outcomes were student portfolios, measures of specialized knowledge and other performance assessments, and rubrics (Table 2), as more than 80% of institutions indicated at least one of their academic programs was using one of these approaches.



“By providing a compendium of good assessment practices for different types of campuses, NILOA is a welcome, realistic alternative to a uniform government-managed approach to documenting student learning outcomes.”

Richard Ekman, President
Council of Independent Colleges

- Community colleges and other associate-degree-granting institutions were more likely to use general knowledge assessments at the program level. More for-profit schools employed a variety of approaches using institutionally valid samples, but fewer collected information at the program level, perhaps reflecting the more focused nature of the curriculum.

“The findings show that self-studies for accreditation are key to triggering assessment of student accomplishment which speaks to the value of the institution-accreditation partnership...”

Judith Eaton, President
Council for Higher Education
Accreditation

“Assessment of learning outcomes is essential practice for every college and university and NILOA is providing much needed leadership by extending and deepening our understanding of how to do this important work.”

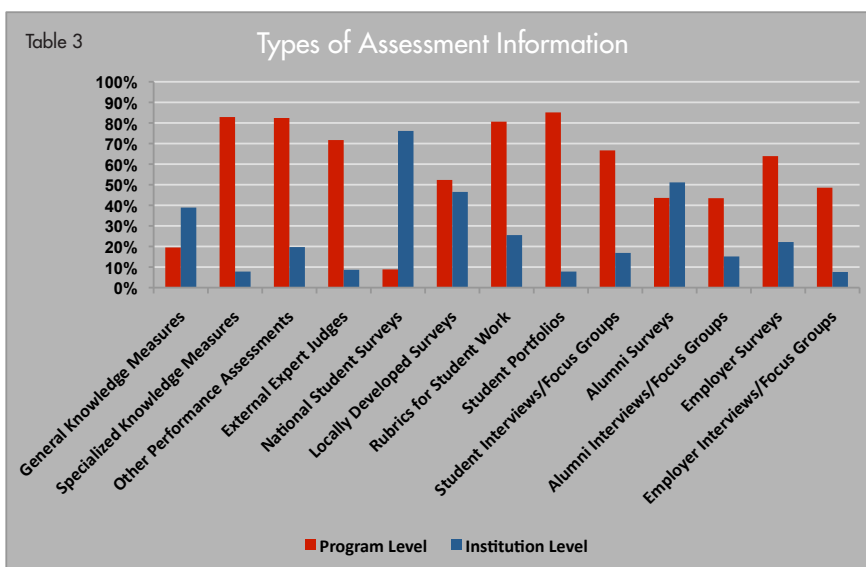
Douglas C. Bennett, President
Earlham College

Community colleges and other associate-degree-granting institutions were more likely to use general knowledge assessments at the program level.

The attention given to learning outcomes assessment on college and university campuses almost certainly increases when assessment activities are focused at the program level. At more than seven out of ten institutions, at least one department was using:

- Specialized knowledge measures
- Performance assessments other than grades
- External judgments of student performance
- Rubrics
- Portfolios
- Student interviews, and
- Employer surveys (Table 3)

In contrast, only three program-level approaches based on institutionally valid samples were being used by at least half of all colleges and universities, and in each case these were surveys.



3. The most common use of assessment data is related to accreditation.

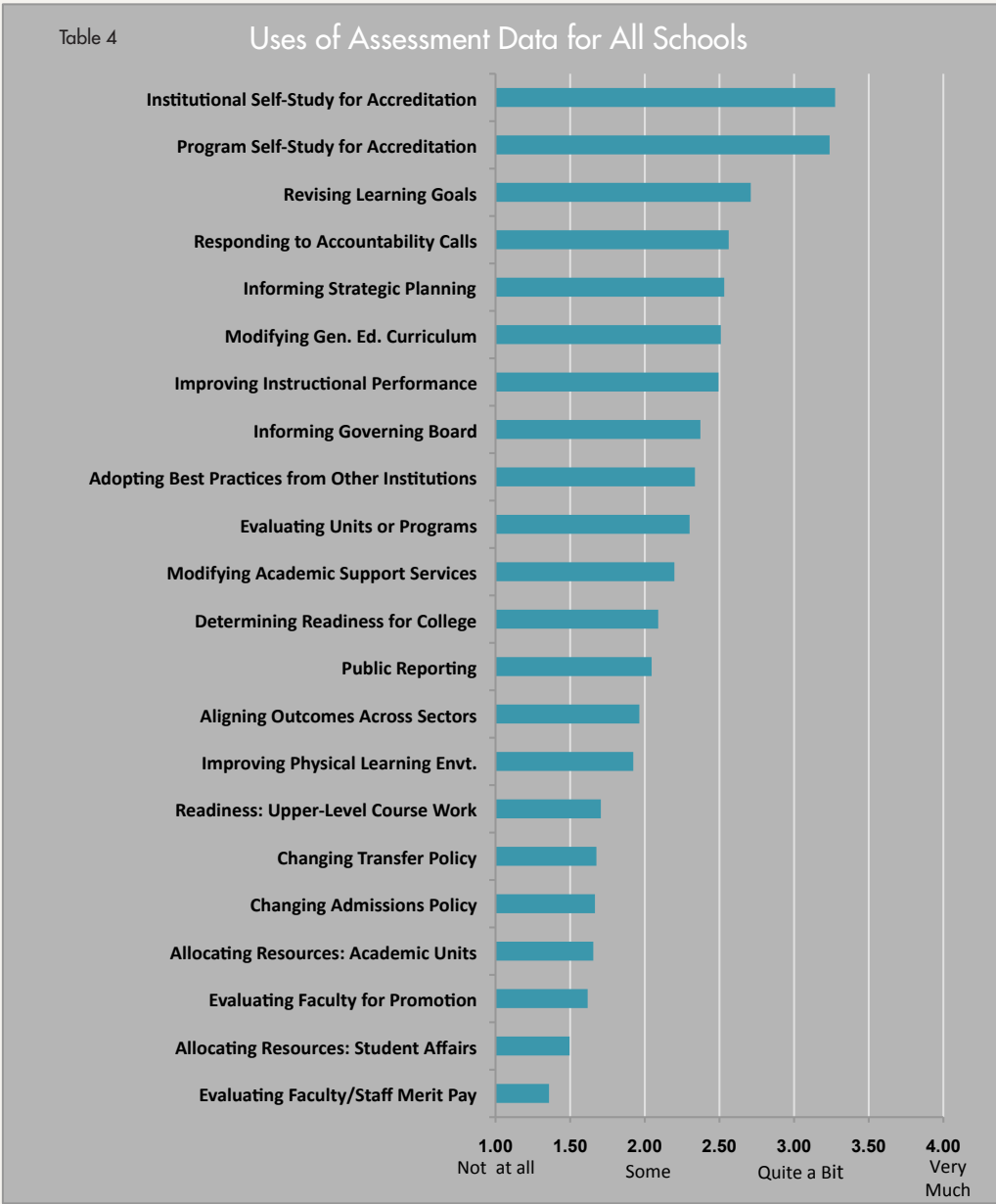
The most common uses for student learning data were for preparing for institution and program accreditation and, to a lesser degree, for revising undergraduate learning goals. Using assessment results for making day-to-day decisions about resources, admissions or transfer policies, faculty and staff performance, and other matters was more limited (Table 4).

The patterns of assessment data use varied somewhat by institution type:

- Fewer doctoral institutions were using outcomes data for determining student readiness for upper-level course work, improving instructional performance, evaluating departments, allocating resources to academic departments, and informing strategic planning.
- Still, more doctoral institutions were using results to respond to calls for accountability such as the VSA and to fulfill specialized academic program accreditation requirements.

“I am heartened that so many institutions are assessing students’ work with authentic measures such as portfolios as they provide the best evidence of what students can actually do with their education.”

Carol Geary Schneider, President
Association of American Colleges and Universities



- Baccalaureate schools were more likely to incorporate assessment results for making faculty promotion and tenure decisions, consistent with their focus on undergraduate education.
- Community colleges and other associate-degree-granting institutions reported using outcomes data for aligning curricula across sectors, determining student readiness for college course work, improving instructional performance, and allocating resources to academic units—all encouraging findings.

“This study clearly shows that while much progress has been made, there is much yet to be accomplished in terms of assessing student learning and using the results in productive ways...”

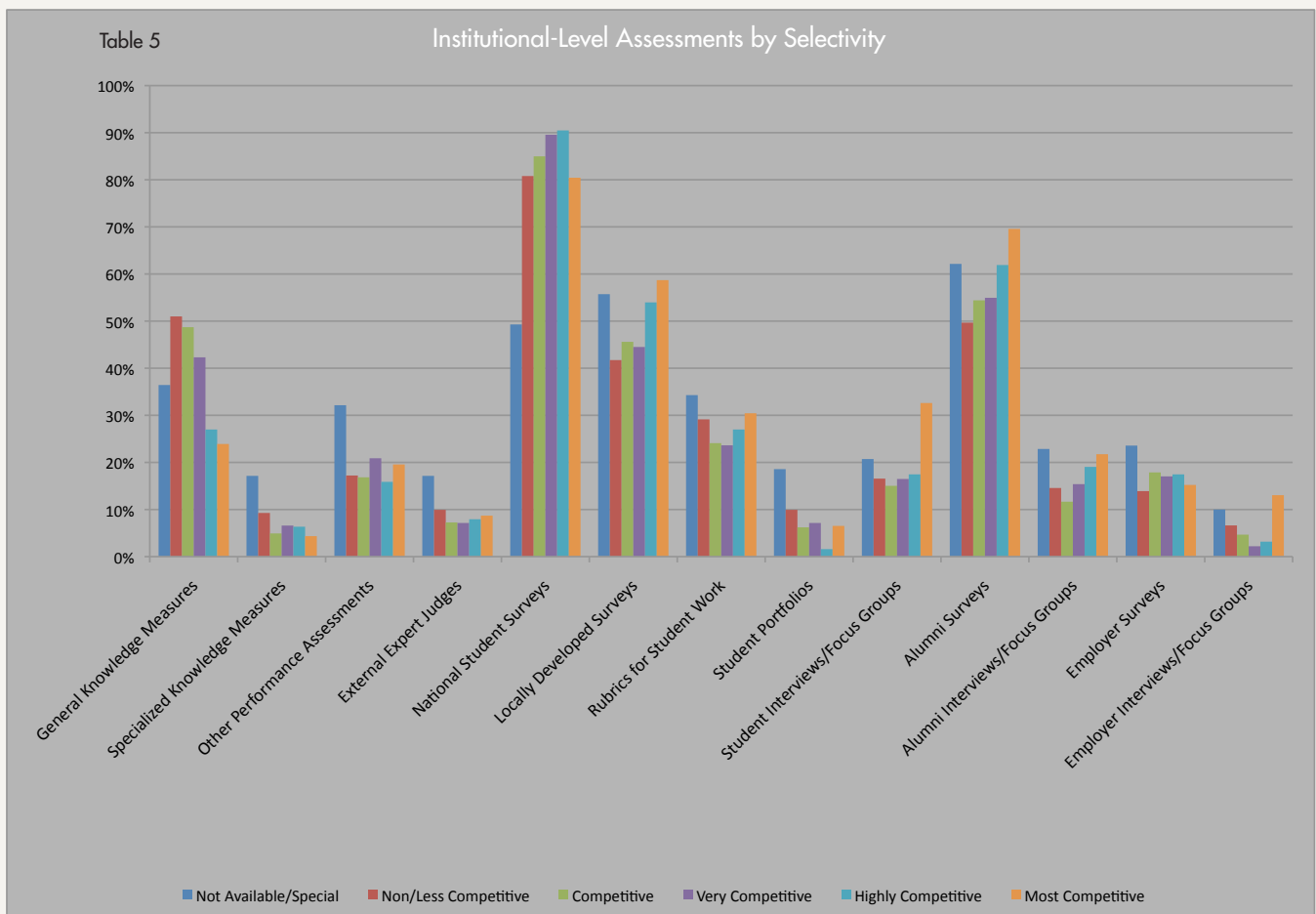
Randy Swing, Executive Director
Association for Institutional Research

For-profit schools reported the most frequent use of assessment data in every category of use.

- For-profit schools reported the most frequent use of assessment data in every category. While only 34 for-profit schools are represented in these data, they represent more than half of the accredited for-profit institutions that award degrees, which were the two criteria for inclusion in the sample. So, the results for this group of institutions probably are as reliable as for the schools in other categories.

4. Assessment approaches and uses of assessment results vary systematically by institutional selectivity.

In general, less competitive institutions are more likely to administer standardized measures of general knowledge with institutionally valid samples, while more of the most competitive colleges and universities use locally developed instruments to collect information from students and alumni (Table 5).



- About half of the least competitive schools employ tests of general knowledge compared with only about one-fifth of the most competitive institutions.
- At least four-fifths of all schools use nationally normed student surveys, *except* for institutions that do not have selectivity data available, where only half do so.

The most competitive colleges and universities collect information at rates generally comparable to their less selective counterparts but do not use it nearly as often.

The *uses* of assessment data at institutions of varying selectivity tell a *different* story, namely, that while the most competitive colleges and universities collect information at rates generally comparable to their less-selective counterparts, they do not report using it nearly as often—with one exception: reporting to the governing board. To illustrate, the most competitive institutions are least likely to use assessment data for:

- Revising learning goals
- Responding to calls for accountability
- Informing strategic planning
- Improving instructional performance
- Evaluating units and programs
- Allocating resources, and
- Reporting to the public

5. Assessment is driven more by accreditation and a commitment to improve than external pressures from government or employers.

What is driving the assessment movement in American higher education? The three most influential forces according to provosts were the requirements of regional accreditors, the requirements of specialized accreditors, and an institutional commitment to improvement. Somewhat less influential in this regard were national calls for accountability or mandates from trustees or state coordinating boards.

The relative importance of different factors prompting outcomes assessment varied somewhat in predictable ways by institution type:

- Community colleges and other associate-degree-granting institutions were more responsive to coordinating and governing board mandates.
- Baccalaureate institutions accorded relatively greater importance to a campus commitment to improvement as a reason for assessing learning outcomes. Master’s institutions gave regional and specialized accreditation relatively greater weight.
- National association initiatives such as the Voluntary System of Accountability seemed to be more influential at doctoral-degree-granting institutions; relatively less influential at those campuses was faculty and staff interest in improving student learning.

“While the results show that institutions of higher education are taking assessment seriously, schools also must use the information effectively to strengthen their academic offerings and improve student performance.”

Belle Wheelan, President, Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

“NILOA can be the connective tissue that links together and advances the work of various groups and organizations interested in using student learning outcomes to improve higher education.”

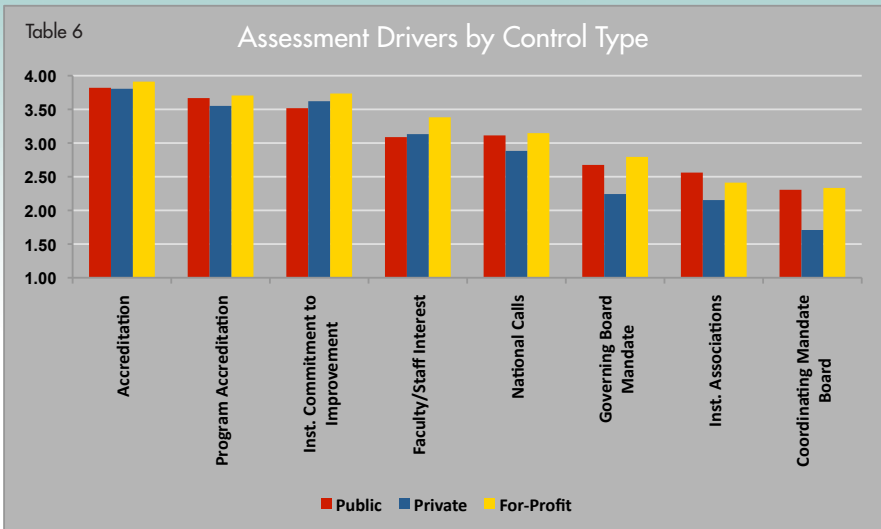
George L. Mehaffy, Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)

“To advance the scholarship of assessment, the work must be sustained over time. NILOA will begin to build a foundation for assessment scholarship that can enable the field to mature and flourish in the years to come.”

Trudy W. Banta, Professor and Senior Advisor to the Chancellor
Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

“To help all students acquire essential learning outcomes, assessment must evolve from a compliance-driven exercise to one where student learning results are used in decision making and resource allocation.”

Jane Wellman, Executive Director
Delta Cost Project

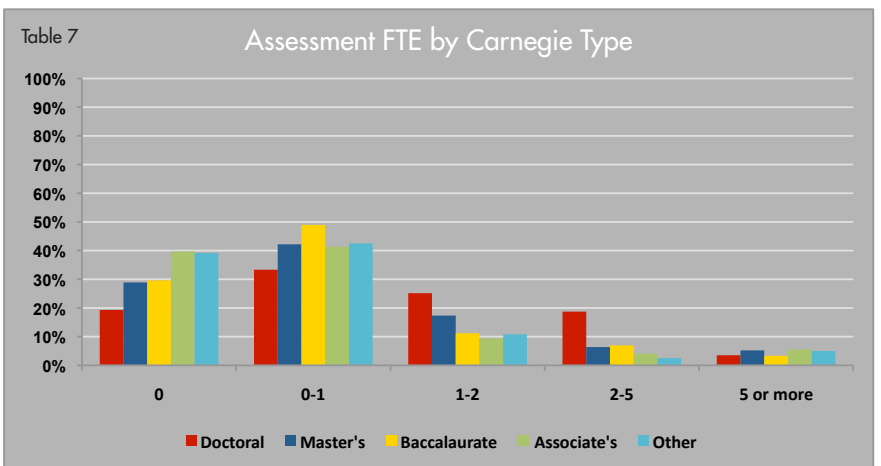


- For-profit schools indicated that every one of the eight factors was influential in driving assessment activity, again suggesting a sharper focus on learning outcomes assessment at those schools (Table 6).

6. Most institutions conduct learning outcomes assessment on a shoestring: 20% have no assessment staff and 65% have two or fewer.

Given the importance of higher education to the future of the society and the resources devoted to the enterprise, investment in assessment staff is modest at best.

- Four-fifths of all institutions indicated that a person or unit was charged with coordinating or implementing assessment campus wide.
- Only 25% of the provosts reported having more than one FTE person assigned to assessment.



- Almost half (47%) of doctoral institutions reported having one or more staff, while only one-fifth (19%) of community colleges and other associate-degree-granting schools had at least one person focused on outcomes assessment (Table 7).
- Institutions in the Southern accreditation region, followed by the Western region, were more likely to have two or more staff charged with student learning outcomes assessment.

7. Gaining faculty involvement and support remains a major challenge. Campuses would also like more assessment expertise, resources, and tools.

When asked what schools need to more effectively assess and use student learning outcomes, the two greatest needs expressed by all institutions were

1. More faculty engagement, with 66% of the schools saying this would be helpful in assessing learning outcomes, and
2. More assessment expertise, with 61% saying it would be helpful.

Other noteworthy findings included:

- About four-fifths of provosts at doctoral-research universities reported greater faculty engagement as their number one challenge.
- Almost half of all provosts said they need more resources for learning outcomes assessment, which is not surprising, given the relatively small numbers of assessment-focused staff reported earlier.
- Rated least important was information about assessment policies and practices at other schools (18%) and presidential support (9%).

That provosts might be relatively satisfied with the level of support from their presidents for assessment of learning outcomes was not surprising. It is possible that what appears to be satisfactory involvement by the president and an apparent lack of interest in learning more about what other campuses are doing in outcomes assessment are a function of the survey's limiting respondents to selecting only a maximum of three campus needs.

8. Most institutions plan to continue outcomes assessment work despite budgetary challenges.

Although more than half of all institutions predicted that the recession would not affect their assessment activities, a nontrivial number (one-fifth) indicated that a decrease in institutional support was possible.

- Understandably, about 15% of all schools were not certain about what might happen at the time the survey was conducted.
- More respondents from public institutions indicated they were uncertain about financial support for assessment compared with their counterparts at private schools.

Outcomes Assessment: A Work in Progress

A fair amount of assessment work is going on in colleges and universities across the country. Challenges to additional progress remain, however. Student performance evaluation is so embedded in the everyday work of teaching, testing, and grading that many faculty members interpret calls for documenting outcomes at the program or institution level—if not as an outright threat—as a redundant exercise or worse: a waste of time and resources that could be more profitably invested elsewhere. Thus, it was not surprising that gaining faculty cooperation and engagement was at the top of provosts' wish list.

Campus culture also plays a role. As noted earlier, the most selective institutions are the least likely to use assessment data for improvement or accountability. Some faculty and staff at prestigious, highly selective campuses wonder why documenting something already understood to be superior is warranted. They have little to gain and perhaps a lot to lose. On the other hand, many colleagues at lower-status campuses often feel pressed to demonstrate their worth; some worry that they may not fare well in comparison with their better-resourced, more-selective counterparts. Here, too, anxiety may morph into a perceived threat if the results disappoint.

“These findings squarely address the most critical, fundamental challenges facing higher education today—what colleges and universities are doing to assess and enhance the knowledge, skills and competencies students need to meet the growing demands of the workplace and function effectively in a global economy...”

Paul Lingenfelter, President
State Higher Education Executive
Officers

“The best way to move the needle on student learning is to assess that learning rigorously and fairly, and this report shows where we are right now and how far we still have to go.”

W. Robert Connor, President
The Teagle Foundation

Accreditation: A Catalyst for Improvement *and* Accountability

Accreditation is the primary vehicle for quality assurance in American higher education and the major driver of learning outcomes assessment. A fair amount of assessment work is with institutionally valid samples, especially using student and alumni surveys as well as standardized measures of general knowledge and skills. Equally important, various assessment approaches are being used at the program level—in engineering, business, and teacher education, for example. Such work often animates improvement. The curricular changes in engineering and engineering technology education stimulated by ABET are especially instructive because much of the impetus originated outside the academy by practitioners via the accreditors *and* featured discipline-specific assessment strategies to evaluate the efficacy of the changes in a formative and summative manner.

That same convergence of improvement and accountability forces is influencing institution-wide regional accreditation. While the focus of regional accreditation is improvement, external accountability forces are shaping and sharpening the expectations of regional accreditation to press for more extensive assessment of student learning and using the results for improvement and making institutional performance more transparent.

The three most influential forces driving assessment were the expectations of regional accreditors, those of specialized accreditors, and an institutional commitment to improvement.

While some observers see these two purposes—*improvement* and *accountability*—if not at odds, at least in tension with each other, campuses seem to suggest that their assessment efforts are substantively influenced by both factors.

Sustaining Assessment Work

Allocating resources to assessment is an expression of institutional priorities, culture, and values. Some institutions have more resources to devote to student learning outcomes assessment; colleges and universities that offer a substantial variety of programs should spend more on assessment. While in the past campuses were left to determine the quality of effort they would direct to assessing student learning, the time has come for a systematic analysis of what institutions of varying levels of organizational and programmatic complexity should invest to do assessment right and to ensure effective use of the results.

The degree to which an institution or program is likely to expend resources on improving student learning is a function of its knowledge about how well its students are learning what is important *and* its knowledge of what to do to improve learning outcomes. How well are individual courses coming together as a cohesive whole? Are the essential learning goals and expectations for students being met? Do engineering graduates have the crucial knowledge and skills? Is the nurse prepared to care for the patient? Does the newly minted graduate have the critical-thinking, analytical, and communication skills the campus promises and employers expect?

Focusing on these and related questions about outcomes can be the common ground that brings together those who demand greater accountability by *documenting* accomplishment and those whose primary interest in assessment is *enhancing* accomplishment. States and higher education associations can play an important role in bridging this divide.

Seeking Common Ground

The common looming challenges are to convince naysayers among the faculty that assessment is not a threat and to find ways to thoughtfully and productively use assessment data to inform decisions, improve programs, and more meaningfully communicate with the public. Initiatives such as a CIC-sponsored consortium of schools that administers the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), along with other assessment tools such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), local campus measures like portfolios of student work, and the universities participating in the VSA are designed in part to address this key issue by prompting more of their member schools to undertake or expand assessment efforts.

Recommendations and Potential Actions

Productively using learning outcomes results to inform decision making and to improve teaching and learning remains the most important unaddressed challenge related to student learning outcomes assessment. Simply posting a number on an institution website or checking a box in an accreditation report are of little value to students, parents, or policy makers. Equally important, such actions do nothing to improve access, affordability, or accomplishment.

Who needs to do what to advance the assessment of student learning outcomes in ways that improve the current state and future prospects of higher education in the United States?

- *Presidents, provosts, and other academic leaders* must make quality assurance an institutional priority. Evaluate the quality and utility of the learning outcomes assessment efforts underway on your campus. Tell your assessment professionals what your institution needs to know and why. Determine whether the resources allocated to assessment are sufficient for the scope and growing importance of the task. Find out how the results are being used, if at all, by whom and for what purposes. Champion productive use of the results. Demonstrate how you are using evidence to make decisions. Keep your governing board informed about the degree to which a culture of evidence is taking root.
- *Governing board members* must ensure their institution has a system of academic quality control supported by the assessment of student learning and the use of those results for continuous improvement. Do your part by understanding the value and contributions of assessment to the educational mission at your institution as well as your responsibility for appropriate oversight. Encourage your board chair and president to keep the issue on the agenda.

Allocating resources to assessment is an expression of institutional priorities, culture and values.

- *Faculty members* must systematically collect data about student learning, carefully examine and discuss these results with colleagues, and use this information to improve student outcomes. This challenging process may well reveal shortcomings on the part of students, instructors, the curriculum, and institutions. But by making sure these data are used to improve and not penalize, the exercise need not and should not be threatening. If assessment results are to be meaningfully interpreted and if changes are to be made to improve outcomes, your leadership and involvement are crucial.
- *Assessment and institutional research personnel* should revisit the rationale for using various tools and approaches to be sure they yield the kind of information that your institution needs to respond to improvement and accountability mandates. Present results in ways that will speak to faculty and policy makers and will answer their important questions. Point to areas that assessment data indicate require attention and design subsequent data collection activities that will determine whether changes in teaching and learning approaches have had the desired effects.
- *Student affairs staff* must share their perspectives on the student experience by participating on the campus assessment committee and self-study committees. Partner with academic affairs to promote a deeper, more widespread awareness and understanding of common undergraduate learning outcomes among faculty, staff, and students. Use outcomes assessment results to orient and inform student affairs practice.
- *Faculty developers* must become familiar with the campus assessment activities and results and use this information in designing professional development opportunities for faculty, student affairs professionals, librarians, and others who work with students.
- *Prospective students and parents* should ask to see learning outcomes information about students who attend the institutions they are considering. If it is not publicly accessible on an institution's website, ask someone in the institution's admissions office for data about how their students perform on different kinds of measures.

“These findings are encouraging, but we also need to know that what is being assessed is what students and the nation need to sustain the democracy and stimulate the economy.”

Joni Finney, Professor, University of Pennsylvania and Vice President, National Center for Higher Education and Public Policy

- *Higher education associations* must keep learning outcomes assessment on their agenda. Much of the campus assessment activity provosts reported would not be underway absent your initiatives. Develop a multiple- (5 to 7) year vision for your organization's engagement with the learning outcomes assessment movement.

“Because higher education is so important to our democracy, society, and economy, mapping the terrain of outcomes assessment is essential to know how well we are doing and what we need to do next to improve student learning.”

Barbara Gombach, National Program
Project Manager
Carnegie Corporation of New York

The productive use of learning outcomes results to inform decision making and improve teaching and learning remains the most important unaddressed challenge related to student learning outcomes assessment.

- *Statewide planning and coordinating boards* must confirm that all institutions under their scope of influence have effective internal systems of academic quality control supported by assessment data that conform to the expectations of both regional and specialized accreditation bodies. Use language that removes the specter of threat from assessment work. Offer incentives for campuses to develop and share sound practices of outcomes assessment.
- *Accrediting groups* must not let up on efforts to promote assessment and the use of student learning outcomes. Sharpen accreditation standards as they are applied to (a) collecting institution- and program-level data about student performance, (b) using assessment results to improve student performance and institutional quality, and (c) making assessment results available internally and externally. In all of these areas, hold institutions accountable.
- *Foundations* should keep learning outcomes assessment on their funding agendas. Devote more attention to programs and incentives that encourage institutions to use outcomes data productively. Encourage accrediting groups, both regional and specialized, to be vehicles for campus change that is constructive and attainable.

More assessment work is underway than many think. Still, it is considerably less than what is needed to ensure that students are prepared to manage the challenges of the 21st century...

Last Word

These suggested action steps are necessary but not sufficient to strengthen American higher education through more effective knowledge of student learning outcomes and the use of that knowledge to improve. While more assessment work is underway than many think, it is considerably less than what is needed to ensure students are prepared to manage the challenges of the 21st century and to secure the future to which we aspire.

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