

NILOA at Ten: A Retrospective

George D. Kuh and Stanley O. Ikenberry

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2008 to 2018



National Institute for
Learning Outcomes Assessment
Making Learning Outcomes Usable & Transparent

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NILOA Mission

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) 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.

Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to Natasha Jankowski, Staci Provezis, Gianina Baker, and Katie Schultz for their help in assuring the accuracy of our recollections!

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Foreword

Natasha Jankowski

This is the 10th year of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), and who better to reflect on where we have been than the co-developers themselves, George Kuh and Stanley Ikenberry. Any way you look at it, these two scholars are beyond distinguished, with NILOA being one of many successful feathers in their proverbial caps. Before moving into why this paper is timely and the importance of NILOA's work, I'd like to pause and recognize the two thought leaders who came together to create NILOA and fostered and continue to support a collection of scholars to carry on the work of exploring meaningful assessment processes and practices.

George Kuh, NILOA's founding director and Chancellor's Professor Emeritus at Indiana University is the founding director of the widely used National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and recipient of eleven honorary degrees. He was director of the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), providing the first-ever in-depth look at the factors that help or hinder the careers of graduates of arts-intensive high schools and postsecondary institutions. George has written prolifically on a variety of topics including institutional improvement, student engagement, assessment, campus cultures, learning environments, high-impact practices (HIPs), student affairs, student success, organizational theory, and student employment. He's not only received dozens of awards, but he has awards named after him. All this is to say, George's legacy is represented by an impressive body of scholarship spanning five decades.

Stan Ikenberry, NILOA's co-principal investigator, served as the 14th president of the University of Illinois for 16 years. During his Illinois tenure he enhanced and augmented the physical presence and the academic diversity and reach of the University, including the University's presence in Chicago. Stan was also active regionally and nationally, chairing the big Ten's "Council of Ten" and the boards of AAU, ACE, APLU, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. During the last year of his Illinois presidency Stan chaired the "Presidents Work Group on Accreditation" whose report led to the creation of CHEA. After leaving the Illinois presidency in 1995 and taking a year's leave at Princeton, Stan assumed the presidency of the American Council on Education, the prime national association and voice for higher education in the United States. In this role he led the restructuring of ACE along with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. Over the years Stan authored thought pieces and policy reports on a range of topics that populate the American higher education landscape.

When these two academics collaborated to tackle a strategically important challenge facing higher education – the learning outcomes our students attain as a result of their time with us – they did the job thoroughly and well. The two reached out to the broader higher education community to fashion a research and development institute that over the span of 10 years has become the go-to-resource for the assessment of student learning they hoped it would, creating a high-quality, reputable response to a timely national need.

Foreword continued

In NILOA's 10th year, we pause to reflect on these early days – where we came from and some of what may have been accomplished. We look to the future as well. George and Stan reflect on the work that has transpired over the last decade, including the accomplishments in the assessment field and the vast work that remains to be done. Questions persist about the value and worth of higher education and the declining public confidence in the enterprise is worrisome. There are doubts about the quality of student learning, how colleges and universities should best document student achievement, and how the evidence of learning can and should be used to improve and transform practices in ways that support student success.

I have had the distinct pleasure to work in various roles with NILOA over the past ten years. Much has been accomplished although many gaps remain. The early vision George and Stan crafted remains a work in progress. NILOA will continue to lead with the dissemination of reports, papers, and practical examples of best practice. We will strive to build bridges of collaboration with various stakeholders within the assessment enterprise. Our aim is to broaden the reach and quality of assessment of learning throughout U.S. postsecondary institutions.

We hope you enjoy this retrospective and invite you to join in the work of fostering meaningful and sustainable assessment as we move toward the future.

Natasha Jankowski
Director, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

NILOA at Ten: A Retrospective

George D. Kuh and Stanley O. Ikenberry

It was only a matter of time. Looking back, there was ample warning that eventually higher education institutions in the U.S. would no longer be able to rely on their “best in the world” reputation but would be compelled to show evidence of educational quality and student accomplishment.

For instance, the 1984 *Involvement in Learning* report called for colleges and universities to “establish and maintain high standards of student and institutional performance. The results (or ‘outcomes’) ... must be measured against their clearly and publicly articulated standards of performance” (National Institute of Education, 1984, p. 3).

Even so, two decades later the blunt words about higher education’s aversion to accountability from what was colloquially known as the Spellings Commission caught the enterprise off guard, sending a shudder through much of academe:

Colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes, and must willingly share this information with students and families. Institutions on a “value-added” basis... must measure student achievement.... This information should be made available to students, and reported publicly in aggregate form to provide consumers and policymakers an accessible, understandable way to measure the relative effectiveness of different colleges and universities. (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 4)

A resounding theme in the Spellings Commission’s deliberations was that colleges and universities had almost no evidence about the quality of their core function, student learning. The little information that was available cast doubt that higher education was performing at the level the public expected and society needed.

It is not as if the field totally ignored the calls for accountability. The student learning outcomes assessment bandwagon started rolling across the higher education landscape in the mid-1980s (Ewell, 2002). For decades, the Educational Testing Service offered general and subject specific tests that colleges and universities could use to gauge student achievement. Organizations such as the American Association for Higher Education sponsored meetings to encourage and support efforts to document student learning. Trudy Banta created the Assessment Institute, a continuing annual event now sponsored by IUPUI.

This is the story of NILOA’s inception and its evolution over time into an authoritative, widely respected resource encouraging and supporting institutions in their search for knowledge and tools to document, use, and report evidence of student accomplishment.

The assessment effort picked up steam in the late 1990s prompted by regional accreditors emphasizing that schools needed to show plans for how they would collect information about student outcomes. By 2000, about two dozen assessment tools were available (Borden & Kernel, 2013) and several more promising developments were afoot, such as the upstart National Survey of Student Engagement and Collegiate Learning Assessment.

However, not all colleges and universities used these or other approaches to document student accomplishment. Moreover, very few schools routinely reported the results publicly, internally or externally. Most troubling, when asked, most institutions could not demonstrate how they were using what they were gathering about student learning, let alone offer examples of how such information had improved desired outcomes.

The field responded almost immediately to Spellings. The National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC, now Association of Public Land-grant Universities or APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AACSC) launched the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), featuring a “College Portrait” that included information about selected student experiences. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) issued a statement featuring guiding principles for assessment work. Regional accrediting groups further strengthened their expectations that institutions provide evidence of student outcomes. Because of these and other developments, substantial numbers of colleges and universities ramped up their efforts to assess student learning.

The postsecondary enterprise appeared to be on the cusp of a new era, one in which the need to assess student learning outcomes could no longer be ignored. Central to this task was collecting and using data about both student and institutional performance.

But how to support this important work? Did campuses have the capacity to respond? What kinds of approaches would be useful in encouraging institutions to learn from one another and share promising practices? Could an existing national organization provide the needed support? Or would some new entity be required?

These forces gave birth to the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). And this is the story—albeit abbreviated—of NILOA’s inception and its evolution over time into an authoritative, widely respected resource encouraging and supporting institutions in their search for knowledge and tools to document, use, and report evidence of student accomplishment.

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The Emergence of NILOA

In Spring, 2008, we began to talk about what the field was doing and needed to do to respond in a meaningful way to the issues raised by the Spellings Commission. At the time, one practical matter was the kind of information that would be helpful in preparing for the next Higher Education Reauthorization. Moreover, what could be done to strengthen the approaches to assessing learning and making improvements that would make a difference?

Our view was it would take a concerted effort over an extended period to support colleges and universities in amassing enough information about student performance to demonstrate that postsecondary education was taking its core function seriously: assuring students were getting a high-quality education.

Over several weeks' time, we considered the potential effectiveness of different options. For example, perhaps regional and national convenings of multiple stakeholders—accreditors, philanthropy leaders, assessment experts, and association executives—could help leverage action and prompt the field to take student learning outcomes assessment seriously. We pondered whether the available assessment tools were adequate for the imposing scale and dimensions of the task. We occasionally wondered aloud whether *we knew enough* to help frame a specific, compelling agenda and identify the most promising approaches to accomplish it.

We concluded nothing short of a national campaign could effectively inform and support the deliberations. To succeed, the initiative required an operational base, a locus of animating purpose and the energy to coordinate and guide the work.

One obvious option was situating the work in a higher education research center such as Indiana University (no surprise), Penn State, or the University of Michigan to name a few of the usual suspects. Alternatively, we could approach one of the national membership organizations such as American Council on Education (ACE), AAC&U or State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) about being the backbone for the kind of multi-year effort that was taking shape in our mind's eye. We also contemplated if the mission of IUPUI's annual Assessment Institute or some other group could be modified to pursue what needed to be done.

For various reasons, we concluded that no extant organization appeared to have the requisite capacity to assume a role as an impartial, independent authority that would serve well universities and colleges, large and small, public and private, in ways that would empower change across the highly differentiated landscape of American higher education.

Our view was it would take a concerted effort over an extended period to support colleges and universities in amassing enough information about student performance to demonstrate that postsecondary education was taking its core function seriously: assuring students were getting a high-quality education.

By early summer 2008, we determined that moving the work forward would require substantial help and support from many others – institutions and national associations but also financial support from funders who shared our vision. It was time to seek guidance and hopefully collective endorsement of what we had in mind.

We prepared a draft of what we thought must be done to advance meaningful, actionable assessment of student learning outcomes, and began to share it with respected, experienced, knowledgeable colleagues, inviting their candid feedback and suggestions. Within a few weeks, thanks to their guidance, we had a clearer, better-informed vision for the work. The brief went something like this:

This initiative will chronicle the journey of learning outcome assessment over the next three years as it unfolds at the campus and sector levels. The overarching goal is to facilitate the dissemination and adoption of best practices in the assessment of college learning outcomes, with a focus on the use of assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally in communication with external publics – parents and students, policy makers, accrediting groups and others. What students know and can do – their learning outcomes – are at the core of student success and a bellwether of the well-being of our entire society. Nothing is more central to student and societal aspirations than the adoption of approaches to learning outcome assessment that help understand and continuously improve the quality of learning for all students and meet public expectations for transparency and accountability.

The goals were to enhance awareness and inform understanding of the state-of-the-art of assessment of learning outcomes in United States postsecondary education inclusive of all sectors—community colleges, public and private research and comprehensive institutions, independent liberal arts campuses, for-profit schools, and others. Using a range of data gathering approaches such as surveys and institutional case studies, we aimed to provide the field with comprehensive, accurate information about what institutions were doing to assess and report student learning outcomes and how they were using the data to improve student learning. By collaborating with such partners as AAC&U, American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), Association of American Universities (AAU), APLU, AASCU, CHEA, Council of Intendent Colleges (CIC), National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), SHEEO, and others engaged in various ways and levels with quality assurance including accreditors, we would help maintain pressure on institutions to take learning assessment seriously. The NILOA strategy was to advance the state of the art of learning outcomes assessment, provide periodic yardsticks of accomplishment, and highlight the shortcomings and additional work still to do.

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We were optimistic this vision might be congenial with that of Lumina Foundation's core mission and priorities, and that is where we turned first for start-up resources.

Lumina Leadership Grant: Making Learning Outcomes Usable and Transparent—Mapping the Territory, Documenting the Journey

NILOA would not exist today without generous start-up and ongoing support from Lumina Foundation. We were fortunate in the summer of 2008 to meet with Lumina staff including Jamie Merisotis, then the relatively new Foundation president. After additional discussion and several more iterations of the proposal, "Making Learning Outcomes Usable and Transparent: Mapping the Territory, Documenting the Journey," we got the green light to begin work.

The \$940,000 Lumina leadership grant offered a sizeable chunk of the estimated \$2,000,000 required to underwrite 36 months of effort. To broaden the base of support and close the funding gap, we scheduled meetings with representatives from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Spencer Foundation, and Teagle Foundation. The latter was led by Robert Connor who expressed a keen interest in documenting and enhancing student learning, having convened small groups to noodle about related topics. Richard Morrill succeeded Connor several years later as Teagle president. Morrill also shared an interest in NILOA's agenda and how to sustain it over time. The Carnegie Corporation soon joined the partnership with a generous grant.

We assembled a project team comprised of colleagues from the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign and Indiana University, and alerted other institutions and organizations about our intentions, soliciting their counsel and moral support. We were the co-principal investigators on the grant with Kuh assuming the project director role. The University of Illinois Urbana Champaign (UIUC) became the organizational home and was responsible for overall financial management.

Work at Indiana University (IU) was performed under a subcontract with the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research (IUCPR). At the time of the first Lumina grant, Kuh was still IUCPR director. Immediately following his retirement from IU in 2010, he was appointed adjunct research professor at UIUC. Jillian Kinzie from IUCPR soon became an integral member of the NILOA team and coordinated the subcontract work at IU among other activities.

The enterprise needed a memorable moniker. "National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment" or NILOA is a mouthful.¹ Even so, the name is descriptive, true to our core mission and program of activities as is its website:

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www.learningoutcomesassessment.org. Both choices were an attempt (largely successful, we think) to signal that the organization was not directly linked to a specific institution. We intentionally designed the website so it did not use the color scheme or style of either UIUC or IU. We also debated whether to call the entity a center or an institute. “Institute” carried the day because the nature of the intended work was more sharply focused on a specific challenge than that of most postsecondary research centers. NILOA also intended to prompt and support action: we wanted institutions and individuals to actually *do something* with the information and resources we set out to gather and curate.

As with most start-ups, the NILOA central staff was very small, comprised only of Staci Provezis, an advanced UIUC higher education doctoral student who served as project manager, and a couple of graduate research assistants (GRAs). Dr. Provezis went on to become UIUC associate provost for academic effectiveness. One of NILOA’s two initial GRAs, Dr. Natasha Jankowski, presently serves as NILOA Director and UIUC assistant research professor of Educational Policy, Organization and Leadership. Over the past decade, Dr. Jankowski has established a well-earned national reputation as an assessment and quality assurance expert. Since its inception, 27 different graduate research assistants have been part of the NILOA team. Today, the NILOA staff and associates number 12, a sufficient critical mass, but modest when compared to NILOA’s national presence (<https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/about/niloa-staff/>).

Among the NILOA associates are a cadre of senior scholars without whom much of whatever NILOA has accomplished simply would not have happened. NILOA and the field owe a debt of gratitude to Tim Cain, Peter Ewell, Pat Hutchings, Jillian Kinzie, Paul Lingenfelter, and David Marshall for their selfless commitment to NILOA’s mission and applying their unmatched experience and expertise to various projects in the cause of advancing student learning outcomes assessment. A cursory glance at the list of publications and presentations on the NILOA website will make plain the extent of their wide-ranging, stellar contributions, offering a glimpse of their individual and collective value to NILOA.

NILOA’s reputation, the quality of its work, and its national reach and impact benefitted immeasurably by the guidance of a National Advisory Panel (NAP) (www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/about/national-advisory-panel), which provided both substantive advice about NILOA’s agenda and an essential symbolic credibility to the field. NAP’s daylong meetings, once or twice annually in NILOA’s early years, were stimulating colloquia about the role of outcome assessment, strategic directions, and ways to overcome the challenges facing contemporary U.S. postsecondary education. For some meetings, we invited a provocateur to jump-start the discussion about a pressing issue. Several NAP

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members played this role, including Wally Boston (APUS), Molly Broad (then of ACE), Peter Ewell (then of NCHEMS), Paul Gaston (Kent State), Susan Johnston (then of AGB), Paul Lingenfelter (then of SHEEO), George Mehaffy (AASCU), Carol Schneider (then of AAC&U), Randy Swing (then of AIR), and Ralph Wolff (then of WASC and now Quality Assurance Commons president: <https://theqacommons.org>).

Since its inception, NILOA has attracted about \$7.5 million in external funding in addition to about \$500,000 of core infrastructure support from UIUC. While Lumina provided the lion's share of the external support for NILOA activities continuously since the initial leadership grant, as noted earlier the initiative also received vital support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York (2009-2011) and two grants from Teagle Foundation (2008-2011, 2012-2014) along with grants and contracts from various organizations to perform specific tasks.

Thanks to NILOA's benefactors, all of NILOA's products including access to its website are available at no cost.

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Hitting Our Stride: The Nature and Scope of the Work

We envisioned NILOA to both mirror assessment activity in U.S. colleges and universities and be a vehicle to discover and highlight promising practices that would advance the quality and impact of assessment work. Our sense was the following would establish NILOA as a credible, authoritative resource while complementing efforts by other groups with an interest in improving undergraduate education:

- Create and continuously update a comprehensive “go to” website as a central repository of best practice examples, resources, links to efforts by such other groups as AAC&U, Association for Institutional Research (AIR), CHEA, the regional accrediting associations, and the APLU/AASCU Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), notice of workshops and training seminars related to outcome assessment, and other relevant activities.
- Produce periodic annual reports on the “state of the art” of student learning outcome assessment disseminated via the project website, presentations at annual meetings of associations such as AAC&U, AACC, AASCU, AIR, APLU, CIC, NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) and others, and essays published by influential outlets such as *Change Magazine*, *Inside Higher Education*, *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, *Assessment Update*, and so forth.

- Commission position papers annually by experts disseminated via a monthly newsletter and posted on the NILOA website to assist institutions as they confront the challenges of learning outcome assessment and to keep collegiate outcome assessment front and center on the higher education agenda.
- Publish a book-length manuscript describing the experiences and tactics employed by early adoption institutions, identifying and examining assessment tools, examples of institutional use of assessment data to improve learning outcomes, and illustrations of useful ways of reporting performance results to the public.
- Disseminate “best case examples” of collegiate assessment via the NILOA newsletter and website, and presentations at annual meetings of such groups as governing board members, presidents, academic deans, institutional researchers and so forth.

So, what has been accomplished so far?

- The NILOA website got off to a modest start but in time became the face of NILOA to the outside world. As a heavily web-based organization, NILOA grew from a few thousand hits in the first year to several thousand hits a month over the next couple of years. As NILOA and its work became better known the numbers grew sharply so today the website averages about 20,000 hits a month. People from every U.S. state and territory and more than 120 countries consult the website. Colleagues across the country and from abroad tell us the website is a treasure trove of up-to-date information about promising assessment practices and valuable, usable resources. Obviously, we are pleased but, candidly, also a bit surprised that the new digital world would allow NILOA to carve out such a needed, usable niche. As certified techno Luddites, we happily and respectfully bow to the NILOA central office team for this achievement, especially Staci Provezis, Natasha Jankowski, and the creative, intrepid GRAs who were of the right generation to design and continuously update NILOA’s website.
- Three national surveys of provosts have been conducted (2009, 2013, 2017) and trends analyzed over time about the nature and scope of student learning outcomes assessment approaches and activities. In addition, NILOA conducted a national survey of program-level assessment activities in 2010. The results of these studies were published online and presented at conferences in the U.S. and abroad. The reports and supporting documents are accessible from the NILOA

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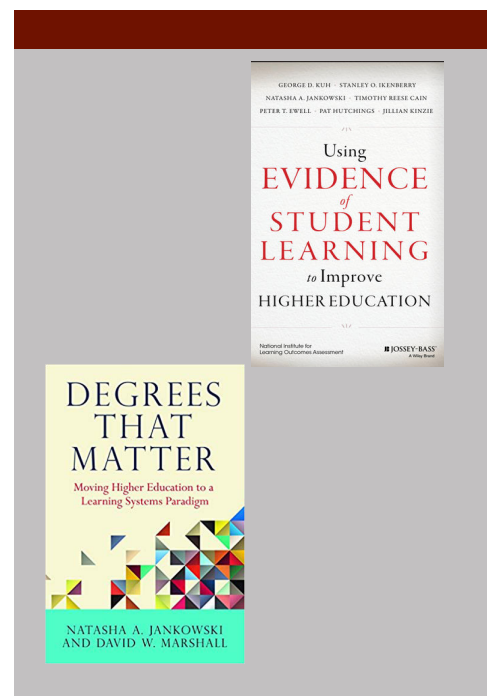
website. The data they contain are foundational for 'mirroring' the evolving state of assessment work in the U.S. colleges and universities.

- Thirty-five occasional papers were published on a wide range of issues (learningoutcomesassessment.org/publications/occasional-papers) with several more commissioned. In addition, the NILOA team produced 17 special reports about timely topics such as transparency, institutional use of the Degree Qualifications Profile, Tuning, and assignment design (learningoutcomesassessment.org/publications/niloa-reports) as well as Assessment Briefs for various groups such as faculty and student affairs staff.
- Two major books have been published:
 - Kuh, G. D., Ikenberry, S. O., Jankowski, N., Cain, T. R., Ewell, P. T., Hutchings, P., & Kinzie, J. (2015). *Using evidence of student learning to improve higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
 - Jankowski, N. A. & Marshall, D. W. (2017). *Degrees that matter: Moving higher education to a learning systems paradigm*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Every month, NILOA features one or more campuses doing some form of exemplary assessment work in its monthly electronic newsletter sent directly to about 15,500 higher education leaders, assessment professionals and other interested parties. The newsletter also contains announcements of relevant publications and fora. So far, more than four dozen *Viewpoints* have also appeared in the newsletter, which are relatively short articles about a current issue related to NILOA's mission and the role of student learning outcomes assessment. A host of other resources including 17 case studies of good assessment practice, featured institutional websites, policy statements, and monthly newsletters are archived here: www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/case-studies.

Noteworthy Activities

As NILOA's work evolved, we encountered some unanticipated aspects of making assessment work meaningful and actionable. Seven clusters of activities warrant special mention.

Transparency Framework. As part of the effort to document what schools were doing in terms of assessment, NILOA central office staff conducted a series of web scans. The primary goal at the time was to determine the extent to which institutions were making public various types of information about their assessment work including student outcomes data. We were not surprised that only a small fraction of schools was publicly sharing outcomes



results. However, we were struck about *how few institutions* seemed to have a grasp on how to organize and present their work for public consumption. Under the guidance of Staci Provezis and Natasha Jankowski, the NILOA team developed the Transparency Framework, a template for how to present assessment work in online formats (learningoutcomesassessment.org/ourwork/transparency-framework). The aim was not to try to standardize assessment reporting, but to help institutions systematically think through how to display their activities and student learning outcomes assessment results to make it easier for internal and external audiences to find and understand the information. Various types of institutions have adopted parts or all of the framework including Purdue University, Central Michigan University, UNC-Wilmington, Kalamazoo College, Broward Community College, and Kankakee Community College to name a few. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) incorporated the Transparency Framework in its Voluntary Framework for Accountability (<https://vfa.aacc.nche.edu/Pages/default.aspx>) as did the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). In addition, the Transparency Framework was instrumental in developing the Excellence in Assessment designation program co-sponsored by AAC&U, AASCU, APLU, and NILOA (<https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/eia>). An extension of this work was NILOA's evaluation of the AASCU/APLU College Portrait and thought leadership for helping shape how to use responsibly student learning outcomes metrics for accountability and other purposes.

We were struck about how few institutions seemed to have a grasp on how to organize and present their work for public consumption. Under the guidance of Staci Provezis and Natasha Jankowski, the NILOA team developed the Transparency Framework, a template for how to present assessment work in online formats.

Academic Quality Assurance at CIC Universities. NILOA coordinated a 15-month (July 2011-October 2012) effort to examine the current state of student learning outcomes assessment and related quality assurance strategies at member campuses of the then Consortium for Institutional Cooperation (CIC). The consortium was then comprised of the members of the Big Ten Conference plus the University of Chicago and is now known as the Big Ten Academic Alliance. The goal was to encourage these research universities to learn from one another about promising practices, gain a clearer picture of the range of approaches to documenting the quality of undergraduate education, and understand how the evidence is being used to inform decisions and improve learning and teaching. Toward these ends, we hosted multiple working meetings and collaborated with CIC member provosts, institutional research and assessment staff, and others to discover and describe:

- What student learning outcomes assessment work looks like at large, complex research universities;
- How CIC institutions are using evidence of learning and how to make those efforts more productive;
- How assessment activity is organized, coordinated, and communicated on CIC campuses.

The sheer scale of CIC institutions combined with the decentralization of academic operations in departments and colleges made it challenging to gain a comprehensive picture of assessment practices and student learning and personal development. We developed a worksheet to help identify and codify available evidence of student learning at CIC universities in response to each of the questions. Taken together, these data provided a snapshot of the state of assessment on CIC campuses. In addition, NILOA's final report to the campuses suggested promising assessment practices for large research universities such as those that constituted the CIC.

Regional Accreditation. NILOA's first survey of provosts confirmed what most informed observers surmised—accreditation was the main driver of institutional assessment work. To serve accreditors and help loosen the perceived yoke of compliance as the overarching (and often smothering) purpose of accreditation, NILOA undertook several efforts beginning in 2009. It twice convened the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), which includes the presidents of the regional accreditation associations, as well as selected institutional and higher education organizations leaders for a broad ranging discussion of quality assurance challenges and opportunities. To inform the field's understanding of the role and evolving expectations of regional accreditation, Staci Provezis visited each regional accreditor and interviewed senior staff about their views and activities. A NILOA Occasional Paper (<https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/OccasionalPaper6.pdf>) summarized much of this work.

Institutional Coaching. A major component of NILOA's agenda from 2012 through 2016 was documenting and encouraging use of the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) and the Tuning process that were created by Lumina several years earlier to help institutions focus on core proficiencies considered essential for all college graduates to succeed in the global 21st century (<http://degreeprofile.org>). As with some tools intended to extend and enhance assessment work, institutions were not always certain about how to use the DQP or Tuning in their efforts to document and improve student outcomes. One such process is curriculum mapping, a collaborative effort by a program or general education faculty that makes it possible to determine what courses address which desired outcomes. The process typically identifies gaps in the outcomes that are directly taught or assessed. Without a framework to guide such a process, gaps may persist. In addition, facilitating such a process can be challenging. This realization prompted NILOA to request permission from Lumina to re-direct some grant resources so that experienced academics could work with institutions wishing to use the DQP, Tuning, and related resources to guide and support their improvement initiatives. Toward this end, in 2013 NILOA recruited about 10 “coaches,” colleagues from different types of institutions around the country who had first-hand experience in Tuning

In 2013 NILOA recruited 10 “coaches,” colleagues from different types of institutions around the country who were willing and prepared to spend at least one day working with faculty and staff at no cost to the host campus. To date, NILOA's now 15 coaches have worked with 80 institutions and organizations, and continue to visit qualifying campuses.

or using the DQP, and were willing and prepared to spend at least one day (in addition to travel) working with faculty and staff at no cost to the campus. A college or university had to apply to be eligible for a coach visit (www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/about/niloa-staff/#Coaches). To date, NILOA's now 15 coaches have worked with 80 institutions and organizations, and continue to visit qualifying campuses.

Assignment Library and Charrettes. Some promising actions are so obvious that they seemingly are hiding in plain sight, receiving too little attention. Working with institutions and “listening” to people in the field, senior scholars Pat Hutchings and Peter Ewell and NILOA director Natasha Jankowski had an epiphany. The direct, most compelling evidence of what students know and can do – the golden nuggets of learning outcomes assessment – is student performance on challenging assignments designed by their teachers that are aligned with the intended course or program outcomes. Duh. This realization led to two related NILOA activities.

1. One was to create a library of exemplary assignments from different disciplines so that faculty and staff from around the country could see the structure and approaches that prompt students to demonstrate an acceptable level of proficiency in the domains addressed by the respective course.
2. The second focus was to create venues where faculty would work together to fine tune assignments to induce students to demonstrate the desired outcomes. Toward this end, NILOA staff and senior scholars hosted several assignment design charrettes around the country in which groups of 20 or so faculty from different disciplines participated, helping one another improve an assignment from one of their courses. These faculty development experiences often were so well received that in more than a few instances participants returned to their home campuses and conducted their own local assignment design charrettes (learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Assignment_report_.pdf). From this work, NILOA also conducted statewide assignment charrettes for the Multi-State Collaborative to Advance Quality Student Learning (MSC) which engaged faculty in revising their assignments to better align with VALUE rubrics. The various approaches and learning from assignment design efforts led to the development and release of a comprehensive toolkit along with examples on how to conduct assignment charrettes locally (learningoutcomesassessment.org/ourwork/assignment-charrette/)

The direct, most compelling evidence of what students know and can do – the golden nuggets of learning outcomes assessment – is student performance on challenging assignments designed by their teachers that are aligned with the intended course or program outcomes.

Assessment Institute. From the outset, NILOA aspired to become an authoritative resource for the student learning outcomes assessment community as well as others with an interest in quality assurance such as accreditors mentioned earlier. Toward this end, the long running Assessment Institute hosted by IUPUI was a natural venue for NILOA to feature its work and highlight promising assessment efforts conducted by others. In 2011, the founding director of the Institute, Trudy Banta, invited NILOA to put together a track of about eight sessions including a track keynote. Later, in 2016, Institute organizers asked NILOA to be a Signature Institute Partner and help organize the Assessment Institute program - recognition of NILOA's leadership and influence on the field.

Emerging Learning System. In 2016, Lumina asked NILOA to serve as an intermediary to animate and guide a comprehensive movement that supports what is being called the emerging learning system and infrastructure development. The focus on the emerging learning system came about following a February 2016 Lumina convening "It's All About the Learning" which concluded that the contributions of the numerous projects aiming to improve learning outcomes and degree attainment have produced less than the sum of their individual efforts due in large part to a lack of coordination and unrealized synergy. The emerging learning system initiative is comprised of multiple complementary, interrelated strands of work, adapting to changing movements within the field including:

- Networking and helping to forge collaborative working relations with like-minded groups whose cooperation and collaboration are essential to the development and efficacy of the emerging learning system;
- Convenings and other events designed to advance thinking and collaborative work and share resources to address key challenges and themes related to the emerging learning system;
- Assignment design work described earlier to catalyze faculty and learned society enthusiasm for and participation in activities supporting the collective vision of the learning system;
- Comprehensive learner record development in collaboration with NASPA and ACCRAO, an effort to more fully document and represent student learning inside and outside the classroom;
- Creation of the Annual Teaching and Learning National Institute at Evergreen State College which is focused on using evidence for improvement with an emphasis on equity. Teams from different campuses use the Institute to work on a specific goal with the help of resource faculty.

In 2016, Assessment Institute organizers asked NILOA to be a Signature Institute Partner and help organize the Assessment Institute program - recognition of NILOA's leadership and influence on the field.

A major point of emphasis across all these stands of work is an equity-minded commitment endorsed and promoted by NILOA staff in all its activities. For example, in January of 2017, NILOA released an occasional paper exploring the relationship between equity and assessment, inviting the field into dialogue and to respond to the paper. Thus far, there have been more than a dozen responses to the paper, furthering the conversation on equity and assessment. In addition, NILOA assisted with the creation of the HBCU Collaborative for Excellence in Educational Quality and Assessment (CEEQA) designed to leverage the collective expertise of assessment professionals and promote using best practices in assessment and evaluation to demonstrate the effectiveness of HBCUs in the achievement of common educational aims.

Unfinished Business

To what extent has the NILOA campaign been successful? Is the national effort to document what students know and can do now commonplace and functioning well enough so that colleges and universities have the information they need to improve student and institutional performance to meet the expectations and challenges of the 21st century?

Hardly. NILOA is contributing, but much unfinished business remains.

To gain some sense of the magnitude of the challenges ahead, it is helpful to step back and consider the current state of higher learning in the U.S. Three pressing realities stand out:

- escalating financial costs of postsecondary education;
- proliferating numbers of providers offering ways to improve student learning and teaching; and
- the growing sense that traditional approaches to the assessment of quality in higher education (accreditation) may no longer be adequate to the challenge.

NILOA was created in part to respond to external calls for accountability and transparency, which were magnified by the Spellings Commission. Those expectations remain legitimate today, but the challenges going forward to assure high quality undergraduate education are even more complicated than meeting compliance requirements set forth by accreditors or state agencies.

The unfinished business is immensely practical. Improve the quality of student learning outcomes while at the same time:

Is the national effort to document what students know and can do now commonplace and functioning well enough so that colleges and universities have the information they need to improve student and institutional performance to meet the expectations and challenges of the 21st century?

1. reduce cost of attendance;
2. remove barriers to access; and
3. demonstrate to students, parents, employers and others who rely on and support the enterprise that colleges and universities have evidence of what students know and can do and are continuously using that information to improve.

American higher education is still well short of being able to provide actionable evidence of learning that can guide changes in learning and teaching approaches that will improve student and institutional performance. The academy has yet to link cost containment efforts and learning outcomes in meaningful ways. Technology-laden innovations proliferate, as do new providers, but most lack sufficient evidence about their efficacy. Accreditation in its several forms survives primarily because of an inability to invent an acceptable alternative to reach informed judgments about educational quality and institutional integrity.

NILOA and the academy's efforts to document what students know and can do are stronger today than a decade earlier. More campuses are committed to and engaged in the work. Assessment tools and approaches are better and more plentiful. There is greater transparency and sharing of the metrics representing desired student outcomes. In addition, those who do assessment work are larger in number and more capable.

Progress is evident and NILOA's role in that regard is well documented.

However, "The Unfinished Agenda" looms large, asking more from all of us.

The challenges going forward to assure high quality undergraduate education are even more complicated than meeting compliance requirements set forth by accreditors or state agencies.

End Note

¹ Upon first hearing the NILOA acronym pronounced, Tom Angelo informed George Kuh via email that NILOA was the third most popular Polynesian surname. We think he jests...

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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.
- NILOA's Founding Director, 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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