Improvement Matters

September 2016

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This Viewpoint summarizes important takeaways found in Chapter 6 of "The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most" (2016) by Peter Felten, John N. Gardner, Charles C. Schroeder, Leo M. Lambert, and Betsy O. Barefoot. The seven principles summarized here inform good assessment practice and improvement. Keeping these action principles in mind and using them to guide assessment and improvement efforts on your campus can help lead to meaningful change. The full text of this chapter, and additional resources, are available on the book's web site.

Assessment is a vital tool for improvement, especially when it is used in ways that serve what matters most in the undergraduate experience. In an era of often intrusive external oversight, many on campus are suspicious—or just plain tired—of initiatives promising change. Yet, a large study of student success in college found that effective institutions are characterized by "positive restlessness," which is "an acculturated wariness that what and how we are doing now can well be improved" (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010, p. 146). This "we can do better" ethos not only works dynamically to improve the institution but also models for students the processes of growth and change. The following seven action principles can guide your work.

Recognize That Assessment Is Fundamental to Improvement

Understanding is the first step toward improvement. Until you understand what is, you cannot identify a reasonable path toward what could be. Unfortunately, assessment in higher education too often operates in a culture of compliance. This "assessment-for-others" orientation has created a chasm between routine assessment practices at many institutions and the people on campus who are most able to act on the results of those assessments to improve student learning: the faculty, staff, and students. By focusing on improving, assessment becomes "problem-specific and user-centered" (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015, p. 12). Those characteristics make it possible for academics to do what they do best: applying their critical capacities to understand and systematically act on complex issues related to both student learning and institutional performance. In other words, assessment as improvement is a key to student and institutional effectiveness.

Focus Assessment on Improving What Matters Most

Assessment can be a powerful lens for improvement, but only when it is focused on what matters most. Effective assessments require clearly articulated goals that are linked to the institution's mission and priorities. For example, St. Olaf College in Minnesota threads this needle by supporting department-level assessment. When the department of religion sought to assess its students' performance on a core disciplinary and liberal arts goal, the capacity to

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"form, evaluate, and communicate critical and normative interpretations of religious life and thought," the faculty worked together to evaluate senior essays. When the management studies concentration weighed the merits of team-based pedagogies, which gave students practice with challenging group work but also consumed considerable class time, the faculty compared student performance on individual and group quizzes. In both cases, assessment led to significant improvements, including new writing assignments in religion courses and expanded use of team-based learning in management (Beld, 2010).

Commit to Using Evidence to Inform Changes

Although institutions have invested vast sums and great hopes in the power of data to serve as a catalyst for change, research demonstrates that evidence alone is rarely sufficient to spark meaningful reform (Banta & Blaich, 2011). Nobel Prize–winning physicist Carl Weiman and his colleagues, for example, conclude that research results seldom are "compelling enough by themselves to change faculty members' pedagogy" in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines (quoted in Wieman, Perkins, & Gilbert, 2010, p. 13). This problem of individuals and institutions not applying what is learned from research is so pervasive in higher education, extending far beyond STEM classrooms, that one of the primary findings from the 49-institution Wabash National Study is that "it is incredibly difficult to translate assessment evidence into improvements in student learning" (Blaich & Wise, 2011, p. 11).

Change is hard, of course, but the human and organizational tendency to remain static may not be sufficient to explain why so little is done with so much evidence in higher education. To counter initiative fatigue, and to enhance the chances of evidence-based action, institutions and individuals should commit to the following (Blaich & Wise, 2011; Kuh & Hutchings, 2015; Walvoord, 2010):

1. Establish clear improvement priorities for sustained focus.
2. Communicate the educational value and anticipated outcomes of each initiative.
3. Gather enough data to have a reasonable basis for action.
4. Foster conversations about and engagement with that data so those in positions to act have the opportunity to understand the evidence and shape further actions.
5. Identify and celebrate successes along the way.

Involve Everyone in the Process of Making Change

Too often, assessment is done to or for people rather than with them. Students, for instance, complete surveys like NSSE or develop portfolios of their best work yet may not know what happens with, or as a result of, these efforts. Trustees often review assessment reports that provide a lot of information but offer little nuanced or benchmarked evidence to support program oversight or appropriate board action (Sullivan, 2015).

To counter this, improvement initiatives should be designed from the start as partnerships among all of the relevant parties. Effective partnerships draw on the distinct expertise and perspectives of different participants. For example, diverse institutions ranging from Bryn Mawr College to North Carolina A&T State University are developing student-faculty and student-staff partnerships to bring undergraduates into the institutional processes used to gather, analyze, and make decisions about how to act on evidence of learning, teaching, and other important aspects of the student experience (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten,

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2014).

Adapt Best Practices from Elsewhere

Assessment often focuses internally. That is essential, but institutions also should look externally to identify effective practices at other institutions and within the scholarly literature that could be adapted to meet local goals and needs. Many students and institutions, for example, struggle with developmental math and statistics. While the particulars vary by campus, common challenges exist including student habits and beliefs that make success unlikely. Drawing on research and a multi-institutional network of faculty, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching sponsored the creation of a set of strategies to support students in cultivating productive persistence. Both scholarly studies and classroom experience demonstrated that students' beliefs about themselves as mathematical thinkers and about their sense of belonging in a mathematical environment had profound influence on their performance in developmental courses. The results of the productive persistence interventions are striking, dramatically increasing the rate of student success in roughly half the time (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; Yamada, 2014). As the number of faculty and campuses who adapt these interventions in their own local contexts grow, the results vary within a small range while the impact of this best practice spreads to thousands of students in many states (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015).

Cultivate an Ethos of Positive Restlessness

Improvement requires not only specific actions but also a certain orientation toward ourselves and our institutions. Although we need to act with resolve, we also need to remain humble—what scholars studying improvement refer to as the assumption that your ideas and practices are "possibly wrong and definitely incomplete" (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 163). Or, as one of the authors of The Undergraduate Experience (Felten et al., 2016, p. 128) was told by a campus leader during a very positive accreditation visit, "We are pleased you think we are doing well. We want you to help us figure out how we can be even better."

Model the Process of Improvement for Students and the Institution

Paying attention to the processes that support improvement has two distinct benefits: (a) We can actually get better at getting better, and (b) we can model and teach students (and others) to learn how to think about and work on improvement in many aspects of their own lives. The field of improvement science began with industry and medicine and recently has been adapted for education by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. This approach rests on a set of principles, three of which are particularly appropriate here:

- Make the work problem specific and user centered: Effective improvement efforts typically focus on concrete, clearly defined problems that are of concern to the people involved in the effort.
- See the system that produces the current outcomes: Whatever you are trying to improve exists within a context, and that context matters. By looking at both specific problems and the environment that produces and sustains those problems, you will be more apt to recognize both resources that can aid your improvement efforts and

challenges that will need to be addressed.

- Use inquiry to drive improvement: Inquiry is a powerful tool for improvement, particularly at academic institutions where many people are trained and motivated by research. (Bryk et al., 2015, pp. 12–17).

By publicly modeling the improvement process and bringing students into the work, projects like this help the institution to get better and students (and others in the campus community) to develop the kinds of practical reasoning capacities that are essential to working and living in the modern world (Sullivan & Rosin, 2008).

Final Words

In short, a personal orientation toward and an institutional culture of positive restlessness are necessary for us to fulfill our aspirations for our students and our communities. Developing these can be challenging in a time of constraints and cynicism, but a persistent focus on what matters most—and on the vital purposes of higher education for our students and our world—can help individuals and institutions to do the hard work necessary to make positive, lasting change.

Excerpted from chapter 6 of Felten, Gardner, Schroeder, Lambert, & Barefoot, *The Undergraduate Experience: Focusing Institutions on What Matters Most* (Wiley, 2016; ISBN 9781119050742).

The full text of chapter 6 is online at http://theundergraduateexperience.org/#resources
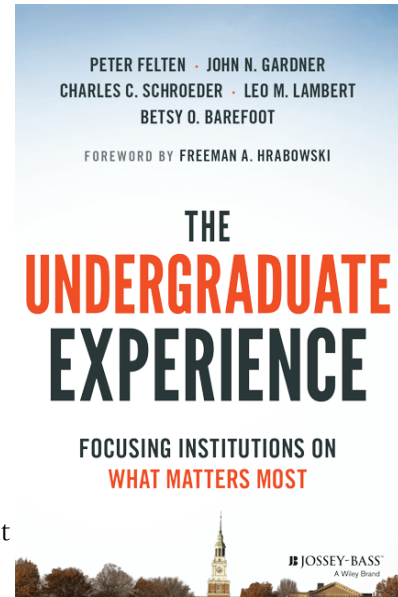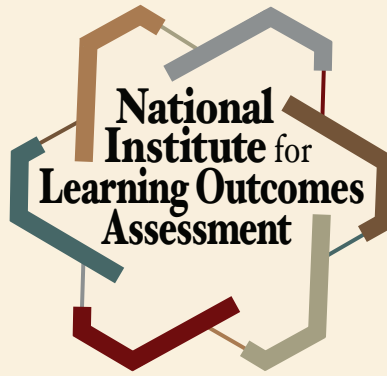
Please Cite As:

Felten, P. (2016, September). *Improvement matters*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

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