

Responses to “The Misguided Drive to Measure” Learning Outcomes

March 2018

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For those not familiar, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was formed in 2008 with a mission 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. Now entering our 10th year, we have realized this mission through research conducted nationally on meaningful assessment practices, developing our research findings into useful resources for institutions in the form of case studies, toolkits, an occasional paper series, and examples of practice, becoming a go-to online resource for all things assessment. We do not condone a “right way” to undertake assessment of student learning, and instead, provide reflective questions to guide practice, because local context matters. In conjunction with our partners and building upon these principles, we launched an [Excellence in Assessment \(EIA\)](#) designation to provide a myriad of examples of meaningful assessment practice to the field. For these reasons and others, I am disappointed in the selective use of findings from our surveys and resources to back a poorly argued and borderline offensive editorial, [The Misguided Drive to Measure ‘Learning Outcomes’](#), in the *New York Times* by Molly Worthen.

Worthen opens the piece with an assertion to which we would agree, that the assessment of student learning is an integral part of faculty daily lived experience—that of teaching and learning. The piece however quickly turns into a series of false dichotomies between grades and quantifiable institution-level data, between marketing exploits to ward off complaints of effectiveness and value with the lack of student preparedness for postsecondary education, the assumed mutual exclusivity of access and quality, and claims regarding the high cost of administrative bloat and increased use of technology behind this industrial enterprise. While the most [recent survey report](#) from NILOA was cited in the piece in relation to one finding about selective institutions, a more complete read of the full report or even a quick glimpse through the vast collection of resources and prior studies from NILOA paints a different picture of assessment altogether. For instance,

- While Worthen claims that assessment is driven by technology industries trying to make a profit, in our survey responses only 27% of institutions were utilizing an assessment-related technology. Interestingly enough, larger institutions were more likely to use technology in an effort to better understand a more nuanced picture of student learning across the institution coupled with disaggregated data to address equity concerns and to find connections between curricular and co-curricular learning.
- For claims regarding the unwieldy cost of assessment, I point towards two occasional papers in our series. The first, [What are institutions spending on assessment? Is it worth the cost?](#), by Tammi Cooper and Trent Terrell, reports on a survey of assessment professionals regarding the cost of assessment. A second paper by Randy

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Swing and Chris Coogan, *Valuing assessment: Cost-benefit considerations*, discusses how one could determine the cost-benefit analysis of assessment practice. Worthen's merely asserting that it is costly without evidence to back up the claims is a missed opportunity to model proper argumentation techniques to our learners. In *our first national survey in 2009*, we found that most institutions conduct learning outcomes assessment on a shoestring, with 20% having no staff whatsoever and only 25% having more than one FTE person assigned to assessment. That means that 55% had only one person charged with assessment work. In the assessment professional survey regarding cost in 2013, Cooper and Terrell found that across seven areas of expenditures, the vast majority of institutions spent between \$130,000-\$160,000 annually on assessment in the categories of personnel (salaries or stipends), resources (such as cost of measures used), release time, professional development, consultants, software, and miscellaneous expenses. Related to the technology question, their survey found that 35% of respondents reported they did not use software, another 12% reported they did not pay for the software they use, and the remaining respondents who used software paid less than \$10,000 a year. Not quite the picture of a driver of administrative bloat and cost that Worthen paints.

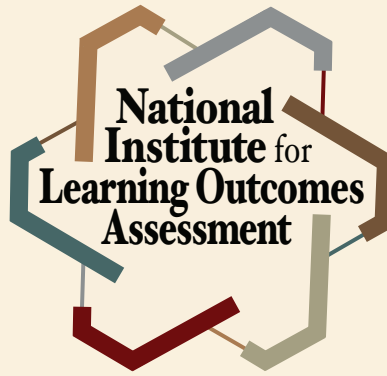
- Regarding the claims that assessment “preys” on less prestigious schools, *our 2018 survey* found that less selective institution types were more likely to be driven by an internal desire to improve and by faculty interest than they were to be driven by external accountability mandates or requirements. Further, all institutions are required to assess student learning through regional accreditation standards, not based on specific types of institutions. Further, the finding that selective institutions are less actively involved is not new, and remains consistent with the *2009 survey results*.
- The focus upon meaningful *assignment design* and the use of assignments as the most valuable source of information about improving student learning, a key finding from our survey, runs counter to Worthen's general sense that assessment is something done to faculty or the insinuation that it is driven by standardized tests.
- Finally, the words of our Senior Scholars around the issue of equity are taken out of context and ignore the work NILOA has done on the issue. In January 2017, we launched a dialogue on the *relationship between equity and assessment*, invited responses, and are continuing the dialogue. You can read about them or join into the discussion here, http://learningoutcomesassessment.org/Responses_Equity_Paper.html and equity concerns are increasingly a driver of engagement with assessment practices for all types of institutions.

While there are many ways in which we could respond further to the Worthen piece, our focus here has been on the selective use of our materials. While we appreciated the opportunity to fact check several claims by the editor, many of those clarifications were not included in the final printing. In light of this, we felt inclined to provide a form of counterpoint. Further, in alignment with our mission, we are offering this space to keep track of the numerous responses from the field of assessment to both the Worthen piece and Erik Gilbert's article, *An Insider's Take on Assessment*, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, as well as similar arguments against the examination of student learning and value of higher education overall. If you do not see your response included yet, please feel free to send it to us so we can add it: niloa@education.illinois.edu. We will continue to update this list of responses as we receive them.

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- Inside Higher Ed
 - Kate Drezek McConnell: [What Assessment Is Really About](#)
- The Chronicle of Higher Education
 - Natasha Jankowski and David Marshall (NILOA)
 - Josie Welsh, Missouri Southern State University
 - Monica Stitt-Bergh, Tim W. Merrill, & Stephanie Foster (AALHE)
 - Margaret Spellings: [The Perils of Trashing the Value of College](#)
 - Letters to the Editor in response to Gilbert piece: [Letters in Response to 'An Insider's Take on Assessment'](#)
- Blog posts:
 - Doug Ward: [It's time to move beyond a bogeyman view of assessment](#)
 - Debra Humphreys: [The 'Quiet Revolution' in College Teaching](#)
- Jeremy Penn: [My Quest to Measure Learning Outcomes while Eating the Perfect Doughnut](#)
- Assessment Professionals Group Response: [Why Are We Assessing?](#)
- ASSESS listserv responses to Gilbert article:
 - David Eubanks: [Link](#)
 - Monica Stitt-Bergh: [Link](#)
 - Catherine Wehlburg: [Link](#)
 - Jane Marie Souza: [Link](#)
 - ASSESS listserv responses to Worthen article: [Link](#)
- Linda Suskie response in the comments section: [Link](#)
- Suskie's analysis of comments: [Link](#)
- Jane Marie Souza: [Link](#)
- Catherine Wehlburg: [Link](#)
- US Air Force Academy
 - [Andy Armacost, Steve Jones, and Gary Packard](#)
- Independent responders
 - [Steve Ehrmann](#)

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Please Cite As:

Jankowski, N. (2018, March). *Responses to “the misguided drive to measure ‘learning outcomes’”*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

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