



Promoting an Improvement Culture

July 2018

Claudia J. Stanny

An interesting theme percolated through discussions at the recent meeting of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) in Salt Lake City: How can campuses move beyond systematic collection of assessment evidence toward building and sustaining a “culture of improvement” (Suskie, 2018)? Findings from an AALHE & Watermark survey, presented at the conference, highlighted the important role assessment should play in improving student learning and facilitating conversations among faculty and staff. Assessment experts sought concrete examples of institutions that have made good use of assessment evidence, reflected on the quality of student learning and academic programs, and revised curricula or adopted new approaches to teaching and learning, with the goal of improving student learning.

In its 2015 volume, *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment argue that assessment can and does produce significant improvements in student learning. However, assessment leaders repeatedly lament the absence of evidence of “significant change” in academic program quality motivated by reflection on and use of assessment evidence (e.g., Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Suskie, 2015, 2108). Linking improved assessment practices to curriculum modifications and/or new approaches to instruction and then linking both to improved student learning will always be a challenge, in part because all three types of change are incremental (Fulcher, et al., 2017).

The NILOA report stands in stark contrast to the commentaries of faculty skeptics, who believe faculty and institutions devote significant time and effort to assessment without producing evidence of a meaningful impact on student learning (e.g., Worthen, 2018). Certainly, assessment can be done badly and simply consume resources. The compliance response is a strong temptation, especially when stakes are high. External demands can distort internal processes and create cumbersome “make-work” assessment tasks that produce little more than a check-off for a mandated process. Institutions may devote so much effort to collecting data and documenting assessment processes to meet external demands that they have few resources to devote to interpret their findings or reflect on what the findings mean for teaching, advising, and curriculum design.

Roscoe (2017) argues for an “improvement paradigm,” which “would place at the forefront collective conversations about curricula and instruction.” Indeed, meaningful faculty conversations are at the heart of successful initiatives that improve student learning. Finding times and places to ensure that these conversations occur is a challenge, especially in large and complex institutions. Faculty at all institutions face increased demands for scholarship, grant writing, service to the community, and learning and managing new technology tools for teaching and research. Nevertheless,

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institutions must find ways to implement assessment processes that pose meaningful questions about curriculum, courses, and learning; engage faculty in deep discussion; and motivate efforts to improve.

The *AAHE Principles of Good Practice* (Astin et al., 1992) continue to guide assessment practices that promote improved student learning:

- Assessment efforts have a clear purpose. They pose questions about teaching and learning that faculty care about.
- Effective assessment is ongoing, not episodic. The power of assessment is manifested in cumulative, incremental change. Collection of and reflection on assessment evidence should be an integral part of the normal ebb and flow of faculty work.
- Effective assessment involves faculty across and within academic programs in meaningful discussions of the structure of courses and curriculum, assignments and teaching strategies that promote learning, and meaningful ways to assess learning and provide feedback to students.

The September issue of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, *Assessment in Action: Evidence-Based Discussions about Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum*, collects a dozen examples from a variety of institutions that have succeeded in facilitating campus discussions about the quality of teaching and learning, informed by assessment evidence. The examples illustrate how institutions leveraged key elements of the AAHE principles to create processes that facilitate improvement. These campuses create structures (offices, processes, supportive technology) that engage faculty across the institution, develop faculty expertise, and facilitate ongoing dialog and reflection among faculty across disciplines. Campus initiatives create opportunities for faculty to develop expertise and carve out time to interpret assessment findings, develop new courses, design new assignments, and discuss teaching initiatives that promise to improve the quality of student learning. Six chapters describe initiatives related to general education, inquiry skills, and student writing. Another six chapters describe campus efforts to engage faculty within specific academic programs in discussion about the interpretation of assessment findings and campus-wide discussions of assessment practices and use of evidence.

Must significant change occur only when a big initiative introduces large changes quickly? The culture today seems to be in love with disruptive innovation (e.g., Christensen & Eyring, 2011), which suggests that the only way to make significant change is to supplant the old with something completely different. If we define “curriculum change” only as a significant overhaul (e.g., of a general education program or the curriculum for an academic major), we will find scant evidence of change, much less evidence of change that produces dramatic improvement in student learning. Even in the best cases, successful initiatives to improve student learning take multiple years to plan, implement, and document impact (Fulcher, et al., 2017). Unless we pay attention, we may fail to notice incremental change. In this case, assessment is our best friend. When we systematically assess and track changes made to the curriculum and note associated changes in student performance, we can discover and document larger changes that take several years to accrue. Systematic assessment practices make “invisible” incremental change visible.

The examples presented in *Assessment in Action* represent initiatives founded on a commitment to incremental change. For example, *Isabella and McGovern* (chapter 10), describe a more than decade-long evolution of a writing program based on thoughtful reflection on evidence

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about the impact of courses and assignments on the quality of student writing. Such gradual transformations require intentionality and persistent leadership among faculty and administrators. Other chapters describe the role **Centers for Teaching and Learning** play, serving as sources for expertise, facilitating faculty discussions, and providing leadership to shepherd efforts to develop assignments, develop faculty skill with active learning strategies and assignments, and facilitate discussions about curriculum change within specific departments or across the general education.

Contributors to *Assessment in Action* describe campus assessment structures and processes that faculty experience as meaningful and beneficial for both curriculum development and advancement of assessment skill. Faculty can lose sight of the progress made when change occurs incrementally. Systematic assessment documents incremental change and makes this progress visible. This volume highlights the benefits created when assessment processes and findings are made visible. The chapters describe models that can be adapted for other institutional contexts. When institutions engage faculty in ongoing discussions of student learning, informed by assessment findings, they enable faculty to identify and celebrate the real progress they achieve through long-term change initiatives.

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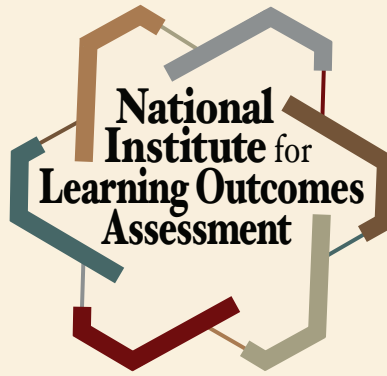
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Please Cite As:

Stanny, C. J. (2019, July). *Promoting an improvement culture*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

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