

# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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## Connecting State Policies on Assessment with Institutional Assessment Activity

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## Connecting State Policies on Assessment with Institutional Assessment Activity

The coincidence of two national surveys—one at the state level and one at the institutional level—enabled researchers at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) to explore the relationships between state policies on student learning outcomes assessment and institutional approaches to assessing student learning and related phenomena. The first survey, conducted by NILOA in the spring of 2009, was administered to provosts at all degree-granting institutions of higher education in the U.S. and addressed questions such as the methods used to assess student outcomes, the reasons for engaging in assessment activity, the uses made of the resulting information, and perceived challenges to engaging in assessment. A 53% response rate was obtained and results were published in a widely distributed report (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). The second survey, conducted by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) in the spring of 2010 was administered to state higher education executive offices and addressed specific policies, mandates, and requirements regarding student outcomes assessment put in place by state authorities. Responses from all fifty states were obtained and results documented in another report (Zis, Boeke, & Ewell, 2010).

According to the NCHEMS report, eight states were unusually active with respect to student outcomes assessment. They included Georgia, Kentucky, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, and West Virginia—representing a mix of states requiring common testing as an accountability measure and states with policies requiring public institutions to conduct their own assessments and report results. For the institutional survey, 203 institutional responses came from these eight states, out of 1512 responses. The assessment activities of institutions within these eight “assessment active” states as reported on the NILOA survey were then compared with their counterparts in states reporting less policy attention to assessment.

The following results were notable:

- Institutions located in the eight “assessment intensive” states were more likely to use general knowledge and skills measures such as Collegiate Learning Assessment, Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, or ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly MAPP) with valid samples to represent the whole institution,

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with 53% using them versus 36% of institutions in the other states. Among public institutions, 58% of those in the eight states reported doing this compared to only 38% in the other states—a finding that might be expected as a result of a state mandate. But similar differences were found as well between private institutions in the eight states and those located elsewhere.

- Institutions in the eight assessment intensive states were also more likely (83%) to use valid samples to represent the whole institution of national student surveys than other states (58%). Only 10% of the institutions located in the eight states reported that they do not use national student surveys while 17% of the institutions located in other states marked they did not. Once again, these differences were apparent for both public and private institutions.
- At the department level, institutions located in the eight states were more likely to use employer surveys and interviews, with 76% of institutions surveying and 57% interviewing versus 62% of the institutions located in other states surveying employers and 47% interviewing employers. Once again, results for private institutions mirrored those obtained for their public institutional counterparts.
- Finally, institutions located in the eight “assessment intensive” states were somewhat more likely (83%) than those located in other states (76%) to have a common set of student learning outcomes that applied to all undergraduate students.

Chi-Squared tests showed all of these reported differences to be statistically significant. These results strongly suggest that aggressive state policies in the realm of student learning assessment will likely induce institutions to do more of it. This finding would be unremarkable, if reassuring, to state policymakers if it applied only to public institutions. But the fact that differences of similar magnitude and direction occurred for private institutions is worth noting. Evidently, state policies on assessment have an important indirect effect on institutional behaviors as well, probably through such mechanisms as public communication by state leaders, statewide assessment consortia sponsored by state authorities, and conferences and workshops open to all institutions.

NILOA researchers also examined the extent to which institutions located in the two state groupings were transparent with respect to public reporting of assessment activities, using a webscan methodology that reviewed institutional websites for assessment activities (Jankowski

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& Makela, 2010). Of the 715 institutions included in the webscan study, 98 were located in the eight “assessment intensive” states and 617 were located elsewhere. The only statistically significant difference found was that institutions located in the eight states were more likely to post assessment information related to faculty development (13%) than institutions located elsewhere (4%). There were no significant differences between public and private institutions on this finding. In contrast to the strong correlation between state mandate and institutional assessment practices, therefore, this result suggests that state policymakers in the eight “assessment intensive” states may not be fully getting what they want because their institutions are not reporting information to the public in a way that is more accessible than institutions located in less active states.

When provosts were asked how they were using assessment data, three out of the five top responses were because of accountability: either to the accreditors or others (Kuh & Ikenberry 2009). As Ewell (2009) points out, institutions should instead strive for a balance of both assessment for improvement as well as assessment for accountability. With the rising expectations for institutional accountability, institutional leaders, state policy makers and advisors should work on constructing a fruitful dialogue around student learning outcomes assessment. Two questions NILOA will explore further are: (1) What learning outcomes are most pressing and relevant for institutional assessment efforts; and (2) How are or can assessment findings be used to improve student learning?

All told, these findings suggest that state policy—acting directly or indirectly—can indeed influence what institutions do in the realm of assessing student learning outcomes. But these findings should not be taken to support proactive state engagement without careful consideration of a given assessment policy’s intentions. The eight states singled out for consideration, for example, vary a good deal with respect to the kinds of outcomes they decided to assess and the uses to which the resulting data are to be put at both the state and institutional levels. Intentional choices were made about these two questions in each of these states. They should be in other states as well.

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*To find additional reports and papers on contemporary issues and current state-of-the-art of assessing learning outcomes in American higher education, visit the NILOA website at [www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org).*

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## 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 ideas and information contained 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.





## About NILOA

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- 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 went live on February 11, 2009.  
[www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org)
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, 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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