

# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

May 2011

## What Faculty Unions Say About Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Larry Gold (AFT), Gary Rhoades (AAUP), Mark Smith (NEA) &  
George Kuh (NILOA)

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Foreword by Stanley O. Ikenberry



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## Abstract

### What Faculty Unions Say About Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Three major national faculty unions –American Association of University Professors (AAUP), American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) – help shape the work conditions of faculty in many postsecondary education institutions. In this paper, representatives from each of the organizations describe their group’s positions on student learning and educational attainment and the role of assessing student learning outcomes. All three affirm the importance of assessment, emphasizing that faculty must have a central role in determining how it is to be done and how the results are used. Indeed, they assert that faculty involvement in assessment is essential in order to insure that the principles of academic freedom and shared governance are honored in all phases of the assessment process. The unions are not opposed to using assessment information for accountability. At the same time, they prefer that evidence of student learning be used by institutions to enhance the quality of the student experience and not allow assessment results to drive resource allocation or other decisions in the absence of other information. Even though the positions articulated in this paper are fairly general, it is noteworthy that the unions have endorsed the value of assessment which promises to advance this important agenda on organized campuses.



## Foreword

Quality in higher education is no less important than is access to higher education. Gauging or judging quality in higher education, however, is especially challenging. It is widely acknowledged that faculty must be actively involved in assessing student learning and in using assessment results to improve the quality of the student experience (Hutchings, 2010). Yet, aside from the American Federation of Teachers' (2011) recent statement about student success, little has been said about the role that national and local faculty unions can and should play in this arena. Indeed, faculty—those who are represented by unions as well as those who are not—are often assumed to be entrenched in the status quo and, thus, are thought to present obstacles to the meaningful assessment of learning.

The very fact that leading representatives of all three major national faculty unions—the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA)—were willing, for this paper, to engage in a dialogue on the assessment of quality in higher education is itself noteworthy and bodes well for advancing the assessment and institutional improvement agenda. As you will see in the following exchange, on many if not most issues that these representatives discussed, the three organizations agree. All three faculty union groups, for example, remain steadfastly committed to the primacy of faculty authority on academic matters—including the assessment of student learning. At the same time, they readily recognize the importance of gathering evidence of student performance and making the evidence public. United in the conviction that the systems used to gather and report such information must be designed by faculty and must be responsive to local circumstances, all three groups challenge the wisdom of externally imposed metrics, arguing that these can too readily be misused and misunderstood. And all three see the standard processes of faculty governance as essential to improving teaching and learning and to insuring quality.

While these faculty union leaders generally support the need to obtain and act on evidence about student learning, they do not cite in this dialogue any specific examples of exemplary assessment efforts taking place on their member campuses. Nor have their organizations yet set forth agendas in this arena. Neither the AAUP nor the NEA has yet adopted a student learning outcomes assessment policy—each referring inquiries on that subject to existing statements by the organization from which one must attempt to ascertain the organization's stance on the matter. Although the AFT comes closest to articulating a policy in its 2011 student success treatise endorsing the premises of learning outcomes assessment, its statement stops short of specific, targeted recommendations.

As the AAUP, the AFT, and the NEA address the challenges of gathering and using evidence of student learning to improve education outcomes and to strengthen higher education's accountability to society, we present this paper—a summary of the views of these organizations on student learning outcomes assessment—in hopes of facilitating that endeavor. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) and its co-principal investigators are grateful to our colleagues Larry Gold (AFT), Gary Rhoades (AAUP), and Mark Smith (NEA) for joining in this dialogue and sharing their perspectives.

Stanley O. Ikenberry

Co-Principal Investigator, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment  
Regent Professor & President Emeritus, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign



## What Faculty Unions Say About Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Larry Gold, Gary Rhoades, Mark Smith & George Kuh

The nation needs more college graduates who demonstrate higher levels of student accomplishment and no group is more critical to attaining this goal than faculty. As Stan Ikenberry stated in the Foreword, little has been said about the role that national and local faculty unions can and should play in this arena. Indeed, unionized faculty are sometimes thought to be a nontrivial obstacle to meaningful assessment because they are perceived as being unreasonably committed to the status quo and as eschewing calls for accountability from external stakeholders.

This paper summarizes the views on student learning outcomes assessment held by the leadership of three major national faculty unions—the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA). While the paper is framed as a conversation, with each spokesperson talking about how organized faculties can contribute their ideas and fashion their practices to enhance student learning and educational attainment, in truth, each of the union representatives responded in writing to four questions we posed to elicit their respective perspectives on student learning outcomes assessment; we then fashioned their responses into a conversational format. These were the four questions:

- Does your organization have a formal position on assessing student learning outcomes in colleges and universities?
- What advice would you give your member campuses for effectively managing the often described tensions between assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability?
- What approaches seem to be effective in encouraging unionized faculty to become involved in assessments of student learning outcomes and using the results to improve teaching and learning? and
- What are two or three other key issues that must be addressed effectively for faculty and staff on unionized campuses to become involved in student learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning and respond to calls for accountability?

To be fair, it is somewhat risky for an organization's leaders and staff to get too far out in front of its members with clarion calls to advance particular activities. The AFT, for example, while making plain that its position on student learning outcomes assessment parallels its student success statement, asserts that this is close to its first word on the topic—not its last. Only time will tell whether what comes next does, indeed, mark the beginning of active faculty union involvement in promoting student learning outcomes assessment. For now, extending the benefit of the doubt seems reasonable; but, of course, we look forward to future developments. Before sharing what these faculty union leaders say, we briefly describe each of the unions to put each of their positions in context.

*It is somewhat risky for an organization's leaders and staff to get too far out in front of its members with clarion calls to advance particular activities.*

George Kuh

## Thumbnail Sketches of the Three Major Faculty Unions

The three major faculty unions differ in terms of their histories as well as their member numbers and characteristics. The smallest of the three, the American Association of University Professors is the only one devoted solely to postsecondary faculty and professionals. About a quarter of AAUP members work in nonunionized settings. Over its 95-year history, the AAUP has positioned itself to be the voice of faculty-at-large in matters of the basic principles and policies that define academic work including academic freedom, shared governance, and tenure. The AAUP's priorities are defending and advancing those principles through policy statements and recommendations about how institutions can faithfully adhere to these policies and practices that flow from them.

The American Federation of Teachers is one of largest collective bargaining organizations in the country. A member of the AFL-CIO, the AFT has about 1.5 million members in K–12 education, higher education, nursing and health, and public services. Its membership includes about 200,000 postsecondary full-time and part-time faculty members (both tenured and nontenured) as well as professional staff and graduate student employees. The AFT organizes workers on its member campuses and conducts collective bargaining and labor-management relations at the local level—as featured in recent national media reports in Wisconsin, Ohio, and other states. The AFT has also been very active in the areas of public communications, political action, and policy advocacy. The primary example of this is the AFT Faculty and College Excellence Campaign (FACE), the goal of which is to reverse what it considers to be two highly deleterious trends in academic staffing: the decline in numbers of full-time tenure-eligible faculty positions and the exploitation of the growing force of contingent faculty.

The roots of the National Education Association, established in 1857, are as a professional association of K–12 reform-minded school superintendents, but the NEA has always been concerned with the learning conditions of students at all levels of education. Although its leadership often came from higher education in the NEA's early years, during the 20th century, K–12 teachers gradually assumed a predominant role in the association. After the adoption of collective bargaining in the 1960s the association grew substantially, making it the largest union in the country, with 3.2 million members. About 200,000 college and university faculty, academic professionals, and staff belong to the NEA—a number comparable to the AFT postsecondary membership.

Despite their differences in member and other characteristics, all three organizations are important players in the postsecondary arena of policy and practice, representing several hundred thousand faculty and academic and student affairs professionals employed across a range of institutions including two- and four-year colleges, universities, and other types of postsecondary institutions.

## Where Faculty Unions Stand on the Matter of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

**GK:** *Does your organization have a formal position on assessing student learning outcomes in colleges and universities?*

*Despite their differences in member and other characteristics, AAUP, AFT and NEA are important players in the postsecondary arena of policy and practice.*

George Kuh

**Gary:** The AAUP is substantively committed to the quality and integrity of higher education and of instruction, which is best served through academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance. Indeed, the AAUP believes that these three pillars of professional practice are necessary conditions for quality education and for realizing significant student learning outcomes. But it has not issued specific policy statements or institutional recommendations about particular substantive aspects of assessing student learning outcomes and of faculty revising their practices in light of those assessments to enhance such outcomes—because its focus is primarily on process.

To some observers as well as some faculty, the AAUP's principles and policies might suggest that the association encourages its members to resist the assessment of student learning outcomes, including acting on that data to reform curriculum and instruction. That is a fundamental misreading and a misapplication of the association's basic principles and policies as they pertain to assessment and institutional improvement. Of principal interest to the AAUP is the *process* by which assessment metrics are developed and applied and the process by which the findings of those assessments are translated into instructional and curricular reform.

Assessment of student learning and reform of teaching and academic programs are core academic activities. As such, the AAUP sees them as being the primary responsibility of faculty—individually and collectively. In the classroom, a core element of academic freedom is the autonomy of the individual faculty member to determine what and how to teach. At the same time, the AAUP emphasizes the collective responsibility of the faculty as a whole for academic programs, suggesting that an academic department, for instance, can adopt pedagogical or curricular standards that colleagues teaching the course(s) need to adopt. One example of this is general education courses in which various aspects of core courses are prescribed. Similarly, within academic departments faculty committees often develop course sequences prescribing the material that will be covered and in some cases even the sorts of exams that will be given—to actualize standards established collectively by the departmental faculty or to conform to professional or specialized accreditation requirements. And, as I will say later, faculty unions can play a collective role in these matters as well, through joint labor/management committees.

There is no reason that a faculty cannot collectively take on the task of identifying student learning outcomes, conducting those assessments, and revising curriculum accordingly. One such example is the development of writing-intensive undergraduate courses to address writing deficiencies among students. The problem arises when faculty members are not central players in these processes. It is worth emphasizing this point, as it plays out in my earlier examples from general education and professional education, because many if not most of the issues surrounding student learning outcomes are related to institution-wide assessment of what students have learned in terms of basic skills and competencies.

Another key assessment issue is the importance of local control of how programs and institutions respond to local challenges and problems. The AAUP is very much committed to local, campus-based decision making in matters of assessment—with faculty being central in those processes. Part of the genius of the American system, which European and other countries are seeking to emulate in reforming their higher education systems, is the local autonomy of colleges and universities. No one size fits all. National standards make little sense in a higher education system as diverse as ours. Collective faculty influence on instruction and curriculum is most appropriate at the institutional or disciplinary level. Nationally standardized

### *American Association of University Professors (AAUP)*

- *Motto: Academic Freedom for a Free Society.*
- *Mission: To advance academic freedom and shared governance, to define fundamental professional values and standards for higher education, and to ensure higher education's contribution to the common good.*
- *Founded in 1915 by John Dewey and Arthur O. Lovejoy.*
- *Smallest of the three major faculty unions.*
- *Over 48,000 members, over 300 local campus chapters, and approximately 30 state organizations.*
- *Only union devoted specifically to postsecondary faculty and professionals.*
- *Voice of faculty for basic principles and policies that define academic work including academic freedom, shared governance, and tenure.*
- *Priorities include defending and advancing those principles through policy statements and recommendations for how institutions can faithfully adhere to these policies and practices that flow from them.*

*[www.aaup.org](http://www.aaup.org)*

outcomes and assessments, such as those embedded in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), at the K–12 level, are inappropriate for higher education, particularly when they get beyond the level of the discipline or professional field. Along the above lines, perhaps the best marker of the AAUP’s position on student learning outcomes assessment is its formal 1968 statement, *The Role of Faculty in the Accrediting of Colleges and Universities*. The statement accepts the value of regional accrediting associations, emphasizing that faculty should be a part of regular visiting committees and that as part of their assessment these visiting committees should address conditions of academic freedom, tenure, shared governance, and faculty working conditions and morale. At the institutional level, the statement recommends that groups of faculty members, responsible to the faculty as a whole, should be centrally involved in the self-study that is done, that it should concentrate on the matters identified above in preparing the accreditation self-study, and that the findings of the review should be shared with the entire faculty. Although the statement is over 40 years old, the basic principles that underlie it remain as relevant as ever, including the commitment to and primacy of assessment approaches that are sensitive to institutional mission and local conditions.

**Larry:** The most relevant exposition of the AFT’s position on student outcomes assessment is its policy statement released April 4, 2011, focusing on the broader issue of student success in postsecondary education. While that document recognizes the general agreement among the AFT membership that college and university curriculum, teaching, assessment, and accountability all need to focus squarely on student success, there is not general agreement on what student success actually means. Some analysts emphasize the achievement of a baccalaureate degree; others are engaged in a national drive to expand the number of community and technical college degrees. Still others emphasize the need to increase opportunities to attain formal training certifications.

AFT members usually think of student success broadly—defining it as the achievement of the student’s own educational goals. Our members teach students whose goal may be to obtain a degree or certificate; but they also teach students who are looking primarily for job training without a formal credential or for professional skills to enhance their career opportunities. Other students are studying academic subjects strictly for learning’s sake. Further adding to the complexity, students often change their goals during the educational experience.

That is why we believe that measuring student success solely in terms of degree attainment is insufficient. Rather, what is needed is a system that assesses students’ academic goals throughout the educational process and ensures that students have multiple opportunities to re-examine their goals, aided by academic advisors.

The guidelines in the 2011 AFT statement are intended to be helpful to AFT members and to spark local activity, but they in no way should be understood as a mandate to local affiliates. The AFT is grounded in a deep tradition of local autonomy and the union believes that faculty autonomy is the capstone of quality education and academic freedom. With that caveat, the AFT statement is based on the premise that assessment of student learning must begin with a shared understanding of learning objectives and how they should be developed. The statement presents common elements many informed parties have vetted that cut across different programs and disciplines and that can serve as a reasonable framework for the type of educational experience all students should in some form have. These common elements—*knowledge, intellectual skills, and job skills*—offer one way (certainly not the only way) to focus professional thinking, collaboration, and planning around the institution’s teaching program and assessment. There are several other frameworks that address similar issues, such as the essential learning outcomes outlined in the LEAP (Liberal Education and America’s Promise) initiative championed by the Association of American

### *American Federation of Teachers (AFT)*

- *Motto: A Union of Professionals.*
- *Mission: To improve the lives of our members and their families; to give voice to their legitimate professional, economic, and social aspirations; to strengthen the institutions in which we work; to improve the quality of the services we provide; to bring together all members to assist and support one another; and to promote democracy, human rights, and freedom in our union, in our nation, and throughout the world.*
- *Founded in 1916 in Chicago through the collaboration of eight local teachers unions.*
- *One of the largest collective bargaining organizations in the country.*
- *Member of American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).*
- *Over 1.5 million members in five different sectors: pre-K–12 education, postsecondary faculty and professionals, public employees, and nursing and healthcare professionals.*
- *Specifically, 200,000 postsecondary full- and part-time faculty (tenured and nontenured) as well as professional staff and graduate student employees.*
- *Current campaign: AFT Faculty and College Excellence Campaign (FACE), designed to fight issues threatening the quality of teaching and learning.*

[www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)



Colleges and Universities and Lumina's Degree Profile. More important than the details of any particular set of outcomes is the facilitation of meaningful deliberations by faculty individuals and groups about the evidence showing that students are benefitting in the intended ways from their course work and other educational experiences.

**Mark:** The NEA believes that faculty should have substantial flexibility in the design, structuring, and teaching of their courses. At the same time, the association has a number of policy resolutions addressing assessment, testing, and student learning—including one specifically entitled *Student Assessment Programs in Higher Education* (National Education Association, 2010–2011). While resolutions that come out of the K–12 experience contain many elements that apply to all levels of education, this resolution focuses specifically on higher education. It welcomes the idea of “student assessment programs in higher education” stating that “properly designed and administered, [they] can be crucial tools for diagnosing student and institutional needs, improving instruction and counseling services, and designing long-range plans” (p. 33). But the NEA stresses that such programs should be “designed institutionally rather than by the state,” “planned, designed, implemented, and evaluated by faculty,” and “implemented in accordance with collective bargaining contracts where such contracts exist” (p.33). In addition, such programs need to be “sufficiently flexible to accommodate the cultural, economic, and linguistic diversity among students, . . . provide tests appropriate for students with identified learning disabilities, [and] provide faculty with information to improve individual student learning styles and aptitude” (p. 33).

The resolution specifies the characteristics of student assessment programs in higher education that receive the association's support:

- a. They are accompanied by adequate funding for remedial programs and advisement.
- b. Remedial programs are designed and provided to meet the deficiencies identified through assessment.
- c. Advisement is designed and provided to link the remediation of individual students to the completion of their degrees, certificates, or other appropriate courses of study. (p. 33)

At the same time, the resolution opposes other characteristics of student assessment programs:

- a. The use of student assessment programs to deny access to or exclude students from educational opportunities.
- b. The use of any single test to deny access to regular credit classes.
- c. The use of student assessment programs for the purpose of evaluating faculty, academic programs, or institutions. (p. 33)

This NEA resolution was first passed in 1995, well before the introduction of No Child Left Behind. It was revised in 2001 prior to the passage of that bill, which enormously expanded the use of standardized tests in educational settings. Since that time a number of controversies have arisen among both our K–12 members and higher education members because of efforts to impose accountability and assessment schemes that rely too heavily on simplistic measures such as standardized tests and single assessments. As inappropriate as these proposals are in K–12 education, they are even more inappropriate in higher education situations where the goal is not simply to learn content but also to develop critical thinking and interpretive skills.

**GK:** *What advice would you give your member campuses for effectively negotiating the tensions between assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability?*

### *National Education Association (NEA)*

- *Motto: Great Public Schools for Every Student.*
- *Mission: To advocate for education professionals and to unite our members and the nation to fulfill the promise of public education to prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world.*
- *Founded in 1857 as a professional association of K–12 reform-minded school superintendents.*
- *Teamed up in 1966 with the American Teacher Association (pre-K–12).*
- *Largest union in the country.*
- *Over 3.2 million members.*
- *Higher education membership, representing college and university faculty academic professionals and staff, is the largest of the three major groups.*

*www.nea.org*

**Larry:** The AFT believes that efforts to use student learning outcomes for either improvement or accountability should start with a clear recognition of the thoughtful work on curriculum and assessment already going on at most campuses and should avoid perpetually reinventing the wheel. Because institutional missions and student bodies are so diverse, and because we need to capitalize on the mix of faculty expertise particular to each institution, the AFT believes it is best to conduct the process of program development at the college or university level rather than cross-institutionally. The AFT also believes that front-line faculty members must drive the process to ensure that educational practices are effective and practical in the real-life classroom. As a result, many union members have been suspicious of cross-institutional assessment mechanisms imposed from the outside, and our members have mixed opinions about assessments grounded in intellectual skills as opposed to subject matter.

For example, tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) may offer some valuable information pertaining to a particular sample of students in a specific time or place. However, questions have been raised about whether the CLA is a reliable assessment of the growth in student learning from one year to the next and about the risks inherent in drawing sweeping conclusions from student samples and employing those conclusions to evaluate institution-wide student learning and teacher performance.

AFT members overwhelmingly favor reasonable accountability mechanisms, but they also believe that accountability standards need to flow naturally from clearly delineated and mutually understood responsibilities. That is why our recently published student success statement lists the roles and responsibilities of four types of stakeholders—institutional administrators, faculty members, students, and government.

To ensure that curriculum and assessment materials translate into real gains for students, the AFT believes the following:

- Faculty should be responsible for leading discussions about how the elements of student success are further articulated and refined to help students succeed.
- The implementation process should respect the principles of academic freedom.
- Professional staff should be closely involved in the process, particularly with regard to how the elements will be articulated vis-à-vis academic advising and career counseling.
- Implementing common elements for student success should both respect differences among disciplines and programs as well as strive for an integrated educational experience for students.
- New curriculum frameworks, assessments, or accountability mechanisms should not re-create the wheel.

Assessment of the effectiveness of this process should focus on student success, academic programs, and student services, but it should not be used to evaluate the performance of individual faculty or staff.

**Mark:** The NEA strongly believes that assessment programs should be used to improve student learning, teaching, and general curriculum design, not just to highlight a particular measure of student outcomes. With this in mind, our advice is to understand that the tension between accountability and improvement does not have to be confrontational, which makes the matter moot in practical terms. To be clear, the association is not opposed to basic accountability, although we would describe accountability as taking responsibility for one's professional activity. In colleges and universities across the

*AFT members overwhelmingly favor reasonable accountability mechanisms, but they also believe that accountability standards need to flow naturally from clearly delineated and mutually understood responsibilities.*

Larry Gold

country, faculty hold themselves accountable to a wide variety of standards—disciplinary, departmental, and peer review—and have very good reasons to resist systems imposed on them by nonpractitioners. Such resistance is not a rejection of accountability but rather a recognition that faculty practitioners combine the training and the experience to best determine how subject matter is to be taught. It is important that our members continue to insist that programs on their campuses be appropriately tailored to the circumstances of their campuses—the students and the institutional missions.

**Gary:** In the current context, there is great potential not only for increased tension between assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability but also for the latter to force out the former. At the institutional level, most colleges and universities have undertaken some sort of restructuring of academic programs in the last decade. We are seeing and can anticipate not just restructuring but the elimination of academic programs as well. At the state level and institutional levels, we are also seeing pressure to increase “productivity.” Both patterns threaten to subsume formative assessment into high stakes accountability, with substantial costs to enhancing student learning outcomes.

Another pattern in the current context that undermines a focus on student learning is the push for greater productivity from state legislatures as well as from system-wide and institutional boards. Productivity is generally conceived quite narrowly and in the short term as increased credit-hour production and/or graduation rates. The focus is on increasing through-put. The two easiest strategies for realizing such productivity are to reduce standards or to recruit students who are more likely to graduate. Neither strategy enhances student learning.

In a time of fiscal constraint, with the focus on cutting costs, unfortunately, colleges and universities pursue practices that run counter to what we know works in enhancing student learning outcomes. For example, what we are seeing nationally, even in difficult financial times, is a continued increase in the share of administrative as compared to educational expenditures (on personnel and activities). The Delta Project on Postsecondary Education Costs, Productivity, and Accountability (<http://www.deltacostproject.org/>) has tracked this pattern nationally, as have various higher education scholars. It is important to emphasize that these shifts are not primarily a function of increases in spending on student affairs programs and personnel who work with students to increase student learning outcomes; those expenditures are basically flat.

Unfortunately, the current accountability push to do more with less is translating into trying to educate more students with fewer full-time faculty, increasing class size, and decreasing the amount of time faculty have to be available to students. As for student support services, the push for greater productivity can lead to cuts in demonstrably effective initiatives, such as learning communities, and it could swell advisor/student ratios, reducing the time that academic support staff have to spend with students.

One step toward resolving the tension between assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability is to acknowledge it—and to explicitly address the sorts of tradeoffs involved in various policy choices and organizational practices. Some metrics of productivity that colleges and universities are adopting are actually counterproductive to student learning. Pushing departments and individual faculty to increase credit-hour production and number of classes runs counter to producing better student learning outcomes. If faculty members are spending more time in larger classes and less time outside of class with students—in labs, service learning opportunities, and informal settings—that does not serve to enhance student learning outcomes. If colleges and departments hire more just-in-time adjunct faculty to teach students and do not provide them with the time or space to meet with students and to work with other faculty to enhance the curriculum, student learning outcomes can suffer.

*It is important that our members continue to insist that programs on their campuses be appropriately tailored to the circumstances of their campuses—the students and the institutional missions.*

Mark Smith

In order to change the status quo, institutions must prioritize and reward practices that enhance student learning, even if in the short term they are more labor and costly. It takes an investment to substantially enhance the yield in student learning outcomes. That means concentrating attention on and tracking patterns in personnel and other expenditures that are designed to stimulate greater learning. It means investing in enhancing student learning outcomes, not just in assessing them. To do otherwise, to have assessment without investment, is to have the academic equivalent of an unfunded mandate.

**GK:** *What approaches seem to be effective in encouraging unionized faculty to become involved in assessments of student learning outcomes and in using the results to improve teaching and learning?*

**Mark:** The best approach for any institution on any issue is to talk with the union and offer to work to develop the issue. That means faculty leaders need to work together with administrators as assessment systems are being developed. This is in contrast to approaches where an administration develops a system, or has a system imposed by an outside entity such as the state government, and demands that faculty follow this new system. Outside imposition has been attempted too often and violates basic principles of faculty governance and academic freedom. The NEA's principles of faculty governance hold that faculty members in higher education should have primary responsibility to

1. Determine the curriculum, subject matter, methods of instruction, and other academic standards and processes;
2. Establish the requirements for earning degrees and certificates, and authorize the administration and governing board to grant the same;
3. Exercise, where the faculty deems it appropriate, primary responsibility for determining the status of colleagues, especially via appointment, reappointment, and tenure; and
4. Establish procedures for awarding promotions, sabbaticals, research support, and other rewards or perquisites (National Education Association, 2011).

The principle of academic freedom applies not only to the content of what is taught but to the approach taken by faculty to teach the content. These are academic decisions that need to be left to the academic practitioner. It is also important to remember that in most cases faculty do not need to be encouraged to develop methods and systems to improve teaching and learning. It is what they do every day of their work lives. Many faculty in both unionized and nonunionized settings have developed quite sophisticated systems of assessing student learning outcomes, and they adjust those systems constantly to changing circumstances.

**Gary:** As a baseline for understanding how to get unionized faculty more involved in assessment and in using assessment, it is worth remembering that the productivity push discussed earlier has reduced the time and the incentive for faculty to get involved in student learning assessment teams and activities. Another baseline condition is the continued growth in the proportion of faculty working in contingent positions. Both of these conditions make it harder to get faculty and unions involved in assessing student learning outcomes and utilizing the results of those assessments to plan and implement curricular and pedagogical improvements.

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Gary Rhoades

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Mark Smith

At present, in collective bargaining agreements and in academic reward systems, the focus is on classroom teaching and advising. There is too little consideration of the time and energy faculty members may put into assessing student learning and revising curriculum and pedagogy accordingly. In a unionized setting, this sort of work should be contractually identified as part of the basic instructional responsibility of faculty members—counting as much as teaching a class. Moreover, it is common in collective bargaining agreements for there to be consideration of pay or release time for developing an on-line course; there should be the same recognition of learning outcomes assessment work.

Another mechanism that can enhance faculty involvement in assessing student learning is the memorandum of agreement. Not uncommonly, collective bargaining agreements have additional, nonbinding letters of agreement surrounding some aspect of the institutional work. Typically, such memoranda involve the formation of a joint labor/management study group. Student learning assessment would be a natural focal point for such a letter of agreement.

Moreover, it would be innovative for an administration and a faculty union, perhaps in conjunction with an academic senate, to develop a grant proposal focused on enhancing student learning outcomes. A similar approach could be utilized to advance the redesign of learning environments along the lines of the Red Balloon project of the AASCU (American Association of State Colleges and Universities). This would be a variation on a labor/management study group that would provide incentive for doing the work.

The current structure of academic employment compromises the ability of faculty to engage extensively and meaningfully in assessing student learning and fostering improvements accordingly. Tenure track faculty attend to the professional reward structure, and those institutional pressures limit their involvement in such assessment work. Similarly, for the large numbers of contingent faculty teaching a majority of classes in the academy, the terms of their employment also undercut involvement in assessment work. Involvement in curriculum planning and in discussing, assessing, analyzing, and seeking to improve student learning beyond the individual classroom is not in the job description of most contingent faculty. Furthermore, the all-too-often physical reality of their employment—no office space or infrastructure that would embed them in the life of the department—effectively prevents them from having any substantial role or engagement in departmental thinking, decision making, and work with regard to assessing student learning.

The extensive use of non tenure track faculty who lack a variety of professional conditions of work makes a focus on student learning highly problematic. Engaging students requires engaging faculty. Part of the scope of responsibilities for contingent faculty could be defined in contracts to include assessment, analysis, and redesign focused on student learning. Such responsibilities could count for a particular number of classes. Similarly, contingent faculty should be involved in student advising and curricular planning, and collective bargaining agreements' definition of responsibilities is one vehicle for achieving that.

In an academy increasingly focused on reducing labor costs and concentrating labor on classroom teaching and credit-hour production, it is important to advance a different conception of productivity—one defined in terms of learning outcomes attained and dropout rates reduced. The challenge is that producing better learning outcomes is an inherently labor intensive endeavor.

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**Larry:** Resources must be adequate to the tasks and challenges we face in terms of helping students attain the skills and competencies demanded by this century. First, in order to help students succeed, faculty members need to work under professional conditions: a living wage, adequate benefits, job security, academic freedom, the ability to participate in shared governance, and access to professional development. College and university administrators are responsible for securing adequate funding for their institutions. Once funding is obtained, it is their job to ensure that resources are targeted first and foremost to instruction and support services that help students advance toward their goals.

Faculty and staff members also have key responsibilities—they are responsible for working individually and collaboratively with all their colleagues to produce a quality educational experience, to develop curricula that are academically strong, and to provide the tools students need to be successful in their lives. Students are responsible for doing their course work and engaging professionals to help them in their individual classes and overall course of study. Federal, state, and local governments are responsible for providing sufficient public funding to support general operations (traditionally a state responsibility) and to ensure that college is affordable to students (both a state and a federal responsibility.) The AFT’s student success policy statement explores these roles in greater detail, urging all stakeholders to collaborate on institutional accountability mechanisms tracked back to the roles and responsibilities.

**GK:** *What are two or three other key issues to get faculty involved in student learning outcomes assessment?*

**Gary:** One critical issue that must be addressed is responding effectively to the changing demographics of the student body. This has profound implications for faculty work. A second has to do with conceptions of student engagement in learning as it relates to modal patterns by which students go to college. In both cases, we must also deal with the relationships between college readiness, success in college, and success after college in graduate and professional school as well as in the workplace.

As the country pursues the big goal of dramatically increasing the proportion of the age group that has a college education, it confronts at the same time a fundamental change in the demographics of the student population. Virtually all of the growth in traditional college-age students in the next 10 to 15 years will be among lower-income, first-generation students of color (as well as of immigrants)—students that colleges and universities have served the least effectively in the past. This presents a particular challenge in efforts to affect student learning outcomes. It also poses a challenge in facilitating the adjustment of faculty members to this new student population (as well as to the continued growth of nontraditional students, now arguably the new traditional students). For this “new majority” of students, there is a particular need for mentors and enduring relationships. That, in turn, points to the need for institutional policies and programs that encourage and reward interaction between faculty and students.

Student engagement is important to student success and satisfaction in a whole range of areas—and student engagement is a function of engaging faculty. Thomas Jefferson had it right in constructing the University of Virginia in such a manner that faculty and students would live in close proximity on “the lawn.” After all, that type of connection and interaction is evident in exemplary programs aimed at increasing student engagement and success. But when a high proportion of students are nontraditional (or the new traditional) and are living off campus, new models are needed for engaging faculty and students. Currently, one of the most effective ways of encouraging faculty to work with students outside the classroom is to involve students in a variety of research and internship opportunities on and

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Larry Gold

off campus. Whether that means students working with faculty on research projects or experimenting with engaging pedagogies in the classroom, connecting faculty and students in authentic settings—in activities that are real and that have an impact beyond the classroom—could be a good way to engage faculty, just as one of the high-impact instructional practices is to embed learning in genuine workplaces.

**Larry:** A critical need for front-line faculty and staff is for correct and up-to-date information about the range of accountability and assessment measures proposed or implemented so they can develop their own local capacity to respond and make constructive recommendations in this area. To accomplish this, the AFT has developed an open website called “What Should Count?” ([www.whatshouldcount.org](http://www.whatshouldcount.org)), which includes a clearing-house of information about accreditation standards, major assessment and accountability proposals, state and international accountability systems, and the latest news in the field. As the site matures over the coming year, it will include more analysis and debate to supplement the basic information provided.

The AFT is also beginning to work with local affiliates to identify areas where the union can promote practices on campus that advance student success through collective bargaining, labor-management agreements, interchange with the faculty senate, and other shared governance mechanisms and direct union activities. Such activities might include union-sponsored mentoring, tutoring, and professional development around teaching issues. There are many other possibilities as well. For one example, unions representing locals in both K–12 and higher education can have a forum in New York and other cities for K–12 and higher education faculty to discuss aligning K–12 exit standards with the requirements of introductory college courses. Key members of faculty and staff unions can work collaboratively with other campus leaders to coordinate learning objectives with student assessment criteria. As key actors on the political front, unions can mobilize with other stakeholders to generate a more sophisticated understanding of student success, such as pressing for reasonable longitudinal tracking of students over a longer period of time. Most of all, unions can generate activism to promote adequate public support for instruction.

Finally, AFT leaders believe the national union can make a contribution to public debate on issues of student retention and attainment. While acknowledging that the current measurement of graduation rates—the IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey—is deeply flawed, the union leadership fully agrees that retention is not what it should be and that action is needed to improve the situation. At the same time, making progress in any of these areas—goal setting, curriculum, teaching, retention, or assessment—will need to begin at tables where faculty and staff members hold positions of leadership.

The union staff sometimes tells people inside and outside the union that genuine discussion of issues such as these has to begin with a willingness to “hear a discouraging word” about our preconceptions. The AFT believes such discussions have to begin in many more places than they do today. Front-line faculty and staff will not agree with every idea that comes down the pike, nor should they; but they and the AFT are strongly committed to engaging in constructive efforts to improve student success.

**Mark:** Throughout this discussion, all three organizations have emphasized the importance of meaningful faculty and staff involvement in the design and implementation of any system of student learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning and achieve real accountability. This requires a strengthening of shared governance structures and practices, a renewed commitment to academic freedom in all its aspects, and a willingness on the part of administrations to work with faculty and staff unions. Unions must

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Larry Gold

also agree to work with administrations to achieve progress in designing and implementing systems that improve teaching and learning within the parameters of the institutions' missions. All elements of the campus should be united in rejecting the outside imposition of overly simplistic approaches. That type of system distorts education, dumbs down curriculum, and substitutes bureaucratic-administrative decision making for educational process. It violates the principle of academic freedom by telling faculty what and how to teach. And finally it destroys the very purpose of higher education. You cannot build a knowledge base for the future if you only fund current preoccupations. The last thing American higher education needs is a federalized system that brings the mistakes of the No Child Left Behind approach into what is still the finest system of higher education in the world.

One of the fundamental strengths of that system is the diversity of institutions that respond to the educational needs of an increasingly diverse population. We can respond to the pressures of the moment and improve our campuses, if faculty, staff, and administrators in both unionized and nonunionized settings work together and create the working conditions that foster the richest learning environments possible. This can be done, but not by standardized systems imposed by outside entities.

**GK:** *Larry, Gary, and Mark, on behalf of my NILOA colleagues and those committed to improving the student experience through systematic inquiry, thank you so much for clarifying the positions of your respective organizations. As with any large scale effort to change what happens on the ground on a college or university campus, the approaches to student learning outcomes assessment have to be sensitive to local conditions and must be designed and implemented by those who will sustain the good work. Unionized faculty represent a large fraction of the professional staff in postsecondary institutions. Their leadership, cooperation, and participation in student learning outcomes assessment and the large student success agenda is essential. It is reassuring to know that the three largest faculty unions are supportive of these priorities and are willing to work toward these desired ends.*

*Unionized faculty represent a large fraction of the professional staff in postsecondary institutions. Their leadership, cooperation, and participation in student learning outcomes assessment and the large student success agenda is essential.*

George Kuh



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### NILOA Mission

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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.

### NILOA Occasional Paper Series

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NILOA Occasional Papers are commissioned to examine contemporary issues that will inform the academic community of the current state-of-the art of assessing learning outcomes in American higher education. The authors are asked to write for a general audience in order to provide comprehensive, accurate information about how institutions and other organizations can become more proficient at assessing and reporting student learning outcomes for the purposes of improving student learning and responsibly fulfilling expectations for transparency and accountability to policy makers and other external audiences.

Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to [sprovez2@illinois.edu](mailto:sprovez2@illinois.edu).

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## 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 web site went live on February 11, 2009.  
[www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org)
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- 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 2009 to 2010. He also served as president of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.
- Peter Ewell joined NILOA as a senior scholar in November 2009.

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