Communicating the Value of Higher Education through Evidence-Based Storytelling

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National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)
NILOA’s mission is to discover and disseminate effective use of assessment data to strengthen undergraduate education and support institutions in their assessment efforts.

- Surveys
- Web Scans
- Case Studies
- Focus Groups
- Occasional Papers
- Website
- Resources
- Newsletter
- Presentations
- Transparency Framework
- Featured Websites
- Accreditation Resources
- Assessment Event Calendar
- Assessment News
- Measuring Quality Inventory
- Policy Analysis
- Environmental Scan
- Degree Qualifications Profile/Tuning
- DQP Campus Coaching
- Assignment Design and Online Library
- Emerging Learning System Networking

Here’s the plan...
- Explore the shift from providing outcome data elements to telling a coherent student-centered story to communicate the value of higher education
- Suggest resources and provide examples of how to tell persuasive evidence-based stories to advance the higher education quality narrative
But first… How did we get here?

About the AAC&U Annual Meeting

...the media, employers, state and national legislators, and community members in rural, urban, and suburban areas have questioned higher education’s value for today’s students and, at times, for society at large. The need is clear for higher education to reclaim the narrative and articulate our role in ensuring that all students achieve success in life, work, and citizenship and that American democracy continues to thrive.

Public Skepticism
“Colleges… do so little to measure what students learn between freshman and senior years. So doubt lurks: how much does a college education – the actual teaching and learning that happens on campus – really matter?”

David Leonhardt, NYTimes, Sept 27, 2009

“The present moment provides an opportunity to educate the public about what higher education does, as well as about how well it does those things.”


Greater emphasis on student learning outcomes and evidence that student performance measures up

Direct Measures
- ETS Proficiency Profile & Major Field Tests
- ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP)
- Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)
- Competency and content tests (e.g., nursing, education)
- VALUE rubrics
- Demonstrations and performances
- Other examples of authentic student (e.g., writing samples)
- Signature work/culminating projects
Indirect Measures
- National Surveys of Student Engagement (NSSE/CCSSE/AUSSE/SASSE)
- Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE)
- Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)
- Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP)
- Your First College Year (YFCY)
- Noel Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory

Accountability Templates
- Voluntary System of Accountability (APLU/AASCU)
- U-CAN /Building Blocks for 2020 (NAICU)
- College Navigator (NCES)
- Transparency by Design/College Choices for Adults (WCET)
- Voluntary Framework of Accountability (AACC)
- College Scorecard (US Dept of Ed)

What's the story?

Every picture tells a story, don't it...
Internship stories are increasingly popular!

- Learn how Kyla’s research and courses helped her become an effective French teacher.
- Read about the non-profit Eli founded and how his college experience shaped his career.

Communication Finding

Communicating effectively about student learning remains a challenge. Colleges and universities must more clearly and persuasively communicate relevant, timely, and contextualized information on their impact on students and value to society.

Provosts: What’s important outcome information to share publicly?
- Information on accreditation
- Retention, persistence, graduation, & completion rates
- Licensure & certification exam pass rates
- Job placement & salaries
- Return on investment
- Costs
Communication Finding

Effectively communicating information about student learning remains a target of opportunity.

Institutions provide limited publicly available information on their websites. And, what was most important to provosts was not what to share, but how to share information.

Hello? Is anybody out there? Does anyone care?

Do audiences on and off campus understand the role and importance of outcomes?

Lack of consensus on whether information shared should be comparable across institutions; should provide program-level or be institution-level evidence only; and present evidence of learner gains, growth, or value-added by the institution.

Presentation and Interpretation Gap

Gap between audience understanding and assessment evidence.

“We are not great as an industry at explaining what we do, how our institutions run, and the great value we provide to students and communities. I think the biggest gap is in outsiders understanding student learning. We can provide all the assessment results or data we like, but if others cannot interpret them accurately there is no benefit to transparency or accountability.” —Provost

Meaning Making Gap

Communicating outputs is not sufficient. Outcome results must be made more meaningful for target audiences.

“This is something we struggle to accomplish. First, there is the need for constituents to become familiar with and understand the student learning outcomes and why they are important, how they are measured, and what we learn from the results, as well as what improvements were made in response...This is not easy to share in “sound bites,” and communicating outputs such as employment rates and beginning salaries does not serve as a proxy for student learning and quality of programs. We can, for instance, communicate results of our annual assessment of the general education, but we need to find ways to help the general public make meaning of the results.” —Provost
Provosts Asked for Help...

- A little about what to share,
- How to share (mostly externally),
- How to communicate a nuanced, complex picture of student learning that couples evidence of learning outcomes with student success data such as persistence and graduation rates.

Example of Transparent, Understandable Outcomes Results

Denison students are highly engaged in the co-curriculum, and 75% of Denison seniors report having held a formal leadership role in a student organization, which is significantly higher than students at similar institutions.

Anchored in the Catholic tradition that affirms faith and builds character...

In all our programs, MCU ensures that students advance their communication, analysis and decision-making skills, while broadening their appreciation of perspectives and their ability to learn from experience. This Student Learning Outcomes flow from our commitment to Academic Excellence, Real World Learning and Character Formation.
Communicating Learning Outcome Improvement

As learning organizations, should colleges and universities share their improvement stories?

Outcomes data suggested our students were not making gains on XYZ, so we took action! Enhancements to the first-year seminar, advising, and writing assignments have made a difference.

Learning Outcome Assessment Communication Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compliance posting of outcomes &amp; select (favorable) results</th>
<th>More tailored posting of outcomes, by program/major experience &amp; results for different audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oversharing of easy to measure outcomes &amp; results, just to do something</td>
<td>More complete picture of all the places learning occurs, posting outcomes in student affairs/services &amp; results for different audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuanced, tailored framework for communicating outcomes, improvements, in comprehensive, student-focused, culturally responsive way</td>
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Audience Questions

- What pressures are you facing, if any, in communicating your value?
- What are the motivating factors in communicating your story?
- How are you currently communicating your story of student learning? Is it effective?

NILOA Transparency Framework
Transparency Framework Components

- Assessment Resources
- Use of Student Learning Evidence
- Current Assessment Activities
- Assessment Plans
- Evidence of Student Learning
- Student Learning Outcomes Statements

Excellence in Assessment Designations

- National recognition program for campus assessment leaders at two levels
- Evaluation based on the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) Transparency Framework
- Focus on campus-wide assessment – including student affairs & external stakeholders
- Joint project of the VSA, NILOA, and the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U)

Why did we create the EIA Designations?

- Faculty & instructional staff
- Student Affairs staff
- Accreditors, governing boards
- Employers, subsequent institutions
- Students & Alumni

Letter from Senior Campus Leadership

Annotated list of individuals and groups engaged in assessment activities across campus

Application narrative
- Self study reflection process
- Draws heavily on components of the NILOA Transparency Framework
- Reflection and Growth/Improvement Plan
- Evaluation by national assessment experts

Application Components
Excellence in Assessment (EIA) Designation

Lessons from EIA Campus Applications

Narrative construction – talk about *why* you do what you do
EIA Designation Rubric

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Standard of Excellence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication of changes made as a result of assessment evidence from all levels of the institution</td>
<td>Changes made as a result of assessment are communicated to both internal and external institutional audiences, including students. Communications include information on evidence supporting the need for change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication of outcomes from changes made as a result of assessment evidence from all levels of the institution</td>
<td>Outcomes from the changes are communicated to both internal and external institutional audiences, including students. Communications include information on evidence used to evaluate the change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution and sharing of institution-level results of student assessment</td>
<td>Results from institution-level assessments are integrated vertically with other aspects of the institution intentionally to create complete picture of student learning for all students with an emphasis on addressing issues of equity and/or equity gaps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration of institution-level results with measures used at other levels to create complete picture of student learning</td>
<td>Institution-level assessment results build on and from assessment activities in all other areas of the institution.</td>
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Evidence-Based Storytelling

- Why stories?
- How does this relate to our conversation thus far?

What do we want to know about students?

- What argument do you want to make about your students’ learning?
- What type of evidence would be necessary to make the argument?

What does good assessment look like for us here?

- Why do we think that what we are doing, for these students, will lead to enhanced learning, at this time?
For instance…

“Educational assessment is at heart an exercise in evidentiary reasoning. From a handful of things that students say, do, or make, we want to draw inferences about what they know, can do, or have accomplished more broadly.” (Mislevy & Riconscente, 2005, p. iv).

Assessment as part of our story

Makela and Rooney (2012) write of telling a story – that assessment “is essentially a process of telling a story about our people, programs, and services” that are told to many different people, in many different ways, with many different foci. They argue that the “storyline surrounding an assessment ultimately aims to include enough evidence to make well-reasoned assertions…” (p. 2)
Why Storytelling…

- Shadiow (2013) presents a process to see stories “as something other than sentimental anecdotes with thinly veiled lessons” but instead as a mechanism by which we may reflect on our practices and teaching (p. viii).
- Stories allow us to go “assumption hunting” (Brookfield, 1995)
- Our stories tell others about our assumptions about the roles of students, faculty and content, and they “help inform—even alter—the thinking of others” (Shadiow, 2013, p. 16) we seek to “make believers out of our readers” (p. 17).

Toolkits for Reviewing Stories

1. Audience: For whom is this narrative written? What counts as evidence for the different audiences of the report?
2. What kind of story are you telling? (i.e., compliance, improvement, loss, struggle, quest, tragedy, fantasy, etc.) What context is needed for readers to understand the story? What is the setting?
3. Who are the character(s) in your story? (Is there a protagonist in your story—someone who is driving the action and/or someone with whom your audience is likely to identify? What are the motivations of the characters?)

Evidence-Based Storytelling

Evidence of student learning is used in support of claims or arguments about improvement and accountability told through stories to persuade a specific audience.
Many institutional leaders have little experience talking publicly about data that represents the core of their school’s performance—about what actually happens to students in classrooms, laboratories, studios, practice fields, and beyond. But with practice and patience, we will all get better at deciding what to measure, how to measure it, and using what we learn to improve the quality.

-George Kuh (2007), Risky Business, Change Magazine