

Assessment Brief

The logo for the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment is a stylized, multi-colored hexagon. It features a central white area with the text "National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment" in a serif font. The hexagon is surrounded by a pattern of smaller hexagons in various shades of teal, red, and grey.

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What Faculty Need to Know About Assessment

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Whether you are new to college teaching or a senior faculty member, full or part-time, you are likely to have questions about your students' learning: Are they really learning what I'm teaching? How well do they understand the key concepts I'm focusing on? Can they apply what they're learning in new contexts? What can I do better or differently to help students develop the skills and knowledge they need to be effective in this class, in subsequent courses, and in their future life and work?

These questions are at the heart of student learning outcomes assessment. This short overview aims to give you a sense of the defining features, practices, and significance of assessment of student learning—a required activity on all campuses today that you can both contribute to and benefit from.

Defining Assessment

The assessment of student learning outcomes came of age in the mid-1980s as a process and set of practices designed to document and improve student learning. It was championed by education scholars (who saw it as an integral part of effective teaching and learning) and by policymakers (who wanted evidence of higher education's effectiveness).

The assessment process begins with **being explicit about goals** for students' learning—in individual courses, departments and programs, and across the institution. It means translating the kind of broad claims that often appear in institutional mission statements into concrete descriptions of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their college experience. For faculty, it means teaching toward learning outcomes that you and your colleagues have agreed upon, and ensuring that students themselves understand those learning outcomes.

Assessment also entails **asking whether and how well students are achieving attainment of intended learning outcomes** and, accordingly, employing a range of tools and methods for answering those questions. While these sometimes include tests and surveys that are designed externally, local approaches like capstone projects, ePortfolios, and juried performances are also used.

Evidence generated through such activities is clearly central to assessment, but the process is not complete until results are brought to **bear in making improvements**. As a faculty, we must reflect on findings, deliberate about their meaning and

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implications, and use new insights to design more effective teaching approaches, curriculum, co-curriculum, and policies to support students' learning and success.

This, then, is the cycle of assessment: setting clear goals, gathering evidence, and using results to make changes—changes which, in turn, become the focus for a next phase of evidence-gathering and improvement. At its best, assessment reflects the ethic of inquiry that informs academic life more broadly, bringing faculty's habits and values as researchers and scholars to their work as educators and to their students' learning.

What Campuses Are Doing to Assess Student Learning

Since the late 1980's, some form of assessment has been required as part of the institutional accreditation process, so most campuses today have at least some assessment activity underway. In addition, some fields and programs (for instance, teacher education, and business) are subject to specialized accreditation, which also requires assessment. But surveys of institutional practice (see Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018) make it clear that assessment is also, and increasingly, shaped by a commitment to improving the experience of students through more effective teaching, curriculum design, and support. Thus, assessment of student learning is driven by questions faculty have about their practice that can then be shared with external stakeholders for accountability purposes. In learning about assessment's purposes and impact on your campus, you may find it useful to explore efforts at three interconnected levels: the institution-level, the program- or department-level, and the classroom-level.

The Institution-Level

According to a survey of chief academic officers conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), more than 80% of campuses have identified a set of learning outcomes, or goals, expected of all students regardless of major (Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018). These outcomes may be locally devised but they may also be borrowed or adapted from national frameworks such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U's) *Essential Learning Outcomes* or the *Degree Qualifications Profile* from Lumina Foundation. Typically, these cross-cutting outcomes are likely to include writing, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, oral communication, problem solving and knowledge in a range of content areas. Assessment at the institution-level aims to provide a broad picture of student progress toward such outcomes and to ensure that the pieces—the courses and other educational experiences in which students participate—add up to a coherent whole—a degree with integrity. Additionally, many campuses are now thinking about embedding and assessing “soft” skills such as teamwork, persistence, and reflection.

Toward this end, a growing number of assessment methods are now in use. While at one time externally devised tests were among the most common, campuses are increasingly moving toward approaches that draw on the work that students do as part of their regular courses: papers, projects, presentations and the like. These more “embedded” approaches are often employed in tandem with “rubrics” (such as those developed by AAC&U), specifying various levels of achievement (Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018). Also widely in use are surveys designed to provide a clearer sense of the student experience. Most common among these is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which provides data about the frequency with which students engage in a range of effective educational practices.

Approaches like these, aimed at the institution-level, are typically directed by a central office or assessment coordinator, often reporting to the chief academic officer. In general, the goal is not to evaluate the learning of individual students or judge the effectiveness of individual faculty, but to provide better information about overall trends, to send up red flags about problems needing attention or strengths that can be built on, and to serve as a compass for improvement over time.

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Information at the institution-level may also be helpful to those beyond the immediate campus community, such as trustees, policymakers, and parents.

The Program- or Department-Level

Building on and enriching assessment activity at the institution-level, academic departments and programs on many campuses have been working to more clearly articulate goals for student learning—aligned with institutional goals—and then to develop plans and activities for assessing progress toward those goals (see Ewell, Paulson, & Kinzie, 2010). At this level, locally designed assessment plans and approaches are very likely to be part of the picture. The English department, for example, may survey its graduates about how prepared they felt to take on and succeed in the tasks they encounter in the world of work. The teacher education program may require all students to develop a portfolio of work samples documenting and reflecting on their progress toward key outcomes. The psychology department may ask students to develop a senior project pulling together what they have learned about the field—and then to present this project to the wider campus community in a setting that invites conversation and constructive feedback. Activities such as these, including reports on findings and on improvements made as a result, are now expected as part of the program review process on many campuses.

As suggested by these examples, assessment activities can be powerful educational experiences for students—occasions to pull together and reflect upon what they have learned, to demonstrate it to others, and to receive useful feedback. For department and program faculty, these kinds of assessments provide important information for rethinking learning outcomes (Do we have the right ones in view?), methods (Do we need to change the way we teach the introductory course?), and curriculum (Do our courses “add up” to the learning we seek for our students today?).

The Classroom-Level

Assessment has always been integral to classroom teaching as faculty design and evaluate their students’ experiences as learners. But with the rise of new, more active pedagogical approaches and “High-Impact Practices” (such as learning communities and service learning), and with a growing understanding of the complex dynamics of how people learn, many faculty today are seeking new ways to determine what their students are learning, where they are having difficulties, and how to foster deeper, more lasting knowledge and skills. These efforts may go by a variety of names, including “classroom assessment,” “classroom research,” or “the scholarship of teaching and learning.” Some approaches are quick and simple. The instructor may ask students to write down, anonymously, the main point they take from the day’s discussion and the point they are least clear about; even a quick scan of such “one minute papers” (as this technique is called) can be eye-opening about how to focus or refocus the next class session.

A focus on the classroom may also entail attention to the design of classroom assignments. Research indicates that when assignments are clear and explicit about purpose, task, and criteria for evaluation, students perform more effectively, and that the benefits of these more “transparent” assignments are especially notable for students who have traditionally been underserved in higher education (Winkelmes et al., 2016) You may well find (or want to seek out) professional development opportunities on your campus that bring faculty together to work on the design of more effective assignments.

Looking Across Levels

Assessment is most powerful when these three levels “talk to each other.” The value of the process lies, that is, not in any particular set of data or assessment activity but in developing a culture of evidence in which colleagues from varied disciplinary contexts and roles (including student affairs) share information and judgments about what is and isn’t working and commit as a community to

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ongoing improvement. This kind of collaboration can then take various forms, including work together on course or assignment design and curriculum mapping.

The Importance of Faculty Involvement

Knowing as much as possible about the students you and your colleagues teach, and seeking to improve their experience as learners, is central to your role and responsibility as a professional educator. But assessment is new to most faculty—not something most have training for or direct experience with. Adding to the challenge, assessment, especially in its early years, was sometimes seen as a corrective to the vagaries of grading and to what some saw as higher education's neglect of undergraduate teaching. Predictably, many faculty were put off by this judgmental tone.

Today's assessment movement, in contrast, is characterized by widespread recognition that if assessment is to make a difference, faculty involvement is critical. Indeed, this is a key lesson from several decades of campus experience. Where assessment is treated as a bureaucratic task, undertaken to satisfy external requirements, impact in the classroom is unlikely. But where faculty are involved in establishing shared learning outcomes for students', where they have access to good information about progress toward learning outcomes, where they talk with one another about how to do better, assessment is a powerful force for change that can make a real difference for students. In fact, students play a role in assessment and improvement as well, helping to formulate questions, generate and analyze data, and participate in planning and implementing improvements (Werder & Otis, 2010).

How Faculty Can Benefit From Involvement in Assessment

Many faculty today, including adjuncts and graduate teaching assistants, face escalating expectations and missed signals about where to put time and energy. Figuring out how to balance your various roles and responsibilities—personal as well as professional—can be a full-time job. Assessment will be one among many developments in your orbit of life and work. For some it may become a central focus; for others an occasional engagement, for instance, in helping to carry out department assessment plans, or by participating in professional development opportunities related to teaching improvement or the scholarship of teaching and learning. But knowing about assessment—and participating in discussions of its value, purposes, methods, and findings—can help make you a more effective teacher and colleague.

Additionally, getting involved in campus assessment activities is a way to meet new colleagues beyond your own department and to share your respective and collective goals for students, experiences in the classroom, teaching innovations, and the like. This kind of exchange is especially powerful in suggesting how your courses (can or do) connect with courses taught by others to create a more integrated, coherent experience for students. Assessment activities and findings may also help bolster your case when applying for tenure, promotion, and salary increases. Looking ahead, assessment is a topic of widespread significance in higher education today, and it offers opportunities for leadership on your campus and beyond.

How to Learn and Get Involved

Many institutions today have a centralized assessment office, or at least an assessment director or committee, and that is clearly a place to start when seeking to learn about developments on your campus. But it's likely that you will, at first, be most interested in activities in your own department and classroom. Your department chair will be an important resource in this regard. Additionally, campus teaching and learning centers can provide resources and opportunities to support the kind of inquiry and innovation that are central to assessment.

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Beyond the campus, there are countless further resources. The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) provides critical leadership for shaping policy and practice in assessment. Several groups and campuses host regular conferences on the topic, and the regional accrediting organizations often highlight assessment at their annual meetings and in training workshops. Many of the disciplinary and professional societies that are so important in faculty life have also explored the place and practice of assessment in their respective fields, developing reports, policy statements, and other useful resources. Finally, NILOA (the sponsor of this assessment brief) hosts a rich website, where you will find occasional papers, survey findings, news releases, and links to useful information from other sources.

Assessment is not easy, and, as most campuses have found, it comes with significant challenges. But faculty who become involved find that its practices make a significant difference in their own classrooms, enriching and informing their experience as teachers and improving their students' learning. As a member of the professoriate new to assessment, you will have much to gain from becoming involved—and you will have new perspectives to contribute as well.

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