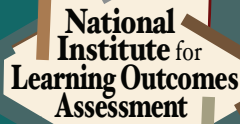


Assessment Brief



National
Institute for
Learning Outcomes
Assessment

Governmental Policy and the Systemic Assessment of Student Learning

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Juxtaposing the words “governmental policy” with “the assessment of student learning” is a little jarring. Governmental policy is often associated with the impersonal “rule of law,” with authoritative, often inflexible standards and regulations. By contrast, assessing student learning is a personal process, involving primarily students and faculty. Unsurprisingly, some parents, students, teachers, and policy makers have questioned whether governmental policy should have any role in the assessment of student learning.

Although evaluating the performance of an individual student on a test or assignment is the most basic element of learning assessment, the assignment of grades is not relevant to policy makers. **The key issue for policy makers is not about measuring learning in the narrow case of a particular student, but whether learning is occurring generally, and how to expand the extent of student learning and improve its quality. These are systemic issues, and they require systemic assessment practices.**

Governmental policy is not the best tool for improving student learning (more on this below), but policy makers should not be totally disengaged from the issue. Policy leaders are responsible for assuring that public investments and public policies in education serve well both individual students and the communities in which they live and work. So what should governments do, and how should they do what they do in the systemic assessment of student learning?

These questions call for a shared understanding of the challenges of assessing learning and of the capabilities and limitations of governmental policy. Such an understanding should lead policy makers to *encourage and support* sophisticated approaches to assessing student learning tailored to each of several useful purposes. It should also lead them to observe an appropriate division of labor in pursuing each purpose.

The Division of Labor for the Different Purposes of Systemic Learning Assessment

Beyond simply grading performance, the useful purposes of assessing learning include:

- a) Improving instruction and student learning at the individual, course, departmental, and institutional levels;
- b) Assuring that degrees and credentials are valid: that students have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills required to begin productive work in the next stage of their life as employees, entrepreneurs, or professionals.
- c) Assessing whether the educational system generally is meeting the needs of people, communities, and businesses in the global economy.

Policy Makers

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Although these three purposes are interrelated, achieving them involves very different tools and processes and a division of labor. Improving instruction and student learning is the responsibility of faculty. Faculty need to establish clear objectives for instruction and to assess student learning in order to determine the effectiveness of different instructional approaches. Faculty have a responsibility to tell other stakeholders (employers, institutional administrators, trustees, and policy makers) how they do this work and to be responsive to external input. However, faculty must still be in charge of this process. Its breadth and complexity demand professional expertise. Efforts by other stakeholders to intervene and manage the instructional process are more likely to degrade than to increase its effectiveness.

Faculty should also be at the center of assessments to assure the validity of degrees and credentials. Achieving this purpose, however, requires collaboration with civic leaders and employers, institutional administrators, and governing boards. Assessing the validity of degrees and certificates should begin with general education and then extend to the specialized knowledge and skills required in particular fields. The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) was developed by higher education leaders to serve this purpose in general education. The Common Core Standards for Career and College Readiness is a similar effort developed by a group of K-12 and postsecondary education leaders. Civic leaders and employers have played important roles in informing the work of educators in determining what should be the learning objectives in both of these general frameworks. Institutional leaders and governing boards are responsible for setting expectations and creating the necessary supports for faculty to play their roles.

Direct governmental involvement is needed to achieve the third purpose of educational assessment, assessing the general effectiveness of the educational system. Such assessments—the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)—have been developed by governments to obtain an assessment of educational progress at the state and national levels. These assessments require both governmental initiative and the professional expertise of educators in determining the content of the assessments and the design of psychometric procedures to assure reliability and validity.

The Tools for Assessing Learning Should Differ According to Purpose

Improving Instruction. Improving instructional effectiveness, fundamentally the most important reason for the systemic assessment of student learning, requires explicit goals and flexible assessment approaches tailored to different learning goals and types of student work in assignments, courses, or programs. Although standardized tests can play a role, they are inadequate for assessing critical thinking, the ability to *use* knowledge, and creativity—all important learning objectives, especially in postsecondary education. Standardized tests also are not well designed to provide evidence that can be used to improve instruction. They may not be sensitive to the institution’s mission and educational purposes and they provide too shallow a view of what students know and can do.

Faculty work to improve instruction most naturally focuses on the assessment of actual student work on assignments, projects, and portfolios. Frameworks such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) Essential Learning Outcomes and the Degree Qualifications Profile describe key learning outcomes. The VALUE rubrics geared to such learning outcomes provide a yardstick for assessing the level of student achievement. In the Multistate Learning Collaborative to Advance Quality Student Learning, an effort to implement these practices more broadly, faculty in twelve states have collected samples of student work and submitted them for judging by an independent panel to test the reliability and validity of their own assessments. An impressive report shared the early results of this effort. The VALUE Institute has been established at Indiana University to provide support to institutions seeking to assess student work more systematically.

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The assessment of learning will not lead to improvement unless the information gained from assessments is used to guide experimentation and changes in institutional practices. Faculty must experiment with different approaches in order to learn what might increase the quality of student work and the number of students who achieve desired learning. Institutions also need to examine institutional practices broadly. For instance, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been employed by more than 1,600 institutions to monitor the extent to which students experience practices associated with greater academic success.

Assuring quality. The quality of degrees and certificates is first assured by the quality of the work faculty do in establishing learning objectives, designing instructional programs to achieve them, and assessing student performance on assignments, projects, and examinations. Although neither faculty nor accreditors have established a single common standard for degree quality, the Essential Learning Outcomes and the Degree Qualification Profile broadly reflect a national and international consensus on the knowledge and skill associated with postsecondary degrees. These frameworks should become increasingly influential in shaping learning goals, instruction, and the assessment of student learning.

Beyond the outcomes of general education, it is necessary to assure that students receiving degrees and certificates in various specialized fields have acquired the knowledge and skill required in their intended work. A large number of specialized fields including health care, technology, social work, and education have developed requirements for supervised clinical practice and assessments of knowledge and practical skills to assure the quality of degrees and certificates. Often students must pass both standardized examinations and evaluations of professional performance in order to receive certification to work in a field. Typically, states establish requirements for certification by relying on the expertise of educational programs and professional associations.

Benchmarking educational attainment. The International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have developed assessments of learning which are administered to random samples of students or adults in countries around the world. The Institute for Education Science in the United States administers similar examinations to random samples of elementary and secondary school students in the states as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). These standardized tests have a single purpose—to provide a rough measure of student learning among countries or states.

Because such assessments can identify and call attention to the need for improvement in educational achievement, they are important and should be taken seriously. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, the unavoidably limited scope of standardized tests and the difficulty of employing broad survey results to guide what to do in particular situations means these studies have little practical value for improving student learning.

What Should Policy Makers Do? What Should They Avoid?

Advancing student learning and educational attainment is clearly an important public objective of interest to policy makers. Unsurprisingly, the various public policy initiatives launched to advance these goals have, at best, achieved mixed success. In some cases heavy handed governmental initiatives have been harmful, wasting time and energy and demoralizing students and faculty. Improving student learning is a complex process that does not respond well to the tools available to governments.

Governments have powerful tools, but they are blunt instruments—money, law, and regulation. Policy can allocate money for different purposes—building roads, parks, schools, supporting research, instruction, police and fire protection, national defense, providing incentives and support for important needs, etc.—but it has limited power over *how* the work is done. The limits of policy are most apparent when policy makers get involved in complex problems of practice. When policy

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attempts to control *how* work is done, the work immediately becomes more expensive and typically, less effective. This is why the word “bureaucratic” is usually a slur.

Very few of the purposes of assessing student learning systemically can be advanced by establishing policies or regulations. Institutions and practitioners will *comply* with regulatory requirements, but compliance rarely produces excellence. Real progress requires genuine commitment, creativity, and the disciplined collection and use of evidence about instructional effectiveness. Good teaching is professional work, and it is driven by professional values and capabilities, not obedience to rules.

Even monetary incentives, while powerful, can go astray. It is very difficult to calibrate an incentive for more authentic achievement and higher levels of excellence because both are hard to measure and complicated to generate. When human beings are offered direct monetary incentives to do a difficult job, they are likely to work harder to shape the rules of the game to assure they will not lose than to actually improve. If the stakes are high enough, protecting against fraud becomes a problem.

The limits of public policy to improve learning through assessment have been amply demonstrated by efforts in K-12 education that have fallen short of their aspirations. It is always possible to establish winners and losers in the assessment game; it is far more difficult to increase the number of winners, which is what policy really wants to achieve.

To get better results, policy leaders should focus on what they *can* do well and avoid doing what they *cannot* do well. Policy makers can make sure educators know that increases in student learning are a priority for them. They should make it clear to trustees, institutional leaders, and faculty that they *expect* them to assess learning and to use the results to improve instruction and student attainment. They should insist that efforts to improve learning be publicly transparent. They should ask for measurable results and ask hard questions. Without micromanaging, they should require evidence that institutions are allocating resources to public priorities. And they should be willing to provide funds to expand efforts that are producing better results.

In short, policy makers should insist on progress, and without interfering with the work itself, they should do what they can to help. Educational progress has never been easy or rapid, but it has always been the result of dedicated educators working in partnership with supportive partners—parents, employers, and policy makers.

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