

Assessment Brief

The logo for the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment is located in the top left corner. It features a stylized graphic of overlapping hexagons in shades of teal, maroon, and grey. The text "National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment" is written in a serif font, with "National" and "Institute" on the top line, "for" in the middle, and "Learning Outcomes Assessment" on the bottom line. The text is white and is set against a dark teal background.

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What Students Need to Know About Assessment

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What if you could change the nature of your experience so it would be even more valuable to you now and after college? By spending a few minutes reading about how you demonstrate your learning, how it applies to your classes, as well as the responsibilities of faculty and staff – you will be well positioned to be successful in attainment of your educational goals.

What Do You Need to Know?

Educating students is the core mission of higher education, and many campuses today are working hard to make sure that you develop the knowledge and skills you need to flourish in today's complex world. An important element in this focus on educational quality is the **assessment of student learning outcomes**.

That phrase may be unfamiliar to you, but assessment is something that students should know about. In this pamphlet, we aim to help you understand what it is, why it's important, and how you can both benefit from and contribute to it.

Defining Assessment of Student Learning

Put simply, the assessment of student learning is a process that addresses:

How well are you and your friends learning the important skills and knowledge you need to succeed as family members, citizens, and workers today and after college?

How you answer this question matters because what you and other students say can be used to improve teaching, course design, curriculum, and co-curricular activities—and your experience as a learner. Talking about what you learned in college can also be valuable to getting a job.

Your campus probably has a set of desired “learning outcomes” specifying what you and other students are expected to know and be able to do by the time you graduate. These are likely to include, for instance, the ability to think critically, to communicate clearly, and to solve complex problems. These goals and others that your campus has identified as important, help to shape the design of the courses and programs you take. You should see them reflected in course syllabi and program

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descriptions. If you don't, ask your faculty members what the intended learning outcomes are for the program or course.

Assessment also entails asking whether and how well students are meeting those goals and expectations. This is a complicated question, which campuses explore in a variety of ways—through the assignments you are asked to complete in your courses, for instance, and surveys inviting feedback on your experience as a learner. Some campuses also ask students to create a portfolio of work done in courses and activities done outside of class to document the impact of your educational journey over time. These and other methods are designed to gather evidence about how the various elements of your educational experience—in courses and outside of class as well—connect to and reinforce one another in ways that add up to the kind of learning you need to succeed and flourish in today's complex world.

And this brings us to the most important component of student learning outcomes assessment: **using that information to make changes that improve the knowledge and skills you need to live a productive, satisfying life.** If, for example, your writing as you approach graduation is not at the level your faculty and employers expect, your professors may work together to design better writing instruction and more effective writing assignments. If your institution discovers that too few opportunities exist to participate in certain meaningful learning experiences (internships, capstones, and reflective portfolios, to name just a few) the institution might begin working to make these experiences more broadly available to you and your fellow students.

This, then, is the cycle of assessment that programs and institutions build into the design of your educational journey: setting clear goals, gathering evidence, and using results to make changes—changes which, in turn, improve the program and your learning experience. This process is a way for your campus to meet its responsibility to you and to the public, ensuring that the time and money you invest actually prepare you for what lies ahead. The process is so important that all campuses today are required to do assessment.

Your Role

Of course the quality of your learning depends on *you* as well as your professors. Your institution must do everything it can to provide high-quality teaching and support, but you must bring time, energy, motivation, and effort. Another way you can make a difference in enriching your learning is by participating in assessment activities. This can take different forms.

You may be asked to participate in activities through which your campus seeks to understand more about your experience as a learner. As mentioned earlier, this might mean filling out a survey about your experience. It might mean developing a portfolio documenting your progress as a learner in different courses over time. Completing these tasks—and giving them your full attention and effort—ensures that the institution has the best possible evidence to guide improvement.

Some of these activities may happen outside of regular courses, but they may sometimes be a part of your regular coursework. Many institutions today use examples of classroom work to draw conclusions about how well their programs are working for students.

There may also be opportunities to play a leadership role in the assessment of student learning outcomes. Many campuses include students on assessment committees, for instance, or as partners in generating and analyzing evidence of learning. This might mean interviewing other students about their experience. It might mean helping to present assessment findings to the campus community. Activities like these are an opportunity to develop leadership and research skills.

Most important, perhaps, you can contribute to ongoing improvement (for you, your fellow students, your teachers, and your campus) by asking good questions.

The quality of your learning depends on you as well as your professors. Your institution must do everything it can to provide high-quality teaching and support, but you must bring time, energy, motivation, and effort.

- What is the purpose of this assignment or activity?
- How will my work be evaluated?
- How can I demonstrate what I know to potential employers?
- How could we make this course more helpful and more personally meaningful?

Research suggests that students who think carefully about their own learning, and who ask questions about purposes and expectations, are more successful learners. In short, assessment is a way for you to contribute to your campus and also to enhance your own success as a learner.

Finding Out More

A short list of resources provide additional information about the assessment process, its challenges (because improvement is never easy), and some of the exciting developments and trends now emerging.

But you can also find out more on your own campus. You might start by talking with your faculty or advisors—and your friends and family—about what you and others find helpful (or not) in a class or program. You could also contact the office or individuals who provide leadership for assessment on your campus. They will welcome your ideas and questions and can talk with you about the role you as a student can play in strengthening the learning experience.

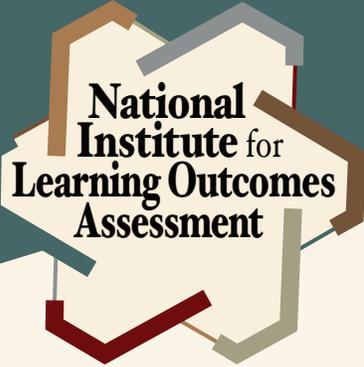
The bottom line is this: **make sure your voice is heard!** At the end of the day, assessment means an ongoing effort to understand and enhance the experience of students. That's not possible without your involvement.

References

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