

# The Culture Change Imperative for Learning Assessment

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The September 2012 issue of the NILOA Newsletter included NILOA's 15th Occasional Paper, "The Seven Red Herrings About Standardized Assessments in Higher Education," written by Roger Benjamin, with a foreword by Peter Ewell, and including commentaries by Margaret Miller, Terrel Rhodes, Trudy Banta, Gary Pike, and Gordon Davies. The points made in that paper for and against standardized tests of student learning are provocative and clarifying but, as Ewell noted, they are arguments with which we are already quite familiar. Ultimately, how best to assess learning for the purposes of furthering learning and accountability is a question for empirical inquiry that can draw on powerful resources in higher education expertise.

Much assessment of learning already exists on campuses. The vexing problem, however, is that little of it consistently and coherently signals to students the institution's expectations and the standards shared by faculty and staff. While there are faculty members on every campus who practice exceptionally inventive and effective assessment, such practice rarely is pervasive such that it both purposefully contributes to all students' learning and informs an institution-level portrait of student learning and development.

Why is systemic assessment still so rare? The answer is embedded in the papers mentioned above: Resistance to learning assessment is in the DNA of the academy's current culture. Benjamin speaks of this charitably as "institutional inertia." Davies, more bluntly, notes that despite rhetoric to the contrary, neither higher education's values nor its rewards for the individuals within it have changed. The academy's incentive and reward system is not about student learning but about institutional prestige measured by selective admissions, endowment, and research prowess. As Davies put it, "Colleges and universities have a huge investment in the status quo, and they are not likely to support changes that may be needed in what and how they do it."

But as considerable research and many critics point out, the status quo is no longer tenable. A culture change in higher education is imperative. Far too many college graduates have not achieved widely accepted and significant *higher* learning outcomes such as the ability to think critically and creatively, speak and write cogently and clearly, solve problems, comprehend complex issues, accept responsibility and accountability, or understand the perspective of others. The central contributor to this learning crisis is culture — both the larger culture surrounding the academy and that within colleges and universities themselves. With regard to the latter, the shared norms, values, standards, expectations, and priorities of teaching and learning on most campuses are not powerful enough to support true higher learning. We do not demand enough from students; our standards are not high enough; we accept half-hearted work from students who have not asked enough of themselves; and we do not support students in asking for more from their teachers. Degrees have become deliverables (purchased, not earned); credit hours are accumulated and

# Viewpoint

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courses passed with little concern for coherence or quality because we are not willing to make students work hard to attain shared high standards to earn them. As a result, students do not experience the kind of integrated, holistic, developmental, rigorous undergraduate education they absolutely must have for truly transformative higher learning to occur.

To put student learning at the center of each institution's work demands that we know the extent to which learning is occurring and that we provide timely and appropriate feedback to students and teachers. To change institutional culture requires that we recognize and embrace the cumulative and collective nature of higher learning and the powerful role that learning assessment plays in outcomes of that nature. Thinking critically and writing creatively, for example, are skills learned cumulatively over the span of the entire undergraduate program. Objectives and standards for excellence in these skills must be shared — intentionally articulated, planned around, and assessed by faculty and staff across all courses and programs. Higher learning requires far more instruction, practice, assessment, and feedback than is currently provided or expected within single courses or other isolated learning experiences.

The assessment challenge of cumulative learning is that it requires faculty to come together — *collectively* — and to agree on which outcomes, expectations, and standards they share and endorse, and then, throughout their various courses and programs, to reinforce these outcomes, expectations, and standards. The assessment of cumulative learning demands change in the institutional culture of learning, change that requires faculty to significantly raise their expectations and standards for learning outcomes and that ensures the adequate formative and summative assessment of those outcomes. Outcomes, expectations, and standards, moreover, must be transparent. When students engage with faculty and staff in pursuing transparent, institution-wide outcomes, expectations, and standards, and when they receive frequent and appropriate feedback, higher learning improves. In this sense, learning assessment is best understood not as an external imposition by the state or administration but rather as a powerful dimension of teaching and learning derived, practiced, and promoted by faculty and staff to improve the quality and quantity of undergraduate learning.

Given the cumulative and collective nature of higher learning, establishing and sustaining a conscientious, diligent, rigorous, campus-wide regime of learning assessment requires changes not just in attitudes but also in campus policies and commonly agreed practices to advance and sustain a more intentional learning culture. Learning assessment, for example, should not be the burden of a small knot of dedicated faculty and staff who understand its benefits and are willing to suffer its additional costs; when that happens, exhaustion, disenchantment, and frustration are inevitable.

To say that academic culture change — however imperative — is hard is an understatement. The work culture of academia rightfully offers each individual faculty member a great deal of freedom for independent judgments about the aims and content of learning. Yet relationships, not just between faculty and administration but also among faculty members themselves, create cultural and power barriers that are difficult to overcome. Constructing shared outcomes, expectations, standards, and assessment tools, and conducting effective learning assessment requires precious time and effort. Incentive and reward systems are currently skewed against such change. Reappointment, promotion, and tenure criteria need to be adjusted to align with these greater expectations for teaching and for the more time-consuming engagement with students that effective learning assessment requires. Given the limits of most doctoral programs, faculty and staff need better opportunities to learn more about appropriate assessment and how to implement it. And, of course, myriad pros and

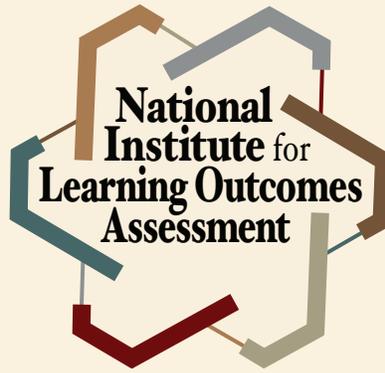
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cons arise with the issue of comparing similar institutions to develop learning benchmarks.

The task list above is hardly exhaustive. This kind of change, ultimately, may be less about expertise and more about will. Changing the academic culture requires sustained, shared, courageous leadership by faculty, staff, administration, and governing boards. Anything less invites those outside the academy to act as referees, which is never good for either the academy or the NFL.

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