



# AAHE Principles of Good Practice: Aging Nicely

May 2012

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Twenty years ago, in 1992, the American Association for Higher Education's Assessment Forum released its "Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning," a document developed by twelve prominent scholar-practitioners of the movement. The principles have been widely used, studied, and written about (see for instance Banta, Lund, Black & Oblander, 1995), and adapted in other documents and statements. Their inclusion on the NILOA website is a welcome addition, for, like good wine, the AAHE Principles have aged quite nicely.

As noted in the introduction to the document, the purpose of the Principles was to advance assessment "as a powerful tool for educational improvement." Their aim was to distill the wisdom of practice emerging at the time, and to assist campuses to craft approaches that actually made a difference for students and their learning. Thus, one finds a focus on the importance of clear purposes and goals, on ongoing rather than episodic attention to improvement, and on the involvement of multiple stakeholders — all now a familiar part of the gospel of assessment. Some of the principles have a special resonance today, however.

Seen through the lens of today's assessment movement, Principle #7 is particularly worth noting: "Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about." In national surveys (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009), and other recent studies (see, for example, Banta & Blaich, 2011; Blaich & Wise, 2011), the problem of use has become increasingly clear. Assessment is certainly being conducted, evidence is being generated, and reports are being written and filed. But translating that work, and the significant energy and resources it requires, into real improvements for learners continues to be a challenge. The problem, as Principle #7 suggests, is not that the data aren't good enough, or that we don't have enough data, but that our questions aren't the right ones. Assessment, the AAHE document urges, "means thinking in advance about how the information will be used, and by whom."

Principle #6 may look a little different from today's perch, as well. It calls for involvement "from across the educational community"— naming "faculty, student-affairs educators, librarians, administrators, and students." Certainly. But of the groups on that list, students have arguably been least involved. That's unfortunate because there are now compelling stories about the value they can bring to the enterprise — not just as objects of assessment but as active participants in helping to shape questions about their own learning, gathering and analyzing evidence, and pushing for change (Hutchings, Huber & Ciccone, 2011; Werder & Otis, 2010). And — more importantly — that involvement brings direct benefits to the students themselves.

The AAHE Principles — as "principles" — are not meant to provide practical, point-by-point guidance. They are

# Viewpoint

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not “how-to” advice. Happily, with the evolution of assessment over the last two decades, there is a lot of this kind of help available today. Their virtue is as foundational ideas, as starting places for how to think about assessment — whether about the “use question” the involvement of students, or any of the other themes developed in the document. As campuses seek to make assessment an integral part of institutional culture, returning to first principles and using them to forge a shared understanding of purposes and processes can be a productive exercise. In this spirit, NILOA would be interested in hearing from campuses that use the AAHE Principles to:

Catalyze conversations about the purposes of assessment

Formulate individual or unique campus principles

Direct next steps

*The principles are posted below this letter.*

And you can comment about their utility, as well as make suggestions for how they might be improved or modified, at <https://illinois.edu/fb/sec/1994240>

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## American Association of Higher Education

### PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING

#### Developed under the auspices of the AAHE Assessment Forum

American colleges have a long history of grading and certifying student work. The more recent practice of assessment build on that history by looking at student achievement not only within courses but across them, asking about cumulative learning outcomes. As a systematic process of gathering, interpreting and using information about student learning, assessment is a powerful tool for educational improvement.

Today, hundreds of colleges and universities are doing assessment, at the classroom, program, and institutional levels. The practice has become a universal expectation for accreditation and a frequent object of state mandate; nine out of ten institutions now report that they have some type of assessment activity under way. Along the way, a “wisdom of practice” has emerged; the nine principles that follow constitute an attempt to capture some of that practical wisdom.

#### A Vision of Education

What, more specifically, is the intent of this document? We hope, first, that campuses will find these principles helpful for examining current practice and for developing and discussing their own principles. Further, we hope that the principles here will support campus assessment leaders in their work with the administrators, policy makers, and legislators who often set the conditions that determine whether assessment will lead to real improvement. This second purpose seems especially important given the current national debate about educational standards, testing, and accountability; the links between assessment and improved student learning must not be lost in this debate.

The core value behind this document is the importance of improving student learning.

Implicit in the principles that follow is a vision of education that entails high expectations for all students, active forms of learning, coherent curricula, and effective out-of-class opportunities; to these ends, we need assessment--systematic, usable information about student learning--that helps us fulfill our responsibilities to the students who come to us for an education and to the publics whose trust supports our work.

Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement.

The authors of this statement are twelve practitioner-students of assessment as it has developed on campuses and to some extent at the K-12 level. We know that no one best exists for the doing of assessment, but effective practices have things in common. We hope you'll find this statement helpful.

December 1992

## PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR ASSESSING STUDENT LEARNING

1. **The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.** Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement. Its effective practice, then, begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for students and strive to help them achieve. Educational values should drive not only what we choose to assess but also how we do so. Where questions about educational mission and values are skipped over, assessment threatens to be an exercise in measuring what's easy, rather than a process of improving what we really care about.

2. **Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.** Learning is a complex process. It entails not only what students know but what they can do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes, and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom. Assessment should reflect these understandings by employing a diverse array of methods including those that call for actual performance, using them over time so as to reveal change, growth, and increasing degrees of integration. Such an approach aims for a more complete and accurate picture of learning, and therefore firmer bases for improving our students' educational experience.

3. **Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.** Assessment is a goal-oriented process. It entails comparing educational performance with educational purposes and expectations--these derived from the institution's mission, from faculty intentions in program and course design, and from knowledge of students' own goals. Where program purposes lack specificity or agreement, assessment as a process pushes a campus toward clarity about where to aim and what standards to apply; assessment also prompts attention to where and how program goals will be taught and learned. Clear, shared, implementable goals are the cornerstone for assessment that is focused and useful.

4. **Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.** Information about outcomes is of high importance; where students "end up" matters greatly. But to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way--about the curricula, teaching, and kind of student effort that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment can help understand which students learn best under what conditions; with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve the whole of their

learning.

**5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic.** Assessment is a process whose power is cumulative. Though isolated, “one-shot” assessment can be better than none, improvement is best fostered when assessment entails a linked series of activities undertaken over time. This may mean tracking the progress of individual students, or of cohorts of students; it may mean collecting the same examples of student performance or using the same instrument semester after semester. The point is to monitor progress toward intended goals in a spirit of continuous improvement. Along the way, the assessment process itself should be evaluated and refined in light of emerging insights.

**6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.** Student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility. Thus, while assessment efforts may start small, the aim over time is to involve people from across the educational community. Faculty play an especially important role, but assessment’s questions can’t be fully addressed without participation by student-affairs educators, librarians, administrators, and students. Assessment may also involve individuals from beyond the campus (alumni/ae, trustees, employers) whose experience can enrich the sense of appropriate aims and standards for learning. Thus, understood, assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement.

**7. Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.** Assessment recognizes the value of information in the process of improvement. But to be useful, information must be connected to issues or questions that people really care about. This implies assessment approaches that produce evidence that relevant parties will find credible, suggestive, and applicable to decisions that need to be made. It means thinking in advance about how the information will be used, and by whom. The point of assessment is not to gather data and return “results”; it is a process that starts with the questions of decision-makers, that involves them in the gathering and interpreting of data, and that informs and helps guide continuous improvement.

**8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.** Assessment alone changes little. Its greatest contribution comes on campuses where the quality of teaching and learning is visibly valued and worked at. On such campuses, the push to improve educational performance is a visible and primary goal of leadership; improving the quality of undergraduate education is central to the institution’s planning, budgeting, and personnel decisions. On such campuses, information about learning outcomes is seen as an integral part of decision making, and avidly sought.

**9. Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.** There is compelling public stake in education. As educators, we have a responsibility to the publics that support or depend on us to provide information about the ways in which our students meet goals and expectations. But that responsibility goes beyond the reporting of such information; our deeper obligation-to ourselves, our students, and society-is to improve. Those to whom educators are accountable have a corresponding obligation to support such attempts at improvement.

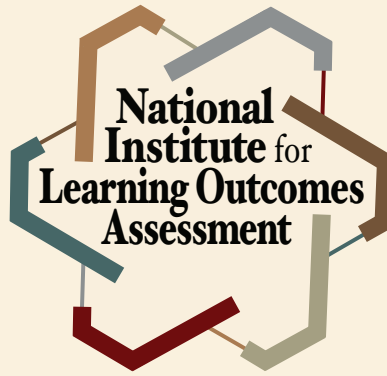
Student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility.

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This document was developed under the auspices of the AAHE Assessment Forum, a project of the American Association for Higher Education, with support from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. It builds on earlier efforts, by campuses and other groups, to articulate guidelines for assessment's practice; its intent is to synthesize important work already done and to invite further statements about the responsible and effective conduct of assessment.

Development of this document was sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) and supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE); publication and dissemination was supported by the Exxon Education Foundation. Copies may be made without restriction.



### Please Cite As:

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Hutchings, P., Ewell, P., & Banta, T. (2012, May). *AAHE principles of good practice: Aging nicely*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

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