

Just Assessment. Nothing More. Nothing Less.

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It is difficult to say anything new about outcomes assessment, and yet few in the higher education community would say we've got it entirely figured out. Many institutions still have questions about what data they should be collecting, how much is enough, and how to best make sense of what they manage to collect. While many work on figuring out the means, others are not at all sure about the ends: Why are we even doing this? Judging from the effort it takes to keep it going, it's safe to say that the need for assessment is still not entirely self-evident to many on our campuses.

And that's unfortunate, because a college education is one of those complex things for which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. We may be confident that we are each (individually) doing our part, but that is no guarantee that we (collectively) are doing the good that we set out to do as an institution. Assessment is one of the best options we have for determining how well our institutional systems are doing justice to the communities we are trusting them to serve.

Just Systems

Our institutions admit students who have been given reasons to expect particular things from us. Are we keeping our part of the bargain, in ways that reasonably and fairly benefit all students? To ask this question is not to assume that someone is failing to do their job or deliberately giving advantages to some students at the expense of others. But we have a lot of students, with many different backgrounds, motivations, and levels of preparation. Institutional systems we create (major programs, General Education, and student services, to name just a few) help these students navigate a path through their many options, but we have little reason to expect that all students experience college in the same way. Summary data, such as graduation rates or cumulative GPAs, will tell us little about how successfully our many systems are accomplishing the purposes they were designed for or which students benefit the most from them.

In addition to examining how well our systems serve our students, assessment provides a way to more faithfully recognize the full work of faculty. Too often, substantive ways that faculty support and challenge students remain largely unacknowledged. Learning outcomes assessment can convey the contributions faculty make to student thinking and development beyond what is shown by student ratings, grade distributions, credit-hour production, or other institutional measures that are commonly used to represent faculty work with students. To assess a program is not to second-guess or re-assess the work that faculty have already done; it is to duly recognize and acknowledge the substantive contributions that faculty make to their students' learning.

Viewpoint

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Assessment also gives departments more visible recognition for their work as stewards of the discipline. An institutional record of a curriculum in a course catalog is relatively static; a living, breathing, adapting curriculum leads to outcomes that extend far beyond its catalog description. Or so we hope. Examining learning outcomes lets a department spotlight its role in preparing the next generation to advance the discipline and broaden its reach to address new questions, new communities, and new challenges.

These concerns provide the central guiding question for assessment: Are the systems an institution has created doing justice to the students, faculty, and departments who all hold a stake in them?

Just Assessment

In order to examine how well systems are doing justice to the communities they were designed to serve, assessment must be intentionally inclusive. It can be a challenge for instructors to account for everything going on in a single class even when they are present in the room. With assessment, we seek to create a vantage point from which to examine student learning across multiple courses and out-of-class experiences, over multiple semesters. The more that assessment includes these many interacting elements of a program, the more likely it is that it fairly and adequately represents the program.

More importantly, assessment needs to be inclusive of all the people the program claims to serve. We may have data that represent some communities of students, but not others. We may know a lot about how well a program served those who completed it, but very little about those who left before reaching that point. When we don't have data to fully represent all experiences or all students, we need to be fully transparent about who and what are represented so that we don't make the mistake of relying on limited data to speak for everything and everyone. And we need to be systematic in seeking to learn more about the program experiences of those who are not yet represented in the data.

Examining the justice of our systems also needs to be done in ways that are trustworthy to participants, decision-makers, and other stakeholders. Users have to be confident that findings address their questions and represent their program well enough to provide a basis for them to make further decisions about it. If not, the focus will be on the quality of the data rather than what can be learned from it, even with its limitations, and we will rarely get to the point of using the data to examine how much good we are actually doing. Therefore our assessments need to be user-friendly, contextually relevant, and methodologically sound. We need to see those who use the findings as partners in identifying and collecting data that they will be willing to trust and use.

If we are serious about assessing the justice of our systems, our efforts also need to be sustainable and integrated into organizational practices. If it's not institutionalized in these ways, assessment will happen only when someone gets around to it or puts in extra time to push for it, which means it will be driven by external pressures or internal crises and maintained until attention fades away. Commitment to justice requires an attention span, and can only be demonstrated by a track record of sustained effort and actions over time.

Are the systems an institution has created doing justice to the students, faculty, and departments who all hold a stake in them?

Accountable for Doing Justice

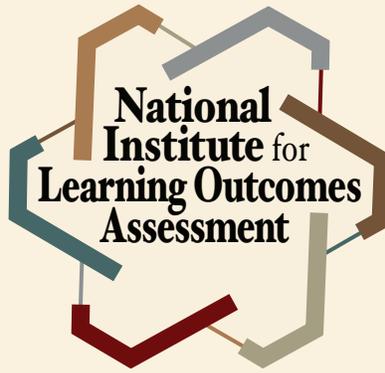
A commitment to justice is also a commitment to transparency. Assessment often gets associated with the idea of accountability and the suggestion that someone is checking up on us, but Shulman (2007) reminds us that accountability is, in essence, “being able to render an account.” In this sense, the purpose is to make sure we’re rightly telling the whole story. Frankly, in higher education there are plenty of people who are glad to step in and tell our stories for us. Shulman advises, “Our responsibility is to take control of the narrative.” We need to keep ourselves accountable – able to render an account – for showing that the systems we create justly serve our students, faculty, departments, and communities we are all part of.

If our existing assessments are helping the institution render these accounts, we can be confident that we have the assessment we need. If not, we should seriously consider why we keep doing them. But in that case, it doesn’t mean we should stop doing assessment. It means we need to do it better, in ways that are more inclusive, trustworthy, and sustainable, so that we can know our systems are doing the good we are trusting them to do.

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Reference

Shulman, L. S. (2007). Counting and recounting: Assessment and the quest for accountability. *Change*, 39(1), 28–35.



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