



The State of Assessment of Learning Outcomes

April 2012

Eduardo M. Ochoa

NILOA hosted a panel discussion on the current state of assessing student learning outcomes at the January 2012 annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges and Universities. Dr. Eduardo M. Ochoa, Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education at the U.S. Department of Education, was on the panel, but due to illness was unable to participate. In this month's Viewpoint, Dr. Ochoa graciously shares his thoughts in response to the following questions which were posed to each of the panelists:

1. Given the evidence of which you are aware, what is the current state of affairs in assessing student learning outcomes and using the results? How much progress have we made over the past 5 years? 10 years? What has higher education done that we can feel good about?
2. What needs to happen next for institutions to document what students are learning and then use that information to improve student and institutional performance? What are the challenges or obstacles that must be addressed and what has to happen to effectively overcome them?

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My sense of assessment of learning outcomes in higher education is framed by what I think is its ultimate purpose and ideal end-state. Ideally, we would have a well-articulated, measurable set of desired educational outcomes associated with all our academic programs. Such measures would exhibit some commonalities in terms of capacities associated with different degree levels, as well as unique aspects by discipline and institutional mission. Student progress toward achieving those capacities would be gauged based on how far and how many of the desired outcomes have been attained using well-established metrics, rather than by seat time or actual hours of work. In such an ideal world, we might not even need the credit-hour rule to distribute Federal student aid!

At this point I believe there is progress and momentum, but there is much that remains to be done to reach that state. In the past ten years, our institutions — and critically, our faculty — have more or less accepted that focusing on learning outcomes as a measure of educational quality is appropriate and unavoidable, given the growing calls for accountability. In addition, a critical mass of faculty and administrators — based in part on positive experiences with accreditation — have come to truly believe that articulating learning outcomes, assessing how well they are achieved, and revising curriculum and practices based on the results of such assessment is the way to assure continuous quality improvement in higher education. Moreover, to a great extent, curriculum is now developed and revised in this fashion.

Viewpoint

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Among the worthy accomplishments I would include:

- Specification and assessment of learning outcomes as a near-universal activity in higher education;
- Institutional and specialized accreditation standards that make such activity a core requirement of institutions;
- The work and influence of AAC&U[1] in developing the LEAP[2] general educational outcomes, a major step forward in establishing core commonalities of higher education;
- The growing recognition of the effectiveness of “high-impact educational practices” identified by George Kuh and AAC&U;
- The development of the Degree Qualifications Profile and its adoption on a pilot basis by several regional accreditors;
- The “Tuning” activities in several States and institutions, including the AHELO[3] work being coordinated by SHEEO[4].

In a word, we do not have reliable or well-defined outcomes-based measures of quality.

Notwithstanding these positive developments, we still have a ways to go before getting close to the end state referred to above. We do not have a generally accepted, well-defined set of competencies associated with each degree level. We have not established core competencies by degree level and discipline for the largest majors or fields. We do not have well established rubrics that could be used to assess the level of such competencies. In a word, we do not have reliable or well-defined outcomes-based measures of quality.

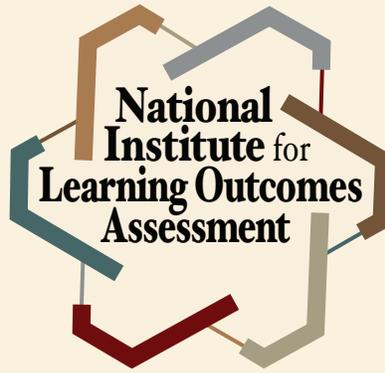
There are technical challenges to get there, but one big challenge is the academic culture of our institutions. Colleges and universities have long thought of themselves as the creators and disseminators of knowledge, and a university education has traditionally been seen at its best as an apprenticeship with subject matter experts. That model has become obsolete, first with the increasingly pervasive consumer culture of students, and second with the explosion of information on the Internet. What is needed is a reconceptualization of the role of faculty from the repositories and transmitters of knowledge to the designers, coaches, and mentors of learner experiences. While the outcomes assessment movement is consistent with such a shift, it is still only a graft onto the larger traditional academic culture. The real source and nourishment of that traditional culture is the way faculty members are trained: in research-oriented PhD programs. In order to truly transform the culture of our teaching institutions, we will have to transform the way faculty are trained and socialized.

[1] American Association of Colleges and Universities.

[2] Liberal Education and America’s Promise.

[3] The OECD project on Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes.

[4] State Higher Education Executive Officers.



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