



Why Assess Student Learning? What the Measuring Stick Series Revealed

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Experts in the field of assessment in higher education were invited during the summer of 2010 to write a 250-word essay on quality. Many of these were subsequently published in twice-weekly installments in a series called the “Measuring Stick” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. As it turned out, these short essays made up only a small part of the generated content on this topic. The majority of what ultimately appeared was contributed by readers. Their comments offer a glimpse into the various reasons that policy makers, administrators, faculty, students, and others think doing assessment is important (or not) and how they think about what constitutes quality in postsecondary education.

Peter Ewell suggests in his [2009 NILOA Occasional Paper](#) that there are two paradigms for assessment: improvement and accountability. These two paradigms are sometimes in tension, which is reflected in the comments of those who posted their views in response to the “Measuring Stick” essays.

NILOA staff conducted a content analysis of the essays and readers’ comments. Three main findings emerged. First, general agreement does not exist as to how to define quality. In addition, who should be responsible for ensuring quality and how to measure it are unclear. In the absence of consensus on these important issues, we hope readers will use the NILOA website to continue the conversation about this important topic. And now, I offer more detail about what my analysis found.

Quality Definition

Despite focusing on quality, no collective definition of quality seemed to emerge from the experts and those who posted comments. Questions were raised such as that by *locomotive*, who, after the first post, asked, “Could the author of this article please define ‘quality’ and ‘quality control?’” While some users asked for the definition of quality, others provided their own definition, covering a broad range of meanings, as demonstrated by the following selection of quotes:

- *sethegordon* suggested that we “look at the students who we recognize as successful” for an idea of what quality education is.
- *abier* suggested looking at the “value-added” to the student during the student’s time at the institution.
- *bbaylis* wrote, “Quality in undergraduate education should be judged on how well we help students get to where they want and ought to be.” This idea of value added is contrary to what *wgoggin* noticed in the series as “‘quality’ is defined by inputs, not value-added to the student and/or to society.”

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- *11272784* defined quality as the “impact of good teaching, faculty who care enough to spend time with students, or such factors as school spirit and morale,” which the user argues cannot be measured by numerical means.

Although there is no consensus for a definition of quality, these comments can aid in distinguishing what some users see as quality.

Who’s Responsible?

As with the quality question, fingers point in all directions when the question is who is responsible for the current lack of quality. *shirley77* suggested, “Any college or university could improve quality if they cut their bloated administration.” *Alex McCormick*, an author of a post, pointed the blame toward narrowly focused faculty and the news media, which focuses on the wrong things. *drgarysgoodman* put it succinctly: “If it is important to our society, then society must find a way to pay the tab.”

Possible groups and individuals responsible for the future of quality in higher education include governing boards, which can remind faculty of their responsibility for the quality of curriculum, as suggested by *Peter Ewell*. Others, *drangie* and *David Glenn* (quoting Staci Provezis from NIILOA) suggest that accreditation agencies and state regulators play a role. As *Judith Eaton* points out, accreditation “plays a major role in not only maintaining but also enhancing quality in higher education.”

With varying responses of how quality is defined, it is not surprising that no one wants to take responsibility for improving quality. There are fundamental assumptions that need be examined like the one *millerdb* points out when we are trying to figure out who is responsible for improving quality: “The emphasis seems to always be on what faculty are or are not doing to meet learning goals. But, at the university level, it’s up to students to make certain that actual learning takes place.”

Indicators of Quality

There were a number of ways experts and users suggested for measuring quality, including graduation rates, senior year tests, student learning outcomes, completion rates, tuition and fee changes, and alumni surveys. Users generally agreed that college rankings and grades were not acceptable ways to measure quality due to their subjectivity and grade inflation. With no party clearly defined as responsible for quality and with a nebulous definition of quality, again, it is hard to discuss ways to measure quality. Yet this discussion should take place.

Thoughts on How to Continue This Conversation

One of the unique components of web articles and comment postings is that the conversation is dynamic, but it is also fragmented. As de Moor and Efimova (2004) found in their study of blogs, such fragmentation slows down the conversation and sometimes parts of the conversation are dropped. So, perhaps, where the “Measuring Stick” leaves off is where this conversation can continue. In their comments, users left many questions:

- How is quality defined in the assessment of student learning outcomes in higher education?
- How should it be defined?

General agreement does not exist as to how to define quality. In addition, who should be responsible for ensuring quality and how to measure it are unclear.

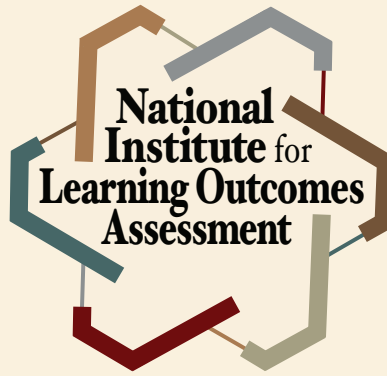
- Who is responsible for the quality of student learning outcomes in higher education? Who should be responsible?
- What practical ways are you measuring and improving quality?
- How should we measure the tools and assessments used to evaluate quality?
- How can we navigate the tensions between assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability?

References

de Moor, A., & Efimova, L. (2004). *An argumentation analysis of weblog conversations*. Proceedings of the 9th International Working Conference on the Language-Action Perspective on Communication Modeling. New Brunswick, NJ, June 2–3.

Ewell, P. T. (2009, November). *Assessment, accountability, and improvement: Revisiting the tension* (NILOA Occasional Paper No. 1). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment. Retrieved from http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/PeterEwell_005.pdf

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