

Why Are We Assessing?

April 2018

Higher Education Assessment Practitioners

We the undersigned have all dedicated a portion of our careers to helping our institutional colleagues assess student learning. Many of us are or have been teaching faculty, and it's our passion for teaching and helping students learn that drew us to this work.

We work at all kinds of institutions, large and small, public and private, research universities and two-year colleges. Our common bond is a conviction that, as good as American higher education is, today's students—and society—need not just a good but the best possible education. We see assessment as a vital tool to making that happen.

We've found that assessment, when done well, can benefit students, faculty, co-curricular staff, and higher education institutions in a number of ways, including contributing to better learning.

For students, the clear expectations for learning that are part of good assessment practices help them understand where they should focus their learning time and energies. When learning outcomes, learning activities, assignments, and other assessments are clear and integrated with each other, student learning is more meaningful and long-lasting. Assessment, especially through grading and other feedback processes, motivates students to do their best. And feedback from assessment helps students understand their strengths and how they might try to improve.

For faculty and co-curricular staff, assessment helps them understand and thereby improve student learning by encouraging reflection on questions such as the following: What do you most want your students to learn? Why? How are you helping them learn those things? How well are they learning those things? How do you know? How might you help them learn more effectively? Assessment encourages faculty and co-curricular staff to collaborate with students and each other in discussing these questions and deciding how best to help students learn. These conversations help faculty and staff see how courses and other learning experiences link together to form coherent, integrated programs and how the courses and learning experiences they offer contribute to student success in subsequent pursuits.

For colleges and universities in an era when American higher education is sometimes criticized as expensive or irrelevant, assessment enables them to provide evidence to students, their families, taxpayers, donors and, yes, accreditors that, if students successfully complete this course or program, they will indeed have learned the important things that faculty and staff commit to in the institutional mission, catalog and course syllabi. Many of us who work in assessment see translation as an important part of our responsibilities; we aim to translate the work of faculty and co-curricular staff into terms that students and other stakeholders—including accreditors—easily

Viewpoint

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understand and appreciate, showing them that everyone's investments in higher education are worthwhile.

Students, faculty, co-curricular staff, and colleges and universities will generally see these benefits of assessment only when assessment is reasonably well done. So what are good assessment practices? The movement to articulate and assess learning outcomes systematically is about 25 years old—a blink of an eye in the history of higher education. We're still figuring assessment out, and we readily acknowledge that there's plenty of room for improvement in how we assess. But we have learned that assessment is most effective under the following circumstances.

Students, faculty, and co-curricular staff share responsibility for student learning.

An impressive body of research demonstrates that “learning-centered” strategies—those in which students are actively engaged in their learning and faculty and students share responsibility for learning—are remarkably effective in helping today's students learn and succeed. We cannot force students to learn, but we can create motivating and effective educational environments that make learning more likely to occur, and evidence from assessment can help us do so.

Institutional leaders make student learning a valued priority. They actively encourage faculty and co-curricular staff to employ research-informed educational strategies and to use assessment and other systematic evidence to decide how best to do so. They invest institutional resources to help faculty and staff do this. They help create time and space for faculty and staff to collaborate on discussions and decisions on teaching, learning, and assessment. They make sure that faculty and staff receive clear guidance, helpful coordination, resources, and constructive feedback that help faculty and staff decide what and how to assess. They ensure that faculty and staff are recognized in meaningful ways for their work to systematically assess and improve student learning.

Faculty and co-curricular staff are respected leaders and partners in the assessment process. Those who determine curricula, teaching methods, and learning strategies collaborate to determine the best ways to assess student learning.

Everyone takes a flexible approach to assessment. Teaching is a human endeavor, and every institution, program, and student cohort is unique, so one size does not fit all. Faculty and co-curricular staff help choose and use assessment tools and strategies that are appropriate to their discipline and setting and that will give them useful information on student learning.

Assessment respects and builds on what faculty and staff are already doing well. For literally thousands of years, faculty have been assessing student learning through grading and feedback processes. Today, assessment simply builds this work into processes of collaborative, systematic inquiry.

Everyone focuses on collecting information that's genuinely useful in understanding and improving student learning. If anyone finds that something hasn't been helpful, they try to figure out what went wrong and implement an alternative approach.

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Assessment is kept as cost-effective as possible. Everyone routinely compares the time spent on assessment with the usefulness of the process and results in understanding and improving student learning. Everyone aims to minimize fruitless or time-intensive assessment activities. Reports on assessment activities and findings have clear purposes and audiences and are kept to the bare-bones minimum needed to meet those needs.

Everyone recognizes that the perfect can be the enemy of the good. While assessment is a form of systematic inquiry, it does not necessarily have to be approached as empirical research; it's designed to collect reasonably good quality information to help everyone make better decisions. Common sense applies here; assessments that may lead to major, expensive changes may need to be more rigorously designed than those informing minor adjustments to a learning activity. Of course, if you want to conduct research on how best to help students learn, great! The higher education community needs more scholarship on teaching, learning, and assessment.

Disappointing outcomes are viewed as opportunities for improvement and are addressed fairly, supportively, and compassionately. Resources are available to help faculty and co-curricular staff identify and implement strategies to try to improve student learning, and those who make assessment-informed changes are recognized for their work.

There is an institution-wide commitment to innovation and improvement. If everyone is satisfied with the status quo, there's no point in assessing.

Is all this worthwhile? Here are a few examples of assessment work making a big impact:

After using rubrics to assess student learning in its writing-intensive, capstone, and service-learning courses, Daemen College hired a writing coordinator and writing-in-the-disciplines specialist, added an information literacy component to its first-year writing course, increased the proportion of first-year writing courses taught by full-time faculty from 35 to 90 percent, and offered workshops to faculty teaching writing-intensive courses. (For more information, see www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/VALUE/daemen.pdf)

After assessment results suggested the need to improve students' digital literacy, Carlow University implemented an extensive faculty professional development program. (For more information, see http://nsse.indiana.edu/NSSE_2016_Results/index.cfm)

After assessing first-year students' writing and finding disappointing outcomes for critical thinking and information competence, Norco College appointed course mentors and created a handbook and model assignments for faculty teaching first-year writing courses. (For more information, see "Can Assessment Loops Be Closed?" in the July-August 2014 issue of Assessment Update.)

To sum all this up: assessment is most effective and useful when faculty and co-curricular staff are valued, respected, supported, and engaged as part of a community that focuses purposefully and collaboratively on helping every student receive the best possible education. We are all committed to helping everyone at our institutions make that happen. Call on us—we are here to help.

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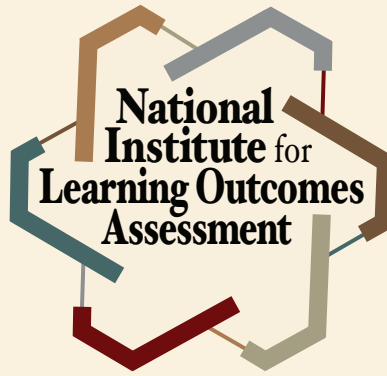
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