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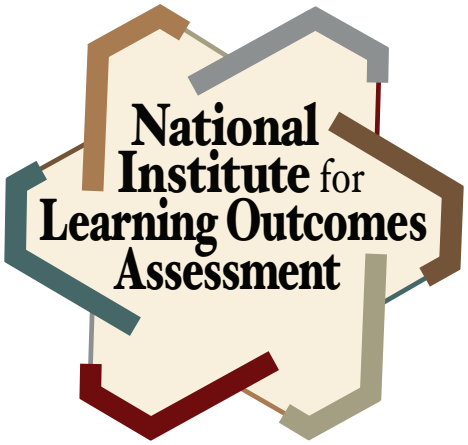

There Is No Return to Normal:

Harnessing Chaos to Create Our New Assessment Future

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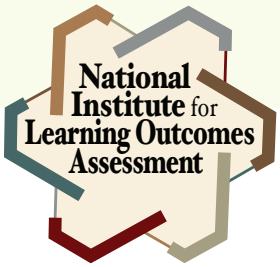
NILOA Mission

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), established in 2008, is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning.



Abstract

The United States is in a period of reckoning from which institutions of higher education are not exempt. Rather, we exist at the intersection of the chaos wrought by the novel coronavirus and the spread of outrage about systemic racism beyond Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPoC) communities. The resulting almost universal sense of loss and uncertainty leads many of us to believe that individuals have little-to-no power to inform, never mind implement, change. Systemic problems require systemic solutions. There can be no return to "normal." We instead invite our assessment colleagues to question the unexamined assumptions which underlie our heretofore taken-for-granted approaches to assessing and documenting our students' learning; to reconnect with their foundational beliefs and values; and to fully engage with the uncertainty and complexity of the current moment. This paper offers readers a developmental approach for reflection, identifying potential leverage points, and intentionally creating a new assessment future which proactively includes *all* of our students.

There Is No Return to Normal: Harnessing Chaos to Create Our New Assessment Future

We are living in historic times. The global health pandemic sparked by the novel coronavirus (hereafter: COVID-19) continues to wreak havoc in every corner of the world. When COVID-19 hit the United States early in 2020, institutions of higher education, not known to be early adopters as a general rule, were forced to respond immediately to a crisis of previously unimagined magnitude. Institutions adopted a triage model, which left decision makers with little time for reflection. With little-to-no warning, final exams and courses were pushed to emergency remote teaching contexts. Staff and faculty packed their laptops, books, and other resources to resume their work in home offices and at dining room tables. Students were asked to move out of campus residences, many with only a few days' notice. The disruptions of daily life from going to work and school, gathering for rituals such as birthdays and commencements, and seeing friends and family, contributed to a shared sense of disequilibrium.

The stark illumination of the deep structural fissures and systemic inequities of our society became too obvious to ignore. We have entered a period of reckoning and higher education institutions are not immune.

Compounding the anxiety caused by the initial dislocation of higher education, COVID-19 infection and death rates numbers in the U.S. continued to climb in March and eventually hit one million cases by April 28, 2020 (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020). Much of the country was practicing physical distancing, sheltering in place, and wearing masks. Schools and colleges had already shifted to emergency remote teaching and learning, with only essential businesses permitted to remain open. Coronavirus required students, faculty, and staff to navigate overlapping stressful transitions simultaneously.

The disproportionate numbers of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPoC) dying from COVID-19 and the communities impacted the hardest revealed the sociopolitical and economic fissures of contemporary America. At the same time, the highly visible and reported murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, swept the nation and became a tipping point for communities of color that have been protesting injustices for decades. The stark illumination of the deep structural fissures and systemic inequities of our society became too obvious to ignore. We have entered a period of reckoning and higher education institutions are not immune.

The intersection of the chaos wrought by the pandemic and the emerging racial awakening, for some, of decades of existing racial inequities and police brutality across this country constitutes an opportunity for deeper reflection as campus leaders. Confronting the seemingly Sisyphean task of examining institutional policies and practices within beloved academic cultures feels overwhelming at times. No single implicit bias or anti-discrimination workshop or webinar is sufficient to support the change needed.

These are systemic problems. They require systemic solutions. As the uncertainty of COVID-19 and racial reckoning is navigated, this paper challenges us all to take an anthropological approach to examining assessment culture and systems and emerge with new ways of being and doing that will deepen a commitment to equitable practices for students at your institution.

This paper invites assessment professionals to reflect on their assessment practices with the goal of emerging out of this uncertain and complex time in higher education better

positioned to engage in the type of assessment work that is needed. This is a time for deep reflection, courageous deconstruction, and intentional rebuilding in alignment with the world in which we live and the learners whom we serve. We begin the reflective process by looking back to how the assessment movement started in order to locate where we are today.

Assessment Rewind: How We Got Here

Prior to the rise of the assessment movement in the mid-1980s, decades of research in collegiate learning, models and taxonomies of outcomes, student growth and development studies of the college experience, and the rise of program evaluation as action research had already existed (Ewell, 2002). The concept of mastery learning that started in elementary and secondary education first became applicable in the mid-1960's among post-secondary education's adult and professional education programs. Establishing outcomes and evaluating student attainment of achievement and competencies were critical to these types of programs. Assessment practitioners, trained and equipped to evaluate authentic student evidence, became a role in higher education that demonstrated how the theory of assessment in higher education could be practiced and operationalized (Ewell, 2002, p. 6).

As far back as assessment practitioners have existed in post-secondary education, so has the tension of the definition of assessment. Assessment has historically been associated with three traditions and purposes: 1. Mastery learning and development over time with continuous feedback (the word *assessment* derives from the Latin and is the past participle of assidere/adsidere "to sit beside"); 2. Large-scale assessment focused on the evaluation of institutional performance in response to accountability; and 3. Program evaluation with the goal of improving pedagogy and curricula (what we might call "closing the loop" today).

From the 1980s through the 1990s, assessment efforts surged across multiple corners of higher education, so much that some referred to it as the "assessment movement" (Ewell, 2002). In 1992, the founding voices of what we know today as learning outcomes assessment identified the *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* (Astin, Banta, Cross, El-Khawas, Ewell, Hutchings, Marchese, Mcclenney, Mentkowski, Miller, Moran, & Wright, 1992).

In just a few decades, the assessment movement identified by Ewell (2002) grew into a recognized, if not always welcome, discipline within higher education. Situated to meet external demands for accountability, the assessment Conversation[1] grew beyond compliance into a curiosity-driven, student-centered process of inquiry and research. We have our assessment forbearers to thank for their efforts to reframe assessment as a generative, collaborative process dedicated to improving student learning. Nicholas and Slotnick (2018) refer to this development as the "Emergence of Institutional Assessment Professionals" (p. 5) and describe the resulting increase of conferences, journals, and associations through which assessment professionals can develop individual capacity to ask and pursue questions about student learning. As the assessment movement forges ahead, it is difficult to ignore this moment in time as a possible inflection point for higher

[1] Per Gee (2014), we use the Big-C Conversation(s) to indicate a metaphorical discussion among members of a discourse community or social group—in this case assessment professionals—about topics of interest to the group.

education and the field of assessment. If the pandemic and awakening to systemic racism has illuminated anything, it is that assessment also needs to be responsive in this moment.

Assessment Professionals: Navigating Disruption

Assessment is about inquiry and action: how we know what our students are able to demonstrate; what we can learn by examining direct evidence of learning. We facilitate conversations about what it means to *know* something. We encourage faculty to examine how their instructional practices create appropriate opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning. The answers to these and other questions constitute the heart of the stories we tell about assessment on our campuses. The global pandemic altered the content of the questions. Along with our colleagues in teaching and learning centers, we asked ourselves questions such as:

- How can we ensure that students' learning is not completely disrupted by the rapid shift of instructional contexts?
- What will faculty need to know in order to embed assessment into plans for instructional continuity?
- What tools are already in place to provide some semblance of continuity?

To answer these new questions, we turned to our community. We sought solace in listservs and reached out to assessment colleagues to ask how they were responding to changes. We contributed to dynamically evolving lists of assessment resources. We registered for webinars and we surveyed! We dialogued online and wrestled with each other's ideas about how to maintain learning outcomes assessment during a pandemic.

We did not expect, but ultimately were not surprised, to discover that the questions had changed yet again, this time in disposition. We heard colleagues talking about maintaining assessment reporting schedules and asking whether they *"still need to do assessment this year?"* or whether regional accrediting agencies were *"still requiring us to do program review?"* Even as our world was falling apart, many members of our assessment community wanted to "just keep moving" or "get back to normal."

In the report of the NILOA COVID-19 Survey, Jankowski (2020a) presents findings that while 97% of respondents said their institution made some kind of change in the spring, 75% of respondents felt the changes would not negatively impact the culture of assessment on their campuses. It's no surprise then, that only 35% of respondents modified assessment report deadlines. While assessment professionals were adapting to the evolving circumstances, there was a commitment to still maintain some sense of normalcy and avoid any negative impact on the culture of assessment on their campus. But, how do we know that the culture of assessment and the normalcy we previously took for granted actually served our students well? Further, as we navigate the unavoidable changes that will occur as a result of COVID-19 and the call for anti-racism at our institutions, is our previously maintained culture of assessment what is needed in moving forward?

According to *Inside Higher Ed.* (2020), 90% of university presidents expressed concern about the inequitable impact COVID-19 has had on minoritized students, while less than 30% of assessment professionals responding on the NILOA survey strongly agreed that

How do we know that the culture of assessment and the normalcy we previously took for granted actually served our students well? Is it possible that higher education has not been paying attention? Is it possible that higher education is a microcosm of what we have been witnessing in the outrage among BIPoC across the nation, exhausted from fighting systemic inequities?

equity, student voices, and listening to those voices occurred before making changes. Is it possible that higher education has not been paying attention? Is it possible that higher education is a microcosm of what we have been witnessing in the outrage among BIPoC across the nation, exhausted from fighting systemic inequities?

In these days of crises, we are experiencing collective grief for the rituals through which we know ourselves. Boss (2020) refers to it as ambiguous loss. Contrary to earlier constructions of grief as a series of stages through which mourners move, ambiguous loss holds no promise of resolution. We may never fully heal our collective ambiguous loss. There is no normal to which we can return. But, if we are to serve our learners well moving forward, the pre-COVID-19 "normal" is no longer an option.

As we navigate this liminal space, we invite assessment professionals to seize this moment for reflection, questioning, and possibly disrupting their current assessment infrastructure and practices, with the goal of emerging better positioned to create new pathways that reflect our commitment to equity and inclusivity.

A New Way Forward

To prepare ourselves to actively create post-COVID-19 pathways, we invite assessment professionals to ground themselves in their first principles, as a way to lay a firm foundation for the work of assessment. First principles thinking is a questioning process that requires one to reveal underlying assumptions to the point where you are left with the foundational truth of a situation. It adopts a scientific approach by uncovering layers of inherited or adopted ways of thinking until what remains is the foundational truth of a situation. Aristotle defined a first principle as "the first basis from which a thing is known" (Met. 1013a14–15, as cited by Irwin, 1989, p. 3). First principles challenge beliefs and their undergirding assumptions until one reaches the underlying truth. It's a way to deconstruct how we've built assessment practices, narratives, and discourses, in order to reconstruct them in alignment with our values and core principles. This is a call to engage in critical consciousness to create assessment practices that demonstrate our acknowledgment of the inequities that have always existed and our intention to no longer sit passively on the professional sidelines.

When used as a developmental approach, first principles brings clarity and consistency to our work as we reconstruct based on what we know or are reasonably sure is true. The three steps involved in engaging in first principles thinking include:

1. Identify assumptions
2. Break down the problem to fundamental basics
3. Build new solutions

Step 1: Identify Assumptions

Davidson (2017) introduced the concept of "legacy assumptions" in *The New Education: How to Revolutionize the University to Prepare Students for a World in Flux*. Legacy assumptions are the received practices and beliefs we inherit. They are often so pervasive and ingrained that they seem natural and beyond question.

> A first step in revolutionizing higher education is being aware of these legacy assumptions. A second step is recognizing other models that respond to different assumptions. It is challenging to rethink the ways structures and methods might actually hinder mission. It is rare for any institution to examine its assumptions this deeply. Yet it is essential if we are going to revolutionize our traditional colleges and universities. (Davidson, 2017, p. 72).

As assessment practitioners, when was the last time we challenged our assumptions about the role and purpose of assessment, or the methods and structures upon which assessment was built? When was the last time we scrutinized our rhetoric and practices around assessment and whether they unintentionally perpetuate inequality? As assessment professionals nested within institutional cultures that are presently confronted with heightened inequities illuminated during this time, we have the opportunity to consider how and to what degree the principles of assessment first articulated in 1992 continue to inform current values, beliefs, and actions, and whether new or additional principles need to be established.

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Dichotomized perspectives of assessment often depict our work as being *either* for accountability and compliance *or* improvement. How often have we reported on whether programs have submitted or not submitted their assessment reports, as if submission was the ultimate goal? Further, what underlying assumptions are we operating from when we claim a culture of assessment exists on our campuses and support our claims based on yearly percentages of report submissions?

Whether you've been involved in assessment work for a year or decades, we can learn from examining inherited practices and habits of mind. There is no doubt that students today differ from students of twenty-five years ago. But, to what degree have our perspectives about students changed and how are we attuned to those changes? Leaderman and Polychronopoulos (2019) assert that:

> [O]one challenge in assessment occurs when faculty or staff get stuck in a pattern of maintaining the status quo through continuing to conduct assessment tasks that are easy to do but have consistently lacked value for the department or program, and have not led to usable results. This type of resistance can make it difficult to implement change." (p. 35)

In order to build an appropriate post-COVID-19 assessment culture, it is critical to begin by identifying assumptions about assessment that you and your team have held onto or have heard others express. For this deconstructive process to begin, create a judgment-free zone for yourself and your colleagues. Be honest with yourself. Here are some questions to get you started.

- What do I believe about the purpose of assessment?
- Why do I think that is the purpose of assessment?
- How do I know this is true? What if I thought the opposite?
- What might someone unfamiliar with assessment think?
- How do I know I am correct?

Allow yourself and your team to process the degree to which unexamined assumptions have served students and their learning; and promoted or hindered acceptance of assessment at your institution. Examine the relationships between assessment practices and various stakeholders within the institution. During this exercise, you might find that the stories you have told yourself and others have been repeated so often that they have become natural scripts in the work we do. Some of these scripts might sound like:

- Our assessment reporting must occur regardless of circumstance (or pandemics!) in order to maintain a culture of assessment.
- If we don't have assessment reports submitted, we won't know if learning has happened during COVID-19.
- Our assessment reports demonstrate to ourselves and our accreditors that we have a culture of assessment.
- We can no longer assess learning because we moved from in-person to unplanned remote instruction.

In addition, it is more important than ever that we consider the potential and unintended messages we communicate when we accept and repeat fables or stories about faculty ("they don't care" about assessment), students (we must prevent them from cheating now that we're online), and assessment itself ("I know you hate it, but we need your report anyway.") The last story is particularly pernicious as it perpetuates a separateness between teaching and assessment. Are we, as Jankowski (2017) suggests, "selling something that faculty would not be interested in to begin with" (p. 9)? What legacy assumptions do we reify when we talk about increasing "buy-in" in assessment activities and how do we begin to disrupt these legacy assumptions that hinder the purpose of assessment moving forward? We suggest beginning with acknowledging and recognizing the assumptions that have gone unquestioned.

Step 2: Break Down the Problem to Fundamental Basics

The next step in the first principles development approach moves from identifying assumptions to examining the fundamental basics and absolute truths that will serve as the foundation for the assessment work you do. You may experience a sense of dissonance if your examination reveals that previously unexplored assumptions have in fact interfered with the core values and principles of your work. This is the time to codify the values that drive your work. While the compliance versus continuous improvement narrative has existed for decades, we question whether these stories are sufficient for the assessment movement going forward. Specifically, how does the dichotomy keep us in a useless debate that only serves to stagnate our work, marginalize would-be collaborators and colleagues, and detract us from our focus on creating equitable learning opportunities? We must ask ourselves, "What language do we have for understanding and describing students' lived experiences now that did not exist thirty years ago? What do we know about today's learners? What do we not yet know?" Failing to ask and answer these and other questions could have deleterious long-term consequences for assessment *writ large*, assessment practitioners, and perhaps most importantly for the students on whose behalf we do our work.

The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequities, leaving us to (re)consider the fundamental purposes of assessment at our institutions. To help get the conversation started, consider how one or more of the following foundational statements might (re) ground work in assessment:

- Assessment is about students and student learning.
- Assessment is an opportunity to shift the paradigm of teaching to learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995).
- Assessment creates space for critical reflection and action.
- Assessment opens up an opportunity to engage in equity-minded sense-making (McNair, Bensimon, & Malcom-Piqueux, 2020).
- Assessment data is valuable when it is used.
- Student voice is integral to the work of assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020).

Exploring these assessment fundamentals and core truths provides an opportunity to "uncover underlying tendencies towards different philosophies of assessment" (Jankowski, 2020b, p. 1) and align assessment philosophies with practices.

It is critical that we consistently examine how we are ensuring that our assessment truths that we create and the practices we employ are in alignment as we look forward to advancing the next chapter of assessment.

Step 3: Build New Solutions

The third part of the first principles development approach moves from reflection, critical analysis, and deconstruction, toward new ways of being and doing. This third aspect rests on foundational truths and principles that emerged as a result of engaging in the previous process. New solutions must be aligned and undergirded by the prior established core truths. There is little appetite for disconnect between what institutions purport to stand for and the policies and practices that play out. We are witnessing a call for greater accountability in our institutions, as students have demanded administrators move beyond lip service and messages of support for Black lives to actual systemic change, with some demanding their institutions cut ties with local police (Whitford & Burke, 2020). One might ask, "What does this have to do with building and fostering a new culture of assessment?"

What We Say Matters

A 2017 NILOA survey revealed that effective communication about student learning is both an opportunity and a challenge for assessment professionals (Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018). Intentional examination of one's own language is necessary in building or reconstructing new assessment practices. This work requires us to go beyond "changing words to make our language more enticing to faculty and other staff to get them 'on board' with assessment; it is about matching our language with what we really want to achieve through engaging in meaningful assessment processes" (Jankowski, 2017, p. 10) or what we have chosen as our foundational assessment truths.

As you seek to build new solutions, examine language use, both formal and informal, to illuminate whether your assessment truths are helped or hindered by your discourse. Following are prompts and questions to get you started.

- Open the last ten emails you sent about assessment. What do you notice about the content or topics? What was the purpose for each of the messages? What perspective or tone might you have conveyed unintentionally? How do you know if your recipients perceive the message in the way you intended?
- How often do you contact faculty when you need something from them or want them to submit a report, answer your questions, check items off of lists?
- How often do you contact campus partners to ask for their stories of success? How often do you highlight these stories to others?

- Take a deeper look. How do you position faculty in relationship to assessment? How have your messages drawn upon shared values and beliefs about learning? How do you know what those shared values are?
- Who may have been unintentionally excluded from communications and conversations? To what degree are partners whose perspectives differ from yours included?

From Foundational Truths to Practice

Another way to look for alignment between foundational truths of assessment and solutions is to examine your assessment office's vision statement, communication to faculty and administrators, and assessment practices and policies (report templates, data discussions, assessment infrastructure). If one of your foundational truths is centered on a commitment to advancing equitable learning opportunities for students, think about how you will respond when the next faculty or administrator asks, "What (fill in your accreditor of choice) needs from us to be in compliance?" When sharing assessment results, how will you lead the conversation toward equitable student learning, as opposed to strictly reporting of results? Are students included in the communication chain? How will you make assessment data useful and meaningful for your audiences? Whose voice should be narrating or co-narrating these stories about student learning?

It is critical that we consistently examine that our assessment truths and practices we employ are in alignment as we look forward to advancing the next chapter of assessment. Just as we work to ensure curricular alignment between learning outcomes and learning opportunities, we can map how our foundation truths of assessment align with our solutions and practices. Here's one approach to examining for alignment (Table 1).

Foundational Truths	New Solutions and Practices
Assessment is about students and student learning.	Ensure learning outcomes are transparent (See NILOA Transparency Framework).
Assessment creates space for critical reflection and action.	Ensure assessment practices leave room for discussion, reflection, and action. Be transparent about what actions are taking place as a result of assessment findings.
Assessment opens up an opportunity to engage in equity-minded sense-making (McNair et al., 2020).	Build assessment practices and policies that are inclusive and bias-free. Interrogate and disaggregate data and include multiple data points ot ensure a complete picture of student learning (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020).
Student voice is integral to the work of assessment.	Actively involve students as partners in assessment that include constructing assessment tools to data sense-making.

Table 1. Moving From Truths to Practice.

In this section, we offered initial approaches to interrogating and recentering our assessment practices through the first principles development approach that identifies assumptions, grounds our work on non-negotiable truths, and forms new solutions and practices that are aligned. We posited that engaging in this reflexive practice is a necessary first step toward deconstructing legacy assumptions, received practices, and counterproductive narratives that have derailed why we engage in the work. Lastly, we challenge assessment leaders to critically exam their own campus assessment cultures and courageously deconstruct previously unquestioned practices that have gotten in the way of attending to learning inequities at their institutions.

Moving Forward Together

If the disruption to institutional norms and the emerging consciousness of racism in our nation has illuminated anything in higher education assessment, it has shone a light on a need for a new way forward that is rooted in critical reflection, followed by rebuilding practices attuned to the realities of our students today. True transformation cannot be built upon old foundations. New foundations are needed.

If the disruption to institutional norms and the emerging consciousness of racism in our nation has illuminated anything in higher education assessment, it has shone a light on a need for a new way forward that is rooted in critical reflection, followed by rebuilding practices attuned to the realities of our students today. True transformation cannot be built upon old foundations.

As we establish new assessment practices and cultures as a result of engaging in this reflection-deconstruction-action process, we must be mindful that change initiatives may privilege some interests over others. If our change initiatives are grounded in students' interests and ultimately intended to benefit students, allow that conviction to guide assessment practices (Kezar, 2013). Critical to the reconstruction of assessment practices that moves beyond the compliance versus continuous improvement binary is the intentional alignment between principal truths, discourses, and practices centered around students. We reject dichotomized views of assessment as either accountability or improvement when talking about the purpose of assessment work. If we allow ourselves to be seduced into arguing false equivalencies, we run the risk of being distracted from the very reason we do our work: students.

Lastly, we are attuned to the fact that not every assessment professional holds positional power or authority in their institutions to make transformational changes. We contest the idea that individuals cannot make a difference. Similarly, as assessment professionals we likely will not be the ones who will be creating, testing, approving, and administering a vaccine for COVID-19 to confront and halt this pandemic. However, we have the power to put on a mask and prevent the spread of this virus. While we alone will not be able to end racism in our institutions, we hold the power to examine whether our own words and actions are perpetuating racism and commit to be anti-racist ourselves. We assert that we all hold some level of power and privilege in shaping values, practices, policies, and moreover, narratives around student learning assessment. It is up to us to lead the rebuilding of assessment that supports all learners whose voices and stories we amplify. A new assessment movement is on the horizon that pushes beyond the compliance versus continuous improvement binary and toward a third way forward rooted in critical consciousness and responsive to educational inequity.

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About the Authors

Rebecca C. Hong is the Senior Director of Educational Effectiveness and Assessment at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, and leads assessment, accreditation, and change efforts focused on advancing equitable learning environments. Prior to joining LMU, Rebecca has served as Assistant Provost for Educational Effectiveness, Dean of Curriculum and Assessment, and Associate Professor of Education. She earned her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, with a focus in Higher Education Administration, from the University of Southern California and a B.A. in Economics from UC San Diego. She is also a proud graduate of the WSCUC Assessment Leadership Academy (Cohort VI) and continues to serve the WSCUC region on accreditation teams and as an ALO.

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- NILOA's Founding Director, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.

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