October 2020
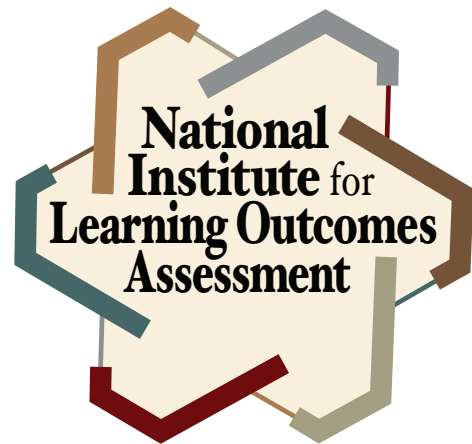
National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Activity: What is Your Student Affairs Philosophy of Assessment?

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One area of consistent disconnect between student affairs staff involved in assessment of student learning is agreement on what assessment is and is not, along with agreement on the value, worth, and purpose for engaging in assessment of student learning. In part, this is due to conversations on assessment beginning with a focus on the *doing* of assessment as opposed to *why* we do assessment. It is also due to differences in philosophical stances on assessment— the underlying mental models if you will—that drive decisions around which assessment processes and practices to implement (Jankowski, 2017). Without clarity on the philosophy behind assessment, student affairs staff can talk past each other, misunderstand one another, and/or reinforce or obfuscate assessment culture.

This activity can be undertaken individually or within a larger group setting, perhaps a retreat, virtual staff meeting, or strategic planning session.[1] It can serve as a useful tool to explore your own perceptions and philosophical approaches regarding the purpose and value of assessment in student affairs. As a group activity, it provides a means to determine where people within your functional unit stand in relation to the different approaches and schools of thought around assessment.

The purpose of this activity is two-fold.

1. The first is to help uncover underlying tendencies towards different philosophies of assessment based on assessment-related beliefs.

2. The second purpose is for those involved in assessment to be better prepared and informed on how to engage in conversations about student learning with people from different philosophical positions and viewpoints.

Knowing the philosophical stances of staff, units, or departments on assessment can help improve communication and lower misunderstanding. For example, one would not be overly successful talking to a person about co-curricular learning in program design who believes assessment to be about compliance reporting or engagement data. Thus, this activity is designed to enable student affairs assessment professionals, and staff within units, to know which philosophies they are aligned with to help them communicate to different groups on assessment.

The activity presents statements of assessment beliefs related to four different philosophical viewpoints on the purpose and function of assessment of student learning as well as beliefs about the best means by which to measure student learning. The four philosophies explored are:

- **Co-Curricular Learning:** Assessment is viewed as part of effective co-curricular learning and programmatic design and is driven by questions about the effectiveness of programmatic practices to advance student attainment of co-curricular learning outcomes. The purpose of assessment is formative, and the process of assessment is viewed as one of learning and as embedded within co-curricular design to enhance program offerings, implementation of programs, and student learning.

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[1] Modified from an activity for prior-learning assessment created by Nan Travers, Ph.D. (2015, 2019)

- **Measurement of Participation/Satisfaction:** Concerns about determining valid and reliable approaches to gathering data on student participation, attendance, and satisfaction drives decisions and discussions on assessing student learning within a participation/satisfaction mindset. Assessment here is about measurement and determining the most appropriate and accurate measures to document and record student participation/satisfaction as well as programmatic or institutional impact on learning. Comparisons, longitudinal data, satisfaction surveys, pre- and post-surveys, card swipes, and involvement data are viewed as an integral part of measurement issues.

- **Compliance/Reporting:** Assessment in student affairs is viewed as undertaken solely to meet the institutional accreditation requirements and demands of administrators. Assessment here is simply about meeting the needs and requirements of external entities for purposes of reporting. It is about doing what is asked, checking a box, and moving on with your day.

- **Student-Centered:** Assessment in student affairs is viewed as a mechanism by which students can learn about their own learning by being an active participant in the assessment process and make connections between the co-curriculum and curriculum. Assessment here is about a reflective and engaged process in which students learn about themselves as learners, how they learn, what they know, and are actively involved in and an agent of their own learning process. Students are not simply the object of assessment, but the primary beneficiaries.

Please note, it is highly unlikely that an individual will fall into only one of the four areas but will instead have several to which there are strongly held beliefs—some stronger than others. For that reason, the scores are based on the direction to which one leans, to understand a picture of the different elements that combine for how assessment is viewed, not to determine which "camp" one aligns with.

Activity Instructions

1. For each of the philosophical statements, indicate your level of agreement ranging from 0-4, where "0" = do not agree and "4" = absolutely agree. It is fine to have a score of 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4. It is even acceptable to give .5 or .7 scores. The only consideration is that you do have to add the scores at the end and sticking with 0, 1, 2, 3, and 4 does make the addition process easier. Remember, this activity is about agreement in terms of beliefs, not reality at your institution. So when considering each statement, approach them by asking "How strongly do I agree with the belief that…"

2. On the second page of the activity, add together each of the scores for each color, or if not in color by each abbreviation (CL, M, C, SC) and put total amounts in the result table. Total sum will range from 0-24 for each of the sets of statements. The colors and abbreviations align with the different philosophical understandings of assessment.

3. For each of the statement types, the closer your score is to 24 (the highest amount you can get by giving all 4s to each statement in an individual category), the stronger you agree with the statements in that grouping. It is highly unlikely that an individual will fall solely into one category, but instead have two or more to which they align. For instance, it might be that someone is student-centered (score of 19) and focused on teaching and learning (score of 17), but also cares strongly about how best to objectively measure learning (score of 15).

4. If doing this as a group activity, take time to discuss the results with those at your table or participating in the virtual break out room. What do the results mean about how you go about assessing student learning, the types of changes made, and the types of questions asked? If doing this individually, reflect on what that means for your own work and the processes and practices of assessment within your institution. You might even want to examine your beliefs over time, completing the activity again at a later date.

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To read more about the different types of philosophies of assessment, see Jankowski, N. A. (2017). Moving towards a philosophy of assessment. *Assessment Update, 29*(3), p. 10-11. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/au.30096

	Philosophical Statements	Do Not Agree = 0 to Absolutely Agree = 4	
1.	Assessment of student learning is a necessary element of effective co-curricular program design and delivery.		**CL**
2.	Results of assessment of student learning are used to improve student affairs processes and practices.		**CL**
3.	Assessment of student learning should be held to the same evidentiary standards as objective, empirical research.		**M**
4.	Assessment of student learning does not provide evidence to improve program design and learning.		**C**
5.	Assessment measures should be responsive to different student populations.		**SC**
6.	Assessment of student learning is for reporting to external entities.		**C**
7.	Assessment of student learning is not the responsibility of student affairs professionals.		**C**
8.	Principles of scientific measurement (i.e., reliability, validity, sample size) should drive assessment of student learning measures.		**M**
9.	Involving students in assessment (beyond completing an assessment) makes the results inherently invalid.		**M**
10.	The only reason to assess student learning is to meet accreditation or institutional requirements.		**C**
11.	Assessment of student learning is a waste of student affairs professionals' time.		**C**
12.	Evidence of student learning is used to inform students about their learning.		**SC**
13.	Assessment of student learning is a shared responsibility of student affairs staff, faculty, and students.		**CL**
14.	Students are active participants in assessment processes.		**SC**
15.	Assessment is a part of the co-curricular design process whereby student affairs professionals learn about their own practice.		**CL**
16.	Students, when appropriate, should be able to provide their own evidence of learning outcome attainment.		**SC**
17.	Assessment of student learning is an integral part of student affairs professionals' responsibilities.		**CL**
18.	To determine if learning has occurred, pre- and post-measures are necessary.		**M**
19.	Students should co-design learning outcomes and related assessments with student affairs staff.		**SC**
20.	Assessment evidence can include embedded student reflections on learning in co-curricular programs.		**CL**
21.	Consistency in assessment measures is the most important element of assessment practices.		**M**
22.	Student learning is measured by participation and satisfaction data.		**M**
23.	Students are a valuable source of information on what could be improved to advance student learning.		**SC**
24.	There is one, right way to assess student learning, for reporting purposes.		**C**

For each of the statements on the prior page, indicate your level of agreement ranging from 0-4. Add your score for each of the following statement types.

Results Table

Statement Types	Total (0-24)
Co-Curricular Learning (CL)	
Measurement of Participation/Satisfaction (M)	
Compliance/Reporting (C)	
Student-Centered (SC)	

For each of the statement types, the closer your score is to 24, the stronger you agree with the statements in that group. The statement groupings are related to different philosophical views on the purpose and function of assessment of student learning as well as the best means by which to measure student learning.

Co-Curricular Learning: For those with higher scores on co-curricular learning, assessment is viewed as part of co-curricular program design for student learning, driven by student affairs professionals' questions about their programmatic practices in ways that guide future developments in both implementation, offerings, and co-curricular learning. The purpose of assessment is formative, and to enhance program implementation and student learning. Thus, the process of assessment is viewed as one of learning and as embedded within co-curricular offerings and experiences.

Measurement of Participation/Satisfaction: For those with higher scores on measurement, concerns about determining valid and reliable approaches to gathering data on student learning drive decisions and discussions on assessing student learning. Assessment is about measurement and determining the most appropriate and accurate measures to document student participation and satisfaction with the co-curriculum. Comparisons, longitudinal data, and controls are viewed as an integral part of measurement issues.

Compliance/Reporting: For those with higher scores on compliance and reporting, assessment is viewed as undertaken solely to meet the requirements and demands of administrators and accrediting bodies. Assessment is simply about meeting the needs and requirements of external entities for purposes of reporting. It is about doing what is asked, checking a box, and moving on with your day.

Student-Centered: For those with higher scores on student-centered, assessment is viewed as a mechanism by which students can learn about their own learning by being an active participant in the assessment process. Assessment here is about a reflective and engaged process in which students learn about themselves as learners, how they learn, what they know, and are actively involved in and an agent of their own learning process. Students are not simply the object of assessment, but the primary beneficiaries.

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.
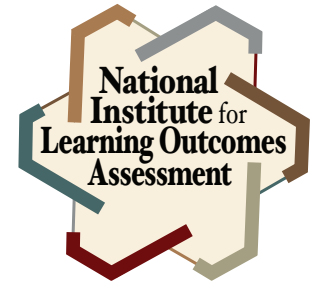
NILOA Staff

Natasha Jankowski, *Executive Director*

Gianina Baker, *Assistant Director*

Verna F. Orr*, Post-Doctoral Researcher*

NILOA Fellows

Erick Montenegro, *NILOA Fellow*

Nan Travers*, Senior Scholar*

NILOA Senior Scholars

Peter Ewell, *Senior Scholar*

Pat Hutchings*, Senior Scholar*

Jillian Kinzie, *Senior Scholar*

George Kuh, *Founding Director and Senior Scholar*

Paul Lingenfelter, *Senior Scholar*

David Marshall*, Senior Scholar*

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For more information, please contact:

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
51 Gerty Drive
Suite 196, CRC, MC-672
Champaign, IL 61820

learningoutcomesassessment.org
niloa@education.illinois.edu
Phone: 217.244.2155