



Collective Wisdom: Themes from Inaugural Episodes of the *Leading Improvements in Higher Education Podcast*

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The *Leading Improvements in Higher Education* podcast, for which we serve as producers, is a new service of the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, the oldest and largest higher education event in the United States devoted to assessment and improvement. During each podcast episode, we profile people, initiatives, institutions, and organizations improving conditions in higher education. Listeners may access the podcast via common streaming services, podcast apps, or at assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu.

In the series' inaugural episodes, debuted during the Assessment Institute in October 2020, twenty-six thought leaders representing twelve national associations, research organizations, and initiatives—all of whom are partners of the Assessment Institute—shared important ideas and trends from their various perspectives:

- season (s) 01 episode (e) 01: **NILOA** - Natasha Jankowski and Gianina Baker from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, the Assessment Institute's signature partner
- s01e02: **AALHE** - Jane Marie Souza and Andre Foisy from the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education
- s01e03: **AAEEBL** - Tracy Penny Light and Susan Kahn from the Association for Authentic, Experiential, and Evidence-Based Learning
- s01e04: **AIR** - Leah Ewing Ross and Stephan Cooley from the Association for Institutional Research
- s01e05: **AAC&U** - Dawn Whitehead and Terrel ("Terry") Rhodes from the Association of American Colleges & Universities
- s01e06: **CARS** - Keston Fulcher and Caroline Prendergast from the Center for Assessment and Research Studies
- s01e07: **CPR/NSSE** - Jillian Kinzie from the Center for Postsecondary Research and the National Survey of Student Engagement
- s01e08: **Grand Challenges in Assessment Project** - Karen Singer-Freeman and Christine Robinson, project directors of the Grand Challenges in Assessment Project
- s01e09: **HBCU-CEEQA** - Mark Howse and Verna Orr from the HBCU Collaborative for Excellence in Educational Quality Assurance
- s01e10: **HEDS** - Charlie Blach and Kathy Wise from the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium
- s01e11: **HIPs (High Impact Practices)** - Pam Bowers, Ken O'Donnell, and Robin Schofield from HIPs in the States
- s01e12: **SAAL** - Sara Gordon, Joe Levy, Sara Ousby, and Aimee Shattuck from Student Affairs Assessment Leaders

Viewpoint

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While each episode delved into specific topics of interest related to a particular association, organization, or stakeholder group, the collective wisdom shared by *all* of the guests provides a mosaic of issues and opportunities to consider as we conclude a challenging, dynamic year in higher education. Here we provide seven crosscutting themes emerging from the podcasts' inaugural episodes.

1. Reminders about enduring principles in assessment and improvement

Given the focus of *Leading Improvements in Higher Education*, it is not surprising guests highlighted the importance of assessment and improvement as key to promoting student learning and success and advancing higher education's capabilities. Student learning outcomes continue to be important in helping to articulate and document what students should know and be able to do upon completion of an assignment, course, experience, or program. Recognizing the multitude of stakeholders involved in this work, guests reminded us that assessment takes place in all parts of the collegiate context: in academic courses and programs; in co-curricular programs and services; and in experiential, community, and international venues. While assessment methods and approaches continue to be adapted in various ways, there is an ongoing need to connect assessment findings to subsequent improvements. This extends from the discrete settings of the course- and program-level to the institution as a whole. Assessing institutional effectiveness by determining how well the institution is meeting its stated missions continues to be a priority, including representing and communicating in a transparent manner to a variety of stakeholders the progress the institution is making toward its goals. To accomplish this, leadership at all levels is necessary to create a student-centric culture that values evidence-informed interventions, improvements, and innovations; this is also a theme shared by many assessment scholars (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Kuh et al., 2015).

2. Purposes and values of a college education, including the experiences necessary for student success

Across the inaugural episodes, guests emphasized the purposes of, and value added by, a college education, including attention to the experiences necessary for student success. This includes the benefits of a liberal education, advanced, in part, by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U, 2007), not from a defensive posture aimed at justifying the existence of such education, but rather outlining the many opportunities it affords students. Indeed, students deserve to receive an education preparing them to function in a society where rapid change is the constant, solve "unscripted problems" (as termed by AAC&U), and incorporate diverse and global perspectives in their thinking, among other outcomes. Faculty and administrators need to cultivate environments to permit students to explore and clarify their personal, academic, and professional identities through a variety of aligned and learner-centered experiences (Jankowski & Marshall, 2017). Student engagement is crucial to this endeavor, including their access to, and participation in, High Impact Practices, such as undergraduate research, service learning, and capstone experiences (Kuh, O'Donnell, & Schneider, 2017). Giving students agency in their learning experience also provides relevance, coherence, and significance, while valuing their respective backgrounds and lived experiences. By inviting students into the learning process, it is possible to increase their involvement in learning design, implementation, assessment, and interpretation of findings, thereby contributing to students' engagement and fostering improvement in learning environments. Finally, guests reinforced the need to make the continual case for higher education's return-on-investment and articulated the many ways in which higher education contributes to not

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only uplifting individual students, but also their families and the communities and societies with which they interact.

3. Attention to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion

Almost to a person, guests in each episode emphatically and repeatedly spoke about the need for increased attention to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many acknowledge these issues have been important to higher education for quite some time. Throughout 2020, issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion have gained increased prominence, specifically as they relate to the COVID-19 pandemic and continued national cries for racial justice. Indeed, the public health crisis has highlighted and “unmasked” issues of systemic inequity and inequality (Jankowski, 2020). As demographics in the United States continue to change and the number of “traditionally” aged students decline in the coming years, colleges and universities will increasingly attract new majority students, individuals often historically under-served and –resourced by institutions. As a result, institutional structures, cultures, and practices will need to be developed or adapted to serve these students (McNair et al., 2016; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). This extends to instructional and assessment approaches which often “privilege” certain individuals, learning styles, and levels of preparedness. These will need to be critically reviewed and reconfigured to create inclusive and equitable approaches to the teaching and learning process (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Equity and inclusion work should involve the entire campus and not be limited to offices of diversity, equity, inclusion, as many guests reminded us. Such work includes advancing an institution-wide equity agenda, disaggregating data to call attention to the experiences and needs of specific populations, scaling interventions to create equitable opportunities for all students to be successful, and broadening access to higher education, generally, as well as to campus-specific interventions and support programs. As Park (2018) suggested, “there is so much that we do not know—and we can only get closer to a fuller understanding by actively courting what has been missing for far too long” (p. 155).

4. Importance of data-informed decision-making in various contexts

Another salient theme emerging from conversations across the inaugural episodes relates to the importance of data-informed decision-making, which relies on data to produce insights and context to assist in making decisions (Webber & Zheng, 2020). Institutions have access to a plethora of data sources and tremendous infrastructures to provide increasingly real-time intelligence to decision-makers. These decision-makers often cite a desire to use data in performing their roles, yet may not always know *how* to do so effectively. Ongoing professional development is necessary so that end-users can increase their data literacy and involvement in answering specific institutional questions. Closely tied to the mechanisms and structures that collect, store, and analyze data is the ethical use of data, highlighted specifically in the episode featuring Leah Ewing Ross and Stephan Cooley from the Association for Institutional Research (AIR). The *AIR Statement of Ethical Principles* outlines ways in which institutions are promoting integrity, professionalism, and fairness in the practical application of data use on specific campuses. It is critical that users of data pay attention to ways in which data tell stories and inform decisions, including giving attention to context both of the decision *and* the manner in which associated data were collected and analyzed to inform that decision. As noted above, there is growing prevalence of disaggregating data to highlight the needs of various populations served by institutions. This allows for deep and meaningful exploration

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of the experiences of specific groups that can inform useful and actionable information for decision-making. As guests frequently mentioned, data use is—ultimately—about understanding and improving conditions for *people* on our campuses.

5. COVID-19 adaptations and implications

Responsiveness to the COVID-19 global pandemic created a disruption to regular operations, including teaching and assessment functions, at institutions across the country and around the world. Podcast guests described ways in which college and university administrators, faculty, staff, students, and partners implemented various measures to manage the crisis, including interventions focused on addressing students' holistic needs. One salient adaptation was the clarification and (re)prioritization of learning outcomes as offerings and modalities shifted. This included realigning assignments and assessments to reflect changing circumstances, while also clearly communicating the purpose, approach, and underlying rationale to students. Many of these changes are congruent with, and corroborated by, NILOA's findings from their survey of assessment-related changes that occurred during spring 2020 (Jankowski, 2020). One implication of responses to the pandemic is the recommendation to view remote, online, hybrid, and limited in-person instructional modalities as the new normal. What started as an initial emergency response will likely be longer lasting; thus, institutions should endeavor to reposition and align resources and support services within this new paradigm. Relatedly, institutions need to explore and invest in flexible and alternative means of facilitating, assessing, and documenting the teaching and learning process—including student learning outcomes—all while continuing to assure quality while promoting flexibility. The pandemic has also drawn attention to the need for additional support for stakeholders, including, but not limited to, promoting physical, emotional, and mental well-being; ensuring internet access and technology needs are met; addressing financial, housing, and food insecurities; and providing other wraparound services. Guests noted that out of this crisis comes an opportunity for higher education to engage in critical self-reflection and determine what pandemic-related interventions should “stick” going forward. While institutions can sometimes be slow to change, a crisis of this magnitude has provided a chance to both *interrogate* and *innovate* policies, procedures, and practices related to delivering on the promise of higher education.

6. Future higher education trends

At the end of each episode, we asked guests to look ahead to future trends they see shaping the higher education landscape in the next 3-5 years. While each person articulated a point-of-view informed from their unique lens, five overarching trends emerged. First, the *necessity of higher education will grow in prominence*. Despite some public skepticism, the aims and purposes of a college education are still valued, including its ongoing contributions to intellectual, cultural, social, economic, technological, and global development. Second, *there are several important priorities for the future*, all of which build on prior and current issues and challenges. These include a focus on quality and opportunity for students; an attention to affordability and value for those making investments in higher education; the need to provide safe and healthy learning environments; and the viability, continuity, and sustainability of institutions themselves. Third, *institutions will sharpen their focus on equity*. There continues to be the need to close equity gaps, broaden access to those historically underserved by our institutions, and address the needs of the diverse array of students and colleagues increasingly attracted to our campuses. Fourth, *collaboration and innovation will be imperative for future successes*. Fiscal constraints, demographic shifts in the student pipeline,

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global competition, and multidisciplinary approaches to knowledge creation and dissemination will require administrators, faculty, and staff to rethink traditional approaches, structures, and partnerships in order to remain vibrant and relevant. Finally, *the need to embrace complexity and adapt to the pace of change will persist*. Heightened stakeholder expectations, technological advances, and pandemic-related disruptions, among other recent influences, have forced the higher education sector to adapt and respond perhaps more swiftly and nimbly than ever. Going forward, institutional leaders will need to embrace new ways of accomplishing their missions, while simultaneously holding firm to the values that have made higher education such an enduring, invaluable contributor to society.

7. Resources and communities for higher education stakeholders

Finally, guests of each episode frequently mentioned plentiful resources to support the higher education community offered by their respective association, research organization, or initiative, some of which are provided free-of-charge. Some example resources highlighted in the inaugural episodes include:

- AALHE's *Assess Listserv* and their *Foundational Statement #1: What is Assessment in Higher Education?*
- AAEEBL's *International Journal of ePortfolio*, *Field Guide to ePortfolio*, and *AAEEBL ePortfolio Review (AePR)*
- AAC&U's *VALUE Rubrics*, along with various *publications and areas of focus*
- AIR's *Statement of Ethical Principles* and *Statement of Aspirational Practice for IR*
- Grand Challenges in Assessment Project's *working groups* to advance the Project's goals
- NILOA's *Transparency Framework*, *Assignment Library*, *Excellence in Assessment (EIA) Designation*, and *Occasional Papers*
- SAAL's *Listserv*, *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry*, and *resources* to support co-curricular learning, engagement, and assessment

Please visit assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu for links to Assessment Institute partners, where additional resources and communities are available. We gratefully acknowledge and thank all of our guests for sharing with us such insightful, inspiring, and thought-provoking ideas during the inaugural episodes of *Leading Improvements in Higher Education*. We also hope this summary of crosscutting themes has inspired you to listen to these episodes, along with future episodes of the podcast. Releases of 1-2 episodes per month will continue to profile the important work of assessment and improvement along with other topics of interest to the higher education community.

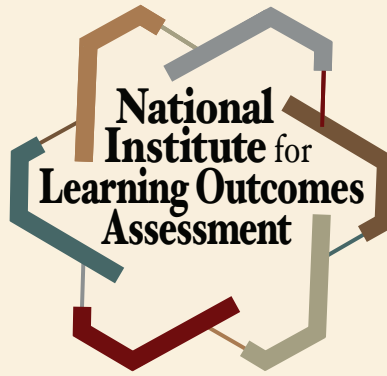
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