

**Background Information on Assessment in Higher Education from the U.S. Perspective**  
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**Overview of this Document**

1. Context and Definitions of Assessment
2. Assessment's Beginnings and Growth
3. Assessment Today

**1. Context and Definitions of Assessment**

- Nearly *20 million students* are enrolled in *postsecondary educational institutions* in the United States
- *Higher education landscape* is increasingly *influenced by external forces*
  - Changing student characteristics and needs
  - Technological advances
  - Intensified competition for students
  - Economic and competitive pressures
  - Public skepticism about educational quality
- *What is meant by assessment?* A clearly understood, widely shared definition has always been one of the highest barriers to the advancement of the field
- Many definitions of assessment exist, some emphasizing *accountability* and others *improvement* of student learning as its principal purpose
- A *range of methods* for investigating the phenomenon and outcomes of students' learning
- The *systematic collection, review, and use of information* about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of *improving student learning and development*
- *Measurement* of what an *individual knows* and *can do*
- The term *outcomes assessment* in higher education has come to imply *aggregating individual measures* for the purpose of *discovering group strengths and weaknesses* that can guide improvement actions
- While assessment mainly focuses on student learning, *broader definitions* focus on *institutional effectiveness*
- Assessment is the *process* of providing *credible evidence* of *resources*, implementation *actions*, and *outcomes* undertaken for the purpose of *improving the effectiveness* of *instruction, programs, and services* in higher education

## 2. Assessment's Beginnings and Growth

- The “*assessment movement*” in the U.S. largely began in the 1980s with calls for greater accountability and transparency from federal and state governments, regional and specialized accreditors, and governing bodies of institutions themselves
- *Three publications in early/mid 1980s* contributed to an increasing emphasis on assessment:
  - *A Nation at Risk* (1983): America’s failing K-12 system
  - *Involvement in Learning* (1984): Conditions of excellence needed in higher education, including student involvement, high expectations, and assessment and feedback
  - *The Self-Regarding Institution* (1984): Calls for accountability stem from a desire to understand what is happening in complex institutions
- *States* began enacting accountability measures that accelerated what was becoming a national assessment movement; Tennessee, Colorado, New Jersey, and Virginia as early adopters of *performance funding*
- *Federal government*: all federally approved accreditation organizations to include in their criteria for accreditation *evidence of institutional outcomes*
- External stimulus for assessment moved from states to *regional associations*; they began to issue specific *outcomes assessment directives for institutional accreditation*
- *Discipline-specific bodies* also created *guidelines for program accreditation*
- Throughout the 1990s, *institutions responded* to these external mandates by *establishing assessment programs on campuses*
- American Association for Higher Education set forth nine *principles of good practice for assessing student learning*, including:
  - The need for clear educational goals
  - Recognition of the multidimensionality of learning
  - Importance of tracking outcomes over time
  - The need for involvement by a broad range of stakeholders
- Barr and Tagg’s (1995) influential *Change* article offered a persuasive new “*learning paradigm*” in which instructional practices focused on the *design of powerful learning experiences and environments*, rather than on information transfer
- *Rewards and recognition* for faculty attention to teaching were examined and debated

- The scholarship of teaching—a forerunner of the current *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)* movement—emerged
- Two reports from the early/mid 2000s exemplified the *continued intensity of assessment activities*:
  - In 2000, *Measuring Up* (National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education): issued biennial state grades on higher education performance and found all fifty states to be seriously lacking in the area of assessment of student learning
  - In 2006, *Spellings Report on the Future of Higher Education* (U.S. Department of Education) further criticized higher education for its limited demonstration of student learning and called for more sophisticated assessment in the name of public accountability

### 3. Assessment Today

- Although the assessment movement primarily began with calls for external accountability, today the *role of assessment* in higher education is *increasingly focused on improving institutions' educational effectiveness*
- Scholars have emphasized *transparency and use of assessment results* to guide improvements in student learning and success
- The longstanding culture of compliance has clouded the most important, actionable purpose for collecting evidence of student accomplishment: *improving teaching and learning*
- National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) developed its *Transparency Framework* in response to the needs for both transparency and improvement:
  - Student learning outcomes statements
  - Assessment plans
  - Assessment resources
  - Current assessment activities
  - Evidence of student learning
  - Use of student learning evidence
- Two recent initiatives—Tuning Process and the Degree Qualifications Profile—focus on *consensus, alignment, student-centeredness, and communication* as elements needed to support coherent learning experiences for students
- VALUE rubrics and Multi-State Collaborative as a means of *promoting more authentic work, including student agency/ownership*
- *Involvement in assessment and improvement has broadened* into institutional areas beyond the classroom to include co-curricular, community, and international learning contexts