National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

May 2016

Higher Education Quality: Why Documenting Learning Matters

A Policy Statement from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Policy Statement

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

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NILOA Mission

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) primary objective is to discover and disseminate the ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families, and other stakeholders.

Abstract

The NILOA policy statement outlines the warrant for multiple, systematic approaches to obtain evidence of authentic student achievement and addresses some well-reasoned concerns that poorly designed assessment efforts can distract from rather than enhance the quality of teaching and learning. George Kuh, NILOA director, observed that, "Many of the reservations about the value of student learning outcomes assessment are because the findings do not speak to issues that faculty and staff find relevant for their work with students or yield information that they or others can use to be more effective."

Recognizing that much remains to be done, a succinct summary is offered of what the assessment movement has achieved thus far, drawing on NILOA's work in the field over the past decade along with that of other organizations. The statement concludes with five principles that when adapted appropriately to an institution's educational purposes and programs can spread and accelerate assessment work worthy of the promises colleges and universities make to their students, policy makers, and the public.

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Higher Education Quality: Why Documenting Learning Matters

A Policy Statement from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Introduction

The importance of assessing student learning in college has yet to capture the attention of policy makers or the public. Indeed, few outside the academy know what the phrase, student learning outcomes assessment, means. And yet the information outcomes assessment produces—when done well—is foundational to addressing some of the greatest challenges the country currently faces.

Thirty years ago the assessment bandwagon began rolling across the landscape of American higher education. The movement was prompted in large part by the highly publicized 1983 federal report, *A Nation at Risk*, which argued American education needed to improve. This document was followed by a spate of others focused more squarely on higher education and the quality of the undergraduate experience. For three decades, institutions, accreditors, blue ribbon commissions, faculty, staff and others have invested considerable time and energy advancing efforts to document and enhance what students know and can do as a result of their studies.

What do we have to show for all this activity? Well, more than many realize, but not nearly enough.

Why Documenting Student Learning Matters

Virtually everyone agrees that what students learn in college is central to subsequent success and satisfaction in life, to the nation's economic competitiveness and productivity, and to building healthy and civically engaged communities. For this and many other reasons, the stakes have never been higher in terms of making sure college graduates acquire the knowledge and proficiencies needed to be self-sufficient and civically responsible.

More recently a whole host of concerns has pushed questions about collegiate quality higher on the national agenda. Large numbers of students grapple with troubling levels of debt. Has their investment been well placed? Institutions themselves—both public and private—are stressed by financial problems, forcing cuts in the programs and services students need, especially those historically underserved by colleges and universities. What is the impact on learning? In addition, the spike in the number of new providers of higher learning along with accelerating technological advances make it possible for students to acquire postsecondary credentials without ever meeting their instructors in person or setting foot on a campus--a prospect that can raise questions about academic quality and integrity.

These circumstances make educational quality a national priority. With so much in play, we should expect a groundswell of interest by faculty and staff as well as policy makers in assessing what students gain from their studies and using that information to enhance student attainment. But this is not the case.

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"Employers recently have been asking for more than just a transcript in order to determine if students have learned what they need to know and do to function effectively."

~George P. Pernsteiner, President, State Higher Education Executive Officers

True enough, there has been some progress. Multiple studies indicate that the vast majority of colleges and universities publish statements about the intended learning outcomes of their degree programs. Where they take the next step—generating and using evidence of those outcomes—the results are often salutary. But some institutions—among them those perceived as the most prestigious—have yet to publicly specify their expectations for student learning or report assessment results. And many rank and file faculty members resist the specification and assessment of learning goals as reductionist and demeaning.

Some of this resistance may be justified, including the worry that the very process of explicitly defining and systematically examining student learning can unintentionally reduce a complex and creative process to a list of mindless, elementary tasks. Effective teaching and learning is not about getting students to master facts; it is about engaging them in ways that foster a genuine love of inquiry and a facility with analytical reasoning and other higher order proficiencies. The challenge is to represent and gather evidence of those proficiencies in concrete ways that preserve their complexity. Another common criticism is that relying on assessment tools and processes developed by external vendors implies that faculty members are not trusted or competent to do this on their own.

To these and other reservations and hazards we say, *Amen!*

Documenting learning and using that evidence to improve student and institutional performance is a challenging, complicated process. But acknowledging the difficulty of the work in no way diminishes the urgency of doing it. Indeed, student learning outcomes assessment—done well—is not just a powerful, potentially effective means to improve student success; it is an *essential strategy* for the higher education enterprise to respond successfully to the many challenges it faces.

Documenting learning and using that evidence to improve student and institutional performance is a challenging, complicated process.

"The assessment movement is poised to drive a sea change in what actually counts as meaningful, actionable evidence by putting students' authentic work at the center of the assessment inquiry."

~Carol Geary Schneider, President, Association of American Colleges and Universities

What We Know About Effective Assessment Work

Since 2008 the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has been tracking what colleges and universities are doing to document and improve student performance and institutional effectiveness. Over this period three trends are evident:

- Institutions are clearer about what they expect their students to know and be able to do and they are more willing to make these expectations public;
- A wider range of assessment tools and approaches is available; and
- Most institutions are using multiple approaches to evaluate student accomplishment.

In addition, many accrediting groups—especially program-specific entities—are encouraging more nuanced, thoughtful ways to assess student learning.

From our work in the field, NILOA has distilled five principles that if enacted in mission-relevant ways can spread and accelerate assessment work worthy of the promises colleges and universities make to their students, policy-makers, and the public.

1. Develop specific, actionable learning outcomes statements.

Learning outcome statements are most useful when they are crafted to inform effective educational policies and practices, not to meet compliance demands by external groups. When they are concrete and clear about the proficiencies students are to achieve, such statements provide reference points for student performance, not just for individual courses but the cumulative effects of a program of study. Doing this demands active, operational verbs to guide the design of assignments that motivate students to demonstrate the desired outcomes in a way that can be verified. Clear, specific statements describing desired outcomes also make it possible for faculty to align curriculum and pedagogy with intended proficiencies, which is essential to ensuring that a program is, indeed, achieving its purposes. Such statements also make it easier for students to understand and appreciate institutional and program expectations for their performance and how their learning will equip them to handle what they encounter after college.

Learning outcome statements are most useful when they are crafted to inform effective educational policies and practices, not to meet compliance demands by external groups.

2. Connect learning goals with actual student assignments and work.

Provosts tell us that the most meaningful, actionable evidence of student learning comes from course-based assessments embedded in regular assignments. Indeed, our NILOA surveys show that faculty-designed assignments are the *primary* vehicle through which students demonstrate that they know and can do what the institution or program specifies; they are used far more frequently than standardized tests. To underscore the critical role of assignments, NILOA has conducted a series of "charrettes" in which faculty from different fields discuss how to improve their assignments in ways that more accurately align with one or more intended proficiencies. The products of that process are now available in an online assignment library [www.assignmentlibrary.org] that illustrates how degree-level proficiencies such as those identified in the Degree Qualifications Profile can be both fostered and assessed through papers, projects, demonstrations, reports and other tasks that faculty require of students. The Association of American Colleges and Universities, drawing on its Essential Learning Outcomes, is sponsoring parallel work on "signature assignments" and its partnership with the State Higher Education Executive Officers coordinating the Multi-State Collaborative (MSC). Faculty participating in such efforts design assignments for individual courses and also work to sequence assignments and incorporate high-impact practices across a program of study and across transfer pathways. An essential feature of these approaches is a systematic examination of artifacts of authentic student learning.

"NILOA's five principles for effective learning assessment should be central to every institution's efforts to better understand what and how students are learning and using that information to further strengthen student and institutional outcomes."

~ Brian K. Bridges, Vice President, Research and Member Engagement, United Negro College Fund

3. Collaborate with the relevant stakeholders, beginning with the faculty.

Faculty engagement and ownership are essential if assessment and improvement efforts are to be effective. And here, too, significant challenges exist. Relatively few faculty members have experience designing clear, explicit course and program outcomes or assignments that directly elicit those outcomes. Not surprisingly, campuses that have made the most progress have invested in serious, sustained professional development and have hosted venues where faculty can come together to formulate and explore questions about their students' learning. When undertaken collaboratively with others who work with students—such as student affairs staff and advisors—this

kind of inquiry can move outcomes assessment from an "add on" to a process that is part and parcel to effective teaching and learning. That shift is critical to fostering a sense of collective responsibility for learning among all those who have a role in the educational process and to establishing systematic assessment as a shared professional norm.

4. Design assessment approaches that generate actionable evidence about student learning that key stakeholders can understand and use to improve student and institutional performance.

Colleges and universities have more information about students and their learning than ever before. But too few institutions use productively what they have in hand. In large part, this is because the evidence available is not translated into actions to enhance student accomplishment. The good news is that we have learned how some institutions do this well.

- They ask questions about student performance to which faculty and others want answers. This means involving the right stakeholders—faculty, staff, students, governing board members, and others as appropriate—at the *beginning* of any assessment project to determine the questions it needs to answer.
- They build interest and momentum by creating occasions for people to work together to raise issues and questions they care and need to know more about in order to improve student engagement and learning. And they bring these same people back together to make sense of the findings and tease out their implications for action.
- They present assessment results in transparent, understandable forms to the people who have a need to know and act on them.

5. Focus on *improvement* and *compliance* will take care of itself.

Assessment that comports with the four previous principles—employing integrated, stakeholder-responsive, action-oriented approaches—has the added, salutary effect of obviating the compliance mentality that often blunts the prospects for effective assessment efforts. Many schools trapped in this "culture of compliance" have either out-sourced the assessment process or hired professional staff to respond to what are often ambiguous and conflicting demands from accreditors and other external actors. And too often the results of compliance-driven assessment—which frequently take the form of standardized tests—are unconnected to policies and practices that matter to desired outcomes. In contrast, assessment motivated by genuine institutional needs and faculty priorities for improving teaching typically yields evidence that is valued and more likely to be used. When college and universities do this right, assessment becomes embedded in the regular daily work of the academy and external actors like regional accreditors are more than satisfied.

Final Thoughts

Clarifying and documenting what students know and can do and using this information to improve student and institutional performance are essential because students need a postsecondary education that will prepare them to meet the challenges of the 21st century. In addition, educators have work to

Assessment that comports with the four previous principles—employing integrated, stakeholder-responsive, action-oriented approaches—has the added, salutary effect of obviating the compliance mentality that often blunts the prospects for effective assessment efforts.

"NILOA's five principles are clear, practical, and useful. As to the fifth principle, 'Focus on improvement and compliance will take care of itself,' this accreditor says 'Amen'!"

~Mary Ellen Petrisko, President, WASC Senior College and University Commission

do in building and maintaining public trust and demonstrating institutional integrity. It is no longer beyond the capacity of a college or university to articulate expectations for learning, to document student progress toward these expectations, and to use the resulting evidence to improve student success. Doing this job and doing it well is within our grasp. Failing to do so shortchanges our students and the many others who have a major stake in the quality of higher education. Equally important, we in the academy owe it to ourselves.

It is no longer beyond the capacity of a college or university to articulate expectations for learning, to document student progress toward these expectations, and to use the resulting evidence to improve student success.

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NILOA Mission

NILOA's primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

NILOA Occasional Paper Series

NILOA Occasional Papers are commissioned to examine contemporary issues that will inform the academic community of the current state-of-the art of assessing learning outcomes in American higher education. The authors are asked to write for a general audience in order to provide comprehensive, accurate information about how institutions and other organizations can become more proficient at assessing and reporting student learning outcomes for the purposes of improving student learning and responsibly fulfilling expectations for transparency and accountability to policy makers and other external audiences.

Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to njankow2@illinois.edu.

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.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, 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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National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

April 2010

Opening Doors to Faculty Involvement in Assessment

Pat Hutchings

Foreword by Peter T. Ewell

Occasional Paper #4

learningoutcomesassessment.org

About the Author

Pat Hutchings

Pat Hutchings joined the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1998, serving as a senior scholar and then as vice president, working closely with a wide range of programs and research initiatives, including the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. She has written widely on the investigation and documentation of teaching and learning, the peer collaboration and review of teaching, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Recent publications, drawing from Carnegie's work, include Ethics of Inquiry: Issues in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (2002), Opening Lines: Approaches to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (2000) and, co-authored with Mary Taylor Huber, The Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons (2005). She left her full-time position in December 2009 but continues to work part-time with the Foundation on a broad range of higher education issues. She was chair of the English department at Alverno College from 1978 to 1987 and a senior staff member at the American Association for Higher Education from 1987-1997. Her doctorate in English is from the University of Iowa.

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Abstract

Opening Doors to Faculty Involvement in Assessment

The assessment literature is replete with admonitions about the importance of faculty involvement, a kind of gold standard widely understood to be the key to assessment's impact "on the ground," in classrooms where teachers and students meet. Unfortunately, much of what has been done in the name of assessment has failed to engage large numbers of faculty in significant ways.

In this paper, I examine the dynamics behind this reality, including the mixed origins of assessment, coming both from within and outside academe, and a number of obstacles that stem from the culture and organization of higher education itself. I then identify more recent developments that promise to alter those dynamics, including and especially the rising level of interest in teaching and learning as scholarly, intellectual work. I close by proposing six ways to bring the purposes of assessment and the regular work of faculty closer together: 1) Build assessment around the regular, ongoing work of teaching and learning; 2) Make a place for assessment in faculty development; 3) Integrate assessment into the preparation of graduate students; 4) Reframe assessment as scholarship; 5) Create campus spaces and occasions for constructive assessment conversation and action; and 6) Involve students in assessment. Together, these strategies can make faculty involvement more likely and assessment more useful.

Pat's paper effectively synthesizes her dozens of years of experience as a faculty member, consultant, and colleague. To her admirable observations and recommendations about engaging faculty in assessment, I would only add one: remember that you don't need everybody on board to move forward.

Peter T. Ewell
Vice President, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)
Senior Scholar, NILOA

Foreword

Since the emergence of assessment as a widespread phenomenon at American colleges and universities in the mid-1980s, "faculty involvement" has been repeatedly identified as essential. I repeated this admonition freely at that time, as did Pat Hutchings, the author of this latest NILOA Occasional Paper. But admonishment did not make it so. NILOA's most recent survey of provosts, for example, reveals that gaining faculty involvement and support is among their top concerns, and I always get similar answers when I pose this question to audiences at conferences and workshops.

In the first portion of her paper, Pat effectively enumerates some challenges to achieving greater faculty involvement. One of the most important is the fact that, from the outset, most faculty perceived assessment as being principally about external accountability. As a result, many continue to see little connection between such activities and their day-to-day life in the classroom. To amplify Pat's point, moreover, the entire premise of "assessment to improve instruction"—especially if it is offered by outsiders—is that there is something wrong with instruction to begin with. This posture is not a happy one from which to begin a productive conversation. Another salient challenge that Pat nails is the fact that there is currently little payoff to faculty for undertaking this work. Simply telling them that "it is part of the job of teaching," as too many academic leaders currently do, doesn't work very well because the connection between assessment and teaching isn't obvious to faculty. And things may be even worse: widespread perceptions that assessment is essentially an administrative activity—the stuff of "strategic planning" and "program review"—mean that faculty will shun it if only for that reason. Pat also notes that faculty value expertise and assessment is something that they typically do not know much about. In a similar vein, assessment is prosecuted in the alien language of business and education—not usually the most respected disciplines on any campus.

These are formidable obstacles. But Pat also gives us reasons to hope by reviewing several areas in which we have made progress. First, as she points out, the entire discourse about instruction has acquired a new tone and heightened respectability. And insofar as the connection between assessment and teaching and learning can be clarified, this new rhetoric can only benefit assessment. Related to this is the rising prominence of Teaching and Learning Centers at many institutions. At their best, they can help faculty discover the integral connection between assessment and instruction and show them how to do assessment better. Finally, Pat observes that assessment methods have come a very long way over the last twenty years. When all this began (with the salient exception of Alverno College where Pat once taught), most institutions doing assessment had to be content with re-administering the ACT Assessment or giving GREs in various fields. Now we have creative and authentic standardized general skills tests like the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and the Critical-Thinking Assessment Test (CAT), as well as a range of solid techniques like curriculum mapping, rubric-based grading, and electronic portfolios. These technical developments have yielded valid mechanisms for gathering evidence of student performance that look a lot more like how faculty do this than ScanTron forms and bubble sheets. At least as important, they have made the job of assessment easier. Given that lack of time is one of the greatest objections that faculty raise about assessment, this also helps engagement. Finally, I'd like to add an item to Pat's reassuring list of "hopefuls." While I have no concrete evidence to back up this assertion, I am becoming convinced through sustained interaction that younger faculty members are more positive about and engaged in

Foreword (continued)

assessment than their "Boomer generation" colleagues. This may be because they are more collectivist and team oriented—eroding the "isolation in the classroom" syndrome that Pat so accurately describes. But wherever it comes from, it is bound to be good for assessment's future.

The meat of Pat's paper is offered in six recommendations for "opening doors to faculty involvement in assessment." The first—embedding assessment directly into the regular curriculum through mapped and targeted assignments, graded validly and reliably through carefully designed and piloted rubrics—has always been a personal favorite of mine, and I argued for it in my Occasional Paper a year ago. The second and third—more emphasis on faculty development offered through campus Teaching and Learning Centers, and greater emphasis on instructional training (and assessment) in preparing future faculty in graduate training—are familiar, though this by no means diminishes their appropriateness. The fourth—making assessment technique and evidence an integral part of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning—reflects Pat's own successful history of doing this over many years at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and as AAHE's founding Assessment Forum Director.

The last two recommendations, though, are not only sound but are fresh as well. The fifth cogently notes the fact that colleges and universities lack spaces and opportunities for faculty to discuss and make meaning of assessment results through sustained engagement. Time constrained committee discussions are no place for serious collective reflection and there is simply no "room" for this activity (figuratively or literally) in current campus discourse. This is a serious limitation and it ought to be addressed. Sixth, Pat urges us to involve students directly in assessment. Now there's an idea! Not only do students have the greatest stake in improving teaching and learning, they also are closer to the data than we are. This means that they can frequently offer much better interpretations of assessment results and I have seen more than one campus assessment committee learn this to its members' benefit.

In short, Pat's paper effectively synthesizes her dozens of years of experience as a faculty member, consultant, and colleague. To her admirable observations and recommendations about engaging faculty in assessment, I would only add one: remember that you don't need everybody on board to move forward.

Peter T. Ewell
Vice-President, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)
Senior Scholar, NILOA

Opening Doors to Faculty Involvement in Assessment

Pat Hutchings

Since the institutional assessment of student learning outcomes arrived on the higher education scene some 25 years ago, no issue has generated more attention than the role of faculty in such work. The research and practice literature on the topic is packed with admonitions about the importance of faculty involvement, which has come to be seen as a kind of gold standard, the key to assessment's impact "on the ground"—in classrooms where teachers and students meet. This view, it seems safe to say, is shared by just about everyone who works in, writes about, worries about, or champions assessment.

What is also widely shared is a sense that the real promise of assessment depends on significantly growing and deepening faculty involvement—and, in short, that there has not been enough of it. In truth, the extent to which faculty have been involved in assessment is difficult to know—and the danger here of self-fulfilling prophecy should be kept in mind—but in a recent national survey of campus assessment practice, 66 percent of chief academic officers name "more faculty engagement" as the highest priority in making further progress (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009, p. 9). Similarly, "a strong faculty leadership role" tops the list of criteria for the Council on Higher Education Accreditation's annual award to campuses with exemplary assessment programs (see Eaton, 2008), and the assessment framework put forward by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U, 2008) urges a focus on "our students' best work," in which faculty must clearly play a—perhaps *the*—central role. Looking back to earlier days, a set of principles developed under the sponsorship of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) (Astin et al., 1993) points in the same direction, urging that assessment be firmly connected to the classroom and the values of educators.

The real promise of assessment depends on significantly growing and deepening faculty involvement…

On the one hand, such urgings reflect the fact that on hundreds of campuses faculty have played critically important roles in assessment; their efforts have produced exciting accounts by and about those who become engaged in assessment and discover in it (sometimes to their considerable surprise) a route to more powerful approaches to student learning. At the same time, these urgings reflect a concern that much of what has been done in the name of assessment has failed to engage large numbers of faculty in significant ways.

In this paper I examine the dynamics behind this reality, identify recent developments that may alter those dynamics by creating a more positive climate for serious work on learning and teaching, and propose six approaches that promise to bring the purposes of assessment and the regular work of faculty closer together—making faculty involvement more likely and assessment more useful. While building on the observations of many who have written about these matters, I also draw on my

experience as an English professor at Alverno College (where assessment was fully integrated into faculty work), on my role as inaugural director of the AAHE Assessment Forum,[1] and on my subsequent work (much of it with The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching) with faculty from a wide range of disciplines and institutional types seeking ways to make teaching more visible, valued, and effective in meeting the needs of today's learners.

Why Faculty Involvement Matters

For starters it's worth looking at what happens when faculty are significant participants in the assessment process—not just token members of a committee cobbled together for an accreditation visit or an after-the-fact audience for assessment results they had no part in shaping but central voices and shapers of activity. Such significant roles have not been the norm. As Peter Ewell (2009) points out in another NILOA paper, from its early days in higher education, assessment was "consciously separated from what went on in the classroom," and especially from grading, as part of an effort to promote "objective" data gathering (p. 19). In response, many campuses felt they had no choice but to employ external tests and instruments that kept assessment distinct from the regular work of faculty as facilitators and judges of student learning. In fact, the real promise of assessment—and the area in which faculty involvement matters first and most—lies precisely in the questions that faculty, both individually and collectively, must ask about their students' learning in their regular instructional work: what purposes and goals are most important, whether those goals are met, and how to do better. As one faculty member once told me, "assessment is asking whether my students are learning what I am teaching."

Such questions are not new, they are not easy, and most of all they are not questions that can be answered by "someone else." They are faculty questions. Ironically, however, they have not been questions that naturally arise in the daily work of the professoriate or, say, in department meetings, which are more likely to deal with parking and schedules than with student learning. Literary scholar Gerald Graff (2006) has written about the skill with which academics in his field manage to side step such conversations—which, admittedly, can become difficult, take a wrong turn, or bog down, generating a good deal of proverbial heat and not much light.

But listening to the voices of faculty who have taken on assessment's questions with colleagues, the power of the process is clear. In interviews conducted as part of the work of the AAHE Assessment Forum, for instance, my colleague Ted Marchese and I heard over and over about assessment's power to prompt collective faculty conversation about purposes, often for the first time; about discovering the need to be more explicit about goals for student learning; about finding better ways to know whether those goals are being met; and about shaping and sharing feedback that can strengthen student learning. As a professor of English at the University of Virginia told us, although he did not wholly

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1 In preparing this paper, I returned to a 1990 *Change* magazine article I co-authored with Ted Marchese, my colleague at the AAHE and its vice president. Ted's view of assessment has deeply influenced my own, and I am grateful to him for thinking with me over the years about many of the issues I deal with here.

endorse its work, the university's assessment steering committee was worth sticking with because "it's the only place on campus I can find an important conversation about what students are learning" (Hutchings & Marchese, 1990, p. 23). Such conversations are important in and of themselves, but they matter, too, because they set the stage for the larger cycle of assessment work: designing and selecting instruments and approaches, grappling with evidence, and using results to make changes that actually help students achieve the goals and purposes faculty believe are most important.

All of this is by way of saying that assessment has deep-seated educational roots. A number of forces propelled assessment's arrival on the higher education landscape, certainly, but among the most notable was the 1984 report, *Involvement in Learning*, by the National Institute of Education's (NIE) Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, which called on undergraduate education to 1) set high expectations, 2) involve students in their learning, and 3) assess and give feedback for improvement. Assessment was seen first and foremost as an educational practice, and its champions—like Alexander Astin, who served on the NIE study group—held up a vision of educational quality based not on reputation and resources but on the institution's contribution to learning—and, therefore, on the work of students and faculty.

Assessment…became identified with a group of actors outside academe whose patronage cast a pall over its possibilities within the academy. From the faculty point of view, this looked a lot like someone else's agenda—and not an altogether friendly someone else, at that.

Obstacles to Greater Involvement

While the role of assessment in learning has had and continues to have eloquent and prestigious proponents, it has also attracted other, perhaps louder, patrons from its earliest days in higher education. In 1986 the National Governor's Association (NGA) embraced the idea in a report tellingly entitled *Time for Results*. A key figure in this initiative was Governor John Ashcroft of Missouri, whose state motto, "Show Me," captured the tone of policy makers tired of what they saw as higher education's sense of entitlement and asking for proof and accountability. In fairness, it should be said that external calls for assessment took a range of forms in the early years, and many of them were sensible and well intentioned. Alverno College's much-touted model of assessment in the service of individual student learning (which was prominently featured in the NGA report) captured the imagination of some policy makers, and the general trend as mandates began to emerge at the state level was toward guidelines that invited, or at least permitted, campus engagement and invention connected to local curriculum and teaching. Nevertheless, the bottom line was that assessment, from its earliest days, became identified with a group of actors outside academe whose patronage cast a pall over its possibilities within the academy. From the faculty point of view, this looked a lot like someone else's agenda—and not an altogether friendly someone else, at that.

But governors and external mandates have only been part of the scenario. Obstacles to fuller faculty involvement in assessment have been encountered in several directions, including that of higher education itself.

First, for many faculty the language of assessment has been less than welcoming. While some observers—attempting to make a virtue of necessity—have pointed out that the word's etymology comes from

"sitting down beside" (in acts of coaching and feedback between teacher and student), louder to most ears have been echoes of less congenial activities: accounting, testing, evaluation, measurement, benchmarking, and so forth—language from business and education, not the most respected fields on most campuses. As a group assembled for a Teagle Foundation "listening" on assessment observed, "If one endorsed the idea that, say, a truly successful liberal arts education is transformative or inspires wonder, the language of inputs and outputs and 'value added' leaves one cold" (Struck, 2007, p. 2). In short, it is striking how quickly assessment can come to be seen as part of "the management culture" (Walvoord, 2004, p. 7) rather than as a process at the heart of faculty's work and interactions with students.

A second obstacle to fuller faculty involvement has been that faculty are not trained in assessment. Put simply, graduate education aims to develop scholarly expertise in one's field. While forward-looking doctoral programs are now beginning to treat teaching as a more prominent part of professional formation, it remains true that reflecting on educational purposes, formulating learning goals, designing assignments and exams, and using data for improvement are activities that live, if at all, only on the far margins of most Ph.D. students' experience. Nor has assessment had a central place in professional development experiences for faculty. Early in the higher education assessment movement most campus teaching centers kept student outcomes assessment at arm's length, wary of mixing their (almost completely voluntary) services with an enterprise associated with mandates and evaluation. This has begun to change (as noted below) but, meanwhile, faculty who might have been interested in assessment have had no ready place or opportunity to learn about it. Especially as assessment conversations turn technical—as they do, perhaps prematurely—faculty, for whom expertise is a premier value, have bowed out, not wanting to be seen as amateurs and dilettantes. This dynamic has likely been exacerbated when the campus, for good reasons, establishes an assessment office and specialized staff to manage it, almost by definition marginalizing "regular" faculty.

A third obstacle to faculty involvement has been that the work of assessment is an uneasy match with institutional reward systems. It is important not to overgeneralize here. On some campuses, particularly those where teaching is the central mission, assessment has been recognized and valued as part of the faculty role, either as an aspect of teaching or (as in the case of faculty sitting on an assessment planning or advisory committee) as valued institutional service. In many higher education settings, however, assessment, like teaching more generally, has often been undervalued or invisible in promotion and tenure deliberations, a circumstance that has certainly not encouraged faculty to see assessment as their work.

Fourth, and finally, it may be that faculty have not yet seen sufficient evidence that assessment makes a difference. There's a chicken-and-egg dynamic at work here; more faculty involvement would presumably make a bigger difference. But the fact remains that the benefits of assessment are uncertain and that faculty facing rising demands on their time and energy must make choices. Not choosing assessment, after all, may be a rational decision. Indeed, assessment is seen as "redundant" on many campuses, duplicating already existing processes and not yielding additional benefits (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009, p. 9). Similarly,

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as evidenced by numerous reports over the years, many campuses have succeeded in "doing assessment" but have fallen short in using the results to make changes in the educational experience of their students (Carey, 2007; Hutchings & Marchese, 1990; Lopez, 1998). Faculty perceptions reflect this shortfall, as shown in data from the 2009 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement; while 75 percent of respondents indicated their campuses were involved in assessment "quite a bit" or "very much," only about a third had positive views of the dissemination and usefulness of assessment findings (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2009, pp. 21–22). Indeed, there is now a growing awareness that the neat logic of "data-driven improvement" is much easier to invoke than to enact (Bond, 2009); a recently announced initiative of the Spencer Foundation, for instance, "questions the assumption that the simple presence of data invariably leads to improved outcomes and performance, and that those who are presented information under data-driven improvement schemes will know how best to make sense of it and transform their practice" (see www.spencer.org). Faculty who are already and increasingly pressed in too many directions would be readier to join the assessment process, one might surmise, if its benefits were easier to see.

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Developments to Build On

The four obstacles to faculty involvement in assessment noted above were in place for the most part when assessment first appeared on the higher education scene in the mid-1980s, and they are still in force today. But it is not true, despite metaphors of graveyards and slow-turning ships, that there is nothing new under the higher education sun. A number of recent developments may be creating a more hospitable climate for a faculty role in assessment.

At the most general level is the growth of attention to teaching and learning. Traditionally less visible and valued than other aspects of academic life in higher education, the profile of pedagogy has clearly risen over the last two decades. In 1999, for instance, my Carnegie Foundation colleague Mary Huber set out to map the various forms and forums for exchange about matters pedagogical. "What has been surprising to us," she reported,

> is not only how *many* forums there are right now for this exchange, but how surprised people seem to be to find this out. In other words, what we are finding appears to be at odds with the prevailing stereotype that there has been little investment of intellectual interest and energy in teaching and learning in higher education. Perhaps in comparison to traditional research this is so, but the field of teaching and learning in higher education is far more active (if not very evenly distributed) than many might think. (Huber, 1999, p. 3)

In short, higher education, here in the U.S. and internationally, has seen a huge rise in the number of campus events, conferences, special initiatives, funded projects, journals, online forums, and multimedia resources shining a light on faculty's work as teachers. Assessment, in its broadest and most important sense of making judgments about student learning, has been a part of this expanding "teaching commons" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005), creating a more generous space for faculty engagement with campus assessment activities.

Within this general phenomenon one also finds the growth of more focused communities around specific pedagogies (service learning, problem-based learning, undergraduate research, and so forth) and the teaching and learning of particular fields (chemical education, for example, or the teaching of writing). As champions of their chosen approach, these communities have naturally turned to assessment-like activities for evidence of impact and to shape next steps. External funding for these efforts has, increasingly, mandated such data gathering, and the notion that educational reform should be informed by evidence has become a commonplace—so much so, in fact, that talking about teaching without invoking learning has become a sort of anathema.

At the same time, and running hand in hand with these developments, has been the rise of the scholarship of teaching and learning, a movement that has gained significant momentum over the past decade. Over 250 campuses have been involved in the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL, running from 1998–2009), and many more campuses in the U.S. and beyond have embraced this agenda. Today, growing numbers of faculty from a full range of fields and all institutional types are posing and investigating questions about their students' learning, using what they discover to improve their own classrooms and to contribute to a body of knowledge others can build on. Such work has become an entrée for those who perhaps would not be drawn to assessment but feel welcomed by the idea of seeing their teaching and their students' learning as sites for scholarly inquiry—particularly in a community of like-minded educators interested in learning from their findings. A 2009 survey of CASTL campuses indicates that such work, even when involving relatively small numbers of faculty, brings energy and openness to institutional assessment activities:

> The scholarship of teaching and learning is often mentioned [in the Carnegie survey] as having had an effect on assessment. Departments where faculty have been engaged in inquiry into the students' experience understand learning outcomes better because "they have assessed student learning in their classrooms," and are "noticeably less hostile to institutional assessment." Respondents also noted specific programs (the first-year experience, general education) and majors (biology) where scholarship of teaching and learning work has been woven into assessment approaches. (Ciccone, Huber, Hutchings, & Cambridge, 2009, p. 9)

Clearly there are productive bridge-building possibilities here, as the scholarship of teaching and learning and assessment share overlapping agendas, practices, and institutional constituencies and as growing faculty involvement in the former shifts understandings of the latter to more clearly align assessment with what faculty actually do as teachers.

Moreover, this kind of serious, intellectual work on teaching and learning is making its way—albeit slowly—into campus practices and policies related to faculty roles and rewards. In a 2002 AAHE national survey, two thirds of chief academic officers reported changes "to encourage and reward a broader definition of scholarship" (O'Meara, 2005, p. 261). It is no accident that for more than a decade the assessment conversation in this country ran in parallel with an energetic national conversation

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about faculty roles and rewards. That conversation had waned somewhat by the time the AAHE Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards concluded a number of years ago, but the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) has since stepped in with new leadership—organizing conferences on the topic and recommending in its much-circulated *Framework for Accountability* that "campus reward systems should incorporate the importance of faculty members' intellectual and professional leadership in both assessment and educational improvement" (p. 12). One route to this end is the work of the Peer Review of Teaching Project (PRTP)—a national initiative promoting the use of course portfolios—a tool "that combines inquiry into the intellectual work of a course, careful investigation of student understanding and performance, and faculty reflection on teaching effectiveness" (not a bad definition of assessment at its best). The PRTP has engaged hundreds of faculty members from numerous universities, many of whose course portfolios can be found at http://www.courseportfolio.org[.] These artifacts and the review processes they make possible are raising the profile of inquiry into learning and teaching, by whatever name, and setting the conditions in which such work can be rewarded, as other forms of scholarship are.

Finally, the climate for faculty involvement in assessment is becoming more hospitable with the emergence of new tools and technologies. A wider range of instruments is now available—beyond the small set of standardized tests most visible in assessment's first decade—and some of these are clearly more related to the tasks and assignments that faculty require of students in their own classrooms. The Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), for instance, forgoes reductive multiple-choice formats in favor of authentic tasks that would be at home in the best classrooms; CLA leaders now offer workshops to help faculty design similar tasks for their own classrooms, the idea being that these activities are precisely what students need to build and improve their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. The widely used National Survey of Student Engagement, and its cousin, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, document the extent to which students engage in educational practices associated with high levels of learning and development—practices like frequent writing, service learning and discussing ideas with faculty outside of class. Electronic student portfolios, which over the last decade have become widespread on all kinds of campuses, now provide a vehicle for bringing the regular work of the classroom under the assessment umbrella in manageable ways (see, for example, Miller & Morgaine, 2009). Some campuses are now employing online data management systems, like E-Lumen and TracDat, that invite faculty input into and access to assessment data (Hutchings, 2009). With developments like these facilitating faculty interest and engagement in ways impossible (or impossibly time consuming or technical) in assessment's early days, new opportunities are on the rise.

Obstacles, it's true, are also on the rise. On campuses across the nation, the picture is hardly rosy. Cutbacks are everywhere; faculty are increasingly stressed and pressed, with many more in part-time, contingent positions; and higher education is seen by some as "underachieving" (Bok, 2006), failing many of the students who need it most. The point here is not that faculty involvement in assessment will now be easy but that there have been developments to build on going forward.

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Opening Doors to Faculty Involvement: Six Recommendations

In this spirit, now may well be a good time for campuses to survey their full range of assessment activities, recognizing that not all of them use the language of assessment and that they come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Having the fullest possible picture in view may suggest new ways to encourage faculty activity where it already exists, to support it where it is emergent, and to think harder about where and exactly how the scarce resource of faculty time and talent can be best deployed. The following six recommendations may serve as keys—opening doors to faculty involvement in assessment.

Embedding assessment in the classroom sets the stage for work at the next level of the department or program, contexts which draw on what most members of the professoriate know and care most about: their discipline or field.

1. Build Assessment Around the Regular, Ongoing Work of Teaching and Learning

Assessment should grow out of faculty's questions about their students' learning and the regular, ongoing work of teaching: syllabus and curriculum design, the development of assignments and classroom activities, the construction of exams, and the provision of feedback to students. These kinds of closer-to-the-classroom connections can help to move assessment "away from the center, and out to the capillary level," as one group of practitioners suggested, making it more "centrifugal" (Struck, 2007, p. 2).

This injunction to build assessment around faculty's regular work in the classroom has been part of assessment's gospel from the beginning, but doing so has often gone against the grain, as campus assessment practices were consciously separated from what went on in the classroom (Ewell, 2009). In the face of this disconnect, campuses could hardly find a better place to begin (or to resuscitate) assessment than by building on (rather than dismissing) the practice of grading—an approach advocated by Barbara Walvoord (2004). Starting, as it were, at "ground level"—with a practice in which every faculty member is engaged every semester in every class for every student—can bring to the fore important questions about course design, assignments and exams, and feedback to students, which is arguably an aspect of assessment that would benefit from much more attention—and where faculty interests and talents would be particularly to the point. A focus on grading and feedback would also address the long-standing problem of student motivation by assuring that assessment does indeed "count" in ways that elicit students' best work.

Embedding assessment in the classroom then sets the stage for work at the next level of the department or program, contexts which draw on what most members of the professoriate know and care most about: their discipline or field. Those seeking to engage more faculty more fully in assessment would do well to invite and explore questions about how students "decode the disciplines" (Pace & Middendorf, 2004) and learn "disciplinary habits of mind" (Garung, Chick, & Haynie, 2008)—to quote from the titles of two recent volumes that map this terrain. When assessment reflects and respects disciplinary interests—recognizing, for example, that learning history is not the same as learning music or chemistry—it is more likely to lead to consequential faculty engagement. Assessment, one might say, must live where faculty live, in the classrooms where they teach the field they love.

2. Make a Place for Assessment in Faculty Development

Over the last several decades many campuses (research universities, first, but now a much broader swath) have established teaching and learning centers that offer a broad array of instructional improvement opportunities—and assessment can be an integral part of their work.

Signs of movement in this direction are increasingly evident. Nancy Chism, a national leader in the faculty development community, argues that teaching improves through "naturally occurring cycles of inquiry" in which faculty plan, act, observe, and reflect. Teaching center staff support this process, she says, by assisting faculty with data collection and by suggesting instruments and methods for obtaining "good information on the impact of teaching" (Chism, 2008, n.p.). Bringing faculty together around such evidence, facilitating constructive conversations about its meaning and implications, setting local efforts in the context of a larger body of research—these are important roles that many teaching centers are now taking up, roles that strengthen the growing sense of community around pedagogy and a shared commitment to evidence.

In this same spirit, many centers offer small grants to faculty trying out a new classroom approach, and some now require them to assess the impact of their innovation on student learning and to share what they have learned in campus events, seminars, and conferences or in online representations of their work. While there's a danger in linking such work too closely to the machinery of institutional assessment (turning an intellectual impulse into a bureaucratic requirement), most faculty are eager to see their work contribute to something larger, and teaching centers can play an important brokering role in this regard, developing faculty habits of inquiry and evidence use that are the *sine qua non* of assessment—and essential to good teaching, as well. In short, assessment should be central to professional development.

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3. Build Assessment into the Preparation of Graduate Students

This recommendation is part and parcel of the previous one (teaching centers often serve graduate students as well as faculty), but it bears highlighting separately as well, especially since signs of progress in this area are beginning to appear.

The chemistry department at the University of Michigan, for instance, offers a program of study for graduate students interested in a more sustained experience in teaching, curriculum design, and assessment. The multicampus, NSF-funded Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CIRTL) (see www.cirtl.net), coordinated by the University of Wisconsin–Madison, trains STEM graduate students and postdocs to bring their investigative skills as researchers to their work as teachers. The Teagle Foundation has recently funded a number of similar efforts, some on individual campuses and one—through the Council of Graduate Schools—tellingly entitled "Preparing Future Faculty to Assess Student Learning Outcomes" (see www.teaglefoundation.org/grantmaking/grantees/gradschool.aspx).

These examples are still the exception, admittedly, but they show what is possible. Weaving assessment into courses and experiences designed to prepare beginning scholars for their future work as educators is a promising step forward, with long-term benefits as today's graduate students become tomorrow's faculty members and campus leaders.

4. Reframe the Work of Assessment as Scholarship

As scholars, faculty study all manner of artifacts and phenomena; their students' learning should be seen as an important site for investigation, as well. Creating a place (and incentives) for greater faculty involvement in assessment means seeing such work not simply as service or as good campus citizenship but as an important intellectual enterprise—a form of scholarship reflecting faculty's professional judgment about the nature of deep understanding of their field and about how such understanding is developed.

In this sense, assessment would do well to find common cause with the scholarship of teaching and learning. This must be done carefully, given the different impulses and motivations behind each, but as noted above the two movements can strengthen each other. Thus, for starters, campus leaders of assessment and those charged with advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning should explore shared agendas and practices. A parallel discussion between these two communities would be beneficial at the national level as well—for example, by including leaders from the scholarship of teaching and learning community at assessment conferences, and vice versa.

Also needed is continued attention to the development and use of new forms, formats, and genres for capturing the scholarly work of teaching, learning, and assessment. The course portfolio model mentioned above is perhaps pre-eminent in this regard, with a growing community of users trading artifacts, reviewing one another's evidence and reflections, and putting their materials forward in both formative and summative decision-making settings (Bernstein, Burnett, Goodburn, & Savory, 2006). But portfolios are only one possibility, and inventing other ways for faculty engaged in assessment—be it in their own classroom or beyond—to document and share their work in ways that can be reviewed, built on, and rewarded is a critical step forward that can help propel and reenergize the larger conversation about faculty roles and rewards.

5. Create Campus Spaces and Occasions for Constructive Assessment Conversation and Action

Behind many of the long-standing challenges of assessment is a more fundamental reality: that teaching and learning have traditionally been seen and undertaken as private activities, occurring behind classroom doors both literally and metaphorically closed. As noted above, this reality has shifted significantly in recent years, as teaching and learning have become topics of widespread interest, debate, and inquiry. Campuses seeking to engage more faculty more deeply with assessment must find ways to create such opportunities—and there are now many possibilities and models.

Behind many of the long-standing challenges of assessment is a more fundamental reality: that teaching and learning have traditionally been seen and undertaken as private activities, occurring behind classroom doors both literally and metaphorically closed.

Some readers will recall, as an example of such opportunities, the Harvard Assessment Seminars from the 1990's, sponsored by Derek Bok, led and reported on by Richard Light, and involving a large group of notable educators from across the university (and a few from nearby institutions as well) in gathering and acting on evidence about a range of widely relevant questions about undergraduate learning (Light, 1990, 1991). On the more modest side, departments can set aside time in their regular meetings to examine issues of teaching and learning or set up teaching circles specifically dedicated to such work. Other possibilities include multidisciplinary reading and study groups (perhaps facilitated by a teaching center), faculty learning communities and inquiry groups (Cox & Richlin, 2004; Huber, 2008), and, importantly, opportunities to interact and share findings with peers beyond the institution, as faculty expect to do in other types of scholarly work.

Bringing students more actively into the processes of assessment may well be the most powerful route to greater faculty engagement.

6. Involve Students in Assessment

If faculty have been less than enthusiastic about assessment, it is not for lack of caring about their students' learning. Indeed, bringing students more actively into the processes of assessment may well be the most powerful route to greater faculty engagement.

One relevant line of work in this vein is student self-assessment—providing the tools and frameworks that allow learners to monitor and direct their own development. Alverno College is arguably the pioneer in this arena, but there are many recent efforts as well, including AAC&U's push for "intentional learning" (AAC&U, 2002); the widespread use of e-portfolios as a vehicle for students to reflect on and to direct their own progress (Yancy, 2009); the creation of rubrics that can serve as frameworks for students to assess their own learning (Rhodes, 2010; Walvoord, 2004); and the interest in approaches that develop students' metacognitive abilities (see, for instance, Strategic Literacy Initiative, 2007). Similarly, working under the banner of the scholarship of teaching and learning, a number of campuses have invented vehicles for involving students in campus conversations about and studies of teaching and learning, arguing that they should be collaborators and co-inquirers (not simply objects of study) and that they can make distinctive contributions to classroom research projects, curricular evaluation and revision, and institutional ethnography (Werder & Otis, 2010).

Efforts like these speak to the role of students as agents of their own learning, but in a larger sense they are also steps toward making the campus an organization in which all members, top to bottom and across the institution, are focused on improvement—and where evidence and reflection are part of the routines of daily life. These routines must be developed across the campus at multiple levels—from the institution, to the program, to the course and classroom where they manifest themselves in the relationship between faculty and students and in cycles of learning, assessment, feedback, and further learning. Situating assess-

ment within those cycles is the key to faculty involvement and to making assessment—at all levels—a more positive and consequential process.

Many Doors to Faculty Involvement

Behind all of the above recommendations is a broader one: that there is no single best way to support greater faculty engagement with assessment. Significant numbers of faculty have been involved, and more will enter into the work if opportunities present themselves in appealing, doable forms aligned with faculty's interests, talents, time, and values. For some faculty, assessment will be done primarily in the context of their own teaching—by gathering evidence, for instance, about the impact of a classroom innovation or a new application of technology and using what is discovered to improve students' learning; this work matters and it should be acknowledged and shared more broadly in ways that are appropriate. Other faculty will be engaged by efforts at the department or program level, perhaps through a curricular reform effort in which assessment will play a part; again, this work should be seen and acknowledged as contributing to the campus's efforts to use evidence to prompt reflection, innovation, and improvement. Some faculty will find through their assessment activities new scholarly interests and communities that will change their career directions in major ways; others will discover more bounded ways to contribute. Whatever the focus or commitment, the need for significant investments of faculty time are likely to be higher in assessment's early stages, declining as experience is gained and as processes become more integrated into regular work.

There is no single best way to support greater faculty engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Making all contributions—large or small, sustained or episodic, early or later in the process—more visible and valued, and opening a variety of doors to assessment, is a critical step forward. In this spirit, campus leaders may need to think more broadly and more creatively about where and how faculty can be involved most productively in the work of assessment—matching tasks to talents, needs to interests, and remembering, above all, that assessment is only a part of the larger enterprise of improvement in higher education.

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NILOA Mission

NILOA's primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

NILOA Occasional Paper Series

NILOA Occasional Papers are commissioned to examine contemporary issues that will inform the academic community of the current state-of-the art of assessing learning outcomes in American higher education. The authors are asked to write for a general audience in order to provide comprehensive, accurate information about how institutions and other organizations can become more proficient at assessing and reporting student learning outcomes for the purposes of improving student learning and responsibly fulfilling expectations for transparency and accountability to policy makers and other external audiences.

Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to niloa@education.illinois.edu.

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 web site went live on February 11, 2009. www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- The NILOA research team reviewed 725 institution web sites for learning outcomes assessment transparency from March 2009 to August 2009.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, 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. He is currently serving as Interim President of the University of Illinois.
- Peter Ewell joined NILOA as a senior scholar in November 2009.

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National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

November 2009

Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement:

Revisiting the Tension

Peter T. Ewell

Foreword by George D. Kuh

Occasional Paper #1

learningoutcomesassessment.org

About the Author

Dr. Peter Ewell

Dr. Ewell is the Vice President at the National Center for Higher Educa-tion Management Systems (NCHEMS), a research and development center founded to improve the management effectiveness of colleges and universi-ties. A member of the staff since 1981, Dr. Ewell's work focuses on assessing institutional effectiveness and the outcomes of college, and involves both research and direct consulting with institutions and state systems on collecting and using assessment information in planning, evaluation, and budgeting. He has directed many projects on this topic, including initiatives funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the National Institute for Educa-tion, the Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education, and The Pew Charitable Trusts. In addition, he has consulted with over 375 colleges and universities and more than thirty state or national governments internationally on topics including assessment, program review, enrollment management, and student retention. Dr. Ewell has authored seven books and numerous articles on the topic of improving undergraduate instruction through the assessment of student outcomes.

A graduate of Haverford College, he received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Yale University in 1976 and was on the faculty of the University of Chicago.

No one is more qualifed than Peter Ewell to author the inaugural paper in the NILOA Occasional Paper Series.

—George Kuh

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Contents

Abstract

Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the Tension

Many of the same tensions that characterized the accountability and improvement purposes of student learning outcomes assessment when the assessment movement began in the mid-1980s still exist today. In this paper I examine these tensions and how they can be managed, if not completely resolved. First, I outline the major relevant changes affecting the assessment movement that have occurred in higher education over the past two decades. These include the perceived legitimacy of assessment today, the demand by policymakers for better and more transparent information about student and institutional performance, the press by accreditors on institutions to collect and use student learning outcomes data, and the availability of more and better assessment instruments and approaches.

Then, I describe and analyze the conceptual incongruities between the accountability and improvement assessment paradigms. Adopting either of these two perspectives affects institutional choices about what and how to assess, how to organize assessment tasks and strategies, and how to communicate assessment results. As with all ideal types, the differences between these two contrasting opposing paradigms of assessment are exaggerated, and rarely does an existing assessment approach fully conform to either one. The next section discusses the major external players in higher education that have stimulated institutions to engage in assessment and the kinds of information about performance on which they do or should focus. The groups include state government agencies, the federal government, regional and specialized accreditors, and the public interest represented by consumer demand for information and third party judgments (e.g., rankings) about institutional performance. I close by discussing four principles to help guide institutions in successfully dealing with the tensions between improvement and accountability and the sometime competing interests of internal and external stakeholders: (1) respond visibly to domains of legitimate external concern; (2) show action on the results of assessment; (3) emphasize assessment at the major transition points in a college career; and (4) embed assessment in the regular curriculum.

Despite adhering to these principles and using other emerging promising practices, some elements of the accountability-improvement tension may be difficult to completely resolve. Nevertheless, because the stakes associated with institutional performance are so much higher for policy makers today, it is imperative that we make much more progress in collecting and using assessment results to improve and in communicating what we are doing more effectively to external audiences.

Foreword

Assessments of what students learn during college are typically used for one of two purposes – improvement or accountability. In the former, faculty members and other institutional personnel gather evidence about how well students are attaining intended course, program, or institution outcomes, and then use this information to improve student performance by modifying pedagogical approaches as well as institutional policies and practices. In this sense, assessment for improvement is essentially an internal matter. In contrast, assessment data collected for the purpose of accountability are used primarily to demonstrate that the institution is using its resources appropriately to help students develop the knowledge, skills, competencies, and dispositions required to function effectively in the 21st century. The information is typically intended for external audiences.

For reasons carefully outlined in this NILOA Occasional Paper, since the early days of the "assessment movement" in the US, these two purposes of outcomes assessment have not rested comfortably together. Indeed, the author of this paper, Peter Ewell, once characterized the relationship between assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability as a "contradiction." During an animated discussion of the NILOA National Advisory Panel in December, 2008, two points of consensus emerged related to these purposes of assessment. First, too many faculty, staff, and policy makers view improvement and accountability to be trains running on parallel tracks, without the promise of converging to an intersection that provides enriched answers to questions related to both purposes. The second point of consensus was that a fresh, informed, thoughtful analysis of the relationships between the improvement-accountability purposes could bring the two tracks closer together, if not resolve all the tensions their uses present.

No one is more qualified than Peter Ewell to author the inaugural paper in the NILOA Occasional Paper Series. And no one is better prepared than Peter to flesh out the factors and perspectives that contribute to what for several decades has been interpreted at best as an uneasy relationship between the twin purposes of assessment and at worst the contradiction that fuels suspicion among skeptical faculty about whether assessment can be a lever for improved student learning and, therefore, worthy of their time and energy. He has written multiple papers on assessment, contributed to numerous policy and professional meeting discussions including participating on the working group that produced the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning in 1992, and presently sits on several advisory boards that are guiding initiatives that bear directly and indirectly on the assessment agenda. In addition to his role as vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, Ewell is a NILOA Senior Scholar and was an original member of NILOA's National Advisory Panel.

In this paper, Ewell draws on his quarter century of experience as a participant-observer and chronicler of the assessment movement to summarize what has changed and what has not over the past two decades in terms of the assessment of student learning and the shifting expectations and demands of policy makers, accreditors, higher education leaders, and government officials about student and institutional performance. After delineating how various kinds of information can and should be used for improvement and accountability, he points to ways that institutions can productively manage the persistent tensions associated with improvement and accountability as faculty and staff members do the important work of documenting, reporting, and using what students have learned and can do as a result of their college experience.

George D. Kuh
Chancellor's Professor and Director
NILOA and Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research

Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the Tension

Peter T. Ewell

Adopting either one of these two perspectives will decisively influence institutional choices about what and how to assess, how to organize assessment, and how to communicate assessment results.

My files have a paper, *Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Managing the Contradiction* (Ewell, 1987), that I prepared for the Third National Assessment Forum of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) in 1987. Twenty-two years later, that organization and the conference for which it was prepared no longer exist, but the points I made then seem alarmingly current. On the one hand, this is depressing. After almost a quarter century and a lot of disputation and spilled ink on assessment, we might have expected more progress—or at least more nuance and sophistication when the topic is discussed. On the other hand, the apparent timelessness of these issues suggests they are hard and important—factors prompting their re-examination. This paper, commissioned by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), at the invitation of George Kuh and Stan Ikenberry, is my attempt to do so.

This paper follows the general logic of the earlier work by first presenting the conceptual tensions between assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement. Adopting either one of these two perspectives will decisively influence institutional choices about what and how to assess, how to organize assessment, and how to communicate assessment results. My current reflections on these conceptual issues—drawn from several papers I have published on these topics in the intervening years—constitute the second main section of the present paper. The third section discusses the major external players in higher education that have stimulated institutions to engage in assessment by looking at their basic interests and the kinds of information about performance that they are, or should be, looking for. In the fourth section, I offer advice for how institutions can navigate the sometimes competing tensions between improvement and accountability. Before doing any of this, though, I briefly outline how the contours of the higher education landscape have changed since the late 1980s in ways that will affect the topic.

What Has Changed?

In 1987, the so-called "assessment movement" in U.S. higher education was less than five years old. It had in part been stimulated by a combination of curriculum reform reports that called for greater curricular coherence, the use of powerful pedagogies known to be associated with high learning gains,[1] and knowledge about student outcomes and experiences (Ewell, 2002). But it had also been given impetus by the growing interests of state governments in using newly available tests and surveys to demonstrate return on investment. These were the roots, more than 25 years ago, of the tension between assessment's use for accountability and its use for internal improvement—a tension that has dogged assessment ever since. Most of the central elements of this tension remain with us today. But the passage of a quarter century has also changed much of the environment within which these elements and the tension play out. Among the most important of these changes have been the following:

[1] Summarized that year as the famous Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Learning (Chickering & Gamson,1987).

- ***Perceived Legitimacy.*** Although assessment probably remains distasteful for many faculty members, it is angrily rejected far less frequently than it was 20 years ago. The majority of academics now realize that engaging in assessment has become a condition of doing business for colleges and universities because of accreditation requirements and the need to show results to taxpayers and potential customers. All of them may not want to engage in assessment themselves, but they are willing to accord the activity a legitimacy that was not forthcoming two decades ago. This is no small thing, because it means that the sharpest tension embedded in assessment's purposes is less apparent today. The question has become more about what kinds of assessment to engage in and under whose control than about whether or not to engage in it at all. Meanwhile, a sizeable minority of faculty have wholeheartedly embraced assessment as useful in improving undergraduate instruction—a constituency of adherents that did not exist a quarter century ago. Many of these faculty are in disciplines where, because of programmatic accreditation requirements, assessment practices are common—disciplines like teacher education, engineering, and the health professions. Buy-in among these groups has also been helped by the growing availability of evidence-gathering approaches like classroom research and surveys of student engagement that provide immediately useful feedback about instructional practices.

- ***New Policy Centrality of Higher Education***. The broader policy environment for higher education has also shifted substantially since 1987. Arguably, at that time the perceived need among policy makers to raise average citizens' levels of educational attainment was less urgent than in today's world, where the competitive position of the U.S. with respect to educational attainment is beginning to slip (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008). As reflected in President Obama's ambitious goal of 60 percent of U.S. young adults with a college credential, higher education is seen by virtually all opinion leaders as more important than ever before. And this perceived centrality is bipartisan and deep. The sentiments expressed in the report of the "Spellings Commission" (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) are shared widely across the policy and business communities and will continue to press higher education for accountability in ways that were inconceivable two decades ago. The central leitmotifs of this new accountability environment are transparency and learning outcomes. Colleges and universities are being asked to disclose more and more about academic results and are responding in kind. Most now realize that it will be impossible to sit out the latest round of pressure for accountability with the hope that it will eventually go away. The current choice is between proactively taking responsibility for demonstrating accountability on the academy's own terms or passively having requirements dictated from the outside with little or no control.

- ***From States to Accreditors as External Stimuli.*** Two decades ago, the principal actors external to colleges and universities requiring attention to assessment were state governments. Proactive mandates in such states as Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington unfolded in a largely benign fiscal environment. After a few rough bouts with standardized testing, state leaders were persuaded that assessment approaches allowing institutions to set their own goals for student learning and to develop institution-specific (therefore non-comparable) methods for gathering evidence of their achievement could both aid improvement and should be sufficient to discharge accountability—so long as institutions acted in good faith to collect the evidence and actually use it. Meanwhile, regional accreditors had entered the assessment arena, and by the early 1990s all of them had standards requiring "institutional effectiveness" or "assessment" that looked a good deal like the state mandates of the prior decade (Ewell, 2002).[2] By this time, most states had

The most important changes in the assessment movement have been the following:

- *Perceived Legitimacy*
- *New Policy Centraility of Higher Education*
- *From States to Accreditors as External Stimuli*
- *Assessment Technology*

[2] A similar progression occurred with most of the specialized accreditors over the same time period that produced even more development in the fields affected—engineering, education, business, and the health professions.

stopped enforcing their mandates because of both budget constraints and a movement of attention toward performance funding and higher degree-completion rates. This shift from state governments to regional accreditors as the locus of external stimulus for assessment has had important implications. One is that independent institutions are as affected as public institutions. Because of its peculiar position as an "accountability" actor jointly owned by the academy and the federal government, moreover, accreditation can buffer the assessment-for-accountability relationship in ways not available to governmental regulation and can simultaneously promote improvement (Ewell, 2008b).

- ***Assessment Technology.*** In 1987, only a handful of instruments were available designed specifically to assess the effectiveness of undergraduate education. As a result, most institutions engaging in assessment used a mixture of surveys (both commercial and home-grown) and a collection of cognitive examinations like the ACT Assessment or the Graduate Record Examination that were designed for something else. Those purpose-built instruments that were available (with the exception of the pioneering long form of the ACT College Outcomes Measures Project), moreover, were standardized multiple-choice tests deemed inappropriately narrow and under-nuanced by most college faculty. Mandated use of such "philistine" approaches was thus doubly unpalatable. Today, in contrast, campuses engaging in assessment have a range of choices generally more acceptable to faculty. These include "authentic" or task-based assessments using constructed-response formats like the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), approaches using actual student work products or artifacts (increasingly compiled in electronic portfolios), "embedded" assignments in regular courses periodically graded by rubric, and well-established surveys like the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that can inform instructional improvement directly. Using such approaches, of course, cannot in itself render externally mandated assessment comfortable for faculty, but it can mitigate the discomforts somewhat and allow faculty to learn something useful from assessment.

The changes in the landscape of higher education, while important, do not alter the fundamental terms of the "contradiction" I presented in 1987 between assessment's use for accountability and its use for improvement. The changes do serve, however, to complicate and modulate the relationships among the range of potential accountability actors. Most of these developments make the dichotomy itself a lot less stark. What was once a "contradiction" has in many ways become an embedded "tension"—never wholly resolvable, but to some extent responsive to institutional attention. On the other hand, because the stakes associated with higher education are so much higher for policy makers today, aggressive action on the accountability agenda is more likely and a proactive response on the part of the academy is more urgent.

Because the stakes associated with higher education are so much higher for policy makers today, aggressive action on the accountability agenda is more likely and a proactive response on the part of the academy is more urgent.

The Tension: Then and Now

The conflicting imperatives of accountability and improvement that formed the basis of my argument two decades ago remain substantially intact. Accountability requires the entity held accountable to demonstrate, with evidence, conformity with an established standard of process or outcome. The associated incentive for that entity is to look as good as possible, regardless of the underlying performance. Improvement, in turn, entails an opposite set of incentives. Deficiencies in performance must be faithfully detected and reported so they can be acted upon. Indeed, discovering deficiencies is one of the major objectives of assessment for improvement. The state mandates that constituted the assessment-as-accountability pole of the tension 20 years ago, in the main, had effects that were similar to assessment's most recent embodiment in the recommendations of the Spellings Commission: an institutional response oriented largely toward compliance and one typified by noticeable

faculty disengagement. The central conclusion of this dynamic, then as now, is that when institutions are presented with an intervention that is claimed to embody both accountability and improvement, accountability wins.

Twenty years ago there also was a good deal of complexity surrounding the tension that belied straightforward polar opposition. To begin with, virtually all of the states mandating assessment professed to be in the business of "improvement." Most eschewed standardized testing for this reason, rightly believing that the relatively few and largely acontextual numbers that testing generates would be ill-suited for informing instructional change. State assessment mandates also typically resulted in a bimodal distribution of institutional response. Most institutions complied, wrote plans, and "did assessment." But not much of what they did was connected to their regular planning, budgeting, and internal review activities. A few of them, though, embraced the process wholeheartedly, using the mandate to mobilize initial action but carrying assessment through multiple cycles unasked and driving it down to the lowest levels of the organization. So a lot of the tension between the polar opposites that I argued more than 20 years ago was more nuanced even then. How this dynamic plays out can also be affected by where when one sits in an organizational hierarchy—for example, the "accountability" dynamic can be as applicable to the relationship between a history professor and a dean as to that between a university president and a governor.

When institutions are presented with an intervention that is claimed to embody both accountability and improvement, accountability wins.

I have fleshed out elsewhere these different roles of assessment in two "paradigms" (Ewell, 2008b). These contrasting "ideal types" are worth describing again here, because the relationships between them can get complicated. The first, evolving from the "institution-centered" approach of the mid-1980s, can best be described as the "Improvement Paradigm." The second, derived from the early state mandates, can best be labeled the "Accountability Paradigm." Table 1 contrasts these two "ideal types" along a number of dimensions.

Table 1

Two Paradigms of Assessment

	Assessment for Improvement Paradigm	Assessment for Accountability Paradigm
Strategic Dimensions		
Intent	Formative (Improvement)	Summative (Judgment)
Stance	Internal	External
Predominant Ethos	Engagement	Compliance
Application Choices		
Instrumentation	Multiple/Triangulation	Standardized
Nature of Evidence	Quantitative and Qualitative	Quantitative
Reference Points	Over Time, Comparative, Established Goal	Comparative or Fixed Standard
Communication of Results	Multiple Internal Channels and Media	Public Communication
Uses of Results	Multiple Feedback Loops	Reporting

These contrasting conceptual pictures of assessment can be distinguished around two sets of descriptors—the first, "Strategic Dimensions," addresses purpose and strategy while the second, "Application Choices," addresses method and implementation. "Intent," the first heading under "Strategic Dimensions," describes what the process is designed to accomplish. Within the "Improvement Paradigm," the intent is to use the resulting information to enhance teaching and learning. Within the "Accountability Paradigm," in contrast, the intent is to use information to demonstrate to policy makers and the public that the enterprise they fund is effective and worth supporting. The second heading, "Stance," describes the standpoint from which evidence-gathering and application is undertaken. Within the "Improvement Paradigm," evidence is gathered and judged directly by practitioners (faculty and administrators) acting within the parameters of the teaching and learning process. Within the "Accountability Paradigm," evidence is gathered and judged from an external "objective" standpoint. The final heading, "Predominant Ethos," addresses the prevailing mentality surrounding assessment. Within the "Improvement Paradigm," the predominant ethos is a posture of engagement seeking continuous improvement and a "culture of evidence." Within the "Accountability Paradigm," the predominant ethos is a posture of institutional compliance, or at least the appearance of it.

These basic distinctions of purpose and strategy imply some important further distinctions in the way the assessment process is enacted. With respect to methods for gathering evidence, the "Improvement Paradigm" can embrace many kinds of evidence-gathering including standardized and faculty-designed examinations, capstone projects, demonstrations, portfolios, and specially designed assignments embedded in regular courses. But because its principal purpose is comparison, the "Accountability Paradigm" places greater reliance on standardized examinations and surveys. Similarly, assessment evidence under the "Improvement Paradigm" can be both quantitative and qualitative, while evidence under the "Accountability Paradigm" is almost exclusively quantitative. In parallel, the reference points used for judging results under the "Improvement Paradigm" can include tracking progress over time or against established institutional goals. It can also involve comparing results across units or for different kinds of students. For the "Accountability Paradigm," however, it is centered on comparisons across institutions or programs, or against fixed standards of performance. Multiple channels of communication are used to disseminate assessment results to a variety of internal constituents under the "Improvement Paradigm," while the "Accountability Paradigm" relies instead on transparent public reporting. Finally, assessment results are used primarily to guide intervention through the establishment of multiple feedback loops under the "Improvement Paradigm," while results are used in the "Accountability Paradigm" primarily to assure external stakeholders of the effectiveness of their investments through comparative reporting.

As is the case for all ideal types, the differences between these two opposing paradigms of assessment are exaggerated, and almost no existing assessment approach fully conforms to either of them. But this conceptual tool does serve to lay out some fundamental tensions embedded in the different ways of implementing assessment that have been with us from the beginning.

Appropriate Domains of Accountability: Who Owes What to Whom?

Assessment has been stimulated by many external actors over the last quarter century including states, the federal government, accrediting organizations, and various third-party organizations—each with its own specific interests in evidence on institutional and program performance. These differing interests, some of which have changed over time, must be distinguished and clearly

Assessment has been stimulated by many external actors over the last quarter century including states, the federal government, accrediting organizations, and various third-party organizations—each with its own specific interests in evidence on institutional and program performance.

understood as a prerequisite for developing a proper response by the academy.

The States. State governments, rather than the federal government, have primacy in the U.S. because they are the units of organization and funding for the higher education enterprise. State treasuries provide direct support for public colleges and universities and frequently provide funding indirectly to independent institutions through student aid programs. States also grant institutions of all kinds—public, independent, and proprietary—permission to operate in the first place through registration or licensure. These basic functions remain today just as they were in place a quarter century ago, but two things have changed. First, there is a whole lot less funding for anybody, due to increasingly tight state budget constraints. Second, states have begun to embrace a broader and more integrated approach to higher education policy that attempts to create a conscious "public agenda" for higher education (Ewell & Jones, 2006). Both of these have affected how states think about accountability and assessment.

With regard to money, the conventional wisdom has it that accountability goes up as money gets tight. This appears not to be panning out with respect to learning outcomes assessment, however.

With regard to money, the conventional wisdom has it that accountability goes up as money gets tight. This appears not to be panning out with respect to learning outcomes assessment, however. Most of the mandates enacted by more than two thirds of the states had by 1990 either fallen by the wayside entirely or were no longer enforced, and the handful of prominent statewide testing programs that commentators like me used to point to have mostly disappeared. Florida and Texas gave up their "gateway" testing programs a few years ago, and states like Arkansas, Colorado, Utah, and Wisconsin that for at least a couple of years in the 1990s had fielded statewide general education assessment programs abandoned them. Several states, including Missouri and West Virginia, have recently experimented with the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) as the "new kid on the block," but none has as yet repeated the effort[3] —probably because these programs are expensive and maintaining them requires spending a good deal of political capital in the face of substantial institutional opposition. Results-based performance does seem to have traction when it is tied to money, a natural linkage when funding is scarce. As a consequence, results-based performance funding schemes are enjoying something of a renaissance, albeit mostly in the realm of graduation-rate incentives. Tennessee remains the lone exception in employing several learning outcomes measures in its long-established performance funding scheme.

The "public agenda" imperative became popular largely through successive issues of *Measuring Up*, the 50-state "report card" on higher education performance issued biennially since 2000 by the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education. The basic change of perspective that *Measuring Up* embodied and promoted was from a view of higher education centered on institutions and what they do to one centered on the citizens of the state and how they benefit (Ewell & Jones, 2006). With respect to learning outcomes, this meant focusing attention less on how individual institutions perform with respect to learning and more on determining particular strengths and deficiencies in the "educational capital" of the state as a whole. *Measuring Up* consequently added a sixth "Student Learning" category to its five established grades in more measurable areas of higher education performance—and repeatedly assigned all states a grade of "Incomplete." This led to several attempts to operationalize the grade, the most prominent of which was a five-state demonstration project assessing both public and independent institutions on a range of general education examinations, licensure and admissions test results, and literacy measures (Miller & Ewell, 2005). Many states have subsequently adopted the "public agenda" model including its implied "educational capital" perspective in creating statewide goals. Although few have as yet measured anything in this vein, growing state interest in things like the Organization

[3] Some state systems of public institutions have also experimented with CLA including the California State University, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Texas systems.

for Economic Cooperation and Development's pilot test of an international student assessment in higher education suggests continuing interest. Statewide benchmark assessments in higher education comparable to K–12's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) might eventually be a legitimate outgrowth of this growing interest.

Other areas in which states retain a legitimate interest in institutional performance are less about student learning outcomes and include degree completion and job placement rates as well as evidence of effective performance in student transitions from high school to college and from one institution to another. Tracking both of these has become a good deal easier over the past two decades because of vast improvements in state student unit record database capacities (Ewell & Boeke, 2007). Measures of employment outcomes have also climbed steadily on the state policy agenda as most states have adopted a consciously articulated "grow the workforce" case for spending their scarce higher education dollars. Beyond this relatively short list, it remains in my view inappropriate for states to mandate the "how" of assessment in general education or in individual academic programs.

The Federal Government. This sector officially has only a limited role in higher education accountability. The U.S. Constitution contains no mention of federal responsibility for postsecondary education, so the major role in higher education policy making the federal government has assumed is both recent and indirect. When the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 created a large and lucrative apparatus for student financial assistance, it created the need for federal oversight. Taxpayer obligations, as well as sheer prudence, demanded that federal authorities determine that the institutions administering these funds were organizationally capable of doing so. As loan monies joined direct financial assistance, the need arose to determine if the programs students bought with these funds had a decent chance of placing graduates in jobs enabling them to repay what they had borrowed. Both of these functions could be checked directly by federal reporting through occasional audits and, when funds for vocational education increased substantially in the 1970s, through job placement statistics. The need for a more general assurance of quality initiated the sometimes active, and always awkward, relationship between the federal government and accreditation.

At least two episodes of active federal involvement in higher education quality assurance that predate the Spellings Commission should be noted (Ewell, 2002). The first was the National Education Goals process that began in 1989, almost yielding a higher education equivalent of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The second was the battle around the 1992 HEA reauthorization, which resulted in a strong resurgence of federal authority surrounding the so-called State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPREs).[4] It is the Spellings Commission, however, which despite being short-lived and having few of its recommendations enacted, appears to signal a decisive and probably long-term shift of responsibility for quality assurance toward the federal government.

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One simple reason for the growing federal role in higher education quality assurance is money. State support for public institutions (and for refilling student aid coffers in states that run such programs) is eroding. Federal dollars, meanwhile, are increasingly flowing to both public and private colleges and universities through larger federal financial aid programs (with bipartisan support and Spellings Commission recommendation) and, more recently, through the economic stimulus package. It is important to underscore the rationales behind these investments and what will probably be asked in return. The Bush administration's rationale for performance reporting was largely

[4] Full descriptions of the history of these ill-starred efforts can be found in Ewell, 2008a, chapter 4.

couched in consumer-economy terms: potential students and their parents would use outcomes information to help them shop for a college or university, and the effects of their choices on market forces would steer institutional behavior. While sharing this concern, looming larger for the Obama administration is the role of young-adult postsecondary attainment in supporting and raising the country's competitive position internationally. In this respect, the federal government has fully embraced the "public agenda" rhetoric the states pioneered in the last decade.

What does this mean for assessment? In the near term, Congressional prohibitions will remain in effect against prescribing national standards and associated assessments erected under the leadership of Senator Lamar Alexander in the wake of the Spellings controversy and written into the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA). With respect to student learning outcomes for the moment, this probably means a relatively free hand for colleges and universities so long as they clearly demonstrate responsiveness by visibly practicing assessment and publicly reporting its results. The primary exercise of the federal interest in quality assurance for the future, however, will increasingly be practiced indirectly through accreditation.

Accreditation. Regional accreditation in the U.S. began more than a century ago in an attempt to establish the boundaries of "higher" education in a rapidly expanding sector. Its programmatic counterpart developed in parallel with the rise of the professions as independent, self-regulating entities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[5] Among institutional accreditors, there was for a long time no specific interest in "student learning outcomes" beyond that implied by curricular structure and faculty qualifications. Among the latter, however, programmatic quality was frequently marked by more prescribed and outcomes-driven curricula and by graduate performance on established licensure examinations.

By the late 1980s, as the regional accreditors began to get interested in things like "institutional effectiveness," they gradually became a greater stimulus for institutions to practice assessment, but their treatment of the topic has historically centered much more visibly on continuous improvement than on accountability. Their requirements regarding assessment are, thus, largely about process: to ensure that the institution *has* valid and vital mechanisms for establishing and determining student achievement of key learning outcomes and to determine the extent to which the institution is *using* the resulting information to improve curricula and pedagogy.

In recent years, the role of institutional accreditation in promoting assessment has become far more complicated. On the surface—and overwhelmingly sincerely, I believe—both the rhetoric and the evolving practice of institutional accreditation is even more dedicated now than in the past to helping institutions enhance teaching and learning. Indeed, the decade preceding the Spellings Commission saw one of the most interesting and sustained periods of reform in accreditation, with not only a new focus on student learning outcomes but also with an unusually proactive effort to engage institutions through more flexible, inquiry-based review processes. Spearheaded by the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP), the three-stage review approach adopted by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' (WASC) Senior Commission and the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges' (SACS) Quality Enhancement Program (QEP), these new review processes allowed institutions unprecedented latitude to focus their internal reviews on real academic challenges around which they could mobilize information and planning resources. By and large, the response was favorable and by about 2005 had considerably altered the typical compliance

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[5] See Ewell, 2008a, chapter 3. Note that the term "institutional accreditation" is used here to refer to accrediting organizations established to review institutions as a whole and recognized by the federal government. The most visible of these are the regional associations, but national accrediting organizations recognizing proprietary and specialized institutions have followed a similar path.

mentality that had up to that point dominated most institutions' approach to accreditation. The situation in the wake of the last administration's attempt to remake institutional accreditation as an aggressive federal quality assurance tool, however, has threatened much of this gained ground.

On the one hand, these developments are inducing institutional accreditors to take more seriously the establishment of clear standards of student academic achievement (Ewell, 2005). On the plus side, this positions them to reinforce other post-Spellings initiatives designed to re-assume the academy's responsibility for publicly assuring academic quality, such as the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) and the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (AAC&U & CHEA, 2008). Institutional accrediting organizations remain membership associations, however, so they cannot stray too far toward establishing common standards and applying them through aggressive review. They also remain extremely limited in their ability to influence the majority of institutions not at risk of losing accreditation. The future effectiveness of institutional accreditation in both promoting good practice and in reinforcing the academy's assumption of consistent and transparent standards of student academic achievement lies entirely in the hands of the academy and its leadership.

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"Customers," Public Opinion, and the "Fourth Estate." Much of the rhetoric of accountability in the last decade centered on "consumer information." The logic of this rhetoric is familiar: provided with concrete information about institutional conditions and performance, potential students and their parents will make individual market choices about which institutions to attend, and the fiscal (and prestige) effects of those choices will induce colleges and universities to change what they do. This particular accountability logic first appeared around the publication of graduation rates in 1989 when Congress passed the Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act (SRK), which required mandatory public reporting of these statistics. Since then, the same logic of disclosure has been written into numerous additional federal and state reporting requirements and was a major element of the Spellings Commission's assault on accreditation practices because they were alleged to be incapable of providing such information.

Despite its recent prominence, this logic's major difficulty is that it does not reflect reality. The vast majority of students in the U.S. exercise little choice about where they attend because the primary drivers of this decision are institution location and price. Even where competitive markets do exist among selective institutions in traditional higher education, information about academic performance is rarely decisive (Zemsky, 2005). The sector where the logic of this "theory of change" does seem to apply in recent years is vocationally oriented proprietary institutions, whose accreditors require them to prominently disclose standardized statistics on program completion and on related employment for graduates. These institutions would probably disclose this information anyway because they have recognized the power of performance in attracting customers. Equally important, they recognize more generally the power of marketing centered not on institutional "quality" in the traditional sense but on how students are treated in service responsiveness and in instruction tailored to individual needs. While this development does not yet pose a real threat to traditional higher education—with its elite market centered on prestige and its mass market still sufficiently subsidized that it can outcompete the for-profit sector on price—it may do so soon.

The other principal change as an accountability driver in this area is the new and growing prominence of third-party organizations in providing information about performance. The *U.S. News & World Report (USN&WR)* rankings of "America's Best Colleges" are firmly entrenched as public "markers"

of college quality and have been joined by many similar rankings publications both here and abroad. Other third-party organizations—ranging from *Measuring Up*, College Results Online (a service established by The Education Trust that reports graduation rates at four-year institutions and allows sophisticated performance comparisons among them), and a range of new performance reporting tools recently developed by Education Sector—are playing a similar role in providing performance information. Many of these nongovernmental initiatives were established to support the consumer information function central to the flawed market-based federal "theory of change." Despite this shortcoming in their original purpose, these initiatives have been shown to strongly leverage institutional behavior because they are related to the "prestige market" within which at least the top 20 percent of the institutions ranked by *USN&WR* operate. Even among nonselective institutions like community colleges, unfavorable performance on such measures as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) can cause discomforting local media stories that while unlikely to influence student choice may well influence local board actions and the outcomes of important mill-levy elections.

The *USN&WR* rankings, despite unceasing criticism over more than a quarter century, have proven remarkably resistant to attack. Third-party information providers in a free market for information will always say what they want so long as it sells, suggesting an intriguing potential niche: ratings of the raters on such dimensions as the adequacy of the rater's model of quality and the soundness of the rater's metrics. This kind of analytical service has already begun emerging in the consumer products ratings industry. Another implication of the rise of the "fourth estate" as an accountability actor is the need to ensure "truth in advertising" with respect to what institutions report when they talk about performance—one reason why institutional accreditors have increasingly adopted "integrity" standards governing how institutions portray themselves through catalogues, recruitment materials, and web sites.

Managing the Tension: Some Principles of Response

In this section, I offer four principles to guide institutions' responses to the increasingly strident calls for external accountability while preserving and developing the institutions' internal capacity for evidence-based continuous improvement.

1. Respond visibly to domains of legitimate external concern. The late 1980s was a period when many states were spending relatively heavily on higher education in the name of developing human capital and workforce skills. Providing stakeholders with reliable information about things like graduation and job placement rates made good sense then, just as it does today. But the current external demand is more about providing direct evidence of student academic achievement—centered on broad undergraduate skills like critical thinking, communication, and problem solving than about where graduates go. And the major client is different: the federal government, acting through recognized accrediting organizations, purportedly on behalf of "customers."

Much also turns on what is meant by "legitimate." Twenty years ago, the very notion that government actors could demand information about performance from self-governed—and, especially, independent—institutions was considered illegitimate by many members of the academy. Indeed, the primary recommendation I made to institutions at that time was that they respond with something other than resistance. As noted earlier, our community has moved on from this position and virtually all colleges and universities are currently engaged in some kind of assessment. The question now is exactly what types of learning outcomes information can be considered "legitimate." One product of the Spellings adventure was that responsibility for setting learning objectives rests with institutions themselves, not with external actors.

Four guiding principles for responding to calls for external accountability that also preserve and develop institutional capacity for evidence-based continuous improvement:

1. *Respond visibly to domains of legitimate external concern.*
2. *Show action on the results of assessment.*
3. *Emphasize assessment at the major transition points in a college career.*
4. *Embed assessment in the regular curriculum.*

How institutions choose to discharge this responsibility remains up to them. Many colleges and universities hold the position that such information should be comparable across institutions, a position reflected in the VSA; but many do not do so, maintaining that each institution should be free to set its own learning goals and assessment methods. A parallel discord surrounds the term "respond." The VSA is unambiguous in construing "response" to be complete public disclosure, while many institutions continue to construe "response" to mean conducting a program of assessment that measures up to accreditation standards, regardless of whether the public ever gets to see the results.

Proactive response has an additional implication: the *ways* and the *tone* in which outcomes information are reported are at least as important as the content of the disclosures themselves. The rhetorical standpoint from which higher education responds to demands for outcomes-based accountability is thus extremely important. When acquiescence has occurred in the past, it was largely with an attitude of compliance. Even when accountability requirements were seen by college leaders as necessary—part of the price that colleges and universities had to pay to receive public funds—their acceptance was largely grudging and unenthusiastic. In contrast, higher education's posture of engagement about assessment's accountability dimension today must emphasize a commitment to a *collective responsibility* for teaching and learning and their results. Instead of seeing assessment as an aspect of higher education's responsibility to its *funders*—legitimate though this may be—both faculty and academic leaders need to see it as part of our accountability to *ourselves*. This is, after all, how we operate in the realm of research, and it is why mechanisms like independent peer review are so important to maintaining scholarly integrity. It needs to happen in teaching and learning as well.

Far too many institutions, dominated by the need to respond to external actors like states or accreditors, approach the task of assessment as an act of compliance, with the objective being simply to measure something and the exercise ending as soon as the data are reported.

Some evidence that the academy has already taken this advice is provided by the recent launch of the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (the "Alliance"). This organization grew out of informal gatherings of higher education leaders in the midst of the HEA reauthorization debates some two years ago as an effort to anticipate calls for public accountability and to develop a proactive response. Advancing principles that call for institutions to set rigorous goals for undergraduate learning, to collect evidence of whether these goals are being achieved, and to act on this information continuously to improve instruction (see AAC&U & CHEA, 2008), the Alliance was formally launched six months ago. The Alliance plans several initiatives, the foremost of which is formal certification of institutions that are doing an exceptional job of acting on the principles of assessment and continuous improvement as determined by an independent, credible, third-party review process. But the real work is up to the institutions. If enough institutions go along with it, especially those in the high-prestige sector that do well in *USN&WR* rankings, it might actually work this time.

2. Show action on the results of assessment. When I offered this advice in 1987, I sincerely believed that sincere and consistent action to assess and improve on the part of a significant number of colleges and universities would be sufficient to "solve" the academy's accountability problem. I argued then that "much of the recent concern about higher education's performance is due more to a loss of confidence than a desire on the part of external authorities to actively run the enterprise" (Ewell, 1987, p. 14). If the academy were only to show sincere and concerted action on the assessment-for-improvement agenda, accountability pressures might let up.

Now I am not so sure. The new policy centrality of higher education and the nation's slipping competitive position internationally means that today's accountability problem goes beyond just lack of responsiveness to a crisis in specific performance. Accordingly, colleges and universities will not only have to demonstrate sincere efforts to improve student learning but will also have to prove that their students are achieving at adequate levels in the first place.

This will increasingly mean reporting actual learning outcomes in comparative or benchmarked forms as well as being transparent about internal efforts at continuous improvement—actions the Alliance champions.

Experience has shown that implementing continuous improvement is not all that easy either, however. A major reason why higher education's accountability problem has not gone away is certainly that most institutions lack the will to "show action" by closing the loop on assessment results. Many institutions simply do not know, however, how to implement evidence-based continuous improvement. Why is this? One reason is the general nature of most assessment results when compared to the concrete realities of changing curriculum and pedagogy. Although exceptions are apparent, most assessment evidence is simply not fine grained enough to yield actionable information at this level. A similar reason is that such evidence tends to be presented in the form of central tendency measures, which don't show the patterns of strength and weakness or the variations in performance across types of students needed to guide intervention (Kuh, 2007). Finally, information about outcomes alone doesn't tell faculty what to fix. In contrast, tools that focus on institutional climate and staff behaviors, like NSSE, are far more amenable to institutional action.

For assessment-based improvement to work effectively learning objectives must be inescapable: They are in catalogues, on syllabi, and visible in the criteria faculty use to assign grades.

Despite these challenges, experience suggests a number of tricks of the trade that savvy institutions have learned about how to use assessment evidence for improvement. One of the most important of these is thinking about utilization from the beginning, as part of the assessment design itself. Far too many institutions, dominated by the need to respond to external actors like states or accreditors, approach the task of assessment as an act of compliance, with the objective being simply to measure something and the exercise ending as soon as the data are reported. Best practice, on the other hand, suggests that involving faculty formally, and in detail, in exercises designed to craft a set of specific teaching-related questions that faculty want answered can yield substantial dividends. Such questions are frequently best framed in terms of particular pedagogical challenges that real faculty face in real classrooms. Up-front planning for utilization should also include expectations exercises: What do participants expect the data to reveal, or what might be the action consequences of this or that result? Another important technique here is to successively disaggregate results for specific populations or outcomes dimensions. As noted earlier, averages tell a user very little about what is actually going on and, therefore, what needs to be changed.

Especially important for continuous improvement, though, is the need to create concrete opportunities for faculty and staff to look at such disaggregated data *together* to discuss what the data mean and to consider what particular action implications they might have. Far too few opportunities for such thoughtful collective reflection about evidence are available on today's college campuses, and institutional leaders need to go out of their way to create them. The best examples of effective utilization of assessment results begin with sharing a few carefully chosen pieces of information with a faculty-staff group charged with examining and discussing them. This process usually results in a few initial conclusions, but far more additional questions that need to be answered by further analysis of the available data. This iterative process is far more helpful in informing action than a "data dump" containing few clues as to what is important or practicable. The analytical art of designing such conversations to shape a productive discussion is in short supply now, just as it was two decades ago.

For assessment-based improvement to work effectively, moreover, learning objectives must be inescapable: They are in catalogues, on syllabi, and visible in the criteria faculty use to assign grades. Neither faculty nor students can forget they are there and the institution's commitment to standards and continuous improvement should be apparent in virtually every action the institution takes with respect to teaching and learning. The same holds true for important

administrative processes like mission review and strategic planning, program review and curricular development, budgeting, and governance. Institutions demonstrate their commitment to evidence-based management and improvement to their members and their stakeholders by constantly referencing—and taking seriously—their goals for learning and the evidence they have about the extent to which these goals are being achieved. The rhetoric of institutional leaders has a lot to do with this. To credibly act on accountability, as well as to reinforce local improvement, presidents and provosts need to explicitly reference assessment and its results whenever they announce important decisions or communicate with the public. And, as noted earlier, this stance must not be grudging but proactive.

3. Emphasize assessment at the major transition points in a college career. If an institution's goals for student learning are truly dominant, they must permeate the entire curriculum and be explicitly assessed at multiple points in a student's career. This means being sure of college readiness on entry and requiring clear demonstrations of mastery to earn a degree. It also requires attention to what happens between these two points, which is a good deal more difficult to define. AAC&U's Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative is an example of exactly what is required in its call for institutions to create "milestone" assessments as students progress in their programs as well as "capstone or culminating experiences" emphasizing the integration of their knowledge in their majors (AAC&U, 2008, p. 8).

One early transition is a good place to start: post-testing basic skills as an exit requirement for developmental education. The logic behind this advice is that this is less threatening to mainstream faculty than directly looking at their own effectiveness in college-level teaching. After all, if it is legitimate to place students appropriately using testing tools like COMPASS or AcuPlacer, it should be equally appropriate to use the same tools to determine if they mastered these skills after remediation. Like the results of any assessment, the data such post-testing produced could be analyzed and fed back to developmental instructors to inform improvement, thus "rehearsing" the assessment-improvement process in a way less risky than immediately turning assessment technology loose on general education.

Equally important, developmental education is itself a major national challenge. Students are being placed into developmental study in record numbers, and this bottleneck in the "education pipeline" is one of the major reasons why U.S. competitive performance with respect to young-adult postsecondary degree attainment is slipping. Assessment constitutes an essential part of the solution to this challenge and, in some places, is being used appropriately and effectively. Fourteen states now employ common placement tests to govern entry into college-level work, 12 of which have also set common cut scores (Ewell, Boeke, & Zis, 2008). This begins to address the national need to establish learning-based benchmarks of college readiness—a badly needed step. Far less progress has been made in using the results of placement testing—or other assessment, for that matter—to improve the effectiveness of developmental education itself. New approaches to instructional delivery in this arena are springing up constantly including modular short-course designs with content tailored individually to address particular assessed deficiency, "just-in-time" provision, blended technology-based and face-to-face formats, and contextualized courses in which basic skills content is embedded in particular areas of study. These all beg to be evaluated and improved using systematic data on posttest-based outcomes.

The second obvious "transition point" at which to locate assessment—and the one most germane to accountability purposes—is at the conclusion of a program. External stakeholders above all want evidence that those who hold

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a degree have actually attained a clearly defined level of performance with respect to knowledge and skills. Indeed, for some of these stakeholders—employers, for example—absolute attainment may be all they want to know. The best illustration here is the many licensure or certification examinations that regulate entry into professional fields ranging from teacher education to the health professions—often used as benchmarks of quality for academic programs. Another example is provided by the few state or system-specific programs that use "gate-keeping" testing, such as the South Dakota Board of Regents use of ACT's CAAP or the California State University's Writing Proficiency Examination that is required of all students to graduate. For those funding (or potentially enrolling in) an institution or program, though, the further question of "value-added" may arise: How much gain in designated knowledge or skill has a student experienced as a result of attendance? Institutional assessment programs tilted heavily toward accountability that put substantial weight on national instruments like CAAP or CLA, for example, attempt to capture both the performance of seniors at or near their point of graduation and that of students just starting out. Disaggregating the results of such summative assessments and looking at patterns of variation as well as mean scores, as noted earlier, may simultaneously aid institutional improvement efforts by identifying gaps in performance among particular population groups or by suggesting further things to investigate.

More suited to a balance between accountability and improvement purposes is a culminating demonstration—usually in the major field—in the form of a comprehensive examination, external examiner, senior thesis or project, or capstone course. In the traditional liberal arts curricula of 50 years ago, such features were common—especially in selective liberal arts colleges; but most had disappeared by the 1980s. As assessment became increasingly salient, many colleges and universities took a second look at them. Capstone courses, in particular, were appealing not only for their instructional value as an opportunity to integrate prior knowledge but also as convenient settings for assessment, and they have become quite common as a result. Not every course labeled "capstone" measures up to what is needed for assessment, however, unless it is intended solely as a convenient opportunity to administer an unrelated examination like an ETS Major Field Achievement Test. To be truly suitable, in fact, a capstone should meet three conditions. First, key assignments in the course ought to examine knowledge and abilities taught throughout the program. This means, under most circumstances, that a specialized course in the discipline would not be suitable. Second, ratings of student performance ought to be the product of multiple expert readers or faculty. This means, under most circumstances, that all the grading in the course should not be done by one individual. Finally, the assignments or demonstrations used for assessment in the course—and the rating schemes used to look at student responses—should be capable of generating information on multiple dimensions of student performance faculty have deemed important. Although these may be difficult conditions to meet fully, many institutions have found ways to approximate them, and it remains important to state them in their purest form as an "ideal type" to guide design.

If the beginning and the end of a program are obvious places to assess, the "middle" in the AAC&U schema has received a good deal less attention. To be sure, some institutions and states have historically used the end of the sophomore year as an occasion to directly assess student competency in general education skills. The most prominent example was the College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST), which was used as a "rising junior" examination in Florida for many years. A more creative example is the King's College Sophomore/Junior Diagnostic Project, in which each student demonstrates a specific set of general education skills in the context of the major that he or she is about to enter (Farmer, 1988). Another logical place to examine midpoint skills is at the point of transfer between two-year and four-year institutions. For example, several states including Missouri and Utah have tried to cast

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their transfer requirements on the basis of "abilities" in addition to just course requirements, although none has as yet created assessments as an alternative way to meet transfer requirements (Ewell, Boeke & Zis, 2008). By and large, it has proven logistically difficult for most institutions to implement "middle-level" assessments as an "add-on" to the regular curriculum, and this is why the final, following, principle is so important.

4. Embed assessment in the regular curriculum. In the early days of the assessment movement, campus assessment practices were consciously separated from what went on in the classroom. This separation helped increase the credibility of the generated evidence because, as "objective" data-gathering approaches, these assessments were free from contamination by the subject they were examining. Partly as a result, assessment practitioner rhetoric at the time strongly criticized grades as a valid and reliable measure of student learning. Instead, most early-adopters relied on off-the-shelf commercial tests like the ACT Assessment or the GRE, originally designed for something else. My original call to embed assessment in the regular curriculum was intended to shift the dominant pattern of thinking away from this "exo-skeletal" architecture toward a reintegration of assessment with the everyday practices of teaching and learning, and I remain committed to this today. Far too many institutions have established learning outcomes in response to accreditation requirements and to drive assessments without ensuring that these goals are continuously mapped to, and reinforced by, the teaching and learning process *throughout* the curriculum as part of a systematic competency-based approach.

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One demonstrated approach to embedding assessment in the regular curriculum is the "competency growth plan" for general education assessment pioneered by King's College (Farmer, 1988), which explicitly uses specific assignments in each academic program to certify achievement at successively more challenging levels up to the senior year. These assignments thus move beyond their course-specific application designed by a single faculty member and become the "collective property" of the faculty as a whole. Because of their collective importance, moreover, student responses to these assignments are rated independently of the regular grading process, using specially design rubrics or scoring guides. Obviously, the number of assignments designated for this purpose must be kept under control, so most institutions that adopt this approach have established no more than one or two midpoint levels of achievement on the way to a degree.

As assessment evidence, student work samples produced in response to regular course assignments have the virtue of having been already generated and are considered considerably more "authentic" by most faculty members than externally produced measures. Probably more important, the problem of student motivation to do well on an exercise that does not count is essentially off the table. As many institutions have found, however, harnessing student work as assessment evidence is harder than it looks. Assignments need to be carefully designed to elicit responses appropriate for consistent scoring, scoring rubrics need to be developed that yield reliable ratings across graders, and a mechanism needs to be in place to assemble and store the artifacts themselves.

When King's College and Olivet College introduced this embedded approach 20 years ago, the logistical tasks entailed were nearly overwhelming. These tasks are much simpler now due to recent advances in managing assessment results through technology (Hutchings, 2009). Some of these technology tools, like TracDat, provide easy-to-access databases of assessment results drawn from multiple sources that can be used to generate summary reports as well as more detailed breakdowns of student performance. Some, like E-Lumen, provide a platform that allows faculty to collectively build and test rubrics associated with particular assignments and to score student work collectively online. The overwhelming method of choice in this arena, however, has become the electronic portfolio. National organizations such as AAC&U have promoted the

widespread use of electronic portfolios particularly because they promise to simultaneously support the detailed inquiry into student learning that assessment for improvement requires while retaining the capacity to report a few summative measures.

Embedded assessment approaches like competency-anchored assignments and electronic portfolios are becoming increasingly comfortable for faculty and can now be implemented efficiently on a large scale. They represent what is today the most compelling route that an institution can take to navigate the accountability-improvement tension.

Concluding Thoughts

Despite many changes in motive and circumstances, the tension between the purposes of assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement that characterized the higher education landscape 20 years ago continues to exist today. Giving too much attention to accountability risks losing faculty engagement—effectively suppressing the sustained, critical self-examination that continuous improvement demands. Devoting attention solely on the internal conversations needed for improvement, on the other hand, invites external actors to invent accountability measures that are inappropriate, unhelpful, or misleading. Managing this tension requires staking out a middle ground. One of the promises of using institutional accreditation as the primary vehicle for stimulating assessment and discharging accountability is that it tries to do just this. Carefully distinguishing processes and initiatives designed to accomplish one or the other of these purposes so they do not interfere with one another can often be useful. Several regional accreditors, for example, have designed their approaches to consciously separate "compliance" and "deep engagement" activities so that the former can be accomplished without driving out the latter. Inside campus practice, the embedded assignment and portfolio approaches to assessment also represent a middle ground because they can generate and capture the necessary informational detail to inform curricular improvement while, if designed properly, retaining the capacity to produce summary benchmarks of student academic achievement for departments or the institution as a whole.

Although the tension remains, some things today are decidedly different. As noted already, I was convinced 20 years ago that widespread institutional attention to designing robust assessment-for-improvement programs and to taking visible action based on evidence from these programs would be sufficient to provide accountability—and would obviate the need to report measures of student achievement that can be benchmarked or compared. I do not believe this today. We will need to do both in the coming years, buying the necessary time to accomplish the more needed and desirable task of building institutional infrastructures for evidence-based continuous improvement with public performance reporting (Ewell, 2008b). Another difference compared to 20 years ago is this conversation's urgency today, which means that attention to it has become unavoidable. Some elements of the accountability-improvement tension will no doubt prove sufficiently long-lived that our successors will be revisiting them two decades hence, but we can all hope that the present urgency results this time in our getting much more done.

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Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to niloa@education.illinois.edu

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 web site went live on February 11, 2009.
  www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- The NILOA research team reviewed 725 institution web sites for learning outcomes assessment transparency from March 2009 to August 2009.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, 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. He is currently serving as Interim President of the University of Illinois.
- Peter Ewell joined NILOA as a senior scholar in November 2009.

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