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Assessment for Student Learning and the Public Good

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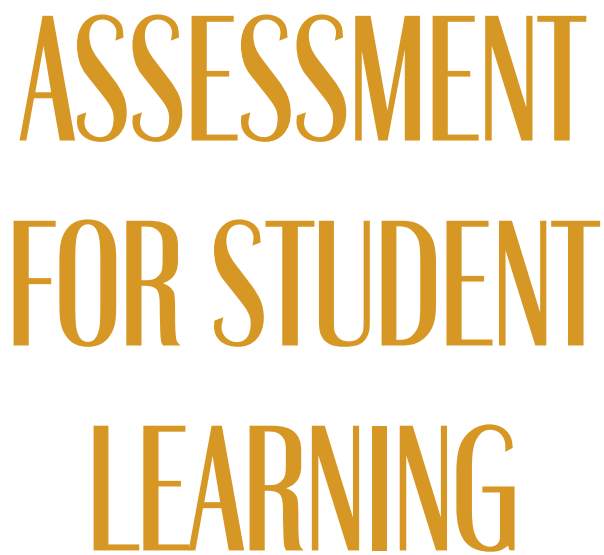
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ASSESSMENT
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The assessment of student learning in higher education has been headed down an unproductive path for too long. Not enough faculty and administrators engage in an assessment process that fosters cognitive and affective learning for all their students. Too many campuses maintain a view of learning assessment that limits its uses to gatekeeping and providing evidence to external entities such as regional accreditors. An expanded view would position assessment as a tool for equity, program understanding, and improvement of the learning system, all in service to the broader public good.

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However, adopting this assessment-for-learning-improvement mindset requires a qualitative shift in thinking by faculty and institutions alike. Our three organizations (Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education, Association of American Colleges & Universities, and the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment) realize that the magnitude of this conceptual change requires stakeholders from across higher education to come together to collectively support new faculty understandings of a learning assessment process that benefits all students.

We invite colleagues from across the spectrum of higher education—assessment practitioners, teaching and learning

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professionals, students, and others—to engage in productive and meaningful conversations about the role of assessment in our departments, institutions, and higher education in general. Only through a willingness to understand multiple perspectives can we move forward to create effective learning experiences and ensure learning equity for all student groups.

To chart a path forward, we must reflect on where we are today and how we got here. How did we lose focus on the quality of student learning? Over the past 50 years, colleges and universities have been asked to respond to increasingly frequent calls from different sectors—legislators, boards of directors, the public, employers—to show that higher education is worth the time, money, and resources invested in it. We are asked, “What is the value of a postsecondary education? What is higher education’s contribution to the public good and well-being of our nation and our global society?” To be transparent and to show what students gain from attending college, we are asked to demonstrate our successes by sharing data about faculty and student accomplishments.

An approach focused on proving our worth has led to increased assessment of student learning, but also to learning assessment developed through often bureaucratic processes aimed at meeting specific, externally mandated standards divorced from teaching and learning. Many of us have heard faculty lament that annual assessment reporting forms are not flexible enough to address how faculty measure and explain student learning. These reporting forms do not provoke interest in, or faculty discussion of, learning. Not surprisingly, the reporting processes aimed at meeting particular guidelines in alignment with external requirements lead to little use and fewer changes. They reinforce the notion that assessment is an externally mandated, administrative process. Such an approach focuses on their institutions’ compliance, not on the learning occurring within institutions or on the individual learners moving through them.

Similarly, within institutions assessment has too often focused learning success on individual student preparation measures or demographic features that morph into gatekeeping. Many of us remember hearing some faculty member proudly claim to have failed 30 percent of a course’s students because they were unprepared for or did not belong in college. That is evaluation of learning, assessment, as gatekeeping. Typically, a student’s test scores and grades are used to only make determinations regarding that student: college entry, continued enrollment, course progression. That does not help our students.

Moving away from gatekeeping can be uncomfortable for some because it requires a change in beliefs, leaving behind the notion that students alone are responsible for their learning. All students bring previous learning to college courses. The question for assessors is: how can assessment practices capture that diverse learning as a basis on which to build rather than as a metric for failure based on often long-held beliefs? (See also Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017.)

We propose a shift to an assessment-for-learning-improvement mindset. In our view, effective assessment:

- is faculty driven, meaningful, and embedded across the curriculum and co-curriculum;
- prepares students for life, work, and citizenship;
- uses methods appropriate for the program’s/institution’s culture;
- is based on broadly shared expectations for quality;
- produces actionable evidence to improve teaching and enhance student success; and
- promotes equity.

First, because learning assessment in its different forms and purposes is so deeply embedded in the teaching and learning process, effective assessment must involve faculty at its center. Our faculty are the experts in what students should learn and be able to do, and they have always used

learning assessment within courses to determine student learning. Faculty should have primary responsibility for establishing and implementing effective assessment-for-learning processes.

An assessment-for-learning approach goes beyond individual students and courses and includes programs. Faculty know that the learning they most value, such as critical and creative thinking, inquiry and analysis, and intercultural knowledge, needs to occur throughout the curriculum in order for students to carry that learning with them. Program- and institution-level learning assessment uses course-level information from faculty and other sources of relevant data to demonstrate what learning has happened and where improvements and changes can be implemented.

This allows us to evaluate student learning for the purpose of informing program-level decisions (and, where appropriate, decisions about general education and the institution). Assessment for learning empowers faculty to use assessment processes as a way to guide program- and institution-level changes aimed at internal improvement and, subsequently, learning improvement.

While effective assessment is faculty-led, it is not achieved by faculty alone. Learning happens in various spaces throughout our educational environments and to support our students in their attainment of desired learning, faculty need to work collaboratively with others throughout institutions of higher education. Why? Because durable learning is hard and cannot readily be achieved in a single course or program, or in the classroom alone.

The central question in assessment for learning is therefore not, “What grade did a student get in a particular course?” Instead, the central questions are, “Does the curriculum add up to more than a collection of course grades?” and “Are we confident that students’ learning, wherever it occurs, will carry through to the students’ personal, professional, and community lives?” Answering these questions helps us focus on the broadest and most important goals of preparing students for life, work, and citizenship.

In answering these questions, subject-area faculty often enlist the assistance of professionals in the learning sciences to identify curricular and co-curricular changes backed by educational research (e.g., the meta-study findings from Hattie, 2009). Higher education professionals in the fields of assessment, professional development, co-curricular experiences, and learning sciences must serve as good partners in that effort. A focus on context-specific methodologies; collaboration among faculty, staff, and students; and faculty meaning-making about learning and teaching through assessment processes keeps attention on our students and improving the learning environment.

The bottom line is that collaboration among experts in the subject areas and professionals in learning assessment and the learning sciences is critical to developing actionable evidence to improve teaching and program design. These in turn will help ensure that students master the knowledge and skills they need to be productive members of our workforce and our society.

An assessment for learning approach is also necessary for achieving equity in higher education. When an institution admits students with varying levels of preparation and from diverse home cultures, an assessment-for-learning process is necessary. It can provide tools that allow faculty and students to have a productive space to investigate learning and plan and implement changes in the curriculum to ensure equity of learning for all groups of students. Emerging research from assessment for learning is finding that what faculty do, what assignments are devised to elicit learning, and pedagogical practices that lead to higher quality and success can indeed make significant improvement in closing equity gaps through the curricula and the co-curriculum (Sullivan & McConnell, 2017).

Assessment for learning at the program and institution levels can make some faculty uncomfortable and be a source of frustration and fear because it asks individual faculty members not only to consider alignment of content and curricular sequencing but to think beyond their own

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courses and their own students. It also suggests that they collaborate with others in their programs, on their campuses, and in their communities. Many organizations like ours can help persuade faculty to make this shift through documents such as *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* (Astin et al., 1992), the American Association of University Professors' recommended standards in *Mandated Assessment of Educational Outcomes* (1991), and the joint statement, *Principles for Effective Assessment of Student Achievement*, by the American Association of Community Colleges and 12 other organizations (2013).

It is clear that requirements for higher education to show that we are doing the things that we promise for our students and communities are not going away. We can use our assessment work, in part, to be transparent about what we do. But we must not conflate assessment for learning with the requirement to demonstrate our worth to those outside of our institutions. We should not chase ever-shifting external accountability goal posts. Our primary goal should be to design assessment processes that support high-quality learning for all students and that enlighten faculty about the collective learning environment. Through such an approach, we

will have the evidence to answer questions about our value and worth.

Rebuilding public trust in higher education demands that all of us—at all levels—share the responsibility for ensuring learning in service to democracy. We are not advocating for the elimination of assessment of learning. Instead we are advocating for a change in our approaches and drivers for engaging in assessment. This can happen if we approach assessment for learning as a process that supports learning and can reveal, and then help address, inequities among groups of students.

As organizations that support higher education, we will continue to engage all of our colleagues in the ongoing quest for educational systems that truly deliver on their promises to yield meaningful knowledge, intentional problem solving, compassionate reflection, and lifelong learning. We support the very best practices of learning assessment and know that while assessment findings have many uses, the most important one is that of continuing the growth and development of all of our students across the spectrum of institutions of higher learning. □

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