

Beyond Compliance: Making Assessment Matter

George D. Kuh, Stanley O. Ikenberry, Natasha A. Jankowski, Timothy Reese Cain, Peter T. Ewell, Pat Hutchings & Jillian Kinzie

To cite this article: George D. Kuh, Stanley O. Ikenberry, Natasha A. Jankowski, Timothy Reese Cain, Peter T. Ewell, Pat Hutchings & Jillian Kinzie (2015) Beyond Compliance: Making Assessment Matter, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 47:5, 8-17, DOI: 10.1080/00091383.2015.1077661

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2015.1077661>



Published online: 23 Oct 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1270



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)

Beyond Compliance

MAKING ASSESSMENT MATTER

By George D. Kuh, Stanley O. Ikenberry, Natasha A. Jankowski,
Timothy Reese Cain, Peter T. Ewell, Pat Hutchings, and Jillian Kinzie



Faculty members have always evaluated their students' performance, but this essential responsibility is usually a private undertaking. That is, faculty members decide what students in their respective courses should know and be able to do, then make judgments about whether each student has acquired the requisite knowledge and skills.

About three decades ago, however, groups of educators began to *work together* to identify desired learning outcomes and design assessment approaches to gather evidence of the extent to which students had mastered those outcomes.

What has happened since?

A veritable explosion has occurred, both in the number of institutions publicly declaring what all undergraduates should know and be able to do when they graduate and in the number of approaches—many produced outside the academy by for-profit entities (Borden and Kernel, 2013)—available to gather evidence about the attainment of learning outcomes. A variety of forces were at play over those 30 years, but the elevated expectations and demands of regional and specialized accreditors have been the chief drivers of these dramatic increases (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014).

Another more recent development has been a spike in the use of rubrics and other approaches to evaluate “authentic student work”—represented by, for example, written

George D. Kuh is an adjunct research professor at the University of Illinois and co-principal investigator of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (kuh@indiana.edu).

Stanley O. Ikenberry is Regent Professor at the University of Illinois and co-principal investigator of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (stanike@illinois.edu).

Natasha A. Jankowski is an assistant research professor at the University of Illinois and associate director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (njankow2@illinois.edu).

Timothy Reese Cain is an associate professor at the University of Georgia's Institute of Higher Education and a senior scholar at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (tcain@uga.edu).

Peter T. Ewell is president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) and a senior scholar at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (peter@nchems.org).

Pat Hutchings is a senior scholar at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (hutchings.pat@gmail.com).

Jillian Kinzie is an associate research scientist and associate director of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University, as well as a senior scholar at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (jikinzie@indiana.edu).

products; student performance in music, art, or dance; demonstrations in science and engineering; and samples of student work assembled in portfolios. To a non-trivial degree, many of these efforts came out of the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), as well as initiatives sponsored by disciplinary affinity groups and institutional membership organizations. Thus, the collection of tools and approaches developed outside of academe has now been enriched by approaches that are closer to the action of teaching and learning and more authentic.

Despite all this activity, the studies we have conducted at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) over the past seven years suggest that assessment has had an embarrassingly modest impact on student accomplishment. The *process* of assessment has taken precedence over the *use* of its findings to improve student success and educational effectiveness.

In Short

- Mired in a culture of compliance, student learning outcomes assessment has had an embarrassingly modest impact on student and institutional performance.
- Five trends will make evidence of student accomplishment increasingly indispensable: a harsher economic environment, technology-enhanced platforms, an expanded role for multiple providers and certifiers of learning, the emergence of more comprehensive and transparent credentialing frameworks, and students' increasing responsibility for maintaining a cumulative record of their postsecondary knowledge and proficiencies.
- To be consequential, assessment information needs to be actionable, focused on the needs and interests of end users, embedded in the ongoing work of teaching and learning, available in understandable forms, customized, and supported by institutional leaders.
- External entities—especially accreditors, but also federal and state governments, philanthropic organizations, and higher education associations—should emphasize the use of results and the impact of changes in policies and practices on learning outcomes and institutional culture.
- Consequential assessment is not about compliance with external reporting demands but about institutional leaders, faculty, and others effectively using evidence to improve the educational experience of students.

How can assessment work become consequential so that information about learning outcomes is used to boost student and institutional performance?

Moreover, assessment activity tends to be driven more from the *outside*—in response to the demands and expectations of policymakers, accreditors, and others—and less by institutional needs and priorities for evidence that can be harnessed for improvement. The result, alas, is that assessment does not matter in the ways it could and should.

The expectation for accountability is legitimate. But to have the desired effects, evidence of what students know and can do must respond to genuine institutional needs and priorities. Far too often, that condition is not met. On too many campuses, assessment activity is mired in a culture of compliance rather than driven by collective concern about student performance or an ethos of “positive restlessness,” where information about student learning outcomes helps answer questions of real significance to faculty, staff, and students.

What can colleges and universities do to break loose from the compliance culture that has dampened the impact of assessment? How can assessment work become consequential so that information about learning outcomes is used to boost student and institutional performance?

THE CHANGING CONTEXT FOR ASSESSMENT

The imperative to “make assessment matter,” as the title of this essay urges, needs to be understood in the context of the changing environment of postsecondary education. Five well-established trends underscore why the use of evidence of student learning will be so important in the years ahead.

1. *A major driver of change in American higher education for the foreseeable future will be a harsher, less-forgiving economic environment that will place a greater premium on evidence of what students know and are able to do.*

Most of American higher education is struggling with the painful realization that the economic model that sustained and enabled the academic enterprise to flourish in prior decades is now severely strained. And as the options available to students multiply, competition becomes more prevalent.

In this challenging economic environment, evidence of learning outcomes could well be crucial to competitiveness, driving institutions to search for information to improve performance. Campuses that have benchmarks of performance that can be easily understood and compared—for instance,

by adopting proficiency frameworks such as the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) or its discipline-based counterpart, Tuning—could well be at a significant advantage as understanding what students know and are able to do becomes increasingly important to ensuring academic integrity, informing decisions, and controlling costs. Students too will benefit by having evidence of what they know and how effectively they can apply their learning to meet the challenges encountered in an increasingly complex and competitive world.

2. *Technology-enhanced platforms will provide new and more comprehensive ways to monitor and document student proficiencies.*

Electronic transcripts and e-portfolios are now being used in ways that are better at recording both what students are learning and how well they are able to transfer their learning from in-class and out-of-class experiences to a variety of settings. These promising developments prompt a set of intriguing questions.

How might such technology-enhanced assessment approaches and tools be used to enhance and more effectively manage learning? What can such tools tell us about how students develop proficiency in integrating, synthesizing, and transferring knowledge to other contexts?

Efforts are also underway on some campuses to harness the power of big data and learning analytics to help institutions deploy effective early-alert systems and support student academic behaviors and performance. These efforts are likely to help us better understand how learning happens and thus to shape the ways faculty and staff work with students.

3. *The roles and characteristics of providers and certifiers of learning—be they tenure-line faculty members, adjuncts, professional staff, interactive-software users, or some as-yet “unimaginable other”—will continue to expand.*

Outcomes assessment is most useful when faculty design assignments that require students to demonstrate proficiencies consistent with intended course, program, and institutional goals. As straightforward as this statement appears, too few faculty members have institutional support for such work or opportunities to work with colleagues to develop the requisite expertise.

Provosts responding to our NILOA surveys appear to be aware of this; they clearly see the need for faculty to learn more about assessment approaches. They have reported as well that evidence from the classroom—which is to say, from the assignments that faculty design and use—is especially useful to improvement (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014).

The challenges of this work will be amplified by the changing demographics of faculty, most of whom are now employed off the tenure track. According to Adrianna Kezar and Daniel Maxey (2014), far too little is known about non-tenure-track faculty members’ involvement in outcomes assessment—or indeed, in other traditional faculty oversight roles, including institutional governance.

A significant rethinking of teaching and learning models will be needed to accommodate the more robust and focused assessment efforts that are needed on campuses in the future. In the meantime, it is incumbent on academic leaders to determine the “assessment basics” that every full-time and part-time faculty and staff member should be able to deploy in their own classes, as well as to align this work with larger institutional efforts to advance student learning and improve educational quality.

4. *The emergence of more comprehensive and transparent credentialing frameworks will bring more order, meaning, and legitimacy to the escalating numbers of postsecondary credentials—degrees, diplomas, certificates, certifications, licenses, badges, accreditations, and other mechanisms that recognize what students know and can do.*

The rapid growth of technology-based educational alternatives—not the least of which are Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)—and entrepreneurial initiatives emerging from both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors will almost certainly increase the number of alternative and competing academic credentials. Little of this is understood by the fragmented network of educational providers, and the subtleties are even less comprehensible to students, employers, and the public.

This bewildering and expanding array of academic credentials brings with it a growing need to define and ensure the quality of any given credential in a manner that informs learners, employers, and others. The creation of a broader, deeper data infrastructure that permits user-friendly analysis and an exchange of information about competencies and credentials is the obvious answer, but that necessity makes the assessment of learning outcomes all the more essential.

Because established colleges and universities will continue to be a major—but not the only—credentialing agent, their student learning outcomes assessment processes must be of sufficient quality to play a meaningful role in this changing framework.

5. *Increasingly, individual students, rather than colleges or universities, are becoming responsible for maintaining a cumulative record of their postsecondary knowledge and proficiencies.*

A majority of today’s students take longer to complete their studies than the traditional two years for an associate degree or four for a baccalaureate degree, and they attend multiple postsecondary institutions before earning a college credential. As a result, it is difficult to hold any given institution accountable for what a graduate knows and can do (Ewell, 2013).

Coupling student mobility with the increasing interest in competency-based learning and the alternative credentialing frameworks discussed earlier makes it imperative that learning outcomes be assessed in ways that are easily understood and portable. The hope is that this new world will give students more flexibility and more options to learn from

an ever-broader range of sources. But the credibility and value of these developments will depend on more and better evidence of proficiency that faculty members, institutions, and especially students find meaningful for their respective purposes.

EFFECTIVELY USING EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING

How must an institution adjust its assessment efforts to respond to these new realities? How can assessment work become part of an institutional improvement strategy so that knowledge about student learning outcomes becomes consequential? What will it take to shift assessment from a compliance-driven activity to one that can actively shape and enhance the experience of students in a rapidly changing educational ecology?

Drawing on our collective experience and information gathered through NILOA’s work over the past seven years, we offer six suggestions. We elaborate on these and other implications for student learning outcomes assessment in our 2015 book, *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*.

First and foremost, assessment data must be **actionable**, focused on the needs and interests of end users. This means identifying and involving the right stakeholders—faculty, staff, students, governing board members, and others as appropriate—at the beginning of any assessment project to determine priorities for evidence gathering.

To build interest and momentum, occasions must be created for people to come together to identify the questions and evidence they consider meaningful and useful for the ultimate goal of improving student learning. And at the close of any assessment effort, those same people need to be brought together again to make sense of the evidence and explore the implications of assessment results.

ACTIONABLE DATA FOCUSED ON USER NEEDS AND INTERESTS

At St. Olaf College, assessment is framed as a form of “inquiry in support of students’ learning,” driven by faculty members’ questions. This utilization-focused, backward-design approach has guided departments and programs to prepare assessment *action* reports, rather than data reports, that outline how they will use the findings to modify curriculum requirements, course content, student assignments, or instructional practices. Similarly, the institution’s philosophy and approach to assessing general education was developed only after identifying how results would be used by individual instructors and by departments and committees.

Of the multiple potentially actionable sources of evidence of student learning, the most useful typically address the questions posed by people who can change policies and pedagogical practices to foster higher levels of student engagement and achievement. A habit of addressing genuine campus questions, a track record of using evidence of student

learning in productive ways, and a history of documenting improvement—these are the best antidotes to a compliance-driven assessment agenda where priorities are dictated by constantly changing external demands. This approach can also help guard against the “initiative fatigue” that often follows a wave of new projects, because the assessment questions being addressed are those that members of the campus community really want answered.

Second, effective assessment is *embedded in the ongoing work of teaching and learning* rather than carried out exclusively using externally developed tools to satisfy demands for comparability. Thus, those at the center of the teaching-learning process—faculty, students, student affairs staff, librarians, and others—must help shape priorities and engage in the work in meaningful ways if they are to find the results illuminating and useful.

Often the most compelling and actionable evidence comes from rubric-based evaluations of students’ performance in classrooms, laboratories, and studios. It may also take other forms such as surveys; comprehensive evaluations of student performance in internships and field placements; or results from focus groups of students, alumni, and employers.

Students benefit from embedded assessment, which deepens their learning by requiring them to document it, reflect on it, talk about it with other students and with faculty, and in some cases develop new strategies for studying it. Taking advantage of the important work that faculty and other staff are already doing recognizes and capitalizes on their professional expertise while further developing individual and institutional capacities.

ASSESSMENT EMBEDDED IN THE ONGOING WORK OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

NILOA’s 2013 Provost Survey indicated that some of the most useful evidence about student learning comes from the papers, projects, performances, examinations, and portfolios assigned by faculty as a part of regular coursework. Yet few faculty members have structured occasions or support to work with colleagues to design and refine those assignments.

Toward these ends, NILOA has convened groups of faculty from both two and four-year institutions in highly interactive “charrettes” (a term borrowed from architecture education) to create powerful assignments aligned with critical learning outcomes such as those specified in the DQP. Those assignments are now being made available at <http://www.assignmentlibrary.org>. Guidance for campuses that wish to undertake this process locally is available in a NILOA report found at http://learningoutcomesassessment.org/documents/Assignment_report_Nov.pdf.

While the most meaningful and actionable questions are not always easily answered, bringing assessment closer to the various in-class and out-of-class venues where learning actually occurs almost always increases the odds of garnering

“It is important to emphasize the ‘demand’ side of assessment—not to just sprinkle evidence around and hope that it will trickle out to good effect.”

buy-in and identifying which changes in policy and practice can make a positive difference.

Third, assessment data can only become consequential if they are *made available in understandable forms* to the people who have a need to know and act on them. Too often, reporting on student learning fails to meet the needs of the campus—those felt by faculty, staff members, academic leaders, governing boards, and others. And too often, institutions release reports that highlight a particular set of data—the results of this survey or that focus group—hoping that it meets some unidentified need.

A more consequential approach is to weave together, from many different sources, evidence that addresses the questions of those on campus who are in the best position to interrogate, interpret, and use evidence of student learning to make decisions to enhance that learning.

One set of questions, for instance, might focus on the extent to which students are proficient in writing at the end of their first year, midway through their major, and on the eve of graduation. These questions might be answered by evaluating samples of student work from writing-intensive

EMBEDDING ASSESSMENT IN TEACHING AND LEARNING BY INVOLVING STUDENTS

As participants in the University of California Merced’s Students Assessing Teaching and Learning (SATAL) project, students design, collect, and analyze evidence to help faculty better understand the learning experiences of their students and improve teaching and student performance through formative assessment. This can mean doing focus groups with students and producing a report on the results or interviewing students in a class and sharing what is learned with the instructor.

Much of the work takes place at the classroom level, but SATAL also entails program-level assessment and research. For instance, findings from student-led focus groups prompted applied mathematics faculty to rethink their senior capstone experience (Center for Research on Teaching Excellence, 2011). And SATAL students also benefited as they gained insights into both the educational process and themselves as learners. (See <http://crte.ucmerced.edu/satal>)

MAKING DATA UNDERSTANDABLE TO THOSE WHO CAN USE THE INFORMATION

At Juniata College, the purpose and intended use of assessment data are regular discussion topics for the Institutional Effectiveness Council, a committee charged with pushing information out of the institutional research office and into the hands of people who need and can use it (Jankowski, 2011).

For instance, in response to faculty concerns about the quality of student writing, the institution brought together evidence from the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the National Survey of Student Engagement, which led to revised, learning-centered goals for a required writing-across-the-curriculum seminar, a shift from three to four credit hours, and a commitment of additional institutional resources to provide faculty workshops on teaching and evaluating writing. Organizing and reporting assessment results that directly addressed an identified need helped make the data meaningful and actionable.

courses and participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement, which provides information about the number and length of student papers, the amount and timing of feedback students get from faculty about their writing, and whether faculty members expect student papers to draw on and integrate ideas from different courses or readings representing diverse perspectives.

Other data sources may also be pertinent, such as papers produced in capstone courses or results from an external performance measure such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment. In other words, to produce information that will actually be *used*, it is important to emphasize the “demand” side of assessment—not to just sprinkle evidence around and hope that it will trickle out to good effect.

Granted, reporting student learning outcomes to interested parties on or off campus can be risky. Uncomfortable questions may arise; the answers to them may be embarrassing. Yet broad transparency—sharing results with faculty committees, the academic affairs committee of the governing board, policymakers, the media, business leaders, alumni, and others—can foster a climate of openness and build confidence and trust among both internal and external constituencies.

“When institutions look to accreditors and government to ‘tell them what to do,’ they further reinforce a compliance mentality.”

Indeed, having people at the table with diverse perspectives and experiences to help interpret findings and debate their implications can only heighten opportunities for improvement. This kind of transparency communicates important institutional values and an agenda shaped by the institution itself, rather than one imposed from the outside. Student voices are especially important in these conversations.

Institutional leaders, faculty, and staff need to be more proactive in converting the expectations of external groups into opportunities to improve student and institutional performance by effectively communicating relevant information to various stakeholders. Making information accessible in plain language via a website can signal that an institution is responsible to its stakeholders and is focused on ensuring quality.

Understanding the root causes of external demands and expectations will make accommodating and responding to such requests more efficient and effective in the long term. Whether related to accreditation or public policy, the goal must be to use external compliance demands to stimulate and accommodate well-functioning, productive, internally driven programs of assessment and quality assurance. Essential to this task is clear and persuasive communication about what are appropriate and inappropriate indicators of quality, as well as about best practices related to teaching, learning, and assessment.

Fourth, external entities—especially accreditors, but also federal and state governments, philanthropic organizations, and higher education associations—can promote more consequential assessment by emphasizing *the use of results and the impact of changes in policies and practices* on learning outcomes and institutional culture. Other parties, such as employers and taxpayers, also have legitimate reasons to be interested in the quality of academic outcomes.

As in other areas of contemporary life such as health care, transportation safety, and environmental protection, there is a broad and fundamental societal interest in the quality of higher education. And if for no other reason than their fiduciary roles, federal and state governments have a duty to ensure that public funds are spent wisely and prudently. But when institutions look to accreditors and government to “tell them what to do,” they further reinforce a compliance mentality.

Accrediting organizations’ and government entities’ demands on institutions for assessment are constantly evolving and can change quickly. National associations try to keep up with these demands by organizing their members to undertake new initiatives in assessing student learning. But meanwhile, campuses need to build assessment policies and approaches that, while focused on institutional needs and priorities, are at the same time flexible and adaptable.

There are internal reasons to do this as well. The assessment questions of interest to faculty members in various disciplines, student affairs staff, and external audiences may differ—as will the information each considers meaningful and usable.

So, fifth, institutions need to *customize assessment work* to adequately address these shifting conditions and varying needs. The rich diversity of American higher education makes

ACCREDITATION EMPHASIZING THE CONSEQUENTIAL USE OF ASSESSMENT DATA

The WASC Senior College and University Commission organizes a number of professional-development opportunities to support the use of assessment for improvement by member institutions. The Assessment Leadership Academy, an eleven-month course of study first offered in 2010, prepares individuals to provide leadership for assessment activities on their campuses and beyond. It was established in part to counter an assumption that assessment was primarily about compliance (see Wright, 2013).

WSCUC also offers workshops for institutions focused on a requirement that member institutions include a component addressing the “meaning, quality, and integrity of the degree” as part of their self-study. The workshop is an opportunity for inter-institutional conversation during which participants can explore connections between institutional mission, expectations for student learning across degrees and programs, and institutional assessment activities. In this way, assessment is framed not as a reporting requirement but as a critical component of educational quality and improvement.

it impossible for a one-size-fits-all approach to assessment to succeed. What will work in large, complex universities with multiple missions may not work in smaller institutions with more focused or specialized educational programs.

However, all institutions that have successfully converted information about student learning into actionable evidence share a handful of conditions that support and sustain an assessment agenda. Most important, they organize and design assessment with end users and desired impacts in mind. That is, they address issues to which their stakeholders need answers.

We recently worked with the academic leaders of some of the nation’s leading public and private research universities, exploring the challenge of gathering evidence of student learning in these large, multi-mission institutions. What were these highly respected institutions doing, we asked, to gain insight into what their students know and can do?

Among other things, our experience revealed how deep and impenetrable are the academic silos on many campuses. Academic units share very little with one another. What student affairs staff learn about student life outside the classroom often fails to connect with evidence from the classroom.

In some cases, the institution’s “center”—top leadership, the assessment office, or institutional research, for example—has little or no knowledge of what is or is not happening with respect to student learning and experience in its various parts. Sharing evidence of student learning and using it more broadly in consequential ways requires faculty and staff engagement and collaboration. This in turn means shaping assessment activity to match the needs and culture of the setting, thinking about who needs to be involved and in what ways, and putting supports in place.

An assessment approach that is useful in almost any setting is what can be termed “methodological pluralism,” whereby institutions employ multiple assessment frameworks tailored for the particular context (this might be program review on one campus and curricular reform on another) in order to yield actionable assessment results. Methodological pluralism also demands periodically “assessing assessment” to determine whether evidence of student learning is being effectively harnessed.

When carried out in this fashion, assessment can meet the needs and demands of external authorities—including accreditors—while also generating information that is useful in meeting campus needs and priorities. But it requires that institutions develop electronic databases of learning outcomes capable of efficiently producing new kinds of reports that bring together different types and levels of evidence as internal and external needs and demands shift.

Sixth, consequential assessment requires *leadership*. Much has been written about the difference between leading and managing. Managing, as the saying goes, is about doing things right; leadership is about doing the right things.

Academic staff and faculty can lead by working with institutional membership associations, accrediting commissions, policymakers, business leaders, philanthropic foundations, and others to help align accountability demands with institutional assessment and quality-assurance mechanisms.

Too few academic leaders, however, are involved in debating and setting accreditation policy and expectations, especially those related to assessment. Too few presidents and provosts are active in national higher education associations that stand at the intersection of government and academia.

CUSTOMIZING ASSESSMENT WORK TO REFLECT THE CAMPUS CULTURE

Assessment work at Marquette University is grounded in its Jesuit pedagogy and the interests of faculty as teacher-scholars. Reflection and collaboration are emphasized by designated Program Assessment Leaders in each program area, who facilitate discussions with faculty and staff about assessment plans and results, and also through a required peer-review process that provides formative feedback on assessment reports.

Assessment is a collaborative effort of individual faculty, programs, co-curricular units, the Office of Institutional Research and Analysis, the Center for Teaching and Learning, and the Division of Student Affairs. Learning outcomes and assessment plans, highlights, and reports are made available to each academic program, the Division of Student Affairs, and other internal—as well as external—audiences. In addition, a dedicated website, “Your Voice,” provides information to students about what Marquette does with the survey information collected. (See www.marquette.edu/assessment/index.shtml)

LEADERSHIP FOR ASSESSMENT

LaGuardia Community College, a pioneer in the use of e-portfolios, has well-established procedures for assessing student artifacts and regularly reviews its assessment processes to determine whether additional approaches are suggested by the results and to catalyze greater learning-centered institutional change (Eynon, Gambino, & Török, 2014; Provezis, 2012). Central to these developments is visionary, steadfast leadership from LaGuardia's president, Gail Mellow, who has been a strong advocate for using assessment data to address the learning needs of its highly diverse student population.

Mellow champions and supports faculty and staff participation in teaching and learning conferences, finds resources to underwrite a range of assessment-focused campus workshops, participates in portfolio reviews, reads the periodic program reviews required of all programs, and provides customized feedback to programs. By using evidence to inform decision making, she models how actionable data representing authentic student accomplishment can demonstrably increase student success. Mellow also acts on these commitments in her work as a member of numerous boards and organizations that help to shape educational policy and practice beyond her institution.

More college and university presidents need to spend time with state and federal legislators from their districts explaining what their campuses are doing to measure learning, to improve student success, to reduce costs to students and the public, and to improve institutional effectiveness. More active participation in the form of *stronger leadership*—which can and must come from every level of the institution—could make a material difference in pushing external pressures in constructive directions.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There is a palpable sense that higher education is at a fork in the road. Because the need for higher learning has never been greater, the direction we choose in terms of student learning outcomes assessment will matter a great deal. Economic competitiveness; the health of the democracy; and society's capacity to innovate, create, and compete all rest on high-quality educational outcomes.

As a strategy, assessment—the questions it is designed to answer, the institutional priorities it is intended to inform, and the needs and interests it is meant to address—must be shaped by faculty members, student-affairs professionals, deans, provosts, and presidents, in concert with academic senates, governing boards, and students.

The value of assessment can only be measured by the contribution it makes to student success and the degree to which it improves institutional performance. A campus that prioritizes gathering evidence to answer and then address important questions about student learning realizes the double benefit of getting better while also meeting accountability

demands. In this way, accountability becomes a natural by-product of assessment, not its driver.

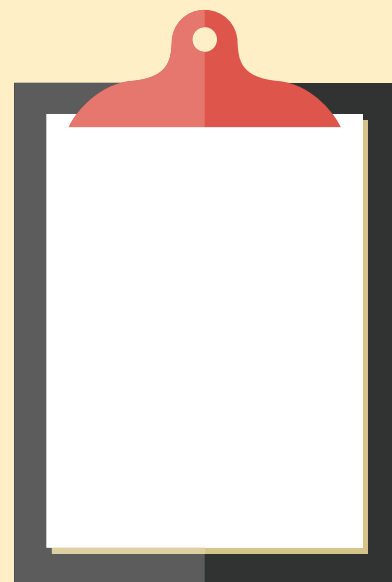
Those who engage in the assessment of student learning, as well as those who call for or use the evidence it generates, should do so with a generous dose of patience and humility, recognizing both the promise of gathering actionable evidence and its limitations. Students come with different motivations, aspirations, and levels of pre-college accomplishment. Faculty have sometimes conflicting views as to what learning outcomes are relevant and which are genuinely important.

In this context, no single test score or institutional rating is likely to reveal much of value about what students actually know and can do—let alone shed light on the changes that need to be made to improve these outcomes. Those outside higher education who demand accountability must be willing to accept this reality and complexity.

Those within the academy, in turn, must answer real questions with evidence—not just to verify academic quality but to make it stronger and better. It is within this broader context that we believe the shift of student learning assessment from a culture of compliance to one focused on institutional transformation will be so important in the era that lies ahead.

The picture within our clouded crystal ball looks like this: As attention shifts toward individual students and what they know and can do; as the capacity to gather, store, and add to proficiency-based credentials grows as a result of technology; as the nature of the faculty and other learning providers continues to diversify and the range of accepted markers of learning expands (diplomas, badges, licenses, certificates, etc.)—all of this occurring in a challenging economic environment—the on-campus demand for evidence of student learning will become ever more important and should take precedence over externally driven demands for assessment.

It is essential that we overcome the culture of compliance if students and institutions are to prosper in the years ahead; doing so will also help to strengthen the public's confidence in and support for higher education. This shift—call it a transformation—will not happen in the absence of committed leadership from faculty and staff members, department and unit chairs, deans, provosts, presidents, and governing boards—in short, from those *inside the academy*. Such a transformation is not the stuff of miracles but of constant attention and collective responsibility. What remains to be seen is whether we have the will to accept that responsibility. ☐



RESOURCES

- Banta, T. W., & Palomba, C. A. (2015). *Assessment essentials* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Borden, V. M. H., & Kernel, B. (2013). *Measuring quality in higher education: An inventory of instruments, tools, and resources* [Online inventory]. Retrieved from <http://apps.airweb.org/surveys/Default.aspx>
- Ewell, P. T. (2002). An emerging scholarship: A brief history of assessment. In T. W. Banta & Associates (Ed.), *Building a scholarship of assessment* (pp. 3–25). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ewell, P. (2013, January). *The changing ecology of higher education and its impact on accreditation*. Alameda, CA: Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Retrieved from <https://wascsenior.app.box.com/s/36qe51avi9e99upn5vdg>
- Ewell, P. T., Paulson, K., & Kinzie, J. (2011). *Down and in: Assessment practices at the program level* (Program Level Survey Report). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Eynon, B., Gambino, L. M., & Török, J. (2014). What difference can ePortfolio make? A field report from the Connect to Learning Project. *International Journal of ePortfolio*, 4(1), 95–114.
- Jankowski, N., Hutchings, P., Ewell, P., Kinzie, J., & Kuh, G. (2013). The Degree Qualifications Profile: What it is and why we need it now. *Change*, 45(6), 6–15.
- Jankowski, N. A. (2011, July). *Juniata College: Faculty led assessment*. NILOA Examples of Good Assessment Practice. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Jankowski, N. A., Ikenberry, S. O., Kinzie, J., Kuh, G. D., Shenoy, G. F., & Baker, G. R. (2012). *Transparency & accountability: An evaluation of the VSA college portrait pilot*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Kezar, A., & Maxey, D. (2014). *The Delphi Project on the changing faculty and student success: Implications for assessment* (NILOA Occasional Paper No. 21). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Kuh, G. D. (2007). Risky business: Promises and pitfalls of institutional transparency. *Change*, 39(5), 30–35.
- Kuh, G. D., & Ikenberry, S. O. (2009, October). *More than you think, less than we need: Learning outcomes assessment in American higher education*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Kuh, G. D., Ikenberry, S. O., Jankowski, N. A., Cain, T. R., Ewell, P., Hutchings, P., & Kinzie, J. (2015). *Using evidence of student learning to improve higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. D., Jankowski, N., Ikenberry, S. O., & Kinzie, J. (2014, January). *Knowing what students know and can do: The current state of learning outcomes assessment at U.S. colleges and universities*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Lumina Foundation for Education. (2014). *The Degree Qualifications Profile 2.0*. Indianapolis, IN: Author.
- Lumina Foundation for Education. (2014, April). *Call for a national conversation on creating a competency-based credentialing ecosystem*. Indianapolis, IN: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.luminafoundation.org/resources/connecting-credentials>.
- Provezis, S. (2012, June). *LaGuardia Community College: Weaving assessment into the institutional fabric* (NILOA Examples of Good Assessment Practice). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Rhodes, T., & Finley, A. (2013). *Using the VALUE rubrics for improvement of learning and authentic assessment*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

A photograph of four people (three men and one woman) standing outdoors in a courtyard area, engaged in conversation. They are dressed in professional or business-casual attire. The background features a modern building with a grid facade and several trees with vibrant purple flowers. A semi-transparent red banner is overlaid at the bottom of the image, containing the text for the section header.

Doctoral Programs in Higher Education

Prepare to Make a Difference

Azusa Pacific University's doctoral programs in higher education comprise a community of scholar-disciples preparing transformational leaders to help shape colleges and universities across the globe.

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Higher Education

- Prepares academic leaders to conduct, interpret, and communicate original research to contribute to the policy and practice of higher education.
- Cohort-based hybrid program.
- Two-week residential intensives twice a year for four years.

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Higher Education Leadership

- Trains student affairs professionals to serve as effective leaders in the rapidly changing world of higher education.
- Three-year, cohort-based program.
- Campus visits one week in June and one weekend a month.

Learn more! Visit apu.edu/bas/highered/.



AZUSA PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

God First Since 1899