

THE ROLE OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

BACKGROUND

The national focus on college completion has prompted a number of ambitious education goals, numerous research- and practice-based initiatives, and a spotlight on the need to continually improve higher education access and success. This national dialogue has raised not only public and political will for postsecondary completion, but also a number of cautionary tales by higher education stakeholders. Chief among them is a concern that postsecondary institutions will dilute educational quality in attempts to increase degree completions. Given the need to ensure degree quality, the assessment of student learning has expanded beyond the traditional purview of institutions and accrediting bodies, and is now being taken up by numerous postsecondary stakeholders such as government agencies, foundations, and businesses. Institutional accountability is hardly a new concept. Yet a number of forces at play today have public officials and individual students and their families asking tough questions: Is the public and private investment in higher education resulting in the development of knowledge and skills that are commensurate with this investment and aligned with employer needs? Does the

traditional higher education learning model meet the needs of our increasingly diverse society? How do we know?

Such questions further prompt a wide range of education stakeholders to seek increased transparency by higher education institutions.

To meet quality and workforce alignment goals, education leaders, practitioners, policymakers, and policy influencers turn to the measurement of student learning to provide accountability and transparency. To this end, the Pathways to College Network, with the support of Lumina Foundation, hosted a series of meetings on student learning outcomes. These meetings led to ongoing discussions of what is most important in ensuring quality and the graduation of an increasingly diverse student body. This brief is a product of these discussions and provides Pathways to College Network partners and their constituents with guideposts for the complex topic of student learning outcomes. Such knowledge is useful as postsecondary stakeholders ensure that institutional accountability and transparency are part of the larger effort to graduate students who are prepared for work and life.



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THE WHY AND HOW OF STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Beyond simply justifying the investment of public and private resources, measuring student learning at the institutional, college, department, and/or classroom levels is necessary to improve practice at each of these levels. Given the rapidly changing demographics and educational needs across distinct student groups—including first-generation college-goers, part-time attendees, adult and reentry students, and those in need of remediation—institutions must assess learning outcomes and use that information to improve teaching. Some of the outcomes, as well as resulting improvements, should then be shared with constituents and the public. With the current emphasis on workforce capacity at the local, state, and national levels, institutions must ensure that they are indeed producing graduates who are career ready and contribute to a diverse society. Institutional missions, as varied as they are, reflect what colleges and universities seek to contribute to their communities, state, and nation. To fulfill their missions, institutions need to assess the effectiveness of their learning environments and delivery models.

Perhaps not surprisingly, what it means to measure learning, the assessment methods for doing so, and the use of results vary widely. Also varied is the rationale for measurement; here we find tension between members of the policy community and institutional leaders and faculty. During this “great recession,” many policymakers view higher education as a means to educate, retool, and place new and dislocated workers. Many institutional leaders and faculty members view higher education as an important foundation for a robust citizenry prepared for their fields of choice and for their contribution to society as a whole.

Making these value propositions more complex is the fact that no single metric can capture quality of student learning across the board for all institutions. Yet agreement *can* be found around the need for faculty to assess what students know and to use this knowledge to improve the delivery of a quality education. Second, demonstration of student outcomes is critical for institutions to assure the public that they are fulfilling their missions and providing a worthwhile educational experience.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES DEFINED

For the purpose of this brief, a given **student learning outcome represents what students know, do, and can demonstrate as a result of having completed or participated in an educational program, activity, course, and/or project. Effective student learning outcomes specify actions by the student that are observable, measurable, and demonstrable. When student learning outcomes are designed and measured effectively, related assessments can help decision-makers determine how to better facilitate student learning.**

PROGRESS MADE IN STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Institutions have made great strides toward becoming both accountable and transparent. Years of educational research and informed practice have resulted in an array of tools that allow faculty members and institutional leaders to set goals for student learning, determine whether they are meeting those goals, and use this information for improvement. Some campuses have developed homegrown assessments; others use tools developed by educational associations, research institutes, or assessment consortia.

For example, the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) **Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE)** consists of 15 rubrics to assess undergraduate student work and learning. Through **Tuning USA**, faculty teams in five states have launched a Beta version of what students should know and do at the associate's, bachelor's, and master's degree levels through the development of field-specific student learning outcomes statements; a process intended to be analogous with the international Tuning Projects of Europe, Latin America, and Australia.

Tuning USA was developed to make educational outcomes more transparent and to facilitate the transfer process and articulation agreements across institutions. More standardized forms of assessment include ACT's **Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP)** and the Council for Aid's **Education's Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)**. In early 2011, the Lumina Foundation released its **Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP)**, to define and measure the general knowledge and skills students need at the associate's, bachelor's, and master's degree levels, regardless of their majors or fields of study. The DQP now has in operation six projects involving about 175 institutions and will continue its iterative development into 2nd and 3rd editions over the next few years.

Building off of Lumina's DQP efforts, in late 2011 AAC&U kicked off a new project to explore implementation models and strategies for the DQP on its members' campuses.

With support from the Lumina Foundation, AAC&U is piloting the DQP in two- and four-year public institutions, with an emphasis on the transfer process. This work will allow colleges to test a set of approaches that will assess student learning outcomes and thus help faculty and staff design practices that help students achieve the profile's competencies in a transfer setting. The initiative will also allow for the formulation of a public reporting mechanism for both quality of learning and the number of degrees conferred.

These mechanisms for assessing student learning outcomes can encourage institutions to change practices and policies to better support student learning. However, institutional change will only come with critical analysis and

interpretation of the data, thoughtful reflection, and the willingness and support to augment practices that affect student learning. Unless they foster an environment that promotes reflective dialogue, removes obstacles to change, and provides resources to support institutional leaders, faculty, and staff in this process, these mechanisms will not improve student results.

COMMUNICATING RESULTS

Institutional accountability and transparency efforts succeed when effectively communicated to the general public. In this area, great progress has been made in recent years. For example, the **Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)**, sponsored by the Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), supports participating institutions in measuring a range of student and campus characteristics, including cost of attendance, campus safety, class size, students' on-campus experiences, retention rates, and student learning outcomes. The VSA disseminates this information in a transparent and comparable format through a public website called **College Portrait**.

Similarly, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is developing the **Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA)** to serve as a national accountability framework specifically for community colleges. The VFA, which will be available in stages throughout 2012-2014, will provide a road map for colleges on the assessment of student learning and will develop an online display tool to share measures of student learning and campus characteristics. At the helm of this effort are community college presidents and leading education researchers.

Through their participation in such efforts, institutions are making strides to hold themselves accountable to students, families, state funding agencies, and other stakeholders. Such transparency demonstrates a willingness to take responsibility for student learning and helps foster an environment of continual improvement, in which institutions are empowered to identify and address gaps in learning between student groups and create measurable goals for improvement.

ASSESSMENT CONSORTIA

Also playing a leading role in the movement to increase the use of student learning measures is a number of independent assessment consortia. Each consortium seeks to raise awareness, increase buy-in, and provide tangible resources to key stakeholders. Most of all, their purpose is to elevate the role of student learning outcomes in the college completion movement and provide tools to make these assessments work for the institutions and higher education at large.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has created a variety of resources to assist institutional leaders with the assessment of student learning and the interpretation of learning outcomes. NILOA argues that such assessments provide critical data that help to identify what curricular and pedagogical practices do or do not work to improve student performance. In addition, the organization has developed a comprehensive transparency framework that includes six components of student learning assessment and regularly produces informative briefs on the nature and elements of the assessment cycle. NILOA also provides examples of good assessment practice taking place in institutions across the country.

The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability, an advocacy organization established in 2009, leads and supports voluntary and cooperative efforts to move the higher education community toward gathering, reporting on, and using evidence to improve student learning in U.S. undergraduate education; and advocates for the integration of assessment of student learning outcomes into the work of an entire institution. The Alliance published *Committing to Quality: Guidelines for Assessment and Accountability in Higher Education* in January 2012, will release *Assuring Quality: An Institutional Self-Assessment Tool for Excellent Practice in Student Learning Outcomes Practice* in fall 2012, and has more than 100 institutions as members of its Presidents' Alliance.

In June 2011, the **Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE)**, based at the University of Kentucky, hosted its first national conference. In reflecting on the work of AALHE, leaders of the organization argued that assessment professionals need to go beyond presenting aggregated test scores as measures of

educational effectiveness.¹ They contend that assessment must take place within a course and within an academic program, as well as at the institutional level.

Two consortia, the **Hampshire Teagle Consortium** and the **Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education**, were founded in 2005 on the premise that faculty, staff, and administrators across institutions must collaborate to collect, share, and utilize assessment data—particularly to secure faculty and staff buy-in.

The resources developed and lessons learned from these consortia have wide-ranging implications for stakeholders

STUDENT REPORTED MEASURES

In addition to measures that directly assess outcomes upon completion of a given course, many institutions utilize student reports of their perceived learning and growth. Such reports are often obtained by surveying students when they enter college, followed by another survey at the end of their freshman and senior years, or at other chosen points in time. Institutions can then use this information—often tracked over time to identify emergent trends among discrete student populations—to improve educational offerings, to inform their stakeholders, and to supplement other forms of student assessment.

Popular tools include the **Cooperative Institution Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey** provided by the Higher Education Research Institute, the **National Survey of Student Engagement**, and the **Community College Survey of Student Engagement**. Other assessments, such as the **Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE)**, provide corresponding surveys of faculty engagement, thus allowing a more complete picture of student development and the role of faculty in providing the learning tools and environment that students need.

No matter what practices or tools institutions employ, assessment alone cannot ensure quality of learning, and no single mechanism will fully inform the choices made by students and families. Given the diversity of both our nation's higher education landscape and its students, each campus and system must decide what mechanism works best for its unique setting. The education community at

¹ David Glenn. January 27, 2011. Educators Zero In on What Lumina's Degree-Qualification Template Would Mean. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

seeking to ensure that more students graduate with degrees that will prepare them for success in work and life. These organizations are leading the effort to ensure that institutions assess student learning, use the results for improvement, and communicate student learning outcomes to the public.

large is then charged with rolling out effective practices to better connect students, families, and other key stakeholders to pertinent information that has the potential to drive their decisions.

The Pathways to College Network urges its partners—and the broader education community—to encourage the use of student learning assessment for postsecondary success. Pathways partners should leverage their collective expertise on what works to increase college access, persistence, and completion for underrepresented students to ensure that this knowledge informs assessment of student learning, increased institutional accountability, and more public transparency on the impacts of a college education. The multitude of efforts to define and measure student learning further reinforces the importance for an open dialogue of diverse perspectives that ultimately focus on what matters most—high quality student learning in higher education. With the advocacy of members like you, the measurement of student learning outcomes will no longer just be about reporting out but instead creating waves of change within.

STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT RESOURCES

PROGRESS MADE IN STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT:

AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE)
<http://www.aacu.org/value/>

Tuning USA
<http://tuningusa.org/>

ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP)
<http://www.act.org/caap/>

Lumina's Degree Qualification Profile (DQP)
<http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/>

COMMUNICATING RESULTS:

APLU & AASCU's Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)
<http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm>

www.collegeportraits.org

AACC's Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA)
<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/VFAWeb/default.aspx>

ASSESSMENT CONSORTIA:

National Institute for Learning Outcome Assessment (NILOA)
<http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/>

New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability
<http://newleadershipalliance.org/>

Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE)
<http://aalhe.org/>

Hampshire Teagle Consortium and Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education
http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/storage/Assessment_Collaborative_Review.pdf

STUDENT REPORTED MEASURES:

CIRP
<http://www.heri.ucla.edu/cirpoverview.php>

NSSE
<http://nsse.iub.edu/>

CCSSE
<http://www.ccsse.org/>

FSSE
<http://fsse.iub.edu/>

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About Pathways

The Pathways to College Network (Pathways) is an alliance of national organizations that advances college opportunity for underserved students by raising public awareness, supporting innovative research, and promoting evidence-based policies and practices across the K–12 and higher education sectors. Pathways promotes the use of research-based policies and practices; the development of new research that is both rigorous and actionable; and the alignment of efforts across middle school, high school, and higher education in order to promote college access and success for underserved students.

To learn more about the Pathways to College Network please visit our websites:

www.pathwaystocollege.net



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