

SEF

SOUTHERN
EDUCATION
FOUNDATION

ADVANCING EXCELLENCE, ENHANCING EQUITY:

*Making the Case for Assessment
at Minority-Serving Institutions*



FOREWORD

In recent years the higher education community has wrestled more intensely with the challenge of producing better, more robust, assessments of student learning. In addition to the national push to dramatically increase the number of Americans with post-secondary credentials, there is also considerable concern about being able to assure the quality of college degrees and institutional effectiveness—hence the focus on assessing student learning outcomes.

It is safe to say that the demands for better assessment data were ahead of a clear path for institutions tasked with actually doing the work. Some questioned the reliability of the tools used for assessment; reaching consensus about what constitutes learning and which aspects of it should be measured proved arduous; and determining the organizational choreography required for success was challenging given the competing demands of any institution. Many campuses, especially those serving “less-traditional” students, have struggled with the necessary task of assessing student learning.

Minority-Serving Institutions represent great laboratories for assessment innovation and practice. These institutions are committed to serving the population of students upon whom the nation’s degree attainment goals rest. There is a strong need to demonstrate student learning gains to external stakeholders beyond merely using graduation rates. There is an even greater need to use all available evidence to correlate institutional practice and student performance at various stages. And, it is often the case that more rigorous assessment must be done without additional resources or people. The context is prime for inventive thinking about how to implement rich assessments and use the results to ultimately improve student success.

In the last few years, with the support of our funding partners, SEF has hosted two Student Learning Outcomes Institutes that brought together chief academic officers, institutional researchers, and key faculty members from more than 150 MSIs. We have supported demonstration site projects on several campuses to improve their capacity for assessment and engaged colleagues across the country with the intent of advancing our collective ability to respond to the call for better data about what students know and are able to do upon graduation.

We hope that this brief, and others to follow, will be a valuable resource for the higher education community and a medium to consider practical and more effective ways to improve student success.

Kent McGuire
President

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Ask veteran faculty members at any institution to describe the changes they have seen in higher education over the course of their careers, and the assessment of student learning is almost sure to show up on everyone's list. Once the purview of an ad hoc task force or faculty director hastily appointed a year or two before a reaccreditation review, assessment work is increasingly a part of "business as usual" at most colleges and universities. It has affected the responsibilities of academic administrators, the portfolios of faculty committees, programs for faculty development and, in some institutions, the expectations for tenure and promotion. It has changed the content of course syllabi, department websites, college catalogs, annual reports, and grant applications. It has commanded attention from faculty and staff at every level and across every unit, from the newest tenure-track hire to the most experienced senior administrator. The assessment imperative has altered both the language and the landscape of higher education in the United States.



It has also altered the way many individual faculty members think and talk about their work with students. The past 25 years have seen significant paradigm shifts in the profession of higher education – from "teacher-centered" to "learner-centered," from "my classroom" to "our program," from "course coverage" to "learning outcomes." Assessment has played a key role in these

shifts, both in framing the questions faculty members ask about teaching and learning, and in urging a more evidence-based approach to academic decision-making. In a retrospective on the evolution of faculty attitudes toward assessment since the 1980s, national higher education leader and scholar Peter Ewell (2009) observes that not only do most faculty "accord [assessment] a legitimacy that was not forthcoming two decades ago," but that "a sizeable minority of faculty have wholeheartedly embraced assessment as useful in improving undergraduate instruction." While institutions are still learning how best to move from evidence to action, it is fair to say that many more faculty now see assessment as a tool for improving rather than merely "proving." Equally important, the process of assessment has required faculty to think carefully and collectively about their goals for student learning, and to pay attention to those goals in developing programs, constructing syllabi, devising assignments, providing "scaffolding," and evaluating students' work. And many skeptical faculty have been surprised by how stimulating and rewarding these collegial conversations can be.

Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) have a vital role to play in realizing the potential benefits of assessment, both for themselves and for higher education as a whole. For purposes of this discussion, following usage by the U.S. Department

of Education, “minority-serving institution” will refer to the broad array of U.S. colleges and universities that are classified by law as minority-serving and/or that serve high proportions of minority students. MSIs thus include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), institutions whose undergraduate enrollment consists of 25 percent or more of at least one minority group (African-American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, or Native American), and institutions whose undergraduate enrollment consists of 50 percent or more students from any minority group (Li, 2007, p. 5). Demographic and enrollment dynamics make the population of MSIs quite fluid over time; some institutions that are not technically classified as MSIs on the basis of enrollments in one year may be classified that way the next, and vice versa.

Of course MSIs, like U.S. colleges and universities as a whole, are hardly a homogeneous group. By definition, they differ considerably in the demographic makeup of their student populations, serving students of widely varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In addition, MSIs vary by Carnegie classification, by geographic region, by size, and by institutional culture. Some are public, others private; some are not-for-profit, others for-profit. However, despite these important institutional differences, as a group they are critical contributors to the learning of U.S. college students. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), MSIs enroll more than half of all minority undergraduates overall and, with the exception of Native Americans, more than half of each minority group. Demographic changes in the U.S. population as a whole have sparked a dramatic expansion of the universe of minority-serving institutions over the past 25 years. Drawing on the most recently-available federal data, NCES notes that the total number of MSIs tripled from 1984 to 2004, increasing from 414 to 1254. Over that same time period, the proportion of all U.S. institutions defined as minority-serving more than doubled, increasing from 14 percent to 32 percent. With total U.S. minority student enrollment increasing over that same time period by 146 percent (compared to an increase of only 15 percent for white students), and continuing to grow as described above, minority-

serving institutions now comprise a substantial sector of U.S. higher education, and educate a significant share of the fastest-growing segments of the student population.

The students MSIs serve are the students of the future for all colleges and universities. Consequently, MSI assessment efforts matter both for their own students and for students at other institutions. Yet for assessment to be undertaken at all, much less to serve its intended purposes, faculty must be persuaded that assessment is worth the investment – both institutionally and personally. This brief is addressed to anyone in the MSI community who has a role to play in leading assessment. You may be a department chair, a provost, a faculty assessment coordinator, an institutional researcher, an assessment committee member, or a president. Whatever your title, if you have responsibility for leading assessment, you know that one of your most important leadership tasks is to be able to make the case for it – to explain to your colleagues why robust assessment is important for your institution and your students. You also need strategies for communicating your message consistently and effectively. This brief aims to assist you in framing assessment as a tool for advancing excellence and enhancing equity within and beyond your institution.

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UNDERSTANDING THE ASSESSMENT IMPERATIVE: WHAT IS EXPECTED OF US, AND WHY?

Making the case for assessment begins with a clear understanding of just what it is we are being asked to do in assessing student learning. When faculty who are relatively new to (or skeptical about) assessment are asked to participate in an assessment effort, it is not unusual for them to respond, “I assess my students’ learning all the time – with each paper I grade, presentation I evaluate, or exam I correct. How is this any different?” This is a fair question, since both grading and assessment involve making judgments about the quality of student work, and it’s a helpful starting point for understanding the assessment imperative in higher education.

When faculty appraise an exam or assignment, they are typically evaluating an individual student’s performance on many outcomes at once – the command of disciplinary concepts, the quality of the writing, the rigor of the research, the originality of the ideas, and so forth – and then summarizing the results in the form of a grade. Assessment asks faculty to do the opposite; instead of evaluating many outcomes for one student, they evaluate one outcome for many students, and then summarize the information in the form of a narrative or numerical report. Assessment is thus “actionable” in ways that grading alone is not; it provides specific information about students’ knowledge, proficiencies, and values that cannot be obtained simply by looking at a collection of composite indicators (grades). Moreover, assessment is conducted collectively and speaks to collective outcomes; in social science terms, the unit of observation is often the work of individual students, but the unit of analysis is the program or the institution as a whole. A useful working definition of assessment is *a collective and systematic process of gathering evidence about the specific learning outcomes of a group of students – what they know, what they can do, and what they care about* (adapted from Kuh and Ewell, 2010, and Maki, 2010). Such evidence may be gathered in a wide variety of ways, ranging from direct observation of work that students complete to meet course requirements, to indirect inferences from students’ responses to written questionnaires or exit interviews.

Recent paradigm shifts notwithstanding, many faculty and administrators in most institutions still see accreditation as the principal “driver” of assessment (Kuh and Ikenberry, 2009; Ewell, 2009). It is quite true



that assessment looms larger than ever in accreditation reviews, and that successful reaccreditation remains essential to institutional viability and vitality. Accreditation by a federally-approved (or “recognized”) accreditor is a prerequisite for student eligibility for federal Title IV student aid, including Pell Grants, Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, Stafford Loans and PLUS Loans. For higher education as a whole, accreditation assures institutional “truth in advertising,” promotes institutional accountability for meeting public standards of quality, and encourages and documents institutional improvement activities (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2010). These benefits of accreditation are significant to the vitality of any institution, but they are particularly so for most MSIs. In an SEF brief for HBCU presidents preparing for reaccreditation, Leroy Davis (2007) observes that “accreditation for HBCUs is especially important because most HBCUs have relatively small endowments, serve many aid-dependent students, and face escalating costs for infrastructure maintenance and staffing.” These are realities not just for HBCUs, but for many other minority-serving institutions, whatever their region, size, or Carnegie classification. It is no wonder that Davis concludes his brief by urging presidents to “rank accreditation among their top priorities.”

Assessment is not a new feature of the accreditation review process. As noted above, in order for accreditation to yield the benefit of institutional access to federal funding, the accrediting organization must be “recognized” by the federal government. To achieve and maintain federal recognition, the organization must comply with a set of federally-established criteria for the standards and procedures it observes in conducting accreditation reviews. For more than 20 years now, these criteria for recognition have featured student learning outcomes and the assessment thereof. Accreditors must show that in conducting institutional reviews, they evaluate whether an institution “maintains clearly specified educational objectives that are consistent with its mission and appropriate in light of the degrees or certificates awarded” and “is successful in achieving its stated objectives” (34 CFR 602.17(a)(1) and (2)). With the dramatic expansion of college enrollments, the increased importance of higher education to public and private economies, the ever-rising cost of college,

If institutions don't deliver meaningful evidence of student learning, policymakers may renew their calls for federally-developed standardized metrics that may or may not be equally valid indicators of the outcomes of college for all the members of a diverse student population.

and continuing increases in public investment, federal policy makers have continued to press for stronger assessment expectations in accreditation reviews as a tool for assuring educational quality and improving educational outcomes.

And as anyone who has helped prepare an institutional self-study over the past several years can attest, the regional accrediting associations have responded both by enhancing the assessment-related criteria for reaccreditation and by holding institutions accountable for meeting them. Concerns about assessment shortcomings are figuring more prominently in reaccreditation reviews, with increasing numbers of institutions being directed to provide intermediate progress reports or take specific remedial action based partially or entirely on unsatisfactory performance with respect to assessment. Moreover, the assessment bar is being raised across the board, not in just one or two regions; in recent years, about two-thirds of follow-up directives by Middle States Commission on Higher Education, up to three-quarters of the directives by the SACSCOC Commission on Colleges, 80 percent of the directives by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and almost all the directives by Western Association of Schools and Colleges, were focused on assessment (Provezis, 2010). Clearly, the assessment of student learning matters more than ever in reaccreditation reviews.

But this is only part of the story – and that turns out to be good news for those of us charged with leading our institution’s assessment efforts. The rest of the story is that the assessment we are being asked to do is now much more inviting to our faculty and staff colleagues. The message, both from our accreditors and from practitioners on the ground, is no longer simply “Do assessment!” or even “Do more assessment!” Rather, it is “Do *meaningful* assessment!” – assessment, in other words, that aims to sustain and strengthen student learning and the pedagogies, programs, and practices that nurture it. Not only is this a more accurate depiction of what we are being asked to do, it’s also infinitely more appealing to those of us who have to do it.

Meaningful assessment, as depicted in federal policy, accreditation processes, and professional practice, is defined by several qualities, all of which can help stimulate faculty engagement: (1) a focus on mission-appropriate goals; (2) the use of multiple forms of evidence; and (3) action in response to the results. The first quality – a focus on mission-appropriate goals – is clearly articulated in recent revisions to the regulatory language governing the recognition of accrediting organizations. Thanks to vigorous advocacy by higher education leaders during the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act in 2008, the federal standards for accreditation now specifically affirm the authority of the institution (rather than accreditors or the federal government) to establish its own goals and standards for student achievement as appropriate to its mission (34 CFR 602.16 (a)(1)(i) and (f)(2)). The regional accrediting commissions have affirmed the premise that goals for student learning should be established by the institution itself and congruent with the institution’s mission. In their shared principles governing the role of student learning in institutional accreditation, the commissions maintain that accreditation should “focus on the quality of student learning without specifying, beyond general categories, what that learning should be – in short, promote standards without standardization” (Council of

Regional Accrediting Commissions [hereafter C-RAC], 2003). Meaningful assessment thus begins with mission, and faculty are in the best position to articulate collectively how their institution’s mission translates into expectations for student learning.

Meaningful assessment is also now understood as a multi-method enterprise, another invitation to broad faculty engagement. In an earlier era, “assessment” was understood by many faculty to mean something along the lines of “scientifically-generated quantitative data worthy of publication in a peer-reviewed journal.” More than one faculty member was heard to say, “I can’t do assessment – I’m not a numbers person,” or words to that effect. But in the current era, assessment is no longer perceived as the purview solely of educational researchers



or statisticians; indeed, faculty across the disciplines are encouraged to employ methods of assessment congruent with their disciplinary training. Many of the professional disciplinary associations, from the National Association of Schools of Art and Design to the American Sociological Association, now provide assessment resources in the sections of their websites devoted to undergraduate instruction. Moreover, the use of multiple forms and sources of evidence enhances the comprehensiveness, nuance, and credibility of the results (Maki, 2010). Consequently, in the current era of assessment, we are much more likely to speak of “observing” and “summarizing” rather than “measuring” and “quantifying,” and to aim for “systematic” rather than “scientific.” The regional accreditors affirm this pluralist paradigm for gathering evidence of student learning. What matters in accreditation reviews is simply that assessment methods are appropriate to the learning goals being assessed, and that the evidence of learning is derived from multiple and complementary sources (C-RAC, 2003). The multi-method approach to assessment reflected in both policy and practice makes broad faculty engagement not only more likely, but more necessary.

But perhaps the most significant feature of meaningful assessment is its potential to prompt action for improvement. Assessment is not just about posting learning outcome statements, developing assessment plans, administering surveys, applying rubrics, or even reporting findings, though all of those activities are important and useful. Rather, it’s about acting on the results in order to sustain and strengthen student learning. The main event is not the completion of the assessment report, but what happens next – who sees it, how they make sense of it, and what they do in response to it. The expectation that assessment findings will be used for improvement is, once again, rooted in the federal standards for the recognition of accrediting organizations; accreditors must require an institution’s self-study to include not only “the assessment of educational quality” but also “the institution’s...continuing efforts to improve educational quality” (34 CFR 602.17(b)). And this is, in fact, what the accreditors require. Through the accreditation process, an institution is expected to demonstrate the quality of its students’ learning not only by establishing mission-appropriate goals and

Assessment reports are prepared as much for the institution itself as for its external audiences, and are seen not as the last stage of a linear process, but rather as one element of a continuous cycle of institutional improvement.

gathering appropriate evidence of their achievement, but also by “applying collective judgment as to the meaning and utility of the evidence and using the evidence to effect improvements in its programs” (C-RAC, 2003).

All three of these features of meaningful assessment – articulating mission-appropriate goals, gathering multiple types of evidence, and acting on results – put faculty at the forefront of institutional assessment efforts. Who better than the faculty to articulate what students should know and be able to do, figure out what constitutes credible evidence of success, and determine the significance of the results for institutional practice? Both federal policy makers and the regional accreditors have issued an open invitation for faculty to shape their institutions’ assessment agendas in ways that capitalize on faculty competencies and harmonize with faculty commitments. The contemporary assessment-accreditation linkage turns out to be much more faculty-friendly than was the case in the early days of the assessment imperative.

An understanding of assessment as mission-focused, multi-disciplinary, and action-oriented creates opportunities for academic leaders to advance some very specific claims about the value of assessment for minority-serving institutions. We turn next to these claims, contextualized by two commitments that are common across (though not necessarily unique to) minority-serving institutions: advancing excellence and enhancing equity.

Whether focused on commonly-shared or institutionally-distinctive learning goals, assessment can tell a systematic story about the extent to which an institution's own expectations are being met.

ASSESSMENT FOR ADVANCING EXCELLENCE

Assessment helps institutions advance excellence in teaching and learning. The process of assessment requires us to be clear about our ambitions for our students and to examine our practices carefully, whether in our individual classrooms, our departments and programs, or our institutions as a whole. The products of assessment provide evidence we can then use in attracting and targeting resources to sustain what works and improve what does not. For individual course instructors, participation in assessment can make teaching and learning more intentional and systematic; for the institution as a whole, assessment projects can build bridges across courses, programs, and curricular and co-curricular units. Among the specific messages we can send to our colleagues about the role of assessment in advancing excellence are the following:

“Assessment can showcase our mission.” Assessment activities can help prospective students, potential donors, and the public achieve a better understanding of the distinctive aims and accomplishments of MSIs. Examples of mission-distinctive expectations for learning abound on the websites of many minority-serving institutions. Some are stated explicitly, while others are implicit in mission, identity, or vision statements. Examples include:

- Preparing students for urban-focused leadership
- Promoting students' spiritual and moral development
- Raising students' educational aspirations
- Educating students about their distinctive history and culture, to make them agents of cultural celebration and preservation
- Facilitating students' transfer to four-year degree programs
- Preparing students for teaching careers in diverse communities
- Promoting students' capacity for social justice advocacy
- Helping underserved students achieve competencies necessary for college-level course work
- Equipping students to contribute to the revitalization of the local economy
- Enhancing the academic confidence of first-generation students

Each of these distinctive intended outcomes represents an opportunity for an institution to gather mission-specific data and use it to enhance stakeholder understanding of institutional purposes.

In using assessment to give voice to their students' accomplishments, MSI faculty can help preserve diversity of institutional mission, a signature strength of U.S. higher education. As noted above, institutional success in assessing student learning ultimately will help to preserve the strong role of higher education professionals in the mediated oversight provided by institutional accreditation, averting unwarranted standardization of institutional missions and imposition of inappropriate assessment metrics. Moreover, the expectation that institutions

will provide assessment evidence as appropriate to their missions invites MSIs to focus their assessment work on mission-distinctive aspects of their students' learning. As several of the examples in this brief will testify, some are doing just that. We can help our colleagues in the classroom see their assessment work as a source of evidence about the systemic benefits of mission diversity – and what that diversity delivers in terms of student learning and development – for U.S. higher education as a whole.

“Assessment can enhance our visibility.” At the same time, MSIs also embrace a number of learning goals common to all institutions of higher learning – effective written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, critical thinking, ethical reasoning and action, intercultural competence, and the like. Indeed, through its Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative, the Association of American Colleges and Universities urges all colleges and universities to be intentional in articulating, acting on, and assessing these and other “essential learning outcomes” necessary for individual student success, democratic vitality, and national prosperity (<http://www.aacu.org/leap/index.cfm>). By doing so, institutions can disseminate the effectiveness of their programs and the accomplishments of their students. A variety of institutions – including MSIs such as Kapi’olani Community College, Miami Dade College, and Texas A&M – describe the impact of first-year seminars, service learning, undergraduate research, critical thinking instruction, and other initiatives on the learning of their diverse students. An investment in assessment has helped these institutions gain visibility as national exemplars of effective practice.

“Assessment can help us secure resources.” Whether focused on commonly-shared or institutionally-distinctive learning goals, assessment can tell a systematic story about the extent to which an institution’s own expectations are being met. Used with care and integrity, findings may be used to support requests to prospective donors and grant-making organizations for program innovation, program expansion, or faculty development. References to prior assessment results also demonstrate to prospective funders an institution’s capacity to gather and use evidence of program impact, and this capacity is increasingly one of the most important evaluation criteria for funding requests. In short, an institution’s



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ability to tell a coherent, evidence-based story about student learning holds potential for increasing institutional visibility and securing needed resources.

“Assessment can help us improve our practice.” The claim that assessment can advance excellence is not just hypothetical. A growing number of minority-serving institutions are using assessment findings to inform specific institutional initiatives. Among the most compelling examples is a series of reports generated under the auspices of the “Building Engagement and Attainment among Minority Students” (BEAMS) project, led by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Institute for Higher Education Policy’s Alliance for Equity in Higher Education. Over a five-year period, the BEAMS project engaged more than 100 four-year historically African American, Hispanic-serving, and tribal colleges in gathering, analyzing, and acting on evidence of student learning and engagement. The institutions developed and implemented specific action plans to improve student engagement, learning, persistence, and success. The resulting practice briefs describe a broad array of specific – and replicable – MSI programs and practices resulting from this intentional use of assessment evidence, embracing first-year programs, writing across the curriculum, co-

curricular activities, student support services, and faculty development (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010). Findings with practical significance are also emerging from individual campus assessment initiatives; for example, one HSI is examining its campus strategies for internationalization in light of recent assessment data about the global perspectives of students, faculty, staff and administrators (Durodoye et al., 2011). Used well, assessment holds promise for helping us target scarce resources to the practices most likely to be productive for the students we serve.



ASSESSMENT FOR ENHANCING EQUITY

Assessment also holds promise for enhancing the equity of educational outcomes for students of color, and MSIs are uniquely positioned to realize this promise. Specifically, assessment can help explain and enhance student persistence, while at the same time reminding us that persistence is not the only story there is to tell. These outcomes will benefit not only the students in our own institutions, but students in other institutions as well.

“Assessment can advance student persistence.” Minority-serving institutions have much to contribute to unpacking the factors that affect retention and graduation rates. The challenges we face in nurturing

persistence are considerable. Even though students of color account for the largest share of growth in college enrollments in recent years, they are less likely than white students to graduate within six years. The Pew Research Center reports that from 2007 to 2008, overall first-year student enrollment in the U.S. rose by six percent, increasing the size of the entering class by 144,000 students – the largest increase in 40 years. Nearly three-quarters of this increase was attributable to enrollment by students of color. First-year enrollment increased by 15 percent for Hispanic students, eight percent for African American students, and six percent for Asian students, compared to an enrollment increase of only three percent for white students (Fry, 2010). Yet a significant gap persists in the graduation rates of white students and students of color. Six years after entering college, 60 percent of white students have a diploma in hand, compared to only 49 percent of Hispanic students and 40 percent of African American students (Lynch and Engle, 2010a, 2010b).

Given their vital and expanding role in postsecondary education, MSIs can use assessment to help advance knowledge about educational persistence among students of color. Some of this work is already beginning, and it is critically important to extend and deepen it. Recent analyses show that national averages in subgroup graduation rates mask considerable institutional variation, with the “graduation gap” quite large at some institutions and virtually non-existent at others. Some of the institutions whose African American or Hispanic students graduate at rates similar to those for white students are MSIs, such as the University of Miami, St. Edward’s University in Texas, North Carolina Wesleyan College, and the University of California-Riverside (Lynch and Engle, 2010a, 2010b). Assessment will make it possible to identify patterns in institutional practice that contribute to these outcomes and that can be instructive for other institutions. A powerful example of the value of assessment in supporting and extending persistence is provided by Dillard University, whose analysis of assessment evidence gathered under the auspices of its participation in the BEAMS project contributed to a major administrative reorganization and the development and implementation of a comprehensive “Student Integration Model for Success.” Dillard’s attention to systematic evidence in this process means that its innovations in service of student persistence will have significance beyond its own students.

“Assessment can amplify student success.” As important as retention and graduation rates are, they are by no means the whole story about student learning for students of color. As MSIs build their repositories of evidence about students’ knowledge, proficiencies, and learning-related attitudes and aspirations, they will be able to tell a much richer story about their students beyond simply whether they graduated or not. And as institutions travel down the assessment path marked for higher education by policy makers, accreditors, and leaders within the field, these stories are beginning to be told. Spelman College’s electronic portfolio program (SpEl.Folio) is yielding data about students’ writing, critical thinking, integrative abilities, and development as lifelong learners. The University of La Verne’s assessment of students’ quantitative literacy, combining direct observation of students’ work in relevant general education courses with survey data from the College Student Survey and the National Survey of Student Engagement, is yielding actionable information about students’ ability to interpret, draw inferences from, and apply quantitative data. Findings from the assessment program at Northwest Indian

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College will track the extent and impact of student engagement in community-based research, reflecting the college's mission to engage indigenous knowledge and foster indigenous self-determination. Assessment results in the College of Languages, Linguistics and Literature at the University of Hawaii–Manoa are confirming students' oral proficiency in a variety of modern languages, and permitting inquiry into the impact of study abroad on the development of that proficiency. In short, there is a wealth of information ready to be discovered about the specific outcomes that MSIs cultivate and the specific programs and practices that foster those outcomes.

We can encourage our colleagues' commitment to assessment by helping them see these connections between assessment and educational equity. In doing so, we can expand the definition of student success, make that success more visible, and contribute to the knowledge of colleagues at institutions beyond our own.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR MAKING THE CASE



Even with a clear vision of assessment as a tool for advancing excellence and enhancing equity, you need to find specific ways to share that vision with your colleagues. This brief concludes with some suggestions for doing so.



Consider your catchphrases. There is considerable power in the words we use to frame important institutional commitments. The way we talk about assessment will convey, whether explicitly or implicitly, what we think assessment is and why we think our institutions should invest in it. It is worth taking time to think about the assessment-related vision and values you hope to cultivate, and to build a language of assessment that is consistent with those aims and appropriate to your institution. Phrases that link assessment to institutional mission, to faculty identities and commitments, to systematic inquiry, and to student learning help faculty see the larger purposes of assessment and its potential. The particulars will vary from institution to institution but, in general, faculty would much rather “inquire into our excellence,” “investigate student success,” or “map our mission” than “write assessment reports” or “get ready for our accreditors.” For example, Johnson C. Smith University introduced a comprehensive assessment of its academic programming with the theme “Review, Renew, and Re-Imagine.” Barry University treats assessment as a matter of “comparing performance with purposes.” The Fort Valley State University College of Education describes

assessment as “a vehicle for improving what we care about most.” Cochise College frames assessment as a tool for “continuous improvement.” LaGuardia Community College promotes assessment to “foster a culture of learning for both students and faculty.” At my institution, in the early days of building our program, it was surprisingly helpful to stop using “assessment” altogether (because of its prior association with reductionist measurement and pointless reporting) and stop mentioning accreditation every time we introduced the topic. We instead began referring to “inquiry in support of student learning” – a phrase that evoked the teaching and research commitments and competencies of faculty, connected assessment to our students rather than our accreditors, and reminded us that assessment is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Look around. There is a growing array of readily-available “field-tested” information about effective assessment practices in institutions of every imaginable profile, and good ideas often transcend institutional classifications. In the present era, no one has to start from scratch. The websites of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (<http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/index.html>) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (<http://www.aacu.org/>) include a wealth of papers, instrument templates, and links to institutions that are doing good work in gathering and using evidence of student learning. The National Survey of Student Engagement website (<http://www.nsse.iub.edu/>) includes a searchable database of practical examples of institutional uses of NSSE results, with searches that can be narrowed by enrollment size, Carnegie classification, and accreditation region. The website of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) (<http://www.voluntarysystem.org/>) includes several helpful papers and presentations designed to assist institutions in evaluating alternative assessment approaches. Finally, assessment resources and links are available on the websites of a growing number of institutions, and these are valuable not only because of the practical information they provide, but because of the way they exemplify thoughtful framing of assessment as a tool for advancing institutional mission. Examples on the websites of very different kinds of MSIs include Howard University, Northwest Indian College, Miami Dade College, and Morehouse College.

Students generate work every day – papers, presentations, performances, posters, essays, exams – that can do double duty as “artifacts” for assessment.

Look within. Faculty sometimes assume that assessment is all about expensive and time-consuming external instruments that may not actually capture the most important aspects of student learning at their institutions – standardized tests, national surveys, performance tasks, and tracking software. But meaningful assessment can be much more organic, making use of opportunities that arise naturally in the course of normal instructional practice. Students generate work every day – papers, presentations, performances, posters, essays, exams – that can do double duty as “artifacts” for assessment. Moreover, faculty invest considerable time evaluating the quality of that work in the process of providing feedback and assigning grades. They know their students, and they know much about their students’ learning and development that will not necessarily be captured in an externally-developed standardized instrument. We can encourage our colleagues to recognize and capitalize on their existing expertise by looking to “embedded assessment” strategies, which make use of work that students are already doing and that faculty are already evaluating.

What embedded assessment permits is the ability to “extract” student learning information systematically from this individual-level work, and aggregate it to the program or institutional level. But there is no need to create special assignments or administer extra tests for this purpose; faculty can derive authentic evidence of their students’ learning directly from their students’ classroom work. An excellent handbook for embedded assessment at the department/program level, relying entirely on exams, term papers, capstone projects,



and other course-based assignments, has been prepared by the faculty assessment committee of Cochise College (<https://my.cochise.edu/web/assessment-committee/about-assessment>), a multi-campus minority-serving community college in Arizona. The handbook includes sample reports from a variety of departments that describe not only the types of student work used as sources of assessment evidence and the results they obtained from their outcomes-based analysis of the work, but the actions the departments plan to take in response to those results. LaGuardia Community College, recognized by Excelencia in Education for its service to Latino and non-traditional students, uses its nationally-known ePortfolio program as

both a distinctive educational experience for students and a source of student work samples for assessing its general education Core Competencies. What LaGuardia says about its ePortfolio assessment program could be said about embedded assessment more generally: it allows faculty to “capture a rich, longitudinal picture of student development and learning through systematic examination of student work” (<http://laguardia.edu/Assessment/About/>).

Be the change you want to see. As assessment findings begin to emerge at your institution, you can model the use of assessment findings in your communication and decision-making. Even a sentence or two about student learning evidence in a faculty meeting, or a question about relevant assessment evidence in a committee discussion about a curriculum proposal, will speak volumes about the role of assessment as useful for academic decision making. Equally powerful is the inclusion of assessment summaries in formal reports, such as presentations to the board of trustees, annual institutional reports, and communications with parents and alumni. As you include assessment findings in your communications with both internal and external stakeholders, you help to “normalize” assessment and demonstrate that it serves institutionally-determined purposes, not just accreditor appeasement.

As a role model, bridge-builder, environmental scanner, and strategic communicator, you can help make assessment not simply an acceptable task, but a powerful tool for institutional effectiveness. Assessment that is mission-focused, multi-method, and action-oriented can do far more than help MSI’s “pass accreditation.” It can strengthen and sustain student learning and advance inclusive excellence in U.S. higher education. Fully compatible with the important, distinctive, and diverse missions of minority-serving institutions, a robust program of assessment is essential to student and institutional success in the twenty-first century. In helping your colleagues embrace this vision, you are leading for learning.

ABOUT THE STUDY

SOUTHERN EDUCATION FOUNDATION (SEF):

For more than 145 years SEF has made outsized contributions to improving equity, excellence, and opportunity education at all levels, from pre-kindergarten through higher education. Research, policy analysis, advocacy, and programs are the primary means through which SEF pursues its mission.

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Through active partnerships with a wide array of faculty and staff, Jo has led several grant-funded multi-campus projects developing assessment instruments and using assessment to strengthen student learning. Jo has facilitated workshops and made presentations on assessing student learning in higher education at a wide array of regional and national conferences and as a consultant to individual institutions.

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¹ HBCUs are defined in federal law as degree-granting institutions established prior to 1964 whose principal mission is to educate African American students. Although African American students comprise the majority of enrollments at most HBCUs, there are a few where African American students constitute less than a quarter of the student population (Li, 2007, p. 1).

² HSIs are federally-defined as degree-granting institutions whose enrollments are comprised of a full-time-equivalent of 25 percent or more Hispanic students, at least half of whom have incomes of 150 percent or less of the federal poverty level (Li, 2007, p. 1).

³ TCUs are members of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), typically located on reservations, and generally governed by tribes (Li, 2007, p. 1).



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