



Abstract

In April 2017, a three-day Learning Improvement Summit, held in Washington, DC, brought together a broad array of national and international assessment stakeholders. The purpose of the summit was to empower a diverse group of faculty and assessment leaders to develop, refine, discuss, and address evidence-based learning improvement initiatives within higher education. In this short note, we provide a brief discussion of the need for the summit, the summit events, emerging themes, and lessons learned.

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Bringing Together Assessment and Learning Improvement: Dreaming Big for an Inaugural Summit

In order for assessment to be a fruitful endeavor, institutions of higher education need to move beyond simply meeting accountability demands to emphasizing student learning as the goal. This is the vision in which the inaugural summit on assessment's role in learning improvement was situated. Over the past few decades, universities have been asked to show the worth of their programs, in part for accountability reasons. One approach is through assessment, with an oft-cited definition:

...the ongoing process of establishing clear, measurable outcomes of student learning; ensuring that students have sufficient opportunities to achieve those outcomes; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well student learning matches our expectations; using the resulting information to understand and improve student learning. (Suskie, 2009, p. 4)

Suskie's definition closes with the charge to use assessment results to "understand and improve student learning." Nationally, college and university stakeholders are discussing what leaders in the field have deemed most important to the practice of assessment: improving student learning. A recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* commentary incited discussion among assessment professionals, claiming "First, it's clear that people in the assessment world have known for some time that their work was not producing results." (Gilbert, 2018, para. 6). The comments captured the view of those who question the value of assessment practices, who desire to assuage faculty members' resistance toward assessment, and who blame assessment's shortcomings on poor methodology. A flurry of responses from the assessment community included letters to the editor, asserting "...assessment offers faculty a process to understand what is happening with teaching and learning in our programs and opens a space for conversation about how to improve the learning environment" (Stitt-Bergh,

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Merrill, & Foster, 2018, para. 4). The difference between Gilbert (2018) and the response by Stitt-Bergh, Merrill, and Foster (2018) could not be more striking. Clearly, it is time to refocus assessment conversations to emphasize student learning.

Need for Focused Discussion on Learning Improvement

The assessment cycle followed by many universities typically includes a stage such as “use of results for improvement,” often referred to as “closing the loop” (see an example at <https://www.jmu.edu/studentaffairs/staff-resources/saac/assessment-cycle.shtml>). However, it is at this point in the assessment cycle where programs often lose momentum, continuity, and direction (Blaich & Wise, 2011; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Smith, Good, Sanchez, & Fulcher, 2015). Consequently, and despite the pervasiveness of assessment programs across the higher education landscape, there are relatively few evidence-based examples that publicly document use of assessment results to improve student learning at the academic program level (Baker, Jankowski, Provezis & Kinzie, 2012; Banta & Blaich, 2011; Blaich & Wise, 2011; Fulcher, Good, Coleman, & Smith, 2014). In fact, a systematic study evaluating 146 assessment programs identified that only six percent of the programs evaluated showed evidence of student learning (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009).

Despite the limited evidence, it is important to emphasize that we do believe that student learning is happening. Moreover, we firmly believe that faculty members want their students to learn. What is not happening, however, is widespread improvement of student learning at the academic degree program or institutional levels that is directly connected to assessment results. One way in which the field of assessment can move forward is to make a concerted effort toward understanding and defining what it means to use assessment results to improve student learning.

During the 2015-2016 academic year, we began wondering whether, where, and with whom there were conversations happening that involved assessment and improved student learning. As a result, the need for intentional, focused conversation among a broad array of national stakeholders was identified. The idea for a learning improvement summit was solidified by the observation that, at the time of planning, it was rare for higher education conferences to include presentations focused upon learning improvement. At that time, even within assessment conferences, only a very small portion of the presentations were dedicated to assessment’s role in improvement. For instance, the 2015 Assessment Institute (Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, 2015) included only one presentation on learning improvement, representing 1% of the total presentations¹. Similarly, the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education conference (2015) had only five (approximately 8% of the total) presentations with a focus on student learning. The American Educational Research Association’s 2015 proceedings returned over 500 presentations when “assessment” was searched but only three of those (less than 1% of the total) also contained “learning improvement.” The lack of coverage at national assessment conferences clearly called for a focused discussion on improved student learning. This led to the inaugural Learning Improvement Summit in Washington, DC in April 2017.

Learning Improvement Summit

The purpose of the three-day Learning Improvement Summit was to provide a space for conversation specifically focused on use of assessment results in the learning improvement process. Through collaboration between faculty at James Madison University and the *Center of Inquiry at Wabash College* directors, participants who represent the broad spectrum of the higher education landscape were invited to attend. The number of participants included in the inaugural summit was limited due to venue space and the desire to create a space that would promote focused conversation and collaboration. We intentionally included voices representative of a diverse array of stakeholders, including those of higher education practitioners, pioneers in the field of assessment, accrediting agencies, testing companies,

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¹ The dream is spreading. A learning improvement track was included in the 2018 conference.

national higher education associations, government agencies, and representatives from one international country. We dreamt big. And, to our delight, the invited participants came and engaged in a spirited discussion.

Throughout the three-day summit, participants were tasked with discussing and addressing issues regarding learning improvement initiatives. The objectives for the summit were to:

1. Empower the higher education community by moving the assessment needle beyond meeting accountability demands to emphasizing student learning as the goal.
2. Develop or refine working definitions of *learning improvement* that include the role of assessment at the university *program level*.
3. Develop a community of, and dialogue among, higher education professionals focused on assessment's role in promoting evidence of student learning at the *program level*.
4. Discuss and address issues, such as how to embed learning improvement efforts into institutional/organizational cultures.
5. Strategize about how to most effectively disseminate learning improvement efforts to the broad higher education community, so that all can benefit.

Keynote speakers and invited presentations laid the groundwork on the first day². Specifically, Trudy Banta and Peter Ewell discussed *Thirty-Five Years of Assessment: Past, Present, and Future*. Keston Fulcher and Cara Meixner outlined a learning improvement framework that promotes collaboration between assessment professionals and faculty developers – *Foundations of Learning Improvement*. Charles Blaich and Kathy Wise discussed a realistic view of assessment in *Walking the Assessment Beat on the Mean Streets of Higher Education*. Following the keynote addresses were a series of nine invited seven-minute presentations, illustrating applied examples of learning improvement. The remaining two days of the summit consisted of working sessions, group discussions, and breakout teams.

Emerging Themes and Areas of Future Collaboration

Dreams

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A variety of themes emerged from the summit. Undergirding the themes was the desire for continued communication and the need for a shared language surrounding the concept of learning improvement. Although we felt it important to include a diverse group of stakeholders, doing so necessitated granting participants the opportunity to clearly articulate their own perspective. As the variety of ideas were laid on the table, it was immediately apparent that we hold diverse perspectives on the definition of learning improvement. We realized that we had dreamt big in regard to the second summit objective to “Develop or refine working definitions of *learning improvement* that include the role of assessment at the university *program level*.” Additional discussion beyond the initial three-day summit would be necessary in order to meet the objective of a refined definition of learning improvement. Fortunately, the majority of participants expressed a desire to continue the conversation.

Another big theme that emerged: where, or how, does accreditation fit? Certainly, assessment's role in accreditation and accountability cannot be abandoned. Ewell (2009) reminds us that there can be tension between an institution's emphases on accountability versus student learning. Accreditation demands should partially shape the emerging definition of learning improvement. Relatedly, the existing infrastructure in higher education should be considered. The learning improvement work must be fully integrated into the life of an

² Video-tapes of keynote addresses and learning improvement examples may be found at <https://www.jmu.edu/assessment/featuredStories/2017/LearningSummit.shtml>

institution, joining the forces of assessment professionals, faculty development, and classroom teaching. This means, too, that more people must be included in the conversation—admission offices, budget directors, students, and institutional research. They all view student learning differently, and bring important perspectives.

Broadening the conversation and creating a working definition should lead to more and more examples of learning improvement. Documenting what has worked, and what hasn't, is crucial. We need concrete accounts of the conditions that led up to the learning improvement, a "What Works" of learning improvement in higher education.

Thoughts for Those who Dream

As we move forward, there are several lessons learned that we would like to share. First, if we want to move forward productively, *a working definition and shared language surrounding learning improvement is necessary*. We realize that this definition is likely not a simple one, given that it needs to encompass and respect a variety of world views. Perhaps the definition could better be described as a set of guiding principles for defining what constitutes learning improvement. Second, if considering a short three-day summit with a broad array of voices in the conversation, it might be helpful to *provide a means for expressing viewpoints prior to the summit*. We disseminated a pre-summit questionnaire, asking people to offer examples of learning improvement at their institution/organization and to voice specific questions they had about evidencing learning improvement. However, we did not use the information, other than for inclusion in the event program. In retrospect, careful coding and summarizing of participants' incoming views may have facilitated momentum towards a definition of learning improvement.

Those wishing to engage in a learning improvement discussion at their own institution, or across institutions, are encouraged to conduct preliminary groundwork that enables participants' voices to be heard, but in a manner that facilitates movement toward a common conversation. Third, inaugural summit participants clearly expressed the desire to engage in the creation of workshops and other training materials. *Sharing the work with the broad assessment community is key*. Fourth, and finally, we encourage future summit planners to *dream big*. We are influencing the learning of generations of students to come.

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