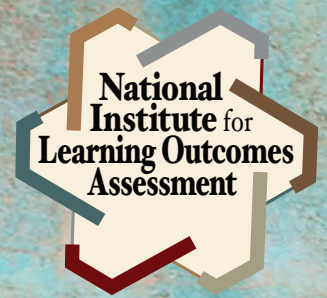


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Centering Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Making the Case for a Statement for the Field and Beyond

Verna F. Orr



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Centering Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Making the Case for a Statement for the Field and Beyond

Verna F. Orr

At this transformational moment in history, I take time to center Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) within the assessment realm; from teaching and learning experiences to internal and external mandates, from accreditation requirements to advocacy and agency. This work requires more than a statement composed of politically correct words and phrases including diversity, equity, inclusivity, culturally relevant, etc. It requires the lived experiences of HBCU connoisseurs who are indeed the experts of their own experiences. Too often the major contributions of HBCU scholar practitioners have been repurposed as “scholarship” and has shifted the conversation from HBCUs being producers of knowledge to consumers of the same. In the midst of a pandemic, an economic recession, and relentless violence and racial hostility against Black Americans, let the lessons herein from our HBCU colleagues be the motivation we all need to deliver on the promise of an equitable educational experience, for all students.

As the Assessment World Turns

In August 2015, I joined the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) as a research analyst. Since then, I have had the opportunity to review, critique, grapple with, and finally accept the fact that the literature on assessment is wide—sometimes messy and conflicting, a seemingly never-ending *soap opera* with competing interests—but absolutely necessary with regard to assuring quality and improving student learning.

Additionally, my time at NILOA has expanded my reach as a researcher, and practitioner: For the past five years, I have participated in the national Assessment Institute in Indianapolis. I completed a graduate assistantship in the Provost Office at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, and co-founded the HBCU Collaborative for Excellence in Educational Quality Assurance (HBCU-CEEQA). NILOA has afforded me the opportunity to indulge in the scholarship of assessment and be intimately involved with the practice of assessment.

Conversely, before arriving to NILOA, I served my first alma mater, Howard University as Confidential Assistant to the 16th President, Dr. Sidney A. Ribeau. In this role, I was often required to anticipate and advise the President on a range of issues including how our students’ learning experiences were being acted out in life, and how our students developed the habits and abilities that are identified as vital for a holistic life. My perspective, at the time, was that of a proud alumna who had benefitted greatly from my HBCU experience. What I lacked was the

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language to appropriately express the teaching and learning experiences that realized my ancestors wildest dreams. This limited understanding of assessment practices, history, accountability levers, and language was the spark that lit my flame of inquiry and interpretation. For reasons stated above, my desire to gain a greater understanding of the important work of assessment and accountability, specifically at HBCUs has increased significantly and is shared below.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

The Higher Education Act of 1965, amended, defines an HBCU as:

...any historically black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation.

Early American higher education institutions were characterized by exclusiveness (Anderson, 1988). Centuries passed before the overwhelming majority of these early institutions admitted women, non-traditional students, or people of color. By contrast, most HBCUs have always been coeducational; they have always enrolled students of various socioeconomic backgrounds; and HBCU students and faculty are among the most racially diverse in the country (Anderson, 1988; Harper, 2019; Nahal, Thompson, Rahman, & Orr, 2015).

Almost all HBCUs were founded by northern missionary organizations for the stated purpose of providing educational opportunity for Black people in the post-Civil War era (Anderson, 1988). At the close of the Civil War, literacy rates among Black Americans were extremely low due to a ban against slaves learning to read. Additionally, the South, having recently lost the Civil War, did not look favorably upon the prospect of free and educated Blacks. Most Black people owned no property, having been prohibited from ownership by the restrictions of slavery. Accordingly, philanthropic support for Black educational spaces was crucial for early institutions. And with few alternative sources of support (monetary and human), White northern philanthropists and the federal government filled this need (Anderson, 1988).

Lincoln University, established in Pennsylvania in 1854, and Wilberforce University, established in Ohio in 1856, were the first private colleges established for the education of Blacks prior to the Civil War (Anderson, 1988). (*Note Cheney University, established in Pennsylvania in 1837, was the first public college for the education of African Americans). And as the early HBCUs were growing in popularity in the Mid-Atlantic States,

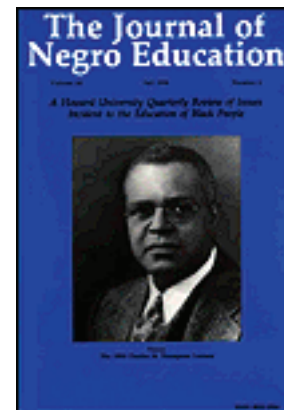
The Institute for Colored Youth, the first higher education institution for Blacks, was founded in Cheyney, Pennsylvania, in 1837. It was followed by two other Black institutions - Lincoln University, in Pennsylvania (1854), and Wilberforce University, in Ohio (1856).

- Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/hq9511.html>

access to education for African Americans in the South remained limited due to the segregation laws instituted there. Moreover, the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 (Land Grant College Act) and the supplementary Act of 1890, which included a provision for Black education, marked a new beginning for public higher education (Anderson, 1988; Cantey, Bland, Mack, & Joy-Davis, 2013).

Safe Spaces and Familial Places

Over the years, and through many iterations of rigor and relevancy, HBCUs have been considered among the nation's most diverse, storied, and indispensable institutions having contributed significantly to the production of the world's Black professional, intellectual, artistic, and entrepreneurial leaders. They address indicators of the educational, economic, political, housing, and health conditions of the Black community and beyond. The Black place making contributions of HBCUs have been the strategic response to the challenges and opportunities before the Black community. And, in spite of historical and present challenges—resource inequities, funding disparities, student learning differences, and the relevancy question of 21st century HBCUs—Black graduates of HBCUs are more likely to be thriving in purpose and financial well-being than Black graduates who did not receive their degrees from HBCUs (Gallup-USA Funds, 2015; Williams, Orr, & Barnett, 2020). HBCUs are vital to the American economy. They create more jobs, stronger families, and stronger communities (Gallup-USA Funds, 2015). Additionally, the economic stimulus stemming from said jobs is credited with creating and maintaining the Black middle class.



The *Early Career Earnings of African American Students: The Impact of Attendance at Historically Black versus White Colleges and Universities* (2011), study found that a higher percentage of African American students attending HBCUs reported strong growth in job-related skills and preparation for graduate/professional schools than their counterparts at predominantly-White institutions or PWIs (Kim & Conrad, 2006). The economic benefits of HBCUs extend to more than just their students. They are equally important to communities, regions, and society.

Similarly, a well cited study by Gallup-USA Funds (2015) revealed that Black graduates of HBCUs are more likely than Black graduates of other colleges to strongly agree that they had the support and experiential learning opportunities in college that Gallup finds are strongly related to graduates' well-being later in life.¹

¹Data regarding college experience and life outcomes were collected as part of the national Gallup-Purdue Index. Findings were obtained based on a constructed Generalized Linear Model (GLM), which was created to study the differences in engagement, well-being, and college experiences between graduates from different races and ethnicities. The GLM accounted for age, gender, race, decade of graduation, university type, and the education level of both parents of the graduate.

Researchers were interested in learning about the relationship between students' college experiences and life outcomes in areas such as employment and well-being, and if there is a relationship among graduates of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Results identified areas in which graduates of HBCUs are thriving, and areas to which other higher education institutions need to pay extra attention. For instance, Black graduates of HBCUs are more than twice as likely as Black graduates of non-HBCUs to recall experiencing all three support measures that Gallup tracked: 1) they had at least one professor who made them excited about learning, 2) the professors cared about them as people, and 3) they had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams.

It is noteworthy to state that HBCUs serve large populations of culturally and economically diverse, first-generation, and students of color (Nahal et al., 2015), while being severely underfunded (Anderson, 1988; Toldson, 2016). HBCUs are broad in its institutional type, including 2- and 4-year, public and private, land-grant and religious institutions whose endowments range from a high of approximately \$650 million to a little under \$1million (Williams et al., 2020). Their student body populations range from approximately 300 to almost 12,000. What HBCUs share is an unwavering commitment to their missions while providing unique learning experiences that have sustained the Black experience in America and beyond.

Assessment Defined and Operationalized

The literature on assessment is wide. Competing interests sets the tone for its understanding, view, and uses. The literature on assessment is wide. Competing interests sets the tone for its understanding, views, and uses. For instance, Ewell's (2009) definition states [assessment] has its roots in the mastery-learning tradition, and includes an individual's mastery of complex abilities...adherents of this tradition emphasized development over time and continuous feedback on individual performance, symbolized by the etymological roots of the word assessment in the Latin ad + sedere, "to sit beside" (p. 9). Additionally, Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, (2018) states assessment of student learning involves the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs, courses, experiences undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development. Additionally, Reneau and Howse (2019) describe assessment as a cumulative process, one that does not end but instead provides the mechanism for continuous improvement and sustainable excellence (p. 7).

Historically, higher education institutions assessment activities either 1) depend on some external pressure (or quality control) and responsiveness to accountability forces; or 2) happens because colleges and universities want to know if what they are doing is working, to ensure students learn, and improve processes and practices (Jankowski et al., 2018). Assessment activity is prevalent at colleges and universities, but unfortunately, very

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few institutions use the results to improve processes and practices (Ikenberry, 2015; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017).

Interestingly, COVID-19 has caused colleges and universities to make fast decisions (seemingly) based on judgment about their students' needs and capacity. In the recent report, *Assessment During A Crisis: Responding to a Global Pandemic*, Jankowski (2020) provides findings from NILOA's national survey of assessment related changes made in the Spring 2020 semester. One particular note of interest:

Respondents shared in the abrupt emergency pivot to remote instruction, assessment was pushed to the side, sending signals to faculty that assessment was not important or helpful in the shift to remote instruction, serving to distance assessment from teaching and learning.

As an HBCU graduate, advocate, and researcher, the above-mentioned finding prompted me to pose the question, assessment *for what* and *for whom*?

Days of Our Lives: Political and Social Context

A college's reputation, ranking, or employment prospects for students is the evidence that some need before fully supporting the assessment movement. Some on the fence are waiting for accreditors to provide evidence that offers benefits commensurate with the expense that goes into it (Gilbert, 2015). Others within the academic community may be open and interested in assessment, "but have no clear view of what might be assessed, how it might be done, how the results will be used" (Ikenberry, 2009, p.6). For all these reasons, accreditation organizations tend to be the practical point at which both supporters and skeptics are brought together to face the practical contemporary challenge of assessing student learning outcomes and using assessment data for improvement as part of the broader approach to quality assurance in American higher education (Cantey et al., 2013; Dumas, Jones, Mbarika, Landor, & Kituyi, 2014).

External Mandates. The United States Department of Education (USDOE) has called for greater accountability through accreditation oversight, as well as more transparency and expediency to protect the public interest (Dumas et al., 2014; Eaton, 2015; Reneau & Howse, 2019). Additionally, the federal government relies on accreditation to assure the quality of institutions and programs to which the government provides federal funds and for which the government provides federal aid to students (Eaton, 2015). And while accreditation remains the prime driver of assessment activity, joining it today are a campus' own drivers; to improve teaching and learning, to assess effectiveness of current practice, and to heed presidential and governing board interests (Dumas et al., 2014; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). These drivers ensure institutional

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practices support the viability and sustainability of the institution and its offerings. In its most basic form, assessment drivers are charged with determining the “reputable” from “non-reputable” institutions and programs (Gilbert, 2015). They represent disciplinary and institutional interests, from institutional accrediting bodies to program accreditation agencies (i.e. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education).

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a national advocate and institutional voice for self-regulation of academic quality, describes accreditation as “review of the quality of higher education institutions and programs. In the United States, accreditation is a major way that students, families, government officials, and the press know that an institution or program provides a quality education (<https://www.chea.org/about-accreditation>)”. CHEA is also a private, nonprofit organization that represents more than 3,000 colleges and universities and 60 regional and specialized accreditors. There are seven accrediting agencies nationwide which includes peers who understand institution type: Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Higher Learning Commission, Middle States Commission on Higher Education, New England Commission of Higher Education, Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, WASC Senior College and University Commission.

Accrediting agencies are charged with examining every aspect of the post-secondary institution that supports the educational mission. Key to the agency’s granting of accreditation is establishing that faculty, facilities, and program curricula successfully support the institutional mission that the institution presents a model of solid fiscal responsibility that ensures its perpetuity, and that student outcomes reflect the stated mission of the institution (Eaton, 2015).

Accreditation serves several major purposes including (but not limited to), assuring quality, access to federal and state funds, and bolstering public confidence, and as the prime mechanism for quality assurance of higher education programs in the United States. Moreover, accrediting groups are considered major drivers of the movement to assess student learning and the use of assessment data to inform improvement (Ewell, 2002; Reneau & Howse, 2019). Additional drivers of assessment include an institution’s goal of improving teaching and learning, assessing effectiveness of current practice, and consideration of presidential and governing board interests (Dumas et al., 2014).

Assessment and Accreditation Operationalized at HBCUs: Another World

Tomorrow’s students will need different educational experiences to prepare them well for new types of careers and new ways of thinking

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<https://www.chea.org/>



– an education that will enable personally satisfying and successful lives. Notwithstanding pressure for value propositions, institutions of higher education in the United States are experiencing external pressures from accrediting groups, state and federal policy makers, and the general public to provide evidence of their effectiveness (Jankowski & Provezis, 2014).

Public pressure for more accountability requires substantial evidence of student learning and achievement, and HBCUs, like other higher education institutions, must be responsive to these pressures while offering meaningful educational experiences. Historically, HBCU leaders have been concerned with what happens to students inside and outside the classroom and have intentionally created pathways to ensure student success is a strategic priority (Anderson, 1988; Dumas et al., 2014; Nahal et al., 2015; Ricard & Brown, 2008). According to Jackson-Hammond (2020), these institutions [HBCUs] may make sacrificial decisions on other initiatives but academic quality will never be compromised (p. 1).

For HBCUs, documenting what students and alumni have accomplished and using this information effectively is a strategic necessity. For instance, in October 2017, nine of the country's 100+ HBCUs were asked to participate in a first of its kind panel at the national Assessment Institute. With a laser focus on assessment practices and policies at HBCUs, each representative, comprising of mostly administrators highlighted culturally relevant assessment practices at their home institutions. Each stakeholder addressed how they have shifted their respective campuses from places of silos to settings that can now be recognized as systemic cultures of assessment (Orr, 2018).

HBCU-CEEQA Advocacy and Agency: The Bold and the Beautiful

The HBCU Collaborative for Excellence in Educational Quality Assurance (HBCU-CEEQA) is a structured network of assessment and institutional effectiveness professionals serving HBCUs. The mission of HBCU-CEEQA is to:

Demonstrate the effectiveness of HBCUs through the use of best practices in assessment and evaluation by leveraging the collective expertise of assessment and institutional effectiveness professionals and other stakeholders. HBCU-CEEQA provides a collaborative space for sharing and promoting the use of best practices and resources in outcomes assessment and evidence-based decision making at partner HBCUs (Orr, 2018; Orr, Reneau, Howse, & Stanford, 2020).

Moreover, HBCU-CEEQA serves as a catalyst in helping to address shared challenges and solutions related to assessment, institutional effectiveness, and other accountability expectations at HBCUs (Orr et al., 2020; Williams, Orr, & Barnett, 2020). This professional network provides so much more than the ordinary higher education collaborative: Equity is



at the heart of its endeavors. For the HBCU community, the collective expertise of HBCU-CEEQA scholars and practitioners honors and builds upon the promises of HBCUs' unique missions.

For the scholarly community, HBCU-CEEQA pushes the present theory, ideas, and assumptions about assessment practices, quality assurance, and student learning experiences at HBCUs. History and current evidence have dispelled major misrepresentation and performance data have borne time and time again that HBCU graduates students who are competitive and contributors to growing economies both nationally and globally (Jackson-Hammond, 2020). For its members, the heartbeat of HBCU-CEEQA lies within its professional development opportunities (presentations, publications, webcasts, etc.) wrapped up in time honored traditions and best-practices. This is truly the soul of HBCU-CEEQA.

Conversely, HBCU-CEEQA holds space for candid, vulnerable dialogue for the purpose of affirmation, uplift, strategizing, and support (Williams et al., 2020). Over time, the collaborative's research agenda and interests have evolved and enhanced the collaborative. HBCU-CEEQA's intimate first-hand knowledge of HBCU life—from student affairs to policy, leadership, and practice—catapults them as subject matter experts.

Days of Our Lives: HBCU-CEEQA In the Field

Documenting what students and alumni have accomplished and using this information effectively is a strategic necessity for all institutions of higher education. For HBCUs, documenting student and alumni accomplishments (or evidence of what students know and are able to do) is complicated by lingering historic resource inequities and demands and expectations from their constituents (Anderson, 1988; Cantey et al., 2013; Orr, 2018). Responding to these pressures along with offering meaningful educational experiences, is vital to the long-term success of any institution. Hence, HBCUs must be responsive to public pressures for more accountability which requires substantial evidence of student learning and achievement (Cantey, 2013; Orr, 2018; Reneau & Howse, 2019).

Now well into its third year of existence, HBCU-CEEQA has enjoyed numerous opportunities to challenge the narrative on teaching and learning, internal and external mandates, and accreditation at HBCUs. They have hosted three annual convenings along with two mid-year “check-ins” at the national Assessment Institute (Williams et al., 2020). These professional development opportunities allow members to operate in safe spaces with efficiency, collaborate, strategize, and be responsive to public pressures; never losing sight of their vision of being “a leader in building the capacity to demonstrate the impact and effectiveness of HBCUs within the post-secondary context” (Orr et al., 2020, p. 8).

HBCU-CEEQA is quickly becoming a leader and the “go to” resource for addressing assessment and accountability at HBCUs. To be clear,

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HBCU-CEEQA is not interested in exposing how accreditation (and other external forces) influences what is actually being done on HBCU campuses or how assessment activities on these campuses are being driven by what accreditors expect. Instead, the collaborative aims to tell the culturally relevant assessment practices story and demonstrate the impact and effectiveness of HBCUs to internal and external stakeholders (Orr et al., 2020).

An example of HBCU-CEEQA's soul in action is their taking the lead on addressing accreditation (among others) issues at HBCUs. It is no secret; accreditation has long been a contentious process for HBCUs (Cantey et al., 2013; Dumas et al., 2014; Osei, 2019). However, unlike the precedent set by COVID-19, where institutions made swift changes to operations and course offerings (Jankowski, 2020), HBCUs had already learned to adjust their operations to meet program standards because quality assurances are the hallmark of quality outcomes (Jackson-Hammond, 2020).

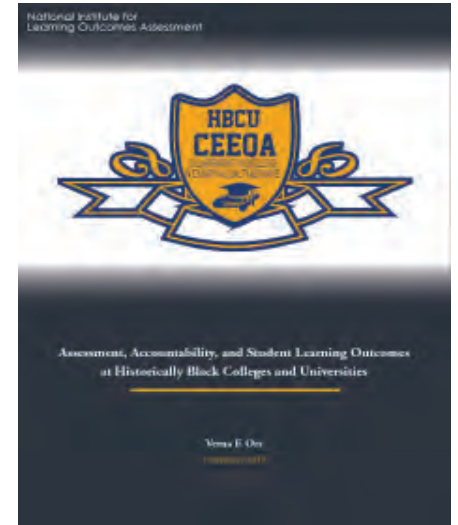
For historical context, it is important to note:

Membership in accreditation associations initially excluded HBCUs: It was not until 1954 and the passage of laws dealing with desegregation in higher education that many HBCUs were allowed to be considered as promoters of scholarly academics by the larger community of scholars (Dumas et al., 2014, p. 1).

In preparing for the 2nd annual convening of HBCU-CEEQA, the leadership team and partners at NILOA drafted plans for a major project with the purpose of offering united agency and affirmation for all HBCUs during their respective accreditation peer review team visits. HBCU-CEEQA leaders and NILOA facilitated the framing that led to a telling conversation regarding assessment, peer expectations, and accreditation at HBCUs. The themes that bubbled up, similar to the points made earlier, centers around assessment activities being dependent on some external pressure, namely accreditors, or happens because HBCUs want to know if what they are doing (to improve processes and student learning) is working.

This pivotal conversation between HBCU-CEEQA leadership and NILOA morphed into a project that was realized during their second annual convening. Members began to dig deeply into the work of addressing common issues, best-practices and resources in outcomes assessment, accreditation, and evidence-based decision making (Orr et al., 2020). The result is a draft Peer Reviewer Framing Statement, which aims to provide historical context to the myriad of factors that must be considered when reviewing HBCUs before, during, and after their reaccreditation efforts.

Over the course of 12+ months and numerous iterations, including vetting by select HBCU presidents, the Statement is on its way to being the game changer, leveling the field and making accreditation less contentious for



our HBCU colleagues. For example, when the draft is ready for release HBCUs can share the statement with peer reviewing teams prior to their campus visit. Ideally, the Statement and supplemental materials will help facilitate understanding where peer reviewers will gain a greater understanding of the nuances necessary to consider themselves familiar with these historic institutions' culture and traditions. In turn, HBCUs facilitate deeper connections to the storied histories, richness, and missions of their institutions.

Guiding Light: HBCUs in the Assessment Space

According to (Jackson-Hammond, 2020),

The initiative that helps HBCUs guide improvement while leveraging accountability expectations is their commitment to their mission and the success of their students. For decades, HBCUs have creatively and resourcefully found ways to support these students: and that steadfast mission-driven support has allowed students to fulfill not only their personal dreams but also fulfill the dreams of their families (p. 1).

As HBCUs continue to evolve, they have made great strides in guiding and lighting the way to improvement while leveraging accountability expectations. For those connected to the history and mission of HBCUs, quantitative and qualitative assessment begins from when students enter and does not end when they depart (Williams, et al., 2020). Students' narratives, perspectives, and experiences guide assessment; from recognizing food and/or housing insecurities to mobilizing resources without a script, plan, or incentives. A lot of what the HBCU community does is in service to their students and doesn't necessarily fit a prescribed assessment plan.

Perhaps some of the ways we assess are not viewed in the typical vein of PWIs. We are constantly doing qualitative assessment because we have to pay attention to our surroundings (as a part of our survival as a people). We understand our students, particularly first-generation students, who perhaps don't need as much academic support as navigating college culture and language. We teach out of love, we mobilize resources, a lot of what we are doing is in service to our students. The literature does not validate what we are doing all the time—but we are doing it (HBCU-CEEQA Founding Member, as cited in Orr, 2018).

This report was not designed to insert the latest politically correct language some use to check their diversity box. Also, it is not meant to answer questions such as what equitable assessment looks like, instead it should be studied and absorbed as a **guiding light** to influence our thinking, planning, and policy making regarding the future of innovation in



higher education—**another world**—guided by lessons from our HBCU colleagues. Undoubtedly, there is a dearth of literature on assessment practices, accountability pressures, accreditation, and student learning at HBCUs that can be addressed by listening to and learning from the voices of those who do the **bold and beautiful** work, every day. **As the world turns** the call to action has launched. Will you join your HBCU colleagues in filling the gap and telling the HBCU story?

An Invitation

I encourage all who have indulged thus far to take another step and support our HBCUs. First, HBCU-CEEQA members are highlighted in the latest edition of *Assessment Update*. Please take a moment to peruse this special HBCU issue which is full of innovative, culturally relevant, creative assessment practices happening at various HBCUs. Additionally, please consider partnering and/or collaborating with our HBCU colleagues. You can find a full list of HBCUs on the [National Center for Education Statistics website](#). As assessment professionals, we know how lonely this space can be, we also know that it is absolutely necessary to ensure continuous improvement in policies and practice. And while we appreciate statements of solidarity, let us come together to influence change, raise the standard, and establish meaningful professional relationships, across all disciplines and institutional types. Our strength and growth as a profession is in our hands.

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About NILOA

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), established in 2008, is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning.

NILOA Staff

Natasha Jankowski, *Executive Director*

Gianina Baker, *Assistant Director*

Verna F. Orr, *Post-Doctoral Researcher*

NILOA Fellows

Erick Montenegro, *Fellow*

Nan Travers, *Fellow*

NILOA Senior Scholars

Peter Ewell, *Senior Scholar*

Pat Hutchings, *Senior Scholar*

Jillian Kinzie, *Senior Scholar*

George Kuh, *Founding Director and Senior Scholar*

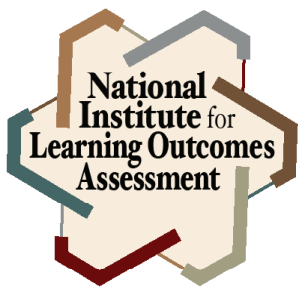
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For more information, please contact:

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
51 Gerty Drive
Suite 196, CRC, MC-672
Champaign, IL 61820

learningoutcomesassessment.org
niloa@education.illinois.edu
Phone: 217.244.2155
