

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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What New Faculty Need To Know About Assessment

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As a new faculty member, you will have questions about your students' learning—as all thoughtful teachers do: Are they really learning what I'm teaching? How well do they understand the key concepts I'm focusing on? Can they apply what they're learning in new contexts? What can I do better or differently to help students develop the skills and knowledge they need to be effective in this class, in subsequent courses, and in their future life and work?

These questions are at the heart of student learning outcomes assessment. This short paper aims to give you a sense of the defining features, practices, and significance of assessment—a required activity on all campuses today that you can both contribute to and benefit from.

Defining Assessment

The assessment movement came of age in the mid-1980s as an ongoing process designed to measure and improve student learning. It was championed by education scholars (who saw it as an integral part of teaching and learning) and by policymakers (who wanted evidence of higher education's effectiveness).

The assessment process begins with being *explicit about goals* for students' learning—in individual courses, departments and programs, and across the institution. It means translating the kind of broad claims that often appear in institutional mission statements into concrete descriptions of what students should know and be able to do as a result of their college experience. For faculty, it means teaching toward goals that you and your colleagues have agreed upon, *and* ensuring that students themselves understand those goals.

Assessment also entails asking whether and how well students are achieving those goals, which typically requires that campuses use a wide range of tools and methods for gathering evidence about the educational experience and its outcomes. While these often include tests and surveys that are designed externally, local approaches like e-portfolios, senior “capstone” projects, focus groups, and juried performances are gaining in popularity.

Evidence generated through such activities is clearly central to assessment, but the process is not complete until results are brought to bear in *making improvements*. The campus community must reflect on findings, deliberate about their meaning and implications, and use new insights to design more effective teaching approaches, curriculum, and policies to support students' learning and success.

This, then, is the cycle of assessment: setting clear goals, gathering evidence, and using results to make changes—changes which, in turn, become the focus for a next phase of evidence-gathering and improvement. At its best, assessment reflects the ethic of inquiry that informs academic life more broadly, bringing faculty's habits and values as researchers and scholars to their work as educators and to their students' learning.

What Campuses Are Doing to Assess Student Learning

In the last decade, some form of assessment has been required as part of the institutional accreditation process, so most campuses today have at least some assessment activity underway. In addition, some fields and programs (for instance, teacher education) are subject to specialized accreditation, which also requires assessment. In learning about assessment on your campus, you may find it useful to explore work at three levels: the institutional level, the program or department level, and the classroom level.

The Institutional Level

Three-quarters of campuses today have identified a set of learning outcomes expected of all students. These are likely to include writing, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, oral communication, and knowledge in a range of content areas (AAC&U, 2009). Accordingly, assessment is often aimed at providing a broad picture of student progress toward such outcomes across the institution—regardless, that is, of major. Toward this end, many campuses employ at least one external instrument, designed by experts in testing and assessment. Sometimes these are multiple-choice tests, but a number of instruments require students to engage in complex problem solving and writing tasks. Some provide or attempt to provide a measure of what the college experience has added between the first and final year.

Additionally, many campuses employ one or more surveys designed to provide a clearer sense of the student experience. Most common among these is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which since 2000 has been administered at almost 1,500 institutions nationwide. NSSE provides data about the frequency with which students engage in a range of effective educational practices including “high-impact” activities.

Approaches like these, aimed at the institutional level, are typically directed by a central office or assessment coordinator, often reporting to the chief academic officer. In general, the goal is not to evaluate the learning of individual students but to provide better information about overall trends, to send up red flags about problems needing attention, and to serve as a compass for improvement over time. Information at this level may also be helpful to those beyond the immediate campus community, such as trustees, policymakers, and parents.

The Program or Department Level

In response to accreditation guidelines, academic departments and programs on many campuses have been working to more clearly articulate goals for student learning—What should our majors know and be able to do?—and then to develop plans and activities for assessing progress toward those goals. At this level, locally designed approaches are very likely to be part of the picture. The English department, for example, may survey its graduates about how prepared they felt to take on and succeed in the tasks they encounter in the world of work. The teacher education program may require all students to develop a portfolio of work samples documenting and reflecting on their progress toward key outcomes. The psychology department may ask students to develop a senior project pulling together what they have learned about the field—and then to present this project to the wider campus community in a setting that invites conversation and constructive feedback.

As suggested by these examples, assessment activities can be powerful educational experiences for students—occasions to pull together and reflect upon what they have learned, to demonstrate it to others, and to receive useful feedback. For department and program faculty, these kinds of assessments provide important information for rethinking goals (Do we have the right ones in view?), methods (Do we need to change the way we teach the introductory course?), and curriculum (Do our courses “add up” to the learning we seek for our students today?).

The Classroom Level

Assessment has always been integral to classroom teaching as faculty design and evaluate their students’ experiences as learners. But with the rise of new pedagogical approaches—for instance, collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and technology—and with a growing understanding of the complex dynamics of how people learn, many faculty today are seeking new ways to determine what their students are learning, where they are having difficulties, and how to foster deeper, more lasting knowledge and skills. These efforts may go by a variety of names, including “classroom assessment,” “classroom research,” or “the scholarship of teaching and learning.” Some approaches are quick and simple. The instructor may ask students to write down, anonymously, the main point they take from the day’s discussion and the point they are least clear about; even a quick scan of such “one minute papers” (as this technique is called) can be eye-opening about how to focus or refocus the next class session.

More elaborate approaches include pre-tests and post-tests of central course concepts, “co-assessments” of student papers or exams by groups of faculty who employ a jointly designed set of criteria, and “think alouds” where the student is asked to share his or her thinking process when, say, reading a complex text or doing a mathematical problem, thus providing faculty with new insights into the dynamics (and difficulties) of learning the field. Additionally, some instructors invite a colleague to interview students, individually or as a group, about how the course could be made more helpful. And on a growing number of campuses faculty are finding ways to involve students themselves as partners in assessment: helping to generate data, analyze results, and collaborate to bring about changes in course design, teaching, and curriculum (see Werder & Otis, 2010).

Looking Across Levels

Assessment is most powerful when these three levels “talk to each other.” The value of the process lies, that is, not in any particular set of data or assessment activity but in developing a *culture of evidence* in which colleagues from varied disciplinary contexts and roles (including student affairs) share information and judgments about what is and isn’t working and commit as a community to ongoing improvement.

The Importance of Faculty Involvement

To say that faculty should be involved in assessment—in their own classrooms, certainly, but beyond them as well—is, on the one hand, to state the obvious. Knowing as much as possible about the students you and your colleagues teach, and seeking to improve their experience as learners, is central to your role and responsibility as a professional educator. Yet, on the other hand, assessment is new to most faculty—not something most have training for or direct experience with. Adding to the challenge, assessment, especially in its early years, was sometimes seen as a corrective to the vagaries of grading and to what some saw as higher education’s neglect of undergraduate teaching. Predictably, many faculty were put off by this judgmental tone.

Today’s assessment movement, in contrast, is characterized by widespread recognition that if assessment is to make a difference faculty involvement is critical. A 2009 national survey found that institutional leaders see greater faculty engagement as essential to delivering on assessment’s potential (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009, p. 9). Indeed, this is a key lesson from more than two decades of campus experience. Where assessment is treated as a bureaucratic task, undertaken to satisfy external requirements, impact in the classroom is unlikely. But where faculty are involved in establishing shared goals for students’ learning, where they have access to good information about progress toward goals, where they talk with one another about how to do better, assessment is a powerful force for change that can make a real difference for students.

How New Faculty Can Benefit from Involvement in Assessment

As a new faculty member, you will face expectations and opportunities from many directions. Finding the right balance for your various roles and responsibilities—personal as well as professional—and learning the culture and practices of your particular campus is a full-time job, and more. Assessment will be one among many developments in your orbit of life and work, and major leadership for assessment on campus is likely to come from your more senior colleagues. But knowing about assessment—and participating in discussions of its goals, methods, and findings—can help make you more effective in the classroom.

Additionally, getting involved in campus assessment activities is a way to meet new colleagues beyond your own department and to share your respective and collective goals for students, experiences in the classroom, teaching innovations, and the like. This kind of exchange is especially powerful in suggesting how your courses (can or do) connect with courses taught by others to create a more integrated, coherent experience for students. Assessment activities and findings may also help bolster your case when applying for tenure, promotion, and salary increases. Looking ahead, assessment is a topic of widespread significance in higher education today, and it offers opportunities for leadership on your campus and beyond.

How to Learn More and Get Involved

Many institutions today have a centralized assessment office, or at least an assessment officer, and that is clearly a place to start when seeking to learn about developments on your campus. But it’s likely that you will, at first, be most interested in activities in your own department and classroom. Your department chair will be an important resource in this regard. Additionally, campus teaching and learning centers can provide resources and opportunities to learn about classroom assessment strategies and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Beyond the campus, there are countless further resources. The Association of American Colleges and Universities provides critical leadership for shaping policy and practice in assessment and has issued a number of powerful statements worth looking at. The Council of Graduate Schools, with funding from the Teagle Foundation, is undertaking a national project to explore how preparation for the assessment of student learning outcomes can be built into the experience of graduate students. Several groups and campuses host regular conferences on the topic, and the accrediting organizations in each region of the country highlight assessment at their annual meetings and in training workshops each year. Many of the disciplinary and professional societies have also explored the place and practice of assessment in their respective fields and have developed tools, guidelines, and useful resources. Finally, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (the sponsor of this paper) hosts a rich website, where you will find occasional papers, survey findings, news releases, and links to useful information from other sources. A Selected Resources section online (<http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/ABfaculty.htm>) will point you to further information.

Assessment is not easy, and, as most campuses have found, it comes with significant challenges. But faculty who become involved find that its practices make a significant difference in their own classrooms, enriching and informing their experience as teachers and improving their students’ learning. As a new member of the professoriate, you will have much to gain from becoming involved—and you will have new perspectives to contribute as well.

References

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website went live on February 11, 2009.
www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- The NILOA research team reviewed 725 institution websites for learning outcomes assessment transparency from March 2009 to August 2009.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001. He is currently serving as Interim President of the University of Illinois.

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