National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

January 2014

Knowing What Students Know and Can Do

The Current State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in U.S. Colleges and Universities

George D. Kuh, Natasha Jankowski, Stanley O. Ikenberry, & Jillian Kinzie

Abridged Report

www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

Contents

This document is an abridged version of the full report of the NILOA 2013 national survey of provosts available here: http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/knowingwhatstudentsknowandcando.html

NILOA Mission

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

Acknowledgments

NILOA sincerely thanks Timothy Cain, Nora Gannon-Slater, Sarah Martin and Robert Dumas for their excellent contributions to this study and report. We also very much appreciate the provosts and their designates who set aside time from their very busy schedules to complete the questionnaire. We are in your debt.

The NILOA Team

Knowing What Students Know and Can Do
The Current State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in U.S. Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

Assessment of student learning keeps climbing upward on the national higher education agenda. The many reasons for this include persistent prods from external bodies such as accrediting and governmental entities and, increasingly, the recognition by institutions of the need for more and better evidence of student accomplishment. Employers, policy makers, and governmental officials agree that the nation needs greater numbers of students from more diverse backgrounds to succeed and achieve at higher levels—all of this while at the same time containing and reducing college costs. Meanwhile, regional and specialized program accreditation organizations, the traditional arbiters of quality assurance, are caught in the middle and are under fire from critics, magnifying the external pressure campuses feel.

Yet despite this heightened external pressure, as this report will show, the impetus for gauging what students know and can do is no longer just an external mandate but increasingly is driven by the people responsible for the final product—faculty, staff, and institutional leaders. Indeed, substantial headway has been made in the past few years in the numbers and kinds of approaches campuses are using to assess student learning, with a welcome discernible shift toward the use of multiple measures and classroom-based approaches.

Learning outcomes assessment is key to addressing both affordability and access issues.

(provost at a master's institution)

Current Assessment Structures and Activities

What do we know about what colleges and universities in the U.S. are doing to gather and use evidence on what their undergraduate students are learning? To answer this question, in spring 2013 we asked provosts or chief academic officers at all regionally accredited, undergraduate-degree-granting, two- and four-year public, private, and for-profit institutions in the U.S. (n=2,781) about the assessment activities underway at their institutions and how their institutions are using assessment results. Of those invited, all told, provosts (or their designates) at 1,202 institutions (43%) responded. The characteristics of these participating institutions generally reflect the national profile in their institutional sectors, Carnegie classifications, and geographic regions.

The responses from institutions reflect a broad range of assessment activities. Some institutions were well advanced in their assessment efforts, while others were just getting involved in this important work. Taken together, what provosts told us underscores the need for meaningful measures that

- are not overly expensive or time consuming to implement,
- provide actionable information for guiding decision making and curricular change, and
- share and leverage what people from different corners of the institution are discovering about student attainment in order to improve teaching and student learning.

In this sense, the survey results suggest that the kinds of student learning assessment approaches that matter most to provosts and the campuses they serve are not primarily responses to the interests of government or accreditors but, rather, are those efforts that yield meaningful, nuanced information that can both document student accomplishment and inform decision making at all levels.

NILOA conducted a similar survey in 2009 (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). Of the schools responding in 2013, 725 also completed the 2009 survey, allowing us to estimate the nature and scope of the changes that have occurred. In addition to the formal questionnaire items, we invited provosts to comment about their hopes, worries, positive outcomes, and needs to move their institution's assessment work forward. More than 83% (1,003) did so, which in itself says something about where student learning outcomes assessment falls on the institutional agenda.

With so many competing demands on faculty time, assessment needs to be sustainable and manageable. For that to happen it needs to be useful.

(provost at a doctoral institution)

Major Findings

1. Stated learning outcomes are now the norm.

Clearly articulated learning goals are important in determining whether students know and can do what an institution promises and what employers and policy makers expect. The vast majority of colleges and universities have set forth with varying degrees of specificity learning goals that apply to all their undergraduates, regardless of major.

- Some 84% of institutions reported they had common learning goals for all their students, up from 74% four years ago.

- Four in ten institutions reported that the learning goals of all their various academic programs were aligned with the institution's stated learning goals for all students. This level of alignment suggests more careful attention by institutions to integrating assessment activities on campus.

2. The prime driver of assessment remains the same: expectations of regional and program or specialized accrediting agencies.

A variety of forces prompt institutions to gather information about student learning (Figure A), but regional and specialized program accreditation remain the prime drivers. At the same time, also very important are internal drivers including an institutional commitment to improve and a desire by faculty, staff, and institutional leaders to gain a clearer understanding of student learning outcomes.

- Public and for-profit institutions more so than private colleges report pressure to assess student learning from a statewide coordinating or governing board, state mandates, or other external pressures.

- Since 2009, the influence of national higher education associations appears to have decreased but the influence of local governing boards has increased—a shift that may reflect increased awareness of governing boards in attending to matters of educational quality.

- Improving student learning and institutional effectiveness seem to be the most important, consequential drivers of assessment practice across all types of institutions.

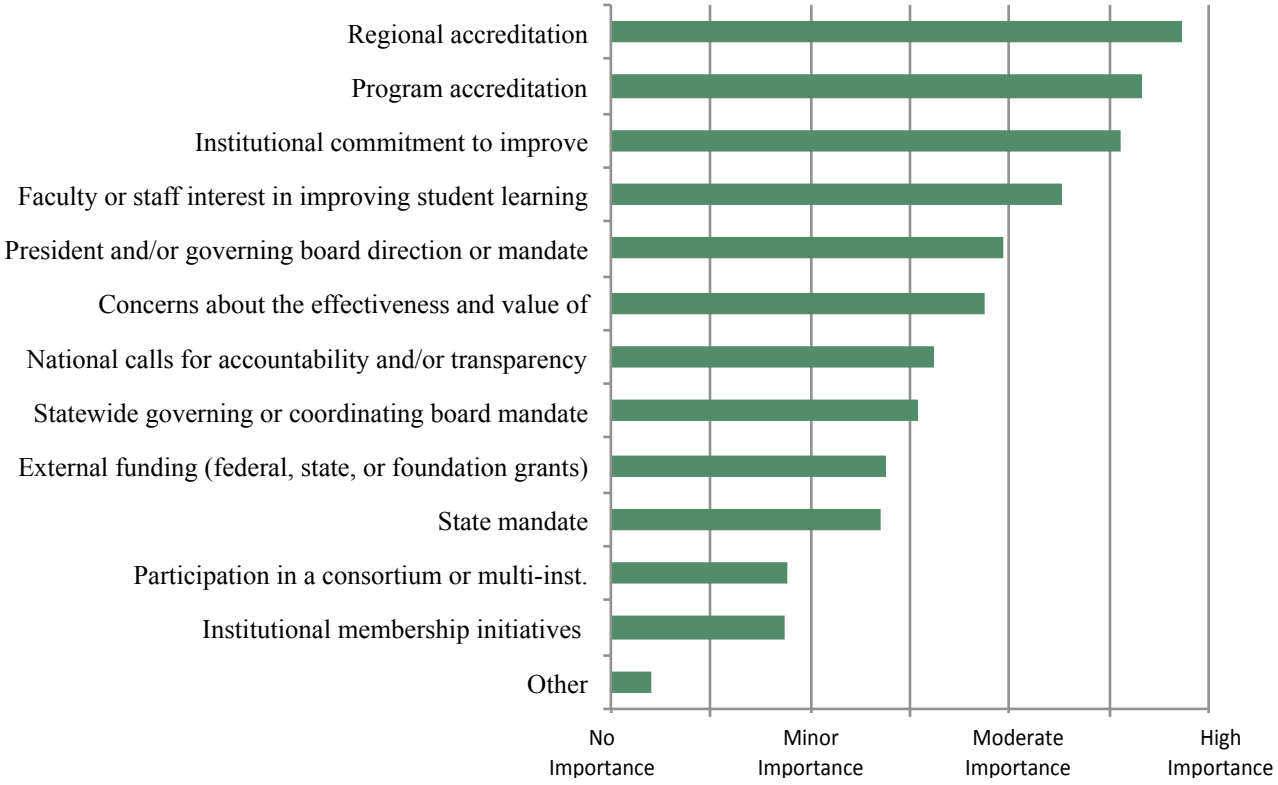

Figure A. Importance of factors or forces that prompt student learning outcomes assessment.

3. Substantially more student learning outcomes assessment is underway now than a few years ago and the range of tools and measures to assess student learning has expanded.

The average number of assessment tools or approaches used by colleges and universities in 2013 is five, two more than the average of three in 2009. Among the assessment tools currently used more commonly are (Figure B)

- national student surveys (85%),
- rubrics (69%), and
- other classroom-based assessments that are aggregated or "rolled up" in some manner to represent student learning outcomes at the institution level (66%).

National surveys remain popular (85% of all schools use them), but there has been a large increase in the use of rubrics, portfolios, and other classroom-based assessments as well (Figure C).

- While all types of measures are being used more often, the most striking changes were the increased use of rubrics, portfolios, external performance assessment (such as internship and service learning), and employer surveys.

- Provosts consider classroom-based assessment, national student surveys, and rubrics (in this order) to be the "most valuable or important" approaches for assessing undergraduate student learning outcomes.

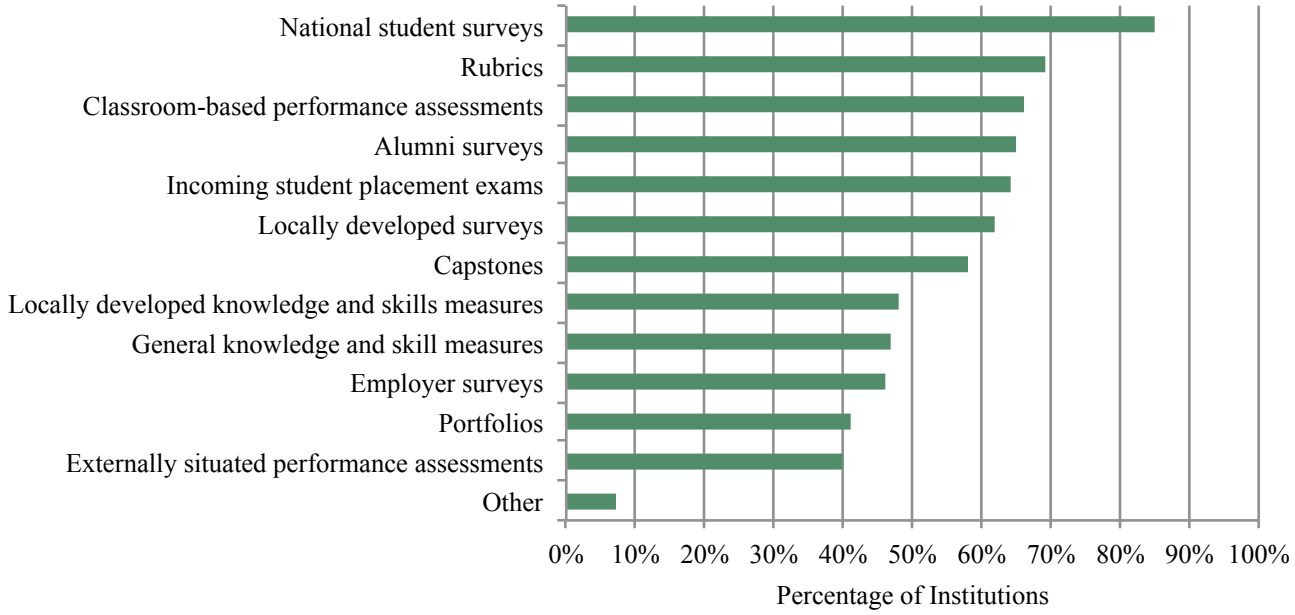

Figure B. Percentage of institutions employing different assessment approaches at the institution level to represent undergraduate student learning.

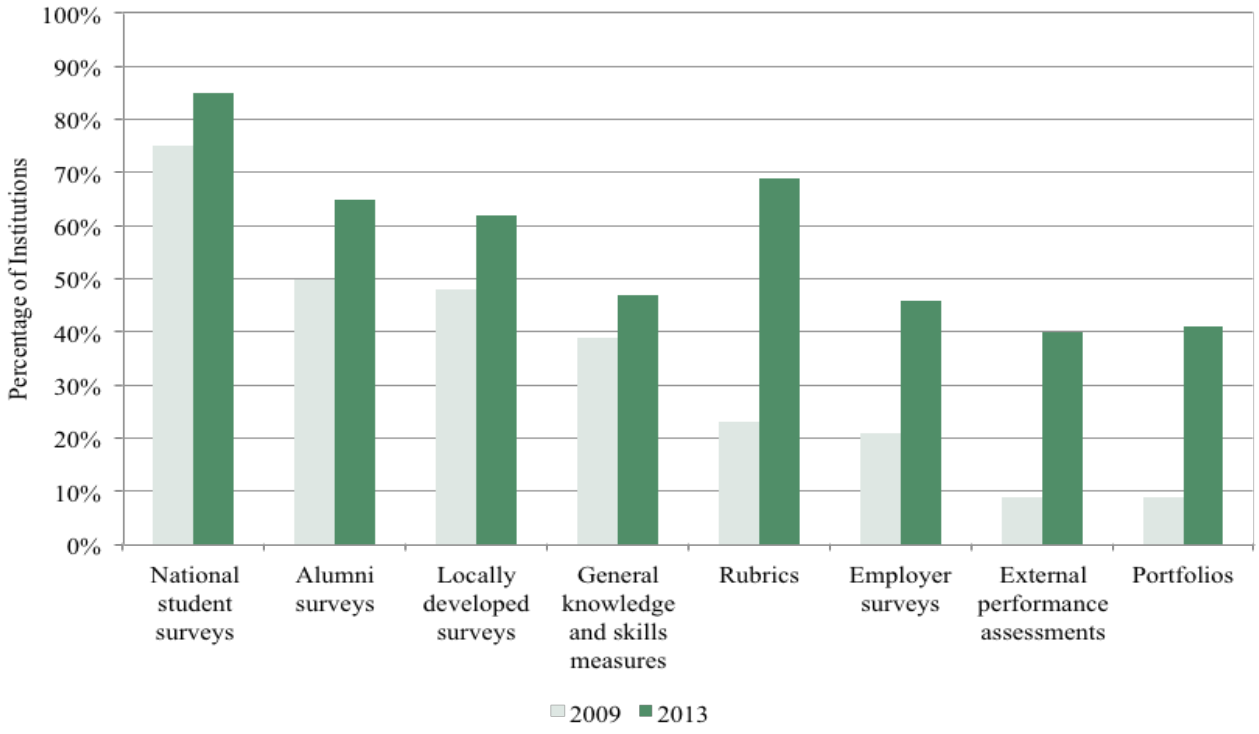

Figure C. Use of selected assessment approaches in 2009 and 2013

That classroom-based assessment and rubrics are among the commonly used as well as the most valuable sources of information about student learning underscores the preference for measures that capture student performance in the contexts where teaching and learning occur—course and program-embedded experiences.

4. Meeting accreditation expectations heads the list for how assessment evidence is used, but internal use by campuses is growing and is considered far more important than external use.

Gathering information about student accomplishment can be an empty exercise if the data are not used in meaningful and productive ways. One of the most encouraging findings from this study is that reports of institutional use of assessment evidence are up in every category but one: governing board deliberations (Figure D).

- As was the case in 2009, complying with regional and program accreditation expectations is the most frequent use.
- Perhaps more noteworthy is that nine of ten institutions today use student learning outcomes data in program reviews, either institution wide (62%) or for some programs (29%).

Assessment results are more often used to guide changes in policy and practice at the course and/or department/program level than at the college or institution level.

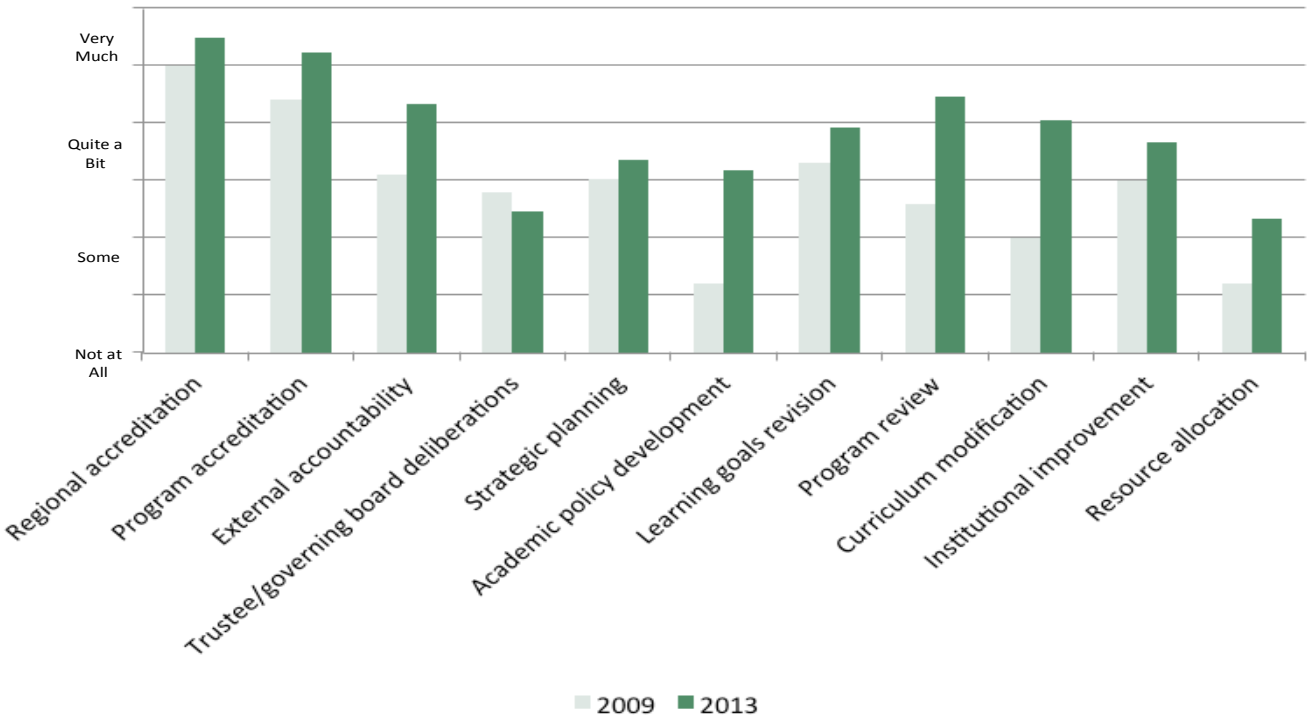

Figure D. Comparison of uses of assessment results in 2009 and 2013.

In their current uses of assessment evidence, institutions also frequently employ these data in other improvement-related tasks, such as curriculum modification, strategic planning, policy development, benchmarking, and faculty development—all encouraging signs (Figure E).

- Assessment results are more often used to guide changes in policy and practice at the course and/or department/program level than at the college or institution level.

- Ironically, while governing board expectations are greater today that the institution collect student learning outcomes data, sharing this information with the board is not as high a priority compared with other uses.

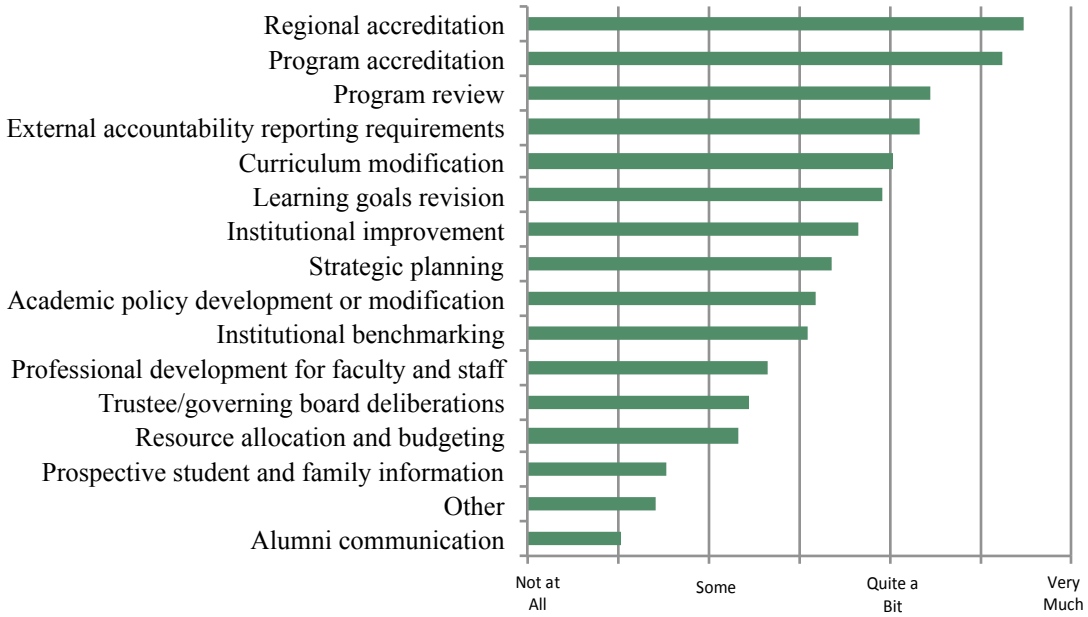

Figure E. Extent to which assessment results are used for various purposes.

5. Provosts perceive substantial support on their campuses for assessment.

Nearly three quarters of provosts reported either "very much" or "quite a bit" of support for assessment activity on their campus. Overall, as Figure F shows, the most important and prevalent elements supporting assessment were:

- statements about the institution's commitment to assessment,

- faculty engagement with assessment,

- existence of an assessment committee,

- institutional research and/or assessment office capacity for assessment work, and

- availability of professional staff and professional development opportunities.

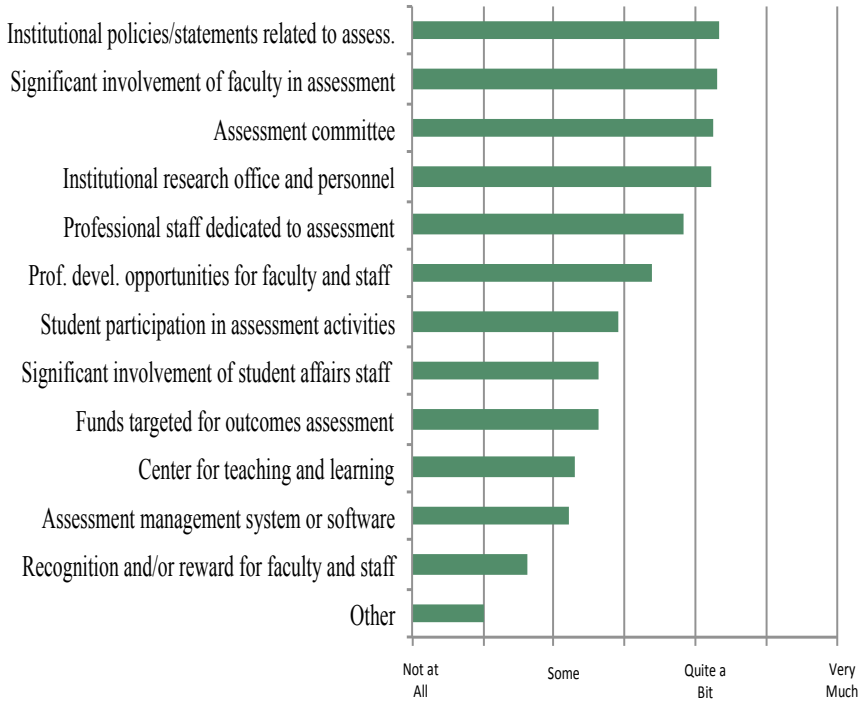

Figure F. Extent to which above institutional structures and conditions support assessment activities.

- Overall, student affairs staff involvement in assessment was not rated as high in terms of support for assessment activities, perhaps reflecting less integration of assessment efforts across campuses.

6. Institutions more frequently report assessment results internally than to external audiences.

The most effective means for communicating assessment results within the institution were:

- presentations of assessment findings at faculty meetings or retreats (73%) and
- through the work of assessment committees (65%).

Different types of institutions favored different internal communication methods that, on the surface, seem to be a function of institution size and organizational complexity (Figure G).

- Baccalaureate institutions more so than other types of schools reported assessment committee and faculty meetings were effective.
- Associate's degree-granting institutions tended to prefer email updates, which may be a more efficacious way for those types of schools to communicate with part-time faculty and others who may not have campus offices or mail drops.
- Doctoral institutions favored using Web sites and reports to dean's councils, perhaps reflecting the scale and complexity of these academic institutions.

We have been working on student learning outcomes at the course level for years, but we still struggle with ways to share our successes within our institution.

(provost at a baccalaureate institution)

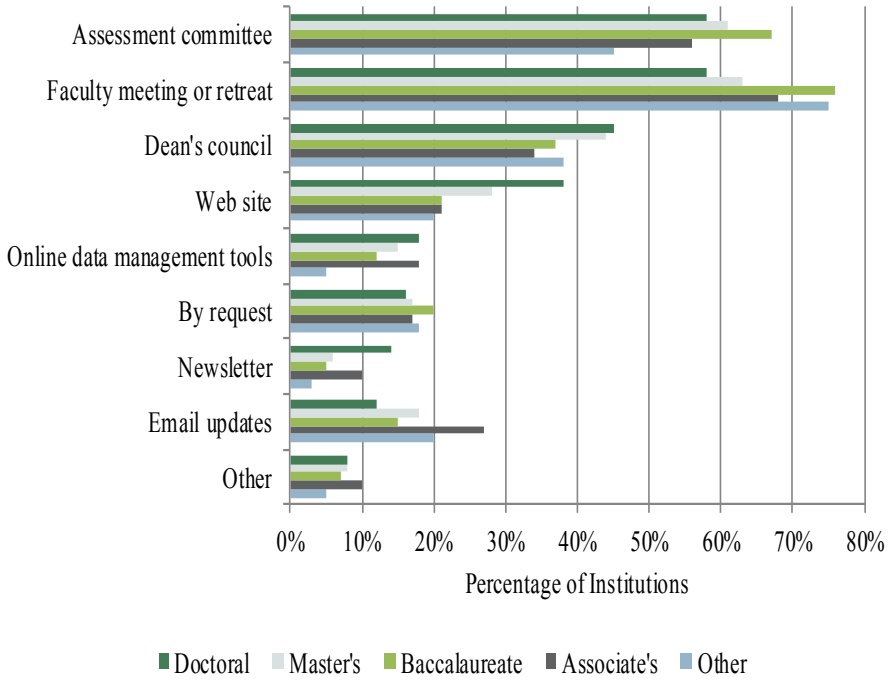

Figure G. Percentage of institutions reporting approach as the most effective means for sharing assessment results within the institution by institution type.

While assessment results are available on some campuses, information about how the data are being used on campus lags. Moreover, assessment activity and evidence of student learning outcomes are less often shared beyond the campus.

- The assessment information shared most commonly with external audiences is the institution's student learning goals and/or learning outcomes statements.
- Fewer than one third of campuses post assessment results on institution Web sites.
- For-profit institutions were least likely to publicly report their current assessment activities and resources.
- Public institutions—which are expected or even legally required to be transparent in most matters—were more likely to report assessment information, except for how they were using the results and the impact of results on institutional policies and practices.

Nine of ten colleges and universities are providing at least some information about student learning outcomes assessment on their Web sites or in publications. However, only about 35% are sharing the results of the assessments and just 8% offer information about whether the assessment data have had any impact on policy or practice. While most institutions are communicating something about their assessment work, institutions need to become much more transparent in this important area of institutional performance.

Many faculty struggle with determining how to conduct a proper assessment and then how to use the results, and many of the disciplinary meetings are very broad and not specific in this regard.

(provost at a master's institution)

7. In general, institutional selectivity is negatively related to assessment activity.

For almost every category of assessment activity, the more selective an institution's admission standards, the less likely it is to employ various assessment approaches or use the results. For example, more selective institutions are less likely to:

- have student learning outcomes statements that apply to all students,
- use assessment for external accountability reporting requirements,
- use assessment results for strategic planning,
- change curricular requirements or courses as a result of assessment,
- consider regional or program accreditation as an important reason for doing assessment.

Why selectivity is associated with less assessment activity is not clear, although a recent survey conducted by the Association of American University (AAU) research universities suggested increased attention to assessment issues by these institution.

Initiative overload is a very real problem. Shrinking state funding compounds this by reducing staff and increasing administrative requirements at the same time.

(provost from a public institution)

8. Faculty are the key to moving assessment forward.

Provosts rate faculty ownership and involvement as top priorities to advance the assessment agenda (Figure H). Priorities have shifted in some ways from 2013, while faculty engagement remains key, less important than in 2009 are better assessment measures.

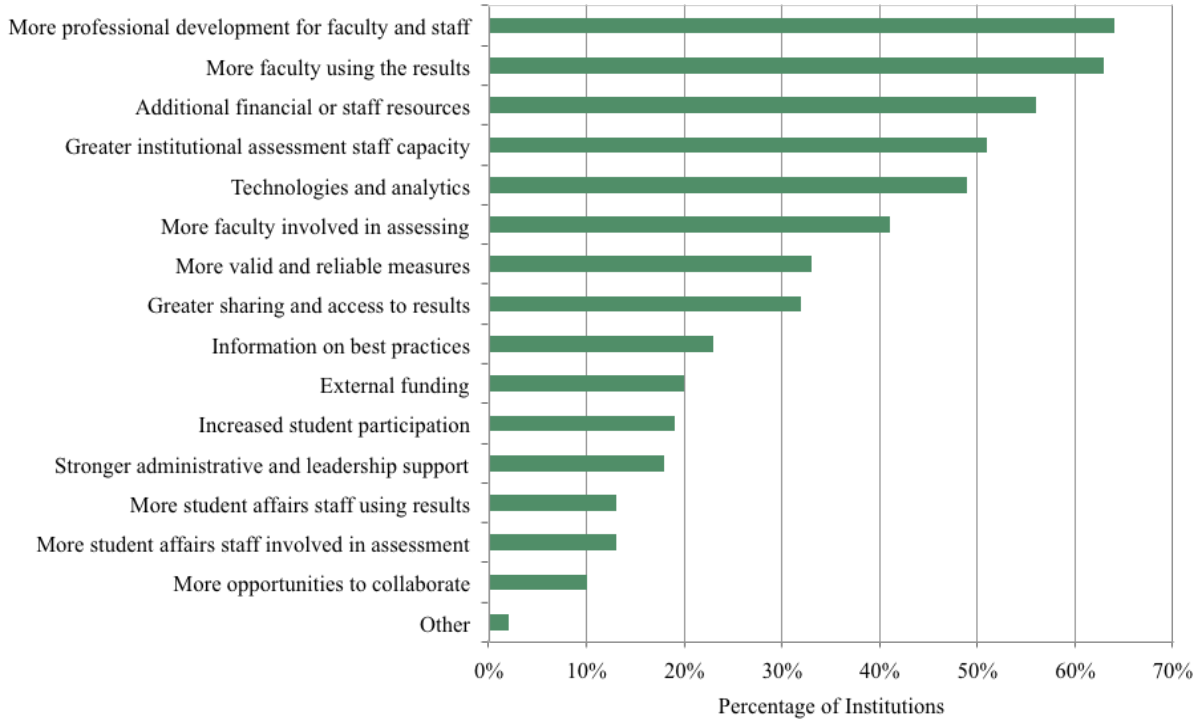

Figure H. Percentage of institutions indicating priority need for advancing assessment work.

By a significant margin, for-profit institutions said they needed:

- more valid and reliable measures of student learning,
- greater student participation in assessment,
- more information about best practices, and
- access to technologies that would aggregate assessment data.

Public institutions reported needing:

- more faculty involved in assessment,
- increased use of the results, and
- more professional development for faculty and staff.

Private institutions, many of which are relatively small and have few if any professional staff dedicated to student learning outcomes assessment, reported their greatest need was for additional financial and staff resources.

In their responses to the open-ended questions, what provosts were most hopeful for and most worried about varied widely. Some of this variance, we suspect, is due to how long and to what extent the institution had a systematic student learning outcomes assessment program in place. On some campuses, for example, achieving faculty and staff initial buy-in for the assessment agenda remains a primary concern. Frequently mentioned were issues that have been discussed in the assessment literature for decades such as:

- external mandates stretching already limited resources and dominating institutional conversations (reinforcing a compliance as contrasted with an improvement agenda),
- assessment work being under resourced,
- the questionable adequacy of assessment tools to measure outcomes the institution deems important,
- the worry among some faculty that assessment results will be used in performance reviews, and
- insufficient use of assessment data to guide curricular reform and to enhance teaching and learning.

Yet the majority of provosts were optimistic about potentially promising but, in many instances, unrealized goals. Many remained hopeful that their campus would find ways to use the results of student learning outcomes assessments both to meet the needs of accreditors and to guide campus strategic planning, resource allocation, curricular revision, and various initiatives to improve teaching and learning.

Many provosts expressed confidence that their institutions had turned a corner and are embracing assessment in new, positive ways. They cited examples of campus and program-level leadership and growing faculty engagement, hinting at a cultural shift at least acknowledging if not completely embracing the value of student learning outcomes assessment.

The findings from this survey point to five areas that require immediate attention by institutional leaders, faculty and staff members, assessment professionals, and governing boards.

Implications

The findings from this survey point to five areas that require immediate attention by institutional leaders, faculty and staff members, assessment professionals, and governing boards.

1. More faculty involvement is essential.

If there is one matter on which almost everyone agrees—administrators, rank-and-file faculty members, and assessment scholars—it is that faculty involvement in assessment and improvement is essential to both improve teaching and learning and to enhance institutional effectiveness. While faculty routinely "assess" their students' learning through papers, tests, other tasks, the nature of student work is not always closely aligned with stated course, program or institutional outcomes. Teaching and learning centers can make an important contribution to the assessment agenda by offering workshops and consultations that help faculty design classroom-based assignments that both address the respective faculty member's interest in determining whether his or her students are learning what is intended as well as provide evidence about student learning that can be used to represent institutional effectiveness.

Another promising faculty development approach is to situate assessment as a curricular review function, either in the context of the disciplines or the general education program. A template such as the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) (Lumina Foundation, 2011) can be used to guide a curricular mapping process for either the general education program or individual major fields to determine which outcomes are being addressed sufficiently in terms of breadth and depth and which need more attention. The key to using such an exercise to full advantage is to emphasize the essential role of assignments in inducing students to demonstrate what they know and can do and to use this information to document whether students are, indeed, achieving the proficiency levels stipulated by the institution and their major field (Ewell, 2013). Doing so returns the responsibility for determining whether students are learning what the institution promises to the faculty where it belongs.

2. Sustaining the recent progress in institutional assessment work must be a priority.

Leadership turnover and constrained resources threaten continued support for assessment, which makes it critical to integrate assessment work into the institution's governance and reward structures. Also, finding ways to embed assessment within the core work of faculty and staff is increasingly crucial. Such observations point to the need for cultural change so that every unit embraces, values, and rewards student learning outcomes assessment.

At the same time, one size does not fit all. What an institution needs to advance assessment work will surely vary in some ways that differ from the aggregated prioritized needs reported by provosts, depending on the campus context and the stage at which an institution is in implementing its assessment program.

3. Colleges and universities must use assessment results more effectively.

Although the use of assessment evidence appears to be increasing, it is not nearly as pervasive as it must be to guide institutional actions that will improve student outcomes. This is by far the most disappointing finding from the 2013 survey.

Although the use of assessment evidence appears to be increasing, it is not nearly as pervasive as it must be to guide institutional actions that will improve student outcomes.

To enhance student accomplishment, an institutional assessment program must purposefully focus on questions and issues that are central to attaining the institution's educational mission and that will produce actionable evidence. Key to such an effort is integrating assessment work into the institution's governance and organizational structures. For example, assessment activities and results should be used to inform faculty and staff development programs sponsored by teaching and learning centers. It is also important that assessment work at every level—classroom, program, and institution—be recognized and rewarded, institutional features that were not viewed by the majority of provosts as particularly supportive of student learning outcomes assessment.

Another area that needs attention on many campuses is the capture of evidence of student learning that occurs outside of the classroom, laboratory, and studio. Student affairs professionals, librarians, and others who have ongoing contact with students can add important perspectives to an assessment program, especially for interpreting and using the results and generating ideas for policies and practices that could enhance student performance. Equally important, the professional organizations of both groups are very interested in their members collaborating with their faculty colleagues on this important work. Students themselves should be regularly asked to help interpret assessment results and offer ideas to improve their learning.

4. Governing boards must make student learning a continuing high priority.

On some campuses, governing board members have been coached to shy away from questions of academic quality because the issues are too complex and beyond the board's expertise. Moreover, assessing student learning is what faculty members do, not the board. Granted, gathering and using evidence of student learning is a complex undertaking and faculty and academic leaders are rightfully the daily arbiters of academic quality. Too often, however, the results of assessments of student learning outcomes do not lead to action. The board should expect to see annually a comprehensive set of student learning indictors and enough examples of productive use of assessment to be confident that the internal academic quality controls of the institution are operating effectively. In addition, governing boards must encourage and support the president, provosts, and other institutional leaders to make sure these issues are given proper priority on an already crowded institutional agenda.

5. Colleges and universities must cultivate an institutional culture that values gathering and using student outcomes data as integral to fostering student success and increasing institutional effectiveness—as contrasted with a compliance exercise.

The goal is to get everyone—faculty, administrators, and staff—to see that assessing outcomes and using evidence for ongoing improvement is not just or primarily an obligatory response to demands from outside the institution. Rather, assessment must be viewed and undertaken as a continuous improvement process yielding actionable information for faculty and staff as well as for institutional leaders. A key element of this culture-bending effort is explaining and communicating better to specific audiences the assessment work underway and the value of this work. Some institutions appear to be well along in such efforts, but much is yet to be done.

The value of assessment lies not in the program or an individual course that is assessed, but in understanding that the real benefit of outcomes mastery is adequate preparation for success at the next level. This means changing how we work - how classes are scheduled, how we advise, how we develop programs, and revise courses - everything is different for us with learning in mind. That's the value [of the assessment] conversation we need to share internally and externally.

(provost at an associate's institution)

Last Word

At most U.S. colleges and universities, more assessment activity is underway now than ever before. Institutions are applying a broader range of instruments and approaches to document student progress, and the use of this evidence appears to be increasing—albeit not fast enough. Some campuses are more advanced in this work than others, which is to be expected given the scale, complexity, and diversity of the enterprise. Much of what has been accomplished is relatively recent, and much of it has been in response to pressure from external entities.

At the same time, knowing what students know and can do is no longer driven exclusively—or even primarily—by external forces, especially if accreditation is viewed as a hybrid of self-imposed and external oversight. Indeed, colleges and universities themselves have every reason to take ownership of assessment of student learning and to use that evidence wisely and productively. While accreditation remains the prime driver of assessment activity, joining it today are a campus's own drivers—to improve teaching and learning, to assess effectiveness of current practice, and to heed presidential and governing board interests. This leads us to conclude that U.S. higher education has turned a corner in the assessment of student learning. Carrying out this important work is more appropriately and promisingly driven by a balance of compliance and institutional desire to improve.

The developments represented in the NILOA survey results suggest that American higher education may be on the verge of an inflection point where what comes next is a more purposeful use of evidence of student learning outcomes in decision making—which, in turn, has the potential to enhance academic quality and institutional effectiveness. To realize this promise sooner rather than later, colleges and universities must evolve from a culture of compliance to a culture of evidence-based decision making in which policies and practices are informed and evaluated by the ultimate yardstick: a measurable, positive impact on student learning and success.

Colleges and universities must evolve from a culture of compliance to a culture of evidence-based decision making.

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NILOA National Advisory Panel

Ex-Officio Members

NILOA Mission

NILOA's primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to njankow2@illinois.edu.

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 contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- 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.

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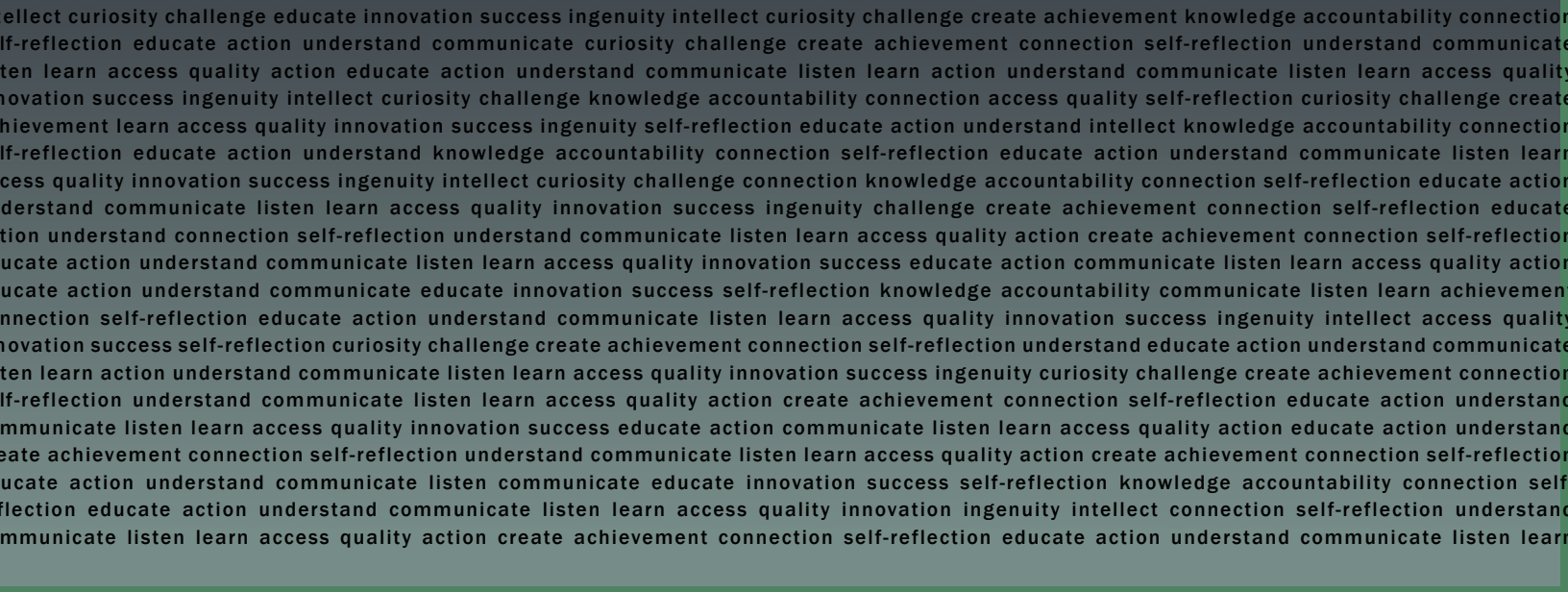

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