

A Brief Overview of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education

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<http://www.edpath.com/assessment.html>

Executive Summary

There has been an upsurge in reports and press coverage concerning accountability issues and student learning outcomes assessment (SLOA) in higher education. This paper is a brief overview of that upsurge, citing and synthesizing some of the most recent information published about accountability and SLOA. More papers about assessment and accountability are slated for future publication. The authors, George Lorenzo and John Ittelson, have started a website to accompany this paper that features numerous additional resources, with links, located at

<http://www.edpath.com/assessment.html>.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

This paper begins with a synopsis of the work that has recently come out of a relatively new organization, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), established in 2008. Between October 2009 and January 2010, NILOA published a national survey report, “More Than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education,” as well as three reports in its Occasional Paper Series: “Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the Tension,” “Three Promising Alternatives for Assessing College Students’ Knowledge and Skill,” and “Connecting the Dots Between Learning and Resources.” These four reports are synthesized in this paper. To read them in their entirety, please visit

<http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/>.

Historical and Current Perspective

This paper also features a brief historical perspective concerning SLOA and accountability issues in higher education, with references and short descriptions of some of the more notable reports that have covered these topics in recent times. Some of the recent feature articles and editorial comments primarily from the education press - many of which are pejorative in nature - are also synthesized. *The general tone of these reports and articles claims that our K-16 educational system needs to be fixed in a way in which the sophisticated collection of data can help drive sound decisions. All this and more has garnered closer attention by the federal government, state governments, education organizations, and the public, in general. In short,*

people want to know what they are paying for; how we are preparing students for the 21st century; and precisely where and how can higher education show evidence of what students are actually learning or not learning.

Shedding Some Light

There are a good number of notable activities that shed light on student learning outcomes assessment and accountability issues in higher education. For instance, CHEA President Judith Eaton writes in “Accountability: An Old Issue In a New Era,” that higher education is in a “new era” of scrutiny with colleges and universities obligated to “multiple constituents, including students; governing boards; institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations; and local, state, and federal governments.”

Intriguing Questions

Despite the good work being conducted by educators to enhance teaching and learning through the proper implementation of student learning outcomes assessment practices, this paper cites at least three national accountability activities that were criticized in some of the literature: the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities’ University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), and the Association of Public Land Grant Universities’ Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA).

What’s Coming?

This paper concludes with some reference to the near future of education as it relates to SLOA and the collection of data, citing an American of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) policy brief published in January 2010, and the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology report published on March 5, 2010. Both the brief and the report point towards continued progress in the development of comprehensive data systems designed to measure student growth and success, with momentum fueled by federal support.



A Brief Overview of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education

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Introduction

This is the start of a series of reports on the topic of student learning outcomes assessment (SLOA) in higher education. It begins with a synthesis of some recently published papers about SLOA and includes reference to other SLOA-oriented information published during the first decade of the 21st century.

Papers by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Four papers were published between October 2009 and January 2010 by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). NILOA was established in 2008 with the mission and vision to assist in the discovery and adoption of “promising practices in the assessment of college student learning outcomes.” NILOA is based at the University of Illinois and Indiana University; guided by a National Advisory Panel; and supported by the Lumina Foundation for Education, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Teagle Foundation.¹

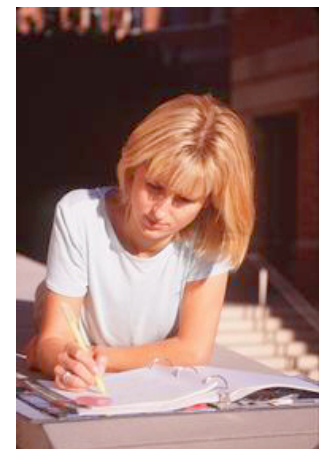
National Survey Report

The first NILOA paper was a national survey report - “More Than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education” - published in October 2009 and co-authored by George Kuh and Stanley Ikenberry. This paper was based on a survey about assessment activities that was sent to provosts and chief academic officers at regionally accredited colleges and universities across the U.S. The survey garnered an impressive 1,518 responses, resulting in “a reliable portrait of the current state of student learning outcomes assessment” in American higher education. In addition to the survey, a NILOA research team reviewed 725 college and

university websites to see how these institutions portrayed and shared their student learning outcomes assessment results.

This work revealed, in part, the following eight key observations:

1. Most institutions have identified a common set of learning outcomes that apply to all students.
2. Most institutions use a combination of institution-level and program-level assessment approaches.
3. The most common use of assessment data relate to accreditation.
4. Assessment approaches and uses of assessment results vary systematically by institutional selectivity.
5. Assessment is driven more by accreditation and a commitment to improve than external pressures from government or employers.
6. Most institutions conduct learning outcomes assessment on a shoestring budget.





7. Gaining faculty involvement and support remains a major challenge. Campuses would also like more assessment expertise, resources, and tools.

8. Most institutions plan to continue learning outcomes assessment despite budgetary challenges.

At the end of their paper, Kuh and Ikenberry provide a strong list of recommended actions that institutions can take to inform their decision-making processes and ultimately improve teaching and learning.²

On Accountability and Improvement

The second paper - "Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the Tension"- was the first of NILOA's Occasional Paper Series published in November 2009 and written by Peter T. Ewell. The so-called tension here sits between two purposes for assessment:

1. Improvement – Where information about learning outcomes evidence is used internally "to improve student performance by modifying pedagogical approaches as well as institutional policies and practices."
2. Accountability – Where assessment data is intended for external audiences "to demonstrate that the institution is using its resources appropriately to help students develop the knowledge, skills, competencies, and dispositions required to function effectively in the 21st century."

To explain this in very basic terms, the tension exists because of competing interests of internal and external stakeholders. Plus, Ewell explains that not much progress has actually been made in resolving the tension, having written a similar paper as far back as 1987. Nonetheless, there are at least four environmental changes that have taken hold since then:

1. Faculty do not reject assessment as much as they did in the past.

2. Because U.S. educational attainment is slipping on the world stage, demonstrating accountability is becoming more urgent.
3. A shift from state to regional accreditors has brought new standards requiring "institutional effectiveness" or "assessment" mandates that promote improvement.
4. A much wider range of assessment instruments, tools and approaches for assessing the effectiveness of undergraduate education are available and acceptable to faculty today than in the past.

There is much more to this paper that is not covered here, including an historical overview that covers a lot of ground relative to state, federal, regional-accreditation, and public-agenda issues. In addition, there is a section on how to manage the tension, with "four guiding principles for responding to calls for external accountability that also preserve and develop institutional capacity for evidence-based continuous improvement." Finally, one of the general concluding thoughts offered by Ewell is that

Giving too much attention to accountability risks losing faculty engagement – effectively suppressing the sustained, critical self-examination that continuous improvement demands. Devoting attention solely on the internal conversations needed for improvement, on the other hand, invites external actors to invent accountability measures that are inappropriate, unhelpful, or misleading. Managing this tension requires staking out a middle ground.³

Promising Assessment Practices

The third paper and second in the NILOA Occasional Paper Series - titled "Three Promising Alternatives for Assessing College Students' Knowledge and Skills"- was published in December 2009 and written by Trudy W. Banta, Merilee Griffin, Teresa L. Flateby, and Susan Kahn. The focus here is on three assessment practices that facilitate valid and authentic assessments that improve student learning as well as

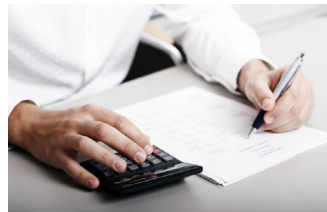


provide important data for reporting purposes. The three are: 1) ePortfolios, 2) a system of rubrics for evaluating student writing and thinking across the curriculum, and, 3) online assessment communities that facilitate faculty collaboration relative to assessment practices. In addition to describing the methodologies of all three, each assessment practice is supported by a concrete example.

Starting with ePortfolios, Banta et al explain how ePortfolios serve pedagogical and assessment purposes and are also utilized for career advancement and entrance into graduate school. ePortfolios have become increasingly widespread but are “still in their infancy,” they write, “with very few examples of longstanding campus use.”

They represent a convergence of expanding technological capacities with emerging ideas and findings about how students develop and learn, what pedagogies most effectively support intellectual growth, and how assessment can contribute to both improvement and accountability.

Banta et al used the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) ePortfolio initiative as a model for operationalizing and institutionalizing ePortfolio assessment, explaining that implementing successful adoption requires a slow but steady and careful approach requiring intensive and extensive faculty development and consultation, with an emphasis on the needs of academic units and examples of success.



The second alternative featured by Banta et al points specifically toward the Cognitive Level and Quality of Writing Assessment (CLAQWA), a performance-based rubric system out of the University of South Florida (USF). CLAQWA has evolved over the past 12 years. It is a 16-trait analytic rubric designed for application across the curriculum and has been transformed into an online system that helps users evaluate or provide feedback on student writing, including components related to critical thinking.

The third alternative for assessing college students centers on the establishment of online assessment communities. These are basically groups of faculty who take time out to discuss how students can be assessed. Today such discussions can be conducted entirely online. Faculty can basically score and analyze student work at an interactive website. The community's goal is to achieve an inter-rater reliability coefficient of 0.80. Banta et al provide explicit examples of successful online assessment community practices from English and writing departments.⁴

The Relationship Between Spending and Student Success

The fourth paper and third in the NILOA Occasional Paper Series – titled “Connecting the Dots Between Learning and Resources” – was published in January 2010 and written by Jane V. Wellman. Here the emphasis is on cost effectiveness as it relates to student learning and degree attainment. However, as Wellman notes, “for all the good work that has been done in the assessment of student learning, little parallel attention has been given to questions of cost-effectiveness and to the difference that money either does or does not make in getting students to degrees with acceptable levels of learning.” In short, this paper analyzes the relationship between spending and student success, and it takes a look inside the research, which is relatively sparse. However, there's a lot to be digested here, including an “emerging consensus” culled from the research that, in brief, postulates two key points:

1. Institutions that put money and resources into instruction and student services have greater student learning and degree attainment success rates.
2. Financial aid that helps students attend college full time in concert with providing more on-campus work programs improves retention and graduation rates.⁵

Finally, NILOA has plans to publish another paper sometime this month, titled “What Does It Cost to Do Assessment Right.”

A Bit of History

Of course, all this talk about measuring, assessing, and adopting student learning outcomes systems, which is often found in papers about “accountabil-

ity,” is really nothing new. There are numerous books, papers and articles written by educators addressing how much college students may or may not be learning and how the Academy, federal and state policy makers, and the public, in general, are all putting this topic into proper perspective. Harvard University President Emeritus and Research Professor Derek Bok’s book, “Our Underachieving Colleges,” immediately comes to mind and is frequently cited in the literature about topics related to student learning and accountability. Appropriately subtitled “A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More,” Bok noted, for instance, that

Professors seldom receive clear evidence of how much students are learning. Classes themselves offer few clues, especially in large classes taught by lectures to a passive audience. Course evaluations offer some insight, but they usually focus on whether the instructor was clear, knowledgeable, and accessible to students while saying little about how much students think they learned.⁶

Bok’s book was published in 2006, the same year that another work was published and has also since grown to become frequently cited in the literature about SLOA - the Department of Education’s Spellings Commission’s “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education.” Here 18 high-level educators/administrators and corporate executives came out in the second paragraph of this report’s preamble and said “U.S. higher education needs to improve in dramatic ways” and then continued with a litany of problems and challenges that American higher education needs to fix.⁷

Other Notable Reports

A 2008 report by the Educational Testing Service (ETS)⁸ includes a section that summarizes accountability-oriented initiatives and reports from the past decade, listing notable works, such as a report published by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) National Commission on Accountability in Higher Education in 2005, titled “Accountability for Better Results: A National Imperative for Higher Education”;⁹ a Business-Higher Education Forum report published in 2004, titled “Public Accountability for Student Learning in Higher Education: Issues and Options”;¹⁰ and

the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) 2002 report, “Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as the Nation Goes to College.”¹¹ The ETS report also includes an annotated bibliography of other related works.¹²

Education Journalism Blasts

In addition, plenty of information and opinions related to SLOA and accountability flow in and out of the academic and popular press, many with pejorative overtones, on a fairly consistent basis. As noted in one recent essay by Kevin Carey, policy director of Education Sector, an independent think tank in Washington, D.C., “the biggest problem with American higher education isn’t that too many students can’t afford to enroll. It’s that too many of the students who do enroll aren’t learning very much and aren’t earning degrees.”¹³ Carey’s scathing essay, which went on to lambaste higher education even further, caught the attention of TIME education correspondent Gilbert Cruz who interviewed Carey for a Q and A piece. Here Carey went on to complain about how “virtually no college assesses how much students learn in any subject and publishes data in a way that would allow you to compare it with other colleges. The information simply does not exist.”¹⁴

Doug Lederman, editor of Inside Higher Ed, wrote about a kind of higher education state of affairs based on the recent AAC&U and the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) annual meetings, both held in January 2010. Lederman writes that while there is a lot of activity regarding SLOA on individual campuses across the nation, “relatively little progress has been made to date toward a broad, cross-institutional consensus about what a liberally educated college graduate should know and be able to do, and toward a more regularized reporting of how successfully colleges are producing graduates with those skills.” Lederman goes on to point out that a common set of learning outcomes across campuses nationally is both “far from reality” and “strongly opposed in some quarters.” As accountability pressures from the



federal government, tied to funding, grow louder, representatives from AAC&U, CHEA and other education agencies continue to grapple with how to build transparent assessment systems that are not so fragmented on the national scene and that grow our nation's confidence in American higher education.¹⁵

On the other hand, in a recent Chronicle of Higher Education editorial, Gary A. Olson, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Idaho State University takes on a more positive tone, saying that colleges and universities have become much more committed to accountability than ever before. He notes that "increased accountability has become a badge of pride for some colleges," and he strongly encourages the growth of data-driven decision-making processes facilitated by information technology and institutional-research departments. "Becoming genuinely accountable means being able to demonstrate that decisions derive from specific facts, not from anecdote, impression, gut feeling, personal agenda, or ideology," Olson writes.¹⁶

It is this kind of press, and much more, that has been garnering closer attention by the federal government, state governments, education organizations, and the general public, who continue to ask what, exactly, are we paying for; how are we preparing students for the 21st century; and precisely where and how can higher education show evidence of what students are actually learning or not learning?



Shedding Some Light

Perhaps answers to these questions can be found inside the increasing number of initiatives that shed light on student learning outcomes and accountability issues. CHEA President Judith Eaton says that we are in a "new era" of scrutiny, with colleges and universities obligated to "multiple constituents, including students; governing boards; institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations; and local, state, and federal govern-

ments." In support of this new era, American higher education has "an impressive array of its own national accountability activities, mainly developed over the past ten years." In addition, individual colleges and universities continue to develop institution-based approaches to accountability that augment and enhance such national efforts. Eaton then lists these national accountability activities, calling them out as valuable frames of reference for organizing institutional approaches to student learning.¹⁷



Intriguing Questions

However, at least three national accountability activities listed by Eaton have recently been scrutinized themselves, and the results have been less than stellar. For instance, Inside Higher Ed's Scott Jaschik reported on a study of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) conducted by Iowa State University Associate Professor of Research and Evaluation Stephen R. Porter.^{18, 19}

The NSSE survey has grown in popularity since it was first administered in 2000. According to the NSSE website, the survey

obtains, on an annual basis, information from hundreds of four-year colleges and universities nationwide about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. The results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. Survey items on The National Survey of Student Engagement represent empirically confirmed "good practices" in undergraduate education. That is, they reflect behaviors by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of college.²⁰

Spring 2009 saw 643 colleges and universities participate in NSSE. However, while NSSE has become a kind of gold standard on the national

survey scene, according to Porter, it has been “largely unquestioned by academic leaders” and “really needs an overhaul. Where is the evidence that students understand the questions, and that their answers lead not only to engagement but to learning?” Porter asks.²¹



Another Inside Higher Ed article, by Doug Lederman, reports on a recent study that both praises and criticizes the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities’ (NAICU) University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN) and the Association of Public Land Grant Universities’ (APLU) Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). Here Lederman refers to what Chad Aldeman of Education Sector and Andrew Kelly of the American Enterprise Institute had to say in a study they co-authored, titled “False Fronts? Behind Higher Education’s Voluntary Accountability Systems.” In short, Aldeman and Kelly criticize the two efforts as having “serious flaws that undermine their utility as engines of accountability” but also praise VSA “for requiring participating institutions to use one of a handful of measures of student learning outcomes,” as well as “for collecting and publishing data on student engagement that many institutions use but many fewer publish.” U-CAN’s College Portraits website, on the other hand, “does not allow users to compare institutions to one another based on a set of their choosing.”^{22, 23}

What’s Coming?

So, what’s in the cards for the near future relative to SLOA? According to an American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) policy brief published in January 2010, there will be an expansion of statewide data systems and new reporting metrics.

In the year ahead, states will strive for continued progress in the development of comprehensive data systems designed to measure student growth and success, with momentum fueled by federal support. State Education

Agencies (K-12) will benefit from the Race to the Top Fund and the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund, both part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA); in part, these provide funding for and require implementation of statewide longitudinal data systems that meet specific criteria. All governors of the Chief State School Officers (CSSO) have committed to building these data systems by 2011. Also, in September 2009, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act (HR 3221); the Senate is currently drafting its version of the legislation. The College Access and Completion Initiative, a component of this bill, provides funding to expand state data systems to track students’ performance.

Also in the year ahead, many national organizations, state policymakers, and institutional leaders will continue to develop and promote improved metrics for understanding and reporting student progression. Compared to the federal IPEDS graduation rate measure currently in use, the new measures are more inclusive, disaggregated and multifaceted—better able to suggest strategies for improvement.²⁴

Plus, on March 5, as we were putting the final touches on this paper, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology published the must-read “National Educational Technology Plan 2010 - Transforming American Education: Learning Powered by Technology.” In particular, inside the “Productivity: Improving Learning Outcomes While Managing Costs” section, under “Moving to Meaningful Use,” the message about assessment of student learning outcomes and data collection (while mostly about K-12 but also applicable and important to undergraduate higher education) is one in which the DOE is seeking more clarity.

Current data on the use of educational and information technology in our system consists of records of purchases and numbers of computers and Internet connections. Very little information about how technology is actually used to support teaching, learning, and assessment is collected and communicated systematically. Only by shifting our focus to collecting data on

how and when technology is used will we be able to determine the difference it makes and use that technology to improve learning outcomes and the productivity of our educational system.

To accelerate the transition to collecting and using this type of data, the Department of Education should initiate work on developing a conceptual framework and definitions for meaningful use of technology in education. Clarity about what constitutes meaningful use is a necessary precursor for establishing goals and progress metrics for the use of technology in education.²⁵

Based on the upsurge of informative reports about student learning outcomes assessment, increased news coverage that helps to educate everyone about where our nation is heading educationally, the DOE's increasing interest in engaging and empowering students and teachers throughout America's educational system through the smart usage of educational technologies, and the growing chorus of educators in K through 16 working and collaborating to effect positive change, the future, we think, looks very bright and promising. Despite all the negative overtones about how we are losing ground on the global education scene, the U.S. still remains home to the most progressive colleges and universities in the world.

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Editor's Note: The authors have developed and published a new website with links to numerous resources related to ePortfolios and Student Learning Outcomes Assessment at www.edpath.com/assessment.html

About the Authors

George Lorenzo is founder and CEO of Lorenzo Associates, Inc., and writer, editor, and publisher of *Educational Pathways*, a newsletter started in November 2001 that covers online teaching and learning and education technologies. Under Lorenzo Associates, Inc., George also publishes a *guide to online MBA programs* (with a free eBook), a *guide to online education degree and certificate programs*, and an *ebook about online learning for adults*. Additionally, George provides *content production services, primarily for the education sector, but also for select small businesses*. These services include writing, editing, researching, designing, and publishing white papers, case studies, feature articles, sales and marketing literature, and a *complete e-mail marketing service* (writing, designing, publishing, and management of eNewsletters) through a partnership with Constant Contact.

John Ittelson, Ph.D., has more than 30 years of experience in the education industry. He serves as Director of Instructional Technologies for the K–20 California Educational Technology Collaborative (K20CETC), a consortium focused on helping students prepare for college. He also teaches a graduate course on Instructional Technology and is a consultant to the CalState TEACH program for California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB). Dr. Ittelson serves on several boards, including the National Board of the Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration (CILC), which helps to advance education through technology.