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Learning Outcomes Assessment in Community Colleges

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Foreword by Walter Bumphus



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Abstract

Learning Outcomes Assessment in Community Colleges

The open access mission of community colleges demands working with individuals with widely varying academic skill levels and diverse educational backgrounds. As a result, learning outcomes assessment in community colleges presents an array of opportunities and challenges distinctive to these institutions and the students that they serve. This paper analyzes the findings from two recent surveys, one of institutional researchers and one of chief academic officers from community colleges, to better understand the state of student learning outcomes assessment in this increasingly important sector. In the context of these findings, the authors discuss the multiple demands for accountability and transparency that characterize the environment within which community colleges operate. They describe assessment approaches used by community colleges and review how institutions can and do use the results. They also provide some examples of good practices in assessment, and suggest some guidelines and cautions for community colleges that are seeking to advance the assessment agenda. The authors encourage community colleges to honestly and openly assess student learning and to use information obtained through the assessment process to improve retention, progression and academic success of students on community college campuses.

If community colleges are going to fulfill their core mission, essential and ongoing assessments must be done to structure an environment of student success and completion. -- Walter Bumphus



Foreword

Balancing Access and Success Through Assessment

Community colleges have long excelled in providing access. The doors to 2-year institutions have traditionally been wide open. A second but increasingly important door—the door to success—has never opened wide enough. As pressure for increased student completion rates grows—and with it, demand for greater accountability and transparency—our colleges fight to push open further the door to student success, not just to satisfy the goals of policymakers, but to ensure that our students are prepared for the future.

Linking academic excellence to completion is essential and must be done. Classroom excellence is key to motivating students to complete. Achieving our completion goals, however, requires colleges to fully examine and assess outcomes. It is the only true way to push wide that critically important door to success.

Certainly there are challenges. Because community colleges serve populations with diverse backgrounds and diverse needs, effective assessment of outcomes can be a challenge in the face of increasingly scarce resources. But that very real challenge can no longer be an excuse to delay or forego assessment. If community colleges are going to fulfill their core mission, essential and ongoing assessments must be done to structure an environment of student success and completion.

In recent years, a number of important initiatives have been created to specifically address the issue of assessment. Achieving the Dream emphasizes the important role of data in improving success rates, particularly for low-income students and students of color. The Voluntary Framework of Accountability, currently being led by the American Association of Community Colleges, is defining metrics to measure student outcomes at community colleges that are appropriate to the distinctive missions and characteristics of these institutions. The investments in these initiatives underscore the reality that assessment measures will be part of the national conversation for the foreseeable future.

Despite the growing need to reexamine existing assessment systems and, where appropriate, design new ones, little has been written on this issue relating to community colleges. The authors of *Learning Outcomes Assessment in Community Colleges* have addressed that void, providing instructive insights into not only about how colleges are assessing outcomes, but also of how colleges are using the results. They look at promising practices and models of success, including the ways institutions have overcome barriers such as lack of funds, inadequate coordination, and faculty resistance. Further, the authors highlight approaches community colleges can take to achieve assessment goals.

Most importantly, this paper recognizes that community colleges can no longer be institutions that provide only access. They must purposefully and consistently balance their historic mission of open door of access with that second critical door of success for all students.

Walter Bumphus

President and CEO
American Association of Community Colleges



Learning Outcomes Assessment in Community Colleges

Charlene Nunley, Trudy Bers and Terri Manning

Introduction

Learning outcomes assessment practices in community colleges vary with respect to comprehensiveness, approach, dissemination, use of results, and the extent to which they are either institutionalized or perceived as marginal to the core work of teaching and learning. Like universities, community colleges react to the national and state environments, the institution's cultural and environmental norms, the needs and demands of students, and the requirements of regional and program-specific accrediting agencies.

Like universities, community colleges react to the national and state environments, the institution's cultural and environmental norms, the needs and demands of students, and the requirements of regional and program-specific accrediting agencies.

We begin this paper by describing the multiple demands for accountability and transparency that characterize the environment within which community colleges operate. While several of these demands are quite similar across the range of higher education institutions, some of them are unique to community colleges. Second, we identify the assessment approaches that community colleges use and review how these institutions use learning outcomes assessments. Third, we explain what we believe are the particularly compelling challenges that community colleges face in assessing learning outcomes. Then, after providing some examples of good practices in assessment, finally, we suggest some guidelines and cautions for community colleges seeking to advance the assessment agenda at their institutions.

Throughout this paper, we present selected results from two recent national surveys. The first survey was sent to institutional researchers in community colleges through a listserv of the National Community College Council for Research and Planning (NCCCRP), an organization sponsored by the American Association of Community Colleges. A total of 101 individual researchers from 30 states across all six accrediting regions responded to the NCCCRP survey. The second survey, conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), was sent to all chief academic officers at regionally accredited, undergraduate degree-granting institutions in the United States. For the purposes of this paper, we focus only on responses to the NILOA survey from the 544 associate degree-granting institutions. This paper is not intended to provide complete results for either survey but, rather, it focuses on those items that are particularly germane to the paper's purpose.[1]

We use the following terms interchangeably throughout this paper: learning outcomes assessment, assessment, student learning outcomes, learning objectives, and learning assessment. All of these terms are meant to focus on the types of knowledge, skills, and abilities students gain as a result of their college academic experiences.

[1] For more information on the complete NILOA survey, see *More Than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education,* retrievable from http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/NILOAsurveyresults09.htm

Demands for Accountability and Transparency

Broad-based demands for accountability and transparency have raised expectations for learning outcomes assessment in the postsecondary system. These demands emanate from a variety of sources, including federal and state governments, accrediting organizations, students and parents, and taxpayer groups. At the federal level, the report of the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006), also known as the Spellings Commission, had a major impact on the conversation about assessment and transparency. Spurred by the fact that the percentage of college-degree-holding adults in many other countries had come to exceed that in the United States, the Spellings Commission underscored other sobering trends. For example, the report stated, "Unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy where, as the truism holds correctly, knowledge matters more than ever" (p. x). This sentiment of institutional underperformance echoed throughout the report.

The Spellings Commission report escalated the demand for accountability and transparency to a new and higher level, and this demand has not lessened under new Department of Education leadership.

An author of this paper, Charlene Nunley, who served on the Spellings Commission, was surprised by the strength of opinion among some of the private sector commission members that 1) higher education is lax in accountability, 2) postsecondary educators do not know enough about what our graduates know or need to know, and 3) colleges do not openly share information about the learning achievements and job performance and success of our graduates. While the commission as a whole seemed more positive about community colleges than about some other sectors of higher education (particularly in the areas of workforce responsiveness), they called on **all** of postsecondary education institutions to "measure and report meaningful student learning outcomes" (p. 24). The commission also focused on the importance of "value-added" measurements, a particularly important concept in community colleges where the policy of open admissions results in students entering with widely varying skill levels. The Spellings Commission report escalated the demand for accountability and transparency to a new and higher level, and this demand has not lessened under new Department of Education leadership.

Another factor in the higher demand for accountability and transparency is the greater focus on learning outcomes assessment by accreditors, in part because they recognize the growing need for improving accountability and also because of increasing pressure from federal and state governments. Both the NILOA and NCCCRP surveys document the importance of accreditation as a major driving force in learning outcomes assessment efforts on campuses (Tables 1 and 2). However, accreditors are evidently not satisfied with the assessment work being undertaken on college campuses. Provezis (2010) found that "each of the regional accreditors reported that deficiencies in student learning outcomes assessment were the most common shortcoming in institutional evaluations" (p. 7). Our investigation confirms Provezis' finding for the community college sector. Head and Johnson (2011) specifically cited evidence from the Commission on Colleges for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, one of the regional accreditation agencies, noting that 70 percent of community colleges undergoing reaffirmation in 2010 were found out of compliance with institutional effectiveness standard #3.3.1., which requires an institution to identify "expected outcomes, assess the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provide evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas…3.3.1.1. educational programs, to include student learning

outcomes" (pp. 48–49). For the past eight years, at the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, assessment has been the most frequently cited issue in accreditation and has led to the largest percentage of follow-up reports and visits for community colleges (personal communication, April 29, 2011).

Table 1. NILOA Survey: How important are the following factors or forces in prompting your institution to assess student learning outcomes?

	Percentage indicating "moderate" or "high" importance	
	Community Colleges	All Institutions
Regional accreditation	96%	97%
Institutional commitment to improve undergraduate education (strategic priority, etc.)	93%	93%
Specialized or program accreditation	91%	93%
Faculty or staff interest in improving student learning	84%	82%
National calls for accountability and/or transparency	78%	74%
Governing board mandate	55%	29%
Institutional membership initiatives (e.g., VSA, U-CAN, AQIP, Transparency by Design, AAUDE)	45%	46%
Coordinating board mandate	44%	35%

Table 2. NCCCRP Survey: Institutional researchers' perspective of what motivates faculty and administrators to participate and support learning outcomes assessment.

	Percentage answering "agree" or "strongly agree"	
	Faculty Participation	Administrator Participation
Required for program accreditation (e.g., nursing, ABET)	86%	74%
Regional accrediting agency requirements	63%	89%
Internal quest to improve programs/services	51%	54%
Pressure from senior administrators	49%	
Pressure from key faculty	46%	
To improve student learning	44%	
Continuous quest for quality in all things	38%	47%
To guarantee that students are learning	36%	
Part of the institutional culture	32%	36%
Pressure from state governing/coordinating agencies		34%
Performance funding		28%
Pressure from local governing board		20%

In addition to the accreditors, a number of states are now requiring colleges to assess learning outcomes, ranging from outcomes of general education to outcomes of career-specific programs. Zis, Boeke, and Ewell (2010) reported that states vary in intensity of engagement with assessment and with the assessment activities they require. Ewell, Jankowski, and Provezis (2010) categorized eight states as assessment-intensive states[2] while observing great variability among the states in terms of the specificity of assessment requirements. Therefore, it is not surprising that community colleges face vastly different learning outcomes assessment demands based on their location.

[2] The assessment-intensive states are Georgia, Kentucky, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

The NILOA survey findings imply that the assessment agenda in community colleges is more externally driven than it is in the four-year sector. For example, Table 1 shows that coordinating and governing board mandates are more common factors associated with community colleges engaging in assessment than with four-year institutions. This finding may be a function of community college governance—where board members generally reside in the local community, typically meet monthly, and regularly engage with their institutions. It may also reflect the multiple stakeholders with an interest in community colleges. According to Davis (2011), 22 different agencies and offices share in community college governance in California, for example. While Davis' evidence is from one state only, the multiplicity of layers of community college governance in many states is complex, indeed.

In addition to accreditation and governance demands, some national initiatives have spurred the assessment movement in community colleges, Achieving the Dream being one of the most significant. According to its website, www.achievingthedream.org, Achieving the Dream is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to helping more students succeed—particularly low-income students and students of color. There are now 160 Achieving the Dream colleges in 30 states committed to improving the progression of their students to credentials that facilitate transfer to four-year colleges and/or job readiness. The Achieving the Dream measures of student success do not explicitly cite learning outcomes, although they are implied in measures such as progress through developmental into gateway, college-level courses, and successful completion of college-level courses. One of the most noteworthy elements of Achieving the Dream is its press for community colleges to use evidence-based approaches to examine effectiveness in meeting the educational needs of students.

Examples of Good Practice in Assessment

While the challenges to assessment are significant, institutions across the country are showing that these challenges can be addressed and that high-quality assessment practices can be implemented. Throughout the document are three examples of good practice in assessment, selected because they demonstrate that community colleges can use assessment results to improve the classroom and learning environment for students.

Example of Good Practice

Community College of Baltimore County (MD)

The Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC) uses Common Graded Assignments (CGAs) to assess general education learning outcomes. Discipline teams known as GREATs (General Education Assessment Teams) design assignments approved by faculty that are incorporated into all sections of designated courses each semester. Detailed assignments require students to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways, e.g., writing, graphic, and oral presentations; and/or creating a website.

A random sample of students' work is then graded by trained scorers according to an accompanying rubric. The rubric, which permits item analysis, uses a 6-point scale to assess students' work in each general education area: Content Knowledge and/or Skills; Written, Oral, and/or Signed Communication Skills; Critical Thinking Skills; Technology as a Learning Tool; Cultural Appreciation; and Independent Learning Skills. CCBC requires assessments of all general education objectives in every general education course over a period of years, so that not every discipline conducts assessments every year. The number of student assignments assessed ranges from 44 to more than 800, depending on the courses selected each term.

Concrete examples of changes based on results include changing the course textbook to a book that includes writings by authors from many different cultures, professional development for adjunct faculty, and many specific course revisions based on rubric item analyses. When the assessment results are low in a particular category, the corresponding faculty team meets to discuss what changes should be put in place to address that area. CCBC collects intervention reports outlining the plans each discipline intends to carry out.

A number of college-wide interventions, including the creation of a Global Education Advisory Board, have done much to help faculty incorporate global appreciation assignments and activities into their courses. CCBC also offers a series of workshops and certifications that faculty can receive in this area. Another area of increased emphasis has been Culturally Responsive Teaching, in which CCBC offers four two-hour training modules and a two-week professional development course for faculty.

For more information about assessment at the Community College of Baltimore County, see http://ccbcmd.edu/loa/great.html

As the Achieving the Dream (2011) website declares, "Community colleges educate nearly half of all undergraduates in the country, yet fewer than half of these students who enter the community college with the goal of earning a degree or certificate have met their goal six years later." Certainly this statistic is cause for deep concern and is motivating many more community colleges to examine the processes by which they encourage student learning. Achieving the Dream colleges are discovering that improving student learning and student achievement is not easy, even when effort is high on the part of the institution and its faculty. A recent report by MDRC and the Community College Research Center (Rutschow et al., 2011) revealed that while, after several years of effort, Round 1 Achieving the Dream Colleges had made significant progress in building cultures of evidence, most institution-wide measures of student success had not changed significantly. Producing advances in learning for students who often enter college with reading, writing, and math skills far below collegiate levels and who often have socioeconomic disadvantages and complex home and family lives has proven stubbornly difficult. Still, Achieving the Dream community colleges recognize that these challenges must be met, and a key element of understanding where these colleges stand with regard to the goals of improving progression and retention of students is better understanding and assessment of how well and how much their students are learning.

One of the most noteworthy elements of Achieving the Dream is its press for community colleges to use evidence-based approaches to examine effectiveness in meeting the educational needs of students.

The Voluntary Framework for Accountability (VFA), another national assessment initiative underway, is "the first national system of accountability specifically for community colleges and by community colleges" (AACC, 2011). Under the auspices of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), community college leaders are working to define the best metrics for measuring how well community colleges serve their students and their purposes. AACC's Principles and Plan (2009) states, "Community colleges need a transparent process through which they communicate data that depict the most accurate portrait of community colleges and their unique role in higher education" (p. 1). This document also highlights the obstacles community colleges face in implementing an assessment agenda because of the absence of commonly accepted performance measures and multiple missions. In 2011, 40 assessment sites involving a total of 72 community colleges of all sizes are piloting the VFA process. As yet unclear, however, are what incentives or mandates will prompt colleges to participate in the VFA when it is rolled out to the entire community college population.

Finally, the motivations for doing assessment seem to differ between the two- and four-year sectors. Respondents to both the NILOA and NCCCRP surveys reported accreditation to be an important driver of assessment, but while 84 percent of respondents to the NILOA survey identified improving undergraduate education as a motivating factor, only 51 percent of NCCCRP survey respondents did so. Although the relevant item was not worded in exactly the same way on the two surveys, this difference in perspectives is provocative and merits further investigation. In general, items on the NCCCRP survey regarding the quest for quality improvement were all ranked relatively low as factors motivating faculty and administrators to be engaged in student learning outcomes assessment.

The difference in the NILOA and NCCCRP survey results may be due to a variety of reasons. Top-level institutional leaders may tend to be supportive of using assessment for improvement but may not communicate that message down the line, at least in community colleges. Or improvements may be taking place without being communicated to institutional researchers. Or perhaps rather than blaming accrediting agencies for the pressures of assessment, chief academic officers may have reported what they perceived to be publicly acceptable responses—while still using accrediting agency expectations to leverage change within their institutions. The difference in the results of the two surveys might also arise from the different perspectives about assessment held by chief academic officers, the NILOA respondents, and institutional researchers, the NCCCRP respondents.

Regardless of the motivating factors driving assessment, we contend that affording access to learning without assuring that learning occurs constitutes an empty promise. The value-added learning achieved by America's community colleges must be documented and used to further improve student accomplishment and institutional excellence. The following section illustrates some of the approaches that community colleges currently use to move more vigorously in this direction.

Assessment Approaches and Applications

To respond to the demands of accreditors and other governmental entities as well as to the internal demands for accountability, community colleges use a variety of approaches to assess student learning outcomes. Table 3 presents results from the NILOA survey of chief academic officers in community colleges.[3] Nearly all respondents said their institutions used performance and other authentic task assessments and grading rubrics. These findings do not permit us to determine, however, whether respondents shared a common understanding of authentic tasks[4] and rubrics or whether they used generally available tasks and rubrics, developed their own, or used them in combination. Nor do these findings allow us to know the extent to which the responding colleges tested the validity and reliability of their own instruments, provided training for scorers, or administered assessments in compliance with standardized procedures. A closer look at survey results indicates most assessment approaches were used at the departmental or individual unit level. Few respondents reported using these approaches with samples to represent the entire institution, with the exception of national and locally developed student surveys.

Regardless of the motivating factors driving assessment, we contend that affording access to learning without assuring that learning occurs constitutes an empty promise.

Table 3. NILOA Survey: To what extent does your institution use the following approaches to assess undergraduate student learning outcomes?

	Percentage used by individual departments or units but not to represent the whole institution	Percentage used with valid samples to represent the whole institution	Percentage not used
Performance assessments other than grades (simulations, lab and other demonstrations, field experiences, portfolios, critiques, recitals, capstone projects)	80%	19%	2%
Rubrics (published or locally developed) to assess student work	81%	23%	2%
Specialized or programmatic knowledge and skills measures (licensure exams, MCAT, Major Field Tests, etc.)	83%	8%	9%
Student portfolios (a purposeful collection of student work showcasing achievement of learning objectives)	83%	7%	10%
Locally developed student surveys	48%	45%	11%
Employer surveys	61%	30%	12%
National student surveys (NSSE, CCSSE, CSEQ, SSI, CIRP FS, CSS, YFCY, FYI, etc.)	8%	69%	22%
External expert judgments of student performance (simulations, lab and other demonstrations, field experiences, portfolios, critiques, recitals, capstone projects)	69%	8%	23%
Alumni surveys	49%	11%	40%
Student interviews or focus groups	55%	16%	31%
Employer interviews or focus groups	61%	30%	12%
General knowledge and skills measures (CLA, CAAP, MAPP, WorkKeys, etc.)	28%	31%	42%
Alumni interviews or focus groups	29%	15%	57%

[3] For the responses represented in this table, we inferred the use of an approach if the respondent did not check "not used."

[4] Mueller (2011) defines an *authentic task* as *an assignment given to students that is designed to assess their ability to apply standard-driven knowledge and skills to real-world challenges.*

Although community colleges use learning outcomes assessment results in a variety of ways, as expected, accreditation is a key driver among these uses, as data from the NILOA survey in Table 4 suggest. However, survey results on this point from community colleges differ in some respects from those from four-year institutions. Community colleges were somewhat less likely than four-year institutions to use assessment as a tool in faculty evaluation, for example, but they were more likely to use it for determining readiness for college, for aligning outcomes across sectors, for changing transfer policy, for improving instructional effectiveness, and for allocating resources across academic units. Many of these differences would be expected based on a community college's mission. Even though community colleges more frequently pointed to using assessment for improving the students' learning experience—for improving instructional performance and determining student readiness for college-level coursework, for example--, it is somewhat discouraging that less than half of the responding chief academic officers indicated that assessment results were being used for these more academic purposes. If assessment practices are to have the intended impact on student learning, more institutions will need to use assessment results to guide changes in classroom learning environments.

Table 4. NILOA Survey: To what extent has your institution used student learning outcomes results for each of the following?

	Percentage responding "quite a bit" or "very much"
Preparing self-studies for program or specialized accreditation	80%
Preparing self-studies for institutional accreditation	79%
Revising undergraduate learning goals	57%
Responding to calls for accountability and/or transparency	50%
Informing strategic planning	49%
Improving instructional performance (e.g., design faculty or staff development programs)	48%
Modifying general education curriculum	46%
Determining student readiness for college-level course work	44%
Informing governing board about student and institutional performance	42%
Encouraging adoption of "best practices" in teaching, learning, and assessment from other institutions	39%
Evaluating departments, units, and programs	36%
Modifying student academic support services (e.g., advising, tutoring, study skills)	31%
Articulating or aligning curriculum and learning outcomes across sectors (K–12/community college/4-year institution)	29%
Reporting to the public	26%
Improving physical environment for learning	22%
Determining student readiness for upper-division course work (e.g., rising junior exams)	16%
Allocating resources to academic units	16%
Changing policies and practices related to transfer or articulation agreements	16%
Changing admissions policies and recruitment materials	13%
Evaluating faculty performance for promotion and tenure	11%
Allocating resources to student affairs units	11%
Evaluating faculty and staff performance for merit salary purposes	7%

Challenges for Community Colleges

While the data presented so far indicate that community colleges are involved to varying degrees in learning outcomes assessment, our experience in working with these colleges makes plain that they face a number of challenges. Some of these, we suspect, are common to the four-year sector as well. These include determining what to measure, assuring real institutional commitment, effectively engaging faculty, and selecting valid and reliable instruments. Community colleges face a number of different challenges, however, that merit special treatment in this paper. Recognizing that a number of the challenges overlap and reinforce one another—in other words, that reality is not as neat as our list—then, what are the challenges? We have identified 11 distinct challenges and present them concisely below.

Multiple missions of community colleges

According to the AACC (2009), students enter community college for many reasons:

- to enroll for a single course
- to upgrade a specific job skill
- to earn a promotion
- to earn an associate's degree or certificate
- to complete lower-division courses needed to transfer to a four-year institution for personal enrichment

These educational objectives of many community college students can be achieved without completing a formal program of study or even a sequence of courses that educators believe is logical. This multiplicity of outcomes has led some to argue that we cannot measure well what community colleges do. The AACC has stated that the "varied needs and individual goals of community college students . . . are difficult to measure in meaningful ways" (p. 1). Yet this argument is unlikely to prevail in the current climate and gets in the way of measuring what can be measured—if not always perfectly. One can reasonably assume, for example, that recent high school graduates who enter college full time are likely to be seeking a degree or transfer and that students who enter particular workforce development programs are likely to be seeking the content and/or credential that these programs provide. Because of these multiple missions, multiple approaches to assessing learning are required.

Assessment findings have been used to prompt college-wide student learning outcomes discussions and improvements at Miami Dade College campuses and within disciplines to enhance student attainment of college-wide learning outcomes.

Example of Good Practice

Miami Dade College (FL)

Miami Dade College (MDC) uses faculty-developed, authentic assessment tasks to assess students' attainment of the college's ten learning outcomes. These ten tasks are scenario-based and usually measure three to four learning outcomes, challenging students to integrate the knowledge and skills they have acquired while at the college. For example, Task 1, "Oil Drilling in Biscayne Bay," asks students to review information about oil extraction in the local environment and to respond to three prompts about a proposed oil drilling initiative. This task measures the College's Learning Outcomes 1 (Communication), 4 (Information Literacy), 7 (Ethical Thinking), and 10 (Natural Systems and the Environment). Task 4, "Creative Expression: An Exercise in Analysis," asks students to review, for example, a clip from a musical performance or an excerpt from a piece of literature as if the students were art critics. Students then respond to three prompts about the creativity, beauty, and cultural value of the work. This task measures Learning Outcomes 1 (Communication), 3 (Creative/Critical Thinking), and 9 (Aesthetic Appreciation).

Students nearing completion of their associate's degree are identified and faculty who are teaching are invited to assign one of the assessment tasks in their classes. The goal is to obtain completed tasks from 10 percent of students expected to graduate that term. Students' work is evaluated by members of the Learning Outcomes Assessment Team (also known as the LOAT) using 4-point rubrics developed for each learning outcome. Results are aggregated and not reported by student or course.

Assessment findings have been used to prompt college-wide student learning outcomes discussions and improvements at MDC campuses and within disciplines to enhance student attainment of college-wide learning outcomes. In spring 2006, the LOAT and the college's Learning Outcomes Coordinating Council (LOCC), also faculty led, began disseminating college-wide assessment results and have been instrumental in creating information and professional development workshops and sessions for students, faculty, student services professionals, deans, directors, chairs, and college executives.

MDC has used assessment results to trigger concrete changes in programs and services. For example, LOAT, LOCC, and the College Training and Development office designed an authentic assessment workshop during which participants created course and student service-area authentic assessment tasks for one of four outcomes, for which results suggested the need for improved student learning: quantitative analysis; cultural, global, and historical perspectives; ethical thinking; and aesthetic appreciation. Tasks developed in the workshop could be used to assess learning in classrooms or in co-curricular activities.

Faculty in English from across all MDC campuses have introduced a variety of initiatives to improve student attainment of the learning outcomes communication and global, cultural, and historical perspectives. Initiatives included portfolios of student work, a novel as part of the course work in freshman composition, collaboration with the Florida Center for the Literary Arts to bring authors into classrooms, and a course on the literature of genocide.

For more information about assessment at Miami Dade College, see http://www.mdc.edu/learningoutcomes

Student characteristics

Community colleges are educating about 50 percent of the nation's college students, and yet these students differ in many ways from the "traditional" student population. A substantial number of community college students

- enter with precollege-level reading, writing, and math skills (Bailey, 2008), some not even reaching middle school levels in these skills
- may not take their developmental courses in sequence; for example, a student may take a required developmental math course in the first semester and then not take another math course until much later in their academic career
- attend intermittently[5]
- are torn among multiple roles as student, employee, parent, spouse, and/or caretaker of other family members
- are uncertain about their educational goals
- lack educational capital, or college knowledge, to navigate the post-secondary world
- leave the institution without completing a certificate or degree or even informing the institution that they will not be returning, thus making it virtually impossible to identify students nearing the conclusion of their collegiate studies at the college, let alone to assess their learning outcomes[6]

Community colleges are educating more than 50 percent of the nation's college students, and yet these students differ in many ways from the "traditional" student population.

These characteristics have implications for learning outcomes assessment. One of them is to incorporate ways to compare what regular class attendees learn with those who miss many classes but never formally withdraw from the classes. Such analytical approaches will make it possible to answer questions about whether student learning is affected by the complexity of students' lives, including the number of hours that they work each week, or whether they are single parents and have to care and provide for dependents. Such approaches will also force us to deal with intractable situations, such as how to improve student learning and success when it is impossible to demand that students abandon their full-time jobs and make other important life changes that will enable them to devote more time to their studies. Until we know whether students are learning what we intend that they learn, we will continue to lack direction as to what else students need to help them attain their educational aspirations.

Many community colleges address some of these obstacles to learning and progression by implementing policies and practices that demand behaviors we know are essential for student success. These include eliminating late registration, requiring students to take developmental courses first and in sequence, and requiring specific interventions for students whose academic

[5] Adelman's (2005) research describes the complexity of student attendance patterns, creatively categorizing community college students as "homeowners," "tenants," and "visitors," depending on the students' degree of engagement with the community college, the numbers of credits that they accrue, and whether they have earned significant credits from other colleges. He also discusses the phenomena of reverse transfer and "swirl," in which students alternate attendance between two- and four-year colleges. Students "stop in" and "stop out" and move between full- and part-time attendance while pursuing their educational objectives. These are common attendance patterns in community colleges.

[6] Bailey (2008) indicates that "[a]ccording to National Center for Education Statistics data on a cohort of students completing high school in 1992, just below one-fifth of those entering community college students left before completing 10 credits"; after eight years, 50 percent of these students had not earned a degree or certificate or transferred (pp. 27–28). Looking at these college-going patterns, one might legitimately ask, "When do we consider these students' education finished and at what point do we measure what they've learned?"

status becomes probationary. When policies such as these are in place, community colleges are faced not only with assessing whether students are learning in their classes but also with the question of whether the policy change is having the expected learning impact. Over time, the work of Achieving the Dream should generate useful insights as to whether these policy changes are having a real impact, since a significant aspect of the Achieving the Dream work on many campuses involves developing more rigorous policies designed to support student success. The Community College of Allegheny County, for example, has made the strengthening of academic policies the centerpiece of its Achieving the Dream efforts and is documenting some impressive results.

Many community colleges address some of these obstacles to learning and progression by implementing policies and practices that demand behaviors we know are essential for student success.

Absence of programs in baccalaureate majors

Community colleges offer two broad categories of degrees and certificates: career and technical education (CTE) and transfer disciplines. CTE programs may include both certificates and associate degrees, the former including primarily technical courses in the occupational area and the latter including general education as well as technical courses. Both certificates and CTE associate degrees have prescribed curricula, and community colleges are encouraged if not mandated by their accrediting agencies and state boards to specify program-level learning outcomes for certificates and degrees. The Higher Learning Commission, for example, requires all colleges that deliver programs through contractual or consortial arrangements to complete an extensive Substantive Change Application that includes information on learning outcomes assessment. Community colleges are encouraged to develop such collaborative arrangements to leverage resources and link with the business community and, therefore, need to obtain approval for such programs. Community colleges in Illinois, as another example, must obtain approval from the Illinois Community College Board, and sometimes the Illinois Board of Higher Education, for each new CTE degree or certificate. Such "new units of instruction," as they are termed, require the specification of learning outcomes and a description of how learning will be assessed.

The story is quite different in the baccalaureate or transfer arena. Some systems or states permit community colleges to offer associate degrees in professional fields such as education, engineering, or the arts. Some of these same systems or states prohibit offering degrees in the liberal arts or business. Community colleges in Illinois, for example, are not authorized to offer associate degrees in fields such as political science, chemistry, or philosophy—while community colleges in other systems or states can award degrees in these fields and, in still other systems, can create unofficial programs of study that "look like" a major but result officially in a broad arts and sciences degree rather than a degree that is discipline specific. In many community colleges, no programs are available in many—if not most—transfer disciplines. What does this mean with respect to assessment? It means that particularly where there is no program it makes little sense to expect colleges to assess learning outcomes at the program level.

The de facto program designation

Because relatively few students actually earn a certificate or degree compared to the overall student population, basing program-level assessments on "completers" misses the majority of students. While in theory it makes sense to assess through a capstone course what students know and can do, in community colleges we often do not know which semester will be a student's last. Moreover, enrollments in capstone courses are often very small because many students depart from the college before completing their programs or because capstone courses might be electives rather than required. To address this challenge, for the purposes of assessment some colleges use the designation of *de facto program*, defined as a set or number of courses that approximate enough of a certificate or degree program to let the institution

assess learning outcomes as if the student had completed an official program curriculum. For example, an institution might gather examples of students' work from students who have completed at least five courses in a CTE program and treat these as proxies for work assessed from official completers. Some institutions refer to these students as "nearbies"—individuals who have "nearly" completed a program.

Alternative learning venues

We know that many community college students work, sometimes at multiple jobs, as well as stop in and stop out at other postsecondary institutions along with their community college. They spend time, in other words, in a variety of learning venues. Because of these students' varying attendance patterns, except where course or program learning outcomes are very specific to the curriculum and unlikely to be attained through other learning experiences, it is difficult to claim that students' knowledge and skills come explicitly as a result of their community college experience. When students spend many years taking courses, working, and raising families, the odds increase that knowledge and skills come from a host of experiences, not just from the college. This is not a substantial issue if the college's goal is to ensure that students have defined types of knowledge and skills upon exit from a course or program, but it is a problem if the college wants to claim credit and to assert the student attained the knowledge and skills *as a result of* the courses and activities in which they engaged at the college.

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Example of Good Practice

Westmoreland County Community College (PA)

Westmoreland County Community College, in Youngwood, Pennsylvania, is a Round III[1] Achieving the Dream (AtD) community college (having entered AtD in 2006). Among their AtD strategies, they decided to address the developmental pipeline, because 65 percent of their entering students required remedial work in at least one discipline. Besides addressing things like placement test cut scores, orientation, advising, and student support services, Westmoreland discovered that the actual teaching and learning in the courses were major issues needing attention.

This college had no common course requirements for any of its courses. Faculty teaching any course—for instance, a remedial mathematics course—were given a description of the course, but it was left up to the faculty member to decide exactly what to teach in the course. In time, the faculty realized that if students were to progress to a second course or to college level math courses, they needed to guarantee that all students mastered the same course content in each course along the sequence. To assure that this would occur, they decided to create a common syllabus, a common set of outcomes, and a common exit competency test for each course in their developmental sequences (English, reading, and math). Learning outcomes assessments were based on the learning outcomes, with multiple items creating subscales for each outcome. Once the exit assessments were given, faculty came together in groups to analyze and address the results. They found that students were doing well on many outcomes but not grasping the content of many others. Faculty looked at differences among sections and realized that some faculty had established teaching best practices that could be shared with others. They began to address ways to better communicate with adjunct faculty—including weekly communiqués to address upcoming difficult teaching content—and offered them resources and support. Faculty began to discuss policy and practice issues. Over the next term, student assessment results improved by 5 to 7 percentage points, depending on the course. The outcomes assessment process spread to additional courses and began to take hold in the gatekeeper courses. Faculty at Westmoreland County Community College are finding that learning outcomes assessment is important to their understanding of what is going on with students and to informing their teaching. As byproducts, faculty members have added assignments, have spent additional time on certain topics, and have facilitated classroom discussion on course topics students considered difficult.

[1] Community colleges joined Achieving the Dream over a span of years. Round III colleges entered the Achieving the Dream initiative in 2006.

Limited professional support, especially in institutional research

Initiatives such as Achieving the Dream and the Foundations of Excellence® emphasize the importance of institutional research in providing crucial and much-needed support for using data to evaluate and improve community college programs and services as well as student achievement. At the same time, a recent study examining the ability of colleges to create a culture of evidence and to use data identified three important barriers to such institutional research efforts: lack of research capacity, including but not limited to skilled personnel; difficulties of cleaning student data; and leadership that has not made using evidence a sustained and high priority (Morest & Jenkins, 2007). The study did not focus specifically on learning outcomes assessment, but we know that part of conducting effective assessments rests on the resources a college has with which to compile and analyze data, to support faculty unfamiliar with conducting research, and to minimize the administrative burden of assessment imposed on faculty.

The NCCCRP survey found that about two thirds of respondents worked in institutional research offices with two or fewer professional staff members and virtually no part-time staff assistance. Institutional researchers were typically highly involved in assessment activities at their college: coordinating assessment (50%), being involved with the institutional effectiveness or assessment committee (63%), and being responsible for program or unit review (67%), which could include assessment. However, while the majority of institutional researchers had done course work in quantitative methods (77%) and qualitative methods (65%), far fewer had done course work in assessment (39%) or program evaluation (36%) (Table 5).

The skill needed to do effective learning assessment by faculty is often at a premium on community college campuses, making reliance on professional staff with assessment and research expertise even more important.

Table 5. NCCCRP Survey: Characteristics of institutional researchers in community colleges

	Percentage
Had a quantitative research methods course in graduate school	77%
Have less than one part-time employee in office	74%
Have master's degree	72%
Have two or less full time staff members in office	67%
Coordinate program or unit review	67%
Work on accreditation self-study	65%
Had a qualitative research methods course in graduate school	65%
Serve on IE or assessment committee	63%
Responsible for coordinating assessment	50%
Had an assessment course in graduate school	39%
Have doctoral degree	39%
Had a program evaluation course in graduate school	36%

The limited availability of institutional research support is of interest considering that community college faculty members are typically untrained in research methods. This means that the skill needed to do effective learning assessment by faculty is often at a premium on community college campuses, making reliance on professional staff with assessment and research expertise even more important.

Costs of assessment

Many community colleges are small and strapped for resources. National Center for Education Statistics (2008) data indicate that the average expenditure per FTE student in community colleges is $10,500 compared to $31,000 in public four-year colleges, making it difficult for many community colleges to fund assessment when they may be having difficulty mustering enough resources to teach growing numbers of students.

While not all assessment approaches require significant dollars, standardized instruments such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), and the ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly MAPP) can cost thousands of dollars for even a midsized college. Swing and Coogan (2010) document the not-insignificant cost of some of the most frequently used instruments. While we cannot assume that costs are the barrier to using such tests, we note that 42 percent of NILOA survey respondents indicated they do not use standardized tests of general knowledge and skills such as these. Yet commercial instruments are not the only driver of assessment costs. Assessment experts often recommend colleges to award stipends or alternative assignment time to promote faculty involvement—strategies that also require real dollars. In addition, limited funding prompts many colleges to provide few resources for institutional research offices and other positions with professional expertise regarding assessment.

Quality improvement and student learning improvement were typically selected by half of the respondents or fewer as motivating factors.

Low faculty interest and engagement in assessment

Both the NILOA and NCCCRP surveys found that engaging faculty in assessment has become a major issue in institutions of higher education. The NCCCRP survey results indicated (See Table 2) that the primary factors motivating faculty involvement came from accreditors or, to a lesser extent, from administrators or senior faculty. Quality improvement and student learning improvement were typically selected by half of the respondents or fewer as motivating factors. Table 6 below also indicates, as would be expected, that more full-time faculty (63%) than part-time faculty (14%) participated in learning outcomes assessment activities.

Table 6. NCCCRP Survey: Perceptions of status of learning outcomes assessment

	Percentage responding "agree" or "strongly agree"
Most full-time faculty are involved in student learning outcomes assessment.	63%
My institution has a well-developed process and structure for assessing student learning outcomes.	58%
My college has several years of student learning outcomes assessment data.	55%
In regard to student learning outcomes assessment, my college is well prepared for our next accreditation visit.	51%
All or most departments use results of student learning outcomes assessments to revise/improve curricula and pedagogy.	35%
The primary driver for learning outcomes assessment at my institution is our faculty.	29%
Most part-time faculty are involved in student learning outcomes assessment.	14%

Although 58 percent of survey respondents believed their institutions have a well-developed process for learning outcomes assessment and 55 percent claimed to have several years of assessment data, only 29 percent agreed that faculty members were driving student learning outcomes assessment at their community colleges. Respondents were asked on the NCCCRP survey what they perceived to be the major barriers to faculty involvement in assessment activities. The following list of barriers is rank-ordered from highest to lowest.

- Lack of time resulting from high teaching loads (community college teaching loads are typically significantly higher than at four-year colleges and universities)
- Not a priority among the faculty
- Lack of faculty knowledge and understanding of the process combined with inadequate time to participate in training

- Lack of focus or sense of purpose for assessment; did not see it mattered; was not valued
- Strong resistance from some faculty; older or tenured faculty did not see it as their job
- Lack of support or follow-through from the administration; no accountability
- Compensation and funding kept colleges from paying overloads or release time or stipends
- Coordination efforts were missing, which broke down the process
- Too many part-time faculty and no way to require their participation or to train them in learning assessment techniques
- Lack of IR or support staff and lack of a good technology infrastructure
- Unions and collective bargaining issues

Respondents were also asked about ways to increase faculty participation. The following incentives are rank-ordered from highest to lowest.

- Compensation for time spent on assessment
- Better faculty development on outcomes assessment that is offered on a recurring basis
- Accountability—include it in the annual performance review process
- Include in faculty contracts
- Obtain true administrative support, not just lip service
- Simplify the processes, which are perceived by faculty to be overly complicated
- Obtain broad-based involvement, especially of key faculty
- Make the results usable to faculty
- Provide enough staff and technical support to faculty
- Provide constant and solid communication
- Hire more full-time faculty—current numbers are inadequate to carry the load
- Relate assessment to student learning—show how it can impact learning in the classroom

Perhaps the most actionable items on these lists of barriers and incentives to faculty participation relate to the need for time, support, and training—as well the prioritization of assessment as an important element of the faculty role.

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Large numbers of adjunct faculty

According to the American Federation of Teachers (2009), "[c]ommunity colleges rely the most heavily on contingent faculty with more than 80 percent of their instructional workforce outside the tenure track and the vast majority—nearly 70 percent—teaching on a part-time basis" (p. 5). It is often difficult to persuasively explain to adjunct faculty whose courses or students are selected for assessment why assessment is being done, why their courses or students were chosen for assessment, and what they need to do. Part-time faculty members are typically expected simply to teach and to hold office hours for their students. Their pay and availability do not lend themselves to effective engagement in assessment activities. Moreover, many

adjunct faculty have tenuous connections with their colleges; they may teach at multiple institutions, may hold full-time jobs elsewhere, may be practitioners in their fields and not conversant in the lingua franca of academics, and may define their institutional responsibilities solely as teaching and meeting with students. Add to this the fact that beyond hiring and assigning adjuncts to their classes, few institutions provide professional development for, regularly evaluate, or engage many adjuncts in departmental or institutional meetings. Adjuncts often teach in the evening, when fewer peers or administrators are available for even casual conversations about assessment. Thus, communicating to adjunct faculty about assessment, let alone obtaining their active involvement, is no easy task. Yet where assessment is embedded in courses through assignments or activities that all faculty teaching a course must include, part-time or adjunct faculty will have to be involved, even if they do not take part in designing the assessment.

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Faculty collective bargaining agreements

Labor contracts for full-time and, in some institutions, part-time, faculty may create a challenge to assessment in some institutions. More than two thirds of collective bargaining units in colleges are located in community colleges and more than 40 percent of the faculty represented by unions teach at community colleges (Annunziato, 1995). This means that on many community college campuses, changes in faculty work conditions must be negotiated; the faculty job description cannot be changed overnight even if the regional accrediting agency changes its assessment requirements. Often, full-time faculty can only be evaluated at certain times in their tenure, and on specified criteria, and they cannot be made to conduct learning outcomes assessment on some campuses except through the contract negotiations process. At the same time, the national faculty union organizations are supporting efforts for assessment, understanding the value of it (Gold, Rhoades, Smith & Kuh, 2011). This national support may present a real opportunity to advance the assessment agenda on unionized campuses.

Community college governance

As the survey information above illustrated, the governance of community colleges differs widely across the country. Some colleges have strong local boards; others operate as statewide systems; others are part of state systems that are coordinated but not directly governed by state boards; and still others are part of larger community college or university systems that are regional but not statewide. The context for and factors affecting community college governance are growing even more complex, and external forces are stronger on community colleges than on institutions in the four-year sector (Amey et al., 2008). In some cases the demand for and interest in assessment comes from leaders that are engaged and boards of trustees that are asking tough questions. In other cases, demand is driven by state and/or system requirements. A number of state systems have a specific format or template for program review that requires statewide outcomes. For some colleges, it is only regional accreditation requirements that push the assessment agenda. And for other colleges it is all of the above, which can lead to a confusing array of requirements that start and also stop efforts to engage in assessment and to multiple demands to meet expectations from a variety of external stakeholders.

Guidelines and Cautions for Community Colleges

One of the overarching lessons learned from the last ten years of intensive assessment activities at community colleges across the nation is that there is no single best way of organizing, implementing, or using assessments. In this section we offer guidelines and cautions for community colleges in their assessment efforts, understanding that each institution will need to make

sense of these suggested policies, processes, and practices in terms of their local conditions and institutional culture. What we mean by this is that there must be a good fit— with adaptations of the adopted approaches, if necessary—between these suggestions and the institution's culture, resources (especially personnel), external drivers such as accreditation agencies and state boards, and competing priorities. Occasionally, a guideline may seem to contradict accepted wisdom about assessment, yet its consideration may spark discussion either affirming accepted wisdom or prompting new ways of thinking about assessment. Some of our suggestions arise from having watched colleges struggle and lose ground, generate complex and onerous processes, and complicate the entire assessment process far beyond what is necessary. We have developed these guidelines and cautions from our own experiences in our own institutions as well as from work we have done with colleges across the country, and we offer them here with respect to those engaged in this important work.

The Guidelines

Focus on the purpose. Why are we doing assessment? The goal is not to be able to say "look at our great assessment process," the goal is to be able to understand the quality of student learning, to inform teaching, and to improve institutional quality. When we take our eyes off the prize, assessment can become a time-consuming academic exercise of little importance to faculty and frontline staff. As Suskie (2009) describes, for assessment to be "truly useful" (p. 57) those involved need to understand why they are assessing student learning and what they plan to do with the assessment results.

Create a meaningful process. Hutchings (2010) argues that faculty involvement in assessment is an essential element in creating an environment where assessment results are used to make changes that help students achieve. Faculty need to be involved in determining what outcomes they value most in any given course or program. The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2005) states that "effective assessment processes are useful, cost-effective, reasonably accurate and truthful, carefully planned, and organized, systematic, and sustained" (p.4). In other words, institutions should strive to create a culture of assessment or inquiry (Banta, 2002; Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010).

Assess to learn. Some colleges have created intense, layered processes that go through multiple approval chains, that take significant time on the part of faculty, and that produce little useful information. Faculty time is critical and is becoming a rare commodity. Faculty should spend the majority of their time preparing to teach and actually teaching—not writing assessment reports and moving results up the approval chain of command. We keep adding more and more to the faculty role and removing very little. Even so, faculty must participate in the creation and implementation of an effective assessment process—because if they do not, someone else will. To engage faculty, leaders of assessment activities may want to build assessment activities into what the educators are already doing and to promote assessment as research into what students are learning (Maki, 2010).

Be realistic about faculty involvement. Conventional wisdom argues for more and more faculty involvement in assessment, and discussions about assessment often bemoan the difficulty of engaging faculty and obtaining their buy-in. Implicit in this is the assumption that effective assessment demands widespread involvement, an assumption rarely questioned or tested. Yet just as we normally use samples of students' work to assess learning outcomes at the departmental or institutional level, so too might we consider

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targeting subsets of faculty. While we realize this suggestion is counter to the widespread idea that all or nearly all faculty must be engaged in learning outcomes assessment, we think high quality, effective, and useful assessment can occur even if some faculty are only peripherally involved, if at all.

Keep it simple. Select a reasonable number of outcomes to measure, a straightforward process for assessing and collecting data, and a timeline or cycle that the institution can reasonably handle. Institutions need to remember that asking faculty to analyze assessments in the classroom is not asking them to conduct empirical research. The process should reflect a higher education environment where there is no such thing as "random" and where principles learned in graduate level assessment courses cannot always be followed. Many faculty are already doing some form of assessment; this is part of their job. Allow them to use common classroom tools without subjecting them to overly rigorous measures of validity, reliability, sensitivity, and objectivity.

The absence of the perfect measure should never keep us from selecting a "good enough" measure.

Supply professional and logistical support. This can be in the form of website support, templates, and assistance with focus groups and survey development. The more that can be done to assist faculty and staff with the assessment process, the better the results. Creating a committee that assumes some of the responsibility for the process can be very helpful to colleges with competing priorities and small numbers of staff in the institutional effectiveness or institutional research office.

Provide recurring professional development. Never assume that your faculty understand and are able to establish and measure learning outcomes without assistance. Similarly, never assume that they cannot. Most faculty fall somewhere in the middle and could use basic training on working through the process of defining, prioritizing, and assessing outcomes. Remember that few if any faculty or staff have formal training in this area (Suskie, 2009). Providing a working session with some hands-on time for faculty groups is very helpful.

Recognize that assessment data are, at best, one and only one source of evidence about institutional effectiveness in facilitating student success. Data on student completion and retention, academic preparedness, and a host of other measures are equally critical in looking at the impact of the institution on the student. Maki (2010) recommends multiple sources of data as part of the learning assessment activity.

Emphasize analysis and use of results above all else. The requirements of the six regional accrediting agencies transparently convey assessment's number-one priority: using the results to improve programs and services for students. Suskie (2009) and Walvoord (2010) stress the importance of this as well. Some colleges have created assessment follow-up reports, so that faculty and staff are required to follow through on any strategies for improvement they identified. In this way, they have created ongoing engagement with assessment, one of the "Characteristics of Effective Outcomes Assessment" that Banta and associates (1993; 2002; Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009) have advanced for nearly 20 years.

Acknowledge that assessment is messy, imperfect, and always incomplete. The absence of the perfect measure should never keep us from selecting a "good enough" measure. Community college environments vary widely and are affected by many uncontrollable factors that impact student outcomes. Even the best assessment processes cannot account for all the variance in student skills, life situations, community economic conditions, and statewide issues.

Celebrate good work. Find ways to recognize those faculty, administrators, and staff that have used assessment results to improve the learning and student support environment on campus. Sponsor professional development sessions that give faculty members an opportunity to share their assessment approaches and results. Allocate institutional resources to programmatic changes that are data-driven and derived from quality assessment practices undertaken on campus. Use assessment results as high-quality proof of needs within programs, and allocate program budgets accordingly.

The Cautions

The progress made in assessment in community colleges is varied and depends on many factors both internal and external to the institution. We hypothesize that colleges in regions where accrediting agencies have demanded attention to learning outcomes for decades have made somewhat more progress than colleges in regions just now implementing demands for institutional effectiveness and, therefore, for assessment. No national data or commonly accepted measures yet exist to empirically assess assessment, however, and in that light, we would also offer the following cautions.

Do not attempt a "one size fits all" model. Colleges often think they can borrow outcomes from another college or create a set of institutional outcomes and make everyone measure those in their courses. Faculty should begin with this question: "What knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values do we want students to get from this course or program?" The answer to that question directs the assessment process. Having some general outcomes (writing, speaking, critical thinking, etc.) and asking faculty to show how they are improving those skills in their classroom is fine, but try not to limit faculty to a finite set of outcomes created by a committee. As Suskie (2009) and others (McPhail, 2005; Nichols & Nichols, 2000) suggest, assessment should be aligned with an institution's mission and goals. Therefore, the outcomes and how they are assessed should mirror the institutional goals.

Do not select the assessment tool before determining the intended outcomes. Some colleges decide that to measure outcomes in general education courses they are going to use a certain standardized test—often because it is much easier to purchase a standardized test, use the agency procedures, mail in the test for analysis, and receive a college report than to work with faculty collecting embedded assessments in the classroom. Colleges often do not ask the question, "Does this test measure what we value and are our faculty teaching what we value in their classrooms?" Assessment should always be driven by what faculty and the institution want students to learn in any given course or program (Banta, 2002; Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010). Assessment has much greater value if used to inform and improve a college's teaching, learning, programs, and services than if used to compare the college with other colleges using the same standardized test.

Do not let administration or nonfaculty entities drive assessment. Effective assessment can only be driven by frontline staff—that is, those who work with and understand students. All others assist and support the process. Faculty often resist when someone in authority or nonfaculty tells them what to do in the faculty's academic context. A good administrator facilitates faculty engagement and brings resources to the table to help faculty develop and to implement the process they value.

Be careful about making learning outcomes assessment one person's job. Giving one person the job of overseeing assessment—for example, as Director of institutional Effectiveness or Coordinator of Learning Outcomes Assessment—gives faculty and frontline staff the impression that "this is not my job." Also, be realistic about the relative cost and value of involving large

Colleges often do not ask the question, "Does this test measure what we value and are our faculty teaching what we value in their classrooms?"

numbers of faculty. Community college faculty members teach heavy loads (12–24 credit hours per term) and often teach in multiple sites across large geographic districts. Many departments employ large numbers of adjunct faculty. Getting everyone involved in assessment is expensive, logistically difficult, and probably unnecessary. A team of faculty can work on learning outcomes assessment and obtain needed feedback electronically from other faculty. A random selection of courses can be assessed, paying attention to a representative sample of sections (including day, night, and distance education sections.)

Conclusion

External and internal forces are shaping a growing focus on student learning outcomes in community colleges across the country. While initially the assessment agenda may have been driven by external governmental entities and accreditors (perhaps still the case in many colleges), growing numbers of community colleges are focusing on assessment because they recognize the need to improve progression and retention of their students and because they accept the mandate to prepare students well for the workforce, for transfer, and for the demands of educated citizenship. While effective assessment has proven to have many challenges, these can no longer serve as excuses for not measuring what we do in our community colleges. This paper summarizes results from two recent surveys to give a sense of the status of assessment in community colleges, discusses a number of the special challenges that community colleges face, provides examples from some community colleges of good practice in assessment, and shares the authors' guidance and cautions for community colleges to consider in moving the assessment agenda forward. To fully become the student-centered institutions that their missions require them to be, community colleges must honestly and openly assess the student learning they produce. Moreover, community colleges must use the information obtained through those assessments for institutional improvement and regular, ongoing monitoring of institutional performance.

Growing numbers of community colleges are focusing on assessment because they recognize the need to improve progression and retention of their students and because they accept the mandate to prepare students well for the workforce, for transfer, and for the demands of educated citizenship.

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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.

NILOA Occasional Paper Series

NILOA Occasional Papers are commissioned to examine contemporary issues that will inform the academic community of the current state-of-the art of assessing learning outcomes in American higher education. The authors are asked to write for a general audience in order to provide comprehensive, accurate information about how institutions and other organizations can become more proficient at assessing and reporting student learning outcomes for the purposes of improving student learning and responsibly fulfilling expectations for transparency and accountability to policy makers and other external audiences.

Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to sprovez2@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 web site went live on February 11, 2009. 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 2009 to 2010. He also served as president of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.
- Peter Ewell joined NILOA as a senior scholar in November 2009.

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