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Changing Institutional Culture to Promote Assessment of Higher Learning

Richard H. Hersh and Richard P. Keeling



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Abstract

While a national chorus of criticism reproaches the academy for its high costs, low graduation rates, lack of accountability, administrative bloat, and faculty inefficiency, a more fundamental problem looms: how to address higher education's shortfall in higher learning. To say it plainly: in both quantity and quality, college learning is inadequate. The root cause of this learning crisis is that at most institutions the campus culture itself does not prioritize and foster transformative learning. The purpose of this paper is to help realign the assessment conversation by arguing for institutional culture change that puts higher learning first and simultaneously embraces systemic assessment as a prerequisite of and central condition for a culture in which learning is the priority. First, we question the efficacy of current attempts to create "cultures of assessment" in institutions lacking a primary focus on higher learning. Second, we contend that, for too many students, learning remains incoherent due to the institutional disregard of the cumulative and collective nature of higher learning. Third, we argue that pervasive assessment is a necessary condition for providing the appropriate and timely feedback to students and faculty required for benchmarking individual student and institutional excellence. Finally, we offer our perspective on "what must be done" to build a culture of learning with assessment.

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While a national chorus of criticism reproaches the academy for its high costs, low graduation rates, lack of accountability, administrative bloat, and faculty inefficiency, a more fundamental problem looms: how to address higher education's shortfall in higher learning. To say it plainly: in both quantity and quality, college learning is inadequate. The root cause of this learning crisis is that at most institutions the campus culture itself does not prioritize and foster transformative learning.

The purpose of this paper is to help realign the assessment conversation by arguing for institutional culture change that puts higher learning first and simultaneously embraces systemic assessment as a prerequisite and central condition for a culture in which learning is the priority. First, we question the efficacy, much less the utility, of current attempts to create “cultures of assessment” in institutions lacking a primary focus on higher learning. Second, we contend that, for too many students, learning remains incoherent due to the institutional disregard of the cumulative and collective nature of higher learning. Third, we argue that pervasive assessment is a necessary condition for providing appropriate and timely feedback to students and faculty required for benchmarking individual student and institutional excellence. Finally, we offer our perspective on “what must be done” to build a culture of learning with assessment.

The Inadequate Culture of Learning in the Cultures of Assessment

In response to calls to lower costs and improve access, retention, and graduation rates, much has been said in the last decade about the need to create cultures of evidence from which would flow better data and greater institutional accountability. Many institutions, responding to accreditors, state demands, and requests from their voluntary institutional peer associations, have begun such development. But those assessment efforts to date have mostly been transactional and have brought little systematic or systemic change. Too often, colleges and universities grudgingly and superficially answer external calls for accountability by conducting alumni satisfaction surveys; administering the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), or Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) to samples of their students; or creating a few pockets of portfolio assessment—missing the more fundamental issue: too little learning. Only by taking learning seriously can we understand the necessity of good assessment and how it can and should support learning. The first step is for faculty, administration, staff, and trustees to acknowledge the existence of a higher learning deficit and to commit to cultural change for learning and assessment.

Too many students graduate underprepared to think critically and creatively, speak and write cogently and clearly, solve problems, comprehend complex issues, accept responsibility and accountability, consider the perspective of others, or meet the expectations of employers. In their 2010 book *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Arum and Roksa provide evidence that most students do not make statistically significant gains in critical thinking, problem solving, analytical reasoning, and written communication skills while in college. Their conclusions are corroborated by

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data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (Blaich, 2007), and earlier research from the American Institutes for Research (2006) and the National Center for Education Statistics (2007). These sources point out that the gap between what colleges and universities promise and what they deliver has become a chasm. These data reinforce conclusions in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U) 2002 landmark study, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, regarding the unsatisfactory nature of learning in college and the academy's culpability in this. That report summed up the urgency of the situation this way: "...even as college attendance is rising, the performance of too many students is faltering... [College] is a revolving door for millions of students while the college years are poorly spent by many others" (p. vii).

How did we get here? At the heart of the matter is institutional culture—the constellation of an institution's norms, beliefs, expectations, standards, priorities, reward systems, and structural organization. While the wider society's overriding focus on college primarily as preparation for employment has undermined the value of the bachelor's degree, the academy itself is culpable by having adopted an increasingly customer-based ethic, lowering its expectations and standards for a rigorous liberal education, and narrowing its focus to the career-only preparation and "professional training" demanded by student and parent "customers" (Delbanco, 2012).

Matriculating students increasingly find their teachers are contingent or adjunct faculty, who, while often highly qualified, are not given the time, professional respect, or compensation necessary to make higher learning happen. The remaining tenure-track faculty members, influenced predominantly by a research and scholarship reward model and/or burdened by heavy class loads, have few incentives or too little time to engage seriously and meaningfully with undergraduates, improve their teaching, or measure what their students are learning (June, 2012). Students' best efforts fall victim not only to lowered expectations and standards and grade inflation, but also to smorgasbord-style curricula, large lecture classes, and institutions' desire to retain students to generate revenue within tight budgets.

Teaching and learning have been devalued, insidiously, with institutional accountability and branding that focuses not on learning but rather emphasizes inadequate metrics and spurious symbols of quality, retention and graduation rates to feed shifting political demands, magazine rankings based on data the academy voluntarily supplies that do not capture the quality or quantity of learning, and always the quest for bigger and better facilities. These metrics, plus drives to increase revenue via larger enrollments, athletic victories, business ventures, and research grants have replaced learning as the academy's primary touchstone for making decisions (Kirp, 2003). None of this makes for higher learning.

The absence in higher education of a serious culture of teaching and learning comes at a time when increased access and higher graduation rates are rightfully national and state priorities. The potentially positive results of these priorities are negated, however, when higher education's culture sends all the wrong signals to both students and faculty. Without high academic expectations and standards challenging students to exceed their own expectations, too much time is wasted and peer norms that are less demanding, less intellectual, and less respectful become dominant. Students regulate their performance by the high or low expectations of them. Under these conditions it becomes possible—even likely—to be in good academic standing, stay in school, and earn a baccalaureate degree with little evidence of knowledge or skill mastery. With such learning, a degree holds a hollow promise.

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The Coherence Problem and the Nature of Higher Learning

A central goal of higher education is to strengthen students' explanatory capabilities—to increase their understanding of the world's complexity rather than to reduce that complexity to fit ideology and/or naïve understanding—by helping students to construct, rather than simply to receive, coherent meanings across encounters with different disciplines, people, ideas, languages, and perspectives. Undermining this goal is a long-held cultural assumption that students are both solely capable of and also solely responsible for comprehending such complexity and creating coherence for themselves across the entirety of their college experience. The prevailing academic curricular and teaching model is one of credit hours per course, founded on the presumption that what needs to be learned ought to be packaged into one or two courses (such as freshman composition) or into a series of courses in a major or minor. Each course, or series of courses, is presumed to stand alone, signifying a module of learning achievement. That module—even if it comprises the requirements for a minor or major—is too often isolated, disconnected from other learning that happens in that semester, year, or four years.

This system conveys to students and teachers alike that learning occurs best when students take individual courses and stack them up, like building blocks—as if learning grows by piling courses higher. Worse, incoherence is reinforced, and tacitly endorsed, by assessment that asks students to demonstrate, but only for a moment, mastery in a discrete block of learning rather than to provide evidence throughout college of their ability to integrate learning comprehensively and coherently. No mortar connects these blocks. They topple easily. The learning that occurs is both disconnected and ephemeral. Passing courses and accumulating enough credits to graduate becomes the goal.

With such disconnection, incoherent learning is the norm. Colleges and universities have few policies and practices that promote the integration of learning from course to course, let alone between the classroom and students' other learning experiences. The autonomy of the disciplines, the lack of true investment by the entire faculty in general education, the absence of faculty consensus about what students should learn across the curriculum, the failure to intentionally integrate learning outside the classroom, the weakness of academic advising, and an assessment system that rigidly rejects linking and applying learning across experiences—all of these combine to undermine coherence in students' learning. The consequence of the working assumption that constructing coherence among individual courses and learning experiences is the student's responsibility alone—along with not promoting and ensuring integrated learning—leaves too much learning to chance. Moreover, the core higher learning outcomes proffered by higher education as taking place within and across general education, majors, and minors (e.g., critical thinking, effective written and oral communication, using knowledge to solve problems, ethical development) are not attained in any one or two required courses or random out-of-classroom learning experiences. One or two freshman writing seminars cannot produce competent writers. A required general education course or even a few courses in the major with critical thinking requirements cannot teach someone how to evaluate the credibility of information and solve problems.

Success in achieving core higher learning outcomes requires a different approach—one that supports students' curiosity, creativity, and intellectual development by intentionally fostering coherence in their educational experience. The significant outcomes of higher learning are best accomplished cumulatively—their achievement requires far more instruction, practice, assessment, and feedback than is provided, or expected, within single courses or other isolated learning experiences. Learning how to think and write creatively, for example, are skills optimally learned and strengthened over

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the span of the entire undergraduate program. These objectives must be intentionally articulated, planned around, and assessed by faculty and staff across all courses and programs. Writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives, discussed below, exemplify the application of this idea, but this concept can be carried much further to include across-the-curriculum approaches to critical thinking, problem solving, quantitative reasoning, and ethical development.

We do not mean to suggest that core outcomes in critical thinking, problem solving, quantitative reasoning, and ethical development are content free. One has to think, speak, and write about something. Subject-matter expertise is a necessary and contextual condition, but knowledge acquisition for use within a discipline alone is not sufficient. Higher learning entails the ability to deploy knowledge to inform one's thinking, writing, or discourse in the context of different disciplines. While disciplinary competence necessarily differs across courses and programs, the core work of higher learning becomes cumulative when all coursework shares and reinforces common higher learning outcomes, increasing each year in complexity, adequacy, and sophistication. For example, a well-written paper in history that offers a critical analysis of the causes of World War I would demonstrate standards in critical thinking and effective writing similar to those of very different papers describing the threats to the preservation of biodiversity or the emergence of the H5N1 influenza virus.

A cumulative approach to higher learning requires that as students progress through their college careers they are taught to an increasingly higher standard of competence in all courses and programs—as suggested, for example, by the Degree Qualifications Profile (Lumina Foundation, 2011). An undergraduate education that is intentionally cumulative is far more integrative, stable, and coherent. This is especially challenging, admittedly, given the increasing number of students who now transfer once or twice to other institutions, but this reality all the more necessitates that institutions publicly articulate their expectations, standards, and means of assessment. Ultimately, the result should be radically different from the commonplace and incoherent tangle of learning that inevitably develops when students are left to make sense of it all alone.

The challenge of cumulative learning is difficult enough and made even more so in that it requires faculty to come together collectively to agree on which outcomes, expectations, and standards they share, endorse, and reinforce throughout their various courses and programs. This demands a different institutional culture of learning in which faculty and staff take account of all of the ways and places in which learning occurs to collaboratively articulate a progressive, cumulative perspective for designing, implementing, and assessing students' learning in all of the institution's educational programs. Yet there is a caveat. The conditions for an authentically congenial faculty—which is necessary to reach agreement on and commitment to common learning outcomes, expectations, and standards—have become more difficult to achieve with the push for more and more scholarship, concern for job security, and the advent of a contingent teaching majority usually treated as second-class colleagues. Here is where assessment plays a key role in aiding culture change for learning. Systemic, cumulative, formative, and summative learning assessment powerfully signals and reinforces the institution's learning expectations and standards, in turn, requires faculty, administration, and staff consensus on what they mean by cumulative and coherent learning matched to appropriate assessment strategies.

Assessment as a Form of Teaching and Learning

To put student learning at the top of each institution's priorities logically demands that institutions know the extent to which learning is occurring by establishing and sustaining a conscientious, diligent, and rigorous program of learning assessment. In such a culture, faculty and students understand

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that assessment usefully connects and reinforces teaching and learning. Transparency, however, is insufficient; formal and informal assessment must be far more frequent and formative than is currently the norm. Too much learning assessment in our colleges and universities is summative at the course level. Feedback is often too little and too late (Metcalf & Kornell, 2007), giving students little opportunity to engage with professors, insufficient time to set misunderstandings straight, and inadequate foundational knowledge upon which to build more advanced learning. Some students fail to realize how poor their performance has been or how inadequate their understanding is of concepts or skills until there is no time left and little reason to change. Motivated mostly by the desire to complete enough courses on their way to a degree rather than by any true engagement with learning—an attitude we reinforce in how we structure higher learning—too many students check their grades at the end of the semester and rarely receive or review comments on their papers or final exams. Assessment that rarely asks students to integrate learning across courses within and across years serves as a powerful denial of the cumulative and collective nature of higher learning itself. It is naive to think that a one-off capstone seminar paper or the rarely required senior thesis does justice to integrative learning and the need for multiple opportunities for its assessment.

The type of assessment used may also convey confusion about expectations and standards. Too often, learning assessments in college are norm referenced rather than criterion referenced, based on faculty-determined standards of acceptable student work. Norm-referenced assessment invites comparisons with the performance of other students in a course, and within this paradigm a student's work will “look” better or worse depending on how other students performed. When the only “standards” are the comparative performance of peers, expectations cannot be clearly articulated and explained at the beginning of a course—so grades will not be based on the achievement of publicly defined learning goals, regardless of whether some, most, or all of those goals are accomplished. How can a student respect and achieve the highest levels of mastery if standards appear to be arbitrary and based on the chance distribution of peer talent, attention, and motivation?

Consider the assessments of learning among surgeons, pilots, and pharmacists who are still in training. Neither learning nor its assessment is left to chance. We insist on high, clear, and well-documented standards for judging expertise in these cases; there are no secrets about what is expected or how success at meeting those expectations will be measured. Nor is it assumed that these students get one shot at proving their achievement of the learning that is required. Practice, lots of it, and feedback in the context of clear and high standards are part of the assessment regime. Measurement is an inextricable part of instruction and advancement, not only through objective tests but also through simulations, comprehensive written and oral examinations, and proofs of performance during as well as at the end of instruction. Assessment is summative as well and comprises the integrated, cumulative results of learning keyed to high levels of performance. None of us would consider flying with a pilot not fully trained and tested on takeoffs and landings, nor would we willingly undergo an operation performed by a surgeon not adequately trained and certified by an examining board or a root canal performed by an uncertified endodontist.

Understanding the difference between first-draft quality and high-level mastery is learned through much experience and feedback. Done well, assessment supports a liberating education helping students learn skills in self-assessment by enabling them to critique the quality of their own performance as measured against those standards. Such assessments are competency/standards-based; students do not move to the next level of learning without clearly demonstrating at least satisfactory performance at the previous level. These assessments are also cumulative in that prior learning is purposely used as the basis for continued growth. Alverno College is an often-mentioned good example in which a competency-based, cumulative learning system is in operation throughout the institution (Mentkowski & Associates, 2000). Other colleges and universities have created less comprehensive versions. Carleton College (n.d.), for example,

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has instituted a writing portfolio requirement in which its students must demonstrate a faculty-constructed, standards-based writing proficiency before they can be officially admitted to their junior year. Similarly, Washington State University (n.d.) requires all of its students to pass a writing portfolio requirement both for entrance into the major and for graduation.

What Must Be Done

Rigorous assessment in the service of teaching and learning is central to an institution's commitment to learning as its highest priority. Faculty and professional staff will adopt it if three conditions prevail:

1. It helps them do their best work;
2. It improves student outcomes; and
3. It is a rewarded activity.

Too often, assessment is orphaned to the province of a small group of dedicated faculty and staff, isolated from the mainstream, who understand assessment's benefits and are willing to engage its costs. When this happens, inevitably, the consequences are exhaustion, disenchantment, and frustration. Instead, educators should support each other—and the institution should support all of them—in a systemic, institution-wide effort to make higher learning and its assessment a high priority. In such a culture, students rise to the occasion. They accommodate higher expectations and standards, and they appreciate appropriate and timely assessment when they know this is the institution's cultural norm. How quickly and willingly students adjust to culture change is evident in their experiences with community service, a semester abroad, a new coach, or simply in accommodating to the microcultural changes they encounter in different courses.

What does an institution of higher education do differently with learning assessment when learning comes first? What are the new dimensions of an institutional culture in which assessment has been made central? How differently do students experience learning in such a culture? What do we look for when we search such an institutional culture for signs of change? To be clear, we acknowledge that culture change is hard work. Indeed, an entire literature is devoted to the subject, but that is a topic for another occasional paper. Suffice it to say culture change is still largely in the purview of each campus. No matter how difficult the process, we believe the academy is capable of such reform and would be best served in controlling its own destiny. In this spirit, we list here elements of what could be observed as evidence suggesting reform in progress. While this is not intended as a linear, sequential, or exhaustive list—and while the pace, outcomes, and evidence of culture change at each institution will vary—after substantive culture change has begun and is progressing, we might fairly expect to see all or most of the following:

- *Learning impact statements.* As part of every proposal for new or directed resources, administrators, faculty, or staff have specified the anticipated effects of the proposed additions or changes on the quantity and quality of student learning—and have provided evidence to support their proposal.
- *Institutional consensus on student learning goals.* All faculty and professional staff have thought, met, talked, and reached strong consensus about the desired learning goals for the whole college or university, and have communicated those goals to all students and to every educator who teaches, at any level, inside or outside the classroom.

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This means the major divisions and departments of an institution have defined their own learning outcomes and standards, nested within and linked to the overall institutional outcomes and standards, and have communicated to students, through syllabi, descriptions of assignments, etc., what they are expected to learn and the standards against which their achievement of those outcomes will be measured and reported.

- *Revised and linked general education.* To promote intentional, coherent, and cumulative learning, the college's program of general education has been revamped—or is under review in anticipation of renewal—to reflect the consensus of the faculty and their recognition that general education goals are shared by the various disciplines and link with and continue through the majors. Similarly, core courses, which have been intentionally and coherently aligned with the institution's overall desired student learning outcomes, have replaced distribution requirements as an organizing structure. (The persistence of distribution requirements in general education is evidence of faculty resistance to collective agreement.)
- *Elevated expectations and support for students.* There are higher levels of both expectations and support for students, who, responding to greatly improved and more comprehensive advising (an important form of teaching) and continuous feedback within and across courses, are making coherent, purposeful decisions about academic programs, courses, out-of-classroom learning experiences, internships, community service commitments, and, eventually, career options.
- *Rigorous and comprehensive assessment of student learning.* Instructional staff and their colleagues in student affairs routinely assess the quality and quantity of student learning in learning experiences expected to contribute to the institution's stated learning goals, inside and outside the classroom, in both formative and summative ways. Cumulative assessments of student learning in general education (e.g., portfolio assessment, comprehensive exams), minors and majors, and across the undergraduate experience (e.g., capstone courses, projects, theses), mapped against desired institutional student learning goals, are completed regularly.
- *Student learning as one basis for faculty and staff evaluation.* Evidence of student learning is routinely used in the evaluation of both faculty and staff; in the preparation of institutional data to be shared with external parties, including accreditors, the press and the media; and in the development of marketing, branding, and communications messages about the institution and its value to students and parents.
- *Purposeful closing of the assessment loop.* Members of the faculty and staff have definitively “closed the loop” in the assessment process, using the data obtained by measuring student learning to plan, complete, and deploy improvements in educational programs and to reassess learning after improvements are made.

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- *Learning-oriented promotion and tenure criteria.* Criteria for reappointment, promotion, and tenure of faculty, emphasizing the quality of teaching and learning attributable to a faculty member's efforts, use direct, authentic assessments of student learning—in place of institutional satisfaction surveys—as evidence of teaching effectiveness.
- *Instructional role for all faculty.* Faculty members in all categories (tenured, tenure track, non-tenure track, and contingent) are assigned teaching responsibilities based on the learning needs of students and the qualifications of the faculty member, and students are expected to meet and work with senior faculty in their first year, long before declaring a major. That means that tenured faculty also are expected to teach and work with first-year students as a way of demonstrating the full faculty's commitment to the institution's learning outcomes.
- *Continuous faculty development.* The institution provides strong support for faculty development in pedagogy, learning, and the assessment of learning, according to professional development priorities identified in routine needs assessments, as well as in the form of peer support, group learning, formal workshops, and individual coaching by expert colleagues.
- *Tighter coupling of academic and student affairs.* There is substantial evidence of collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs, for example, in the creation of learning communities, intentional linking of classroom and experiential learning activities, integration of community service learning with course content, close and purposeful connections among all forms of advising, and co-participation by faculty and student affairs professional staff in first-year seminars and orientation.
- *Benchmarking learning within and across peer institutions.* The academy prides itself in its constant striving for excellence through constructive peer critique and institutional renewal. In that spirit, faculty, staff, administration, and trustees are offered data from continuous, longitudinal institutional research comparing student learning within and across departments and peer institutions and benchmarking the institution's expectations, standards, outcomes, as well as the quality and quantity of assessment itself.

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Conclusion

All colleges and universities state that learning is their central concern, yet neither learning nor transparent assessment is the central topic of campus conversations. When assessments do take place, they too often occur in reaction to the demands of an upcoming accreditation visit; the appearance of a new president, provost or dean; a demand by the state; a catalytic grant by the government and/or foundation; or a financial crisis. This reactive mode is perilous, because it creates a vacuum begging to be filled by a “No-Child-Left-Behind” mandate, for-profit enterprises, and inexorable market forces searching only for “the best educational value.” Having lost patience waiting for academic leadership to cut costs, the nation demands clearer evidence of higher learning. The culture change we espouse includes

significantly higher expectations and standards, far greater student effort, an incentive and reward system focused on learning, and, at its core, extensive learning assessment that is timely, formative, summative, standards based, and transparent. Such assessment must reflect the institution's collective commitment to the cumulative nature of higher learning and the understanding that assessment—done well—promotes learning.

What the academy has been missing, however, is the will to act boldly in making higher learning and its assessment the priority. This deficiency is a function of a combination of inadequate graduate training, too much focus on the scholarship and research prize, a habit of not taking learning and its assessment seriously, and perhaps a lurking fear of what we will see when we look in the learning assessment mirror. Changing culture is not easy and requires strong, sustained, shared leadership by administration and faculty. Happily, the platform for such change already exists. It is the academy that has produced the research informing critiques of its teaching and learning inadequacies, offering pathways to improve learning and providing powerful evidence that appropriate and timely assessment is a necessary condition for higher learning. Ultimately, colleges and universities possess key and necessary attributes for change—the values and norms supporting open discourse, reflective critique, conservation and deconstruction of knowledge, and the impulse to keep pushing the boundaries of excellence. That quest for excellence now requires institutional cultural commitment to improve learning and assessment to support the endeavor.

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Portions of this paper originally appeared in or were adapted from *We're Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education*, by R. P. Keeling and R. H. Hersh, 2012, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

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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 njankow2@illinois.edu.



About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website went live on February 11, 2009.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.
- Peter Ewell joined NILOA as a senior scholar in November 2009.

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

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