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**Most colleges are learning what students are learning**

Contrary to what many observers think, findings from a national study released today show that gathering information about what undergraduates learn during their studies is commonplace in most US colleges and universities. However, the results are not always used and reported in ways that could improve student accomplishment and inform the public about institutional performance.

Most institutions use multiple approaches to measure what happens to students during college in addition to assigning grades, with accreditation being the primary driver of such assessments. For example, most all colleges and universities (92%) use at least one assessment approach with samples of students intended to represent institutional performance; two thirds of all schools use three or more such approaches. And about 40% of all campuses use some standardized measure of general knowledge and skills which can be used to compare student performance across different institutions.

The 2009 report from the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) is based on information from more than 1,500 regionally accredited degree-granting institutions in the U.S. The NILOA study, titled "*More Than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education*," summarizes what colleges and universities are doing to measure student learning.

"The results are cause for cautious optimism, given that most colleges and universities are now using different approaches to determine how well students are performing in ways that are consistent with their missions," says George Kuh, the NILOA director and professor of higher education at Indiana University." For example, community colleges tend to use general knowledge assessments and other measures to determine if students have work-place skills and are ready for upper-level course work. In contrast, for-profit schools use a variety of approaches to demonstrate overall institutional performance in terms of student accomplishment, perhaps because of a greater need to demonstrate their educational quality.

The NILOA study is the first systematic attempt in more than a decade to find out what colleges and universities are doing to assess student learning and how they are using the results. The questions posed to chief academic officers focused on four key areas:

- The learning outcomes your institution measures,
- How you assess these outcomes and use the results,
- The major factors prompting assessment at your institution, and
- What is needed to advance learning outcomes assessment at your institution.

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According to Molly Broad, president of the American Council of Education, “Now, more than ever, we must understand how well our students are learning so we can better target efforts to help students succeed.” David Shulenburg, vice president for academic affairs of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, says “NILOA is lifting the veil on the crucial matter of learning outcomes measurement and will help us better document and improve student learning.”

Other key findings from the study are:

- The most common uses of student learning outcomes data are for preparing for accreditation and responding to calls for accountability.
- Student outcomes information is least often used for evaluating faculty for promotion or for merit pay increases.
- Four fifths of all schools have one or more departments using portfolios of student work to assess outcomes linked to a specific program of study.
- The most selective colleges and universities collect information at rates comparable to their less selective counterparts, but tend not to use it as often.
- The greatest needs to advance student learning outcomes assessment are more faculty engagement followed by more assessment expertise.
- Most institutions conduct learning outcomes assessment on a shoestring, and one fifth of all institutions devote less than one person to the activity.
- No wonder that about half of all provosts said more resources are needed to do learning outcomes assessment better.

Carol Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, is heartened that “so many institutions are assessing students’ work with authentic measures such as portfolios as they provide the best evidence of what students can actually do with their education.”

According to Stanley Ikenberry, a NILOA researcher and University of Illinois professor and interim president, “Colleges and universities must do more to use student outcomes assessment results to guide improvement in teaching and learning and to inform the public about institutional effectiveness. A key next step is to discover more about what is going on at the program level where faculty directly affect student learning.”

The NILOA project is a collaborative effort between Indiana University, University of Illinois, and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, and supported by grants from Lumina Foundation for Education, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and Teagle Foundation.

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The NILOA Report, “*More Than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education*,” may be retrieved in pdf form at <http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/NILOAsurveyresults09.htm>. For more information, contact Staci Provezis, [sprovez2@illinois.edu](mailto:sprovez2@illinois.edu). NILOA web site: [www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org).