National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Making Student Learning Evidence Transparent: The State of the Art

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Full Report

learningoutcomesassessment.org

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The structure of this report is such that it can be read in its entirety or each section may be read individually. This Table of Contents provides brief summaries of each of the sections.

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-George Kuh and Stan Ikenberry

Foreword

Monitoring Transparency in Higher Education

The assessment bandwagon has been rolling for decades. But it wasn't until six years ago when U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings impaneled the National Commission on the Future of Higher Education that outcomes assessment caught the attention of the popular media as well as a critical mass of policy makers and mainstream college and university leaders. The Commission proposed six sweeping recommendations, one of which was to create a "consumer-friendly information database" so that prospective students ostensibly could find answers to the kinds of questions one would ask when making a major purchase:

- How much does it cost?
- How do I finance the purchase?
- How good is this "product" relative to others?
- What do the performance data show?

This last topic – providing comparable evidence of performance – hadn't gotten much traction, even among those who were proponents of outcomes assessment. But it sure got a spike in attention as a result of the Commission's bully pulpit.

Since that time, several leading institutional membership organizations developed templates for their member colleges and universities to publicly report the activities and evidence on their campus related to student academic attainment. Balancing the legitimate demands of public interest and institutional autonomy, the objective was to test the appropriate and acceptable applications of transparency efforts and ameliorate problematic aspects of making data public. By all accounts, these initial steps seem to have been at least modestly successful.

For example, at this point almost 300 universities have agreed to experiment with the College Portrait segment of the *Voluntary System of Accountability* championed by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and American Association of State Colleges and Universities. In the independent sector, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities initiated the *University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN)*. NAICU also recently launched another effort in cooperation with the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), *Building Blocks to 2020*, which is a searchable web database that includes a variety of measures including persistence and graduate rates and results from such measures as student surveys and standardized tests. The most recent transparency template to appear is the *Voluntary Framework of Accountability* being tested by the Association of American Community Colleges with institutions in that sector.

While NILOA's national surveys suggest the attention devoted to assessing student attainment continues to grow, how are campuses sharing this information with the wider world? To what degree have colleges and universities been willing to report publicly and share what they are doing and learning?

These are the questions to which this set of NILOA reports speaks. The work represents a series of studies that NILOA staff, led by Staci Provezis and Natasha Jankowski conducted over the past couple of years, and may be the most comprehensive examination yet of institutional transparency in terms of student learning outcomes and the assessment activities.

Foreword continued

The study is based on a well-designed web scan approach whereby the publicly accessible areas of college and university websites were scoured for mentions of student learning outcomes assessment and the evidence such efforts yielded along with examples of how the data were used. One of the more informative findings is that on our national surveys campuses report more assessment activity going on than Staci, Natasha, and their colleagues could find on the website.

These reports can be read as one package or separately as time and interest permit. What you will find from these analyses, the Featured Website page on the NILOA website (see http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/featured-websites), and the examples of institutions using the NILOA Transparency Framework (see https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/ourwork/transparency-framework/) is that some colleges and universities are well out in front of the pack in terms of sharing information on student learning. Still, higher education has a distance to go to adequately communicate to the several interested parties the myriad activities underway at the class, program, and institutional levels. Moreover, we have a lot to learn about how to make this wealth of information understandable and meaningful to students, parents and policy makers. Learning what students know and can do and using that evidence to make wiser decisions and improve student success remain huge challenges.

Finally, taken together, these reports establish the baseline for future web scan studies. That is, these ground-breaking efforts will allow us to estimate the progress we will make down the line in addressing the transparency issue. And for that, we are grateful to the authors and the research team for their excellent work and insights.

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Section 1

Revealing Student Learning Outcomes: National Transparency Initiatives Make a Difference

Clarion calls nationwide exhort institutions of higher education to increase postsecondary credential and degree attainment while simultaneously increasing academic quality. Regional and special field accrediting groups also hold colleges accountable for the assessment of student learning and the use of that evidence for improvement. Some argue that making assessment information more widely available and readily accessible—more transparent—will enable prospective students and their families to make better informed college-going decisions and will also aid institutions in deploying their scarce resources.

No medium offers more possibilities for transparency than the Internet. Institution web pages, for example, are accessible to interested parties on and off campus. Utilizing the Internet's potential for enabling transparency, several national higher education organizations have created online templates with which member institutions can publicly present information about their students and their institution's performance. This report examines the impact of these national transparency initiatives and efforts by institutions to make student learning outcomes information available on their websites.

This report examines the impact of these national transparency initiatives and efforts by institutions to make student learning outcomes information available on their websites.

Four initiatives were the focus of this investigation: the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), Transparency By Design (TbD), and Achieving the Dream (ATD).[1] This study is part of an ongoing series of efforts undertaken by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).[2] The findings from this analysis suggest the following:

1. The majority of TbD and VSA institutions posted student learning outcomes assessment results. For the most part, institutions participating in U-CAN and ATD did not do so.
2. Institutions participating in VSA posted more examples of actual use of learning outcomes evidence than did institutions in other national transparency initiatives.
3. Institutions participating in national transparency initiatives tended to make more assessment information public than did nonparticipating institutions.
4. Public institutions showed more assessment information than did independent institutions, even those participating in a national transparency initiative.
5. Whether participating in a national transparency initiative or not, institutions that had been accredited between 2008 and 2010 were also more likely to make student learning information available.

[1] For full descriptions of each of these initiatives, see Table 1.

[2] See *Exploring the Landscape: What Institutional Websites Reveal about Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Activities,* retrievable from https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/WebScanReport.pdf

The NILOA 2010 Web Study

The NILOA 2010 Web Study sought to document the relationship between institutions participating in national transparency initiatives and disclosure of assessment information on institution websites. A team of three NILOA researchers examined 200 institution websites between July 2010 and September 2010 to answer the following questions:

1. What and how much information do institutions display on their website regarding student learning outcomes assessment?
2. To what extent do institutions show results and describe their use of the results on their institution web pages?
3. Is there a difference in learning outcomes disclosure on websites between institutions involved in national transparency initiatives and institutions not involved in those initiatives?

The sample for this web study was composed of two sets of institutions: 100 institutions participating in national transparency initiatives and 100 comparable institutions not participating in national transparency initiatives. Institutions in both groups were similar in size, control, setting, type, and regional accreditation.[3] The national transparency initiatives included the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), and Transparency by Design (TbD). Although Achieving the Dream (ATD) is not a *transparency* initiative per se, it was included in this study to get a sense of assessment activity within the two-year sector given that the Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) had not started its pilot effort until four months after the research for this study was completed. However, ATD does focus on using data to improve practices and student success through institutional change, creating a culture of evidence, and collecting data and publicizing findings on student success.[4]

Some relevant definitions used in this report include:

Results. To show results means to provide indicators of institutional performance as well as indirect and direct evidence of student learning.

- ***Performance indicator.*** An indicator of overall student performance, which may include licensure pass rates, graduation rates, placement rates, common data sets, fact books, and so on.
- ***Direct evidence of learning.*** An indicator of what students have learned in a concrete way. Direct evidence may include results of capstone experiences, portfolios, e-portfolios, standardized tests, and local tests.
- ***Indirect evidence of learning.*** An indicator that represents or approximates what students have learned, without providing a concrete demonstration of that learning. Indirect evidence may include results of national student surveys, local student surveys, graduating student surveys, alumni surveys, and other similar instruments.

National Transparency Initiatives

Each of the voluntary transparency initiatives asks its member institutions to use a common web-based reporting template to publicly display information. Table 1 summarizes the basic features of each transparency initiative.

Each of the voluntary transparency initiatives asks its member institutions to use a common web-based reporting template to publicly display information.

[3] For additional information on the study design and sampling, see Appendix A.
[4] Of the ATD institutions examined in this study, ten were selected to participate as pilot colleges for the VFA and an additional eight were part of the study.

Table 1. Overview of National Transparency Initiatives

National Transparency Initiatives	Institutions Served	Information Provided	Of Note
University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN) http://www.ucan-network.org/ Web-based resource designed to give prospective/current students and their families concise, consumer-friendly information on nonprofit, independent colleges and universities in a common reporting format.	Developed in September 2007 and managed by the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) for independent, not-for-profit institutions. Over 800 institutions participate.	Information in the institution profiles includes admissions, enrollment, academics, and other performance indicators.	The U-CAN template does not include learning outcomes measures because in their focus groups of students and parents on information needed to inform college choice there was no consumer demand found for the information (National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, 2010).
Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm Web-based resource designed to provide information to students, families, policy makers, campus faculty and staff, the general public, and other higher education stakeholders on the undergraduate student experience through a common web-reporting template, the College Portrait. http://www.collegeportraits.org/	Developed in 2007 by the American Association of State College and Universities (AASCU) and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) for four-year public colleges and universities. Over 300 institutions participate.	Information in the College Portrait includes consumer information, student experiences and perceptions (generally shown through posting NSSE results) and student learning outcomes (generally shown through posting results of a standardized test).	The VSA was formed out of a task force of university presidents and other administrators who met to discuss what it is that the public wants to know about choosing colleges.
Transparency By Design (TbD) http://wcet.wiche.edu/advance/transparency-by-design Web-based initiative to lead universities and colleges toward greater accountability and transparency. College Choice for Adults is an online reporting template launched in 2009 to help users determine what they will learn from each program. http://www.collegechoicesforadults.org/	Developed in 2004 by the President's Forum, a group designed to provide a means for leaders to learn from one another in a collaboration of accredited, adult-serving institutions to advance innovation and excellence in online learning. For more information, see http://presidents forum.excelsior.edu/. TbD is open to all regionally-accredited, adult-serving higher education institutions that offer some or all programs at a distance. Roughly 18 institutions participate.	Information provided includes program specific learning outcomes data, nationally comparable information on student engagement (through nationally normed surveys) and alumni satisfaction (through a common set of questions).	College Choice for Adults includes program-level learning outcomes and program-level results to assist adult students in selecting a program consistent with their personal and professional goals. Users of College Choice for Adults may compare institutions by selecting several they are interested in learning more about and viewing the relevant learning outcomes.
Achieving the Dream (ATD) http://www.achievingthedream.org/ A national initiative for student success through encouraging institutions to use data to guide changes in institutional policy, programs, and practices to promote educational attainment, particularly among low-income students and students of color.	Developed in 2004 through a Lumina grant and seven founding partner organizations it focuses on community colleges. Over 100 institutions participate.	Emphasizing a data-driven approach, the initiative works on three main fronts: institutional (through coaching and campus culture), knowledge (collecting institutional data), and policy.	At this time, ATD does not directly address student learning outcomes assessment beyond focusing on performance indicators, but they do encourage institutions to benchmark and analyze student outcomes, employ data-driven decision making, and provide better access to data, policies, and practices that improve student outcomes.
Voluntary Framework of Accountability (VFA) http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Resources/aaccprograms/VFAWeb/default.aspx A system for community colleges to benchmark student information with peers around issues of completion and success as well as gather and use data to improve their effectiveness.	Being developed by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the College Board, and the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) to serve community colleges and other two-year institutions.	The information that will be included on the VFA is under development with the intention to create metrics that will serve the variety of students and purposes of the American community college system.	Forty institutions began pilot testing the VFA in February 2010 and full availability to all community colleges will start in 2012. This initiative was not part of the study as it is still in development.

Findings

National Transparency Initiatives Websites

Initiative-specific websites were reviewed to determine how many of the 100 institutions participating in the national transparency initiatives posted learning results on the respective common reporting template (Figure 1).

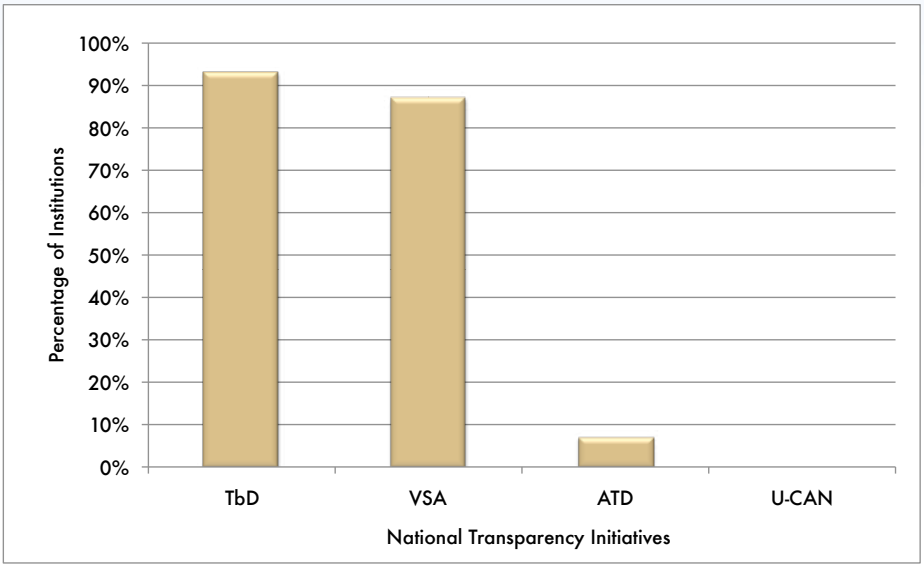

Figure 1. Percentage of Institutions Showing Results of Student Learning on the Website of Their National Transparency Initiative

Transparency by Design institutions (93%) were the most likely to share learning results on the College Choices for Adults website, followed by VSA institutions (87%) on the College Portrait site.

- Transparency by Design institutions (93%) were the most likely to share learning results on the College Choices for Adults website, followed by VSA institutions (87%) on the College Portrait site. Results included selected survey findings from alumni surveys and national student surveys such as National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) as well as results from more direct assessment of learning such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA).
- U-CAN does not call on institutions to make student learning information transparent, and the U-CAN template does not provide a specific section for such information. Institutions that participated in U-CAN did not display student learning outcomes results on their U-CAN pages; however, they did post information on standard institutional performance indicators such as enrollment numbers, graduation rates, and cost.
- Achieving the Dream institutions did not have a template for institutions to use to share results of student learning; however, 7% of the institutions posted results of student attainment on the ATD initiative website.

More specifically,

- TbD institutions: 100% posted performance indicators, and 86% posted selected NSSE results and alumni survey results.
- U-CAN institutions: 89% posted performance indicators, but none posted results of assessment activities; however, 11% did provide links to assessment information via their institution website.
- VSA institutions: 13% posted performance indicators, 84% posted selected NSSE results, 26% posted CLA results, and 16% posted ETS proficiency profile results. Of the institutions using College Portraits, 55% provided links to assessment information on their institution website.
- ATD institutions: 67% posted performance indicators, and 30% stated that a specific goal of the project was to use data to improve practices and outcomes.

Institutions Participating in National Transparency Initiatives

The websites of the 100 institutions participating in national transparency initiatives were also examined to determine the extent to which they posted assessment information and advertised their participation in a national transparency initiative. As Figures 2 and 3 show, institutions varied in terms of whether they publicly acknowledged participation in national transparency initiatives or how much assessment information they disclosed.

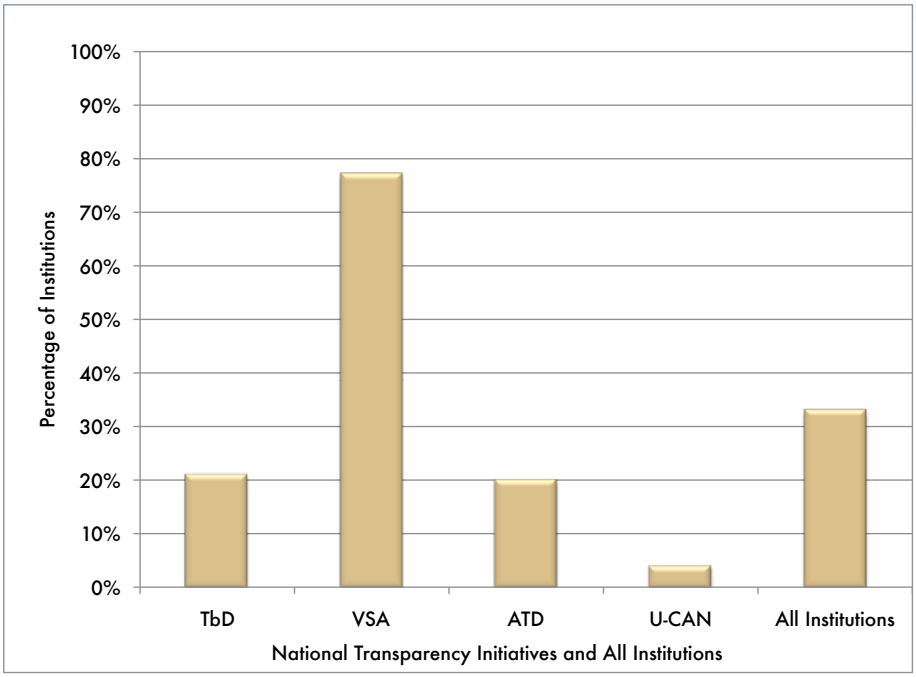

Figure 2. Percentage of Institutions Posting Their Participation in a National Transparency Initiative on Their Institution Website

Of the 100 institutions participating in national transparency initiatives, only a third (32%) listed their participation on their institution website.

- Of the 100 institutions participating in national transparency initiatives, only a third (32%) listed their participation on their institution website.
- About three quarters (77%) of VSA institutions mentioned their participation, with the majority posting the information on the institutional research or assessment page.
- Only 9% of VSA institutions in the sample indicated on their home or admissions page that they were participating in VSA.[5]
- 21% of TbD institutions posted their participation in College Choice for Adults on their home and/or admissions page.
- 20% of ATD institutions posted their participation on their home or institutional research web pages.
- U-CAN institutions were the least likely to post their participation on their institution website, as well as the least likely to post information from surveys, tests, and results on their institution websites than institutions participating in other initiatives.
- More VSA institutions posted information on their institution websites from surveys, portfolios, standardized tests, faculty/staff development, awards for assessment, results, and examples of use than institutions participating in other initiatives.
- Fewer TbD institutions posted information about faculty/staff development, local student surveys, and performance indicators than institutions participating in other initiatives.

[5] This finding shows a shift from a NILOA study completed last year. Of the VSA institutions scanned last year, 75% of the institutions that previously posted their participation on their home page no longer did so.

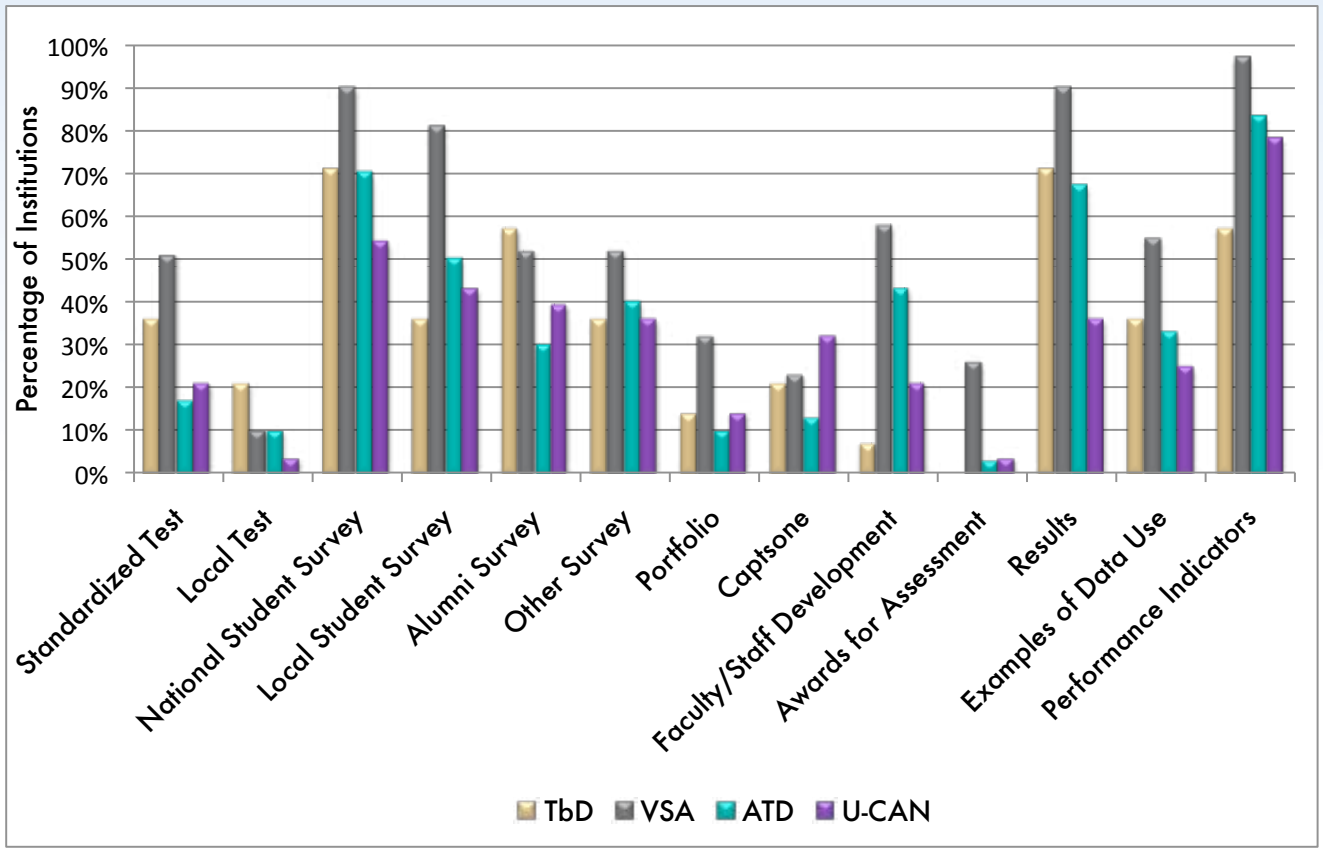

Figure 3. Percentage of Institutions Participating in a National Transparency Initiative Posting Assessment Information on Their Institution Website

Institutional Control

Because these national transparency initiatives were developed with their institution members in mind, some of the differences between them are more a function of the differences in the characteristics of the member institutions than of the initiatives themselves. This is very evident in Figure 4, which compares public and independent institutions.

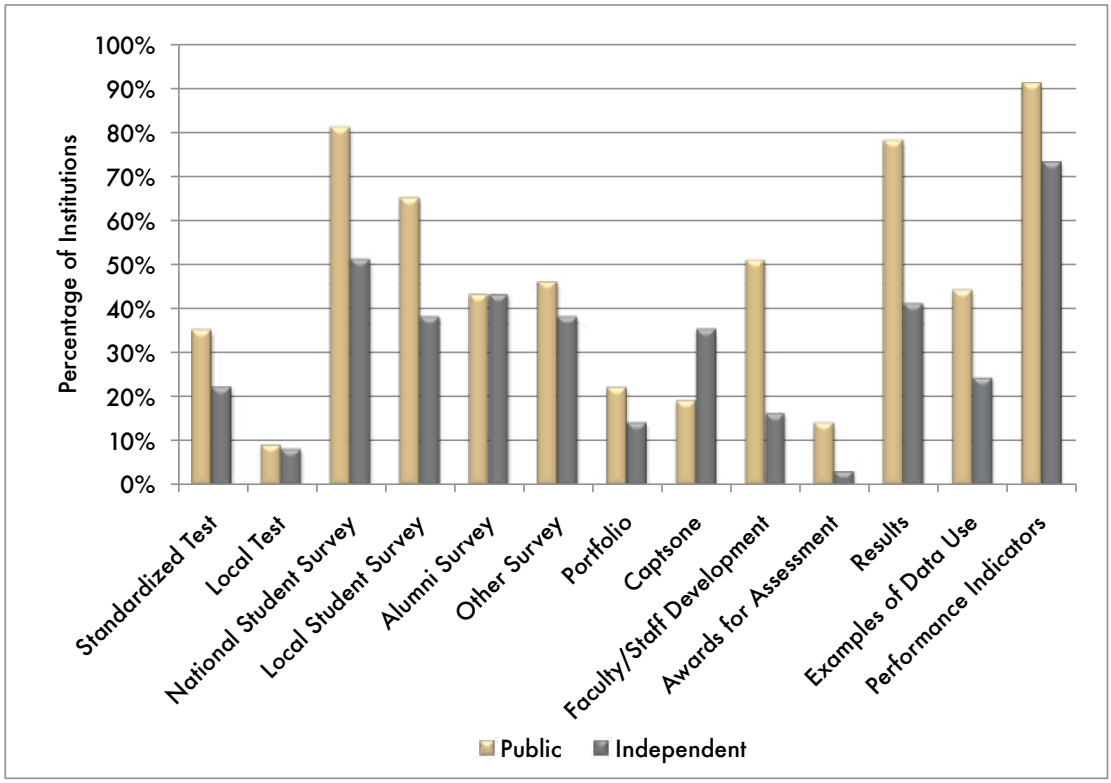

Figure 4. Percentage of Institutions Participating in a National Transparency Initiative Posting Assessment Information on Their Institution Website by Institutional Control

- Fewer independent institutions than public institutions posted information on all assessment activities including results of assessment and their use. The only exception was in respect to capstone experiences, on which independent institutions posted more information than did public institutions.

Institutional Comparison

Institutions participating in the national transparency initiatives were matched with institutions that did not participate in such initiatives but were similar in size, setting, control, and regional accreditation. The sample of institutions participating in U-CAN, for instance, was matched with a sample of similar institutions not participating in U-CAN to determine if any differences were found.

- There was no difference in terms of the nature or amount of assessment information on the institution website between institutions that were participating in U-CAN or ATD and those that were not.
- More VSA institutions posted information from standardized tests, national student surveys, and other learning results than did non-VSA participating institutions with similar characteristics.
- More TbD institutions showed information from national student surveys, alumni surveys, and results on their institution website than did non-TbD institutions.

The findings for VSA and TbD institutions were expected, given that the templates of these initiatives specifically required information from surveys and standardized tests. In this sense, these national transparency initiatives appeared to influence the kind of information institutions make publicly available. Conversely, because the U-CAN template did not require such information, participating institutions, not surprisingly, were far less likely to make it available.

The Impact of the National Transparency Initiatives

In this section, we summarize the major findings across the 100 institutions participating in national transparency initiatives and the 100 institutions not participating in them.

- Institutions involved in national transparency initiatives were slightly more likely than those not involved in initiatives to post on the institution website results of student learning outcomes assessment, examples of the use of those results, and performance indicators (Figure 5).

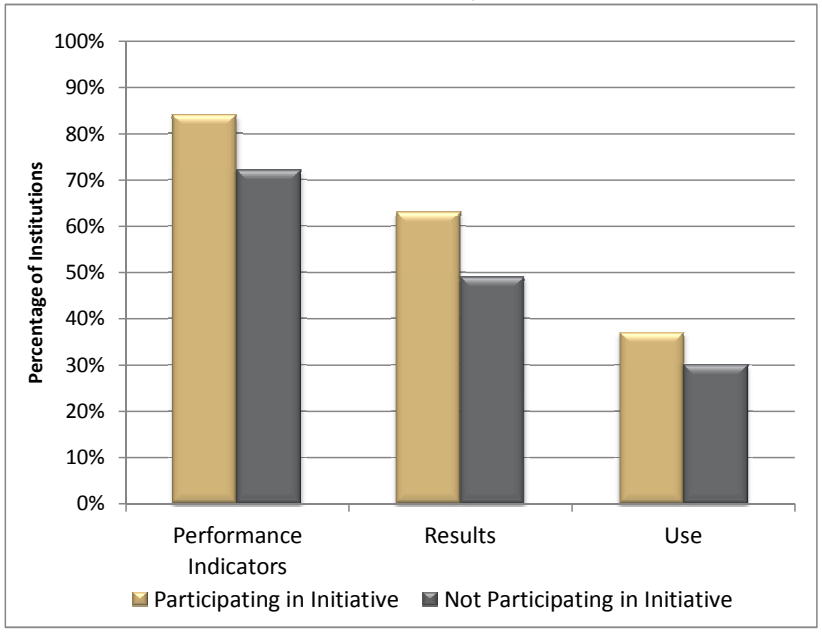

Figure 5. Percentage of Institutions Posting Assessment Information by Participation in Initiative

Because these national transparency initiatives were developed with their institution members in mind, some of the differences between them are more a function of the differences in the characteristics of the member institutions than of the initiatives themselves.

- Institutions participating in national transparency initiatives were *more likely* to report results from national student surveys (70%) than were those not participating (44%).
- Those participating in national transparency initiatives also were *more likely* to post information from standardized tests (30%) than were those not participating (17%).

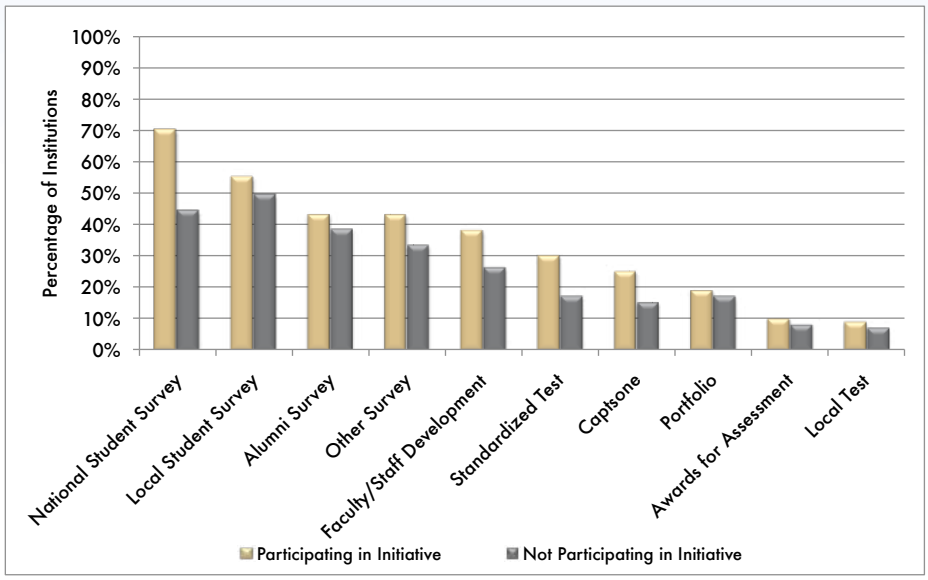

Figure 6. Percentage of Institutions Showing Assessment Activity by Participation in Initiative

In most cases, accreditation region was not related to the posting of assessment activity information on institution websites.

Regional Accreditation

The expectations of regional accreditors may influence the transparency of learning outcomes (Jankowski & Makela, 2010; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Provezis, 2010). To get a sense of whether posting assessment information was a function of recent accreditation activity (accreditation team visits within the past two years), information regarding institutional accreditation was examined to see whether a recent accreditation visit may have influenced the information found on the institution website. Four findings warrant mention:

- Institutions accredited within the past two years, meaning between 2008 and 2010 were *more likely* to post student learning outcomes statements and examples of the use of evidence of student learning than were those not accredited within the past two years.
- Institutions accredited within the past two years were *more likely* than those not accredited recently to post information on standardized tests, alumni surveys, and portfolios.
- Institutions accredited within the past *three* years were *more likely* than those not accredited between 2007 and 2010 to provide examples of the use of assessment results on their websites.
- Institutions preparing for accreditation in the upcoming years, specifically 2011 and 2012, *did not* display any significant differences in the information posted on their websites.

In most cases, accreditation region was not related to the posting of assessment activity information on institution websites. However, institutions were *less likely* to publicly post assessment results on their website if they were members of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges than if they were members of the other regional accreditation organizations. This may be influenced in part, however, to the larger proportion of independent institutions in the Middle States and New England regions.

Conclusions

Overall, findings of this study point to five conclusions:

1. Institutions participating in TbD and VSA tended to post institutional results of assessment on their initiative websites to a greater extent than did institutions participating in other national transparency initiatives.
2. Institutions participating in VSA posted more assessment information, results, and examples of use on their institution websites than did institutions participating in other national transparency initiatives.
3. For all sectors, however, those institutions participating in national transparency initiatives tended to make transparent on their website more information about student learning outcomes and display more examples of how these results were being used.
4. Recently accredited institutions were more likely to post examples of use of student learning outcomes evidence.
5. With the exception of information on capstone learning experiences, independent institutions were less likely than public institutions to post student learning outcomes assessment information.

Participation in national transparency initiatives appears to encourage more transparency in reporting of results and of the use of assessment information. Accreditation makes a difference as well, especially when it comes to demonstrating the use of assessment results. It is self-evident that online reporting template designs and requirements have a substantial effect on the information that gets reported and—further upstream, perhaps—on the kind of information the institution collects and uses to make decisions. Independent institutions are not expected via the U-CAN template to report student learning outcomes information. At the same time, it is clear by the numbers of independent colleges participating in initiatives such as the Teagle consortia and the Council of Independent College-coordinated efforts to use the CLA and NSSE, that learning outcomes assessment activity is underway. In short, while participation in national transparency initiatives may increase transparency by inducing campuses to make assessment information publicly available, websites and other public venues are not the only indicators of an inducement toward enhanced transparency.

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Section 2

The Changing Landscape of Transparency in Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Assessing student learning and using that information wisely is an important function of higher education. Communicating these efforts and making them transparent presents complex challenges to higher education institutions. Among these challenges is the reality that, for the communication of their assessment information, institutions have two very different audiences with very different interests, purposes, and perspectives: external audiences and internal audiences (Ewell, 2009; Suskie, 2009; Volkwein, 2008; Walvoord, 2004; 2010). External audiences, such as prospective students, families, policy makers, and tax payers, are interested in knowing about student learning. Assessment information targeting these audiences would highlight the institution's successes and disclose what the institution is doing to address any shortcomings (McCormick, 2010). Assessment information targeting internal audiences, on the other hand, audiences such as faculty members, academic leaders, and governing boards, would highlight information on student performance and the possibilities to improve teaching and learning. While these external and internal audiences are often considered separate, the distinctions between them are fluid and often unclear. To effectively communicate information about student learning outcomes and institutional performance, institutions must develop ways to respond to a complex multitude of needs and interests.

Over the last three years, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has been investigating the state of student learning outcomes assessment in U.S. higher education. These studies have included a survey of chief academic officers and a second survey of departments regarding assessment practices. NILOA has also conducted a number of focus groups, reviewed institution websites, examined state policies, and conducted institution case studies in an attempt to learn more. Looking across these investigations, what have we learned about how the assessment landscape has changed—particularly the landscape of institutional transparency of student learning outcomes assessment? To answer this question, this report synthesizes key findings from three studies: the NILOA National Survey of Chief Academic Officers, conducted in 2009; the NILOA 2009 Web Study; and the NILOA 2010 Web Study.

While many forms of media can facilitate institutional transparency, none is more valuable and amenable to the task than the Internet and the institution web page.

Studying the Role of Institution Websites in Transparency

While many forms of media can facilitate institutional transparency, none is more valuable and amenable to the task than the Internet and the institution web page. To discern what information about student learning was accessible and where that information was most likely to be found online, NILOA systematically examined institution web pages. The first NILOA web study was done in 2009 and a second in 2010. This report examines the shift in transparency patterns during this brief one-year period. Our findings from this analysis confirm the following:

1. Higher education institutions are showing more information online now than previously about student learning outcomes assessment.
2. While more information on student learning outcomes assessment is being made available, likely only a fraction of assessment activity, as reported in the 2009 NILOA National Survey of Chief Academic Officers (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009), is being made transparent.

The NILOA National Survey of Chief Academic Officers

In spring 2009, NILOA invited chief academic officers at all regionally accredited, undergraduate-degree-granting, two- and four-year, public, private, and for-profit institutions in the U.S. (n=2,809) to respond to a series of questions about the assessment activities underway at their institutions and how assessment results are being used. All told, 1,518 institutions responded, or 53% of the original sample. The NILOA National Survey of Chief Academic Officers instrument was organized around four broad questions that addressed what learning outcomes institutions were measuring, how they were assessing the outcomes and using the results, and the factors prompting assessment at the institution.[1]

The NILOA 2009 Web Study

In its 2009 Web Study, NILOA sought to document *what institutions portrayed* in regard to student learning outcomes assessment on institution-wide web pages (as opposed to department or program-based web pages) by examining the assessment activities, the web page locations, and the language that institutions used on their websites regarding student learning outcomes assessment. Institutions were randomly selected from a group of all regionally accredited undergraduate degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the U.S. A team of six researchers systematically reviewed 725 institution websites from March 2009 to August 2009. In contrast to the 2010 Web Study, no attempt was made in the 2009 Web Study to determine whether the institution reported the results of its assessment efforts.[2]

The NILOA 2010 Web Study

To conduct the 2010 Web Study, a team of NILOA researchers spent roughly 120 hours reviewing 200 institution websites from July 2010 to September 2010, seeking answers to the following questions:

1. What and how much information do institutions display on their website regarding student learning outcomes assessment?
2. Which institution web pages provide information about assessment of student learning outcomes?
3. To what extent do institutions show results and describe their use of the results on their institution web pages?

The 200 institution websites scanned were examined for information on assessment activities, student learning outcomes statements, posted results, and examples of the use of assessment findings. Web pages examined for information on student learning outcomes assessment included home, admissions, institutional research, provost/academic affairs, center for teaching and learning, regional accreditation, and assessment pages. For more information on the methodology and sample, please see the Appendices.

Findings

1) Institutions are showing more information online now than previously about student learning outcomes assessment.

Of the institutions examined in the 2010 Web Study, 49% created web pages solely devoted to providing information on student learning outcomes assessment.

[1] For more information on the survey instrument, see *2010 Survey Questionnaire*, retrievable from https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/NILOA-2010-Program-Survey.pdf. For findings from the survey, see *More Than You Think: Less Than We Need*, retrievable from https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2009NILOASurveyReport.pdf

[2] For more information on the 2009 Web Study including the methodology and findings, see: *Exploring the Landscape: What Institutional Websites Reveal About Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Activities*, retrievable from https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/WebScanReport.pdf

The 2010 Web Study found institutions were participating in multiple aspects of assessment activity through listing student learning outcome statements and providing information on assessment activities on their websites. For instance, 49% of the institutions examined in the 2010 Web Study created web pages solely devoted to providing information on the assessment of student learning and focused on communicating learning outcomes information to multiple audiences. In addition, information on the assessment of student learning was found on each of the diverse web pages examined; slightly over half (52%) of the institutions scanned had institution-wide student learning outcomes statements posted on their website. Of those that had statements, 61% were easily found on the website while 39% were difficult to locate or hidden within the text of larger documents. Comparing the results of the 2010 Web Study with those of the 2009 Web Study (Figure 2.1), we found the following:

- In the 2009 Web Study as well as in the 2010 Web Study, the most commonly found type of assessment-related information posted on institution websites was information from national student surveys, followed by information from local student surveys, alumni surveys, and other surveys. Information from local tests was found the least often on institution websites in both web studies.
- The 2010 Web Study found more information with indirect evidence of student learning than was found in 2009 but less evidence of capstones and portfolios.

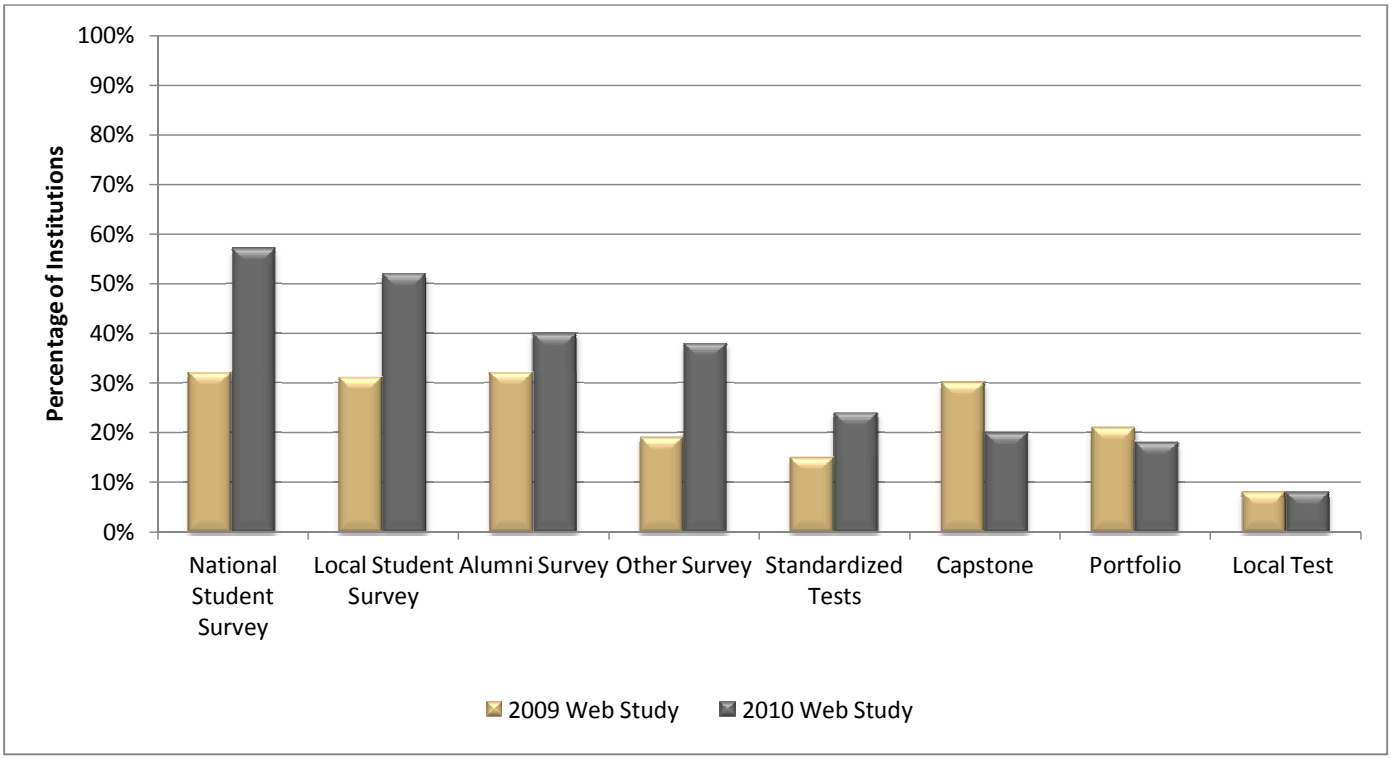


Figure 2.1. Percentage of Institutions Posting Information on Assessment Activity, Results of 2009 and 2010 Web Studies

While more information was found in the 2010 Web Study, researchers also noted that institutions were password-protecting assessment information more often than found in the 2009 Web Study. While 9% of the institution websites in the 2009 Web Study had password-protected assessment-related information, this percentage had increased to 15% in the 2010 Web Study. This growth suggests that to house assessment results institutions may be using internal management software applications such as WEAVE online or TracDat, which require a login and limit external audience access to information.

2) While more information on student learning outcomes assessment is being made available, institutions still fall short of reporting as much assessment activity as chief academic officers have indicated.

In comparing findings from the 2009 Web Study with those from the NILOA National Survey of Chief Academic Officers, researchers found that institutions had claimed in their survey responses to be involved in more assessment activities than were represented on their institution websites. Because institutions in the 2010 Web Study were found to be posting more information on their assessment activities on their websites than in the 2009 Web Study, the findings across all three studies were compared to examine change over time (Figure 2.2).

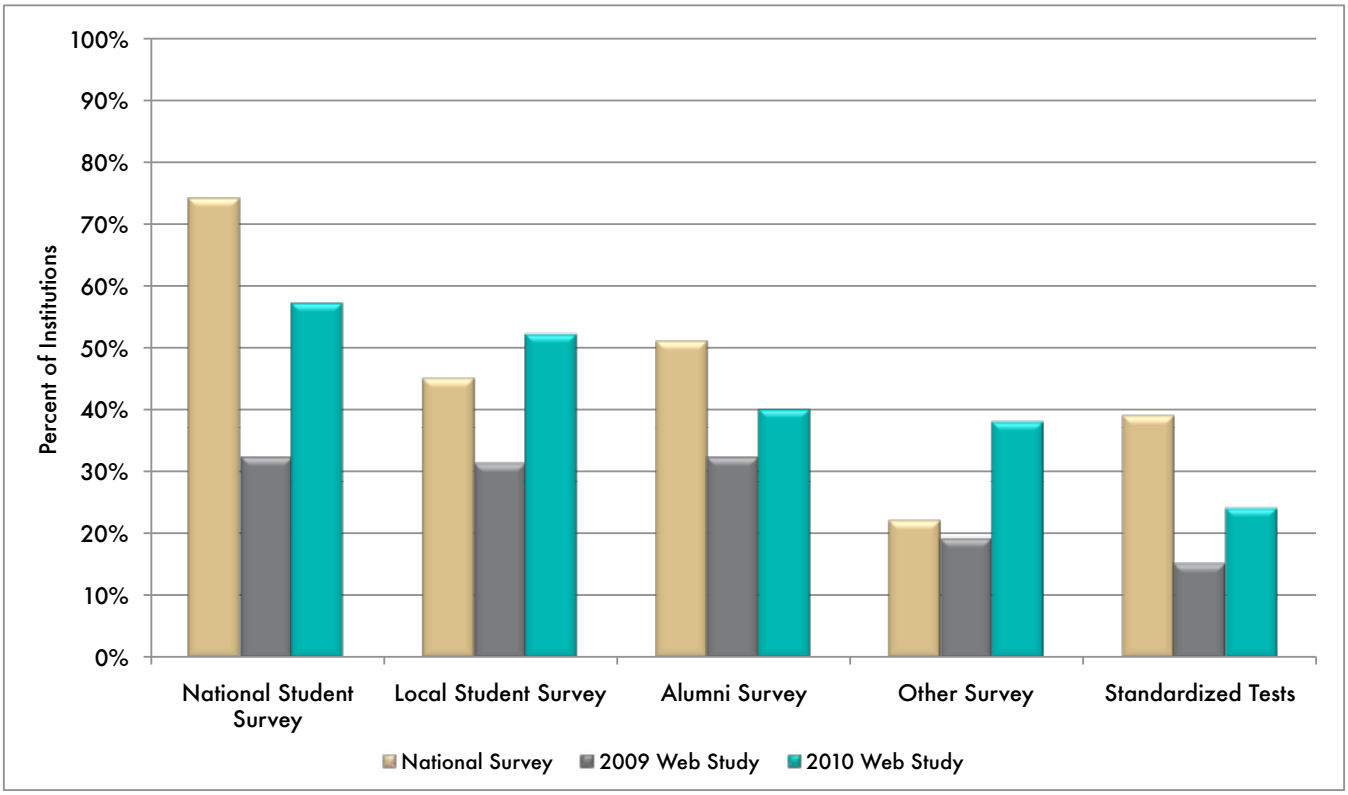


Figure 2.2. Percentage of Institutions Displaying Information on Assessment Activities, Results of National Survey and 2009 and 2010 Web Studies

- Institutions currently show significantly more assessment activities on their websites than before, but still not as much as suggested in the National Survey results.
- The gaps between stated assessment activity and information found online in 2010 are not nearly as large as those found in 2009.
- Information on local student surveys and other surveys was found online more often in 2010 than was suggested in the National Survey results.

Ways to Enhance Communication

Institutional transparency related to student learning outcomes information appears to be increasing, even in this report's brief time span of one year. Institutions have begun to share more assessment information on their websites, but they may still not be showing as much outcomes assessment information as they have available. While student learning outcomes statements were found at 52% of the institutions, these statements were often difficult to find. Even so, according to the NILOA National Survey, some three quarters of institutions claim to have statements of goals and expectations for student learning. These findings illustrate how increasing transparency could aid communications with institutions' external as well as internal audiences. Following are specific suggestions to enhance communication about student learning:

1. Gather assessment information, such as statements of learning goals and expectations assessment measures, and reports, considering what information would be of interest to internal and external audiences.
2. Think about how best to communicate with each audience. A detailed report may work for an internal audience; but graphs and simple explanations that avoid jargon may serve an external audience best.
3. If information is password protected, consider what portions could be extrapolated and communicated to external audiences.
4. Consider where assessment information should be displayed and how users can navigate to the page. Our study found that 49% of institutions place information on a single page and direct users throughout the website to that page.
5. Check the NILOA Transparency Framework for ways to make each component of your assessment activity more transparent.[3]
6. Finally, to avoid embarrassment, take time to review your website regularly to assure that all information is up-to-date.

[3] See https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/ourwork/transparency-framework/

Section 3

Presenting and Using Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Results

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) reviews assessment activity at colleges and universities and offers resources to campuses to assist and strengthen assessment initiatives. Some of NILOA's efforts have centered on institutional transparency with assessment information. Internet websites serve as a primary medium of communication for most colleges and universities. How institutions convey information about student learning on their websites is of major interest to institutions, accrediting groups, and other higher education stakeholders. In an initial study, conducted in 2009, NILOA staff examined the websites of over 700 colleges and universities to determine whether and where student learning outcomes assessment was mentioned (Jankowski & Makela, 2010). In a follow-up study, conducted in 2010, NILOA staff looked specifically at whether institutions share information on assessment results and how those *results* were actually *used*. In this second study some 200 college and university websites were examined over a three-month period. This report of that study describes findings that add to our understanding of the broader issue of transparency. The results of the study suggest four conclusions:

1. Most institutions post some results of student learning outcomes assessment, but few provide examples of the use of those results on their institution websites.
2. Often, the posted results are not presented in user-friendly ways.
3. Institutions use assessment results in many ways, the most prominent being for accountability purposes and for institutional improvement.
4. Regional accreditation self-study is the most cited use for assessment results.

How institutions convey information about student learning on their websites is of major interest to institutions, accrediting groups, and other higher education stakeholders.

The NILOA 2010 Web Study

This NILOA web study examined institution websites for assessment activity, public disclosure of results, and examples of the use of assessment findings. A team of NILOA researchers systematically reviewed 200 institution websites over 120 hours from July 2010 to September 2010 to address the following guiding questions (see Appendix A for further information on the study design and sampling):

1. What and how much information do institutions display on their websites regarding student learning outcomes assessment?
2. Which institution web pages provide information about assessment of student learning outcomes?
3. To what extent do institutions show results and describe their use of the results on their institution web pages?

Findings

The 200 institution websites were scanned for information on posted results of student learning outcomes assessment and examples of the use of assessment findings. This report provides an overview of those findings in three sections including a general overview, an in-depth section looking at cases in which results were publicly shared online, and a section examining posted examples of the use of assessment findings. Several vignettes showing specific examples of institutional activity online are also provided throughout the report.

Overview

The following percentages show general findings on the 200 institution websites reviewed in this study (Figure 3.1):

- 78% posted performance indicators;
- 57% posted results of student learning outcomes assessment; and
- 34% posted examples of the use of student learning outcomes assessment results.

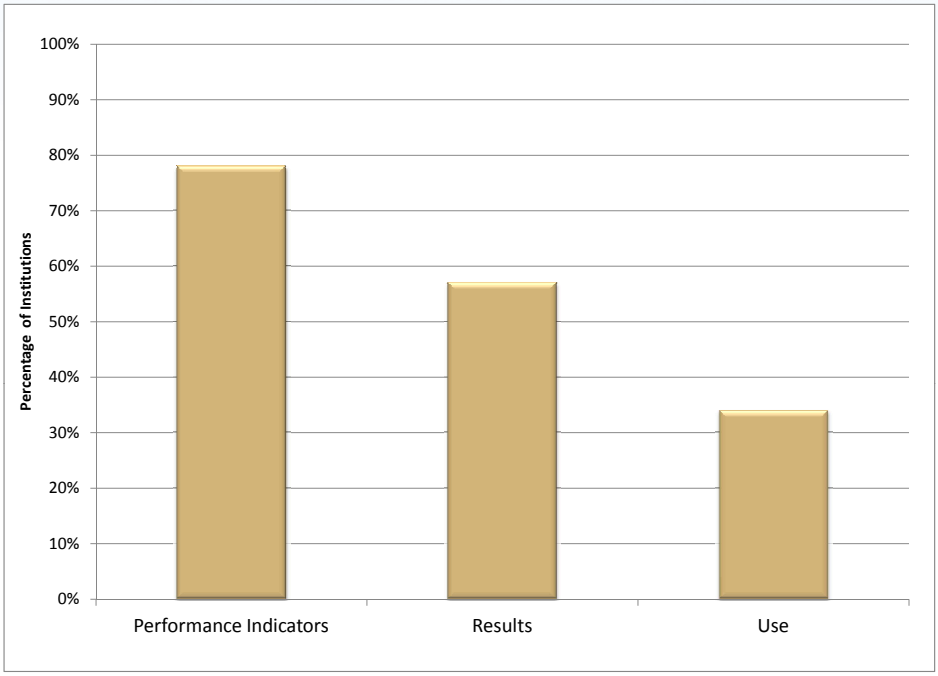


Figure 3.1. Percentage of Institutions Posting Performance Indicators, Assessment Results, and Examples of the Use of Assessment Results on Their Institution Websites

Performance Indicators

Examples of performance indicators found on institution websites include student demographics, cost, enrollment data, fact books and common data sets, graduation rates, pass rates on licensure exams, and retention rates. Performance indicators were often presented in a list, in a report, or in pie graphs. Occasionally, performance indicators were disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, or full-time/part-time status. Performance indicators do not directly relate to student learning, but they may be used in conjunction with the results of student learning outcomes assessment to present a more complete picture of student performance or to help decision makers identify areas for improvement. Findings from the 200 institution websites on performance indicators include the following:

- Institutions were less likely to post the results of student learning outcomes assessment than they were to post information on performance indicators. Still, over half (57%) of the institutions in the study publicly posted the results of student learning outcomes assessment activities on their institution websites.
- Institutions were much less likely to post examples of the use of the results of assessment (34%). Even in the instances where institutions clearly outlined their use of student learning outcomes assessment results on their website, not one institution in the study included information on whether the changes informed by assessment results actually led to improvements in outcomes or in student learning.

Performance indicators found on institution websites appeared as "consumer information," such as on Augustana College's *Open Book Program* (see vignette 1).

Assessment Results

Results of student learning outcomes assessment should be presented in ways that facilitate use by students, parents, faculty members, and institution decision makers—such as being displayed in tables as well as in succinct, jargon-free text tailored to specific audiences. Information should also be provided on assessment measures and on recommended or implemented changes (Ketcheson, 2001; Middaugh, 2010; Suskie, 2009; Volkwein, 2010; Walvoord 2004; 2010).

An example of an attempt to make assessment findings user friendly is found on Capella University's web page showing results of student learning (see vignette 2).

Posted results at the 200 institution websites were mainly composed of surveys, specifically national student surveys, and standardized test results (Figure 3.2). This is not surprising since the majority of information on assessment activity is survey based (Jankowski & Makela, 2010). Of institutions that used student portfolios as part of their assessment activities, no aggregate results or results on individual student portfolios were found. Rather, viewers could access individual portfolios for samples of work or examine rubric templates used to assess the work.

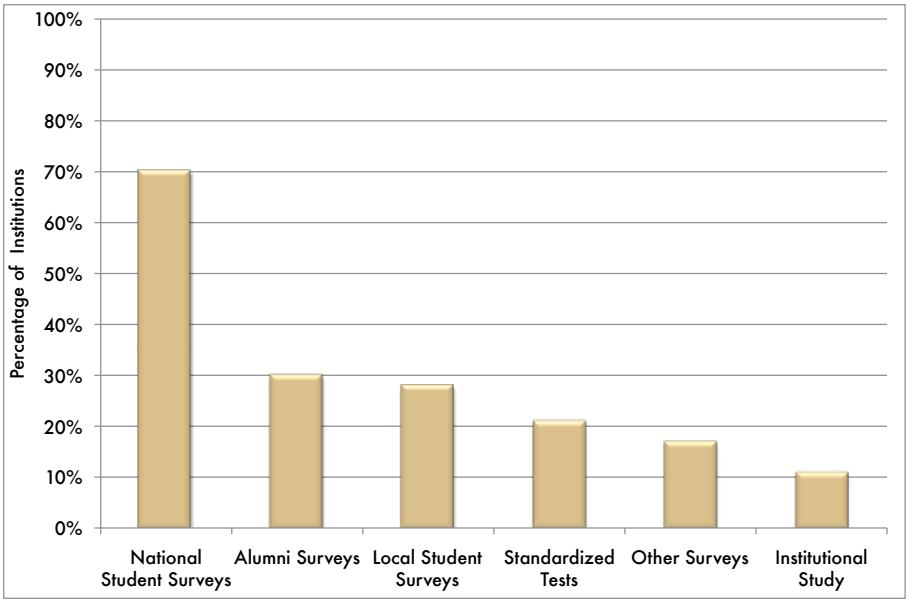


Figure 3.2. Percentage of Institutions Posting Results by Type of Student Learning Outcomes on Their Institution Websites

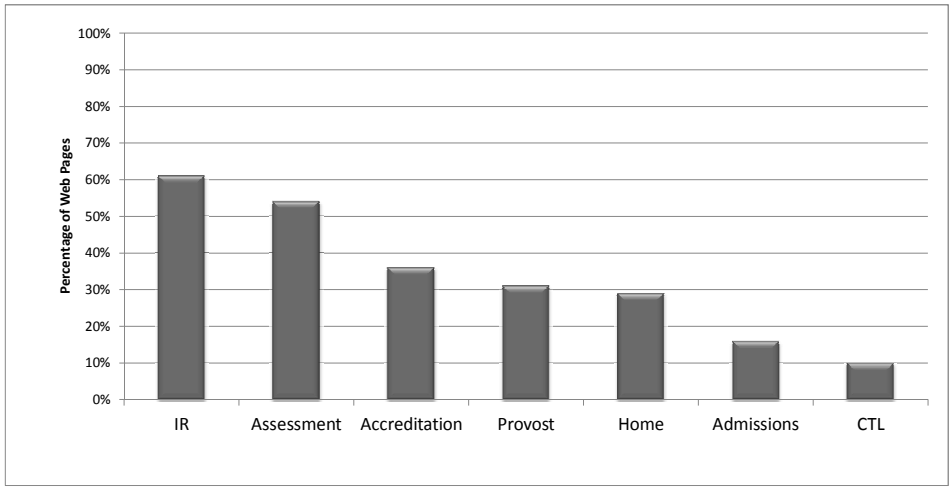


Figure 3.3. Percentage of Institution Web Pages Displaying Results of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Vignette 1:

Augustana College provides a web page tool under their general information tab to help multiple audiences assess their college options. The page, titled the Open Book Program, includes links to performance indicators; governmental data; selected first-year, senior, and NSSE survey results; as well as alumni outcomes information. The data are not linked collectively but are provided in a central location and tailored to external audiences, thus presenting performance indicators alongside data on student learning. http://www.augustana.edu/x3148.xml

Results of student learning outcomes assessment were located most often on the institutional research web page, with 61% posting publicly available results (Figure 3.3).

- Assessment web pages showed results 54% of the time, followed by accreditation web pages at 36%.
- The web pages least likely to show results of student learning were the center for teaching and learning and admissions pages.

In regard to the actual reporting of assessment results, institutions posted results in multiple formats and in many different ways (Figure 3.4).

- The majority of institutions (67%) posted reports that included complete results of surveys or standardized tests as opposed to selected, highlighted, or partial results (33%). Further, 54% of institutions posted multiple reports of different assessment activities such as surveys or tests on their website.
- The majority of reports (54%) included long tables of data that were hard to read or comprehend. Graphs of results were provided in 46% of the institution reports, with only 29% of institutions providing text-based reports without figures, graphs, or tables.
- In the posted reports, 70% of the institutions did not benchmark the results with peer institutions or previous results, and 22% of the reports were over 100 pages in length.
- Few institutions presented a summary of key findings at the beginning of the report (30%), while even fewer discussed background information on what the survey/instrument measured (16%), provided implications or next steps (10%), or tailored their reports to a specific audience (10%).
- Few institutions (21%) included longitudinal data where results were compared over time, while even fewer disaggregated results (10%) or combined results of multiple assessments (3%).
- Few institutions provided PowerPoint presentations of their results (10%), while still fewer advertised or marketed their results to a broader audience (5%).

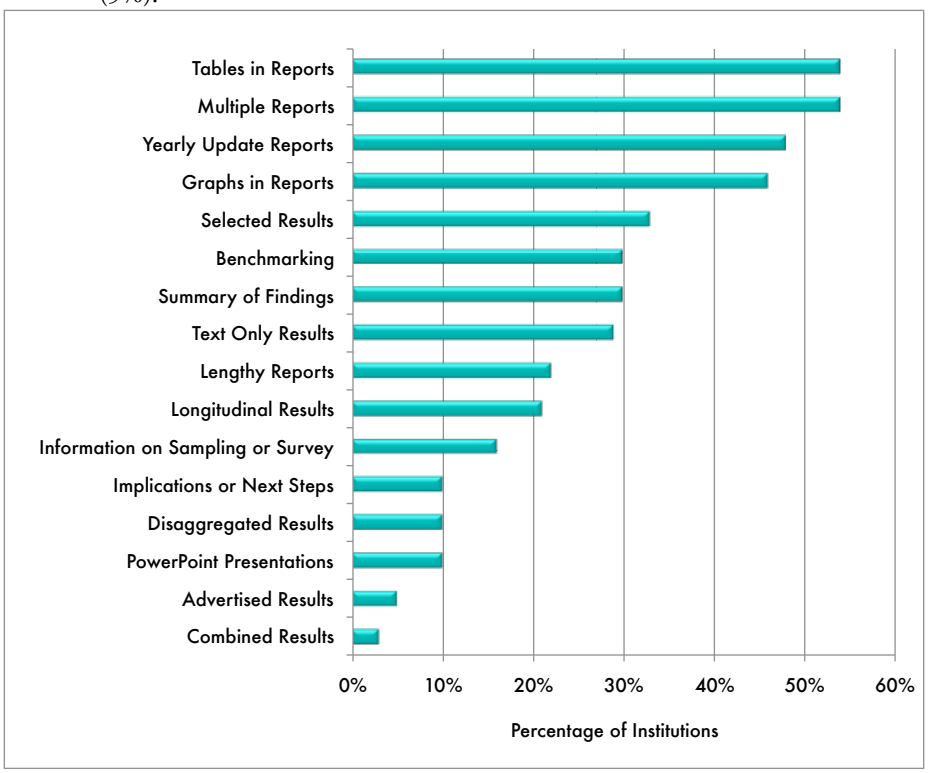


Figure 3.4. Percentage of Institutions Posting Assessment Results by Selected Reporting Characteristics

Vignette 2:

Capella University has a website devoted solely to the reporting of results of student learning. The site includes interactive charts and graphs by program as well as career outcomes, alumni survey responses, and explanations of how student learning is measured and reported—all in one centralized location. http://www.capellaresults.com/index.asp

Some institutions provide assessment data in interesting ways to viewers, such as through a changing *Fact of the Day* at Case Western Reserve or through an *Interesting Fact* section of a website. Inclusion of assessment data in such straightforward and user-friendly formats may foster greater interest in and awareness of assessment findings (see vignette 3 & 4).

Use of Evidence of Student Learning

A little over a third (34%) of the institution websites reviewed provided evidence or examples of the use of student learning outcomes results. Institutions used assessment results in a variety of ways, such as to identify areas of improvement, to complete regional accreditation self-studies, to alter curriculum or policy, and to inform institution decision making (Figure 3.5).

- The examples found on institution websites of use of evidence of student learning were more likely to be related to accountability than to institutional improvement.
- Regional accreditation self-studies (54%) were the most prevalent use of assessment results—not a surprising finding, given the important role that accreditation plays in institutional assessment activities (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Provezis, 2010).
- Identifying areas for improvement or potential problems (31%) were the second most frequent use of assessment evidence.

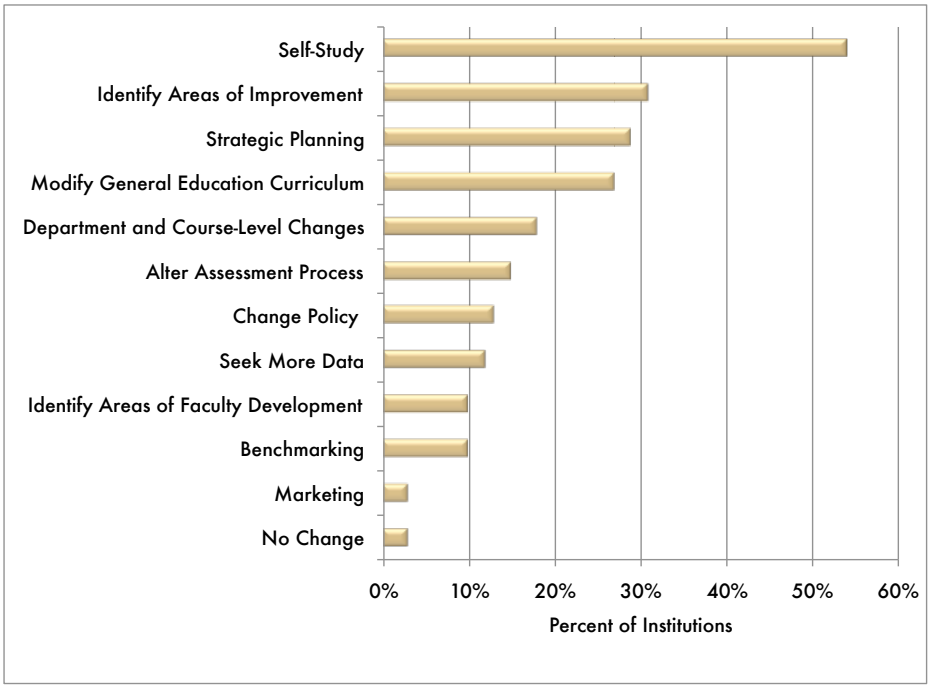


Figure 3.5. Percentage of Institutions Posting the Use of Evidence of Student Learning by Type of Use

The finding from institution websites that the top two uses of assessment results addressed accountability through regional accreditation and improvement reinforces the belief that assessment is undertaken for these dual purposes: regional accreditation and institutional improvement (Ewell, 2009). However, the reviewed institutions did use assessment results for a variety of other purposes as well:

- Curricular uses included examples of modifications to general education curriculum (27%) and departmental/program requirements or changes within specific courses (18%).
- Several institutions (15%) used the evidence of student learning to make changes in the assessment process itself, such as employing different measures or tests, while 10% of the institutions used the results to compare student performance on assessment activities with other schools.
- Although evidence confirming these claims was difficult to locate on the institution websites, 29% of the institution websites claimed that evidence of student learning was used in their strategic planning process.

Vignette 3:

Case Western Reserve University Institutional Research home page provides a changing *Fact of the Day* ***drawn from the institution's assessment data as well as other institutional studies to update visitors on selected finding. http://www.cwru.edu/president/cir/cirhome.html***

- Few institutions used evidence of student learning to alter institution policy or to determine resource allocation (13%).
- Some institutions used evidence of student learning to determine that they needed to gather more data prior to making a decision or to determine if certain results were problematic (12%).
- Only 3% of the institutions claimed they were satisfied with the results and used them to either market their institution or to show external stakeholders they were doing a good job educating students.

Of the institution websites that presented evidence of the use of student learning outcomes results (Figure 3.6), 42% showed only one instance or type of use. The remaining 58% of institutions showed multiple types of use, with 1% of the institutions showing seven different types of use.

The websites of California State University, Los Angeles, as well as San Francisco State University provide a template for the use of evidence of student learning by asking departments to report the many ways in which use occurs (see vignette 5).

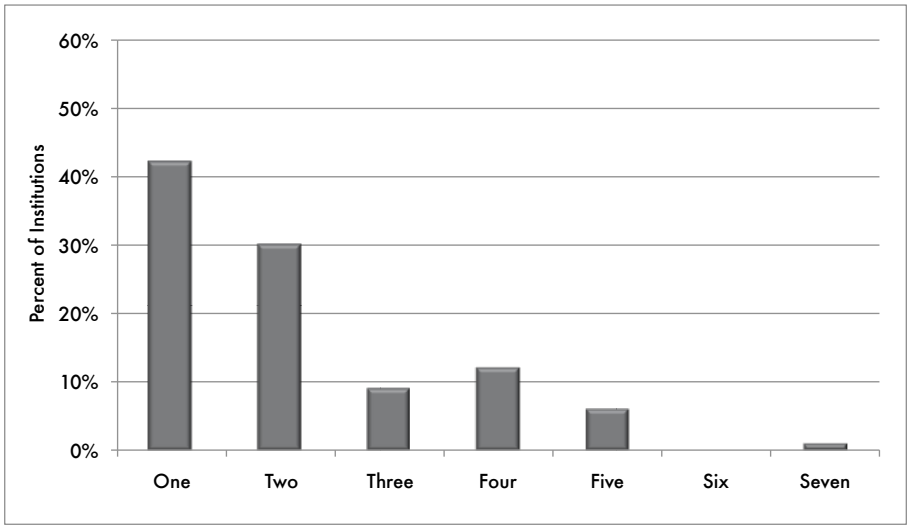


Figure 3.6. Percentage of Institution Websites Showing One or More Types of Use of Evidence of Student Learning

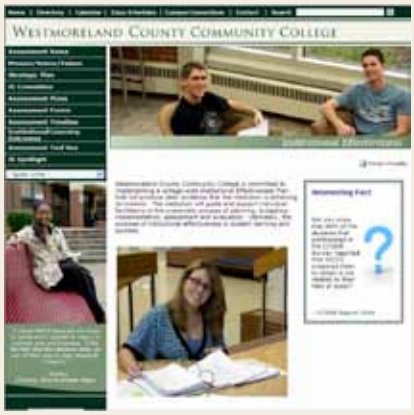
- The institutions that showed one type of use mainly used evidence of student learning for regional accreditation in the self-study (54%). Other uses included department- or course-level use (13%), or identification of areas of institution-level improvement (11%).
- The remaining uses (22%) were vague in language, meaning the institution website claimed that evidence of student learning was used in decision making, planning, or improving outcomes and learning—without any clear indication or examples of such use beyond the claim.
- Institutions that provided multiple examples of the use of evidence of student learning were very diverse in their application, meaning that no single area of use was prominent.

Conclusion

Slightly over half of the institutions in the study (54%) posted results of student learning outcomes assessment on their website, suggesting that institutions are beginning to provide access to assessment results. At the same time, only a third (34%) of institutions shared examples of how they were *using* results. As institutions become more proficient and confident in reporting assessment results, the opportunity and challenge of showing how evidence is used is likely to grow. Institutions currently display a large amount of "consumer information" in the form of performance indicators (78%), but these indicators are not directly related to student learning.

Vignette 4:

Westmoreland Community College provides a tease to the full CCSSE results on the main institutional research office page under a changing Interesting Fact section. http://wccc.edu/IE.aspx?PID=420



Genuine transparency is more than simple disclosure. Most of the results posted on institution websites reviewed in this study were not presented in an easy-to-read form or tailored to a specific audience. Few institutions (10%) discussed next steps or implications of the results. Most of the reports were lengthy, lacked a summary, and contained too much information for the average person to review.

While the majority of institutions used the results of student learning for self-study (54%), even more institutions (69%) ***did not state any use*** of results for improvement of student learning. Only 3% of the institutions claimed they were pleased with the results, yet only 31% identified areas for improvement. No institution examined in the study provided information suggesting that the changes made based on assessment results had led to enhanced learning. Furthermore, most examples of the uses of assessment data tended to be vague or limited to departmental contexts as opposed to institutional changes.

On a more positive note, institutions do appear to be making strides in the public display of assessment results and how they use this information. Examples of institutions that are working on reporting and using results have been presented throughout this report, and additional examples of such are provided below.

Even so, use of evidence of student learning remains largely a function of regional accreditation self-study. Assessment results are mostly still found on internal institutional research web pages only and, when shared, they are difficult to comprehend or apply. Much more can be done to make assessment information easier to understand and to use by both external and internal audiences. As institutions continue to develop assessment initiatives it will be important to pay more attention to the presentation and use of their results.

Instructive Examples of Reporting Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Online

In addition to the examples listed in the text, the following provides additional resources that may be useful to an institution that is looking for examples of good practices:

- The Community College of Allegheny County provides PDF copies of newsletters on specific learning outcomes results on their website. Four to five pages in length, these newsletters clearly outline the findings, identify areas of improvement, and provide next steps. Further, the reports are composed in clear, straightforward language and utilize graphs, highlighted tables, and selected results. http://www.ccac.edu/files/PDF_Document/0246280caf704c8a90cdb1dc70dc1fa3.pdf
- The University of California–Irvine provides on its website an example of a report tailored to the Council on Educational Policy. This example presents results from a study of summer courses linking findings from course evaluations, surveys, interviews, and subsequent course grades to present a coherent picture of the quality of summer instruction. Winnowed down to three pages from the full 25-page report, this report summary is for a specific audience and includes conclusions, five recommendations, and student learning outcomes findings. http://www.assessment.uci.edu/reports/documents/Conclusions_and_Recommendations_Summer_Instructional_Quality.pdf
- American InterContinental University provides a link at their website home page to an outcomes page presenting selected information to multiple audiences in easy-to-read bullet lists and graphs of the responses of students, alumni, and employers to multiple assessment and surveys. http://www.aiuniv.edu/Student-Life/Outcomes/AIU-Online
- Dominican University of California provides a different means for external audiences to access multiple types of performance-indicator-related information across their institution website by providing a three-page table of required disclosure information along with the link to that information. http://www.dominican.edu/about/current/files/consumerinformationsummary.pdf

Vignette 5:

California State University, Los Angeles as well as San Francisco State University use a reporting template that asks each program and department to respond to a series of questions including:

- ***Are there formal learning outcomes?***
- ***Where are they published?***
- ***Other than GPA, what data are used including direct and indirect assessments?***
- ***What is the process and frequency of data collection?***
- ***Who interprets the evidence?***
- ***How are the findings used?***
- ***Date of last program review***
- ***What were results of most recent student assessment?***

This template provides, in one location, information on the data collection and use of assessment activities across departments and programs.

https://sites.sfsu.edu/sites/sites.sfsu.edu.air/files/Report%20Due%20Dates%20%20Educational%20Effectiveness%20Indicators.pdf

http://www.calstatela.edu/academic/aa/assessment/AssessmentReports/EducationalEffectivenessWASCtable06-07.pdf

Section 4

Online Transparency of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

The emergence of the Internet in the early 1990s radically changed how information is disseminated and accessed. One demonstration of this is in how colleges and universities use the Internet for their communications through both college email systems and institution websites. College and university websites now provide information for a variety of stakeholders including prospective students and families, current students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Whether one is looking for an institution's application for admission, its policies for tenure, or a schedule of its athletic events, the college website is the central location to find this disparate information and much more. Yet, despite the online availability of so much information from colleges, observers have argued that higher education institutions are not providing access to meaningful information on student learning (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006).

Whether for reasons of accountability or for reasons of integrity, as the use of and expectations from the Internet continue to grow, institutions will be called to place more and more information about student learning and quality assurance on their websites.

Why should institutions post information about student learning on their institution web pages? The reason is twofold. First, the information on the websites can tell various external stakeholders (such as students, families, and alumni) what students learn at the institution and what the institution is doing to assure quality. Second, the information can signal to internal stakeholders (such as faculty, staff, and administrators) that their assessment efforts are valued and can provide these audiences with the data to make decisions and improve student learning. Third, through online communication of assessment information, institutions can meet a higher level of accountability. From the perspective of the regional accrediting agencies, for example, making information on student learning public is a matter of institutional integrity (Provezis, 2010). Whether for reasons of accountability or for reasons of integrity, as the use of and expectations from the Internet continue to grow, institutions will be called to place more and more information about student learning and quality assurance on their websites.

Given that a college's central function is education, one may reasonably ask: What information is publicly available about student learning and the assessment of that learning on the college website? Researchers at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) examined college and university websites to learn what assessment information was being made available. The research involved looking at nearly 1,000 institution websites of undergraduate degree-granting 2-year and 4-year institutions (for details on the methodology, see Appendix A). The goal of studying institution websites was to find out if institutions posted assessment information, what information they posted and where, and what factors possibly influenced the posting of assessment information.

Given the complexity and somewhat disparate questions of the research project, the findings were organized into three reports which may be viewed individually or as a full report: *Revealing Student Learning Outcomes: National Transparency Initiatives Make a Difference,* discusses the role of the national transparency initiatives on the assessment information posted; *The Changing Landscape of Transparency in Student Learning Outcomes Assessment*, compares and contrasts the study of websites done in 2009 with the one completed in 2010; and *Presenting*

and Using Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Results, focuses on the assessment results that were found and the ways that institutions use them. Summarizing these three reports, this overview outlines the major factors associated with institutional transparency; the audiences that the posted assessment information appears to address; and the amounts and types of information found on the websites, specifically looking for student learning outcomes statements, assessment activities, evidence of student learning, and the usez of student learning evidence. Finally, this overview offers a means for institutions to address transparency through using the NILOA Transparency Framework as a tool.

Factors Influencing Transparency

Calls have been made for institutions to show more information about what students learn, and several factors appear to influence institutions to do so. While the NILOA report *Revealing Student Learning Outcomes: National Transparency Initiatives Make a Difference* discusses these findings in more detail, some of the highlights from that study are presented here.

Calls have been made for institutions to show more information about what students learn, and several factors appear to influence institutions to do so.

Four national transparency initiatives created by several national higher education organizations and used by member institutions to present information about students and on institution performance were examined: the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), Transparency By Design (TbD), and Achieving the Dream (ATD). (For full descriptions of each of these initiatives, see Table 1 in *Revealing Student Learning Outcomes*). Participation in these initiatives appeared to have an impact on institutions' efforts to be more transparent. An analysis of institutions participating in these initiatives versus those not participating showed that institutions participating in the initiatives not only provided assessment information on their respective initiative web pages, but they also provided more such information on their own websites.

Institutional control—public vs. private/independent—was found to be related to the extent to which institutions show assessment information on their websites (see *Revealing Student Learning Outcomes*). Public institutions, more so than independent institutions, described their assessment activities, posted assessment results, and discussed the use of results more frequently than did independent institutions. Of course, many public institutions are under state mandate to provide information, so this requirement may have influenced the information posted (For a more detailed description of state policies and institutional assessment activities, see Ewell, Jankowski, & Provezis, 2010). Private institutions may not have undergone the same type of scrutiny from state oversight; therefore, this could be a factor as to why less information was found on these institutions' websites.

The regional accreditation process appears to be an impetus for institutions' participation in institutional assessment activities and, as such, accreditation has advanced collegiate assessment on many campuses (Jankowski & Makela, 2010; Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). While none of the regional accreditation organizations specifically require institutions to post assessment information (Provezis, 2010), many institutions have created an accreditation page on their websites that includes assessment information and are incorporating assessment information throughout their web pages. Specifically, those institutions accredited in the last three years were found to be more likely to post their student learning outcomes statements, assessment activities, assessment results, and examples of how they were using evidence gained from student learning assessment than institutions not accredited recently.

Audiences for Assessment Information

There are two primary audiences for assessment information: those internal to the campus community and those external to it (Ewell, 2009; Suskie, 2009; Volkwein, 2008; Walvoord, 2004; 2010). In his NILOA Occasional Paper, *Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the Tension*, Ewell (2009) wrote that the assessment process and information gathered from it is usually different for internal audiences than it is for external audiences. Internal audiences seek assessment information that is ongoing rather than finite and that can be used for improvement. External audiences, on the other hand, seek assessment information that is more compliance driven and that can be easily reported (for example, a test score). Regardless of the intent, institutions can communicate assessment information that both informs internal audiences and responds to external audiences if the information is centrally located and meaningfully presented with clear language and graphics. Instead, however, the NILOA studies of websites found that most assessment information was on the web pages geared to internal audiences, such as the offices of institutional research and chief academic officers and, furthermore, that most of this information was difficult to understand for someone unfamiliar with assessment. First described in our original study on websites (*Exploring the Landscape: What Institutional Websites Reveal About Student Learning Outcomes Activities*), these findings were confirmed in our most recent study (*The Changing Landscape of Transparency in Student Learning Outcomes Assessment*). Given this finding continues to emerge, more can and should be done to make assessment information accessible to the different audiences seeking it.

The NILOA studies of websites found that most assessment information was on the web pages geared to internal audiences, such as the offices of institutional research and chief academic officers.

Student Learning Outcomes Statements

The skills, knowledge, attitudes, and competencies that students should acquire as a result of their college educational experiences should be embodied in student learning outcomes statements. Most colleges indicate that they have such statements at the institution level, as evidenced by two thirds of the chief academic officers surveyed in the NILOA National Survey (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009). A reasonable expectation following from that finding is that institutions would post these statements on their websites, and yet only 52% of institutions were found to do so. Even when statements were posted, they were often difficult to find because they were embedded in larger reports or documents (see *The Changing Landscape of Transparency in Student Learning Outcomes Assessment*). The difference between the number of institutions with statements and the number who post them suggests that institutions have this information but the effort was not made to make it available. In other words, colleges have created student learning outcomes statements—possibly for accreditation or strategic planning—but they are not communicating them widely enough.

Assessment Activities

Chief academic officers purport that their institutions engage in more assessment activities than are represented on their institution websites (Jankowski & Makela, 2010). From the time of the original review of institution websites, in 2009, until the review a year later, in 2010, NILOA researchers found that within just one year institutions had begun to show more information. Even so, they were still not showing as much as they were claiming to have done (see *The Changing Landscape of Transparency in Student Learning Outcomes Assessment*). While assessment activities may be in place, the mechanism for communicating about these activities may be underdeveloped or misunderstood. The Internet provides the means to post assessment information, but an institution needs to decide what to show and how to show it. Given the call for more information, institutions must,

at the very least, acknowledge the work they are doing in this area. Ideally, for a fuller picture of learning at the institution, this information should include both direct and indirect assessment information. To date, however, the most prominent information found on institution websites are results of surveys—indirect measures of learning. Granted, surveys do provide data that, if presented well, can be easily digested by multiple audiences. Even so, the demands placed on colleges require more substantial, robust information about what students actually learn at an institution. By not providing the right amount of information, institutions are falling short of meeting demands for greater transparency.

Evidence of Student Learning

While having stated objectives and a means for assessing are important steps toward understanding student learning, more information is needed to assure that learning is actually taking place. Institutions can show such evidence of student learning by presenting results from their assessment activities. Most institutions by now should have results of some kind. The NILOA research sought to see if those results were available via institution websites, and the report *Presenting and Using Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Results* explains that in many cases institutions were reporting results of learning outcomes assessment information on the institution web pages (see *Presenting and Using Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Results*). Nearly 80% of institutions included performance indicators such as graduation rates, placement rates, licensure pass rates, fact books and so on, while 57% posted results such as survey findings and standardized tests. Even so, this information tended to be difficult to find and was often buried in longer reports that lacked a summary of the findings. Given the difficulty of finding the documents containing this information, it is unlikely that average Internet users off campus would search for this information. Furthermore, it is doubtful that more than a handful of people on campus would be aware of the information either. By obfuscating the results, institutions are not promoting their use. Instead, the institutions must prioritize making the information easily found and understood.

While having stated objectives and a means for assessing are important steps toward understanding student learning, more information is needed to assure that learning is actually taking place.

Use of Evidence of Student Learning

Explaining how assessment activities are being used provides the public with an idea that institutions are continuously examining the quality of the education they provide and making decisions that lead to improvement. Yet, in describing how assessment information was being used, only about one third (34%) of the institutions provided examples of use. As expected, most institutions stated that the results were used for improvement, to complete regional accreditation self-studies, to alter curriculum or policy, or to inform institution decision-making. More than half of the institutions said that the assessment results were used for institution self-study, whereas only about 30% of institutions were using assessment for improvement. At this point, none of the regional accreditation organizations requires complete transparency of the accreditation process and reports. While it may not be necessary to provide complete transparency, a worthwhile venture for institutions would be to provide reflections on lessons learned through the self-study process. Assessment highlights could also be featured regularly on a website.

Next Steps

The Internet provides a useful platform for communicating information in a timely manner. The NILOA website research found that while institutions post assessment information more frequently than many would likely have guessed, the information is often hidden or not presented effectively. The NILOA research also found that factors associated with institutions' showing information online are

their participation in national transparency initiatives, institutional control, and the accreditation process. The three NILOA reports *Revealing Student Learning Outcomes: National Transparency Initiatives Make a Difference; The Changing Landscape of Transparency in Student Learning Outcomes Assessment;* and *Presenting and Using Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Results* offer a more in-depth look at these findings.

For reasons of institutional integrity and accountability and because the desire among higher education stakeholders will surely increase to know more about what institutions are doing to assure they are providing a quality education, institutions should consider ways to better communicate assessment information on their own websites. One recommended tool for examining an institution's website is NILOA's Transparency Framework, which is available on the NILOA website at https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/ourwork/transparency-framework. The NILOA Transparency Framework not only provides ways to improve web-based communications but also points to examples of institutions already working toward web-based transparency. The Transparency Framework is organized in six categories representing the six components of student learning outcomes assessment: student learning outcomes statements, assessment plans, assessment resources, current assessment activities, evidence of student learning, and use of student learning evidence. Users of the Transparency Framework can evaluate their own institution websites or develop an assessment website by reviewing each category to see if that information is available and how it is being presented on the institution website. By using this framework as a guide, institutions can make a focused effort to communicate assessment information both for external accountability and for internal improvement.

The NILOA website research found that while institutions post assessment information more frequently than many would likely have guessed, the information is often hidden or not presented effectively.

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Appendix: Web Study Methodology

The 2010 NILOA Web Study sought to document the impact of national transparency initiatives on institutional learning outcomes disclosure through an examination of institution websites for evidence of assessment activity, public disclosure of results, and examples of the use of assessment findings. A team of NILOA researchers systematically reviewed 200 institution websites from July 2010 to September 2010 over a period of 120 hours to answer the following guiding questions:

1. ***What and how much information do institutions display on their website regarding student learning outcomes assessment?***
2. ***Which institution web pages provide information about assessment of student learning outcomes?***
3. ***To what extent do institutions show results and describe their use of the results on their institution web pages?***
4. ***What and how much information do institutions display on national transparency initiative websites regarding student learning outcomes assessment?***
5. ***Is there a difference in learning outcomes disclosure on websites between institutions involved in national transparency initiatives and institutions not involved in those initiatives?***

The results of this research are presented in a series of reports from NILOA on the web study findings.

The Web Study Sample

The sample for the web study was composed of two sets of institutions: 1) 100 institutions involved in a national transparency initiative and 2) 100 institutions not involved in a national transparency initiative but similar in size, control, setting, type, and regional accreditation to the institutions involved in national transparency initiatives. The national transparency initiatives with which the first set of 100 randomly selected institutions was involved included the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), Achieving the Dream (ATD), the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN), and Transparency by Design (TbD). The population was determined by visiting each national transparency initiative website and adding each institution listed into a database. The entire population of institutions involved in any of the above national transparency initiatives was 1,245. Those institutions were then cleaned by removing several that were not regionally accredited or undergraduate degree-granting postsecondary institution in the U.S. This list was also checked against the 2009 NILOA National Survey list to ensure that the institutions included were part of the larger NILOA study population. The final institution population included 1,196 eligible institutions.

To determine the sample of national transparency initiative websites to scan, 100 institutions were selected from the national transparency initiative population starting with those that were part of the 2009 NILOA Web Study. Involvement in national transparency initiatives by these 100 institutions was relatively evenly distributed across the four national transparency initiatives, except for the Transparency by Design initiative, for which all of the involved institutions were selected because of their small number (n=14). The sample of national transparency initiative institutions is shown in Table A1, below. The 100 institutions not involved in national transparency initiatives were selected for the sample based on their matching one of the institutions involved in a national transparency initiative.

Table A1. National Transparency Initiative Institution Sample

National Transparency Initiative	**Institution Sample (n)**
Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)	30
Achieving the Dream (ATD)	28
University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN)	28
Transparency by Design (TbD)	14

The Web Study Procedure

This web study had three components: an institution-wide web page scan, a national transparency initiative web page scan, and a gathering of institutional student learning outcomes statements. Researchers first scanned a designated set of web pages for each institution, beginning with seven institution-wide web pages:

- home
- admissions/prospective students
- institutional research office/institutional effectiveness office
- provost/chief academic officer/academic affairs
- assessment/accountability
- accreditation
- center for teaching and learning

Any information related to student learning outcomes assessment activities, results, or use found within five mouse clicks[1] from an initial institution-wide web page was recorded in a database. The information's location in relation to the initial page, measured by the number of clicks to get to that location, was a proxy for the information's degree of transparency. In addition to recording the occurrences of student learning outcomes assessment activities, results, and use, researchers made notes in an "other" category of unique or unanticipated findings, making it possible to document the various assessment activities and results posted on institution websites.

The types of assessment activities documented in this scan included standardized tests, local tests, national student surveys, local student surveys, alumni surveys, other surveys, portfolios, capstones, awards for assessment, and faculty/staff development.[2] In addition, researchers captured screen shots and document examples from the institution websites.

Researchers recorded evidence of assessment results and use found on institution-wide web pages in the database as well. Results include student learning outcomes assessment data, findings, analysis, as well as use of the data. Institutions were marked in the database as showing results if they provided publicly available evidence of institution performance as well as indirect and direct evidence of student learning on the institution website. If results and use were found on the institution web pages, researchers clearly stated the assessment activity for which the results were posted (such as NSSE, CLA, etc.) and then indicated where the results were found (such as in the self-study, off the institutional research page, etc.). In a text box in the database, using keywords from the *Results and Use Web Scan Researcher Guide*[3] prepared for the study, researchers provided structured answers to the following three questions:

1. ***Did the institution present data or information on assessment results?***
2. ***How are the assessment results presented?***
3. ***How does the institution use the results of student learning outcomes assessment?***

In the second part of the web study, researchers reviewed the website of the national transparency initiative in which each institution was involved, if the institutions were involved in one. This meant, as an example, visiting the VSA website and recording in the study database whether there was information on student learning outcomes assessment activity for a specific institution at the website and, if so, whether results were posted there.

The third part of the web study procedure involved researchers gathering institution-wide student learning outcomes statements from each institution website. Information was recorded in the study database as to whether the statements were easily found on the website or were hidden within documents and whether the statement's language clearly related to student learning outcomes.

Reflection and Reviewer Information

Each section of the web study database form for researchers included an area for comments and additional items related to learning outcomes. Also, the researcher's initials, the date the web scan was conducted, and the length of time taken to complete the scan were recorded because each website was visited at a specific moment in time and was likely to be updated after the researcher scanned the site. Researcher training, consistency, and communication were facilitated via practice web scans, training sessions, periodic reflective journaling, midterm data analyses, and group feedback sessions. Reflective journaling was done at the completion of every 20 scans or at the end of every week, whichever came first. This allowed the researchers to think back and comment upon the study procedure in general as well as to reflect on any trends or gaps found while scanning the websites.

[1] Marketing research has suggested that Internet users are not likely to look for information beyond three to four mouse clicks on a website (Geissler, Zinkhan, & Watson, 2006). To ensure generous and complete review in this study and to allow for deeper exploration of the site, five clicks were used for this web scan procedure.

[2] See Jankowski and Makela's *Exploring the Landscape: What Institutional Websites Reveal About Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Activities* (2010) for definitions of each of these activities: https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/WebScanReport.pdf

[3] Please contact njankow2@illinois.edu if you would like a copy of the *Results and Use Web Scan Researcher Guide*.

Data Analysis

Cleaning of the data prior to data analysis involved making sure there were no missing data, reviewing the comments in the reflections for any potential analysis issues, and reviewing identified analysis issues that had been updated throughout the scanning process. Two institutions were removed from analysis as the regional accreditation status of one was withdrawn and another institution was closed. To keep the number of national transparency initiative institutions and noninitiative institutions at 100 each, these two institutions were replaced in the sample with similar matched institutions. Descriptive statistics for the combined 200 institutions as well as for each set of 100 institutions were run in SPSS, as were Chi-square analyses between the matched groups and within the initiative population. Analyses were run to examine the significance of control, institution type, accreditation region, and date of last accreditation on public disclosure of student learning outcomes information. Text from the database's results and use boxes as well as from the national transparency initiative website comment boxes were coded and analyzed for themes.

The starting point in coding the text was the list of descriptive terms and questions to consider when looking at posted institutional use and results. This list was developed from the literature on effective reporting, including such sources as Ketcheson (2001), Middaugh (2010), Suskie (2009), Volkwein (2010), and Walvoord (2004; 2012). Coding of the written comments was initially done using the terms given in the study's guide, and then additional codes were developed as needed based on the frequency of a comment or the inability of the then-current list to capture the comments recorded by the researchers. Once an initial coding of text was complete, codes were reviewed for clarity, for ability to capture comments, and for possible redundancies. Changes were made on the second review and each comment was read again to ensure that the coding fully captured the comment coherently.

Limitations

One limitation of this study stems from the research team's knowledge of and experience with navigating institution websites. Compared to average users of the Internet, this research team probably had a better idea of the location of information and how to search for it, potentially finding more paths to information and generally more assessment information in five clicks than the average user would.

As a second limitation of this study, the sample of institutions and the national transparency initiative population is not representative of the population of regionally accredited undergraduate degree-granting institutions in the U.S. as the institutions involved in these national transparency initiatives are more likely than is the larger population of institutions to be private, baccalaureate, and master's institutions. This may be reflective of the institutions involved in the initiatives themselves or of the types of initiatives—such as U-CAN, which is specifically for private institutions.

Another limitation of this study concerns the medium of the website itself, which has the potential to be continuously changed and updated. A website scan captures a snapshot of a website at one moment in time and may not necessarily reflect practice at a later time. Scanning institution websites gathers information that may partly reflect the importance an institution places on the Internet as a means of communicating information as well as the institution's financial and technological capacities. By looking at specific pages and predetermined content criteria, this study addressed this limitation to some extent. Finally, inter-rater reliability was a concern in this study, as in any project with multiple researchers, and steps were taken to address it. First, before researchers began to gather data, they received training on how to scan. Second, the researchers' periodic sharing of reflections provided a means to regularly discuss data-gathering experiences. Finally, feedback sessions, meetings, and discussions provided additional contexts for training.

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NILOA National Advisory Panel

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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.

The ideas and information contained in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Carnegie Corporation of New York, Lumina Foundation for Education, or The Teagle Foundation.

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. www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry , was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.
- Peter Ewell joined NILOA as a senior scholar in November 2009.

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