

# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

October 2009

## More Than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education

George Kuh and Stanley Ikenberry



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Full Report

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## National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (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.

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Data Collection and Analysis

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.



Allocating resources to assessment, as to every other institutional function, is an expression of an institution's priorities, culture, and values. Some institutions have more resources to devote to student learning outcomes assessment; some colleges and universities offer a greater variety of programs and should spend more resources on assessment. While in the past campuses were left to determine the quality of effort they would direct to assessing student learning, the time has come for a systematic analysis of what institutions of varying levels of organizational and programmatic complexity should invest to do assessment right and to ensure the results are used appropriately.

### Seeking Common Ground

Focusing on these and other questions of accomplishment can be the common ground where those who demand greater accountability by *documenting* accomplishment and those whose primary interest in assessment is *enhancing* accomplishment can come together. Establishing new or different relationships and opportunities for dialogue is essential to nurturing a collective commitment to assessing student learning and using the data to improve. For institutions as well as for individual faculty members, learning outcomes assessment is more likely to thrive in a climate that promotes and supports experimentation, variety, and responsible transparency. Assessment results are more likely to be useful if the assessment's prime questions are clearly articulated in advance. Accountability interests are more likely to be met if the specific concerns of policy makers are made explicit. Put simply, assessing student learning outcomes just to post a score on an institution website is of little value to campuses, students, parents, or policy makers.

### Recommended Actions

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While considerable assessment activity is underway on college and university campuses, American higher education is far from where it needs to be in assessing student learning and in using the results to improve outcomes. Our findings suggest that the productive use of learning outcomes assessment information by campuses and programs to inform decisions and to improve teaching and learning remains the most important unattended challenge in this effort.

In the final section of this report we offer recommendations to presidents, provosts, governing boards and many others who play important roles in shaping the future of learning outcomes assessment in American higher education. Our message to faculty, for example, was that they must systematically collect data about student learning, carefully examine and discuss these results with colleagues, and use this information to improve student outcomes. This challenging process may well reveal shortcomings on the part of students, instructors, the curriculum, and institutions. But the exercise need not and should not be threatening if assessment results are to be meaningfully interpreted and if changes are to be made to improve outcomes.

### Last Word

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Our recommended actions fall short of an exhaustive set of steps needed to strengthen American higher education through the better knowledge of student learning outcomes and the more effective use of that knowledge. While much is being done, far more will be required to ensure students accomplish what they need to respond to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to contribute meaningfully and responsibly to civic life. Outcomes assessment is more extensive than some think, but considerably less than is needed to secure the future to which we aspire.



## More Than You Think, Less Than We Need

*“Colleges... do so little to measure what students learn between freshman and senior years. So doubt lurks: how much does a college education – the actual teaching and learning that happens on campus – really matter?” (Leonhardt, 2009)<sup>1</sup>*

The present moment is sobering: How can higher education reduce expenditures, maintain the gains achieved in access, improve graduation rates, and remain affordable while at the same time ensure that students acquire the skills, competencies, and dispositions that prepare them for a lifetime of learning in an increasingly competitive global marketplace?

The challenges are unprecedented in their severity and urgency. To effectively address them, faculty members, provosts, and presidents must have good information about what undergraduate students learn to make informed decisions about instructional approaches, staffing, resource allocation, and other policies and practices that will help students attain the desired outcomes.

### Why Assessment, Why Now?

Over the next several years, many more high school graduates and adults must prepare for, matriculate into, and complete a certificate or degree in postsecondary education. *Access to and success in college* are substantially influenced by prior academic achievement. If students leave high school poorly prepared for college, even though they may have taken the courses and received the diploma, access to college can be an empty promise. Learning is a continuum; gaps and weaknesses at one point—whether in high school or in college—create barriers to successful performance at the next level. For this reason, it is imperative that educators have student learning outcomes data to better understand what is working and what is not, to identify curricular and pedagogical weaknesses, and to use this information to improve performance.

The recent economic downturn has made ensuring *affordability* and sustaining *educational quality* more difficult. Cuts in state aid to students and campuses coupled with a diminished capacity for students and families to pay for college threatens to limit access for low-income students, fueling even greater inequities in college enrollment and degree completion. Reductions in public and private support in the face of rising enrollments make it especially challenging for institutions to enhance student learning and overall institutional effectiveness.

In the May/June 2009 issue of *Trusteeship*, Jane Wellman examines the affordability-learning outcomes link, arguing that campuses need to “connect the dots between performance and resources” as they make tough decisions and communicate with policy makers and the public.<sup>2</sup> When campuses spend money on programs and services that do not achieve the intended results, those resources could instead be invested in things that make a real difference to student learning and success.

Simply put, colleges and universities must become smarter and better at assessing student learning outcomes; at using the data to inform resource allocation and other decisions; and at communicating these responsible, mission-relevant actions to their constituents.

### **Ultimately, access and affordability are empty gestures in the absence of evidence of accomplishment.**

Ultimately, access and affordability are empty gestures in the absence of *accomplishment*. What students learn, what faculty members create, and what public service postsecondary institutions render to society—these are the outcomes that matter. In terms of student accomplishment, courses, credits, certificates, and degrees are important surrogate markers—but they are only surrogates. It is the broad range of students’ accomplished outcomes that yield the personal, economic, and societal benefits promised by higher education.

*“Now, more than ever, we must understand how well our students are learning so we can target efforts to help students succeed. NILOA has come on the scene at just the right moment.”*

Molly Corbett Broad, President  
American Council on Education

What is the higher education enterprise doing to assure the public that it is delivering on this promise? This report tackles this key question.

### A Rising Chorus

Interest in knowing whether students are benefiting as intended from their postsecondary studies and experiences has been building for more than a decade. A short time ago what was essentially an “inside the academy” conversation—documenting what students have gained from their studies and what they can do as a result—has been joined by constituencies outside the academy including government officials, policy makers, and business leaders. These groups have become more vocal in recent years about wanting more transparency from colleges and universities about the range and level of student accomplishment.

For example, in 2006 the Spellings Commission scolded colleges and universities to become more forthcoming not only about college costs but about student outcomes as well.<sup>3</sup> Around the same time, the nation’s two leading public university associations introduced a Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), and so far more than 300 institutions have agreed as part of this experiment to collect and report student learning outcomes along with other information. Many private or independent colleges and universities, encouraged by their affinity associations such as the Council of Independent Colleges, are also using standardized and locally developed instruments to document student learning; some have gone public with their results on the University and College Accountability Network (U-CAN) website. Another noteworthy initiative undertaken by regionally accredited, adult-serving, distance education schools is Transparency by Design. Over the past decade, the regional and specialized accreditors have gradually shifted from *encouraging* to *requiring* member institutions to assess and provide evidence of student performance *and* how these results are being used to improve outcomes.

By all accounts, many institutions have heard the call to be more systematic in assessing student performance. Almost every regional or national meeting sponsored by an institutional or disciplinary membership association including sociologists, student affairs administrators, international services staff, librarians, and others has one or more sessions addressing this topic. Several annual well-attended national and regional meetings focus specifically on assessment. Another indicator of the growth of the assessment movement is the sharp increase since 2000 in the range of assessment tools and organizations devoted to some aspect of assessment.<sup>4</sup>

Work is underway to explore further the validity and reliability of instruments used to assess learning outcomes such as the CLA, CAAP, and MAPP. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is leading an effort through its VALUE initiative to develop rubrics and a portfolio approach to measure the accomplishment of essential learning outcomes for the 21<sup>st</sup> century ([aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm](http://aacu.org/leap/vision.cfm)). In addition, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is attempting to measure the extent to which the baccalaureate experience prepares students to perform effectively in the workplace and civic life, here and abroad. Finally, the AAC&U and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) have developed a statement of guiding principles to promote and guide assessment, institutional accountability, and public release of performance data.<sup>5</sup> In short, on a number of fronts involving a diverse range of actors, questions about student accomplishment and the assessment of learning outcomes are getting more attention. While informative descriptions of assessment approaches at specific institutions are available, surprisingly little is known about the forms assessment takes on college campuses across the country and how assessment results are being used.

### What is NILOA?

To better understand what is actually happening on campuses with regard to student learning outcomes assessment, we launched the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). With the generous support of [foundations](#)<sup>6</sup> and guidance from a [panel of higher education leaders](#) (p.2), NILOA is a resource for institutions, agencies, and individuals who want to do better work in this area.<sup>7</sup>

*“Assessment of learning is growing, but much more rapid and complete progress needs to be made to better understand and describe what students should know, understand, and be able to do with a college degree.”*

Jamie Merisotis, President and Chief Executive Officer  
Lumina Foundation for Education

This report presents the results of NILOA's first systematic inquiry into student learning outcomes assessment in American higher education. The findings provide a snapshot of the current state of affairs in measuring student learning and the approaches being taken to use those data to improve performance in teaching and learning and to enhance the transparency about student learning outcomes assessment for students, parents, policy makers, and employers.

Beyond analyzing the NILOA National Survey data, the NILOA research team scanned the websites of 725 campuses to learn how these institutions portray and share the results of outcomes assessments. In addition, occasional papers by NILOA on timely topics have been commissioned to inform and stimulate dialogue around outcomes assessment. This report along with other NILOA resources will be available at the NILOA website ([learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://learningoutcomesassessment.org)).

Now, the findings from the NILOA National Survey. Eight observations based on these survey findings summarize the current state of outcomes assessment:

1. Most institutions have identified a common set of learning outcomes that apply to all students.
2. Most institutions use a combination of institution-level and program-level assessment approaches.
3. The most common uses of assessment data relate to accreditation.
4. Assessment approaches and uses of assessment results vary systematically by institutional selectivity.
5. Assessment is driven more by accreditation and a commitment to improve than external pressures from government or employers.
6. Most institutions conduct learning outcomes assessment on a shoestring: 20% have no assessment staff and 65% have two or fewer.
7. Gaining faculty involvement and support remains a major challenge. Campuses would also like more assessment expertise, resources, and tools.
8. Most institutions plan to continue learning outcomes assessment despite budgetary challenges.

## Assessment of Learning Outcomes on U.S. Campuses

To take stock of what institutions are doing to assess student learning outcomes, in spring 2009 we invited provosts or 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. The [NILOA questionnaire](#) focuses on the range of assessment tools and approaches institutions are using, the factors influencing assessment work, and selected other topics such as what institutions need to assess student learning more effectively.

Our work is informed by the growing body of assessment literature including previous efforts to examine the national landscape of assessment practices.<sup>8</sup> For example, as part of a series of *Campus Trends* reports beginning in the mid-1980s and extending through the mid-1990s, Elaine El-Khawas surveyed institutional leaders on their opinions about assessment and found considerable support for its uses in improvement as well as wariness about potential misuses of its results. In the late 1990s, as part of the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Marvin Peterson and his colleagues conducted a comprehensive survey of institutional assessment practices and concluded, among other things, that while considerable assessment activity was underway, there was little evidence that assessment findings were guiding changes in approaches to teaching and learning. Others, such as NILOA Senior Scholar Peter Ewell, have periodically summarized the state of the art of student learning outcomes assessment.<sup>9</sup>

*“By providing a compendium of good assessment practices for different types of campuses, NILOA is a welcome, realistic alternative to a uniform government-managed approach to documenting student learning outcomes.”*

Richard Ekman, President  
Council of Independent Colleges

The NILOA National Survey instrument was organized around four broad questions:

1. What learning outcomes are you measuring at your institution?
2. How are you assessing these outcomes and using the results?
3. What are the major factors prompting assessment at your institution?
4. What do you need to further learning outcomes assessment at your institution?

The questionnaire was initially administered online with multiple follow-ups; later in the survey administration cycle a paper version also was used. All told, 1,518 institutions responded, or 53% of the original sample. The characteristics of these participating institutions reflect the national profile in their institutional sectors, Carnegie classifications, and geographic regions. The relatively high participation rate suggests we can be reasonably confident the survey results provide a reliable portrait of the current state of student learning outcomes assessment.

At the same time, it is likely our data overstate to some degree the amount of assessment going on. Campuses more engaged in assessing student learning may have been more likely to respond to our questionnaire. Some responding academic officers may have painted overly rosy pictures. Still, the snapshot resulting from our data is the most up-to-date and comprehensive portrait of the current state and near-term course of learning outcomes assessment in American higher education.

The appendix contains more information about the survey administration process, institutional characteristics, and data analysis.

## What We Learned

Keeping in mind that the assessment of student learning outcomes and the productive use of results are moving targets, the data provided by provosts or their designates leads us to conclude that more assessment activity may be underway in American higher education than some have assumed.

### 1. Most institutions have a common set of learning outcomes that apply to all students.

About three-quarters of all institutions say they have adopted common learning outcomes for all undergraduate students (Table 1), an essential first step in guiding efforts to assess learning outcomes campus-wide. This relatively high percentage of schools with common learning outcomes is consistent with data assembled by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in a late 2008 survey of its member institutions.<sup>10</sup>

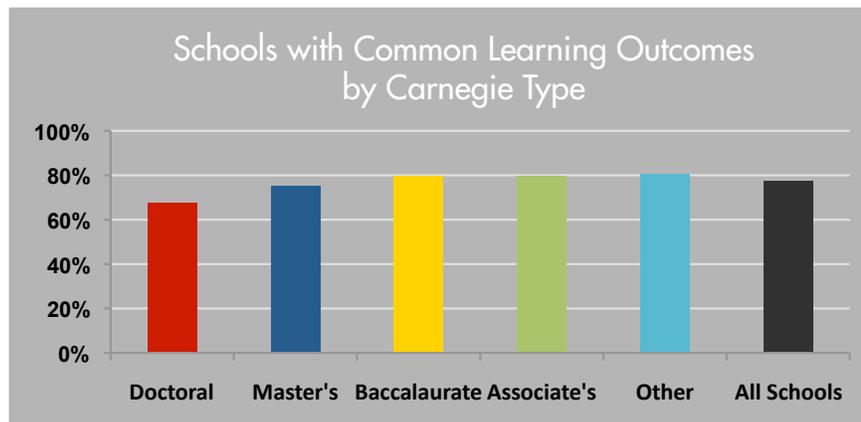


Table 1. Schools with Common Learning Outcomes by Carnegie Type

*“The best way to move the needle on student learning is to assess that learning rigorously and fairly, and this report shows where we are right now and how far we still have to go.”*

W. Robert Connor, President  
The Teagle Foundation

**Three-quarters of all institutions have adopted common learning outcomes for all undergraduate students.**

Larger, research-intensive institutions were less likely than colleges that award primarily baccalaureate or associate's degrees to have common learning outcomes for all undergraduate students. Still, taken as a whole, all types of institutions—ranging from 65% of doctoral universities to 81% of Carnegie-classified “other” colleges—reported having a common set of learning outcomes expectations that apply to all undergraduate students.

Minor variations were also apparent among accreditation regions. Schools in the Northwest region, for example, seemed more likely to have common learning goals for all students while New England campuses were least likely to do so (Table 2).

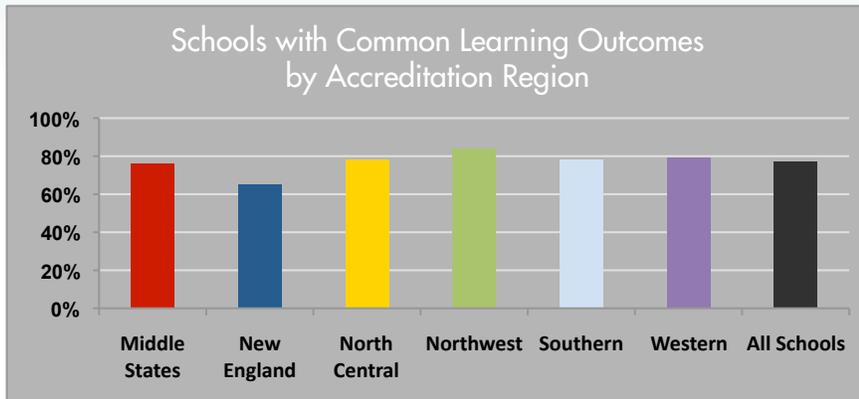


Table 2. Schools with Common Learning Outcomes by Accreditation Region

*“Measuring educational outcomes is of crucial importance and we know too little about how it’s done. NILOA is lifting the veil on learning outcomes measurement and will help us better document and improve student learning.”*

David Shulenburg, Vice President for Academic Affairs  
 Association of Public and Land-grant Universities

## 2. Most institutions use a combination of institution-level and program-level assessment approaches.

We asked provosts what instruments and approaches their institutions use to assess learning outcomes, such as nationally normed measures of general knowledge and skills (e.g., CLA, CAAP, MAPP, WorkKeys, etc.), portfolios, national or locally developed surveys, and alumni and employer surveys and interviews. We also wanted to know what the data represented. That is, were the tools or approaches used with institutionally valid samples so that claims could be made about overall institutional performance? Or was the assessment approach focused on one or more programs, without inferring that the results are representative of the institution as a whole?

Assessment tools and approaches understandably vary depending on what the data are intended to represent. For example:

- The vast majority (92%) of all colleges and universities use at least one assessment approach or tool with institutionally valid samples; two-thirds of all schools use three or more (Table 3).
- Nine of ten schools use at least one institutional-level and one program-level assessment approach; 77% use two or more of each type and 58% use three or more of each (not tabled).
- More than half (55%) of for-profit schools use five or more institution-level assessment approaches.

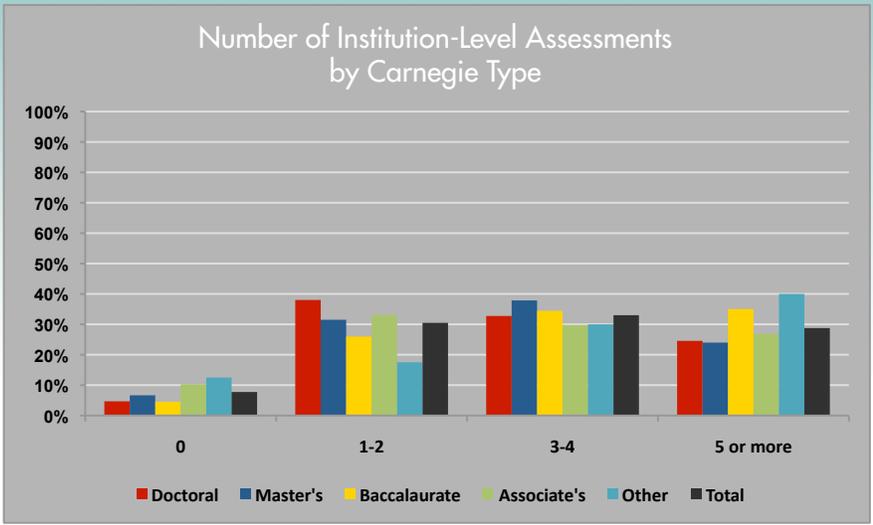


Table 3. Number of Institution-Level Assessments by Carnegie Types

- The most frequent approach used with an institutionally valid sample was a national survey with three-quarters (76%) of all schools doing so (Table 4).
- Two-fifths (39%) of all colleges and universities reported using a standardized measure of general knowledge and skills (e.g., CLA, CAAP, MAPP, WorkKeys).
- Far less common uses with institutionally valid samples were external expert judgments of student work (9%), tests of specialized knowledge (8%), student portfolios (8%), and employer interviews (8%) (Table 4).

*“I am heartened that so many institutions are assessing students’ work with authentic measures such as portfolios as they provide the best evidence of what students can actually do with their education.”*

Carol Geary Schneider, President  
Association of American Colleges and Universities

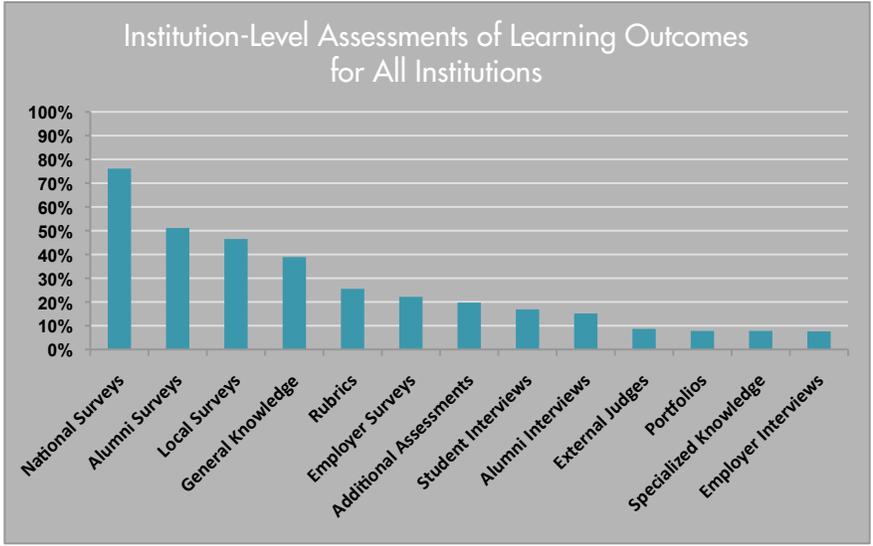


Table 4. Institution-Level Assessments of Learning Outcomes for All Institutions

In contrast, at the program level the most common approaches to assessing learning outcomes were student portfolios, measures of specialized knowledge and other performance assessments, and rubrics (Table 5). More than 80% of institutions indicated at least one of their academic programs was using one of these approaches. While campus-wide assessments tended to rely on surveys, such approaches were infrequently used for program assessment.

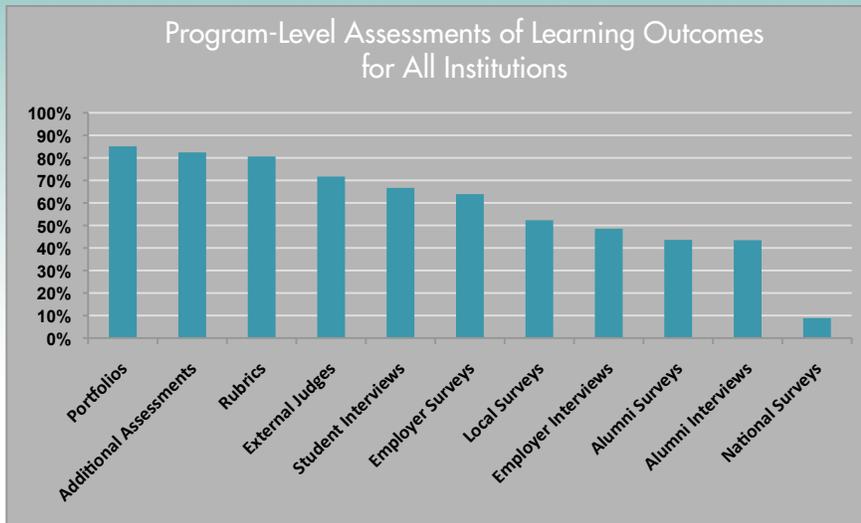


Table 5. Program-Level Assessments of Learning Outcomes for All Institutions

Approaches to institution-level and program-level assessment seem to be consistent with the varied missions of institutions of higher education in the U.S. For example:

- More private colleges used alumni surveys with institutionally valid samples (Table 6).

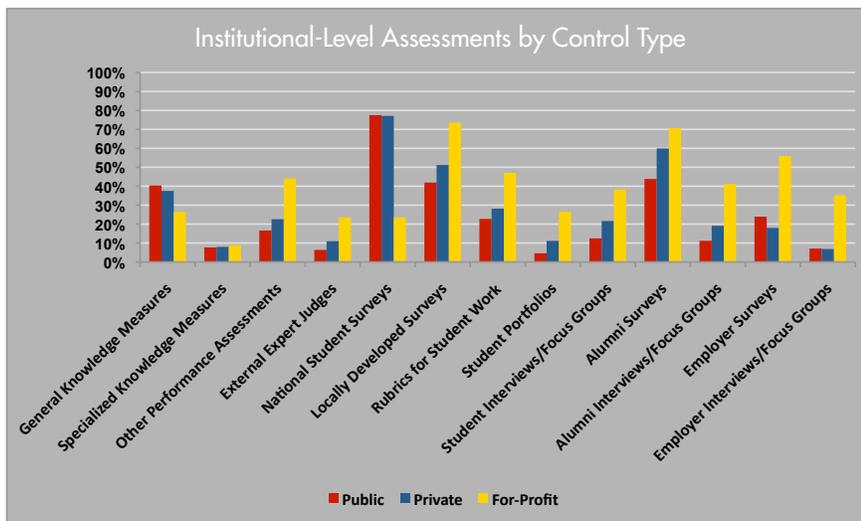


Table 6. Institution-Level Assessments by Control Type

- More public colleges and universities collected data about their students from employers using program-level surveys and interviews (Table 7).
- While for-profit institutions on average use more institutional-level measures than other types of institutions as noted earlier, they are least likely to collect information at the program level, perhaps reflecting the more focused nature of the curriculum (Table 7).
- Community colleges and other associate-degree-granting institutions were more likely to use general knowledge assessments at the program level (28%), and doctoral institutions were more likely to use performance assessments (91%) and alumni surveys (61%) at the program level (Table 8).

*“NILOA can be the connective tissue that links together and advances the work of various groups and organizations interested in using student learning outcomes to improve higher education.”*

George L. Mehaffy, Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change  
American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU)

**Community colleges and other associate-degree-granting institutions were more likely to use general knowledge assessments at the program level.**

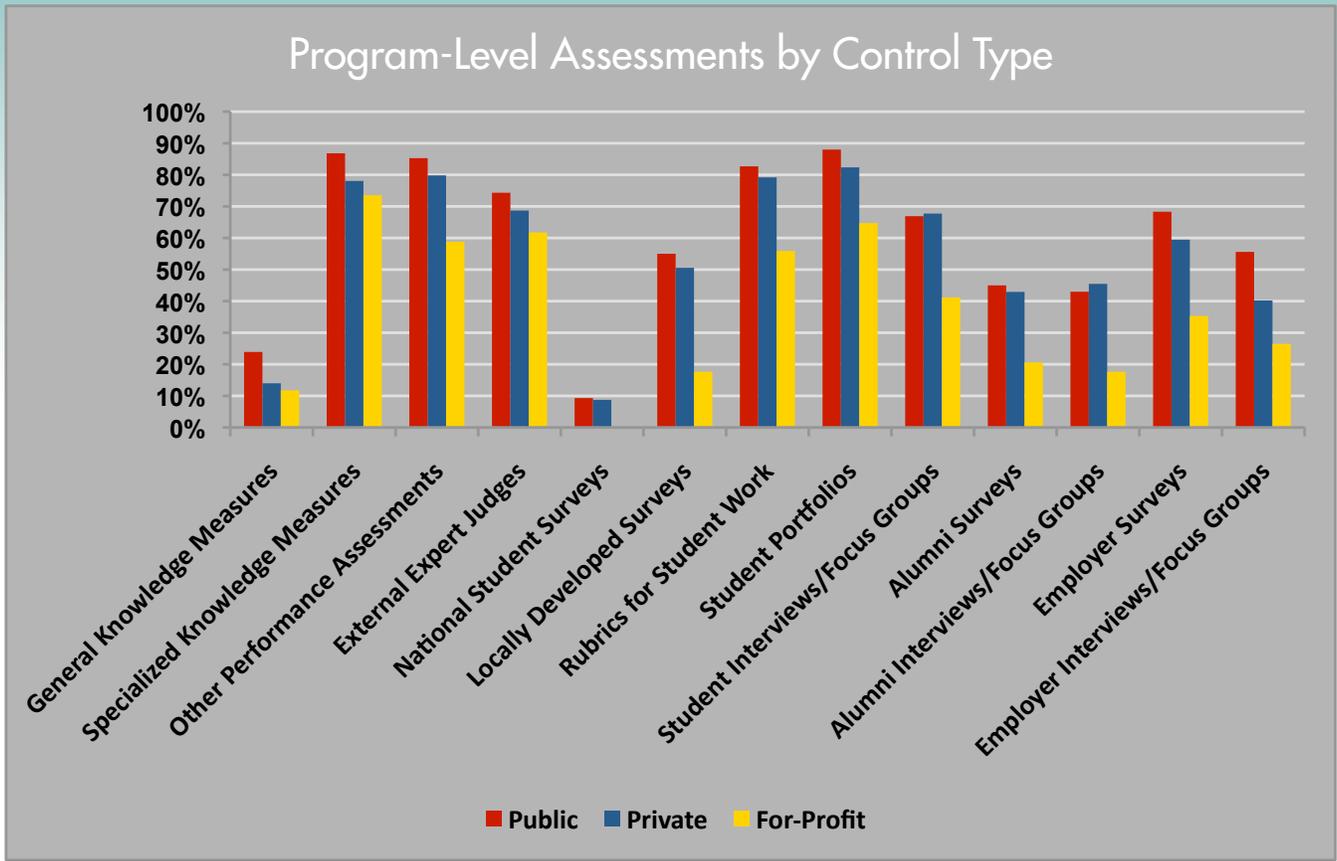


Table 7. Program-Level Assessments by Control Type

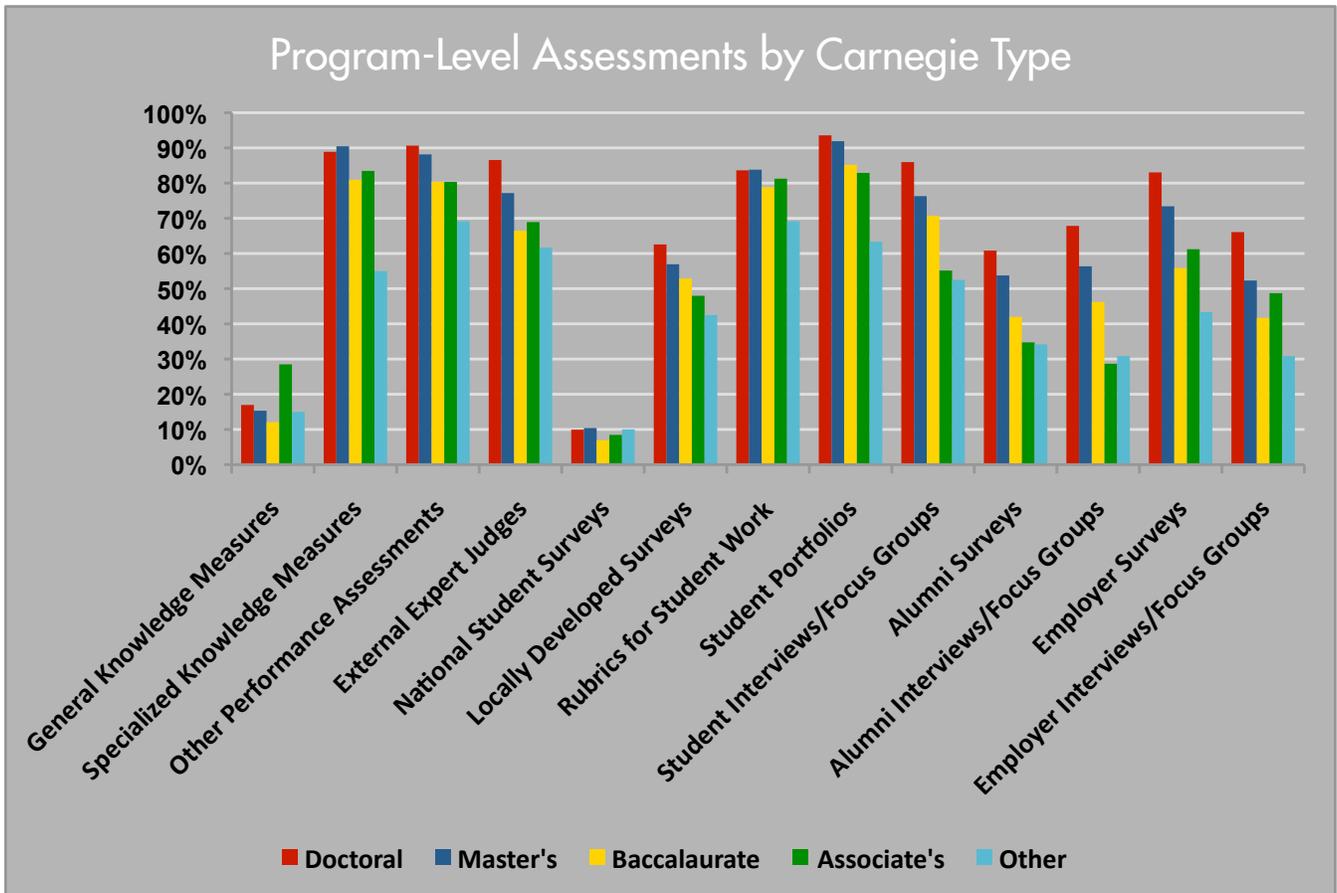


Table 8. Program-Level Assessments by Carnegie Type

Variation in approaches to assessment is not surprising and is, arguably, reassuring. If the results of outcomes assessment are to be useful to campuses and policy makers they need to reflect reality—one aspect of which is the wide-ranging differences across institutions in mission, curriculum, organization, governance, and constituency.

When looking at assessment practices by accreditation region, the six regions appear to have more in common than not, but a few differences are noteworthy:

- In the New England region, for example, fewer colleges and universities used general or specialized knowledge measures, but were more likely to conduct surveys or interviews with employers.
- In contrast, schools in the Southern region were more likely to use standardized tests of general knowledge with institutionally valid samples.
- In the Northwest region, more institutions were using program-level measures of specialized knowledge and were more likely to use locally developed surveys.

The attention given to learning outcomes assessment on college and university campuses almost certainly increases when assessment activities are focused at the program level. At more than seven out of ten institutions (Table 9) at least one department was using:

- specialized knowledge measures
- performance assessments other than grades
- external judgments of student performance
- rubrics
- portfolios
- student interviews, and
- employer surveys

In contrast, only three program-level approaches based on institutionally valid samples were being used by at least half of all colleges and universities, and in each case these were surveys (Table 9). Of course, it is possible that only a small fraction of programs at a given institution are responsible for much of this apparent activity.

*“The nation and the academy need better assessments of student learning; equally important, students deserve it. NILOA’s work documents for the first time the distance traveled as well as the road still ahead...”*

Susan Johnston, Executive Vice President  
Association of Governing Boards

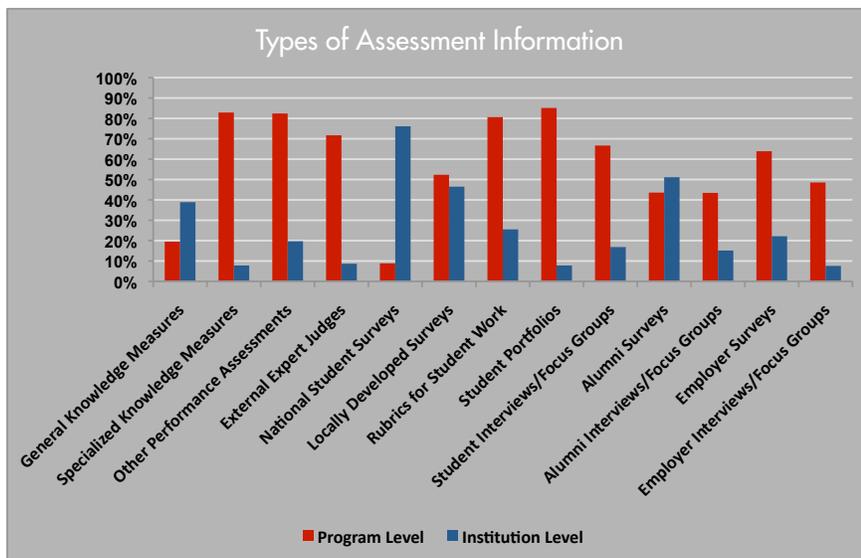


Table 9. Types of Assessment Information

### 3. The most common uses of assessment data relate to accreditation.

How are campuses actually using the results of outcomes assessment? We asked institutions to what extent they were using assessment findings for various purposes, using a four-point scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 4 = very much. The most common use for student learning outcomes data was preparing for accreditation—both institutional (3.27) and programmatic (3.24)—and to a lesser degree for revising undergraduate learning goals (2.71). Using assessment data for making day-to-day decisions about resources, admissions or transfer policies, faculty and staff performance, and other matters was more limited (Table 10).

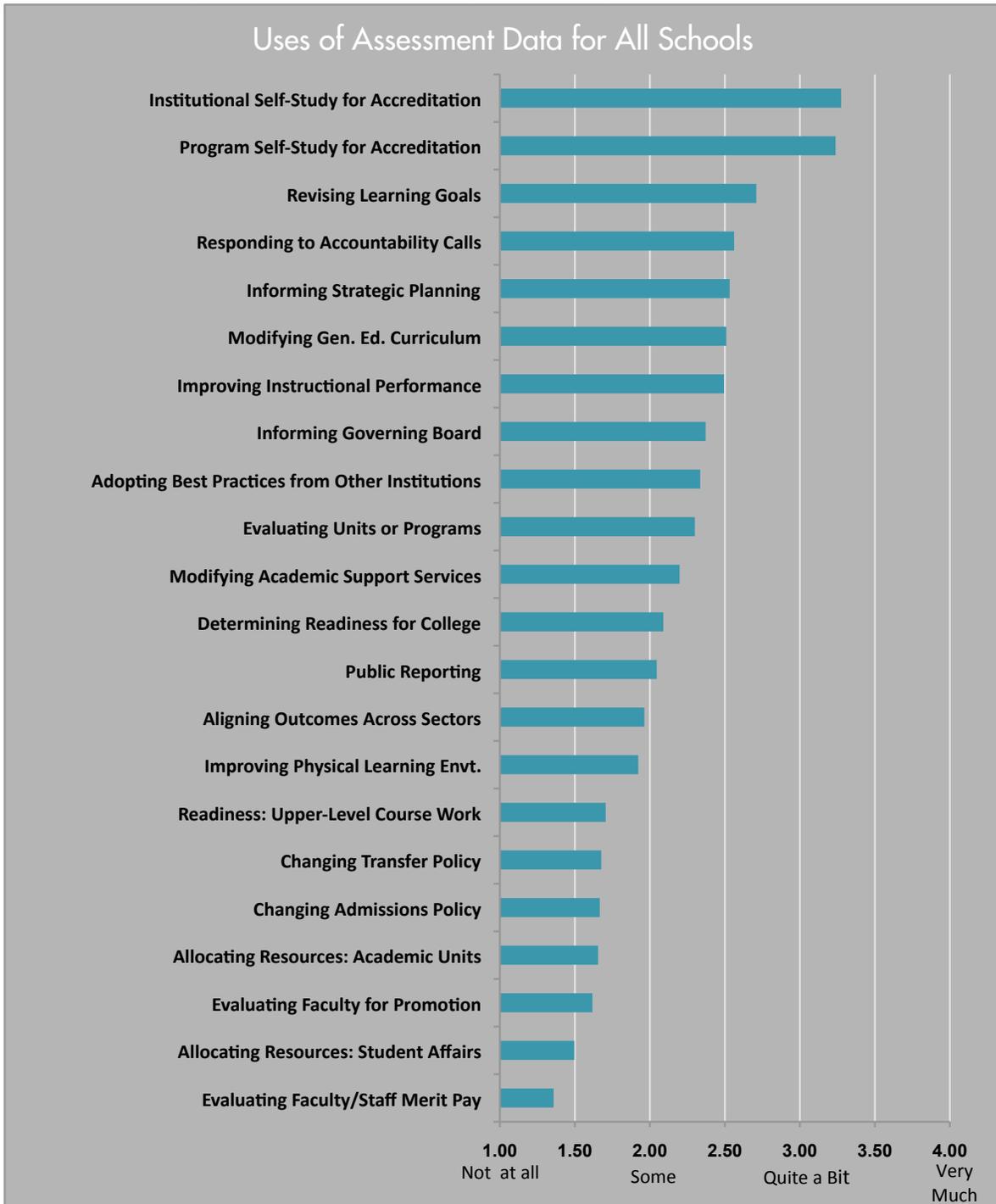


Table 10. Uses of Assessment Data for All Schools

The patterns of assessment data use varied somewhat by institution type (Table 11):

- Compared with other types of schools, fewer doctoral institutions were using outcomes data for determining student readiness for upper-level course work, improving instructional performance, evaluating departments, allocating resources to academic departments, and informing strategic planning.
- On the other hand, more doctoral institutions were using results to respond to calls for accountability such as the VSA and to fulfill specialized academic program accreditation requirements.
- Fewer master’s-level institutions were using assessment results to revise undergraduate learning goals, but more of them often used data for institutional and specialized accreditation and in faculty promotion and tenure decisions.
- Baccalaureate schools, too, were more likely to incorporate assessment results for making faculty promotion and tenure decisions, consistent with their focus on undergraduate education and its improvement.

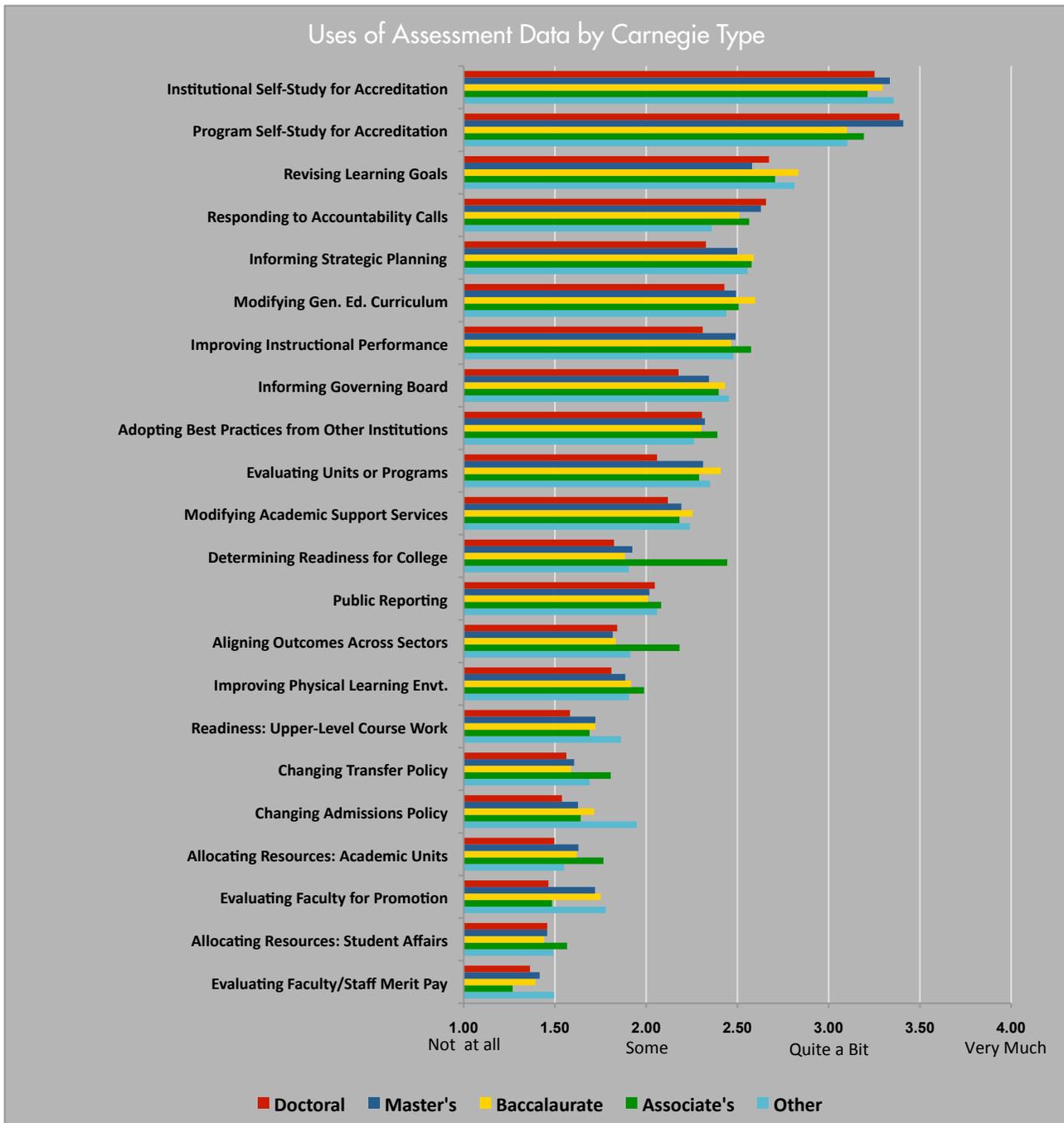


Table 11. Uses of Assessment Data by Carnegie Type

- Community colleges and other associate-degree-granting institutions reported using outcomes data for aligning curricula across sectors, determining student readiness for college course work, improving instructional performance, and allocating resources to academic units—all encouraging findings.
- In terms of institutional control, public colleges and universities were more likely to use assessment data to gauge student readiness for college and/or upper-division work, to revise curricula, to encourage best practices, to guide articulation agreements, to facilitate student transfer, and for public reporting.
- In contrast, more private institutions reported using assessment data for informing faculty promotion and merit-pay decisions; evaluating departments, programs, and units; revising learning goals; and modifying general education requirements (Table 12). These differences were fairly small, however.

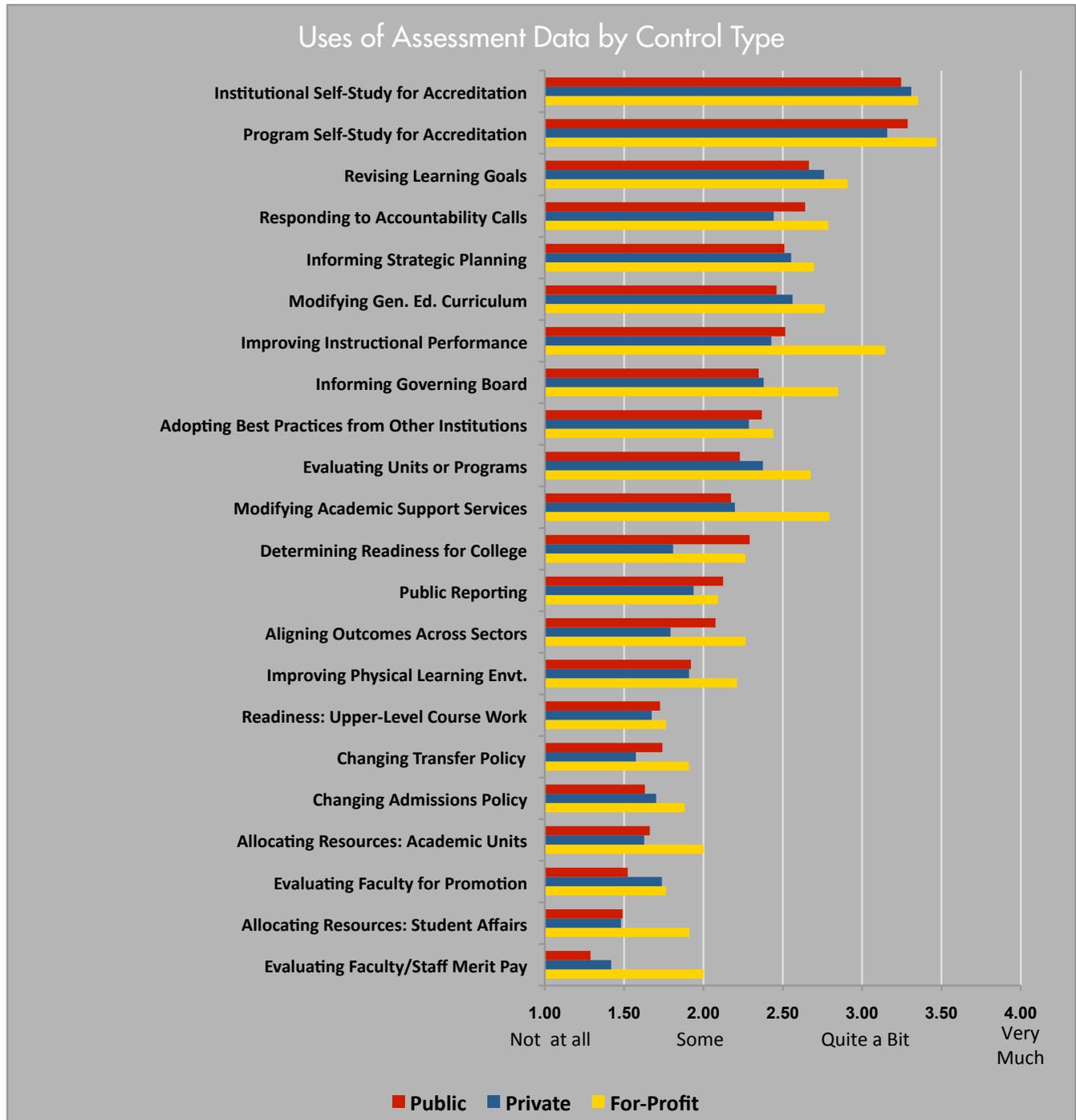


Table 12. Uses of Assessment Data by Control Type

Not only do for-profit schools administer a greater variety of institution-level measures as noted earlier, they also reported the most frequent use of assessment data in every category of use. The for-profit schools' business models, their concerns about persistent questions about their legitimacy, and their desire to achieve accreditation may push these schools to be more active in collecting, reporting, and using assessment results. While only 34 for-profit schools are represented in these data, these schools represent more than half of the accredited, for-profit institutions that award degrees—the two criteria for inclusion in this study. So, it is possible that the results for this category are as reliable as those for the other categories of schools.

**For-profit schools reported the most frequent use of assessment data in every category of use.**

- In terms of accreditation region, schools in New England and, to a lesser extent the Western region, use outcomes data less often than the national average for most purposes we asked about (Table 13).
- For example, fewer colleges and universities in the New England region say they use assessment results in conducting institutional self-studies, evaluating departments, allocating resources to academic units, and evaluating faculty performance.

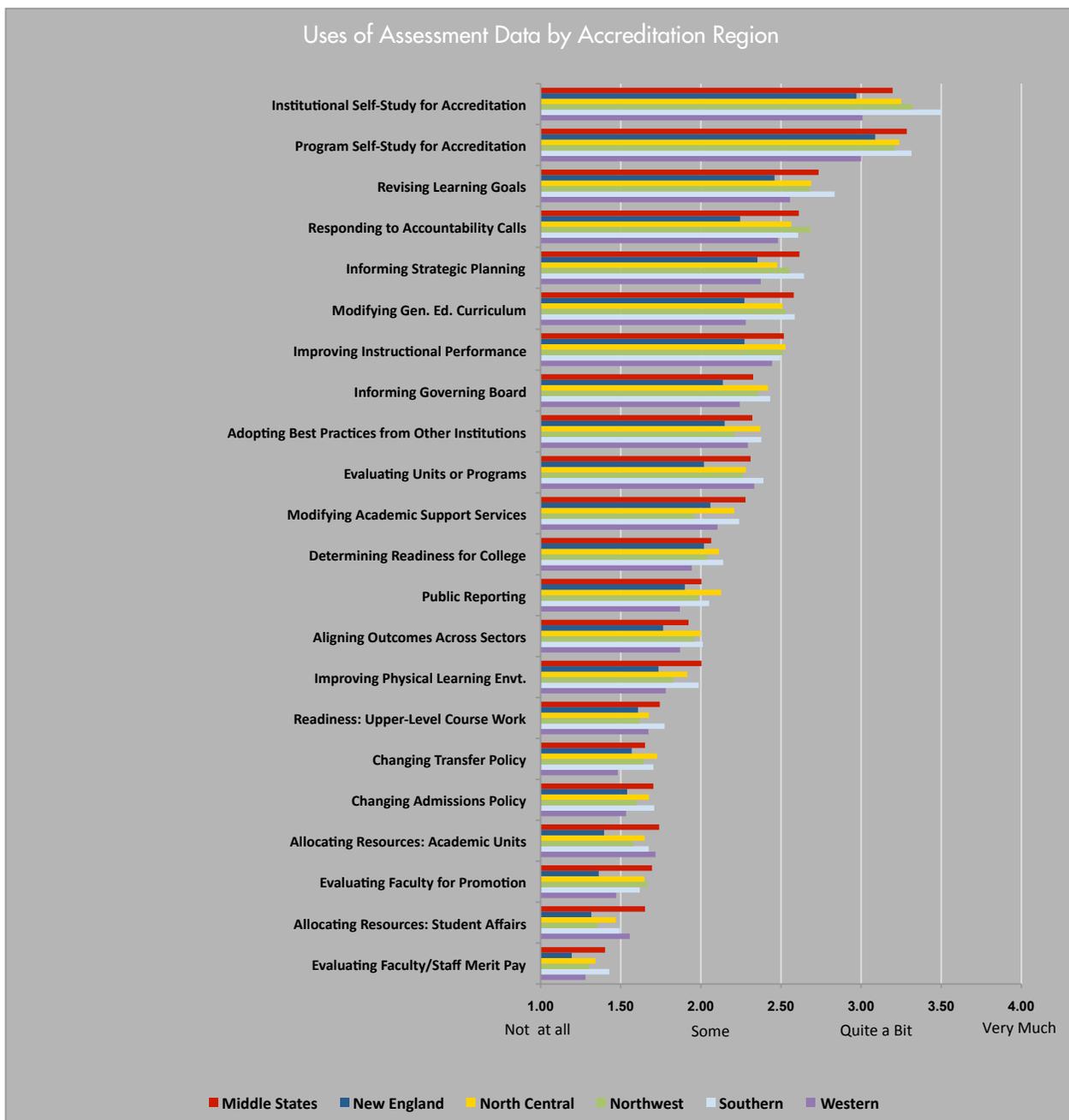


Table 13. Uses of Assessment Data by Accreditation Region

#### 4. Assessment approaches and uses of assessment results vary systematically by institutional selectivity.

In general, less competitive institutions are more likely to administer standardized measures of general knowledge and skills with institutionally valid samples while more of the most competitive colleges and universities use locally developed instruments to collect information from students and alumni (Table 14).

**The most competitive colleges and universities collect information at rates generally comparable to their less selective counterparts but do not use it nearly as often.**

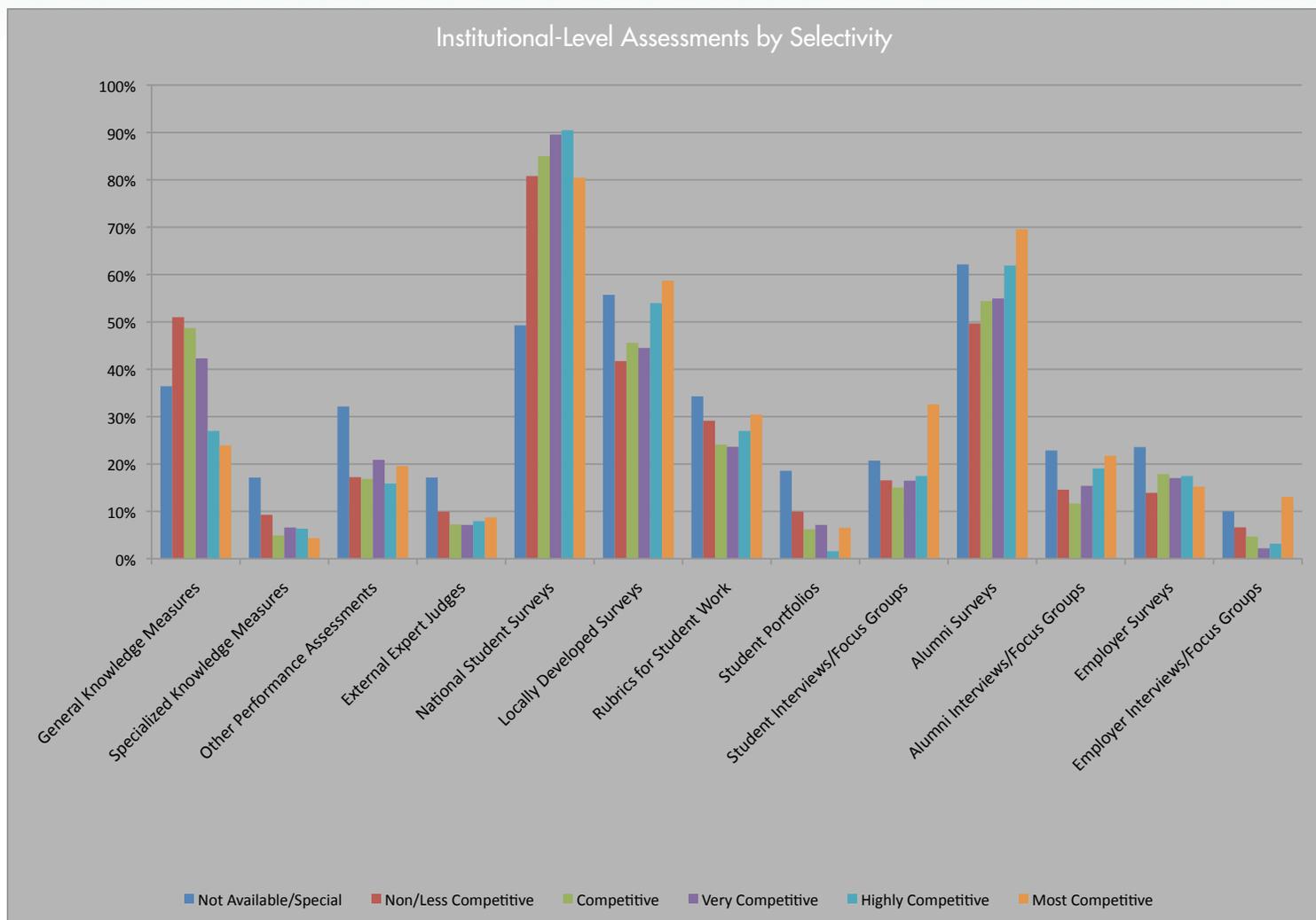


Table 14. Institution-Level Assessments by Selectivity

- For example, about half of the least competitive schools employ tests of general knowledge compared with only about one-fifth of the most competitive institutions.
- Only half of the least competitive schools do alumni surveys, contrasted with 70% of the most competitive schools.
- At least four-fifths of all schools use nationally normed student surveys *except* for institutions that do not have selectivity data available, of which only half do so.

While differences in assessment approaches at the program level exist across the selectivity spectrum, they do not represent a discernable pattern (Table 15).

- For example, almost four-fifths of both the competitive and most competitive institutions use external expert judges to evaluate student performance at the program level. Again, we cannot determine from our data how widespread this practice is within a given institution.
- Seven out of ten of all institutions except for the special-mission schools use student interviews and focus groups at the program level to assess student learning.

*“Because higher education is so important to our democracy, society, and economy, mapping the terrain of outcomes assessment is essential to know how well we are doing and what we need to do next to improve student learning.”*

Barbara Gombach, National Program Project Manager  
Carnegie Corporation of New York

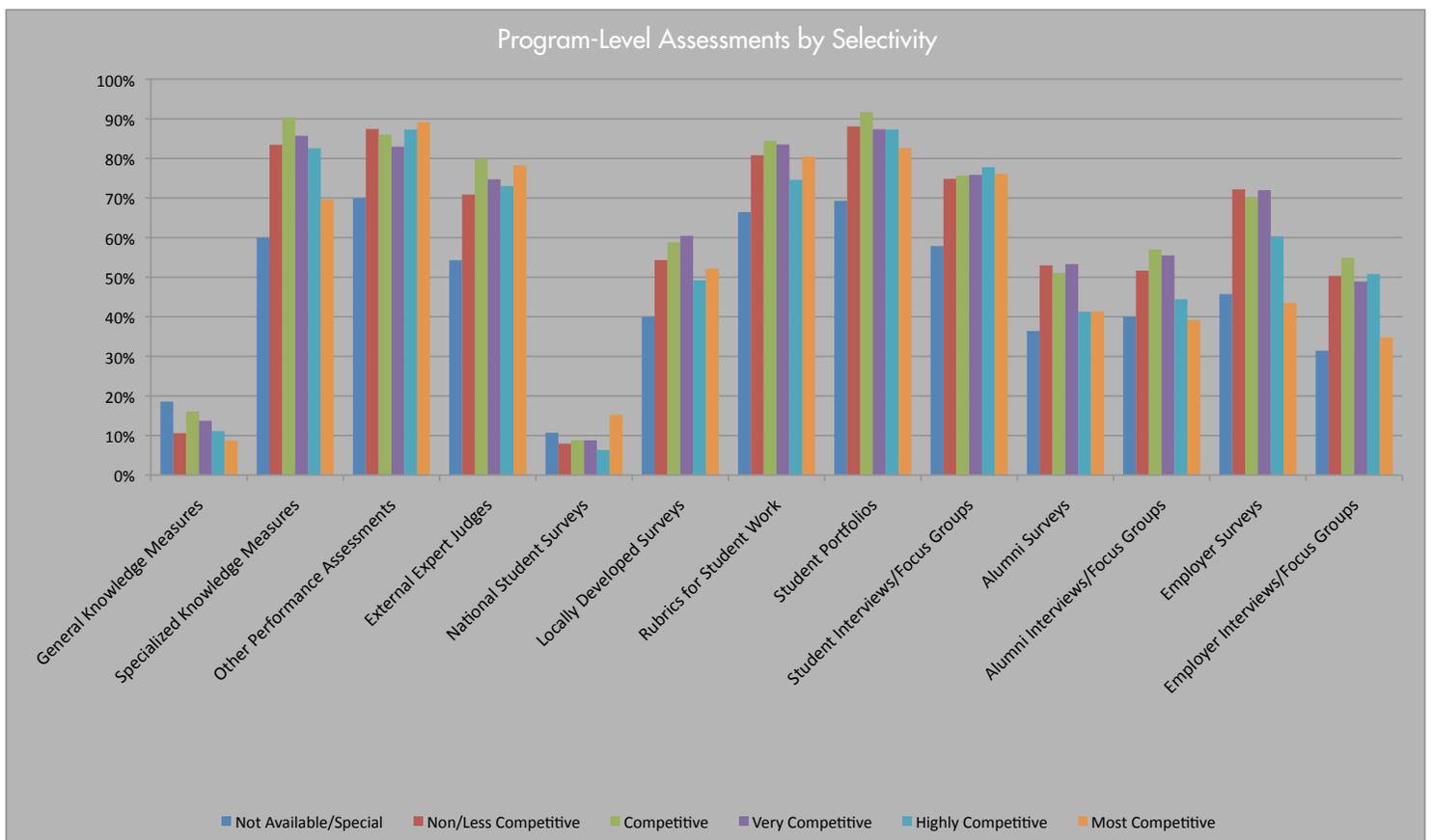


Table 15. Program-Level Assessments by Selectivity

The *uses* of assessment data at institutions of varying selectivity tell a different story, namely that while the most competitive colleges and universities collect information at rates generally comparable to their less selective counterparts, they do not report using it nearly as often—with one exception: reporting to the governing board (Table 16). To illustrate, the most competitive institutions are least likely to use assessment data for

- revising learning goals
- responding to calls for accountability
- informing strategic planning
- improving instructional performance
- evaluating units and programs
- allocating resources, and
- reporting to the public

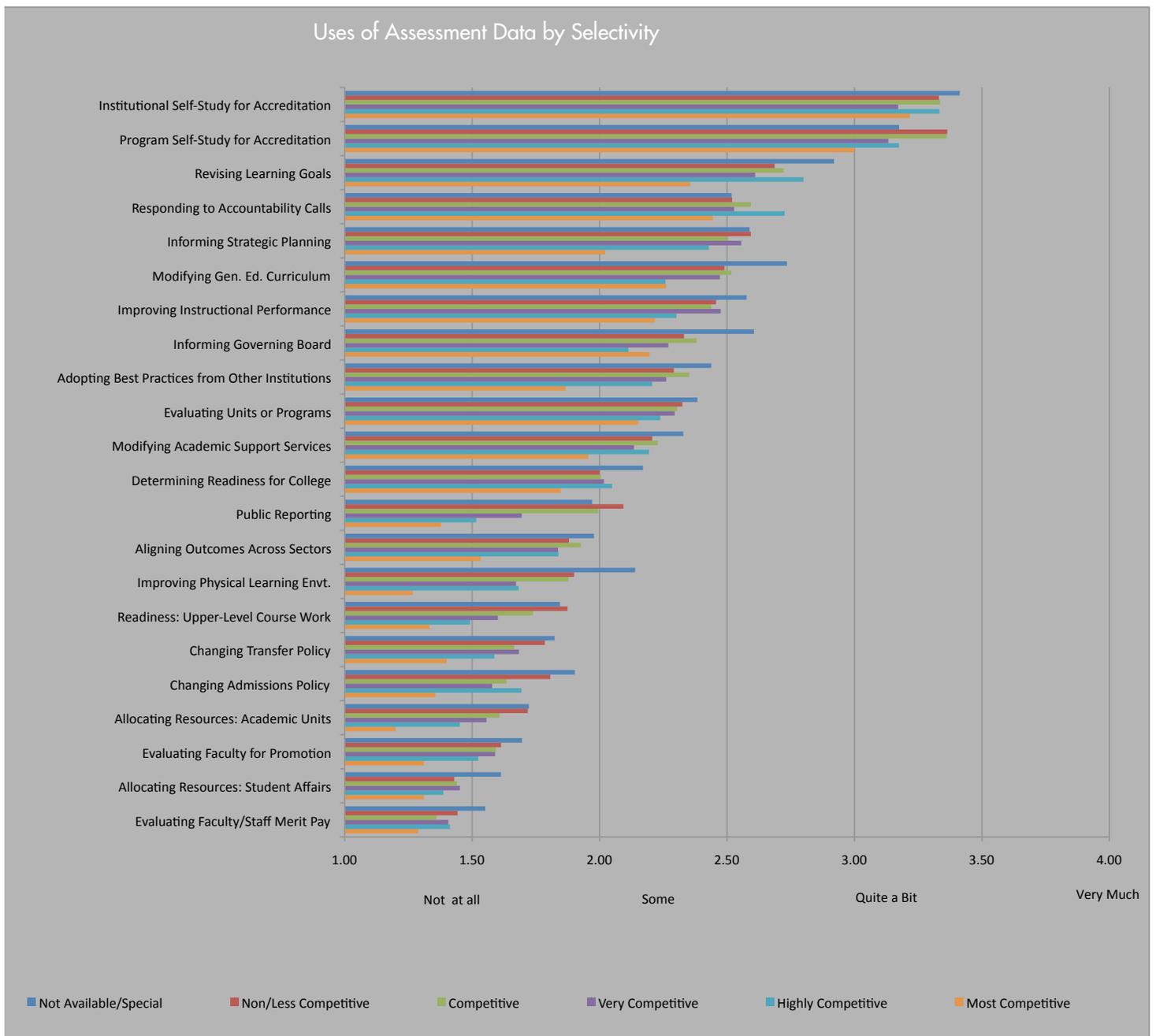


Table 16. Uses of Assessment Data by Selectivity

**5. Assessment is driven more by accreditation and a commitment to improve than external pressures from government or employers.**

What is driving the assessment movement in American higher education? Provosts were asked about the relative influence on their assessment practices of eight different factors or forces. The three most influential forces were the expectations of regional accreditors, the expectations of specialized accreditors, and the institution’s commitment to improvement. Somewhat less influential in this regard were national calls for accountability or mandates from trustees or state coordinating boards (Table 17).

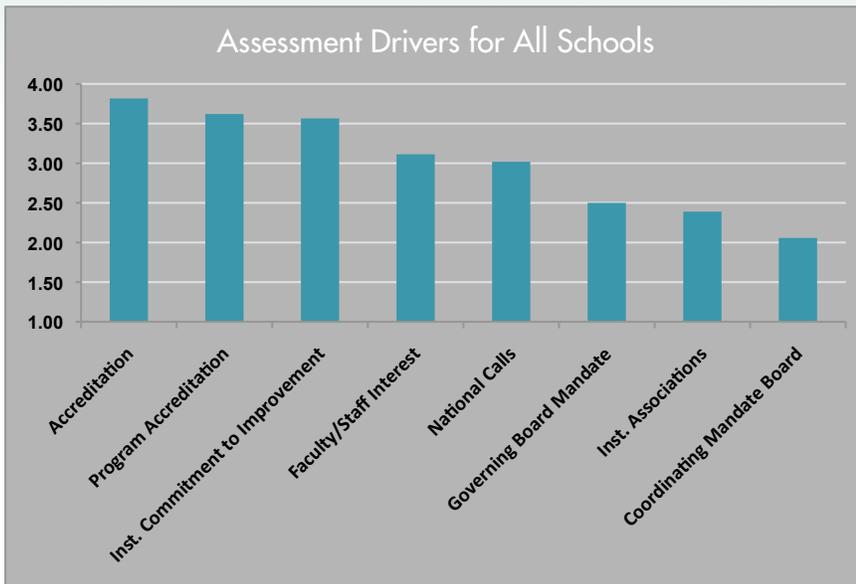


Table 17. Assessment Drivers for All Schools

The relative importance of different factors prompting outcomes assessment varied somewhat in intuitively predictable ways by institutional type (Table 18).

- Community colleges and other associate-degree-granting institutions were more strongly influenced than other schools by coordinating and governing board mandates.
- Baccalaureate-level institutions accorded relatively greater importance to a campus commitment to improvement as a force for learning outcomes assessment and were less influenced by specialized accreditation and governing board mandates.
- Master’s institutions gave regional and specialized accreditation relatively greater weight.
- National association initiatives such as the Voluntary System of Accountability seemed to be more influential at doctoral-degree-granting institutions; relatively less influential at those campuses was faculty and staff interest in improving student learning.

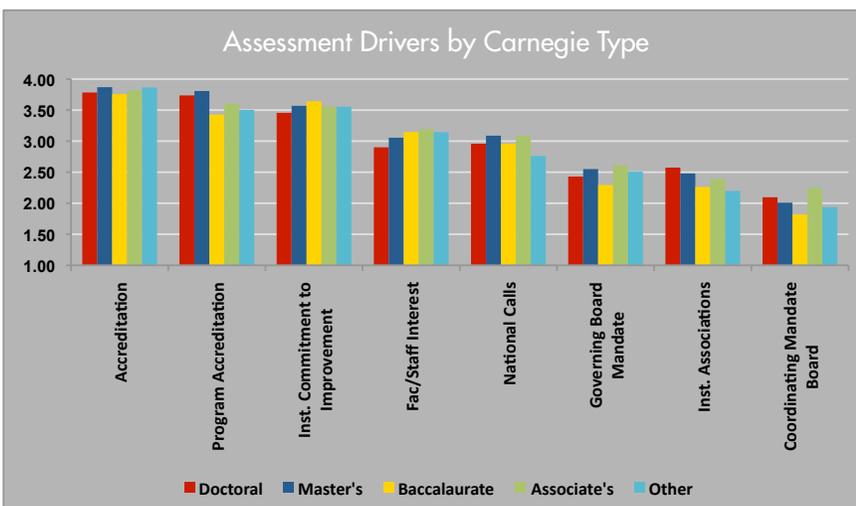


Table 18. Assessment Drivers by Carnegie Type

*“These findings are encouraging, but we also need to know that what is being assessed is what students and the nation need to sustain the democracy and stimulate the economy.”*

Joni Finney, Practice Professor  
University of Pennsylvania  
and Vice President  
National Center for Higher Education  
and Public Policy

We looked also at differences among public, private, and for-profit campuses in factors prompting outcomes assessment (Table 19).

- Calls for accountability, governing board interest, and initiatives by national membership associations were somewhat more influential on assessment activity at public colleges and universities.
- Private colleges ranked the institution’s commitment and the faculty’s interest in improving student learning higher than the public universities.
- For-profit schools indicated that every one of the eight factors was influential in driving assessment activity, again suggesting a sharper focus on learning outcomes assessment at those schools.

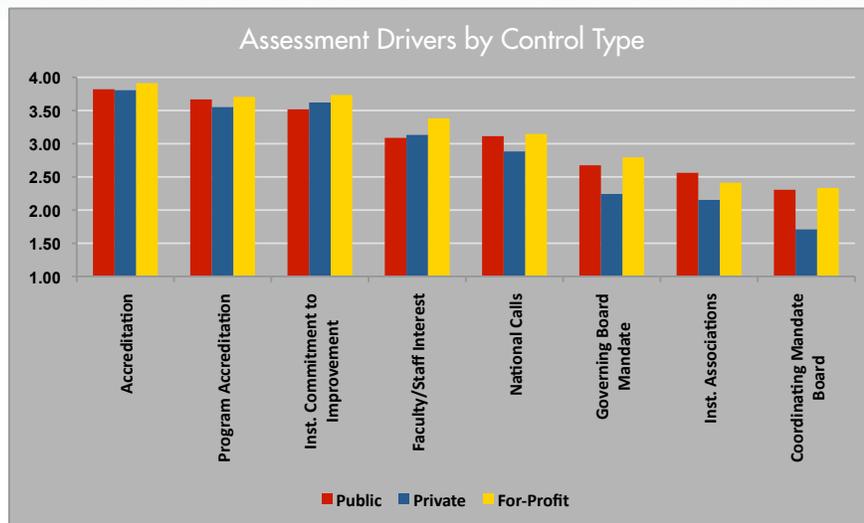


Table 19. Assessment Drivers by Control Type

Compared with their counterparts in other accreditation regions,

- Campuses in the New England region were somewhat less likely to be influenced by national calls for accountability, institutional membership initiatives such as VSA or U-CAN, trustee mandates, regional accreditation requirements, and faculty or staff interest in improving student learning.
- In contrast, institutions in the Southern and Western regions reported that accreditation and board mandates were relatively more important than schools in other regions.
- In the North Central region, institutional membership initiatives such as VSA and U-CAN were reported to be important to assessment activity (Table 20).

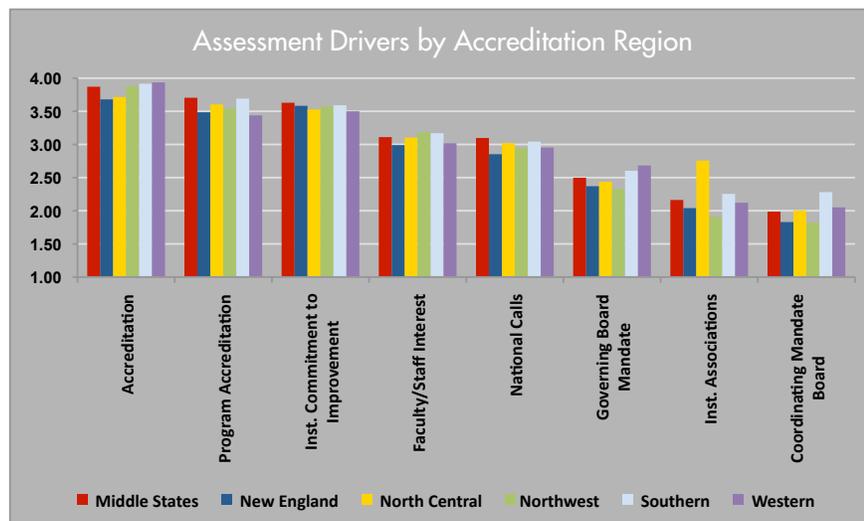


Table 20. Assessment Drivers by Accreditation Region

*“These findings squarely address the most critical, fundamental challenges facing higher education today--what colleges and universities are doing to assess and enhance the knowledge, skills and competencies students need to meet the growing demands of the workplace and function effectively in a global economy...”*

Paul Lingenfelter, President  
State Higher Education Executive  
Officers

**6. Most institutions conduct learning outcomes assessment on a shoestring: 20% have no assessment staff and 65% have two or fewer.**

Given the importance of higher education to the future of the society and the amount of resources devoted to that enterprise, investment in assessment staff is relatively modest.

- Four-fifths of all institutions indicated that a person or unit was charged with coordinating or implementing assessment campus-wide.
- Only 25% of the provosts reported having more than one FTE person assigned to assessment.
- Almost half (47%) of doctoral institutions reported having one or more staff, while only one-fifth (19%) of community colleges and other associate-degree-granting schools had at least one person focused on outcomes assessment (Table 21).
- Institutions in the Southern accreditation region, followed by the Western region, were more likely to have two or more staff persons charged with student learning outcomes assessment (Table 22).

*“To help all students acquire essential learning outcomes, assessment must evolve from a compliance-driven exercise to one where student learning results are used in decision making and resource allocation.”*

Jane Wellman, Executive Director  
Delta Cost Project

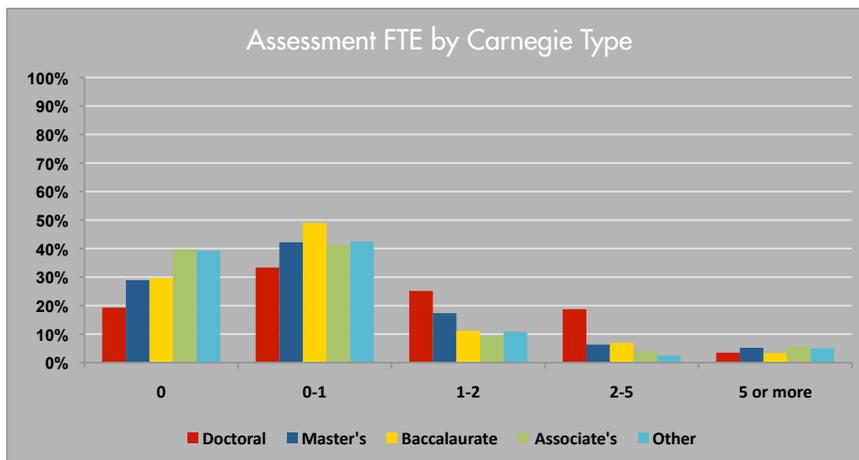


Table 21. Assessment FTE by Carnegie Type

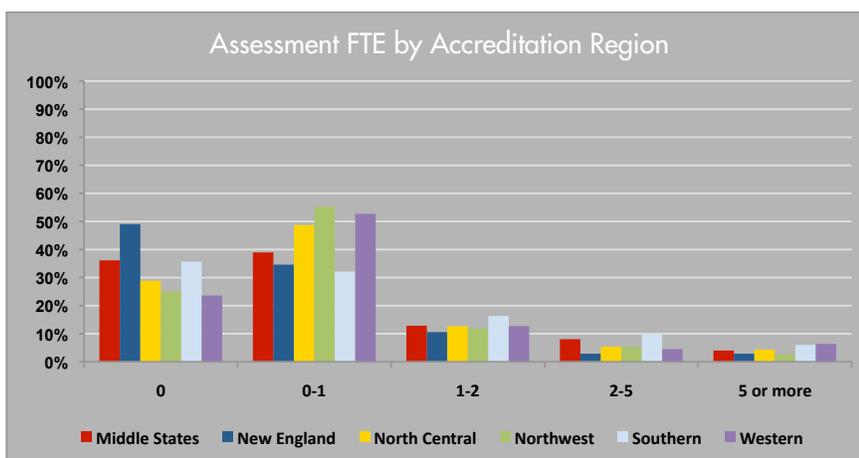


Table 22. Assessment FTE by Accreditation Region

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

When asked about what schools need to more effectively assess and use student learning outcomes, the two greatest needs expressed by more than three-fifths of all institutions were:

1. More faculty engagement, with 66% of the schools saying this would be helpful in assessing learning outcomes, and
2. More expertise in assessment, with 61% saying it would be helpful.

Among the other noteworthy findings:

- About four-fifths of provosts at doctoral research universities reported greater faculty engagement as their number one challenge.
- Almost half of all provosts said they need more resources for learning outcomes assessment, which is not surprising, given the relatively small numbers of assessment-focused staff reported earlier.
- The resource pinch appears greatest on smaller campuses.
- Rated least important was information about assessment policies and practices at other schools (18%) and presidential support (9%).

That provosts might be relatively satisfied with the level of support from their presidents for assessment of learning outcomes was not surprising. It is possible that what appears to be satisfactory involvement by the president and apparent lack of interest in learning more about what other campuses are doing in outcomes assessment are functions of limiting respondents to selecting only a maximum of three campus needs (Table 23).

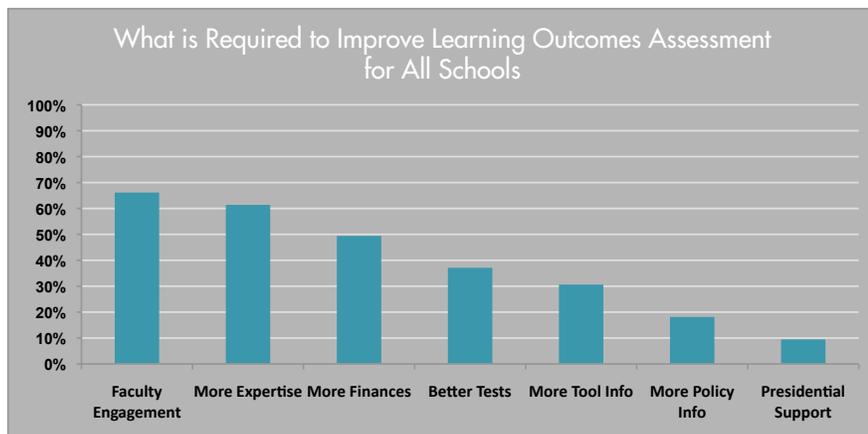


Table 23. What Is Required to Improve Learning Outcomes Assessment for All Schools

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

Given the difficult financial challenges facing colleges and universities, we wondered whether changes were in the offing for institutional resources currently committed to assessment. Although more than half of all institutions predicted that the current recession would not affect their assessment activities, a nontrivial number (one-fifth) indicated that a decrease in institutional support was possible.

*“Assessment of learning outcomes is essential practice for every college and university and NILOA is providing much needed leadership by extending and deepening our understanding of how to do this important work.”*

Douglas C. Bennett, President  
Earlham College

- Understandably, about 15% of all schools were not certain about what might happen at the time the survey was conducted (Table 24).
- More respondents from public institutions indicated they were uncertain about financial support for assessment compared with their counterparts at private schools (Table 25).

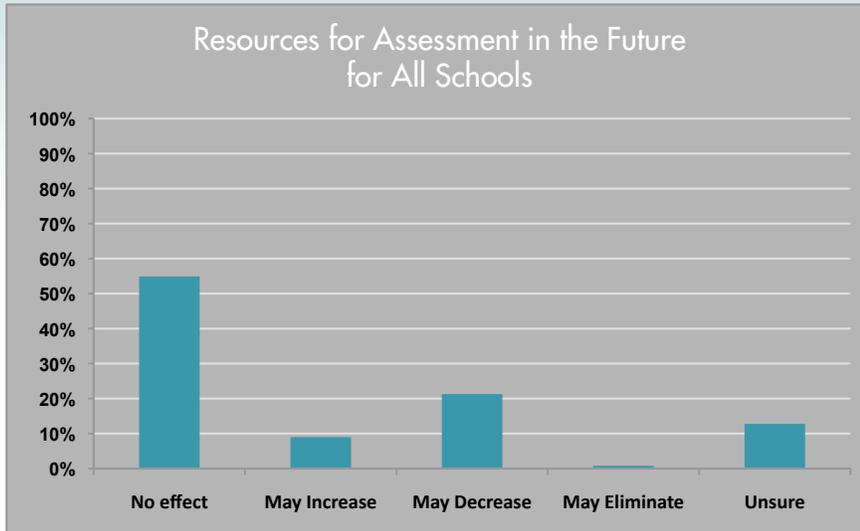


Table 24. Resources for Assessment in the Future at All Schools

*“This study clearly shows that while much progress has been made, there is much yet to be accomplished in terms of assessing student learning and using the results in productive ways...”*

Randy Swing, Executive Director  
Association for Institutional Research

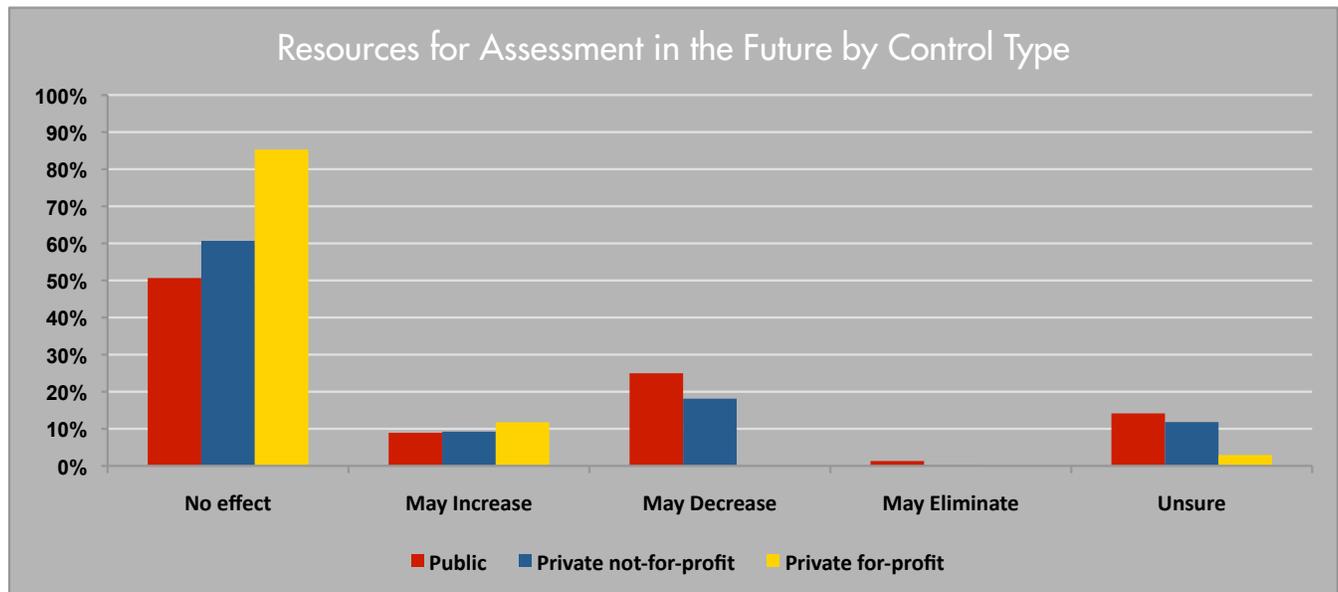


Table 25. Resources for Assessment in the Future by Control Type

## Outcomes Assessment: A Work in Progress

In the U.S. as elsewhere in the world, assessment of student learning outcomes in higher education remains a work in progress. More than a few challenges have hampered assessment efforts. Student performance evaluation is so embedded in the everyday work of teaching, testing, and grading that many faculty members interpret calls for documenting outcomes at the program or institution level—if not as an outright threat—as redundant or worse: a waste of time and resources more profitably invested elsewhere. Thus, it is not surprising that gaining faculty cooperation and engagement is at the top of provosts' wish list.

Campus culture also plays a role. As noted earlier, the most selective institutions are least likely to use assessment data for improvement or accountability. Some faculty and staff at prestigious, highly selective campuses wonder why documenting something already understood to be superior is warranted—seeing little to gain and perhaps a lot to lose. On the other hand, many of their counterparts at lower status campuses often feel pressed to demonstrate their worth—some worrying they may not fare well by comparison with those at better resourced, more selective institutions. Here, too, anxiety may morph into a perceived threat if the results disappoint.

### Accreditation: A Catalyst for Improvement *and* Accountability

Accreditation is the primary vehicle for quality assurance in American higher education and the major driver of learning outcomes assessment according to the results of this study. This was also the case in the late 1980s and again ten years ago when colleges and universities reported that accreditation was the primary reason they were assessing student learning outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Many things have changed in the assessment landscape over the past two decades. Still, it remains a puzzle why accreditation—especially regional accreditation—has been criticized so much in recent years for failing to place more emphasis on learning outcomes assessment and the use of the results for improvement. The answer may lie in twin realities.

Because accreditation is a condition for federal student financial aid, it is all but mandatory for institutions. Accreditation also offers a ready target for those seeking to change American higher education, such as the Spellings Commission or the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. Moreover, accreditation—specialized as well as regional—must answer to its critics wanting to know the basis on which judgments of academic quality are made. Without evidence of learning outcomes—what students know and can do—the credibility of accreditation groups, regional as well as specialized, is open to challenge.

In terms of accountability, campus-wide assessment is often undertaken to respond to such expectations. This is one reason a fair amount of assessment work is based on institutionally valid samples, with student and alumni surveys as well as standardized measures of general knowledge and skills being the most popular approaches. Equally important, various assessment approaches are being used at the program level—in engineering, business, and teacher education, for example. This is important because program-level assessment data—especially in large, organizationally complex universities—are more likely to be actionable, to get the attention of faculty, and to point to specific improvement needs and opportunities in teaching and learning.<sup>12</sup> The curricular changes in engineering and engineering technology education stimulated by ABET are especially instructive because much of the impetus originated outside the academy by practitioners via the accreditors *and* featured discipline-specific assessment strategies to evaluate the efficacy of the changes in a formative and summative manner.<sup>13</sup>

That same convergence of improvement and accountability forces is influencing institution-wide regional accreditation. While the focus of regional accreditation is improvement, external accountability forces are shaping and sharpening the expectations of regional accreditation to press for more extensive assessment of student learning and using the results for improvement and making institutional performance more transparent.

In sum, while some observers see these two purposes—*improvement* and *accountability*—if not at odds, at least in tension with each other, most campuses say their assessment efforts are substantively influenced by both.

*“The findings show that self-studies for accreditation are key to triggering assessment of student accomplishment which speaks to the value of the institution-accreditation partnership...”*

Judith Eaton, President  
Council for Higher Education  
Accreditation

**The three most influential forces driving assessment were the expectations of regional accreditors, those of specialized accreditors, and an institutional commitment to improvement.**

## Inescapable Conclusions

Postsecondary institutions and accreditation groups must devote more attention to strengthening standards for learning outcomes assessment and to judging the quality of these activities. Moreover, expectations and requirements for learning outcomes assessment must be more clearly articulated by accreditors to campuses and policy makers. Campuses must also be held accountable for showing evidence of student learning outcomes assessment, for applying assessment information to changes in teaching and learning approaches, and for reporting how student learning has been affected as a result of these changes.

Integrating assessment into faculty practice and using assessment findings to guide pedagogical change and improved learning outcomes are as yet unrealized goals on many campuses. At the same time, learning outcomes assessment—gauging accomplishment, understanding what is working, spotting weaknesses, and using data to make better decisions—may be more important than ever in realizing the broader higher education agenda. Even at the most selective campuses, no matter how gifted the students and distinguished the faculty, improvement is not only possible but desirable. The most prestigious schools that many higher education institutions try to emulate are far from exemplary when it comes to using student learning outcomes results for either improvement or accountability.

## Sustaining Assessment Work

Given the present uncertain economic conditions, it is appropriate to ask whether the press for learning outcomes assessment is sustainable. Allocating resources to assessment, as to every other institutional function, is an expression of an institution's priorities, culture, and values. Some institutions have more resources to devote to student learning outcomes assessment; some colleges and universities offer a greater variety of programs and should spend more resources on assessment. While in the past campuses were left to determine the quality of effort they would direct to assessing student learning, the time has come for a systematic analysis of what institutions of varying levels of organizational and programmatic complexity should invest to do assessment right and to ensure the results are used appropriately.

The degree to which an institution or program is likely to concentrate resources aimed at improving student learning is a function of its knowledge about how well its students are learning what is important and its knowledge of what to do to improve learning outcomes. How well are individual courses coming together as a cohesive whole? Are the essential learning goals and expectations for students being met? Do engineering graduates, for example, have the crucial knowledge and skills? Is the nurse prepared to care for the patient? Does the newly minted graduate have the critical-thinking, analytical, and communication skills the campus promises and employers expect?

## Seeking Common Ground

Focusing on these and other questions of accomplishment can be the common ground where those who demand greater accountability by *documenting* accomplishment and those whose primary interest in assessment is *enhancing* accomplishment can come together. States and higher education associations can play an important role in bridging this divide.

Institutions will eventually discover how to manage the challenges of implementing collegiate learning outcomes assessment. The strategic and practical obstacles of doing so are taxing for many campuses, large and small. A recent evaluation of a Teagle Foundation-funded project to foster a culture of evidence on liberal arts campuses found that administrators and faculty members expressed lingering reservations about the power of assessment data to change teaching and learning and the nature of faculty work.<sup>14</sup> The common looming challenge is to convince the naysayers among the faculty that assessment is not a threat and to thoughtfully and productively *use* assessment data to inform decisions, improve programs, and more meaningfully communicate with the public.

*“While the results show that institutions of higher education are taking assessment seriously, schools also must use the information effectively to strengthen their academic offerings and improve student performance.”*

Belle Wheelan, President  
Commission on Colleges, Southern  
Association of Colleges and Schools

Initiatives such as a CIC-sponsored consortium of schools that administer the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) along with other assessment tools such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), local campus measures like portfolios of student work, and the universities participating in the VSA are designed in part to address this key issue by prompting more of their member schools to undertake or expand assessment efforts.

Establishing new or different relationships and opportunities for dialogue is essential to nurturing a collective commitment to assessing student learning and using the data to improve. For institutions as well as for individual faculty members, learning outcomes assessment is more likely to thrive in a climate that promotes and supports experimentation, variety, and responsible transparency. Assessment results are more likely to be useful if the assessment's prime questions are clearly articulated in advance. Accountability interests are more likely to be met if the specific concerns of policy makers are made explicit. Put simply, assessing student learning outcomes just to post a score on an institution website is of little value to campuses, students, parents, or policy makers.

## Recommended Actions

While considerable assessment activity is underway on college and university campuses, American higher education is far from where it needs to be in assessing student learning and in using the results to improve outcomes. Using assessment merely to check a box in an accreditation report will not in itself improve access, affordability, or accomplishment in American higher education. Overall, our findings suggest that the productive use of learning outcomes assessment information by campuses and programs to inform decisions and to improve teaching and learning remains the most important unattended challenge in this effort.

To advance the assessment of student learning outcomes in ways that improve the current state and future prospects of higher education in the United States, who needs to do what?

- *Presidents, provosts, and other academic leaders* must make quality assurance an institutional priority. Evaluate the quality and utility of the learning outcomes assessment efforts underway on your campus. Tell your assessment professionals what your institution needs to know and why. Determine whether the resources allocated to assessment are sufficient for the scope and growing importance of the task. Find out how the results are being used, if at all, by whom and for what purposes. Champion productive use of the results. Demonstrate how you are using evidence to make decisions. Keep your governing board informed about the degree to which a culture of evidence is taking root.
- *Governing board members* must ensure their institution has a system of academic quality control supported by the assessment of student learning and the use of those results for continuous improvement. Do your part by understanding the value and contributions of assessment to the educational mission at your institution as well as your responsibility for appropriate oversight. Encourage your board chair and president to keep the issue on the agenda.
- *Faculty members* must systematically collect data about student learning, carefully examine and discuss these results with colleagues, and use this information to improve student outcomes. This challenging process may well reveal shortcomings on the part of students, instructors, the curriculum, and institutions. But by making sure these data are used to improve and not penalize, the exercise need not and should not be threatening. If assessment results are to be meaningfully interpreted and if changes are to be made to improve outcomes, your leadership and involvement are crucial.
- *Assessment and institutional research personnel* should revisit the rationale for using various tools and approaches to be sure they yield the kind of information that your institution needs to respond to improvement and accountability mandates. Present results in ways that will speak to faculty and policy makers and will answer their important questions. Point to areas that assessment data indicate require attention and design subsequent data collection activities that will determine whether changes in teaching and learning approaches have had the desired effects.

*“To advance the scholarship of assessment, the work must be sustained over time. NILOA will begin to build a foundation for assessment scholarship that can enable the field to mature and flourish in the years to come.”*

Trudy W. Banta, Professor and Senior Advisor to the Chancellor  
Indiana University-Purdue University  
Indianapolis

**Allocating resources to assessment is an expression of institutional priorities, culture and values.**

- *Student affairs staff* must share their perspectives on the student experience by participating on the campus assessment committee and self-study committees. Partner with academic affairs to promote a deeper, more widespread awareness and understanding of common undergraduate learning outcomes among faculty, staff, and students. Use outcomes assessment results to orient and inform student affairs practice.
- *Faculty developers* must become familiar with the campus assessment activities and results and use this information in designing professional development opportunities for faculty, student affairs professionals, librarians, and others who work with students.
- *Prospective students and parents* should ask to see learning outcomes information about students who attend the institutions they are considering. If it is not publicly accessible on an institution website, ask someone in the institution's admissions office for data about how their students perform on different kinds of measures.
- *Higher education associations* must keep learning outcomes assessment on their agenda. Much of the campus assessment activity provosts reported would not be underway absent your initiatives. Develop a multiple- (5 to 7) year vision for your organization's engagement with the learning outcomes assessment movement.
- *Statewide planning and coordinating boards* must confirm that all institutions under their scope of influence have effective internal systems of academic quality control supported by assessment data that conform to the expectations of both regional and specialized accreditation bodies. Use language that removes the specter of threat from assessment work. Offer incentives for campuses to develop and share sound practices of outcomes assessment.
- *Accrediting groups* must not let up on efforts to promote assessment and the use of student learning outcomes. Sharpen accreditation standards as they are applied to (a) collecting institution- and program-level data about student performance, (b) using assessment results to improve student performance and institutional quality, and (c) making assessment results available internally and externally. In all of these areas, hold institutions accountable.
- *Foundations* should keep learning outcomes assessment on their funding agendas. Devote more attention to programs and incentives that encourage institutions to use outcomes data productively. Encourage accrediting groups, both regional and specialized, to be vehicles for campus change that is constructive and attainable.

## Last Word

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This list of recommended actions is far from an exhaustive set of steps needed to strengthen American higher education through the better knowledge of student learning outcomes and the more effective use of that knowledge. While much is being done, far more will be required to ensure students accomplish what they need to respond to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to contribute meaningfully and responsibly to civic life. Outcomes assessment is more extensive than some think, but considerably less than is needed to secure the future to which we aspire.

**The productive use of learning outcomes results to inform decision making and improve teaching and learning remains the most important unaddressed challenge related to student learning outcomes assessment.**

**More assessment work is underway than many think. Still, it is considerably less than what is needed to ensure that students are prepared to manage the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

## Endnotes

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*“NILOA is helping take stock of our educational capital—the skills and knowledge college graduates are acquiring—by giving us a comprehensive picture of higher education’s efforts to assess student accomplishment.”*

Margaret Miller, Professor  
University of Virginia



## Appendix

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### Data Collection and Analysis

The population of institutions for the NILOA National Survey was chosen using The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (downloadable from <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/>) and the Higher Education Directory. The institutional population for the survey included undergraduate, regionally accredited institutions. To meet these requirements, the Carnegie list of institutions data file was cleaned by removing institutions without a Carnegie classification, with exclusively graduate enrollment, with no enrollment, or with missing data on accreditation. This cleaned institutional list was then compared with the list generated from the Higher Education Directory. Institutions that did not appear in that directory but that did appear in the cleaned institutional list underwent a status check to determine if they were open or closed, accredited or not. This was necessary as the Carnegie list was dated 2006 and the Higher Education Directory was dated 2008. The Higher Education Directory, however, is developed from institutions submitting information to be included in the directory. Due to this qualification, any regionally accredited institution in the cleaned institutional list was added to the Higher Education Directory list, along with the necessary contact information for the NILOA National Survey. Of the institutions examined, several were closed or had lost accreditation and as such were removed from the institutional list. The final, combined, cleaned file for the NILOA National Survey contained 2,809 institutions.

### Survey Administration

Prior to distribution, several national higher education organizations alerted members to the NILOA National Survey. Several also sent follow-up emails to members reminding them the survey was in the field. In the actual dissemination of the survey, emails were sent to the chief academic officers at each of the institutions. Included in the email was a link to an online version of the survey. Several reminders were sent as well. Phone follow-ups were conducted to a selected group of non-respondents, and a postcard was sent as yet another reminder. Near the end of data collection, a paper version of the survey was also sent to non-respondents. In all, 1,514 surveys were returned. Two institutions completed the survey twice; in each case the earlier reply was used. This left a usable sample of 1,512, representing a response rate of 53.8%. Completions on the web were the most common by far, as 82% of respondents used this mode.

### Characteristics of Participating Institutions

Respondents matched the national sample well in terms of Carnegie type, control type, and accreditation region. In terms of Carnegie type, 11% of the schools were doctoral level, 23% were master's level, 22% were baccalaureate, 36% were community college or associate-degree-granting, and 8% were designated as "other"—the last group including specialized schools (e.g., pharmacy or art) and tribal colleges (Table 26). More than half of the institutions in the study were public (56%), 42% were private institutions, and 2% were private for-profit schools (Table 27). Finally, in terms of accreditation region representation, 16% of schools were from the Middle States region, 7% from New England, 38% from the North Central region, 5% from the Northwest region, 26% from the Southern region, and 7% from the Western region (Table 28).

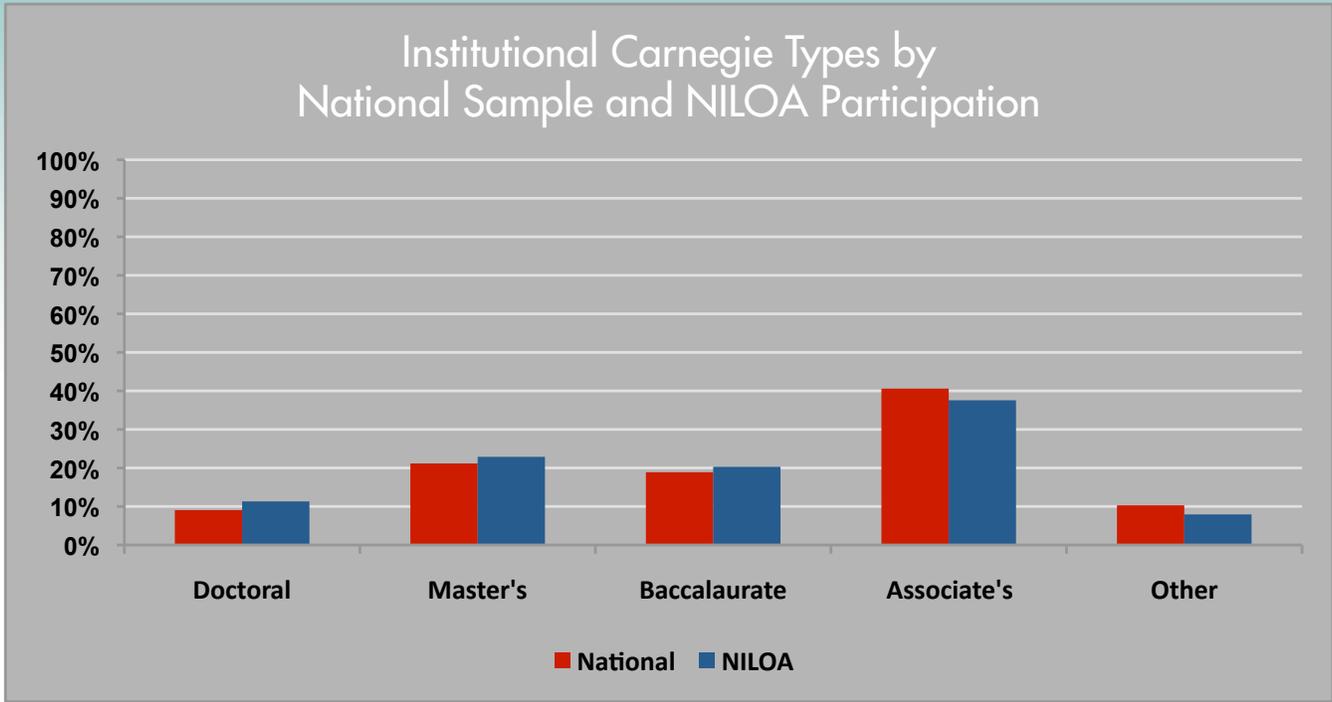


Table 26. Institutional Carnegie Types by National Sample and NILOA Participation

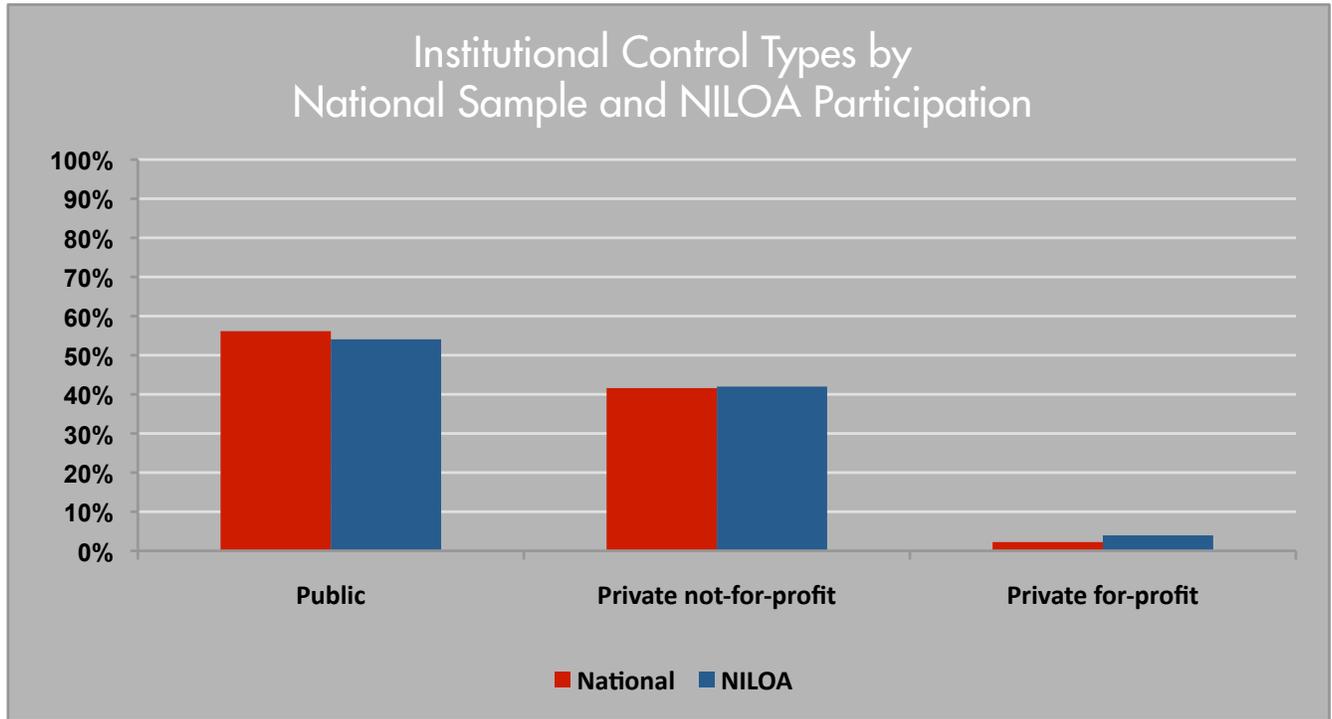


Table 27. Institutional Control by National Sample and NILOA Participation

## Institutional Accreditation Regions by National Sample and NILOA Participation

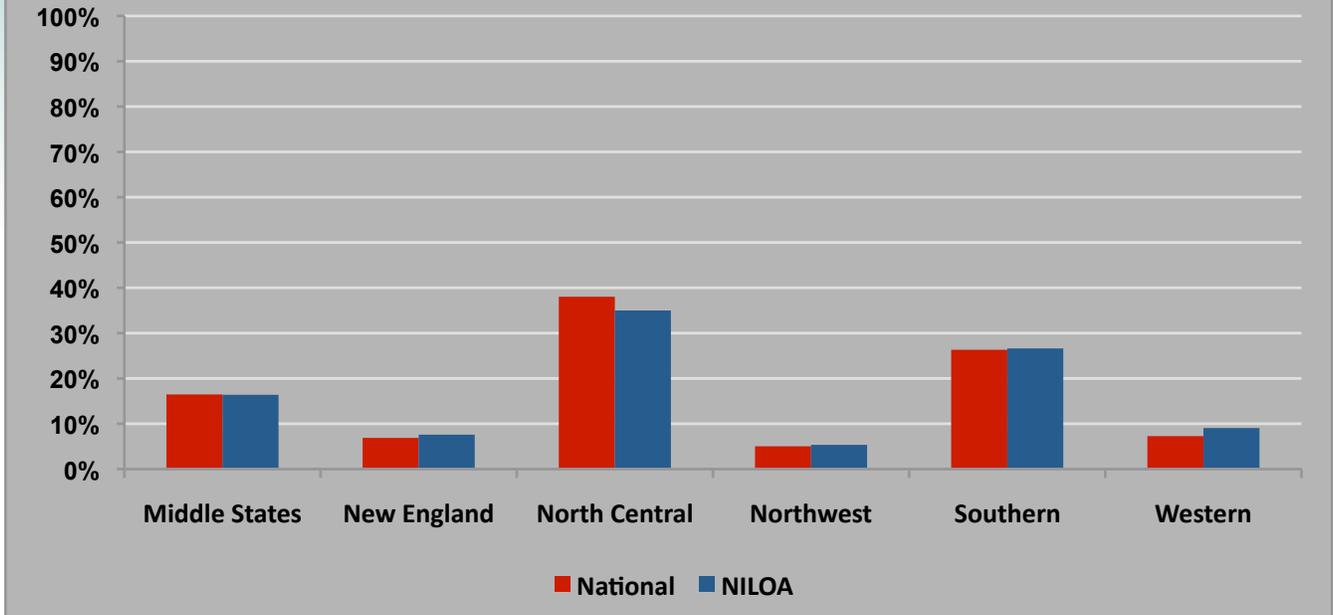


Table 28. Institutional Accreditation Regions by National Sample and NILOA Participation

### Data Coding and Analysis

Additional data were merged into the survey results from a number of sources. From IPEDS, information on Carnegie classification, accreditation group, control, mission (HBC&U, tribal college, etc.), size, and student demographics (e.g., average entrance exam scores) were added along with *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges* (2009) selectivity indicators. Several variables were combined to create new variables representing uses of student learning outcomes data. These indices included undergraduate learning uses, policy-oriented uses, and evaluation outcomes. An initial review was conducted that included frequency distributions and, where appropriate, means for all items for all participants. Frequency tables were also produced for Carnegie, accreditation, and sector groups.



## About NILOA

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- 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](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org)
- The NILOA research team reviewed 725 institution websites for learning outcomes assessment transparency from March 2009 to August 2009.
- 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. He is currently serving as Interim President of the University of Illinois.

## NILOA Staff

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