

Why Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes in Post-Secondary Education is Needed and Inevitable

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In the 1980's and 1990's I was centrally involved in significant strategic academic planning and priority setting exercises at the University of Minnesota, the University of Pittsburgh, and the City University of New York. Our review committees formulated similar evaluation criteria to assess the quality, centrality (for example, an undergraduate program cannot do without an English department), student demand, and cost effectiveness of all the academic programs: Unfortunately we were only partially successful in benchmarking quality, the most important criteria.

While there were multiple indicators of research and scholarship, at the time there were no objective measures of the quality of undergraduate student learning outcomes. This meant that the leaders of academic units who were thought to be candidates for reduction, restructuring, or elimination could argue that they were strong contributors to student learning progress and we had no compelling response. The absence of measures of student learning was the Achilles' heel of our strategic academic planning and priority setting efforts. We did not reduce costs and improve academic quality as much as had been desired.

Today there are several standardized measures of student learning offered nationally that benchmark the quality achieved in student learning outcomes.¹ However, many faculty and administrators in higher education institutions remain content to demonstrate their quality by inputs such as SAT scores of incoming freshmen, instructor to student ratios, and per-student funding. The sector continues to resist any standardized assessment of the outcomes of undergraduate education. This situation is about to change.

¹ For example, Proficiency Profile (Education Testing Service), College Assessment of Academic Progress (CAA) (ACT) and the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) (CAE which I direct).

It is reasonable to forecast a turbulent decade of change for post-secondary education. A basic problem is that the key assumptions that higher education leaders have relied upon are no longer warranted. This means that evidence for today's key decisions should be judged against the only relevant metric: student learning outcomes because undergraduate education is the principal activity most colleges pursue. First, until recently, it was reasonable to assume that students entering college were able to read, write, and do mathematics at the college level. However, today, at least 40 percent of entering students do not arrive with these skills at the college level. Second, in any event, it seemed reasonable to assume that the attainment of a BA degree meant the student was qualified for the world of work. . This assumption is increasingly questioned through employer surveys not pleased with critical thinking, analytic reasoning and writing skills recent graduates possess. Third, decision makers could also assume that each year the sources of their funding would be adequate for the next year's budget. This assumption and the incremental decision-making model based on it are also no longer warranted. The financial crisis has reduced the ability of local, state, and federal government and endowments to support higher education. In addition, rising costs accompanied by dramatic increases in tuition and equally dramatic increases in student loan debt have reduced the willingness of private and public groups to support higher education.

In addition , the emerging consensus that human capital is a nation's principal asset and the education system is the formal venue for preserving and enhancing it, is encouraging private- and public-sector leaders to place more scrutiny on the learning outcomes achieved at the nation's colleges and universities. Here, then, are the principal reasons measurement of student learning outcomes are becoming necessary.

1. Entering students should be assessed to determine whether they have appropriate 21st century college-readiness skills and will be able to succeed in college.
2. Graduating seniors should be assessed to determine whether they have attained sufficient skills to succeed in the workplace.
3. Uncertainty about the quality of online courses in "traditional" and for-profit institutions places a greater focus on assessing the achieved student learning results.
4. To evaluate the end products of competency-based undergraduate programs, an independent, third party standardized assessment are

- essential to validate this new approach to education. This certifies students as ready to graduate if they meet minimum proficiency levels in their chosen major rather than accumulating the required number of credits to graduate. This is particularly true of for-profit colleges who certify students as ready to graduate only on the basis of the competency-based approach and increasing true for “traditional” colleges that are adopting the competency-based approach.
5. If rising costs and declining resources are a major problem, assessment of student learning outcomes is necessary. This is because a metric against the proposed impact of budget cuts is needed and student learning outcomes are the only credible metric to select.
 6. There is a shift underway from accountability based on a rules regime enforced by an administration to an outcomes-based accountability system; assessment of learning outcomes achieved is a necessary part of this new system of governance.
 7. Evaluation of the impact of resources on all student learning outcomes is needed and identification of the gaps in student learning achieved between racial, ethnic, and social-economic groups is important. Evaluation of the efficacy of solutions proposed to close the gaps through measurement of student learning gains is also essential.
 8. Identification of the efficacy of improvements in pedagogy and curriculums is needed.
 9. To validate progress toward the student learning goals agreed to by faculty in their incentive plans that are now adapted to encourage improvement of teaching and learning.
 10. Accountability requirements of the future should include student learning results in the context of the multiple measures suggested above.
 11. To align promising teaching and learning improvements with assessments to create a more systematic approach to student learning. This is a goal all academicians share.

At present none of these measurements of student learning outcomes are mandated but they soon will be. Policy makers will request and college administrators will accept the need for greater evidence-based decision making and transparency because post-secondary education is the major fulcrum to preserve and enhance the only resource that really matters: our nation’s human capital. The costs of higher education must be reduced while the quality of student learning must be improved.

