

FROM COMPLIANCE TO OWNERSHIP

WHY AND HOW COLLEGES AND
UNIVERSITIES ASSESS STUDENT LEARNING

Stanley O. Ikenberry and George D. Kuh

Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement.

—Daniel H. Pink

EVERY ERA BRINGS CHALLENGES. Even so, by all accounts, this second decade of the twenty-first century has swept in a steady stream of disruptive developments that threaten some of the most basic assumptions on which the higher education enterprise rests—including how and by whom its core academic functions are delivered.

More than 18 million undergraduate students are currently enrolled at thousands of academic institutions—some quite large, others small, some public, others private, some for-profit, and still others virtual. Movement of students and faculty across these sectors has grown. On many campuses, a large portion of undergraduate teaching is provided by other-than-tenure-track faculty members: part-time adjunct faculty

members and graduate teaching assistants. Soaring college costs, unacceptably low degree-completion rates, new technologies, and competitive new providers have become defining features of what some call higher education's "new normal." Further disruption comes from the uneasy sense that the quality of student learning may be falling well short of what the twenty-first century demands of our graduates, the economy, and our democracy. It is in this complex context that understanding student performance and optimizing success is not just important to maintain public confidence; it is even more necessary to guide and inform academic decisions and policies.

But with challenge comes opportunity. By every relevant measure, higher education adds value to individuals and to society (MacMahon, 2009). What today's students know and are able to do will shape their lives and determine their future prospects more than at any time in history. In addition to the numerous lifelong benefits college graduates enjoy, the performance of our colleges and universities has profound implications for the nation's economy, our quality of life, and America's place in the world. It is this *profound relevance and worth* of higher education that adds a palpable sense of urgency to the need to document how college affects students and to use this information effectively to enhance student attainment and institutional effectiveness.

The big question is this: How will colleges and universities in the United States both broaden access to higher learning and also enhance student accomplishment and success *for all students* while at the same time containing and reducing costs? This is higher education's signal challenge in this century. Any meaningful response requires accurate, reliable data about what students know and are able to do as a result of their collegiate experience. In the parlance of the academy, this systematic stock-taking—the gathering and use of evidence of student learning in decision making and in strengthening institutional performance and public accountability—is known as *student learning outcomes assessment*. Gathering evidence and understanding what students know and can do as a result of their college experience is not easy, but harnessing that evidence and using it to improve student success and institutional functioning is even more demanding. This second challenge is the subject of this volume.

Assessment should be *intentional* and *purposive*, relevant to deliberately posed questions important to both institutions and their stakeholders, and based on multiple data sources of information, according to the guidelines for evidence of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC, 2014). Evidence does not "speak for itself." Instead, it

requires *interpretation, integration, and reflection* in the search for holistic understanding and implications for action. As did assessment pioneers at Alverno College many years ago, Larry Braskamp and Mark Engberg (2014) describe this work as “sitting beside” in an effort to assist and collaborate with members of the academy in ways that engender trust, involvement, and high quality performance.

Whatever the preferred formula or approach—and there are many—we are convinced that if campus leaders, faculty and staff, and assessment professionals change the way they think about and undertake their work, they can multiply the contributions of learning outcomes assessment to American higher education. The good news is that the *capacity* of the vast majority of American colleges and universities to assess student learning has expanded considerably during the past two decades, albeit largely in response to external pressures. Accreditors of academic institutions and programs have been the primary force leading to the material increase in assessment work, as these groups have consistently demanded more and better evidence of student learning to inform and exercise their quality assurance responsibilities (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014). Prior to the mid-1990s, accrediting groups tended to focus primarily on judgments about whether an institution’s resources—credentials of the faculty, adequacy of facilities, coherence of the curriculum, number of library holdings, and fiscal soundness—were sufficient to deliver its academic programs. Over the past 15 years, however, both institutional and program accreditors have slowly shifted their focus and now expect colleges and universities to obtain and use evidence of student accomplishment (Gaston, 2014). In other words, the question has become “What have students learned, not just in a single course, but as a result of their overall college experience?” Still more recently, in addition to collecting evidence of student performance, accreditors are beginning to press institutions to direct more attention to the *consequential use* of assessment results for modifying campus policies and practices in ways that lead to improved learning outcomes.

The push from accrediting bodies for institutions to gather and use information about student learning has been reinforced by demands from policymakers at both the federal and state levels. As college costs continue to escalate and public investment in aid to students and institutions has grown, governmental entities have become more interested in how and to what extent students actually benefit, sometimes referred to as the “value added” of attending college. This, in turn, has brought even more attention to the processes and evidence accrediting groups use to make their decisions. Employers also have an obvious interest in knowing what

students know and can do, prompting them to join the call for more transparent evidence of student accomplishment.

Taken together, this cacophony of calls for more attention to documenting student learning has not gone unheard by colleges and universities. Thought leaders in the field of assessment have developed tools and conceptual frameworks to guide assessment practice (Banta & Palomba, 2014; Suskie, 2009). In fact, the number of assessment approaches and related instruments jumped almost ten-fold between 2000 and 2009 (Borden & Kernel, 2013), both reflecting and driving increased assessment activity on campuses. Perhaps the best marker of the growth in the capacity and commitment of colleges and universities to assess student learning comes from two national surveys of provosts at accredited two- and four-year institutions conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009; Kuh et al., 2014). The most recent of these studies found that 84% of all accredited colleges and universities now have stated learning goals for their undergraduate students, up from three-quarters just five years ago. Most institutions have organizational structures and policies in place to support learning outcomes assessment, including a faculty or professional staff member who coordinates institution-wide assessment and facilitates the assessment efforts of faculty in various academic units. While the majority of institutions use student surveys to collect information about the student experience, increasingly, classroom-based assessments such as portfolios and rubrics are employed. Taken together, this activity strongly suggests that many U.S. institutions of higher education are working to understand and document what students know and can do.

At the same time, all this effort to assess student learning, at best, seems to have had only a modest influence on academic decisions, policies, and practices. Make no mistake: the growth in assessment capacity is noteworthy and encouraging. But harnessing evidence of student learning, making it *consequential* in the improvement of student success and strengthened institutional performance is what matters to the long-term health and vitality of American higher education and the students and society we serve. Moreover, consequential use of evidence of student learning to solve problems and improve performance will also raise the public's confidence in its academic institutions and give accreditors empirical grounds on which to make high-stakes decisions.

What is needed to make student learning outcomes assessment more consequential? Answering that question first requires a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the motivations of different groups who conduct this work and their sometimes conflicting effects on faculty

members—who are and must continue to be the primary arbiters of educational quality. That is the conundrum we take up in this volume.

A Culture of Compliance

To make evidence of student learning consequential, we must first address the *culture of compliance* that now tends to dominate the assessment of student learning outcomes at most colleges and universities. While external forces fueled the sharp growth of assessment activity in higher education over the past two decades, these same influences unintentionally nurtured the unfortunate side effect of casting student learning outcomes assessment as an act of compliance rather than a volitional faculty and institutional responsibility. As a result, a plethora of external pressures to collect and use student learning outcomes assessment data quickly filled the incentive vacuum, creating the dominant narrative for why and how institutions should set assessment priorities and design assessment programs. That is, instead of faculty members and institutional leaders declaring that improvement of student success and institutional performance was the guiding purpose for documenting student performance—and being encouraged and rewarded for doing so—the interests of others outside the institution with no direct role in the local process held sway. Thus, from the outset of the assessment movement circa 1985, complying with the expectations of those beyond the campus has tended to trump the internal academic needs of colleges and universities. Compounding the effects of what is sometimes called *initiative fatigue*, discussed in Chapter 9, a syndrome that commonly develops when campuses are swamped by the competing demands of multiple initiatives, assessment for compliance has meant second-guessing the interests and demands of external bodies with no clear vision of how the results can or will be used to help students and strengthen institutional performance.

So it is that by defaulting to the demands and expectations of others, the purposes and approaches of learning outcomes assessment morphed over time into a *compliance culture* that has effectively separated the work of assessment from those individuals and groups on campus who most need evidence of student learning and who are strategically positioned to apply assessment results productively. The assessment function—determining how well students are learning what institutions say they should know and be able to do—inadvertently became lodged at arm's length from its natural allies, partners, and end users—including the faculty, but others as well. Ironically, it is the faculty who are responsible for setting and upholding academic standards and who are in the

best position to judge student accomplishment. Yet because the externally driven compliance culture has defined and framed assessment, the work of assessment is frequently off-putting, misguided, inadequately conceptualized, and poorly implemented.

Thus, rather than student learning outcomes assessment being embraced by the faculty and academic leadership as a useful tool focused on the core institutional functions of preparing students well for their lives after college and enabling continuous improvement in teaching and learning, on too many campuses this work remains separate from the academic mainstream, severely limiting its contribution to the very student learning and institutional performance it is designed to enhance. As a result, the *purposes and processes of assessment*—collecting and reporting data to external audiences—continue to take primacy over the institution's *consequential use* of the results of outcomes assessment.

Peter Ewell (2009) offers a cogent analysis of the implications of these conditions by describing two distinct, competing assessment paradigms, one that serves an accountability function and the other that addresses continuous quality improvement of both student learning and institutional effectiveness. In practice, the urgent necessity of accountability has tended to overwhelm the need and opportunity for improvement. It is these two worlds that must be joined.

Without question, providing data about student and institution performance to external entities for the purpose of accountability is both necessary and legitimate. Still, we believe that the two—the interest of faculty and staff to improve teaching and learning and the proper interest of external bodies for *accountability*—can be reconciled *if* college and university presidents, provosts, assessment professionals, and faculty members take ownership of assessment and align assessment work with campus needs and priorities in ways that focus on compelling questions and issues of student success and the myriad challenges to institutional effectiveness. Far more important than activity for mere accountability is the effective and productive use of student learning outcomes data by partners and end users inside the institution—faculty, staff, students, campus leaders, and governing board members. Failure to do so undermines the credibility and trust that is crucial in any system of accountability.

End users, as we apply the term in this chapter, are those who have occasion to use assessment results that frequently may be collected by a professional third party, perhaps an assessment or institutional research staff member, or by groups of faculty or student affairs staff. Thus, assessment work is performed as a service to those end users inside as well as

outside the institution who, as a result of their roles and responsibilities, have a practical and functional need to know the answers to pressing questions about student learning and related topics.

The functional relationships between those formally charged with doing assessment and other faculty, staff, students, and campus leaders can also take the form of a partnership when those people work together to do some or all of the following: design the assessment priorities and strategy, collect and analyze the data, interpret the results, and take action based on the findings.

In this sense, individual faculty members are partners when they design and use in their classes assignments calibrated to address one or more of the institution's stated learning outcomes goals (along with specific course goals) and share the assessment findings with those charged with building an institutional profile of student attainment. Students are partners by putting forth their best effort on assignments and responding to information requests such as surveys about their experiences as well as helping faculty and staff interpret campus assessment results to determine how to improve the campus climate for engagement and learning (see Chapter 5). Later in this chapter, we talk more about why using partner and end-user relationships more effectively matters in making assessment work more consequential.

Realizing the Promise of Assessment

This volume is organized around the proposition that student learning outcomes assessment and the evidence it produces can be more consequential *if the work focuses squarely on the questions about student performance of institutions, partners, and end users*. These questions necessarily differ, depending on the partners' and end users' interests and needs. That is, faculty members want to know, among other things, whether students in their classes and programs are acquiring the knowledge, proficiencies, and dispositions valued by their disciplines. Campus leaders want to know whether graduates have attained the institutionally espoused outcomes that pertain to every student, such as those often associated with general education. Students want assurances they are well prepared for life after college, whether it is a job, graduate or professional school, or some other destination. Members of governing boards also need to know that the institution's academic quality assurance mechanisms are effectively functioning and that its commitment to continuous improvement is transparently active. Student learning outcomes indicators are a crucial source of that evidence.

In the process of serving the information needs of these various end users and as a result of engagement in that service, the multiple uses of evidence of student learning include calibrating and refining learning goals, revising courses and curricula, gauging the impact of technology, informing budget priorities, improving student retention and graduation rates, containing costs, and otherwise harnessing evidence of student learning to strengthen and improve American higher education and to brighten the prospects of graduates.

For evidence of student learning to be used these ways, the compliance culture that has captured the assessment function in higher education must change. On some campuses around the country, this is happening, but the pace is too slow and the progress too modest given the level of investment being made in assessment and the magnitude of the challenges now facing American colleges and universities. As George Kuh (2013a) argued elsewhere, changing—or *bending*—campus culture is more art than science. As with student-centered cultures, recalibrating the assumptions and norms that shape assessment work in colleges and universities will not just happen. Such conditions are built and sustained over time by institutional leaders, faculty and staff members, and governing boards. It is these same end-user groups who genuinely need evidence of student learning in order to improve academic outcomes. While consumers of evidence, many of these same people also are potential partners who can help interpret assessment results and envision the implications for change in policy and institutional practice. Even more relevant, these are the partners who must help bend the cultural properties in ways that elevate *improvement of student success* as an institutional priority and affirm the consequential value of learning outcomes data.

Bending the cultural properties that shape assessment of learning and the perceptions others have of that quest requires a shared purpose. A common, understandable language is needed to communicate to internal and external groups about the value of evidence of student learning and its potentially consequential impact. To be at least minimally effective, these efforts must extend across the campus, accepting that each academic community will bring its own perspective, assumptions, and norms and that these will affect how evidence-gathering and use are viewed.

To sum up to this point, as the need and value of higher education continue to grow, demands for public accountability will not diminish. Even so, gathering evidence of student learning in ways that address the genuine needs and questions of the many groups on and off the campus and using that evidence productively to improve performance will provide a stronger foundation from which to respond to the doubts of

skeptical publics. To morph from a complacent culture of compliance to a sustainable, forward-looking enterprise, those engaged most directly in the assessment of student learning must lead by targeting their work on the everyday functional, structural, and cultural challenges of student learning and institutional performance facing their campus and virtually every other college and university in America.

Harvesting Results

At least three things must happen to make the assessment of student learning more meaningful and consequential. First, outcomes assessments must be more closely aligned with the major forces and challenges facing students and higher education institutions in the twenty-first century, including the specific *issues relevant to student learning* at individual campuses. Second, presidents, provosts, and assessment professionals must identify and *engage the key end users* or consumers of assessment results, working with them as full-fledged partners. For both end users and partners, the animating impulse is whether the results of outcomes assessment will be useful for performing their respective roles and responsibilities. Finally, for assessment results to be relevant and actionable, student learning outcomes assessment must have a clear focus—*an anticipated use*—that will shape the methodology and set the stage for the eventual consequential use of results. The anticipated use of assessment work should be made explicit at the outset of an assessment effort; it may or may not materialize after the fact.

Relevant Issues

As the prime societal institutions charged with discovering, preserving, and transmitting knowledge and its practical application, institutions of higher education need and must seek evidence of how well they are performing, especially with respect to their core function—teaching and learning. Every college or university confronts campus-specific questions that call for information about what students know and are able to do. For all these reasons, assessment priorities and practices will vary from campus to campus. At the same time, nearly every college and university in the country is at the mercy of five broad societal trends: changing student characteristics and needs; unrelenting technological advances that stretch institutional resources and revolutionize when, where, and how students learn; more intense competition for students; less forgiving economic circumstances that make efficient, effective management of the

academic enterprise more challenging; and widespread skepticism about the quality of higher education.

The consequences of attending poorly to these forces are harsher today than at any previous time for both students and institutions. Priorities for the assessment of student learning must respond to these broader systemic challenges and at the same time align with very specific academic needs and priorities unique to the individual campus. What are the defining features of these broader forces?

CHANGING STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS Students bring with them varying academic and personal qualities; they come from widely diverse family, educational, and community environments and have different preferred learning styles. Students are increasingly mobile, not only in terms of often traveling long distances to attend college, but also in terms of the number of institutions where they take courses or earn credits on the way to graduation. This increased diversity and mobility of college students adds an additional layer of complexity in assessing student proficiency. For example, if a student attends two or more postsecondary institutions on the way to a baccalaureate degree, as about two thirds of graduates now do, which institution is responsible for what portions of what a student has learned? Understanding the needs of learners, documenting student performance, and making adjustments in pedagogy that lead to improved learning outcomes—these constitute the core functions of assessment.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES The digital revolution is altering virtually every sector of society, including higher education. Many undergraduates today are digital natives, having grown up in a flat-screen world in constant contact with and instant access to information. Hundreds of institutions now offer online degree programs. More and more students enrolled in traditional residential programs also take one or more courses online. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) have entered the nation's vocabulary. On most campuses, technology is not likely to displace traditional pedagogy any time soon, yet hybrids of conventional and technology-driven learning systems are evolving quickly, and the education of increasing numbers of students is solely online. Understanding the implications of technology for what students know and are able to do may be essential, but we have only scratched that surface.

INTENSIFIED COMPETITION FOR STUDENTS The pool of applicants for college is changing and, in some states and regions, has diminished as growth in the numbers of high school graduates has leveled off or

declined. *Student success* in the form of the completion agenda is important both for individual campuses and for the nation as a whole. The upshot is that it is essential for many campuses to implement an enrollment management strategy that attracts a strong pool of matriculates, sometimes reaching out to new populations, and to provide what is necessary to help more students persist and finish what they started. Increasing student persistence and graduation rates requires, among other things, an informed picture of how students are performing academically and what they are gaining from their experience. Assembling and using evidence of student learning to improve the prospects for student success—in the current context—is an essential competitive strategy.

ECONOMIC AND COMPETITIVE FORCES Much of the demand for a clearer understanding of the outcomes of student learning is driven by the changing economic and demographic forces that fueled expansion of higher education during the twentieth century but present a quite different reality in this century. All but a select handful of colleges and universities now cope with strained business models that functioned reasonably well in times past but now experience significant stress. Financial support for higher education from state governments has been in gradual decline for decades, and for most public colleges and universities state government is no longer seen as a reliable source of substantial support.

For private as well as public institutions, simply using tuition and fee increases to manage budget stress is no longer a viable option. Pushback from public opinion and the constraints of the academic marketplace itself make it harder for institutions to fill revenue gaps simply by raising tuition. Moody's Investors Service (Data retrieved 11/25/13 at https://m.moodys.com/mt/www.moodys.com/research/Moodys-New-Survey-Finds-Over-40-of-Universities-Face-Falling—PR_287436) reported that 28% of public institutions and 18% of private institutions expected *declines*, not increases, in net-tuition revenue—and this at a time when both sectors of schools are increasingly tuition dependent. Credit-rating agencies are more attentive and more likely to issue cautionary downgrades. And while income from gifts and grants from alumni and friends continues to grow, such gifts often are earmarked for purposes other than the core mission of the undergraduate education.

Controlling college costs while at the same time improving student success is no small order, yet as the financial strain felt by institutions grows and the debt load carried by students gets heavier, the pressure to contain and, where possible, to reduce college costs will escalate. Any successful effort at cost containment will require colleges and universities

to do things differently—including altering approaches to teaching and learning. As this experimentation takes place, collecting and using evidence of student learning to inform decisions will be crucial for both students and institutions. This dynamic, uncertain economic environment has increased the urgency and elevated the stakes of institutional decisions and policies that affect student success and institutional performance.

SKEPTICISM ABOUT EDUCATIONAL QUALITY Public confidence in the quality and integrity of American higher education is indispensable. At the same time, confidence levels are waning in nearly all societal institutions—governmental, corporate, religious, and academic. In the end, enduring confidence in American higher education will be defined by our performance, by the quality of college graduates, and by the impact of the innovation, creativity, and service colleges and universities render society. If academic institutions are *collecting* and *using* evidence of student learning to inform decisions and guide change that can help students and institutions improve performance, the confidence of the American public is likely to follow.

The range of challenges that confront individual campuses is endless. The mission for those who are engaged in collecting and using evidence of student learning must be one of *cultivating institutional ownership* of student learning outcomes, *deploying assessment in ways that inform campus needs and priorities*, and *using the resulting information in consequential ways*.

Campus Partners and End Users

Consequential assessment work is a collaborative endeavor. Earlier, we identified two distinguishable roles for campus groups with an interest in assessment. Recall that partners in gathering evidence of student learning can be faculty, student affairs staff, students, and others who have much to contribute in designing the assessment strategy as well as in collecting and analyzing the data, interpreting the results, and taking action based on the findings. Members of these same groups—and others such as governing boards, senior campus administrators, and occasionally external bodies such as accreditors or governmental agencies—may also be end users of assessment in that they may find illuminating and useful the data collected by faculty members, librarians, student affairs staff, an assessment committee or task force, or the professionals in an assessment or institutional research office. Keep in mind that end users and partners—be they faculty members, students, board members, or

administrators—are not self-generating; they must be systematically cultivated and their respective interests and contributions encouraged and renewed over time.

An effective assessment program requires both partners and end users who will (1) help shape or have a vested interest in the questions to be studied, (2) anticipate ways the assessment methodology or process will yield useful results, and (3) apply the evidence in ways that will improve students' prospects and institutional performance. Who are these likely partners and the potential end users of assessment evidence?

Accreditors and governments, no matter how reasonable and defensible their accountability demands, rarely become partners in the assessment work itself. Even as end users, such entities typically are not in a position to *use* assessment results to advance student success. For these external bodies, too often the end goal is making certain the institution is *in compliance*.

Virtually all of the potential partners and end users of assessment work are on campus. To be useful—to have a consequential impact on student learning and the health of academic institutions—they must be engaged. Assessment's attention must shift toward the campus and the academics who need and can use the evidence (Banta & Blauch, 2011).

FACULTY Faculty members are closest to the scene of the action and best understand the challenges related to student success. Assessment literature underscores the importance of faculty engagement (Hutchings, 2010), yet in NILOA's recent survey, when chief academic officers were asked what their institutions most needed to advance assessment work, their top two priorities related to faculty: more professional development opportunities for faculty; and more faculty members using and applying assessment results. For various reasons addressed in Chapter 5, faculty members too often neither are informed in advance about institutional assessment activities and (thus, not cultivated as potential end users) nor are recruited to be partners in the work. Despite the long-standing yearning that larger numbers of faculty members become more involved in assessment, many well-intentioned and hard-working academics are, through no fault of their own, excused and distanced from the action by a complacent compliance assessment culture that responds to one externally driven initiative after another.

If faculty members are engaged at the outset as partners in the assessment of student accomplishment, involved as the initiative is taking focus, consulted as questions and issues are being framed, and help shape and clarify the potential uses of evidence—if these principles are

followed, prospects for collaboration and productive use of results can be greatly enhanced. The key is involving faculty members early, with the end in mind: the consequential use of data. Among the most promising approaches for engaging faculty is to engage them in reframing the conversation about documenting student learning as fundamental core teaching and inquiry responsibilities, with course assignments serving as the vehicle through which student performance and instructional effectiveness are demonstrated and evaluated (Ewell, 2013a). More is said in later chapters about the importance of the assignments faculty design as a critical component of learning outcomes assessment.

STUDENTS Frequently overlooked as potential partners in an assessment program are the primary subjects of the inquiry—students. As Chapter 5 explains, there are pragmatic and salutary reasons to involve and consult with students who are at various stages of an assessment effort. Students can offer invaluable advice about how to garner student cooperation in assessment activities as well as selecting from the available assessment tools those that are most relevant to the nature of the learning experiences they have had, inside and outside the classroom. Students also can help interpret patterns of responses by different groups and may be best positioned to suggest the policy and programmatic implications of the results.

COMMITTEES AND SPECIAL TASK FORCES So far, we have referred to *faculty* in generic terms. To advance assessment work on campus, we need to think strategically about which members of the faculty and other campus educators—student affairs professionals, librarians, learning resource staff, academic advisors and writing program administrators, among others—are potential partners and possible end user-consumers of assessment evidence. The need for faculty engagement is not just representational—it is not simply the faculty voice that is desired. Faculty as well as staff engagement in assessment is about entering into a meaningful partnership to help define the key assessment questions, shape and refine the methodology, and clarify how assessment evidence can be most useful to improve student learning outcomes and completion.

Among the more obvious partners for assessment work are the many faculty and staff members who perform various institutional tasks that have student learning implications. They serve on campus committees on undergraduate education or general education, on ad hoc committees focused on student retention and graduation rates, or on faculty-staff study groups defining the learning goals of undergraduate education.

Other faculty members teach high enrollment gateway courses that—for better or worse—help define and shape the undergraduate experience and prospects for success of thousands of students. In professional and pre-professional programs such as engineering, business, education, medicine, and social work, still other faculty members are obvious partners when they take on a special responsibility for assessment of student learning for programs with specialized accreditation.

ACADEMIC LEADERS AS PARTNERS AND END USERS As just noted, provosts, deans, directors, program and department heads, and chairs are indispensable to an effective institutional assessment program, both as cheerleaders and through their day-to-day actions overseeing educational quality and institutional performance.

The chief academic officer by whatever title—provost, vice president for academic affairs, dean of the college—must be the prime strategic leader of academic quality assessment and its leading advocate. Provosts are the chief academic problem solvers and resource allocators. They must help shape the assessment agenda, articulate the questions about student and institutional performance that assessment can help answer, and influence priorities for the work to be done to understand what students are learning and how they are performing. The scope of these activities is broad, as student learning occurs at or is relevant for many different venues and levels: in individual classrooms, in professional and specialized academic programs, in graduate programs as well as those for undergraduate students, in connection with budget allocations, in understanding the link between student life and student academic success, in support of decisions to continue or terminate academic programs, in defining and shaping the curriculum, and in response to a host of ad hoc decisions that demand evidence of student learning outcomes.

Provosts operate at the intersections of each of these venues. Thus, they are in the best position to align assessment priorities with the campus strategic plan, and to oversee the consolidation and integration of the various strands of evidence collected by the multiple campus partners involved in assessment. Put another way, for those in the assessment community, the office of the provost is both the prime partner and the principal end user, crucial to shaping and championing the assessment agenda and essential to the productive use of findings.

As emphasized in Chapter 6, deans and department or program heads are crucial as well because they directly oversee and have frequent if not day-to-day contact with colleagues in the best position to generate the guiding assessment questions and to collect the data to answer these

questions. And for assessment to be consequential, faculty and staff who have ongoing contact with students inside and outside the classroom, lab and studio are in the best position to use assessment evidence in significant ways. Moreover, in addition to the institution-level assessment approaches where standardized tests or student surveys may provide an estimate of performance based on a sample of students, other arguably more authentic measurement of student achievement takes place at the classroom or program level through the use of rubrics, portfolios, and demonstrations. To inform and drive campus improvement efforts, evidence of student learning must be harvested at multiple levels throughout the institution.

When those who lead assessment initiatives ignore or fail to capitalize on the various potential end user and partner relationships, others—especially faculty members—tend to adopt a role of passive resistance and often become a barrier rather than a pathway to consequential assessment work. Campus leaders, led by the provost, must champion and nurture faculty relationships in ways that acknowledge and speak to the interests of the various end user groups as well as engender authentic, long-term mutually beneficial partnerships.

PRESIDENTS Assessment of student learning has moved higher on the presidential agenda over the last decade. One such concrete and recent example is *Principles for Effective Assessment of Student Achievement* (2013), adopted by the presidents of major research universities in cooperation with the heads of the nation’s regional accreditation bodies, which proclaims, “. . . all institutions should be expected to provide evidence of success in three domains” (p. 2), and lists the following: evidence of the student learning experience, evaluation of student academic performance, and articulation of postgraduation student outcomes (p. 2).

Almost certainly, the Association of American Universities and other college and university presidents will differ on exactly *what* constitutes evidence of student learning, precisely *how* student performance should be assessed, and specifically *which* postgraduation outcomes are most relevant to academic quality. Yet the emerging broad presidential consensus around the need for evidence of student learning outcomes in and after college represents an important milestone.

Symbolic and concrete milestones are important, but most faculty and staff are either unaware of or not persuaded by national movements—for some reasons explained in Chapter 5. Even so, it is both an article of faith as well as an empirical finding that presidents have more than a little influence in shaping campus culture and setting the institution’s strategic

priorities. Whether at a research university or a community college, striking the right tone at the top and working in partnership with the provost and with the support of the governing board, a president can do much to focus faculty and staff on the core function of the undergraduate experience: student learning. In so doing, through words and deeds the president can help infuse this preoccupation into the institutional culture.

GOVERNING BOARDS As guardians and fiduciaries of an institution of higher learning, governing boards are responsible for the oversight of the institution's academic quality as well as its financial soundness. On the financial side, the governing board provides for an independent financial audit, assures strong internal financial controls, adheres to generally accepted financial accounting policies and procedures, and oversees the financial performance (outcomes) of endowments and investments. A comparable level of oversight is essential to the quality and integrity of the institution's academic program. For all practical purposes, the governing board is an end user—albeit a very influential one—that needs assessment evidence to inform decision making and policy development. Frontline responsibility for questions on academic quality is typically delegated to a board committee on academic affairs to consider the following assessment evidence. To what degree do graduates demonstrate achievement of the institutional learning goals? That is, have they learned and can they do what the institution promised? What systems are in place in programs, departments, colleges, and institution wide to address these questions? What happens to the results? Is institutional performance and efficiency improving as a result?

Still, on many campuses, board engagement with academic issues, including weighing evidence of student learning, tends not to be a part of the board's culture. This, too, is changing as the Association of Governing Boards (2010) and other professional associations have placed more emphasis on boards being actively engaged in oversight of educational quality. However, specifying the board's role for assuring academic quality does not substitute for the authority and responsibility of the faculty for determining and upholding educational standards. Gathering and using evidence of student learning is a complex undertaking, and faculty and academic leaders are the daily arbiters of academic quality. At the same time, the governing board should expect that instances and examples of productive use of student learning outcomes assessment be presented in a way sufficiently understandable and coherent to support the board's confidence that the institution's internal academic quality controls are operating effectively (Chaffee, 2014; Ewell, 2013b, 2014).

Begin with the End in Mind: Anticipating Use

Too often, assessment activity fixates on executing an assessment process or approach to document student attainment rather than focusing on shedding light on a vexing issue and using evidence to address student and institutional needs and questions. Those charged with coordinating assessment frequently struggle to second-guess what might satisfy an accreditor or placate a state legislature or other government entity. Rather than taking account of genuine academic concerns and deploying assessment to inform change in pedagogy, the activity is preoccupied with “doing” assessment rather than using assessment results. The specific need for evidence of student learning—the central question or questions—and the particular uses the results will inform—these basics must be defined up front, at the beginning of the assessment process, not after the fact. St. Olaf’s Jo Beld has advocated backward design assessment in ways that anticipate use of evidence—for purposes such as advising, curriculum revision, pedagogical changes, resource allocation, faculty development, and program review (American Association for Higher Education Assessment Forum, 1992; Beld, 2014; Blauch & Wise, 2011).

Whether through backward design or in forward-looking anticipation, consequential assessment begins with the articulation of an important question, such as the following. How does the prior academic preparation of incoming first-year students influence dropout rates at our institution and what are the implications? What assignments are used by faculty in capstone courses, and what can be learned from them in terms of student performance and pedagogical effectiveness? Does the evidence of student learning outcomes align with and confirm our institution’s stated learning goals? Are there disparities in academic performance among students from various backgrounds? Are our students able to transfer knowledge learned in one course to another in the same discipline or allied discipline? How does student–faculty interaction influence our students’ success and learning outcomes?

Assessment work preoccupied with collecting data rather than using evidence typically falls short of the mark. It is the articulation of an important question and an explicit understanding of the need for evidence that must drive the assessment process and empower the productive use of evidence.

The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), sparked by the last reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, suggests one instance in which the ultimate impact might have been greater had the focus and intended use been clearer. Growing out of the national conversation on

accountability instigated by the Spellings Commission (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Secretary of Education, U.S. Department of Education, 2006) and related Congressional hearings, public universities and colleges came forward with a simple plan: an approach to providing information about student performance in which participating institutions would voluntarily administer a standardized test to a random sample of their first-year and senior students, calculate a value-added index, and make the results public.

As it turned out, the VSA was a timely, prominent public policy response to a hot political issue—but it was less useful to institutions and those they serve. That is, while the VSA proved effective in breaking an otherwise intractable political logjam and attracted the attention of unprecedented numbers of university presidents and provosts to the challenges of assessment of student learning, it was less effective than needed for improving student success and strengthening academic quality. Hundreds of campuses administered the standardized tests and posted the results, but precious few found the test scores meaningful for decision making, problem solving, or curricular reform. Moreover, very few members of the public for whose benefit the VSA was ostensibly created actually visited the websites that contained this information. Simply put, *process* prevailed but *use* was minimal. Administering a standardized test and posting the results—for institutional *compliance* with the requirements—became ends in themselves. Other than policymakers, identifiable end users were lacking. Perhaps with a clearer sense of the target audiences and a sharper vision of how the results could be applied and used, the VSA could have had a more powerful and lasting impact.

A similar pattern often prevails in accreditation. On hundreds of campuses, a flurry of assessment activity takes place 12 to 18 months in advance of an accreditation site visit. A review team is appointed, a variety of assessment efforts launched, a report prepared, the campus visited, and, at the end of the process, accreditation likely affirmed, and the campus urged to do better—with impact on student success and institutional improvement modest at best.

Demands for institutional accountability and compliance with the dictates of external forces are unlikely to diminish. The challenge for higher education institutions and especially for those most directly engaged in the assessment of student learning is to anticipate and align external demands with authentic campus needs. As a response to expectations of external authorities, compliance is a practical necessity. Absent a clear focus and vision for the use of assessment results, as a tool for improving learning outcomes, compliance is a waste.

What This Book Promises

As may well be evident by now, this is not a how-to book on the assessment of student learning, as valuable and important as those volumes may be. *Our preoccupation is with making assessment consequential.* That is, for us, the gnawing question is this: What can institutions and others with an interest in quality assurance in American higher education do to make assessment more useful and productive so that the results of assessment efforts are put to better use? To address that challenge, the following chapters search for answers to nine key questions.

What Counts as Evidence?

Colleges and universities are collecting a broader range of information about student learning, and more of it, than even a few years ago. Evidence drawn from the regular work of teaching and learning, like portfolios and classroom assignments, is on the rise. Rubrics are increasingly used to assess student learning and guide changes in pedagogy. Surveys provide rich information about the behaviors of students and the perceptions of alumni and employers whose feedback can help to guide improvement. And learning analytics promise greater insight into conditions that foster (or impede) student success. The practical challenge is to translate this growing body of information into evidence that answers pressing questions about student and institutional performance in ways that will inform pedagogical changes and policy going forward. This means paying careful attention to what counts as evidence for different audiences and thinking not only about the technical properties of data but also about their potential to catalyze improvement.

What Are Relevant Examples of Productive Use of Evidence of Student Learning?

Many campuses are using evidence of student learning productively to set institutional priorities, to guide decision making, to clarify learning goals, to increase student persistence, to reallocate resources, to enrich and accelerate learning via technology, and in a host of other ways. What has worked for these campuses and what has been the impact? Much can be learned from the successes and frustrations of the early adopters, but the hard truth is that most campuses have too little to show and share in terms of productive *use* of evidence of student learning in ways that transform student success and institutional performance.

How Can Assessment Work Be Better Organized and Led?

The rich diversity of American higher education calls for a comparable variety of approaches to understand what students know and are able to do. Approaches necessary and suitable for large, complex universities with multiple missions may not fit smaller institutions with more focused or specialized educational programs. Moreover, most campuses are replete with the proverbial academic silos, which inhibit sharing information about student performance as well as promising practices. How can evidence of student learning be shared and used more broadly and with greater impact, and what does the sum of all parts tell us about the whole?

What Can Institutions Do to Involve in the Assessment Process Those Whose Contributions Are Most Central to Improving Student Learning?

Members of the faculty are closest to and most knowledgeable about what students know and are able to do as a result of their college experience, but they are often the most skeptical of attempts to assess student learning on a broader scale. Often not consulted in advance or viewed as partners, faculty members may see efforts to gauge student learning as threatening, unneeded, useless, intrusive, or irrelevant. Moreover, institutional cultures and reward structures might press against, rather than encourage, their active engagement with assessment. Yet many campuses are finding ways to involve faculty, and their engagement is crucial if assessment is going to be consequential. So, too, is the engagement of their partners in the teaching–learning process: the students whom assessment is supposed to benefit. Although too often left out of the assessment conversation, when meaningfully included, students can promote their understanding of their own educational experiences and outcomes, inform institutional practices, and help further engage faculty in assessment deeply embedded in the teaching and learning process.

How Can Campus Leaders at All Levels Create and Sustain a Culture of Evidence That Emphasizes Improvement?

The student learning assessment movement in higher education was prompted in large part by government agencies and accreditors wanting colleges and universities to be more accountable for their actions. While much progress has been made and assessment capacity has increased, too many institutions remain most focused on complying with the demands

and expectations of others. This culture of compliance has clouded the most important, actionable purpose for collecting evidence of student accomplishment—improving teaching and learning. To shift the culture to one that harnesses evidence in ways that enhance student achievement, committed leadership is needed from presidents, governing boards, provosts, and deans, in partnership with an engaged faculty.

With Its Role in Prompting Assessment Well Established, What Can Accreditors Do to Become Even More Helpful to Promoting a Culture of Evidence for Improvement in Higher Education?

Accreditation of academic institutions has become the federal government's engine for change in higher education. Despite a cacophony of criticism of accreditation in recent years, we believe history will show it served well the postsecondary enterprise and society. As discussed earlier, NILOA's two national surveys of chief academic officers confirm that accreditation is seen by institutions as the prime force demanding more attention to the assessment of student learning. The best strategy for institutions and for those who wish to hold them accountable is a strong system of academic quality assurance that relies on relevant, reliable data accurately representing student and institutional needs and informing meaningful changes in policies and practices to promote student learning and institutional effectiveness.

What Has Been and Will Likely Be the Influence of State and Federal Policy and Higher Education Affinity Groups on Student Learning Outcomes Assessment?

Government entities—both federal and state—have played a major role in the growth of assessment by seeking more information, greater accountability, and better evidence of student learning. Thought leaders, higher education associations, and allied affinity groups have responded with efforts to frame and support the assessment agenda for the vast majority of U.S. colleges and universities. Despite the ebb and flow in the priorities of government and the work of associations, these entities have largely created and sustained demands for evidence of student learning. This was especially so in the early years of assessment. State mandates got assessment established in many states, and federal recognition of accreditation has kept it focused on student academic achievement. Moreover, these same forces largely generated the culture of compliance we know today. The key question becomes, “Where will these external forces take assessment from here?”

What Can Be Done to Ameliorate the Debilitating Effects of Initiative Fatigue That Often Come with Assessment Work and Related Improvement Efforts?

Initiative fatigue is one of the most troubling, and troublesome, side effects of the culture of compliance. As institutions take cues from government, accreditors, and their peer institutions on how to document and improve student and institutional performance, initiatives tend to pile up, multiply, duplicate—and become transitory. Not uncommonly, academic and student affairs faculty feel overwhelmed by the sense of “one more thing” and disenfranchised by someone else’s notion of what constitutes improvement and accountability. The result is often pervasive frustration and a fragmented, burdensome, and less effective institutional investment in assessment.

How Can Institutions Best Respond to the Clamor for More Transparency About Student and Institutional Performance?

To be transparent—including sharing evidence of student learning—is not simply to make information available, nor necessarily public. Rather, transparency is meaningfully communicating actionable information to those who can *use* it, most of whom, in the case of learning outcomes assessment, are *internal partners and end users*: faculty, students, campus committees, provosts, deans, department chairs, budget officers, president, and members of governing boards. Other relevant, interested parties are external stakeholders: prospective students, parents and family members, governmental agencies, media, and the general public. The needs and interests of these groups differ, and they seek and consume information differently. What is needed is not so much for institutions to report more as for the information they do share to be meaningful and actionable to the targeted audiences.

On the pages that follow, we confront these and many other pertinent issues that bear on this central challenge: What must colleges and universities do to more effectively gather and use evidence of student learning in ways that will enhance student and institutional performance?

