

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Making Learning Outcomes Usable & Transparent

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Colleges fall short in reporting their student learning assessment work

Findings from a national study released today show that most institutions do not take full advantage of their websites in reporting the nature of their student learning outcomes assessment activities.

The 2010 report from the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) is based on information obtained from the websites of 725 colleges and universities across the U.S. The NILOA study, titled “*Exploring the Landscape: What Institutional Websites Reveal about Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Activities*,” summarizes the nature and amount of information two- and four-year colleges and universities make available on their websites about student learning outcomes assessment.

“To the extent an institution’s website is a window into its performance, this study shows that schools need to do more to inform the public about what they are doing with regard to assessing student learning outcomes,” says George Kuh, the NILOA director and professor of higher education at Indiana University. Despite persistent calls for colleges and universities to make information about student performance readily available, the information shared online falls considerably short of the assessment activities reported by chief academic officers in 2009 and summarized in the NILOA report, “*More than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning Outcomes Assessment in American Higher Education*.” At two thirds of the institutions, not all of the assessment activities reported by provosts were displayed on the respective institution’s website.

The NILOA study is the first systematic national attempt to find out what information colleges and universities are posting related to student learning outcomes assessment on their institution website. The web scan study questions focused on:

- The information the institution displayed on its website
- The language used to present the information
- The location of the information on the institutional website

According to Christine Keller, Director of Research and Policy Analysis at the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, “The NILOA report challenges colleges and universities to become more transparent and make sure information about student and institutional performance readily available and understandable to prospective students and their families.”

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Key findings from the study are:

- More assessment activity was reported by chief academic officers than was available on institution websites.
- The typical institution listed two student learning outcomes assessment activities on its website.
- The most common assessment activity posted was national student surveys followed by alumni surveys and locally developed student surveys.
- Student learning outcomes assessment information was most often available on web pages intended for internal audiences as opposed to external.

"Posting assessment information on a website is not the same as doing everything possible so that external and internal audiences can find it. Indeed, assessment information often is hidden in plain sight," says Charlie Blaich, director of inquiries at the Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College.

The report concludes that to meet transparency obligations and responsibilities, institutions should make more information about student and institutional performance accessible via their websites. Toward this end, the report provides recommendations to colleges and universities including:

- Prominently posting student learning outcomes statements, resources, examples and activities in multiple places on the website and updating the information regularly
- Explaining the meaning and use of results of student learning outcomes assessments on the website in layperson's language for multiple internal and external audiences
- Enabling ease of access to information on the website by making text and non-graphic versions of web pages available and by providing clear ways to navigate the site

According to Stan Ikenberry, a NILOA researcher and University of Illinois professor, "What happens in college shouldn't be hidden in a black box. Evidence of learning outcomes needs to be transparent and shared with faculty members, students, governing boards and the public. The findings and recommendations in this report give us a hint of what is happening across America and how we might move forward."

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

The NILOA report, "*Exploring the Landscape: What Institutional Websites Reveal about Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Activities*," may be retrieved in pdf form at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/NILOAwebscanresults2010.htm> For more information, contact Staci Provezis, sprovez2@illinois.edu. NILOA web site: www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.