

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

Making Learning Outcomes Usable & Transparent

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Contact: Natasha Jankowski

Phone: 217.244.2155

E-mail: njankow2@illinois.edu

Higher Education Making Slow Progress Reporting Evidence of Student Learning

A report released today summarizes what colleges and universities tell the public via their websites about their efforts to measure student learning. In "*Making Student Learning Evidence Transparent: The State of the Art*," researchers from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) analyze the degree to which institutions make available what they are doing to assess the knowledge and abilities undergraduates acquire.

The report is based on information from the websites of 200 colleges and universities across the U.S. and describes how institutions display assessment results, the progress higher education has made in the past few years in terms of institutional transparency, and the impact of national transparency initiatives to encourage schools to report such information. The national transparency initiatives examined include the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), the University and College Accountability Network (UCAN), Transparency by Design (TbD), and Achieving the Dream (ATD).

According to George Kuh, the NILOA director and adjunct professor of higher education at the University of Illinois, the set of studies on which the report is based "may be the most comprehensive examination yet of institutional transparency in terms of student learning outcomes and assessment activities."

Stanley Ikenberry, a NILOA researcher and University of Illinois president emeritus, calls this NILOA project "a ground-breaking effort that will allow us to estimate the progress we will make down the line in addressing the transparency issue." For example, accreditation seems to matter in terms of encouraging transparency as those public institutions and institutions accredited since 2008 showed more assessment information than did independent institutions and institutions not recently accredited.

Other key findings from the study include:

- Institutions are reporting more information about student learning on their websites than found previously, but the information appears to represent only a fraction of the assessment activity underway.

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign • 363 Education Building MC-708 • Champaign, IL 61820
Phone: (217) 649-9592 • Fax: (217) 244-3378 • E-mail: sprovez2@illinois.edu
Web Address: www.learningoutcomesassessment.org

- Assessment results are most often found only on internal institutional research web pages not routinely searched by prospective students, parents and other interested parties.
- Even when institutions share the results of student learning assessments, rarely is the information presented in an easy-to-read form or tailored to a specific audience.
- While more than half of all institutions posted the results of student learning outcomes assessment on their websites, only a third offered examples of how they are using results.
- Institutions participating in national transparency initiatives, particularly those in VSA and TbD, tended to make more assessment information public than did nonparticipating institutions.
- None of the 200 colleges and universities examined presented information about whether the assessment results led to improved student learning following changes in teaching and learning approaches or policies and other practices.

NILOA researchers point out that while institutions now share what they are doing in terms of assessing student learning more frequently than many might suspect, much more can be done to make assessment information easier to understand and to use by both external and internal audiences. The report provides recommendations to colleges and universities to enhance transparency of evidence of student learning and subsequent use including utilizing the NILOA Transparency Framework <http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/TransparencyFramework.htm>

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The NILOA report series, “*Making Student Learning Evidence Transparent: The State of the Art*,” may be retrieved in pdf form at <http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/transparencyofevidence.htm> For more information, contact Natasha Jankowski, njankow2@illinois.edu NILOA web site: www.learningoutcomesassessment.org.