Meta-Themes and Meta-Trends in Assessment: Enduring Issues, Emerging Ideas

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After 35 years of the assessment movement in the U.S., how are we approaching assessment today? What have we learned? What has changed? And what do the answers to these questions imply for designing teaching, learning, and curricula, and generating the kinds of learning we value?

These are the questions we set out to address in our new edited volume, *Trends in Assessment: Ideas, Opportunities, and Issues for Higher Education* (2019). As organizers of the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, now the nation's oldest and largest assessment conference, we were uniquely positioned to comment on changes over time. Further, the contributors to the book were composed of the Institute's past and current track leaders, in addition to the representatives of the many higher education organizations who partner with the Institute and who offered their own perspectives on current and future assessment trends in the book's concluding chapter.

As we reviewed the contributions of this array of assessment experts and leaders, we noted a number of overarching themes and trends that appear and reappear throughout the volume. These themes and trends align with and build on the work of NILOA—the Institute's signature partner—on assessment trends, adeptly summarized by Natasha Jankowski and Gianina Baker in Chapter 1. Like Jankowski and Baker (2019), we found that there is "movement afoot," along with paradigm shifts in the making, within the field of assessment. At the same time, some perennial issues seem unlikely to disappear any time soon. We close the volume with a summary of these "meta-themes" and "meta-trends," and we offer them here in abbreviated form:

1. Assessment continues to make important contributions to understanding and improving student learning and success.

Systematic assessment and improvement efforts demonstrate and ensure that institutions take student learning and success seriously and cultivate campus-wide cultures of evidence-based decision-making. Assessment has helped faculty and staff better understand students' learning, strengths and difficulties across individual courses, academic and co-curricular programs, and entire institutions. But, too often, our assessment data fail to offer meaningful information for improvement, and too few programs and institutions use their data as effectively as they might.

Viewpoint

2. The need to navigate tensions between accountability and improvement in higher education remains a key issue.

An initial impetus for assessment was to provide accountability to external stakeholders for teaching and learning undertaken in higher education institutions. But assessment for accountability alone rarely improves student learning or institutional effectiveness and often leads to mechanistic, top-down assessment practices that alienate the very faculty and staff charged with carrying them out. For consequential improvement to occur, we must find more meaningful ways to involve all stakeholders in designing assessments, examining findings, determining needed changes, implementing those changes, and investigating subsequent impacts. A focus on improvement may also generate evidence that addresses accountability needs (Ewell, 2009).

3. Sound assessment programs require both leadership and broadened stakeholder engagement.

Commitment to student learning, assessment, and improvement requires engagement and leadership from senior leaders. But only engagement and leadership from faculty, staff, and other stakeholders—and reward systems that recognize this work—can ensure a truly institution-wide focus on student learning and adoption of thoughtful assessment practices. At the same time, the range of internal stakeholders in assessment continues to broaden, as staff in such areas as community engagement, global learning, and student affairs seek to ensure that the out-of-class learning experiences they offer contribute to student development and institution-wide learning outcomes.

4. Assessment strategies and approaches are becoming more inclusive, equity-oriented, and reflective of the diverse students our institutions serve.

Ensuring that all students have equitable access to learning experiences and resources and are able to benefit from them is an emerging priority for higher education. Inclusive assessment strategies examine which students have opportunities to engage in particular learning experiences, disaggregate assessment findings to determine who benefits or not, and develop interventions to close equity gaps. A commitment to equity also means that learning experiences include diverse perspectives and value students' voices and lived experiences. As McNair et al. (2016, p. 5) suggest, "a student-ready college…strategically and holistically advances students' success, and works tirelessly to educate *all* students for civic and economic participation in a global, interconnected society."

5. Assessment is broadening its perspective on outcomes to include students' personal, academic, professional, and civic development.

Too often, our assessment practices have approached student learning outcomes as a set of discrete, narrow competencies—a stance that disregards what we are coming to see as the responsibility of higher education to support students' holistic development and to shape the citizens, professionals, scholars, and leaders of the future. At both the undergraduate and graduate/professional levels, we must help students develop the self-awareness and habits of mind that will enable them to thrive during and beyond their formal education (Ben-Avie, Kuna, & Rhodes, 2018; Kahn, 2019). This means that learning experiences and environments must be designed to promote both disciplinary knowledge and the development of what Kuh, Gambino, Bresciani Ludvik, and O'Donnell (2018) term "neurocognitive"

and "dispositional" skills. To accomplish this successfully, we must also develop and adopt assessment approaches that enable us to understand student achievement of outcomes often considered ineffable and hence challenging to assess.

6. Authentic measures of student learning from a variety of experiences and contexts are increasingly necessary and valued.

Students themselves can offer the most direct and comprehensive information about what they are learning and what they are struggling with. Good authentic measures offer actionable insights into *how* and *why* students learn, as well as what they learn. It is thus important that we identify innovations and interventions that generate more meaningful, authentic evidence and help us improve assessment of this evidence. Current promising practices include ePortfolios, which can support integrative learning and identity development and offer insights into student perceptions and interpretations of learning experiences; guided reflection, which can provide evidence of student understanding of disciplinary concepts and procedures or engage them in examining their own learning strategies and processes; VALUE rubrics, which are designed for assessment of authentic student work; and Comprehensive Learner Records, which document learning from engagement from both in- and out-of-class learning experiences.

7. Assessment is expanding its focus to include the learning *processes*, *practices*, and *environments* that support achievement of learning *outcomes*.

Assessment is often defined and understood to mean "outcomes assessment." But, as noted above, good authentic measures, such as reflective ePortfolios, can also help us understand the experiences, practices, and environments that encourage learning and development to occur. A focus on the learning processes that generated (or failed to generate) desired learning and developmental outcomes can provide more actionable information for improvement than outcomes alone can offer, moving us toward more truly learning- and learner-centered assessment and improvement practices.

8. Ongoing, thoughtfully implemented professional development remains essential to building assessment capacity and sustaining a culture that supports systematic, well-designed assessment and improvement practices.

Institutions committed to effective assessment and improvement practices systematically strive to develop and maintain capacity for this work across the campus. Professional development is offered through teaching and learning centers and by assessment and institutional research professionals providing internal consulting and assistance, among others. Leveraging the capabilities of institutional systems and processes that support assessment, including learning management systems, institutional accreditation, and program review, is another key capacity-building strategy.

9. Assessment work must be valued and recognized in order to result in sustained improvement.

Too often, the time, energy, and effort needed to effectively engage in assessment and improvement work are not sufficiently valued by administrators and colleagues when determining annual merit increases and making decisions about promotion, tenure, or advancement. This must change. For many years now, higher education leaders have called

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on campuses to rethink faculty roles, rewards, and recognition to align more closely with institutions' educational missions (e.g., Boyer, 1990; Dolan et al., 2018; Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997), and their arguments also apply to professional staff. In order to support sustained assessment and improvement practices, rewards and recognition for this work must be embedded in institutional cultures and be revisited periodically to ensure continued recognition of engagement in and leadership of assessment efforts.

10. Assessment remains a work in progress.

Experts agree that assessment has a long way to go to realize its full potential to improve our institutions. Now is the time to reconsider what and how we assess and how assessment practices can most effectively foster genuine improvements in student achievement, especially as student bodies grow ever more diverse. We further recommend that assessment more intentionally incorporate scientific understandings of learning developed in the past few decades and be tied more closely to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, which has historically sought to design more effective teaching and learning practices. Assessment is more complex than some of its proponents have recognized, and learning is even more complex. While much has been discussed, written, and debated about assessment in higher education in the past 35 years, it remains a work in progress.

Concluding Thoughts

If our assessment practices reflect our educational values writ large—and we believe that they do—then we find reason for optimism in the trends we identified. They suggest that assessment leaders and innovators are moving away from:

- treating assessment as a mere compliance exercise to *treating assessment as an opportunity to genuinely improve student learning and academic success*;
- focusing on narrowly defined learning outcomes to *an equal emphasis on holistic student development for citizenship and professional achievement*; and
- assuming that all students have the same needs to *an understanding that we must account for student diversity in order to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to learn and achieve.*

Several of these emerging new directions amount, in our view, to a potential paradigm shift, as we rethink *how* and *what* we assess and more intentionally seek to identify the conditions that support deeper, more engaged learning. At the same time, we must continue to strengthen institutional cultures that support thoughtful, effective, systematic assessment and improvement practices. We believe that these are essential tasks for higher education institutions to undertake if we are to meet our responsibilities for increasing educational attainment, developing a more informed and engaged citizenry, and contributing to global welfare.

The Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, along with its partners, remains committed to its role as a principal venue for showcasing assessment and improvement work. We invite you to visit assessmentinstitute.iupui.edu to learn more about ways to become involved.

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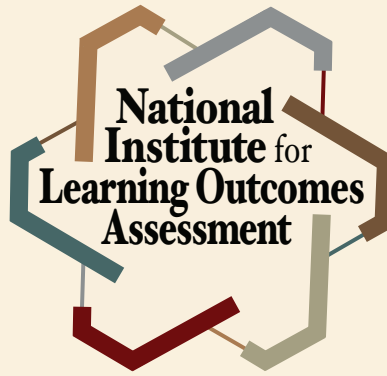
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