

## US: New report on learning outcomes assessment

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A national study published last week reveals that most US universities and colleges gather information about what students learn during their studies - but mostly do not use and report the results in ways that could improve student accomplishment and inform the public about institutional performance. The report from the **National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment**, NILOA, based on information from more than 1,500 degree institutions, found among other things that most institutions conduct learning outcomes assessment "on a shoestring" and one in five devote less than one person to the activity.

**More Than You Think, Less Than We Need: Learning outcomes assessment in American higher education** summarises what universities and colleges in the US are doing to measure student learning, according to a statement by NILOA, which is a collaborative project between Indiana University, the University of Illinois and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

"The national study is the first systematic attempt in more than a decade to find out what colleges and universities are doing to assess student learning and how they are using the results," NILOA said. Questions posed to chief academic officers focused on four key areas - the learning outcomes measured; how outcomes are assessed and the results used; major factors prompting assessment; and what is needed to advance learning outcomes assessment.

The study found that most institutions, over and above assigning grades, use multiple approaches to measure what happens to students during college "with accreditation being the primary driver of such assessments". Almost all colleges and universities (92%), use at least one assessment approach with samples of students; two thirds use three or more approaches; and around 40% of institutions use some standardised measure of general knowledge and skills "which can be used to compare student performance across different institutions".

George Kuh, NILOA Director and professor of higher education at Indiana University, said the results were "cause for cautious optimism".

Community colleges tended to use general knowledge assessments and other measures to determine if students had workplace skills and were ready for upper-level course work, he said: "In contrast, for-profit schools use a variety of approaches to demonstrate overall institutional performance in terms of student accomplishment, perhaps because of a greater need to demonstrate their educational quality."

Other key findings of the study, according to the NILOA statement, are:

- \* The most common uses of student learning outcomes data are to prepare for accreditation and respond to calls for accountability.
- \* Student outcomes information is least often used for evaluating lecturers for promotion or merit pay increases.
- \* Four fifths of all institutions have one or more departments using portfolios of student work to assess outcomes linked to a specific programme of study.
- \* The most selective colleges and universities collect information at rates comparable to their less selective counterparts, but tend not to use it as often.
- \* The greatest needs to advance student learning outcomes assessment are more faculty engagement followed by more assessment expertise.
- \* Most institutions conduct learning outcomes assessment on a shoestring, and one fifth of all institutions devote less than one person to the activity.
- \* About half of all provosts said more resources are needed to do learning outcomes assessment better.

Stanley Ikenberry, a NILOA researcher and University of Illinois professor, said institutions should do more to use student outcomes assessment results to improve teaching and learning and inform the public about institutional effectiveness. "A key next step is to discover more about what is going on at the programme level where faculty directly affect student learning."