SEF SOUTHERN EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Building Your Assessment Toolkit:
STRATEGIES FOR GATHERING ACTIONABLE EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING

DR. JO BELD APRIL, 2015

Foreword

For years, testing and assessment practices have been driven by external forces; accreditation, program review, rating and ranking systems. And of course, these data are widely used to govern who gets in and out of degree programs. In an earlier SEF brief, Dr. Jo Beld makes a compelling case for thinking about the assessment of student learning as much more than complying with an external requirement. That report highlights the growing use of student learning assessments to examine how well students are doing on campus and how these data are being used to strengthen academic programs and benefit students. This second brief by Dr. Beld, builds on the first by offering useful guidance and tools for developing robust assessment strategies.

With internal motivations related to institutional effectiveness in mind, the types of evidence we need depends on what we want to know and how we intend to make use of the data. Of particular value are the questions Dr. Beld offers for thinking about assessment goals and objectives and the framework provided for making decisions about specific assessment instruments and tools. Building Your Assessment Toolkit provides advice, information on specific approaches, examples of how these approaches are evident in practice and guidance on how various assessment practices support specific institutional, program or faculty objectives.

SEF has frequently argued that MSIs would be wise to link their data on student learning to various national assessments and other survey data to facilitate meaningful comparisons within and across institutional types. Our sense is that when appropriate controls are in place for student characteristics and program goals, it becomes clearer how MSIs contribute to broad national priorities like degree completion for underrepresented groups. One of the things this brief does is identify specific national assessment data and speak to when such comparisons might be useful.

Of particular value is Dr. Beld's analysis of different types of assessment instruments and the guidance offered about the strengths and weaknesses of each. This should really help decision makers at all levels of the institution make informed judgments about the instruments best suited to the task at hand. In this regard we are reminded that often we do not take maximum advantage of assessment information we already have at our disposal. Dr. Beld offers a number of very useful suggestions for identifying and taking advantage of existing forms of evidence of student learning.

MSIs are poised to illustrate for others in higher education what is involved in helping an increasingly diverse student population make successful transitions from postsecondary education to becoming full participants in our nation's economy and democracy. The MSIs making the most progress toward this goal are really smart about capturing and using data on student learning to identify the strengths of their academic programs and where we can do more to impact student learning. An important theme running through this brief is the idea that assessment strategies and practices represent a powerful mechanism through which institutions improve their overall effectiveness. Perhaps even more significant, when done well, these practices empower students to take hold of their own learning. If anything is likely to improve student retention and completion rates, it will be institutional practices that generate useful data and feedback to students about how well they are doing along with guidance on how they can deepen their learning. It is in this spirit that I recommend to you this brief.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the title suggests, Dr. Jo Beld's brief, Building Your Assessment Toolkit: Strategies for Gathering Actionable Evidence of Student Learning, explores the myriad of tools available to Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) that can be used in gathering actionable evidence of student learning. Dr. Beld discusses several methodologies used at MSIs around the country and believes these methodologies would enhance the existing toolkits at comparable institutions. Dr. Beld acknowledges there is no one "best" way to assess learning, rather she focuses on the quality of an assessment approach that best aligns with the type of outcome being assessed, the questions the institution is seeking to answer, and the purposes the institution wants both the evidence and the process to serve.

Dr. Beld invites institutions to first ask these questions when addressing their existing assessment toolkit— What types of outcomes do they want to examine? What evidence may they already have? What is the potential impact of the process itself, and what are the tradeoffs involved with comparative data? Focusing on the audience of the assessment report will better assist in determining methods that will be credible to the audience. Determining the set of learning outcomes that the institution plans to assess informs the method. Selecting a strategic approach to assessment planning while contemplating what institutions want students and faculty to gain from the time they commit to the assessment process itself are vital to this process. Analyzing each of these questions serves to assist administration in determining priorities that will guide the administration's review of the actual assessment options available.

Once an institution has adequately answered the questions raised above, the next step is to select a method that will best allow the institution to gather the evidence it seeks from current students and alumni. The brief discusses several methods of assessment currently used by institutions in collecting this information. These methods include; surveys, questionnaires, interviews, test and examinations, rubrics and course embedded assessments. The brief discusses the advantages and disadvantages of each assessment. For example, focus groups and interviews are an attractive option for institutions that already foster close relationships between faculty and students or a disadvantage in using a survey or questionnaire is the potential of not receiving a high enough response from students and alumni that administration is confident in the representativeness of the results. An advantage of using a course embedded assignment is that it would require faculty no additional work to collect the sample. They can use existing course assignments as the sample for their assessment. Dr. Beld emphasizes that most institutions do not have to "reinvent the wheel" in coming up with these assessments.

Many institutions already have viable assessments tools buried somewhere at their institution. Dr. Beld encourages institutions to search for existing assessment tools before duplicating the effort in developing new assessments.

The brief discusses several national assessment tools currently used by MSIs developed by organizations like the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Education Testing Service (ETS), and the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS). Surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the College Senior Survey (CSS) are highlighted for the benefit they could provide MSIs and cited as an example of an existing assessment that could enhance a toolkit.

The brief discusses the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) or the Proficiency Profile formerly called the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP) and the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST) as tests and examinations that assess student competencies for general education outcomes (i.e. critical thinking, reading, writing and mathematics). The addition of these tests into a MSIs repertoire is yet another quick and easy method to strengthen an institution's student outcome assessment.

Rubrics are discussed as an assessment that offers great flexibility to an institution. The brief defines rubrics as a way to help instructors analyze the extent to which a given outcome is demonstrated in a sample of student work. Rubrics can provide data about outcomes in a single course, in an established program or pilot project, or across an entire institution, depending on the nature of the sample of work being assessed. They are suitable for work in virtually any field, making it much easier for faculty to summarize what they see without running the risk of reductionism. Rubrics are characterized as a widely popular tool for institutions because of their ability to serve as an assessment tool for faculty and an instructional tool for students.

Institutions can create assessments internally, in lieu of using an externally created assessment. The brief highlights MSIs that effectively use internal assessments of student outcomes. Rubrics are characterized as a widely popular tool for institutions because of their ability to serve as an assessment tool for faculty and an instructional tool for students. This further substantiates the numerous ways an institution can address their assessment toolkits.

Finally, Dr. Beld leaves us with a profound statement that choosing a methodology is only one element in building a robust program of student learning assessment. She urges institutions to look at an assessment report as the beginning and not the end- an assessment of what worked, what failed and how to improve the institution. Dr. Beld describes how a plan that embraces but extends beyond the assessment report, institutions can accomplish what assessment is intended to do: sustain and strengthen learning, to the benefit of the students we serve.

Introduction

In a previous brief ("Advancing Excellence, Enhancing Equity: Making the Case for Assessment at Minority-Serving Institutions"), the assessment of student learning as something more than a box to check off on the way to "passing accreditation," was described. Done well, it can strengthen institutional effectiveness and advance inclusive excellence, not only within Minority-Serving Institutions, but across higher education more generally. That earlier brief discussed strategies for framing assessment in a way that engages Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) faculty and staff and supports student success. The present brief addresses the question that inevitably arises next, even among those who are most eager to tackle the task: How can institutions actually do the work? How can they gather credible evidence of what students know and can do as a result of their college education?

The purpose of the present brief is to answer this question, but from a strategic perspective. Assessment is an investment, and like any investment, it requires some up-front analysis of goals, tradeoffs, and long-term consequences. Thinking strategically about assessment is useful for any institution, but it may be especially so for institutions with limited resources, dedicated but over-extended faculty and staff, and students whose paths to a college degree may be as diverse as the students themselves. Consequently, the first section of this brief identifies several key questions to consider before you and your colleagues begin to choose or develop assessment methods. The second section examines several common approaches to assessment already in use at a number of MSIs, and outlines some advantages and limitations of each approach. My hope is that this brief will assist you and your institution in strategic decision-making as you expand your assessment toolkit.

BEFORE YOU START YOUR SEARCH:
WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM YOUR ASSESSMENT TOOLKIT, AND WHY?

Systematic evidence of student learning can be gathered in a variety of ways, and both the evidence itself and the process of gathering it can serve a variety of purposes. Here are some strategic questions for you and your colleagues to consider before you begin to review your assessment options.

Questions for Getting Started

1. Who will do what with the evidence that will be gathered?

2. What outcomes are you aiming to assess, and what kinds of outcomes are they?

3. What evidence, or items that could be turned into evidence, do you already have?

4. What purposes do you want your assessment process to serve?

5. What kinds of comparisons within or beyond your institution might be useful?

"all accrediting agencies ask institutions of higher education not simply to do assessment, but to use it."

1. Who will use the evidence that will be gathered? What will they do with the evidence?

There are many reasons to make this the first question to consider in the search for an assessment approach. From a compliance perspective, all accrediting agencies ask institutions of higher education not simply to do assessment, but to use it. Thinking first about the uses of the evidence increases the likelihood that your institution will select a method of gathering evidence that will generate actionable results. From a methodological perspective, asking "who are the potential users and uses of the evidence?" helps focus an evaluative inquiry and sharpen the evidence-gathering process (Patton, 2008). Focusing on the audience for your assessment reporting will incline you and your colleagues toward methods of gathering evidence that will be credible to that audience. Finally, from a practical perspective, attention to the likely uses of assessment results helps set assessment priorities. Because institutions aim to foster multiple student learning outcomes, not only at the institutional level but also within individual curricular and co-curricular programs, the potential assessment agenda at any college or university far outstrips the available time and resources to gather and interpret results. In short, attending first to the expected uses of assessment evidence will focus and strengthen not only the assessment process, but also its impact.

2. What outcomes are you aiming to assess, and what kinds of outcomes are they?

It is increasingly common for institutions to make their goals for student learning public in one or more written statements. According to a recent survey of provosts by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA),

approximately 84% of colleges and universities have adopted stated learning outcomes for their undergraduates, and this percentage is 10% higher than it was just five years ago (Kuh et al., 2014). The terminology and framing of these statements vary from one institution to another; Howard University, for example, expresses its learning goals as a set of general education "competencies" for all its undergraduates, while Miami Dade College lists 10 "learning outcomes" cultivated not only in general education but also in co-curricular activities and the academic disciplines. Northwest Indian College links its eight "institutional outcomes" to the college's core commitments to native leadership, Tribal values, indigenous knowledge, and community-building, while California State University-Monterey Bay conveys its learning outcomes in the context of individual general education requirements and academic majors.

Whatever the specifics of style, substance, and situation, most learning outcomes fall into one of three dimensions of student learning: knowledge and understanding; proficiencies and practices; and attitudes and dispositions. "Historical awareness" (Howard University) is a "knowledge" outcome; the ability to "practice community building" (Northwest Indian College) is a "proficiency" outcome; and "appreciation for aesthetics" (Miami Dade College) is an "attitude" outcome. The suitability of an assessment instrument for a particular outcome depends in part on the match between the instrument and the dimension of learning reflected in the outcome being investigated. Attitudinal outcomes, for example, are more easily captured in interviews and focus groups than in examinations; proficiency outcomes can be more convincingly demonstrated in students' actual behavior than in their responses to survey questions; and knowledge outcomes can be documented more effectively through the analysis

"Whatever the specifics of style, substance, and situation, most learning outcomes fall into one of three dimensions of student learning:

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*- **attitudes and dispositions**"*

of student work than through course completion statistics. In short, "What do students know?" "What can students do?" and "What do students care about?" are different kinds of questions that often require different types of evidence.

3. What evidence, or items that could be turned into evidence, do you already have?

When an institutional decision has been made to pursue a new assessment initiative or extend assessment practices into a new program area, it is tempting to jump right into the process of choosing or developing an instrument, debating a sampling design, or recruiting faculty participants. This is a temptation to be resisted, because your institution may already have student learning evidence on hand, or established practices that, with some enhancement or adaptation, can yield some evidence. Many times, a faculty assessment director has convened a working group to develop a questionnaire for graduating seniors, only to discover after the fact that their institution already had relevant data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE - administered by a number of MSIs, such as Morgan State University), the Higher Education Research Institute's College Senior Survey (CSS - administered by others, such as Shaw University), or both (as is the case at Dillard University). A department assessment committee may start drafting a rubric for assessing the development of students' understanding of social change in academic internships, only to find that (like Spelman College) the institution already had a rubric assessing the same outcome in a different program.

Conducting an inventory of available assessment instruments and evidence before launching a new initiative is about more than avoiding unnecessary replication, though that is certainly one benefit.

Institutions may encounter findings that are relevant but puzzling or insufficiently detailed, raising new questions about the learning to be investigated, and thereby shifting the focus of the assessment they were planning to do. Or they may discover an instrument that the institution already uses regularly but that does not address the specific questions they want to answer in their new assessment initiative, and modify the instrument accordingly. St. Olaf College encountered both of these circumstances; in the first instance, their NSSE findings influenced a series of interviews they conducted with sopho- mores and seniors about their learning in general education, while in the second, they decided to add some questions about writing proficiency to an already-scheduled administration of an information literacy assessment questionnaire.

Even if your institution does not have a relevant instrument already available, there may be an ongoing program or practice that could do double-duty as an assessment moment. For example, senior exit interviews are part of the graduation checklist at many institutions, such as Morehouse College, or are conducted within individual programs, as in the Department of History and Government at Bowie State University. In addition to asking students about educational "inputs" (e.g., the quality of classroom instruction, program requirements, advising, and co-curricular activities) and their future plans, exit interviews can include questions focused on the stated learning goals of the program or institution as a whole. Other opportunities for assessment include student portfolios and senior projects, both of which are gaining in popularity in undergraduate degree programs. "High-impact practices" such as these are a ready-made opportunity to gather systematic evidence about a wide range of student learning outcomes – as faculty and

staff at LaGuardia Community College and Spelman College would readily affirm, since their student portfolios have long been used in exactly this way. In short, knowing what assessment findings or opportunities are already in place at your institution allows you to build on what you have, rather than reinventing the wheel.

4. What purposes do you want your assessment process to serve?

Every assessment strategy requires an investment of time and energy from faculty and staff, and often from students as well. The specifics of that investment will vary with the instrument (question- naire, interview, test, rubric, etc.) but even when assessment is completely embedded in the normal process of teaching and learning (i.e., faculty decide to gather evidence from work students are already doing to meet course or program requirements), faculty and staff time is still needed to plan the approach, gather the work, synthesize and summarize observa- tions about the outcome being assessed, and discuss and act on results. A strategic approach to assessment planning includes giving some attention to what you want students and faculty to gain from the time they commit to the assessment process itself.

For example, some assessment approaches can be inherently educational for the students whose learning is being assessed. Completing a survey focused on the intended learning outcomes of a program or institution draws students' attention to those outcomes, and that awareness may carry over into their choice of future courses or co-curricular activities. Keeping a learning journal or compiling a portfolio can help students synthesize and reflect on their learning, and many discover that they know and

can do more than they thought they could. Participating in an interview or focus group led by a faculty member may strengthen a student's sense of connection to the community. Reviewing an assessment rubric along with a syllabus or signature assignment can help students recognize the specific characteristics of a broad outcome such as critical thinking or intercultural competence. The more seamlessly assessment can be interwoven with the students' actual educational experience, the more it can become part of – and thereby enhance – that experience.

Assessment processes can also benefit participating faculty, both individually and collectively. Many faculty have discovered that collaborating to articulate outcomes or to develop a method of assessing them – drafting interview questions, identifying signature assignments, inventing a rubric, or reviewing externally-developed instruments – can enhance a sense of common purpose and build community in unexpected ways. Particularly within departments, assessment can move faculty from thinking about "my course" and "my teaching" to "our course" and "our teaching." Preparing a brief assessment report on the extent to which an outcome was demonstrated in a given course or assignment can promote evidence-informed self-evaluation and serve as a kind of faculty development. Working together to interpret results and consider their implications for programs and practices can do the same on a more collective level. With good leadership, assessment processes can reduce faculty isolation and foster collaboration, community, and program coherence. Strategic planning for assessment thus requires attention to the process as well as to the information the institution hopes to generate.

5. What kinds of comparisons within or beyond your institution might be useful?

A final consideration is whether to select an assessment instrument that offers the opportunity for subgroup comparisons within your institution, or for comparison between your institution and others similar to it. This decision inevitably involves some tradeoffs. A student survey administered at multiple institutions generally permits both internal and inter-institutional comparisons, but may not address all the outcomes of interest or ask all the questions the faculty is interested in; moreover, surveys typically provide only indirect evidence (based on perceptions and self-reported data) rather than direct evidence (based on students' actual work). On the other hand, a thoughtful questionnaire or rubric designed by the institution's own faculty may gather just the evidence that the institution is looking for, and allow for comparisons across subgroups within the institution (men vs. women, transfers students vs. students who complete all degree requirements at the institution, US students vs. international students, etc.), even though it will not allow for comparisons with other institutions. Typically, neither inter-institutional nor within-institution comparisons are possible with interviews or focus groups, given the small sample sizes and variations in the ways questions might be asked; on the other hand, these approaches allow for a highly customized and nuanced set of results. It is important to recognize these tradeoffs before the process of selecting or developing an assessment approach begins; it can be more than a little frustrating to complete your evidence-gathering project, only to have your prospective users ask for comparisons that the approach wasn't designed to permit.

This brings us full circle to the question of intended uses and users of your assessment evidence. Asking this question first, and keeping it in mind while addressing the other strategic issues to be considered – the types of outcomes you want to examine, the evidence you may already have, the potential impact of the process itself, and the tradeoffs involved with comparative data – will help you set important priorities that will guide your review of the actual assessment options available to you. We turn next to the options themselves. How are MSIs actually doing the work of assessment, and what are the strengths and limitations of different approaches?

NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHERE YOU WANT TO GO, WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS FOR GETTING THERE?

Assessment – like higher education itself – is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. In fact, it is common to recommend the use of multiple methods of gathering evidence of our students' learning, because no one method will answer all the questions we might want to ask, and all methods have limitations as well as strengths. The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment reports that institutions are using more types of assessment instruments, and using them more often, than was the case even a few years ago (Kuh, 2014). Minority-Serving Institutions are no exception to this general trend. Below is a discussion of the most widely-used approaches, including some thoughts about what each approach can and cannot tell us about what our students know, can do, or care about.

Types of Assessment Instruments

	Strengths	Weaknesses	Examples
Written Surveys & Questionnaires	- National instruments can provide comparative data & free-up faculty since there is no instrument development or validity and reliability testing involved. - Local instruments can be tailored to campus mission & goals.	- Only provides indirect evidence of student learning.	- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), - College Senior Survey (CSS)
Interviews & Focus Groups	- Opportunity to delve more deeply into student perceptions, understandings, and experiences, and can enhance what institutions learn from more broadly-administered written questionnaires.	- Labor intensive & only provides indirect evidence of student learning.	- Howard University's Students Speak Research Institute - El Paso Community College's "Project Dream" evaluation
Tests & Examinations	- National instruments are likely to be valid and reliable. - Local instruments can be more aligned with course and campus goals.	- National instruments can be expensive & may not align with course and campus goals. - Local instruments are labor intensive, small sample sizes make determining validity & reliability difficult.	- Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) - Educational Testing Service (ETS) Proficiency Profile (formerly called the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, or MAPP, test)
Rubrics	- Can provide specific and comprehensive feedback to students and instructors.	- Labor intensive & finding a sample of work that is representative.	- VALUE" (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)
Course Embedded Assessment	- Design process prompts faculty, to consider the alignment between course work, course learning outcomes, campus mission & goals.	- Difficult to account for differences in faculty judgments and evaluation.	- Florida Memorial University is using the Paul-Elder Critical Thinking rubric to assess student writing

Written surveys and questionnaires

These continue to be among the most popular methods of gathering evidence of student learning.

NILOA estimates that surveys are part of the assessment toolkit in approximately

85%
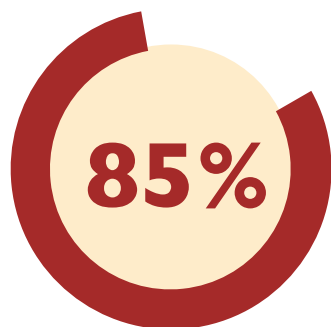
of higher education institutions
(Kuh et al., 2014).

I have already mentioned two of the best-known nationally-administered instruments: the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the College Senior Survey (CSS), both developed and administered by university-affiliated higher education research centers. Georgia State University's use of NSSE for a variety of purposes was recently featured in the NSSE brief Moving from Data to Action: Lessons from the Field, Volume 2 (2012). The institution's sample of participating students is large enough to permit subgroup comparisons, and according to the brief, "the GSU Office of Undergraduate Studies explores retention by comparing NSSE responses of those students who left the institution with those who are still enrolled. This comparison is part of an important initiative at GSU to develop

a retention model based on both direct and indirect data" (p. 12) – an initiative that was recently recognized by The Education Trust as a national model for increasing student success. Georgia State University also used NSSE findings on the development of critical thinking and writing proficiencies to inform its Quality Enhancement Plan for reaccreditation, pairing its NSSE results with relevant findings from its own locally-developed survey of recent graduates.

NSSE results can also be paired with questionnaires designed to address the specific experiences of the students being served at MSIs. For example, the Latino Emotionality Index (LEI) and the Intercultural Effort Scale-Latino students (IES-LS) could provide institutions serving large proportions of Latino students, like

HSIs, with data on outcomes like campus climate and students' intercultural effort. Intercultural effort is the effort Latino students expend to feel more connected to their institution's culture, which could help contextualize the academic experience of Latino college students (Sawatzky, 2014).

Written questionnaires can be administered to many different cohorts of students, providing a rich developmental picture of student learning. NSSE, for example, is administered to spring-semester first-years as well as graduating seniors. A companion to the College Senior Survey, the "Your First College Year" (YFCY) survey, is administered by a variety of MSIs, such as the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, and Mount St. Mary's College in California. The YFCY survey can be administered not only to first year students who are still enrolled at the institution, but also to students who matriculated at the institution the previous fall but have subsequently left. The YFCY questionnaire also permits institutions to add their own questions. These two features of the instrument make it a potentially rich source of information to inform student retention efforts, as well as to enhance the quality of programs and services for first-year students. A number of two-year MSIs, such as Kapi'olani and Miami Dade Community Colleges, participate in the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) for both benchmarking and diagnostic purposes.

At the other end of the cohort continuum, alumni can offer valuable insights on the outcomes and effects of their college experience on their post-baccalaureate lives. NILOA estimates that about two-thirds of institutions include alumni surveys in their assessment toolkits (Kuh et al., 2014). Savannah State University, for

example, regularly administers an alumni survey that includes questions such as "How much of your current work requires the application of diversity skills?" and "To what extent have your educational training and experiences at SSU allowed you to integrate theoretical concepts into real-world situations?" Sitting Bull College, a North Dakota tribal college, includes questions about each of its intended institutional outcomes in its annual alumni survey. California State University–Monterey Bay participates in an alumni survey administered by the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS), a professional association of institutional researchers and assessment directors at private colleges and universities. Although the HEDS Alumni Survey is not yet in use at many other MSIs, institutions need not be affiliated with HEDS nor be private institutions in order to participate. The instrument is an especially good fit for institutions whose learning goals align with the "essential learning outcomes" of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), since it includes a series of questions specifically addressing those outcomes.

Surveys and questionnaires offer a number of advantages. Those that are nationally administered offer not only the possibility of comparative data, but also the prospect of saving considerable faculty time, since there is no instrument development or validity and reliability testing involved. This frees up faculty and staff time to dig deeper into the results and consider their implications for specific programs and services, such as academic advising (California State University-Northridge – NSSE, 2009) and student support services (University of California-Merced – NSSE, 2009). Instruments that are locally-developed can be quite institution-specific, with the language of the questions paralleling the

language used in the institution's statement of outcomes. St. Olaf College, uses a locally-developed "Learning Goals Questionnaire" administered to new students at the beginning and end of their first year of college, as well as to graduating seniors, alternating the administration of this questionnaire with NSSE administration. The institution-specific questionnaire serves the dual purpose of evidence-gathering and reflection-prompting for the participating students. Whether locally-developed or inter-institutional, assessment questionnaires typically cover a wide range of outcomes, ranging from writing to critical thinking to civic engagement and ethics, as well as key aspects of students' learning experiences. As a result, the findings are broadly applicable to numerous curricular and co-curricular programs. Finally, written questionnaires can elicit important information about students' values, attitudes and dispositions. Many MSIs include outcomes such as commitment to community, artistic appreciation, spiritual development, curiosity, and academic confidence in their list of learning goals, and these are easier to capture in written or oral questionnaires than to observe directly in student behaviors.

However, surveys and questionnaires are limited in some important ways. Probably the most significant is that they generally provide only indirect, rather than direct, evidence of the other two types of outcomes – students' knowledge and proficiencies. Questionnaire items typically address students' learning experiences or behaviors, or ask for students' perceptions of the contributions of the institution or program to a variety of outcomes. While this is valuable information, it does not tell us what students actually know or can do. Moreover, unless there is some kind of follow-up effort to gather supplementary evidence, it is not always

easy to interpret students' responses to fairly general questions. Finally, both students and alumni are increasingly besieged by requests for survey completion for a whole range of purposes, and often from sources outside their institutions. It can require considerable institutional effort to secure a response rate that is high enough for faculty and staff to have confidence in the representativeness of the results. Nevertheless, written questionnaires continue to be a popular approach to assessment, and there is much that faculty and staff can learn from the voices of their students.

"As a complement to other forms of evidence, students' voices can be a valuable source of information and insight about students' learning."

Interviews and focus groups

A second approach to assessment, less frequently used but also engaging student voices, involves face-to-face interactions with students through individual interviews or small focus groups.

These offer the opportunity to delve more deeply into student perceptions, understandings, and experiences, and can enhance what institutions learn from more broadly-administered written questionnaires. North Carolina A&T used focus groups for exactly this purpose during its participation in a national longitudinal study of student learning and development across a range of liberal education outcomes, from critical thinking and moral reasoning to leadership development and intellectual curiosity. The approach proved so productive that the institution established an ongoing program training undergraduates to conduct focus groups on a variety of topics, such as the impact of different models of supplemental instruction, and student learning in mathematics courses. Similarly, Howard University established a "Students Speak Research Institute" to train undergraduate researchers to conduct focus groups on teaching and learning with representative samples of students from across the institution. Howard University also supplemented a widely-administered electronic survey of alumni with data from alumni focus groups conducted during its 2012 Homecoming celebration. Interviews and focus groups can be particularly effective in program-level or grant-funded project assessment, since these involve smaller numbers of students who are often closely-identified with the program in question. El Paso Community College gathered detailed information from student focus groups about learning experiences and outcomes in its "Project Dream" summer bridge program. In addition to documenting the ways in which the students actually engaged various program elements, the focus groups results indicated significant improvement in students' sense of confidence and preparedness for college-level work.

Focus groups and individual interviews are particularly attractive options for institutions that already foster close relationships between faculty and students, a signature element of the institutional culture at many MSIs. Conversations with students are relationship-building for the participants, and are more likely than written questionnaires to prompt student reflection and integration. However, like written questionnaires, interviews and focus groups typically yield indirect rather than direct evidence of student learning. And while interviews and questionnaires can elicit considerably more detail than the typical questionnaire, and require fewer student and faculty participants, they are much more labor-intensive for those who participate, and they can be harder to summarize. Perhaps this is why institutions tend to use them for narrower or more time-bound purposes – during a review of general education, for example, or in the context of a grant-funded project. As a complement to other forms of evidence, students' voices can be a valuable source of information and insight about students' learning.

Tests and examinations

As is the case with written questionnaires, tests of students' knowledge and proficiencies can be either external or "local" (i.e., developed and administered by the institution itself), but the former is more common than the latter. A testing instrument that has received considerable national attention in recent years is the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), a performance-based test of students' proficiencies in writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Students complete either a Performance Task, in which they use evidence from a library of hypothetical documents to develop a solution to a problem scenario, or an Analytic Writing Task, in which they are asked both to make an argument and to critique an argument in response to a variety of writing prompts. Students' responses are evaluated against detailed rubrics that reflect criteria for effective writing and thinking that align well with the criteria faculty apply in evaluating students' classroom assignments. The CLA is used by a number of MSIs of varying types, including numerous campuses in the California State University, City University of New York, and University of Texas systems, Fayetteville State University, Our Lady of the Lake University, Dillard University, and West Virginia State University. Morgan State University uses both the Collegiate Learning Assessment and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Proficiency Profile (formerly called the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress, or MAPP, test), which assesses general education outcomes in critical thinking, reading, writing, and mathematics. Bennett College is able to obtain longitudinal data about students' general education proficiencies by administering the ETS-PP to fall-semester first-years and spring-semester juniors. Bennett also administers ETS Major Field Tests to seniors in their last semester of study, to assess learning outcomes in academic majors.

Another well-established testing instrument that can be used at both the institutional and the program level is the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST). Florida Memorial University, for example, is using the CCTST as one of several assessment instruments in its Quality Enhancement Plan to enhance students' critical thinking. The CCTST has been used for assessment in some pre-professional programs with specialized accreditation requirements, such as nursing and social work; more recently, field-specific variations of the CCTST have become available for use in these programs, as well as in business and legal studies. Still another way that externally-developed tests have been used in an institution's repertoire of assessment methods involves tracking pass rates on professional entrance examinations. The Radiologic Technology program at El Camino Community College, for example, includes certification/licensure examination pass rates as one of its sources of evidence concerning the

achievement of the program-level learning outcomes it has identified, and posts its pass rate on the program website. (More institutions could do this – it is not unusual to find statistics about pass rates on pre-professional program websites, but the data are typically not considered part of the program's assessment data.)

Internally-developed tests at the institutional level are less common than externally-developed measures, but some institutions use them to assess one or more of their institutional-level or general education competencies. Norfolk State University, for instance, administers a faculty-developed but externally-validated Quantitative Reasoning Test (QRT) to all students enrolled in its required mathematics general education courses. The institution designed its QRT specifically for assessment purposes, pairing the results with the quantitative reasoning items in the National Survey of Student Engagement and its locally-designed Graduating Student Exit Survey. Morgan State University complements its administration of both the CLA and MAPP with locally-designed proficiency tests in writing and speaking, completed in the sophomore year as a general education capstone experience. A somewhat different example is provided by the University of Massachusetts—Boston (UMB), which requires its sophomores to meet a general education writing proficiency requirement, either through the submission of a portfolio or through the successful completion of a university-designed writing examination. UMB's writing proficiency exam results could serve as powerful assessment evidence, especially if considered in relation to other indicators of the quality of student writing.

The Norfolk State and UMB examples point to one of the benefits of locally-designed tests as a source of assessment evidence. Both institutions integrate the administration of these tests seamlessly into their curricula, rather than as an "extra" thing that students are recruited to do outside of normal course or degree requirements. Norfolk has taken the extra step of seeking external validation of its assessment tests, thus mitigating one of the common concerns about locally-developed instruments. Indeed, these concerns about validation, as well as the desire for inter-institutional comparisons, are among the reasons that institutions are more likely to turn to externally-developed and administered testing instruments if they wish to incorporate tests into their assessment toolkits. But of course, these have their limitations as well. Faculty are likely to worry about the "fit" between an externally-developed instrument and their individual teaching goals and strategies, which may make the results less credible and therefore less likely to be used. Externally-developed instruments are also frequently administered to student volunteers, sometimes with the benefit of modest material incentives, and these characteristics of the sampling design raise further questions about the credibility of the results. Finally, externally-administered testing instruments come with a price tag, and the expense can be a barrier for many institutions. Still, valid and reliable test results are among the most direct forms of evidence of student knowledge and proficiencies, so the right kinds of tests administered to a representative group of students can be a very useful addition to an institution's portfolio of assessment strategies.

Rubrics

Few approaches to assessment offer as much flexibility as rubrics do. A rubric – a succinct statement of the component characteristics of a learning outcome, accompanied by specific descriptors of what each characteristic "looks like" at varying levels of accomplishment or performance – is a way to help instructors analyze the extent to which a given outcome is demonstrated in a sample of student work. Rubrics can be developed and applied to many different types of work, from a single essay, oral presentation, poster, or performance, to a portfolio of "artifacts" in a range of genres; they can also be applied to artifacts derived from learning experiences outside the classroom, such as non-credit-bearing service learning opportunities and co-curricular activities. Rubrics can provide data about outcomes in a single course, in an established program or pilot project, or across an entire institution, depending on the nature of the sample of work being assessed. They are suitable for work in virtually any field, making it much easier for faculty to summarize what they see without running the risk of reductionism. Finally, rubrics can readily do double-duty as instructional resources. They can be provided to students along with their assignments, to help students understand what faculty are looking for in evaluating their work; one colleague of mine asks his students to apply his rubric assessing critical historical analysis to several of the chapters in the course textbook before the rubric is applied to the students' own writing. Individual rubric results can be returned to students with their graded papers, so students receive more detailed, outcome-focused feedback. They can also be used as guides to self-reflection and/or peer evaluation. With so many possible uses both for assessment and

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(Kuh et al, 2014).

instruction, it is no wonder that rubrics are increasingly popular additions to institutional and program-level assessment toolkits; NILOA estimates that nearly 70% of colleges and universities use them for this purpose (Kuh et al, 2014).

As is the case with the other assessment methods described above, rubrics can originate outside or within an institution. Perhaps the best-known of the externally-developed options is the collection of "VALUE" (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) rubrics developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Created by inter-institutional teams of faculty drawn from multiple disciplines and institutional types, the VALUE rubrics address a range of "essential learning outcomes" of a college education, such as critical thinking, intercultural knowledge and competence, effective writing, integrative and applied learning, teamwork, and ethical reasoning. More

than 200 MSIs have accessed these rubrics on the AAC&U website (Rhodes and Finley, 2013), and some have integrated them (often with minor modification) into their institutional assessment practices.

Winston-Salem State University is a case in point. Following a revision to the university's general education curriculum in 2009, the institution adopted slightly modified versions of the VALUE rubrics corresponding to six of the institution's newly-articulated intended general education learning outcomes (critical thinking, critical reading, quantitative literacy, written communication, information literacy, and oral communication). Not only are the rubrics being used to assess student learning in the new GE curriculum, they are also being used in the instruction of GE courses. In true "backward design" fashion (Wiggins and McTighe, 2006), faculty teaching GE courses develop signature assignments that help students develop and demonstrate the outcomes captured by the VALUE rubrics that the Winston-Salem faculty adopted, assess those assignments using the appropriate rubrics, and contribute the results to a university-wide database (Rhodes and Finley, 2013). The VALUE rubrics have played a somewhat different role in Kapi'olani Community College's assessment repertoire. Kapi'olani has a robust program of course-based service learning, with intended learning outcomes carefully aligned with the outcomes established for the college's general education program. Students complete written reflections in response to a common prompt, which are then assessed using a rubric developed by Kapi'olani faculty that synthesizes elements from several of the VALUE rubrics – critical thinking, written communication, analysis and inquiry, and civic engagement.

Institutions use locally-designed rubrics as well, both for program-level and institutional-level assessment. LaGuardia Community College has a well-established set of rubrics for assessing the core competencies it has articulated for its general education program: critical literacy (including written communication, critical thinking, and critical reading), quantitative reasoning, oral communication, and research and information literacy. The rubrics are applied by teams of faculty to samples of general education course assignments obtained from electronic portfolios maintained by the students throughout their LaGuardia experience. The rubrics allow faculty to compare student performance at the beginning and end of their GE course work across all competencies, and the results yield rich and actionable information for LaGuardia faculty. Miami Dade College also relies on its own rubrics to assess the ten outcomes it has identified for all its graduates, such as communication, ethical thinking, aesthetic appreciation, and personal, civic, and social responsibility. The rubrics are applied by faculty assessment teams to a random sample of student responses to collectively-designed assessment tasks administered to the selected students in the final semester of their general education coursework. As these examples illustrate, the use of locally-designed rubrics both draws upon and fosters faculty collaboration, not only around assessment, but also around instruction.

But rubrics, too, have their limitations. Developing them – or even deciding to adopt or adapt existing ones – is time-consuming, and applying them systematically to samples of student work is even more so. In fact, one of the biggest challenges institutions confront in deciding to use institutional-level rubrics is determining how, exactly, to obtain a sample of work that is representative of both the students and the educational experiences offered by the institution. Locally-designed rubrics may have great credibility for the institution's faculty, but they cannot generate comparative data. Inter-institutionally-designed rubrics hold promise for normed data, but that promise has not yet been realized. Moreover, it is not always easy to fit a pre-existing rubric to the particulars of the work students generate. Despite these challenges, though, rubric-based assessment probably does more than any other assessment approach to stimulate faculty conversation and collaboration around teaching and learning.

"How do we know if one faculty member's judgments about the achievement of a given outcome in her history course, as demonstrated in students' oral presentations, are the equivalent of another faculty member's judgments about the same outcome in chemistry, as demonstrated in students' lab reports?"

Course-embedded assessment

Unlike the other assessment approaches discussed above, "course-embedded assessment" is not so much a method of measurement as it is a means of sampling. In course-embedded approaches, samples of student work (sometimes described as "artifacts") are systematically gathered and analyzed in relation to one or more learning outcomes of interest. The artifacts can be of varying types – short writing assignments, term papers, group projects, oral presentations, posters, artistic creations or performances – or can consist of an outcome-relevant excerpt from any of these. The method of assessment can vary as well, ranging from examinations to rubrics to ratings. At St. Olaf College, for example, some departments use selected items in the final exams of selected courses as their assessment artifacts, with different scores on that portion of the exam indicating different levels of achievement on the outcome of interest. A few departments incorporate items from externally-developed discipline-based tests into signature courses, and use the results from those items as their assessment data. My own department assesses the abstracts students prepare for their senior seminar term papers (rather than assessing entire papers), using a departmentally-created rubric for assessing scholarly writing. The studio art program aggregates results from the rubric faculty use to critique the exhibitions of students' senior art projects, and the rubric itself was designed with input from students. At the institutional level, St. Olaf College uses a course-embedded approach as one component of their assessment of general education learning outcomes. Each faculty member teaching one or more general education courses is asked to assess one of the stated general education learning outcomes in one of their general education-accredited courses, using whatever assignment(s) the faculty member determined to be the best source of evidence about the learning outcome he or she had selected. While grading each student's work, the faculty member rates the extent to which the work demonstrates the achievement of the outcome in question. The results are aggregated by requirement, and supplemented by evidence gathered from student focus groups and items relating to general education in our institutional-level assessment surveys.

Many MSIs are using a variety of course-embedded assessment methods at both the program level and the institutional level as well. In the assessment of its Quality Enhancement Plan focused on critical thinking, Florida Memorial University is using the Paul-Elder Critical Thinking rubric to assess student writing assignments in five required first-year courses that have been designed with a critical thinking emphasis. Critical thinking elements are also included in FMU's locally-designed rubric for assessing students' culminating projects (which may take any of several forms – a senior thesis, a capstone project, or an internship, for example). The LaGuardia e-Portfolio/rubric-based assessment program described above is essentially a course-embedded approach, since students' portfolios consist of samples of work completed in designated e-Portfolio courses. Norfolk State's approach to assessing scientific reasoning, like its assessment of quantitative reasoning (see above), is also course-embedded. NSU's faculty-developed Scientific Reasoning Test, validated by external test development and evaluation consultants, is administered to all students enrolled in the required natural and physical science general education courses; the results for the students whose course enrollment constitutes the completion of their natural and physical science general education core requirement serve as the institution's

assessment data for the scientific reasoning outcome. Finally, Fayetteville State University's approach to program-level assessment is entirely course-embedded. Each year, programs determine which program-level learning outcome they will assess; select an assignment, project, or examination in a required (preferably upper-level) course to serve as an assessment artifact; and report the number and percentage of students who demonstrated proficiency with respect to that outcome in the selected assignment. Programs with multiple sections of a required course are encouraged to consider incorporating a common core of outcome-related items in a midterm or final exam across all the sections of the course, and to aggregate the results for those items purposes of assessment.

Course-embedded assessment strategies have numerous advantages. The process of designing a course-embedded strategy prompts faculty, both individually and collectively, to consider the alignment between the learning outcomes they have established for their courses and the learning outcomes established for their programs and/or for the institution as a whole. It also prompts reflection on the alignment between all of these outcomes and the actual work students are asked to do – sometimes causing some adjustment in syllabi and assignments even before the assessment is undertaken. Arguably, this means the assessment process has the potential to improve teaching and learning even before the evidence has been gathered. Course-embedded assessment is also very efficient, once the plan is in place; it makes use of work that students are already completing and that faculty are already grading. Finally, course-embedded assessment is direct and authentic. It is based on students' actual work, not on their perceptions or experiences, and makes assessment an organic part of the teaching and learning process. These advantages help to explain why course-embedded assessment is not

only one of the most frequently-used approaches to gathering evidence of student learning, but also considered among the most valuable (Kuh et al., 2014).

But like every other strategy discussed in this brief, course-embedded assessment has its challenges. The bigger the scope of the assessment, the bigger the communication task; it is not easy to explain even a relatively simple approach to a large number of busy faculty, and to track the successful completion of a large number of reports. It is also difficult to know how to aggregate evidence gathered from such varied sources into a coherent summary of findings. How do we know if one faculty member's judgments about the achievement of a given outcome in her history course, as demonstrated in students' oral presentations, are the equivalent of another faculty member's judgments about the same outcome in chemistry, as demonstrated in students' lab reports? Partly for this reason, while course-embedded assessment findings may be quite actionable for individual faculty members reflecting on student outcomes in their own courses, or for departments considering results in a required course, they may be less obviously actionable at the institutional level. Despite these limitations, course-embedded assessment strategies can serve an important faculty development purpose, reminding participating faculty about how their own work with students fits into the larger ecology of student learning at their institutions.

Beyond the assessment report

Building an assessment toolkit is about much more than methodology, though methods do matter. The Minority-Serving Institutions described in this brief testify to the richness and variety of options available for gathering meaningful and actionable evidence of student learning. Their varied approaches also suggest that there is no one "best" way to assess learning. Rather, the quality of an assessment approach depends on its fit with the type of outcome being assessed, the questions the institution is seeking to answer, and the purposes the institution wants both the evidence and the process to serve.

But choosing a meaningful methodology is only one element in building a robust program of student learning assessment, albeit an important one. For assessment to fully realize its promise, faculty and staff need to use the evidence they work so hard to gather. This means learning to see an assessment report not as an end, but rather as a beginning – a starting point for evidence-informed deliberation on what is working well, what needs improving, and how. As noted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment in its research with provosts, "Although more assessment evidence is now available, its use is not nearly as pervasive as it must be to guide institutional actions toward improving student outcomes" (Kuh et al., 2014, p. 4). This is because the use of assessment evidence doesn't just happen; it requires as much strategic thinking, broad engagement, and thoughtful leadership as does the gathering of the evidence in the first place. The next brief in this series will be devoted entirely to this topic, exploring not only the many uses of assessment evidence in institutional programs and practices, but also the organizational and leadership strategies MSIs can employ to enhance the likelihood that these uses will actually occur. With a plan that embraces but extends beyond the assessment report, institutions can accomplish what assessment is intended to do: sustain and strengthen learning, to the benefit of the students we serve.

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