## Assessment Needs Work: What can we do? (Part II)

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Part II of the discussion around Dr. Erik Gilbert’s question, “Does Assessment Make Colleges Better? Who Knows?” posed in The Chronicle a few weeks ago. Part II features an invigorating conversation across campuses, listservs, and social media on how to improve our understanding of learning outcomes assessment (and its language), reward faculty and institutions for improving teaching and learning with assessment, improve the preparation of future faculty, accept responsibility for accountability and assessment of learning, and more!

[*Read Part I of the dialogue.*](http://www.aalhe.org/assessment-works-but-it-needs-more-work/)

**Improve Understanding of Learning Outcomes Assessment** – and its Language  
Learning outcomes assessment is the process of collecting evidence about student learning in order to improve it. It is not synonymous with entering data into an assessment management system (frequently heard on SACS campuses: “I gotta do my [WEAVE](http://www.weaveonline.com/about-us/).”). It is frequently used to provide grades, but when used in this context, grading should not be confused with learning outcomes assessment ([here’s why](http://www.slideshare.net/JeanDowns/why-grades-dont-make-the-grade-explaining-how-learning-outcomes-assessment-can-improve-student-learning)).

It is not synonymous with evaluation; although assessment – and the resulting data – should be used to inform academic program review (a type of program evaluation), it should NEVER be used to evaluate faculty, teaching, or courses.

**Reward faculty and institutions for improving teaching and learning with assessment**  
Continuing the discussion with Dr Eder on [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/grp/post/1171287-6039360184403451908?trk=groups-post-b-all-cmnts), Dr. Suskie wrote, “one of my memories… was one professor telling us, ‘I know I could be a better teacher. But I need to get my promotion, and the only way I’ll get it is by spending every waking hour working on getting published research. As long as my student evaluations are decent, trying to improve my teaching doesn’t count.’ There are a lot of sources of resistance to assessment, and that’s just one, but it’s a big one.” Teaching is gaining a greater emphasis in three criteria that dominate tenure reviews at four-year colleges and universities, but what else can we do to reward students, faculty and institutions for great learning?

Teri Lyn Hinds recommends that faculty work on assessment be more formally recognized in the scholarship of teaching and learning, especially to balance the faculty workload during tenure and promotion processes. This recommendation aligns well with Dr. Souza’s suggestion to change the word assessment to research. Even if we didn’t formally attempt to change the dreaded “A” word, what if the discussion of assessment could be more firmly associated with learning, research, and student achievement rather than terms like evaluation, documentation, accreditation, or numbers?

Dr. David Dirlam recommended the intrinsically motivating and psychological rewards of real-time assessment, which Peggy Maki recently highlighted as a good practice for 21st century learners in her [keynote address](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CB8QFjAAahUKEwjozovTwuvHAhXMF5IKHclUB3Q&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sacscoc.org%2Finstitute%2F2015%2F2015sihandouts%2Fhandouts%2FPeggy%2520Maki%2520-%2520Assessing%2520Your%252021st%2520Century%2520Students.pdf&usg=AFQjCNE9xt0d9xjTKgOT0HzN3JkCeoXInA&sig2=mYdemyw5tnnEjnOFN7IxUQ) at the SACS Summer Institute on Quality Enhancement and Accreditation. Not only do students receive more instantaneous feedback, but faculty do not have to suffer another infrequently discussed frustration of learning outcomes assessment: the delayed gratification of waiting a year (or longer) to find anything of satisfaction from the assessment data.

**Improve Preparation of Future Faculty**  
Even though learning outcomes assessment has been heavily mandated in higher education for two decades, many graduate programs do not train faculty about this core function of teaching and service (and perhaps even scholarship). Programs like the Council of Graduate School’s Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) to Assess Student Learning have [examined](http://www.cgsnet.org/preparing-future-facultypreparing-future-faculty-assess-student-learning) how professional development programs can best train graduate students in the assessment of student learning, and the use of outcomes measures to improve teaching and course design. How should we design the curriculum?

**Accept Responsibility for Accountability and Assessment of Learning**  
Despite consensus about whether or not assessment makes colleges better answer, the bottom line is what Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander and other have warned: “if colleges and universities do not accept more responsibility for assessment and accountability, the federal government will do it for them” (Denecke, Kent, & Wiener, 2011).

**Communicate about achievements in learning in clear and meaningful ways**  
(Eubanks & Gliem, 2015; Kuh, et al., 2015).  
Capella University designated an entire website to results for individual programs on learning and career outcomes – and included video explanations of the reports. What are some other examples that we can use as models (especially for those with fewer resources)?

**“Develop ways to better share the information that we have on student learning”**  
(Wehlburg, 2015).  
After the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment ([NILOA](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/)) was created in 2008, the Association for Assessment of Learning in Higher Education ([AALHE](http://www.aalhe.org/)) joined forces in 2009 to collaborate on a national level to support practitioners interested in using effective assessment practice to document and improve student learning.

At AALHE, we hope you’ll continue the dialogue with us as new trends about teaching and learning emerge…

To continue the conversation about the cultures of assessing student learning in higher education, please join us for AALHE’s upcoming webinar, “Faculty Perspectives on Cultures of Assessment,” featuring the research of Dr. Matt Fuller, Sam Houston State University – October 16, 1:00 – 2:30 EST 2015.

[Part I of the dialogue – Assessment Works! But it Needs More Work](http://www.aalhe.org/assessment-works-but-it-needs-more-work/)

**References & Resources**

**Recommended during these discussions with colleagues:**

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[model of influence: Use of assessment data in higher education](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CB8QFjAAahUKEwiemdWv8u_HAhUUjpIKHV0nCNA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.rpajournal.com%2Fdev%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2014%2F06%2FA1.pdf&usg=AFQjCNHlwtePWhPad-1r7yB9B6u7zseAnA&sig2=FmlNOCPZ99Z5KhwDEsYW0w). Research  
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**Participants in this Dialogue**

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Dirlam, David – Virginia Wesleyan College – personal communication – 9-3-2015

Douglas Eder – Southern Illinois University – [LinkedIn discussion Higher Education: Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes & Educational Innovation](https://www.linkedin.com/grp/home?gid=1171287) 8-23-2015.

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