Equity Driven, High Achievement Outcomes-Based Assessment: What does it Mean for Open Access Institutions?

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These are increasingly interesting times for educators, administrators, and policy makers who are committed to open access and all students' success. The emphasis on performance metrics, particularly those that involve parameters for progress through education with specific time limits, don't appear to be sensitive to the type of work that open access institutions engage in, nor do those metrics appear to be thoughtful of the intersections of the multiple characteristics of those served by open access institutions. It is my hope that this brief Perspectives article provides you with encouragement, as well as some questions to consider for how outcomes-based assessment may be useful in advancing equity and high achievement for all. And as such, my hope is that you will find ways to enhance your organizational culture of curiosity and learning through outcomes-based assessment.

Before we get to that, we need to contextualize student learning and development and de-conceptualize the process of improving learning. Outcomes-based assessment can be useful here if we know the goals of the students once they enroll for the first time in our colleges. The challenge, as you all well know, is that most of our students do not know their educational goals. And if they do know their goals, they may not know the path to goal achievement. OK, you know all of this… so what? The goal of outcomes-based assessment (OBA) is no different. Your team may not know the goal of OBA; they may not know why they are supposed to engage in OBA. And if they do know that the goal or purpose of OBA is to get playfully curious about how well what they do every day is working in a way they can improve it in order to advance access and equity high achievement, they may not know the path (or the systematic process) to achieve that goal (e.g., to stay curious about how to improve their programs in a systematic way).

One option is to tell your team members the goal of OBA, but that works about as well as telling students what their goal for their education should be. For instance, it may work for some, but nor for others. So, why not engage them in the process of discovering the "answer" for themselves by designing a process that has structure and flexibility, and that is kind, non-judgmental, promotes curiosity, questioning, failure, resilience, discovery, and connection to why they are at your institution anyway?

To do this for our students, we would need a systematic process where they can engage in learning in a way that leads to their educational goal discovery. The same is true for our team members who are wondering why they would engage in OBA, particularly when their schedules are already packed

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with the kinds of activities that reinforce their meaning-making. So, if you don't have a systematic process to engage your team members in learning in a way that leads to their discovery of what OBA is and why it is useful (e.g. professional development plan) with some flexibility (e.g., one on one consultations when they get stuck), OBA will likely remain a "to do" item on their list, just like a course, certificate, or an advising appointment will for a student.

Back to the process of learning and development; it's messy. You also already know that. So, what? You might be saying again. Well, in an open access institution, we have many (NOT all) students coming to us who MAY be more likely to perceive education as less than a first priority for their life goals, or they may be just trying to survive their day-to-day. As such, tending to that which they know will help them succeed is just not feasible. In essence, once students choose to pursue education, it may not be their first priority. The parallel is that many of our team members may want to commit to engaging in OBA but it is not a priority; their schedules are already over-loaded.

As leaders, we can help students see how their education must remain a priority by connecting every assigned task and course they engage in to their goal of achieving an education (or whatever their positive goal may be). It is, in essence, a larger curriculum alignment matrix, but in this case, it is highlighting their pathways to success. Expressly articulating outcomes for each activity and connecting them to what we understand is needed for student success helps students and us identify the importance of what we do, and therefore what they need to do. In addition, we can link the results to each outcome and if we have linked each outcome to a positive goal directed behavior (e.g., performance indicators) needed for student success, then the student and our team members can see how they contribute. Doing so helps our instructors, staff, and administrators explain how engaging in OBA connects to their own priorities for why they are on our campuses (whether virtually or not).

Where might you begin for students? Many of you are already doing this in informal ways with individual educational plans and pathways projects. What is important to remember here is that the path to success for many of our students is not JUST a set of courses or a sequence of courses. They also require assistance that is offered by our student and academic support services team members. The same is true for our faculty and staff. The question is how clearly articulated are those outcomes for support services and programs and how transparently are those outcomes connected to the activities designed for them? Also, how well are those outcomes and activities connected to higher level institutional goals such increased engagement, sense of belonging, and

EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVE: AN IN-DEPTH LOOK

Increasing numbers of community colleges are focusing on the assessment of student learning outcomes, due in part to the demonstrated need to improve student progression and foster success in students' future academic and workforce roles. The open access mission brings with it a student body presenting widely varying academic skill levels and diverse educational backgrounds. As a result, community college learning outcomes assessment presents both opportunities and challenges. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Forces that Influence the Adoption of Assessment Processes

Jennifer Hegenauer, MM

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QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can community college leaders best enhance assessment programs and promote an institutional culture of assessment?

Over the past three decades, higher education has been reacting to the growing emphasis on accountability, academic quality, and the use of data in instructional decision making (Cameron, Walsh, Stavenhagen Helgren, & Kobritz, 2002; Coburn & Turner, 2012; Daly, 2012; Ewell, 2010; Farahsa & Tabrizi, 2015). When responding to these pressures, it is vital that college leaders understand what influences the successful implementation and adoption of practices such as assessment of student learning. The best-laid plans can easily be derailed should the forces and issues that affect the successful use of assessment data be underestimated.

Through conversations with leaders from a variety of colleges, several factors that influence the effective implementation and adoption of the practice of student learning assessment emerged. Each institution will develop its unique culture, mission, and objectives within which practices that lead to improved student learning are framed. However, the factors that influence the overall success of implementing assessment of student learning that emerged through those conversations are applicable and actionable for leaders at any institution.

External forces often lead to assessment programs. While external forces may drive the need to develop and implement assessment programs, it is important that leaders approach this or any new initiative with clearly defined objectives, moving the conversation beyond the function and features and focus on the benefit to the institution. When a project is about the college and not the accreditor, the potential for success is greater.

Resistance and fear of assessment are likely. Acknowledge that there will be resistance and fear, and make an effort to address concerns. In the case of assessment of student learning data, it needs to be clear when, how, and by whom the assembled information will be used. Allay the concern that assessment data will be used to evaluate individual instructors by focusing the conversation on improving the student learning experience. Be transparent in purpose and process.

Foster change in institutional culture. Cultural change will likely be needed when working to implement assessment, and that type of change is never easy. The first step for a leader is understanding where the institution's culture is now and take deliberate steps to advance it to where it needs to be. In many cases, members of an organization need to be encouraged to embrace continuous improvement processes such as assessment of student learning. Just as the organizational mindset needs to shift from viewing assessment as an accountability exercise to one focused on improving the student learning experience, the existing culture may need to adjust to embrace the idea of continuous quality improvement.

Promote a prominent role for faculty. The importance of prominently

involving faculty from the start of an initiative related to learning cannot be understated. Building in support for those faculty is also critical to the success of assessment and continuous improvement practices. Faculty best understand what is happening in the classroom and if they are part of the process from the start, they will understand the benefit that assessment can provide and become advocates for the adoption of its practices.

Plan for data collection, interpretation, and presentation. Data collection, interpretation, and presentation should not be an afterthought. Think about what information needs to be presented, what information those involved want to see, and then consider the best and most useful way to present it. Aligning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional level will provide clear connections to the program and institutional goals and objectives. Forward thinking planning will ensure the relevancy and consistency of data, avoid piecemeal and fragmented data collection, and serve as the foundation for the evaluation and improvement process.

Close the assessment loop with decision making. Begin with the end in mind – making a decision – and consider how each part of the initiative will support that goal. Starting here will help determine what data is needed, who needs to be involved, what part of the culture may need to be changed, what fears may need to be addressed, and how to define the benefit to the entire college.

Benchmarking what works in other institutions can inform your processes, but when implementing assessment of student learning, leaders need to consider the objectives and culture of their institution. Each of the influences discussed here will likely be present to differing degrees at various institutions. The benefit for college leaders is understanding how each of these influences can impact their efforts to promote a culture of assessment. Using this information as the lens through which you view the implementation, or re-implementation, of a student learning assessment program will help guide the process that leads to a dynamic program that drives improvement in student learning.

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NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Increasing numbers of community colleges are focusing on the assessment of student learning outcomes, due in part to the demonstrated need to improve student progression and foster success in students' future academic and workforce roles. The open access mission brings with it a student body presenting widely varying academic skill levels and diverse educational backgrounds. As a result, community college learning outcomes assessment presents both opportunities and challenges. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Fostering a Sustainable Culture of Excellence: Two Leadership Perspectives

Natasha Jankowski, PhD

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QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

How can community college leaders best enhance assessment programs and promote an institutional culture of assessment?

Community colleges serve an increasingly diverse group of learners with different end-goals and reasons for attending. With such a wide variety of learners bringing a range of prior-learning and diverse educational backgrounds with them, how can assessment processes be framed and led to support institutional improvement efforts, along with meeting external accountability mandates? It's true that the demands of accreditation have historically driven assessment processes across U.S. higher education with limited success in promoting an engrained institutional culture of assessing student learning. In part, our assessment processes have been designed to minimally document the learning happening within and outside of educational programs. As leaders of community colleges, there is an opportunity to showcase the strong suits of our institutions, our engagement with the community, our collective impact on students, and our meaningful employer relations. But how do we support and instill such a culture and view of assessment of student learning within our institution?

> *Most institutions have a history with assessment that begins with someone external to the institution telling them that they had to implement an assessment process to document that students have indeed learned something while attending, and that their experience was worth the cost.*

In our work with institutions at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), there are two main approaches to assessing student learning that readily present themselves – a reporting process and a teaching and learning improvement-driven approach. In addition, there are purpose and value framings that accompany each, outlining the reasons for engaging and possible benefits of assessment to institutions and those within. I offer a brief overview of the two approaches and then present three steps for community college leaders to advance a culture of meaningful engagement with assessment of student learning.

Most institutions have a history with assessment that begins with someone external to the institution telling them that they had to implement an assessment process to document that students have indeed learned something while attending, and that their experience was worth the cost. This return on investment and accountability reporting approach to assessment led to quickly putting something in place to show reviewers and interested parties when asked that there were reports on the topic. Learning outcomes were developed, assessment measures selected, data collected, and reports written, with the cycle ending with the filing of reports. The reporting approach to assessment also generally includes a focus on the importance of comparability of results across institutions and issues of measurement. The value and purpose of assessment under a reporting approach is to meet accountability requirements - it is inherently about compliance. In many cases, faculty and staff find the process tedious, divorced from teaching and learning, with assessment seen as an additional reporting burden on already stretched work demands.

In contrast, a teaching and learning improvement-driven approach begins with questions of faculty, staff, and administrators about their current practices in relation to the students that they serve. It involves a deep understanding of the varied student populations addressed and the means to best meet their needs in relation to learning. It is embedded in courses, an integral part of the teaching and learning process, informs future improvements, and provides ready feedback to students on their learning journey. The value and purpose is in improving learning for students and the institution and aligns well with ongoing efforts underway. It is also a more holistic approach, including various constituencies within and across campus in making meaning of what is working well for the students served. Further, the focus is upon individual students and their learning, as opposed to processes within institutions to ensure students learn – it helps us answer the question of how we are meeting the needs of our varied student populations.

The two approaches to engaging in and instilling a culture of assessment are very different in terms of philosophy for even engaging in assessment of student learning. Three opportunities for community college leaders are offered for how best to support and provide leadership to ensure a meaningful, manageable approach to assessing student learning.

▲ Engage faculty in mapping the varied pathways of student learning to meet the outcomes of interest to the institution, faculty, employers, and staff through course-embedded assignments based on principles of best practice. This requires administrative support for space and time to develop a shared vision of student pathways towards learning.

▲ Clearly frame the purpose of assessment as one that builds from questions of interest of the institution first. Meeting our own internal improvement needs in a meaningful manner will provide information to respond to accountability demands. As leaders, we need to not position assessment to advance accountability over improvement, otherwise we will have a continual issue with a sustainable culture.

▲ Engage in ongoing communication and advocacy to foster transparency in student learning. It is not enough for our institutions to develop coherent integrated curriculum if our students are not aware of what they have learned. Further, if our students are not aware of their learning, how can they tell employers about their knowledge and skills?

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Equity Driven, High Achievement Outcomes-Based Assessment

well-being? Since these are skillsets that researchers have attested to being necessary for students' success, connecting to them also enhances the connection to persistence, time-to-degree, completion, and employability.

The challenge for many of our instructors, staff, and administrators may be that the OBA process is not linked to the process of how their generated results can advance equity and high achievement for all. I'll illustrate with just one example of work from the Texas Accountability system for PK-12, which moved from a deficit-minded accountability process to a transparent high-performance, equity driven system. Based on this system and interpreted through the work of Drs. Joseph Johnson and Lionel (Skip) Meno, Dean and Former Dean respectively of the College of Education at San Diego State University, an equity-driven, high achievement accountability system involves several characteristics. Following each characteristic, I'll share how this can align with OBA, thus allowing your team members one way in which they can connect OBA to what they may care about.

Evidence of an equity-driven, high achievement organization (Skrla, et al 2000) demonstrates:

▲ use of criterion-referenced performance measures, rather than norm-references measures,
▲ use of disaggregated data by race, ethnicity, gender identity, SES, disability, Veteran status, and the intersection of those characteristics and identities, and
▲ results-driven accountability, as opposed to inputs-driven accountability (e.g., providing access is not enough).

These three bullet points can be linked to the types of assessment tools used in the OBA process. Is your institution committed to using comparable results only, or do the instruments you are using allow your instructors and student services professionals to connect to what they are doing on a daily basis, as well as informing how you are making decisions to advance equity?

> **What is important to remember here is that the path to success for many of our students is not JUST a set of courses or a sequence of courses.**

Additional evidence of an equity-driven, high achievement organization (Skrla, et al 2000) demonstrates:

▲ transparency of data,
▲ improvements in performance across all disaggregated groupings,
▲ sincere and genuine responsiveness by institutional leadership when improvements are not realized, as opposed to explanations and excuses,
▲ institutional leadership generates, directs, and maintains focus on necessary improvements by:
 • developing and aligning curriculum and delivering instruction
 • building and supporting capacity in people to contribute and lead (e.g., professional development),
 • acquiring, allocating, and aligning fiscal, human, and material resources,
 • collecting, interpreting, and using data, and monitoring results,
 • supervising, evaluating, and holding people accountable,
 • refocusing energies, refining efforts, and ensuring continuous performance, and

• creating and nurturing collaborations and alliances.
These bullet points connect to the manner in which you share results that are derived from your OBA process, as well as how you make decisions with those results. Assuming that what you are offering in your institution has identified outcomes and links each of those outcomes (where relevant) to a larger institutional priority, student success goal, or equity-driven performance indicator, how are the results generated for each outcome linked to larger institutional performance indicators such as closing persistence gaps among the intersections of race and gender? One of my mentors taught me a few decades ago, that "providing same is not equal. Providing same does not advance equity." What is often difficult is to engage in dialogue where not everyone in our organization is getting the same.

> **Perhaps the largest challenge in creating a culture of accountability, assessment, dynamic learning, or curiosity (whatever your preference) is that data informed dialogue to advance equity and high achievement is difficult and time consuming.**

OBA was never meant to be easy. Perhaps the largest challenge in creating a culture of accountability, assessment, dynamic learning, or curiosity (whatever your preference) is that data informed dialogue to advance equity and high achievement is difficult and time consuming. This leads to my last set of questions for your gracious consideration. And these questions apply both to having conversations with our students who may no longer be moving in a positive goal-orientated manner, as well as for our team members who may not be moving forward in positive goal-oriented ways. How aware are you that your choices matter to this institution? How aware are you that what you choose influences the overall success of this organization and its ability to be in service to success for all students? How aware are you that data informed equitable and excellent student learning and development is the primary focus of this organization and it needs every single person getting really curious about how well they do what they do every day to make that success a reality?

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