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Committing to Quality: Guidelines for  
Assessment and Accountability in Higher  
Education

New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and  
Accountability

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**Committing to**  
**QUALITY**

— **GUIDELINES FOR** —

**Assessment and  
Accountability in  
Higher Education**

new leadership  
**ALLIANCE**   
*for student learning and accountability*

The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability leads and supports voluntary and cooperative efforts to move the higher education community toward gathering, reporting on, and using evidence to improve student learning in American undergraduate education.

The Alliance envisions a self-directed, professional higher education community that produces an increasing number of college graduates with high-quality degrees in preparation for work, life, and responsible citizenship.

Through the promotion of shared principles, recommended actions, and innovative initiatives, the Alliance aims to:

- Shape attitudes, practices, and policies related to gathering, reporting on, and using evidence to improve student learning.
- Promote the establishment of new professional norms for gathering, reporting on, and using evidence of student learning.
- Increase public confidence in the quality of undergraduate education provided by American colleges and universities.

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# INTRODUCTION

## **The U.S. government has made a commitment to lead the world in postsecondary degree attainment.**

This is a necessary and laudable goal that is critical to economic competitiveness, equal opportunity, and a healthy democracy.<sup>1</sup>

Success in the 21st-century knowledge economy will require greater levels of formal education. Employer surveys indicate increased emphasis on hiring individuals with postsecondary degrees and higher levels of skills and knowledge. College graduates entering the workforce will increasingly be asked to apply a broader range of skills, think critically, solve problems, utilize existing knowledge, and learn on the job.<sup>2</sup>

By at least one estimate, the United States by 2018 will have several million fewer degree recipients than the economy needs. Closing this gap requires that more college students gain the knowledge and skills to become productive workers. It also requires that colleges and universities enroll and graduate students from previously under-represented populations, including minority group, first-generation, and non-traditional-age students.<sup>3</sup> Higher education's commitment to access must include a commitment to helping students succeed in achieving degrees.

The value of a college education is not primarily economic. The experience, skills, and knowledge students develop through higher education contribute to their personal development and promote their engagement in a democratic society. Breadth of knowledge, appreciation of diverse backgrounds and points of view, and analytical and problem-solving abilities all contribute to a student's capacity for individual growth and responsible citizenship. Personal and family health and rates of civic and political participation are strongly correlated with levels of education.<sup>4</sup>

The achievement of these educational, economic, and political goals requires sustained attention to the quality of student learning. Awarding more degrees will only be meaningful if those degrees reflect a high level of student accomplishment. Persistence and learning are linked. Paying close attention to student engagement in learning and learning outcomes will likely help students remain enrolled and graduate.<sup>5</sup>

The primary responsibility for assessing and improving student learning falls on (two- and four-year) colleges and universities. Those granting educational credentials must ensure that students have developed the requisite knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that prepare them for work, life, and responsible citizenship. U.S. higher education must focus on both quantity and quality — increasing graduation rates and the learning represented in the degree.

# ARE OUR STUDENTS LEARNING?

This fundamental question should drive the work of colleges and universities that are preparing students for success — in careers, as citizens — in our increasingly complex world.

The *Committing to Quality* guidelines are a tool to help higher education institutions answer this question and take responsibility for assessing and improving student learning.

Committing to quality means setting clear goals for student achievement, regularly measuring performance against those goals, reporting evidence of success, and continuously working to improve results. We urge all those in college and university communities — presidents and chancellors, faculty members, academic and student affairs administrators — to share and discuss these principles and, ultimately, to put them into practice.

# GUIDELINES FOR ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## 1

### Set Ambitious Goals

THERE IS GENERAL AGREEMENT ABOUT THE DESIRED OUTCOMES of undergraduate education.<sup>6</sup> This broad consensus includes the development of appropriate levels of knowledge and skills; the ability to integrate and apply knowledge to a variety of problems; and the acquisition of intellectual and social habits and dispositions in preparation for productive, responsible citizenship. Learning goals may vary according to an institution's mission, resources, student population, and community setting, but they typically include acquiring both broad learning and specialized knowledge; developing intellectual and practical skills; developing a sense of personal and social responsibility; and integrating and applying learning.

Each college and university is encouraged to articulate its specific goals for student learning and prominently announce these goals to various stakeholders and the public. Similarly, the major academic divisions and cocurricular departments within an institution are encouraged to state their goals and their connection to the broader institutional aims and the constituencies they seek to serve. Faculty members, staff, and administrators should understand the relationship of their work to these learning goals. Students should also understand and be able to articulate the relationship of their coursework and cocurricular experiences to the learning goals.



## IS YOUR INSTITUTION SETTING AMBITIOUS GOALS?

Colleges and universities and their major programs can use the following guidelines to determine the degree to which they are setting ambitious goals:

- ◆ The institution's statements of learning outcomes clearly articulate what students should be able to do, achieve, demonstrate, or know upon the completion of each undergraduate degree.
- ◆ The outcomes reflect appropriate higher education goals and are stated in a way that allows levels of achievement to be assessed against an externally informed or benchmarked level of achievement or assessed and compared with those of similar institutions.
- ◆ Institutional practices, such as program review, are in place to ensure that curricular and cocurricular goals are aligned with intended learning outcomes.
- ◆ The institution and its major academic and cocurricular programs can identify places in the curriculum or cocurriculum where students encounter or are expected or required to achieve the stated outcomes.
- ◆ Learning outcome statements are presented in prominent locations and in ways that are easily understood by interested audiences.



## Gather Evidence of Student Learning

SYSTEMATIC PROCESSES FOR GATHERING EVIDENCE allow colleges and universities to discover how well students are progressing toward the institution's overall and programmatic learning outcomes. Evidence-gathering efforts that are ongoing, sustainable, and integrated into the work of faculty and staff can suggest where the institution is succeeding and where improvement is needed.

Gathering evidence concerning the degree to which students are actively engaged in academically challenging work can also suggest ways in which student learning can be enhanced. There are significant differences within colleges and universities in the degree of academic engagement among students. Similarly, disaggregation and comparison of results by gender, race/ethnicity, and other variables

permit an institution to monitor educational equity.<sup>7</sup> Evidence of how well students are achieving learning outcomes (i.e., “What is ‘good enough?’”) against externally informed or benchmarked assessments or against similar colleges and universities, where appropriate and possible, provides useful comparisons. At the same time, it is critical to keep in mind that the objective of comparison is not ranking but improvement.

## IS YOUR INSTITUTION GATHERING EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING?

Colleges and universities and their major programs can use the following guidelines to determine how effectively they are gathering evidence of student learning:

- ◆ Policies and procedures are in place that describe when, how, and how frequently learning outcomes will be assessed.
- ◆ Assessment processes are ongoing, sustainable, and integrated into the work of faculty, administrators, and staff.
- ◆ Evidence includes results that can be assessed against an externally informed or benchmarked level of achievement or compared with those of other institutions and programs.
- ◆ Evidence also includes assessments of levels of engagement in academically challenging work and active learning practices.
- ◆ Results can be used to examine differences in performance among significant subgroups of students, such as minority group, first-generation, and non-traditional-age students.

# 3

## Use Evidence to Improve Student Learning

THE PURPOSE OF GATHERING EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING is to use it to ensure quality in student learning and to improve it. Using evidence effectively requires a plan that makes the analysis and use of evidence a prominent and consequential factor in the institution’s strategic planning and program review processes. Discussions about evidence can lead to recommendations for institutional improvement and taking action when appropriate and feasible. The cycle of making evidence-based changes in programs and practices promotes continuous review, evaluation, and reporting of institutional action and improvement.<sup>8</sup>

## IS YOUR INSTITUTION USING EVIDENCE TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING?

Colleges and universities and their major programs can use the following guidelines to determine how effectively they are using evidence to improve student learning:

- ◆ Well-articulated policies and procedures are in place for using evidence to improve student learning at appropriate levels of the institution.
- ◆ Evidence is used to make recommendations for improvement of academic and cocurricular programs.
- ◆ There is an established process for discussing and analyzing these recommendations and moving from recommendation to action. Where feasible and appropriate, key recommendations for improvement are implemented.
- ◆ The impact of evidence-based changes in programs and practices is continuously reviewed and evaluated.

# 4

## Report Evidence and Results

REPORTING EVIDENCE AND RESULTS OF STUDENT LEARNING to both internal and external constituents strengthens the institution's commitment to improving programs and services that contribute to a high level of student accomplishment. Assessments of student learning can be shared with internal constituents (e.g., faculty members, staff, administrators, students) in a variety of ways, including through regularly scheduled and well-publicized meetings, which can lead to changes in program and pedagogy. The institution's governing board should receive regular reports about the assessment of student learning and efforts to use evidence to improve programs. In addition, the institution can ensure transparency and accountability to the public by developing on its website a highly visible and easily accessible location that highlights evidence of student learning, its use, and other institutional indicators (e.g., retention rates, time to degree).

In recent years, significant steps have been taken toward greater transparency in reporting results for students. Associations representing both public and private institutions have developed reporting templates that provide important information about

institutional demographics, persistence, and completion, as well as information about student experience and learning outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Such templates aid understanding by using uniform definitions and reporting conventions. Colleges and universities should evaluate such templates and use them to support internal discussion and communication to the public.

## **IS YOUR INSTITUTION REPORTING EVIDENCE AND RESULTS?**

Colleges and universities and their major programs can use the following guidelines to determine how effectively they are reporting evidence and results:

- ◆ Regular procedures are in place for sharing evidence of student learning with internal and external constituencies.
- ◆ Internal reporting includes regularly scheduled meetings, publications, and other mechanisms that are accessible to all relevant constituencies (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators, students, the governing body).
- ◆ Reporting to external constituencies via the institutional website includes evidence of learning as well as additional descriptive information and indicators of institutional performance (e.g., retention rates, time to degree).
- ◆ Reporting on student learning outcomes is both accessible to and appropriate for the relevant audience.
- ◆ The results of evidence-based changes in programs and practices are reported to appropriate internal and external constituencies.

# A PUBLIC TRUST, THE PUBLIC GOOD

**WE IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTINUE TO LEARN ABOUT EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES.** There are many examples of institutions that have made positive changes in programs and pedagogy. Now, we must demonstrate to ourselves and the larger public that we are systematically gathering and reporting on evidence of student learning and using it to improve educational outcomes. Evidence-based understanding and improvement of practices will indicate how effectively colleges and universities are achieving ambitious goals for students.

For many generations, U.S. colleges and universities have been respected at home and admired and imitated abroad for their combination of wide diversity, broad access, and high quality. Our institutions of higher education have provided students with opportunities to grow intellectually and socially, and in doing so they have helped our society advance and prosper. The substantial direct and indirect state, federal, and philanthropic financial support for higher education indicates how crucial this system is to our economic, cultural, and political future.

Higher education has been entrusted with an important social responsibility. This responsibility calls for a commitment to see that all students reach high standards and fulfill their potential. Doing so requires us to gather and report on evidence of student learning and use it to improve student learning outcomes. If colleges and universities focus on evidence-based improvement of student learning outcomes, they will be true to their societal responsibilities and serve the common good. Our students and our nation deserve nothing less.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 The White House (2009). Excerpts of the president's remarks in Warren, Michigan, and fact sheet on the American graduation initiative. Retrieved March 10, 2011, from [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/excerpts-of-the-presidents-remarks-in-warren-michigan-and-fact-sheet-on-the-american-graduation-initiative/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/excerpts-of-the-presidents-remarks-in-warren-michigan-and-fact-sheet-on-the-american-graduation-initiative/)
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- 5 Tinto, V. (2000). Linking learning and leaving: Exploring the role of the college classroom in student departure. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 81–94). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press. See also Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (2010). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2011). A mandate for reform. In R. Arum & J. Roksa, *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- 6 There are several national efforts to define educational outcomes, including the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative of the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the standards in *CAS professional standards for higher education* published by the Council for the Advancement of Standards. Similarly, a number of books and articles have discussed desirable student learning outcomes, such as Keeling, R. P. (Ed.) (2004). *Learning reconsidered: A campus wide focus on the student experience*. Washington, DC: National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and American College Personnel Association; and Bok, D. (2006). *Our underachieving colleges* (pp. 58–81). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. The Lumina Foundation has recently published *The degree qualifications profile* articulating what students "should be expected to know and be able to do once they earn their degrees."
- 7 Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. See also Brownwell, J.E. & Swaner, L. E. (2010). *Five high-impact practices: Research on learning outcomes, completion, and quality*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- 8 Banta, T. W., Jones, E. A., & Black, K. E. (2009). *Designing effective assessment: Principles and profiles of good practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. See also Maki, P. L. (2004). *Assessing for learning: Building a sustainable commitment across the institution*. Sterling, VA: Stylus; Suskie, L. (2004). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; and Wehlburg, C. M. (2008). *Promoting integrated and transformative assessment: A deeper focus on student learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- 9 The Voluntary System of Accountability (2008). Overview of the college portrait. Retrieved March 10, 2011, from <http://www.voluntarysystem.org/docs/cp/CollegePortraitOverview.pdf>. See also, University and College Accountability Network (2008). Retrieved March 10, 2011, from <http://www.ucan-network.org/>

# ENDORSERS

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