

Facilitating Assessment of Student Learning: Insights from HLC Team Mentors

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Introduction

Since 1989, the Commission has provided programs and services in support of institutions striving to assess and improve student learning, most recently adding the four-year Academy for Assessing and Improving Student Learning and a series of new workshops under the title “Making a Difference in Student Learning.” Essential to the success of these Commission programs and services are more than fifty mentors directly involved in or facilitating efforts to assess and improve student learning. These mentors are typically responsible for facilitating and/or overseeing their own institution’s assessment efforts. As a group, these individuals come from diverse types of institutions, but share both the expertise and the passion for assisting institutions in meaningful, useful, workable, and reasonable means of assessing what and how well students learn.

A core group of twenty of these mentors have more than four years of mentoring experience. Through their work in consulting, guiding, and learning with HLC member institutions, the Assessment Mentors have been participant observers in the Commission’s workshops, roundtables, think tanks, and mentoring services. The lessons they have learned may benefit other member institutions as they strengthen their assessment efforts. What have these mentors learned from working with more than 500 different institutional teams in the past four years?

Purpose and Design of the Study

Both the multi-year Academy and the one-time assessment workshops reflect HLC’s commitment to supporting institutions as they seek to engage in assessment designed to *improve* student learning and to demonstrate what students are learning and how that learning supports students as they enter 21st century cultures (“Commission Statement on Assessment of Student Learning,” 2003). The purpose of this study was to gather information about what assessment mentors, the on-the-ground facilitators of this mission, have learned about successful assessment practices and remaining challenges.

A short questionnaire was sent to 19 of the most experienced mentors to solicit their responses to each of the six fundamental questions based upon their experiences as participant-observers. These illustrative examples were reviewed for patterns and the summarized responses are reported below.

Framework for the Study

The Commission uses six fundamental questions to reflect the expectations in the Criteria, to prompt conversation about student learning, and to catalyze institutional efforts in assessing and improving that learning. These six fundamental questions include:

1. How are your stated student learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs, degrees, and students?
2. What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?
3. In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of what and how well students learn?
4. How do you ensure shared responsibility for assessment of student learning?
5. How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your efforts to assess and improve student learning?
6. In what ways do you inform the public and other stakeholders about what and how well your students are learning?

While the fundamental questions present a conceptual framework for assessing and improving student learning, assessment mentors help institutions put this framework into actual practice. Thus, lessons learned from mentor experiences, as well as more general research about the Commission's efforts, provide valuable information for institutions both in the beginnings of implementation and in settings where assessment is an established process. Mentors' reflections on their experiences suggest hallmarks of success and harbingers of challenge, including examples that illustrate both successes and challenges related to each of the six fundamental questions. (Institutional identities are used only with permission.) In addition, a synthesis of findings from these reflections, as well as some highlights from a larger research project evaluating Commission-sponsored assessment events are included. Ultimately, then, principles for good assessment can be extrapolated from a range of specific experiences and general analysis.

Fundamental Question 1: How are your stated student learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs, degrees, and students?

Hallmarks of Success:

Institutions that have taken into consideration the *real* contexts in which they exist generally have more appropriate student learning outcomes. These contexts have been defined by those on campus with an *investment* in that learning: faculty, staff, and students in addition to administrators. The more that student learning outcomes (and, in fact, institutional mission) are collaboratively and collectively defined and the more they reflect the interests of those who carry out this mission – from classroom to board room – the more invested the campus is in the outcomes.

Harbingers of Challenge: Institutions that have created their student learning outcomes with an emphasis on polish (so that they are very broad and not especially meaningful), measurement (so that they are very narrow and produce results that are not especially helpful), and/or without participation by those who are expected to act on the results, typically have a difficult time investigating how students are achieving the outcomes – and, in fact, what the outcomes actually mean.

Fundamental Question 2: What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?

Hallmarks of Success:

Institutions that focus on collecting evidence that is appropriate to *their* institution, *their* students, and *their* outcomes have greater success gathering *appropriate and useful* evidence. Collecting evidence from multiple sources is important, as is gathering evidence that constitutes *credible evidence of student learning in this institution* – that is, evidence that reflects student learning outcomes as they have been defined in *this* context.

Harbingers of Challenge: Institutions that are drawn to “easy answer” measures that claim to produce evidence of student learning. For instance, the use of standardized assessments (like the CAAP, MAPP, and CLA) without understanding the relevance to the institution's specific desired learning outcomes. Institutions have not paid adequate attention to essential questions: How does this instrument collect evidence about *our* learning outcomes? How does it define what is measured and how does that relate to *our* context? How will we use the results for improvement of learning at *our* institution?

Fundamental Question 3: In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of student learning?

Hallmarks of Success:

Institutions that foster discussions about analyses of student learning at *all* levels – from staff and faculty to administrators – are more successful at *using* evidence of student learning. There is an understanding at all

levels, up and down the institutional structure, that assessment is an *ongoing* process. The emphasis is not on “closing the feedback loop,” but instead on an *ongoing focus on institutional effectiveness*. Additionally, as institutions have developed assessment plans they have given thought to how the data will be collected – that is, the method for conducting the assessment (including what instruments will be used) – *before* the assessment starts. This includes explicit attention to questions about how learning is defined in the measure and what results of the assessment mean in the context of learning *at this institution*.

Harbingers of Challenge:

Institutions who conduct assessment for the sake of conducting assessment and who fail to communicate about findings and/or implications of results with *everyone* who is invested in student learning. These includes using standardized assessments; it also includes collecting data without thought to its value or meaning, and communicating the results of assessment (if communicated at all) only with “key” people (e.g., administrators) instead of the faculty and staff who might be able to *use* the data to improve student learning.

Fundamental Question 4: How do you ensure shared responsibility for assessment of student learning?

Hallmarks of Success:

Institutions that recognize that instruction is *everybody’s* business – from faculty, to staff, to students – foster greater engagement and investment in the process of assessing student learning. Institutional assessment people should work with faculty to learn about the culture of departments and programs and to learn about the things that matter to them. In addition to involving faculty and staff in assessment design and administration, communication throughout the process is key. Identifying who will do what, who will inform whom, how feedback will be given, and what will be done with the results is vital to ensuring that results will be used in meaningful ways.

Harbingers of Challenge:

Institutions that develop assessment plans without consulting those invested in student learning create problematic situations. These are complicated when there is an assessment “guru” on campus – in other words, when one person or a select committee is responsible for assessment, rather than seeing this as a shared responsibility. Use of standardized tests can also create obstacles to ensuring shared responsibility. Faculty are usually not invested in these tests, they do not reflect faculty’s work, and the tests provide results that are not meaningful to faculty in their attempts to improve student learning in their classrooms or programs.

Fundamental Question 5: How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your efforts to assess and improve student learning?

Hallmarks of Success:

Institutions that recognize that assessment is a dynamic activity and see assessment plans as guides, not maps, generally see evaluating and improving of assessment activities as part of their missions. A focus on assessment as a larger piece of the scholarship of teaching and learning generally positions assessment as a long-term *process* that is part of the research work of faculty.

Harbingers of Challenge:

Institutions that believe that assessment of student learning is a static process that cannot be changed once a plan is developed. This includes developing student learning outcomes that are seen as immutable, and choosing assessment instruments that make proclamations about “reliability,” but which are not appropriate to the institution or the learning context (and thus are not reliable at all).

Fundamental Question 6: In what ways do you inform the public and other stakeholders about what and how well your students are learning?

Hallmarks of Success:

Institutions that make their assessment work public, both on campus and to interested parties (“stakeholders”) outside of the institution and the actively help interested parties understand the context for teaching and learning *in this institution*: What is the institution’s mission? Who are its students? What are the learning outcomes being assessed and why are those outcomes appropriate for the discipline, program, or subject? How is instruction in this discipline undertaken? What are key concepts and/or vocabulary underscoring that instruction? Institutions and disciplines need to share their conceptual framework with interested stakeholders to help them understand the context for student learning.

Harbingers of Challenge: Keeping assessment results close and/or not attending to issues of context in the broader act of sharing results of assessments. Additionally, there is a need to uncouple faculty worth (individual or collective) from aggregated data on student learning.

Conclusions

Whether an institution has experienced more hallmarks of success than harbingers of challenge, the most important thing to remember is that purposeful progress toward successful assessment structures needs to be meaningful to a specific institution. The lessons learned here, while broad in spectrum, reflect experiences by Mentors and can be used to provide guidance for institutions as they determine how assessment can be an effective means to continuous improvement in student learning.

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HLC Six Fundamental Questions

1. How are your stated student learning outcomes appropriate to your mission, programs, degrees, and students?

Hallmarks of Success -Considered *real* contexts, campus investment in learning, SLOs collaboratively and collectively defined, SLOs reflect institutional mission

Harbingers of Challenge -Emphasis on polish or measurement, developed without participation by interested parties, unclear definitions of what outcomes mean

2. What evidence do you have that students achieve your stated learning outcomes?

Hallmarks of Success -Evidence collected appropriate to *your* institution, students, outcomes, evidence from multiple sources, evidence appropriate to *your* context

Harbingers of Challenge -“Easy answer” measures, standardized assessments without an understanding of relevance to outcomes, lack of attention to essential questions: : How does this instrument collect evidence about *our* learning outcomes? How does it define what is measured and how does that relate to *our* context? How will we use the results for improvement of learning at *our* institution?

3. In what ways do you analyze and use evidence of what and how well students learn?

Hallmarks of Success -Institutions foster discussion about analyses of student learning at all levels, assessment is ongoing, ongoing focus on institutional effectiveness, methods for conducting assessments are developed before assessment starts, focus on meaningfulness of results in *your* institution’s context

Harbingers of Challenge -Conducting assessment for the sake of conducting assessment, collecting data without thought to value or meaning, not communicating results to those who use data to improving student learning

4. How do you ensure shared responsibility for assessment of student learning?

Hallmarks of Success -Recognizing that instruction is everybody's business (in different ways), assessment is *coordinated* by one or a few people in *collaboration* with the everybody invested in learning (see hallmark above), communication exists throughout the process, clear processes for developing, conducting, using, and sharing findings from assessment processes

Harbingers of Challenge -Assessment plans designed without input from *all* stakeholders, "Assessment is not my job", using standardized tests without faculty investment

5. How do you evaluate and improve the effectiveness of your efforts to assess and improve student learning?

Hallmarks of Success -Recognizing assessment as a dynamic activity, seeing assessment as part of institutional mission, focusing on assessment as larger piece of SoTL, making assessment part of long-term research work of faculty

Harbingers of Challenge -Seeing assessment as static process, making assessment plans that are carved in stone, using assessment instruments without regard to reliability or validity

6. In what ways do you inform the public and other stakeholders about what and how well your students are learning?

Hallmarks of Success -Making assessment work public, helping stakeholders understand contexts for teaching and learning (including mission, students, SLOs being assessed, appropriateness to the discipline...)

Harbingers of Challenge -Keeping results close, not attending to issues of context, linking individual faculty performance to disaggregated data

Applying Hallmarks at your School

Hallmarks of Success	Short-term applications	Longer-term applications
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