Accountability for Student Learning: Slow and Steady Progress or Persistent Resistance?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the present status of efforts to assess student-learning outcomes within the bachelor's degree granting institutions of the campuses in one system of public higher education. Further, the purpose of this study was also to understand what challenges and criticisms academic leaders report about the call to provide learning outcome evidence. Themes and findings of the study suggest that accountability for student learning is a persistent accountability challenge within higher education institutions.

Accountability is a persistent and commanding policy issue facing higher education leaders, and student learning is a predominant form of accountability evidence requested by stakeholders (National Governor's Association, 1986; Thelin, 2004; Spellings Commission, 2006). Two high level reports provide historical bookends on the persistent call for accountability evidence of student learning. In 1986, the National Governor's Association released a report entitled *Time for Results*, outlining a plan to reform education in the United States. One of the major foci called for nationwide commitment on the part of institutional leaders to focus on improving educational quality and to produce evidence of student learning (National Governor's Association, 1986). Twenty years later, the *Spellings Commission* (2006) released "*A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education*." That report once again raised concern with student learning and called for a nationwide effort to re-position the United States as a world leader in education.

Joining these calls have been efforts from lawmakers to push toward institutional accountability for student learning (Flaherty, 2013; Board of Governors, State University System of Florida, 2013). In Iowa, for instance, the legislature passed and the Governor signed a mandate that faculty who teach at each of the three state universities create assessments that provide summative information on student performance and formative results that can be used to generate a plan for improvement (Flaherty, 2013). Florida's state universities are required to develop an '*Academic Learning Compact*' for each undergraduate educational program, which articulates the expected outcomes, corresponding assessment instruments and methods, and a plan for improvement based on the results (State University System of Florida, 2013).

In addition to state-level mandates, accreditation has added pressure to the expectation to assess and report student learning outcomes. Ewell (2001) stated that accreditation organizations, both regional and specialized, have a central role in pushing assessment of student learning outcomes to the forefront at colleges and universities to demonstrate institutional effectiveness. For instance, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2012) requires that all educational programs identify a clearly articulated set of student learning outcomes and that such outcomes are accompanied by a plan for how the results will be used to guide improvement. With the

requirement that federal student aid is tied to regional accreditation, universities have an added incentive to prioritize the assessment of student learning outcomes (United States Department of Education, 2013).

But despite longstanding and widespread interest, accountability for student learning persists as a desired, but largely unaddressed, form of accountability evidence. Consequently, this paper seeks to describe the current status and challenges associated with institutional efforts to respond to expectations for learning evidence. This description will not be given, however, without first considering the underlying contextual factors that influence these efforts. Several questions are warranted to give consideration to this context.

Why are stakeholders concerned with accountability in student learning? Many of the students who graduate from colleges and universities are perceived to lack core competencies associated with an undergraduate education. A recent book entitled *Academically Adrift* by Arum and Roksa (2011) criticized colleges and universities for not asking enough of students, arguing that insufficient rigor has led to student incompetence with basic skills such as written communication and critical thinking. Examining test scores, survey responses, and transcripts of over 2,000 students, Arum and Roksa found that students do not significantly improve in these skill domains as a result of the undergraduate curriculum.

In addition, employers commonly report that graduates lack basic skills to meet job-related demands. In 2010, the American Association of Colleges and Universities released a report on employer perceptions of college learning. Employers were interviewed about the skills needed to address challenges associated with a globalizing marketplace and about their perspectives on the effectiveness of institutions to prepare students with the skill sets to meet these challenges. Participants shared that a broad range of skills and a specialized understanding of a field were necessary for success in today's workplaces. However, employers also reported that many graduates entered the workplace insufficiently prepared to meet these expectations and that college and university leaders should address these skill deficiencies (American Association of Colleges & Universities, 2010).

Aside from perceived deficits in the competencies of college graduates, many of higher education's key stakeholders view institutions as incapable of or disinterested in sufficiently addressing accountability and performance expectations (Lane, 2007; Bogue & Hall, 2012). Bogue and Hall (2012) surveyed corporate executives, legislators, and academic leaders in five different states to gather and compare major stakeholder perspectives on higher education accountability. Bogue and Hall found that corporate and legislative leaders perceived that institutions will 'use cosmetic changes to avoid disclosing unflattering information on performance.' Other evidence suggests that resistance to external expectations for change in institutional accountability for learning may insufficiently characterize the issue of institutional response to assessment. Lane (2007) wrote, for instance, that a key factor influencing resistance, where truth to this notion may be observed, can be due to the uncertainty

surrounding the change proposition. What is it, specifically, that stakeholders want as evidence for student learning, it is grounded in consensus, and is there a clear connection between what is expected and what is taught on college and university campuses? At the heart of accountability for student learning may, in part, be the uncertainty about how to navigate tension between an enterprise that is valued for its autonomy in academic mission and evaluated by its duty to demonstrate performance within a democratic social and political fabric. Further, a lack of clarity is present on the extent to which institutions are truly resistant to change or whether this perception is more closely associated with some stakeholder dissatisfaction with institutional mission priorities.

What has been the response from colleges and universities thus far? Despite the complexity of the task to be accountable for student learning, some institutions have taken initiative to provide transparent, comparable data to stakeholders (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2013; The Lumina Foundation, 2013). The Association for Public and Land Grant Universities' Voluntary System of Accountability, a resource in which many colleges and universities elect to participate, launched a pilot program in 2012 that built in evidence of student learning into the profile of key performance criteria on student outcomes and experience indicators. Collected through the pilot project on student learning were scores on standardized exams designed to measure outcomes commonly associated with the general education curriculum (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, 2012).

Non-profit organizations have also partnered with colleges and universities to address the call for assessment of student learning. For example, the Lumina Foundation (2013) has developed the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), which is a resource that seeks to define competencies that a graduate should be expected to know upon completion of an associate's, baccalaureate, or master's degree – though a corresponding, comprehensive plan for how universities can assess and report on such student learning is missing. In partnership with Lumina, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, located at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, has been working to track institutional use of the DQP and found that hundreds of institutions across 46 states are using this framework for assessment (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2013). Through these initiatives, it is evident that many colleges and universities are working to address concerns related to student learning. The impact of these efforts to inform the public and to guide improvement is yet to be determined.

What makes being accountable for student learning difficult? Evidence suggests there is inadequate consensus about what forms of learning evidence are considered desirable among major stakeholders (Bogue & Hall, 2012). In Bogue and Hall's five-state study on corporate, political, and academic leader views on accountability, for instance, there was wide disagreement between the three groups on the desirability of various student learning outcomes as an indicator of performance. Business and state political stakeholders differed from college and university presidents, provosts, and faculty on the desirability of student knowledge of democratic culture and heritage as an indicator of performance. The ability to pursue knowledge through different modes of inquiry was

also viewed as less desirable among business and political stakeholders as compared to academic leaders. The challenge to identify what should be measured may provide difficulty for college and university leaders to effectively demonstrate accountability to stakeholders whose viewpoints vary on the desirable outcomes expected of graduates.

A study conducted by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (2008) concluded that one-third of students entering a two- or four-year college or university in the United States will transfer to at least one other institution during their time in college. Given overlap in broad competency areas taught at each institution to which mobile learners attend, it may be difficult to target the effectiveness of learning interventions specific to one institution or another. In addition, college is a place where students are presented with multiple opportunities to develop essential competencies across the curriculum. It can also be difficult to ascertain with confidence the extent to which assessment results offer a true reflection of students' learning performance in relation to a particular institution or curriculum.

In the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education's (2008) *Measuring Up* report, each state was given an A through F grade to indicate performance in an easily digestible manner on a variety of indicators tied to institutional quality and effectiveness. Included in this report was an indicator on student learning; each state earning a grade of "Incomplete" due to a lack of commonly accepted student learning outcomes assessments across the nation. In the report, Peter Ewell noted that since the release of *Measuring Up's* first edition in 2000, fewer institutions seem to be committing to national efforts to provide comparable, transparent information on learning (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008). This lack of cooperation, however, is not due to an insufficient array of available instruments to assess student learning. Stanford University's National Center for Postsecondary Improvement houses an electronic inventory of dozens of instruments commonly used to measure college-level learning (National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, 2013). What, then, is stalling progress on assessment as an accountability indicator and a quality assurance mechanism?

The ability for college and university leaders to respond to stakeholder calls for evidence of student learning is met with significant contextual considerations. To understand how college and university leaders are attempting to respond, if at all, to expectations for student learning outcomes involves a deeper look into the steps currently underway to collect this evidence. Given the longstanding concern with accountability for student learning, however, it is evident that significant barriers impede the ability for or willingness of many institutional leaders to gather, report, and use information on student learning.

The Research Problem and Purpose

The problem is that although the call to assess student learning persists as an accountability challenge, there is an insufficient understanding of what steps, if any, colleges and universities are taking to gather such evidence. Further, little is known about the challenges faced by college and university leaders to address stakeholder expectations

for evidence of student learning. This knowledge is important because it adds narrative to institutional efforts to respond to critique and concern expressed by key stakeholder groups expressed through several decades. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to explore the present status of efforts to assess student-learning outcomes within the bachelor's degree granting institutions in one system of public higher education. Further, the purpose of this study was to understand what challenges and criticisms, if any, are reported by academic leaders about the effort to produce evidence of student learning. The study was guided by the following research questions:

-What efforts, if any, are institutions presently taking to assess and report student-learning outcomes and why?
-What types of learning outcomes, if any, are institutions trying to measure?
-What challenges and criticisms, if any, currently impede institutions' abilities to gather learning outcome data?

Method

The study utilized a multi-site case study design. Semi-structured interviews, field notes, and site documents provided information about learning outcome focused initiatives on the three baccalaureate degree granting campuses of one system of public higher education.

Research Sites and Population

University A is a large public research- intensive institution offering bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and professional degrees. Approximately 21,000 undergraduate students attend the institution. Over 300 undergraduate degree programs are offered. University B is a mid-size public institution and offers bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. Approximately 11,400 students attend the institution and nearly 140 undergraduate majors are offered. University C is a small to mid-size public, undergraduate and graduate-degree granting campus. University C enrolls around 7,500 undergraduate students, and offers bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral degrees. Universities A and B have been in operation for over a century while University C was founded in the early 20th century.

The population from which the researcher sought participation included not only the institutional administrators who held official responsibility with learning outcomes assessment, but also those who were responsible for accountability to stakeholders. As such, the presidents or chancellors and chief academic officers or provosts were eligible participants for the study. The researcher then used chaining from these participants to connect with participants who were principally responsible for outcomes assessment on each campus. The additional personnel were the directors of institutional research, college deans, and vice provosts for undergraduate programs. Twelve participants (4 at each campus) were interviewed.

Sources of Data

Three sources of data were used to conduct the study: semi-structured interviews, site documents, and field notes. Site documents included institutional accreditation reports, accountability documents, strategic plans, and others provided to the researcher by the participants. Field notes were taken to provide documentation of observations that further illustrated the participants' responses to the interview protocol that could not otherwise be recorded. The interview protocol was comprised of three major inquiries: assessment instruments, initiatives, and challenges.

Procedure

Upon IRB approval, the researcher contacted eligible university administrators for participation in the study. Though chief executives served as the lead off participants, the researcher was linked to other administrators who held formal responsibility with outcomes assessment. In addition, the researcher was connected to academic administrators who work closely with faculty and college deans with regard to outcomes assessment. In addition to interview data, relevant site documents were obtained through the university website and were also gathered upon recommendation of interview participants. Field notes were also taken to provide additional thoughts or observations while in the university settings with the participants. Data collection continued until no new evidence was gathered.

Data Analysis

During the initial within-site analysis, the researcher reviewed data and wrote a preliminary list of in vivo codes based on the words and text noted in the data sources for each campus (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). After reviewing the data several times and modifying the list of initial codes according to similarity, the researcher read through the data to assign codes. Upon completion of coding, the principal investigator generated patterns unique to each institution to compare and contrast findings between the campuses during the between-site analysis. To answer the research questions, the researcher reported themes common between the campuses in relation to the three research questions (assessment initiatives, types, and challenges).

Data Trustworthiness

Member checking and data triangulation were used to ensure trustworthiness of the study's analysis and findings (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004; Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2009). The researcher inquired with participants to verify the accuracy of the interpretations of data collected in the study (Guba, 1981, Merriam, 2009). The researcher also gathered multiple data sources through the study, which were used collectively to affirm the trustworthiness of findings noted in each as an independent source (Shenton, 2004; Creswell, 2009).

Results

An important contextual factor became clear after analyzing the interviews, site documents, and field notes: Student learning outcomes assessment on each campus was driven primarily by compliance with state law and regional accreditation standards. The duty to assess, however, was delegated to particular personnel on the campuses.

Accreditation standards articulated that each educational program must identify, assess, and demonstrate improvement on a clearly articulated set of learner outcomes to show commitment to continuous improvement. State law mandated that each public college and university assess and report scores on assessments of general education and major-specific learning outcomes. At each campus, personnel who managed assessment were getting ready to provide student learning data to the state *and* were in the middle of preparing evidence of compliance with standards for their approaching regional accreditation reaffirmation visits. Embedded in their efforts to comply with these external stakeholders were perspectives on the instruments, initiatives, and challenges associated with student learning outcomes assessment.

Findings Related to Assessment Types

The case study included an inquiry into what learning, specifically, is being assessed at the institutions. Also, the inquiry focused on what instruments are used to produce the assessment results. Two findings related to what is being assessed and by what instrument were exhibited: general education and major-field testing. The state agency's requirements for outcomes assessment required that, with agency approval of the instrument, institutions develop or adopt measures for major and general-education learning that provide a numerical comparison to a standardized or historical score. Each institution adopted a different general education outcomes assessment instrument and a broad array of instruments for major-specific outcomes. Further, some programs were exempt from the state's assessment standards due to a curricular focus that does not yield easily to quantitative assessment (i.e. studio art).

General Education Testing

To comply with state accountability standards for general education assessment, University A used a quantitative instrument to assess critical thinking skills. The instrument is a nationally and internationally standardized instrument and is widely used as a measure of college-level critical thinking skills. Critical thinking ability is delineated in sub-scores with the intended purpose that the results can be used to identify possible curricular improvement areas. Students were tested during the senior year. University B used a value-added assessment to comply with general education assessment standards. Students were tested at the start and completion of the curriculum. The instrument is a widely established, standardized instrument offered in multiple-choice format. A written essay accompanies the assessment and is used to examine writing and analytical reasoning skills. Questions assess students' aptitudes for reading, writing, mathematics reasoning, science-reasoning, and critical thinking. University C offers a

different value-added examination than University B, but students, too, are tested prior to and at the conclusion of the curriculum. This assessment also examines core competencies associated with the general education curriculum as noted in the other instruments. Once every five years, each institution is required to report its student learning outcomes data to the state agency to comply with accountability standards. To incentivize improvement in the results over years, universities are eligible for state performance-based funds if the score from the most recent reporting period improved from the prior period.

Major-Field Testing

Each university developed and adopted a variety of quantitative assessment instruments to assess learning outcomes associated with academic programs. At University A, for example, the investigator collected and reviewed the Department of History's state agency-approved major field assessment. The history format is a multi-question, true-false examination about specific events and individuals noted in the curriculum.

Standardized major field tests, such as those administered for programmatic accreditation, are given to students within departments that seek such accreditation. One example cited in the study was accounting, which at University C is accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). As part of the accreditation review and reaffirmation process with AACSB, institutions must report Certified Public Accountant (CPA) licensure examination pass rates.

For some academic programs, the departmental faculty members were engaged in embedded assessment of learning outcomes to provide additional information not yielded from the state-mandated quantitative instruments. For instance, Judy, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Learning at University A, shared:

> In my discipline, we teach a capstone course which is intended to bring together all the learning that students have done throughout their studies…they [students] have to present on a media campaign that they have developed. They have to demonstrate that they know the material through integrating their knowledge into the project. As a faculty, we look for student demonstrations of their learning in the presentations. One of the things that we do as a faculty after the presentations is to sit down together and go over our evaluations of the projects and discuss where the students did well, and where they did not do so well.

Though assessment was present at each institution, participants expressed that more work was needed to get each department involved, to show skeptics the utility of assessing outcomes, and to use the data to strengthen teaching and learning. As a result, university-

wide initiatives were underway at each institution to improve upon the assessment process.

Assessment Initiatives

Each campus had built into their institutional strategic plans the priorities to assess learning in response to compliance expectations from the state and from the assessment standards articulated by the regional accrediting body. Therefore, themes noted were *working toward compliance* and *trying to engage in continuous improvement*.

Working toward Compliance

Though institutions were in full compliance with state assessment regulations, meeting these regulations did not translate to fulfillment of the more rigorous standards associated with regional accreditation. State standards only required that scores improved from one reporting period to another, whereas accreditation compliance meant a much more comprehensive approach of documenting, assessing, and planning improvement in student learning. For instance, Gerald, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at University B, shared that "some of the departments in my college do not get as much out of the [assessment] experience as others; they aren't that serious about assessment."

In preparation for each university's accreditation reaffirmation visits, the participants noted that, although they will not fully comply with standards articulated by the regional accrediting body, little worry was devoted to what this would mean to the university in terms of their reaffirmation prospects. For instance, Sharon, University C's Associate Provost who was responsible for undergraduate assessment, reported, "Right now, we're coming up on [our regional accreditation reaffirmation] and we're going to get dinged on our assessment. We do a lot of data gathering; we just don't do a lot with it…"

Getting 'dinged' meant that although the accrediting agency may raise concern with the campus' efforts to assess student learning, there was little concern that any serious consequences would come from the finding. Only getting 'dinged,' however, did not mean that the participants were willing to concede progress toward compliance with accreditation.

Though the universities may be unable to fully address the accreditation standard in time for their upcoming reaffirmation visits, participants articulated that moving step by step toward the standard was an ongoing priority. On each site, the participants stated that the immediate first steps are to ensure that each program has a clearly articulated set of outcomes. Then, the campus' assessment leaders plan to have each program develop corresponding instruments and a plan for how the data will be collected. To achieve these goals, the participants were busy integrating assessment into already established quality assurance processes. As Provost at University A, for instance, Allison stated her priorities in relation to getting all of the departments engaged in assessment:

> I've been fine-tuning our academic program review process. We're building student learning outcomes into the program reviews we conduct internally, which our institution requires every five years. Once we do that, our student learning outcomes assessment process will be built into the accreditation process.

At University C, the process involved implementing a new centralized database to provide greater collaboration between departments and university administrators in its established program review process. The database uses a standard structure for departments to enter the learning outcomes, assessment plans, instruments, results, and plans for improvement of academic programs. From there, Lynn, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs at the institution states that we "now have a common structure in which to plug the data. Now it's easy to track departments and say, "Well, you don't have anything in there you need."" The ability to make campus-wide steps forward and to provide continuous guidance and support were viewed as critical steps toward fulfilling accreditation standards.

Trying to Engage in Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement in teaching and learning was also a work in progress. For instance, University A was in the midst of a campus-wide effort to tie learning outcomes assessment data into improvement of the general education curriculum. The participants shared that this process involved gathering faculty members who teach general education courses together to define the competencies associated with the curriculum. That work group is led by Judy, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Learning, who shared that, "we are right in the middle of the process of making some changes to our general education program for undergraduate students. One of the charges to the committee was to be very intentional about what our learner outcomes are for general education, how we can assess those, and how we can use the assessments to go through an improvement process." In the report released by this work group were some general competencies that students should gain as a result of the general education curriculum. Up to this point, the effort had not tied specific courses to the competencies or provided an overview of how assessment might be used to improve curricula.

On each campus, the ability to design assessment systems was a key area of focus in trying to engage in continuous improvement. But in attempting to move forward, participants shared that two key challenges encountered were to determine which instruments to use and, in turn, to develop a plan based on the type of information yielded by the results. The quantitative instruments used to comply with state assessment standards were met with criticism by faculty in terms of the ability of instruments to yield data that could target specific areas of improvement. For instance, John, University B's Director of Institutional Research, shared that "We get faculty who look at the questionnaires we administer [for compliance] and say, "Well, this doesn't represent

what I teach.”” In response, John asks, “Well, what would?” He’s also taken leadership on an institution-wide effort to provide answers to this question within each academic program, but not all units have agreed to participate.

At University B, the effort to get programs involved in the continuous improvement goal have thus far resulted in push for embedded assessment, which Susan, the university’s Provost described as “a process where faculty take the work already submitted by students in coursework and re-evaluate it for competencies in the curriculum.” According to the participants, this type of information provides clarity about what, if anything, should be addressed that a number may be unable to discern with credibility and confidence. The participants also felt that embedded assessment provided a means for faculty to link identified outcomes to specific courses, thereby targeting improvement areas within the curricula.

One illustration of how embedded assessment was cited as a useful resource for strengthening efforts to continuously improve program delivery was in the Department of Music. Lynn, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Programs at University C, reported that:

> Embedded assessment allows us…to look at whether the interpretation of the piece is appropriate for the time period... It’s subjective, but the faculty have been able to develop a way to examine student performance because they are qualified in their areas so they can judge.

The example provided shows how universities are adapting to the expectation that assessment lead to continuous improvement, but it also illustrates a divide between the call for comparable quantitative data to evidence learning and the expectation that such data be used to guide improvement. But, from the participants’ perspectives, it was a priority for them to make progress by doing what worked to address accountability expectations and strategic goals. However, there was no clear timeline identified for when the universities would achieve their strategic plan goals for institution-wide assessment. To meet this goal, key challenges would need to be addressed.

Challenges to Reaching Assessment Goals

In moving their campuses forward, the study participants encountered challenges that impeded the ability to achieve institutional goals to assess student learning and to use the data to guide improvement. Namely, the themes related to these challenges were resistance based on established practices and concern with assessment decision utility. In turn, before efforts could be made to strengthen assessment systems in response to institutional goals and compliance standards, these participants shared that much time and effort is currently spent addressing criticism, building trust, and gaining support for the value of assessment.

Resistance Based on Established Practices

Participants stated that their efforts to assess and report student learning outcomes were met with resistance from some academic units, particularly where the faculty viewed student learning outcomes as unnecessary or redundant to grades as an indicator of performance, and, as a result, of little importance when it comes to using the data to guide performance. Many of the participants, like Richard, Dean of University C's College of Business, for example, are often asked what value assessment brings that grades do not when attempting to work with programs that do not currently assess outcomes.

In response to the value that assessment data bring to informing the conversation of improving teaching and learning, Allison, Provost at University A, shared, "If I have assessment data, I can say look, a Classics graduate from this institution should be able to do these 10 things, and, doggone it, they can," instead of, "Well, this person got a 3.5 GPA in X number of classes."" Allison's point is that assessment provides an organized crosswalk between what students should be learning and, by linking these outcomes to the courses in which the outcomes are taught, evidence can be generated to target improvements and to demonstrate performance to stakeholders. Grades and grade point averages, in contrast, fail to indicate where students may not be learning expected outcomes of students.

In addition to grades and grade point averages, the participants reported that some colleagues resisted assessment because, not having familiarity with the practice, they worried about its use and intent. Richard, Dean of University C's College of Business, shared that faculty members are often distrustful of how the assessment data will be used. He reported, "It is difficult sometimes convincing faculty members that the data will not be used against any particular faculty member, and, of course, we're not gathering the data in order to get rid of faculty member X, and the convincing process takes a while." In response to this concern in his college, Richard assembled a group of faculty across the departments to serve in a collaborative manner and to act as liaisons back to the faculty to help demonstrate how data are used. In addition, the faculty help communicate to Richard how assessment is being used to improve teaching and learning. As a result, assessment goals were being met within the college and faculty had a clearer understanding of the intent of the assessment process.

Concern with Assessment Decision Utility

Participants encountered and perceived concern with the decision utility of assessment, also described as the ability for the assessments to yield data that could truly measure learning or guide improvement. Bill, University C's Chancellor, expressed concern that the college experience was larger than "a litany of assessment instruments" could gauge. He reflected:

> I'm asked to tell stakeholders all the time about what transpired within our students during college and I don't know. They [our students] started years ago and a lot has happened to them and not just during college. Those who make laws or policy think we produce a product or service – that it can be measured and if we can't show we're doing it then we have to get rid of what we're doing or change it.

Another challenge was that of student motivation to take assessment seriously, particularly where examinations did not directly affect students based on their performance. John, University B's Director of Institutional Research, shared that he often receives completed tests where students fill out the bubbles in various shapes or in a Christmas tree pattern, thereby raising questions about how seriously the instruments can be taken in making judgments about student learning.

Participants shared concern with the ability to draw conclusions about where improvements can be targeted due to broad overlap in the competencies reinforced in the curriculum. At University A, Judy reported, for instance, "We report the data [on general education testing] and show comparisons across colleges, but that's not assessment. That's testing." The distinction is that data should indicate where, specifically, the learning is or is not taking place and should provide useful evidence. The general education examination provides statistical means that indicate performance relative to other colleges within the institution or to other institutions across the country. However, the participants shared that comparable data falls short of being able to guide curricular improvement.

Though participants encountered and recognized the limitations of assessment data, particularly in relation to accountability expectations, they also work to overcome resistance as a means to achieve institutional quality assurance goals for continuous improvement. Those responsible for leading student learning outcomes assessment at each campus had engaged colleagues through initiatives to gather evidence that could yield improvement-oriented results. As a result, many departments recently started using embedded assessment where faculty use assignments from coursework to evaluate whether students learn key competencies.

At the universities, however, efforts to address concerns were a work in progress that still faced criticism and challenges to institution-wide commitment. Not all departments adopted methods that addressed concerns regarding decision utility. Though progress had been made, participants still reported that more work is needed to fully implement assessment processes that responded to institutional goals for quality assurance in teaching and learning.

Discussion

What is stalling progress on outcomes assessment? Consistent with Ewell's (2001) essay on the role of accreditation, regional accreditation was cited as a major factor

driving assessment on each campus. But the participants shared that not complying with assessment standards raised little concern, citing that they are likely to 'get dinged' for not being in full compliance. Without serious reprimand for compliance failure, institutional leaders and curriculum leaders have little motivation to take the practice of outcomes assessment seriously. Will it take the threat or actual loss of regional accreditation to more heavily incentivize learning outcomes assessment? Up to this point, the reinforcement of standards has not yielded satisfactory results at prompting many institutions to prioritize learning outcomes assessment.

Despite the wide variety of instruments used to assess major-specific learning on each campus, and further recognizing the ability for each institution in this study to choose from a litany of general education and major-specific assessment instruments, the issue of decision utility still persisted as a challenge to the institution-wide establishment of assessment practices. Participants from each campus reported concern with the ability of assessment instruments, particularly quantitative measures, to yield results that are useful at guiding curricular improvement or at reflecting performance to stakeholders accurately. Though participants were working to steer the campus forward with assessment, their reports only reflected partial, incomplete engagement across the academic units. Could 'engagement lag' be a major reason why national efforts over several decades have thus far failed to produce widespread commitment on the part of colleges and universities to respond to calls for evidence (National Governors Association, 1986; Spellings Commission, 2006; Ewell, 2008)?

As was mentioned earlier, the presence of student learning outcomes assessment is not a new phenomenon. Yet, in response to accountability standards, why do instruments not viewed as capable of producing useful results still get used? With no shortage of assessment instruments or approaches, it is unclear why college and university assessment leaders would continue to use instruments and approaches that do not yield meaningful, credible results among campus faculty (National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, 2013). Participants were committed to compliance with standards articulated by stakeholders in government and accreditation. But outcomes assessment is not just about compliance or accountability. If a divide exists between what is viewed as credible by stakeholders and what is viewed as useful by faculty, then campus-wide initiatives should extend beyond compliance and focus also on improvement. With regard to general education assessment, this was not observed on each campus, and differing engagement with academic units was reported on devising approaches that responded to criticism about major-specific assessment.

Although the dialogue up to this point has principally focused on learning outcomes assessment in relation to external accountability pressure, this attention is not to suggest that institutions have completely failed to respond to expectations for evidence of student learning and continuous improvement (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2013). To this end, it is also important to consider how stakeholders themselves fit into the picture. Why, despite evidence of progress on student learning outcomes assessment, does there seem to be a lack of recognition by external stakeholders on the efforts of colleges and universities to respond to expectations for

accountability in learning? To what extent do expectations held by state leaders align with those in external accreditation? Perhaps colleges and universities are caught in an accountability paradox where unflattering evidence of performance weighs significantly more heavily than achievements. Added to this paradox is the magnitude of higher education's stakeholder audience whose expectations on performance and mission priorities may often exist without consensus (Bogue & Hall, 2012).

Participants also shared that although they encountered resistance from some faculty and departmental leaders with regard to student learning outcomes assessment, they were also able to make small steps toward achieving institution-wide commitment by engaging colleagues in dialogue about what *would* give them evidence needed to improve teaching and learning. This study suggests that if assessment remains as an accountability priority, and if leaders can demonstrate value to colleagues, perhaps slow and steady progress can be made toward achieving institution-wide commitment to accountability for student learning through the practice of assessment. However, with widespread and persistent public interest in learning outcome evidence, combined with a continued resistance noted at each campus, it is unclear when or if institution-wide learning accountability will be attained.

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