

Committing to
QUALITY

Assessment and
Accountability in
Higher Education

leadership



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

Are Our Students Learning?

Guidelines for Assessment and Accountability in Higher Education

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

is is a necessary and laudable goal that is critical to economic competitiveness, equal opportunity, and a healthy democracy. ¹

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. ²

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. ³ Higher education's commitment to access must include a commitment to helping students succeed in achieving degrees.

he value of a college education is not primarily economic. he 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. ⁴

he 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.⁵

he 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?

is fundamental question should drive the work of colleges and universities that are preparing students for success — in careers, as citizens —

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Set Ambitious Goals

undergraduate education. ⁶ is 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.

permit an institution to monitor educational equity. ⁷ 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.

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Use Evidence to Improve Student Learning

It 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. ⁸



institutional demographics, persistence, and completion, as well as information about student experience and learning outcomes. ⁹ 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

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

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