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heidea for this article originated in what sounded like a simple request from hangeeditor, Peg Miller. She asked for some examples of the ways in which the results of student learning outcomes assessment particularly those derived from standardized tests,

had been used to stimulate improvements in teaching, learning and student services such as advising. The request sounded reasonable—until we began searching for examples.

We scoured current literature, consulted experienced col eagues, and reviewed our own experiences, but we could dentify only a handful of examples of the use of assessment ndings in stimulating improvements. In fact, among 146-prolles of good practice submitted by colleagues at campuses for

their evaluation of the Wabash National Study, Charles Blaich and KathleenWise noted strong campus engagement with the process of assessment but few instances of actual change in response to the information generated by the study.

Accreditors, speakers at assessment conferences, and campus geaders all decry the fact that too few faculty are closing the loop—that is, studying assessment indings to see what im provements might be suggested and taking the appropriate steps to make them. This is difficult enough with locally developed measures; adding the need to interpret nationally standardized test scores and connect them with local programs and teaching approaches exacerbates the difficulty of the task. It is even rarer not that theeffectsof making improvements on the basis of

cent of the pro les contained evidence that student learning had Many articles and books describe the qualities of good out improved, no matter what measure had been used. Likewise, incomes assessment. In her new book, Linda Suskie devotes



In this article we will describe some of the conditions that make it dif cult to close the loop. We discuss the importance of faculty engagement in assessment, the dif culties created by external mandates for assessment and for testing, the challenges presented by high turnover in faculty and administrative leadership, and the need to develop realistic expectations about how long it will take to move from collecting evidence to making changes. Then, in an attempt to suggest a way of addressing these concerns, we introduce the concept of double-loop learning in assessment as a mechanism for increasing the likelihood that assessment will lead to improvements in learning.

To Lose the Looi

Engaging Faculty is Essential

Although much of the national conversation about assess ment focuses on measurement issues, encouraging the use of assessment data to guide change is much more about collabo rating with colleagues to decide what to improve than it is about measurement. Evidence forms the basis for these collabora tions, but even the most beautifully collected and interpreted evidence will have no impact on students whatsoever unless it engages an institution's faculty, staff, governance structures, faculty development programs, and leaders.

In a recent survey of chief academic of cers conducted by the National Institute on Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), two-thirds of the respondents said faculty engage thent in particular is a key element needed to advance assess ment. While evaluating the work of individual students and in forming them of their strengths and weaknesses is a process in which faculty engage routinely, taking a look at student work in the aggregate, not to mention other sources of evidence, to see

a chapter to this topic. Banta, drawing on several prior lists, identi es 17 characteristics of effective outcomes assessment (see Table 1), including beginning with a written plan with clea purposes, providing for faculty and staff development, and ensuring that assessment data are used continuously to guide improvements. Presenters at national and regional assessment conferences also provide examples of effective practices. With so much good advice available, why are improvements in student learning resulting from assessment the exception rather than the rule?

where group strengths and weaknesses are occurring and using his evidence to guide improvements constitutes a new, unfamil

The notes from these conversations then inform subsequent discussions with faculty. In addition to looking at survey data and ndings on learning outcome measures, inserting themes and occasional quotes from the students into faculty conversation about assessment data allows us to move beyond the concern that "students at my institution would never understand what a survey means when it asks how many drafts they typically write before they hand in a paper" to providing details about what students may be pointing to in their survey responses.

Of course there are caveats. As Upcraft and Schuh argue, un like research, assessment is oriented toward action, not the leve of deeper clarity and precision that faculty strive for in their scholarship. The consequent need for "just one more" survey, focus group, or portfolio review may be wise, but it can also be a way of postponing action and preserving the status quo.

One of the challenges of translating assessment evidence into docus groups, improvement is for assessment leaders to know when gathering more information would help focus and clarify potential actions and when their knowledge is good enough to change a class or program. The goal of assessment is not just to gather evidence, after all, but to make evidence-informed changes.

External mandates don't facilitate campus engagement. NILOA survey respondents made it clear that regional and disciplinary accreditors provide the primary impetus for campus engagement in outcomes assessment. Accreditors have been phasing in their assessment guidelines for institutions since the late 1980s. These associations are governed by campus representatives and provide a buffer between the institutions and state and federal governments. Their in uence has been gradual and generally helpful.

State mandates and reactions to national calls for account ability exempli ed by the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA) have been less gradual and thus more actively resisted, not only by faculty but by students. According to Pat Hutchings, from its earliest days, assessment became identified with actors outside academe whose patronage cast a pall over what assessment might have become within the academy.

Some of the strongest resistance has been evoked by require ments to use standardized tests of general intellectual skills. Banta, Jones, and Black found that only 8 percent of the authors of their 146 pro les of good practice mentioned such tests as one of their strategies for assessing learning. And when the pro le authors described the uses made of assessment indings to guide improvement, the test scores were not mentioned. Instead, supplemental measures constructed locally and indirect evidence derived from questionnaires and interviews were identiced as the stimuli for planned responses.

countered the same phenomenon. Scores and value-added statistics based on the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and Collegiate Assessment of Academic Pro ciency (CAAP) were not productive of signicant change unless they were woven into institutional conversations with students, faculty, and staff. Even when test scores were available, they did not attract as much attention as did students' responses derived from surveys and focus groups.

Nevertheless, students' performance on such tests can be reve latory, sometimes in unexpected ways. For example, one Wabash When the position of assessment coordinator is vacated, quagain the approach to assessment campus-wide may change, as especially if an individual inexperienced in assessment assumes the responsibilities and must take time to become educated, interpretation that choose his or her own path. Even permanent faculty who of are asked to take on the role of campus assessment coordinator often decide that they need to return to their disciplines in ordeAs

Interestingly, changes in administrative leadership, faculty, and staff often have a more profound impact on institutional a sessment work than on other functions such as admissions, a signing students to residences, scheduling courses, and grandegrees. This shows that using evidence to promote improve ments is not yet a core institutional function.

Unrealistic timelines for changeCollecting and reviewing reliable evidence from multiple sources can take several years It is too expensive to do everything—standardized test, nation survey, locally developed measures—for all stated outcomes it the same year. So there must be a multi-year schedule. Yet stamandates or impatient campus leaders may exert pressure for immediate action. Pat Hutchings (2010) says that Missouri's state motto, "Show Me," captures the tone of policy makers who are tired of what they view as higher education's sense of entitlement and are asking for accountability.

But trying to force change can lead to faculty frustration and ultimately to resistance if results are disappointing—particularly if low test scores or negative satisfaction ratings are met with disapproval or even punishment by campus administrators or policy makers. Effective assessment takes time to plan, implement, and sustain. And faculty need to have reason to truthat disappointing indings will be met with offers of assistance in taking corrective action.

On the other hand, waiting for perfect data or con rmation of ndings from multiple sources over multiple years must not lead to paralysis and fear of taking any action at all. Since faculty are the ones who must use assessment evidence, it is bot reasonable and necessary to have them play a role in making sense of that evidence, but with the expectation that they will act on their analysis. If data seem to con rm their previous experience, faculty may be motivated to implement an improvement quickly.

INSTITUTIONAL LEADNING

Organizations, like individuals, need ongoing feedback on the impact of their efforts that comes from sources outside th day-to-day experience.

Assessment is a learning process—that is, it takes trial and error for institutions to gure out what and how to assess. Moreover, to be successful in improving student learning, as sessment programs need to evolve as incoming student qualities, institutional learning goals, faculty, and resource levels change. So assessment programs themselves should be assecontinually.

A "single-loop" approach to evaluating assessment program revises and tunes the way things are currently done: ways of sampling student work or how students are solicited to partici pate in a test or survey. A "double-loop" approach, as conceive originally by Chris Argyris, encourages more fundamental

questions about learning goals and whether the processes to assess them are in fact leading to improved student learning.

Editor's note: for a discussion of single- and double-loop learning, see the article by John Tagg in the July/August 2007 issue of Change

A key step toward increasing the effectiveness of any assess ment program is to engage in periodic deeper formative-evaluration, in which the question is not only how well assessment looks are being deployed and whether targets for gathering and looks are being met but whether those goals reject core values and how effective the program has been in reaching them

The assessment of an assessment program should not fo Scus primarily on the quality of the assessment measures but have been gathered by various inneans is the right information about the right goals, is being the action

Three key components of any assessment program should be evaluated: resource allocation, communication, and getting as sessment evidence to interested users.

ResourcesAn effective assessment program should spend more time and money on using data than on gathering it. This means sponsoring faculty, staff, and student discussions of the data and providing support for making changes in response to the evidence. If all of an assessment program's resources are gobbled up gathering evidence, no change is likely to occur.

Communication of assessment resultine best assessment strategies cannot be effective if the data are hidden because they are too controversial or are presented in reports that are disseminated without public calls for a response from institutional leaders. If someone from the faculty, staff, or student body were fandomly selected, could they identify the outcomes, measures, and recent indings of their institution's assessment program? If asked, would faculty in a department, or the director and staff of a student affairs program, name the same two or three things that their unit is doing well and cite the evidence that supports their assertions? Would they identify the same two or three weaknesses on which their unit is focusing for improvement and cite the evidence they will use to evaluate the success of their efforts to improve? If the answer to these questions is no, then the department or program needs to review and strengthen its communication plan. Units should consider their target audiences in advance of any attempt to disseminate assessment evidence, summarize the responses to a dissemination effort, or use that information to change future attempts to communicate with those audiences.

ess@tting evidence to potential use its is critical that people who feel even a small interest in using assessment information to access it easily and to contact someone who will help them with their questions. Increasingly campuses are posting assessment evidence on internal or external sites. How often edio people access these sites and how much time do they spend reading the articles? Do faculty, staff, and students know where

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