Virtually every college and university in the United States has a mission statement that describes the purposes and principles underlying the education provided to students who choose to attend. Most of these mission statements demonstrate significant commonality of purpose, but they also express the distinguishing characteristics of institutional identity. As a result, institutions adopt different mixes of programs, recruit different students, and pursue similar yet varied learning outcomes for their graduates.

In a 2009 survey conducted for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) by Hart Research Associates, chief academic officers reported that 80 percent of colleges have adopted broad learning outcomes that apply to all students. These outcomes include a wide array of cross-cutting skills and abilities valued by employers—writing, critical thinking, oral communication, quantitative reasoning, intercultural skills, information literacy, teamwork, civic engagement, integrative learning, and ethical reasoning. And, contrary to many recent public representations, seven in ten institutions reported that they assess these learning outcomes across the curriculum, primarily through the department or major; an additional two in ten reported developing cross-curricular assessment processes.

We know, in short, what we want students to learn and carry with them from their college studies. We also have begun to create, for the first time, a culture of inquiry about how well students are achieving essential learning outcomes across their studies. The challenge now is to make assessment an integral part of faculty and student work, and a significant resource in strengthening learning. At the same time, the research on cognitive development and deep learning is clear and overwhelming: if we want to help students retain and deepen their learning beyond the specific context of course events (e.g., the assignments and tests), then we need actively to engage them in their learning through more intentional educational practices. We typically learn better and retain more for longer periods of time when we engage in learning in direct ways, using multiple learning modes. Reading information is a beginning; reading and hearing about the information results in greater reten-
tion of information over a longer period of time; actively doing or making something with the information further increases retention; teaching others about the information and how to use it produces even deeper learning. This developmental progression has been described as engaging students in high-impact practices. Significantly, the emerging evidence on portfolios of student work suggests that applying knowledge, selecting examples or representations of students’ own work, integrating learning from multiple sources, and reflecting on the process of learning, its quality, and the outcomes—the how and the why of learning—further strengthens student learning.

Mission statements, results of faculty and administrative surveys, and faculty research about learning all show that campuses—regardless of size, public or private ownership, or Carnegie classification—are focused on and committed to student learning. There is unanimity that the critical mission of higher education is to advance student learning. Why then is the assessment of learning so often divorced from or unrelated to the work that faculty do?

Just as students who are more engaged in their learning are more likely to experience enhanced, persistent learning, faculty are more likely to be engaged and invested in assessing learning when assessment processes provide information that improves their pedagogy and practice. If assessment processes do not provide faculty and students with useful information they can readily incorporate into their daily practices, higher education will continue to struggle with reporting results that have little relevance to the essential learning outcomes and performance levels expected of graduates as articulated by employers and faculty alike.

In the following discussion of the primary types of assessment used on campuses, Sternberg, Penn, and Hawkins emphasize the importance of assignments. This critical point about assessment, which is made in the context of a discussion of portfolios and authentic assessment, recognizes the fundamental centrality of what we ask students to do. Assignments, whether in the curriculum or the cocurriculum, generate evidence of demonstrated student learning. As Sternberg, Penn, and Hawkins argue, “if instructors do not give students opportunities to create materials that can go into the portfolios, student portfolios may look thin—not because the students lack value-added skills, but rather because they were not given opportunities to create products that would fit nicely into their portfolios.” Assignments invite students to produce their best work in response to significant questions and information. If we don’t ask students, if we don’t assign students, to create their best representations of their learning, they will be much less likely to do so.

Assignments imply clarity about the learning students need to demonstrate, and they imply that we have expectations for what the outcomes of the learning will be. The role of expectations also is central to useful assessment. If we cannot clearly state or communicate
what students need to learn and at what level of competence, then we cannot be very intentional or precise in assessing the degree to which the learning has been achieved. By articulating expectations for learning, students and faculty now can have shared understanding of what the standards of accomplishment are.

Rubrics have been used for years to develop and articulate the key elements of learning outcomes at increasingly more complex and demanding levels of achievement. Rubrics exist for all of the essential learning outcomes that employers and faculty have identified as markers of a successful graduate (see www.aacu.org/value/rubrics). Initiatives such as writing across the curriculum, efforts to incorporate technology into information literacy, and AAC&U’s own VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) project have found high levels of agreement among faculty around the core elements or criteria of learning for a broad array of outcomes regardless of the type, size, or location of an institution. In addition, rubrics increasingly are being modified to incorporate newer technologies and media that go beyond print or written representation. These rubrics reflect the ability to capture student learning and to represent learning through multiple mediums spanning the diversity of modes of communication utilized by students and society today.

The recent release of the Degree Qualification Profile (DQP) by the Lumina Foundation augurs a next step in articulating student achievement in higher education by presenting a framework for essential areas of learning and levels of student competence for associate’s, baccalaureate, and master’s degrees. The DQP takes the descriptions of performance criteria in rubrics and indicates the levels of competence or achievement that all students should have in order to receive a degree at the specified level. The DQP asks institutions to certify that students receiving a specific degree have demonstrated an expected level of accomplishment by the time they graduate. The DQP places assessment of learning across a broad set of essential learning outcomes at the center of faculty and student work, lifting up the centrality of linking our stated expectations for learning, the work students are asked to engage with, and the evidence of accomplishment at specified levels.

As Sternberg, Penn, and Hawkins argue, there is today a more robust set of approaches and resources available for assessing student achievement than existed even five years ago. As a result, institutions are struggling to determine the best approach for their respective circumstances. The first step in the decision process is to focus on what an institution...
wishes to measure and why. Only after the desired learning outcomes have been identified can decisions be made regarding the tools for assessing learning. In selecting appropriate tools and methods for assessment, dollar costs are important, but it is equally important that the types of assessment data generated be useful both for faculty and for students in order to facilitate actions to enhance learning in areas of needed improvement and for addressing differential achievement among groups of students within an institution.

As the authors explain in part 1 below, different assessment tools measure different outcomes; no single assessment can, by itself, measure all that is important in higher education. For this reason, as the case studies presented in part 2 demonstrate, institutions that are taking the assessment of student learning outcomes seriously are using multiple measures in a variety of ways.

Today in higher education we have unprecedented agreement on the importance of improving student learning achievement, on the learning outcomes that are essential for success in a global economy and for a healthy civic life, and on the need to examine our practices to provide a high quality education for all our students. We have unprecedented research evidence and insight into the learning process, the relationships among pedagogies, intentional practices, purposes and expectations for learning, and the capabilities to capture and represent learning in ways that could not easily have been done in the past. As a result, the following examination of alternative methods of assessing college student learning not only challenges us, but it also helps us rethink what we are assessing, why we are assessing, and how we are assessing in order to achieve these important outcomes of a democratic society.

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