Preface

Since the 2005 publication of Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College, much has occurred in assessment in higher education. We now know more about how well students are faring in the achievement of liberal education outcomes across multiple measures of learning. We know more about the degree to which campuses nationwide are adopting outcomes-based frameworks as the basis for assessing and communicating student learning at their institutions. We also know more about the importance of attaining liberal education outcomes in today’s economy from the perspective of employers. This publication both updates and goes beyond the 2005 publication in order to call attention to these new developments. Current data from national datasets have been provided alongside data from previous years in order to highlight patterns of change in student learning over time, as well as changes in faculty attitudes on the importance of liberal education outcomes and the incorporation of these outcomes into coursework.

This report also advances what we know about student progress on outcomes through the inclusion of new national studies. Data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, the Association of American Colleges and University’s (AAC&U) Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (now housed at Iowa State University), the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, and the Higher Education Research Institute’s faculty survey provide a more comprehensive view of student learning gains across a spectrum of outcomes than was possible in 2005. This picture is further developed by the inclusion of data on the degree to which faculty value and implement the outcomes of a liberal education. Current evidence is also provided on students’ views of whether specific learning outcomes are essential to learning.

Taken together, the findings in this report signal the need to shift the national assessment effort from one of compliance and accountability to one of heightened determination to move the needle on demonstrated achievement. For, as Making Progress? shows, we have a high degree of consensus on learning outcomes that students really need to achieve and abundant evidence that too many students are falling short in relation to these outcomes.

But Making Progress? also gives us reasons for hope. As chapters 5 and 6 explain, higher education already has tools in hand both to significantly raise the quality of students’ learning in college and also to make assessment itself one of the catalysts for achievement. The proof of what students are learning can now be gathered in e-portfolios and evaluated against nationally validated standards to see whether students really are achieving competence on expected learning outcomes. Students themselves, working with faculty, can join in the assessment of their own progress and proficiency. And we in higher education can see, far more holistically, whether students are in fact attaining the breadth and level of learning that a liberal education should provide. This new movement toward “direct” and “authentic assessment” is an exciting development that we should all work together to advance.

The fast-moving discussion of assessment in higher education demands that descriptive reports on outcomes attainment be only one part of the story of student success. Much of the rest of the story must necessarily focus on the educational environments—and the assessments of those environments—that are created to foster learning achievement. Discussions of both direct assessment of student work and high-impact practices enable the emphasis in this report to move from considering the question, “How are we doing now?” with regard to student learning to, “How can we do better in the future?”

— Ashley Finley and Carol Geary Schneider