Campus Labs: Best Practices for Higher Education

Learn More from Your Outcomes

JD White, Ph.D.
Vice President, Product Management

October 2015

campuslabs®
Data Driven Innovation

Table of Contents

> **"Not everyone's college experience will look the same, but they must all have one thing in common: an unyielding commitment to student success and outcomes."** *U.S. Department of Education Fact Sheet: Focusing Higher Education on Student Success, July 2015*

Focusing on Outcomes

In their January 2014 report for National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), "Knowing What Students Know and Can Do: The Current State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in U.S. College and Universities," George D. Kuh, Natasha Jankowski, Stanley O. Ikenberry, and Jillian Kinzie outline the findings of a spring 2013 survey of provosts and chief academic officers. The results confirm that articulating learning outcomes continues to be a best practice for institutions. Although the primary motivation is still tied to accreditation, a growing number of campuses are also using assessment data to guide internal initiatives to improve courses, departments, and programs. The report concludes with a set of implications, culminating with the idea that campuses need to cultivate a culture of assessment: "The goal is to get everyone – faculty, administrators, and staff – to see that assessing outcomes and using evidence for ongoing improvement is not just or primarily an obligatory response to demands from outside the institution. Rather, assessment must be viewed and undertaken as a continuous improvement process yielding actionable information for faculty and staff as well as for institutional leaders."

We agree that simply linking outcomes to courses and departments is not enough to drive the level of progress needed to transform institutions. An internally focused approach that preserves traditional silos won't keep higher education moving in lockstep with the promises and demands of the 21st century. Moreover, an approach that focuses exclusively on student data in the aggregate – without ever delving into the characteristics and trends related to individual students – won't move institutions forward in their efforts to improve learning outcomes.

What's needed is a change in how student learning outcomes are perceived, how instructive data is used, and who is given access to it. Higher education leaders should also focus on using various sources of data throughout the entire student lifecycle in order to make strategic decisions about course offerings and programs of study. We believe the time is right for a paradigm shift that includes "educational intelligence." Coined by our peers at Eduventures, educational intelligence refers to "leveraging data at multiple points across the student lifecycle to make intelligent decisions to positively impact student outcomes." (Source: "Educational Intelligence Should Be in Your Vocabulary," Max Woolf, Eduventures, September 8, 2015) Student learning outcomes are an important data set that must be incorporated into an institution's educational intelligence ecosystem. Not fully leveraging these critical data sets can cause the loss of invaluable insights for faculty, learners, and leaders. However, maximizing student learning outcomes data requires that institutional leaders change their thinking and adopt a new paradigm of assessment possibilities.

Learn More from Your Outcomes | www.campuslabs.com   3

Shifting the Paradigm

It's not necessarily about creating more data. In fact, most colleges and universities already have much of the information they need – they're just not making the most of it.

The first challenge is to widen the access to institutional data by breaking down the prevailing silos on campus. Data about outcomes should be more accessible and integrated across departments and divisions. The data should be available at any given moment to those at the institution who need it, and in a format that is meaningful to the specific purpose. Students, for example, might want to map their coursework in relation to competency-based skills. Access to data can also help advisors who are eager to show the connection between learning outcomes and relevant academic and co-curricular experiences to their advisees. Easy access can support the efforts of deans and other academic leaders who need to develop strategic plans to advance their institution's core mission.

Institutions must also strive to make the data more accessible. Empowering faculty or academic leaders to engage with the data of learning outcome assessment has traditionally involved summative reports. These reports typically capture information that is tucked away in individual unit files or annual assessment plans, causing valuable information to go unexamined and underutilized. In short, inaccessibility prevents institutions from tapping into new, data-enabled wisdom that can help shape teaching and learning across the institution and limits the value of the work required to create these data sets. Instead of being sequestered, the data should be available as a fluid and open resource.

Yet another challenge is to leverage the data to inspire thoughtful decision-making followed up by action. Academic leaders and institutional administrators should expect outcomes data to provide more than just a report to document their efforts for accountability or accreditation processes. The data can in fact inform new ways of working and interacting with students and faculty across the institution. As one example, suppose outcomes data from a three-term period were to show that first-year students who enrolled in morning sections of both a history elective and English 101 consistently underperformed in the learning outcomes of the English course. Using this information, an advisor could more effectively work with students on scheduling courses or offer additional support resources as students pursue especially challenging course loads. Moreover, the English department could examine why this trend is occurring.

We envision a campus where decisions are made not solely because of episodic documentation of outcomes, but through a campus-wide network of continual, connected intelligence. This approach would be in stark contrast to the traditional focus of outcomes assessment, whose static, compartmentalized framework has limited impact. And while there has been an increased use of rubrics, portfolios, and competency-based assessments on campuses, these tools are rarely used to facilitate dialogue across departments and divisions – a key factor in true institutional transformation.

The diagram on the next page presents a summary of what the practice of outcomes assessment has traditionally been, what it is currently, and how we think it should evolve.

Toward a Dynamic Model of Outcomes Assessment

Assessment

In this paradigm, outcomes assessment is reflected in a static, archived report that can satisfy external requirements, namely, accreditation criteria.

A report is created by faculty and delivered to executive administration for review by an external accrediting body.

↓

The report is accessed a limited number of times as part of the accreditation process.

↓

The information is stored until it is revisited in anticipation of the next accreditation review.

Silo-by-Silo Improvement

In this paradigm, outcomes assessment inspires change at the course and departmental level. The insights gleaned are a static tool and reinforce a traditional silo approach to institutional effectiveness.

Reports are created by faculty for the department chair or divisional dean for internal review.

↓

There is little, if any, collaboration across departments.

A Holistic Perspective

A fluid, holistic network connects classroom learning outcomes, course feedback (quality of instruction), co-curricular opportunities, enrollment data, and anything else related to the learner experience. In contrast to an archived resource, the analytics provide a continually updated source of information. The focus is on continual monitoring, transparent results, and action-oriented progress.

A dashboard connects data points from every aspect of the learner experience, including competency-based activities both in and out of the classroom.

↓

The information is accessible to everyone on campus (administrators, faculty, advisors, students) at any given moment.

↓

Advisors map the learner experience by integrating data points about a learning outcome, quality of instruction, and relevant co-curricular experiences.

↓

Outcomes data can be used to anticipate future outcomes and prescribe pathways for success.

Making More Connections

Higher education administrators need to fight against the tendency to build protective walls around institutional knowledge. One office collects data about student learning performance and degree requirements. Another office collects data about campus facilities, organizations, events, and student housing. Meanwhile, another office has information about course scheduling. Yet remarkably, none of the data is ever integrated. As a result, even though nuggets of information exist, the valuable connections between them aren't being made – and opportunities for positive change are being missed.

Similarly, rarely does a department directly link information about student learning outcomes with other relevant data sources such as course evaluations. Why not look for connections between what students are learning and what their experience is in the classroom? As one example, data analysis can highlight evidence to show that the majority of students comprehend a certain subject better when the professor uses a particular method of instruction (e.g., seminar-style discussion instead of a lecture format). Indeed, faculty would be able to receive recommendations of potential teaching methods based on known outcome performance for courses. This information would support an instructor's continuous review of his or her teaching approach, while expanding opportunities to promote faculty development and student learning in new ways.

Exposing the Assumptions

Sometimes the right question to ask is not only "Are students learning?" but also, "Is the course designed to maximize student success in an expected outcome?" Maybe there's an inadvertent disconnect between expected outcomes and the required assignments and activities. Revisiting course design can help confirm if this is the case, while inspiring a broader analysis of assumptions and institutional outcomes. By applying text analytics to an instructor's learning outcome statements, for instance, we can map how closely they correlate with descriptions used in the course, departmental, and divisional assessment taxonomy. Armed with this data, the instructor is in a better position to modify her course content or approach, especially if results reveal an overemphasis on instruction in one domain (e.g., application) at the expense of others (e.g., synthesis). By aggregating mined text from across departments and divisions, it also becomes easier to assess institution-wide progress in aligning course objectives, instructional methods, and expected level of outcomes. A careful analysis, for example, can uncover any discrepancies about whether students are being expected to demonstrate certain skills at appropriate levels.

Going Beyond the Aggregate

A report on course outcomes often emphasizes the percentage of those who meet the requirements vs. the percentage of those who don't. But why stop here? The data should also provide a better understanding of the characteristics and habits of students who achieve the outcomes. This kind of knowledge can help redirect the efforts of those who don't.

Deconstructing the Aggregate View

Here's a hypothetical example of a second-year business course:
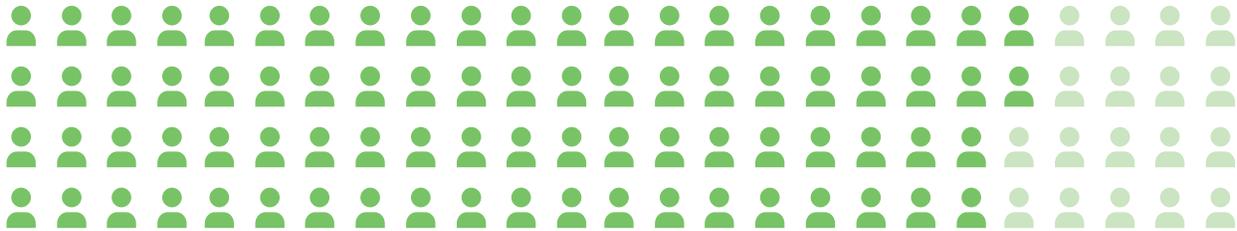
82%
Met Course Requirements

18%
Did Not Meet Course Requirements

How often does the student use the campus tutoring center?

Does the student take advantage of a professor's office hours?

Which students may have already been exposed to the same learning outcomes through a different course?

What co-curricular involvements do peers with positive outcomes tend to have?

What exactly do we know about the individual students who comprise the 18 percent? What do the 82 percenters have in common, besides this shared classroom experience? We should be asking more specific questions about the students who comprise each group. Note the possibilities above, all of which explore details beyond basic demographic information. Taken separately, each answer might not seem significant, but viewed together, the answers will undoubtedly reveal patterns and characteristics of students with successful (or unsuccessful) outcomes. The goal is a deeper analysis of how campus resources are used, especially in support of positive outcomes. This can be achieved by tapping into an institution's layer of information and connecting the everyday data throughout a student's higher ed journey.

These new insights will open up myriad possibilities for a more effective and empowered campus. Administrators can make better decisions about allocating campus resources. Faculty can gain a more comprehensive view of their students, anticipate future trends based on existing data, and adjust their teaching accordingly. Advisors can play a more proactive role in guiding students toward resources that support positive outcomes. And students will realize a new level of awareness – one that empowers them to capitalize on individual decisions and strategies that have contributed to positive results.

Conclusion

Information about student outcomes should certainly be working much harder for the institution. One clear solution is a connected campus in which more of a university's data is instantly available to guide actions taken by faculty, staff, and students. The promise of new capabilities to understand and enhance the core purpose of the institution far outweighs the risks inherent in the status quo. Institutions will realize a reduction in assessment overload and have the ability to extract the enormous value of previously underutilized experience data (course evaluations, event attendance, and assessment). Faculty can fine-tune their teaching, advisors can have better information at their fingertips, and students can be empowered to better manage their own pathways to success.

It's clear that the combination of rising tuition prices, student debt, discouraging graduation rates, and a changing global economy has raised the stakes higher than ever for higher education. Colleges and universities need to upend traditional thinking, connect their campus-wide data, and embrace the long view of student success – not to mention their own institutional effectiveness. The tools for transformation are within reach; they're just waiting for leaders with the vision to move education forward to embrace a future that has already arrived.

Campus Labs empowers institutions to make valuable connections with their data. We offer a complete set of integrated solutions for areas such as assessment, retention, teaching and learning, student engagement, and institutional effectiveness. We're proud to serve more than 750 public and private colleges and universities. To learn more, visit **campuslabs.com**.