

The Leadership Imperatives for Assessment Excellence

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Stephen P. Hundley, Executive Editor, *Assessment Update*

The **Leadership Imperatives for Assessment Excellence** involve the following five actions:

1. Making assessment excellence a strategic institutional priority;
2. Attracting and retaining talent to support assessment excellence;
3. Developing sufficient capacity for assessment excellence;
4. Rewarding, recognizing, and promoting assessment excellence; and
5. Sustaining a culture supportive of assessment excellence.

Leadership Imperative #1: Making Assessment Excellence a Strategic Institutional Priority

This involves leaders setting the “tone at the top” through words and actions; aligning goals for learning throughout the institution; developing the infrastructure to support learning and improvement; offering multiple opportunities for student learning to occur; and using and communicating results effectively. To accomplish all of this, people, plans, resources, processes, and communication are essential.

People

In what ways does the institution make known its commitment to student learning, and to the assessment and improvement efforts that undergird this work? It begins with senior leaders—presidents, provosts, and institutional governance leaders—who set the “tone at the top” through their words and actions. Words convey and reinforce values surrounding student learning, communicate vision, and signal expectations for assessment excellence. Actions demonstrate the meaning of words through intentionality of actions and behaviors. Leaders' engagement of others who have a stake in ensuring a collective focus on student learning is necessary. These include deans, support unit leaders, department chairs, program directors, faculty governance bodies, faculty and staff colleagues across campus, community partners, and, increasingly, students themselves.

Plans

To promote the learning priorities of the institution, prominent inclusion in plans is vital. Dynamic strategic plans do not sit on a shelf. Instead, they set direction, provide a framework for goal setting, help the campus/unit/program achieve its purpose, and are responsive to changing circumstances and opportunities. Planning also extends to the learning goals the institution has for its students at multiple levels and for varying contexts: learning goals at the institutional-level, program-level, course-level, assignment-level, and goals for learning in co-curricular, community, and international contexts. Ensuring widespread buy-in and adoption relies on

cascading plans throughout the campus, while also aligning the efforts of individual faculty, staff, courses, programs, and experiences to the broader strategic directions of the institution.

Resources

The institutional infrastructure to support assessment excellence requires allocation of resources to make this a reality. Assessment and improvement efforts will be either facilitated or impeded by how much time is allocated to this priority. Collaborative activities require space for individuals to meet, share ideas, and connect with colleagues. Financial resources can support worthwhile activities such as adopting promising instructional practices, attending conferences, hosting professional development opportunities, and conducting investigations of learning interventions. Finally, sufficient human resources are needed to devote the efforts involved in cultivating meaningful assessment excellence expertise on campus.

Processes

At the heart of assessment excellence is creating conditions that foster student learning and growth. This relies on learning processes that offer students opportunities to acquire and apply their learning in general education courses, in their major field of study, through educationally purposeful activities, and in co-curricular and experiential settings. These learning processes provide for students meaningful, intentional pathways to scaffold and integrate their learning, and to reflect on and document learning in different ways and for various purposes and audiences. Additionally, learning processes should provide continual mechanisms for faculty and staff to examine assessment findings, determine changes needed in a given context (assignment, course, program, curricula, or service), implement those changes, and investigate subsequent changes or improvements realized.

Communication

Conveying the abundance of activities contributing to student learning is challenging. Communication is critical to telling the institution's assessment excellence story. Leveraging student-centric communication vehicles, such as ePortfolios and Comprehensive Learner Records, is one way to demonstrate progress through authentic student artifacts. Periodic internal reporting opportunities, coupled with meaningful discussion about use of findings, serve to document outcomes and improvements. Finally, transparently showcasing results to internal and external stakeholders—in ways that speak to their interests and expectations—goes a long way toward courting support for and understanding of the aims and purposes of higher education.

Leadership Imperative #2: Attracting and Retaining Talent to Support Assessment Excellence

This involves designing recruitment and selection approaches and criteria to reinforce assessment excellence from the outset, along with providing orientation and mentoring to new hires through a variety of institutional onboarding activities. It also requires creating conditions in which colleagues want to contribute meaningfully to this institutional priority.

Clarify Roles and Expectations for Assessment Excellence Early in the Process

Assessment excellence means that the institution takes seriously its ongoing responsibility for using credible evidence to improve conditions related to student learning and institutional effectiveness. Such responsibility begins with senior leadership and cascades down to include academic and support units, departments, programs, and individuals. A culture supportive of this responsibility emerges, in part, based on talent hired by the institution. As position vacancies emerge, use these opportunities to clarify roles and expectations for assessment. Develop or update job descriptions explicitly including language related to requirements for assessment as an essential responsibility of the role. Have hiring authorities charge search committees with an expectation that they seek individuals committed to assessment and improvement principles. Ensure that those involved in making hiring decisions understand the importance of assessment excellence as an institutional priority. Doing so early in the process facilitates effective recruitment, selection, and onboarding activities.

Recruit and Select Talent with Assessment Excellence in Mind

When conducting searches for new colleagues, there are several things to consider. First, be intentional about promoting the opportunity in venues where candidates have an interest in, and preparation for, assessment and improvement. Several professional associations and disciplinary societies often have conferences, special interest groups, and communities of practice devoted to assessment, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and similar themes. Use these networks to recruit assessment-minded individuals. Second, describe in position advertisements why and how the institution engages in and values assessment and its contributions to student learning and success. Encourage candidates to submit materials that display their demonstrated commitment to and capacity for contributing to assessment, such as incorporating this narrative in a statement of their educational philosophy or by providing artifacts they have used in their own assessment activities. Third, during interviews, ask questions related to assessment and seek from candidates specific examples of how they have used assessment processes and outcomes to inform improvements to their work. Finally, include prior knowledge and experience with assessment as part of the evaluation criteria for advancing candidates to the next phases of the selection and hiring process.

Onboard New Talent with Interventions Aimed at Reinforcing Assessment Excellence

Once new colleagues are hired, ensure that they have information about assessment incorporated into their onboarding activities. Philosophies, plans, and approaches to assessment should be provided, along with how assessment has evolved and matured at the institution over time. Make certain new colleagues see how their specific roles contribute to the larger mosaic of assessment work on campus. This involves helping individuals understand how multiple levels of and contexts for assessment (assignments, courses, learning events, programs, and institution wide learning goals) are aligned with and mutually supportive of each other. Provide connections to mentors and other resources that can aid in helping new colleagues become successful in their assessment efforts. These include members of curriculum and assessment committees, professionals from such venues as teaching and learning centers, and other individuals across campus that have been early adopters or champions of assessment. Educate new colleagues on

sources of data available to them in their work, including the type of evidence the institution values and uses in its assessment excellence culture. Finally, be sure that individuals are made aware of their specific expectations for how they will contribute to this culture.

Create Ongoing Conditions to Retain Talent in Support of Assessment Excellence

As new colleagues begin to settle into their roles, there are several leadership activities to help retain talent in support of assessment excellence. First, value assessment work. This means that the leader communicates their goals for assessment, provides resources for assessment and holds individuals accountable for engaging in assessment and improvement processes. Second, provide opportunities to showcase assessment work. This occurs through informal exchanges, as part of periodic agendas of various meetings, and via dissemination opportunities on campus and externally. Third, give feedback on how to strengthen assessment work. This promotes peer review of assessment findings, encourages developing evidence-based improvements, and highlights a culture of reflective assessment practice. Finally, celebrate assessment work. This requires leaders to intentionally reward, recognize, and promote assessment excellence on an ongoing basis. It also relies on continuing to build capacity for this work across campus.

Leadership Imperative #3: Developing Sufficient Capacity for Assessment Excellence

Building capacity relies on equipping colleagues with the knowledge, skills, tools, and resources to do assessment and improvement work well. This requires capacity be developed at the institution, unit, and individual levels; capacity-building should leverage institutional systems, processes, and structures supportive of assessment excellence; and capacity is strengthened and enhanced by promoting intentional opportunities for continual engagement in assessment and improvement work.

Capacity for Assessment Excellence Needs to Be Developed at All Levels of the Institution

Institutions that foster assessment excellence all have one thing in common: Leaders develop capacity for this work at institutional, unit, and individual levels. At the institutional level, capacity begins by setting campus wide goals for learning and ensuring that there is widespread understanding of, support for, and alignment around those goals. It requires systematic approaches to assessment to both demonstrate and ensure that institutional stakeholders take student learning and success seriously and that results of assessment are communicated transparently to various internal and external audiences. Capacity-building can occur through professional development opportunities offered by teaching and learning centers and other venues. Assessment professionals and institutional research offices can provide internal consulting and technical assistance in working with colleagues to develop interventions, measures, reports on assessment progress, and strategies for improving learning conditions.

Deans, unit leaders, department chairs, program directors, or other similarly titled professionals play a key role in developing and promoting unit-level capacity for assessment excellence. This includes setting unit- and program-specific goals for learning, and determining the needs and capabilities of the talent involved in supporting assessment excellence. It also means that these unit leaders regularly take stock of how well the unit is meeting its goals and making use of

credible evidence to guide improvements. Finally, capacity is maintained by ensuring that learning and improvement remain an important component of the unit's ongoing plans and priorities. This means that discussions of teaching, learning, and student success routinely take place and that attention and resources are provided to make needed improvements.

Individual capacity for assessment excellence involves the need for individual colleagues to develop course- or assignment/event-level goals for learning. It also relies on these individuals using feedback from peer reviews of teaching, student/course evaluations, and sources of evidence of learning to engage in reflective practice, connect individual work to that of the unit and institution, and inform future actions at all levels. Individual faculty and staff should be encouraged to connect with assessment-related resources locally and within their disciplinary or professional societies. Leaders should further encourage individuals to disseminate lessons learned through Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and at teaching- and assessment-oriented conferences. Inherent in developing capacity at institutional, unit, and individual levels is the corresponding need to leverage institutional systems and processes supportive of assessment excellence.

Capacity-Building Should Leverage Institutional Systems, Processes, and Structures Supportive of Assessment Excellence

Leveraging the capabilities of institutional systems and processes supportive of assessment excellence is necessary to support capacity-building at all levels. Learning management systems, student information systems, and assessment management systems provide opportunities for faculty and staff colleagues to coordinate and align goals for learning, deliver content to students, track student progress, capture assessment findings, and regularly document learning and other outcomes. Accreditation, both institutional and specialized, provides an impetus to focus on assessment and improvement by giving colleagues periodic opportunities to collect and analyze learning artifacts, build evidence responsive to accreditation criteria, and report on actions taken to improve learning conditions. Similarly, program reviews provide opportunities for colleagues to reflect on a program's resources, processes, and outcomes related to student learning, determine how effective the program is meeting its goals for learning, and develop plans for the program's future.

Councils and committees routinely convened within the institution should also be leveraged to build capacity for assessment excellence. These typically include groups focusing on matters such as the curriculum, student co-curricular learning on campus, enrollment management strategies, community engagement, and international activities, among others. Each of these groups contributes to individual and collective understanding of student learning and the experiences influencing that learning. However, the distributed nature of responsibility for student learning and improvement on many campuses may inadvertently produce structures that reinforce silo-type behavior. Capacity-building for assessment excellence is therefore best facilitated when integration and coordination occur, and when colleagues see the interconnectedness of their work across the institution's various systems, processes, and structures. Leaders play a role by promoting intentional opportunities for continual engagement in assessment and improvement work.

Capacity Is Strengthened and Enhanced by Promoting Intentional Opportunities for Continual Engagement in Assessment and Improvement Work

Building an individual's competence and confidence in assessment means that leaders provide—on an ongoing basis—intentional opportunities for engagement in this work. Plentiful examples for such engagement abound, including some of these popular and emerging approaches:

- through participation in assignment charrettes, popularized by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, which center assessment on intentionally designed authentic assignments aligned with outcomes;
- through expansion of High-Impact Practices, which, when done well, include thoughtful design, student and faculty interaction, public display of competence, and well-guided reflection;
- through the use of ePortfolios, which support integrative learning and identity development and give us insights into student perceptions of learning experience;
- through the adoption of VALUE rubrics, from the Association of American Colleges & Universities, which are designed for assessment of authentic student work;
- through the development of Comprehensive Learner Records, which incorporate what students learn in both classroom and co-curricular spaces, and help students integrate and evaluate their learning through documentation valued by students, employers, and others;
- through colleagues' participation in external projects, partnerships, and initiatives, which provide opportunities for network-building and for promising practices from elsewhere to be identified and adapted to the local campus context; and
- through involvement in various learning improvement activities.

Leadership Imperative #4: Rewarding, Recognizing, and Promoting Assessment Excellence

Rewarding assessment excellence involves providing tangible resources that reinforce desired behaviors at the individual, program, and institutional levels. Recognizing assessment excellence relies on identifying and valuing exemplary practices undertaken by faculty and staff members in support of assessment and improvement. Promoting assessment excellence occurs by communicating the outcomes of assessment and improvement processes and sharing lessons learned with others in both our immediate communities and throughout the broader higher education community. For leaders, all of this requires allocating resources, valuing contributions, incentivizing initiatives, connecting this work to valued institutional practices and processes, and communicating accomplishments broadly.

Allocating Resources for Assessment Excellence

A leader needs to establish and make clear their personal commitment to the principles of excellence related to assessment and improvement. Moreover, they need to ensure this work remains a priority for the leader and those in the leader's sphere of influence. This commitment is demonstrated through securing, influencing, and allocating resources to support assessment excellence. Leaders can capitalize on opportunities to reinforce their commitment by making resources available on an ongoing basis, including some of these employment life-cycle touchpoints:

- start-up or similar funding to promote this work from the outset;
- annual merit increases reinforcing desired emphases on assessment excellence;
- at the time of promotion in rank or comparable advancement opportunities;
- through periodic rewards to those making exemplary contributions to assessment in a given context; and
- in other ways that advance the leader's commitment to assessment excellence.

Valuing Contributions to Assessment Excellence

Leaders need to understand who is involved in assessment and improvement work and to identify what actions have been undertaken that contribute to assessment excellence. In doing so, the leader should also determine how individuals and programs use assessment results for ongoing improvements to enhance effectiveness of instruction and support services. Leaders can signal how they value this work by celebrating the many contributions colleagues make to assessment excellence, including these various opportunities:

- by providing positive formal and informal feedback to the individuals and groups involved in this work;
- during meetings and retreats where assessment and improvement topics are included as specific agenda items;
- when important milestones have been reached related to student learning and success goals; and
- in annual goal-setting and performance review conversations.

Incentivizing Initiatives Related to Assessment Excellence

Encouraging widespread involvement by colleagues across campus in promoting assessment excellence in their courses, programs, support services, and other areas should be a key leadership goal. The leader can facilitate this by providing targeted support to start, scale, or sustain promising assessment and improvement practices from elsewhere that can be adapted to the local context. Leaders can use various approaches to incentivize assessment excellence, including the following:

- mini-grants to individuals or programs that seek to undertake projects aimed at strengthening assessment excellence;
- stipends to faculty and staff who go above the call of duty in advancing an important assessment excellence leadership priority;
- awards bestowed upon individuals, programs, or units demonstrating a sustained commitment to assessment excellence;
- budgetary resources to aid the important work of curriculum- and assessment-oriented committees; and
- through other forms of reward and recognition to foster ongoing contributions to assessment excellence (e.g., establishing a faculty fellow role focusing on assessment).

Connecting This Work to Valued Institutional Practices and Processes

Assessment work must not exist in a vacuum, isolated from other important work on campus. When this happens, assessment excellence efforts may be misaligned to the broader strategic

priorities of the institution, including the practices and processes that support these priorities. Thus, leaders need to identify the recurring activities that hold significant value to institutional stakeholders. In doing so, leaders should work to influence an appreciation for, understanding of, and commitment to assessment and improvement within these practices and processes. Whenever possible, the leader should insist on an integrated focus on assessment excellence in key areas, including:

- hiring and onboarding activities;
- professional development and related interventions (e.g., mentoring);
- promotion and tenure criteria, expectations, and decisions;
- appointments to strategic task forces, councils, and committees; and
- advancement and future professional growth opportunities.

Communicating Assessment and Improvement Accomplishments Broadly

Promoting assessment excellence relies on the leader to develop and implement a communication plan for assessment and improvement accomplishments. This involves leveraging existing communication channels (e.g., websites, annual reports, speeches/remarks to various audiences) to incorporate stories about assessment excellence into ongoing communication with stakeholders. Such engagement is important to cultivate widespread understanding of and support for assessment excellence. Leaders can advance this work by engaging stakeholders—on campus, in the community, and throughout the broader higher education ecosystem—through the following activities:

- sharing assessment findings with campus constituents, including administrators, governance groups, and other influencers;
- involving students in analyzing and making meaning from assessment information, including seeking their input regarding suggestions for improvement;
- inviting feedback about assessment work from community members, employers, and other external partners; and
- disseminating lessons learned at disciplinary and professional meetings, through Scholarship of Teaching and Learning publications, and at assessment conferences such as the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis.

Leadership Imperative #5: Sustaining a Culture Supportive of Assessment Excellence

Assessment and improvement in higher education requires leadership in order to realize its fullest potential of promoting student learning and success and maximizing institutional effectiveness. Leaders need to adhere to the following principles in order to sustain a supportive, excellence-focused culture.

Develop Learning Goals Broadly and Pervasively Throughout the Campus

One of the most important things a leader can do to sustain a culture of assessment excellence is insist upon and promote learning goals broadly and pervasively throughout the campus. Academic programs—at all levels—should necessarily articulate what students should know and be able to do upon completion of their program of study. However, learning takes place in other contexts, too. Institution-wide goals for learning—what every student on-campus, regardless of

major, should demonstrate at the time of graduation—are increasingly common, as are goals for learning in co-curricular, community, and international settings. Leaders must encourage learning goals be developed collaboratively, updated periodically, and communicated continuously to reinforce the seriousness with which the institution takes its commitment to student learning and success.

Implement a Variety of Interventions at Several Touchpoints to Reinforce Learning Goals

A culture of sustained assessment excellence requires leaders to involve colleagues throughout the enterprise in implementing learning goals at several touchpoints. This begins at orientation and in first-year experiences, continues through general education offerings, is reinforced in discipline-specific courses, and is further supported through experiential learning opportunities in various settings. Interventions to reinforce learning goals include effective instructional strategies, meaningfully designed assignments and learning events, wraparound support services aimed at supplementing instruction and providing assistance to students, through programs and resources to deepen students' engagement with each other and the campus, and in an environment that is supportive, equity-oriented, and inclusive for all students. Because leaders operate at a strategic level, they tend to see the big picture and are uniquely positioned to foster alignment of often-disparate activities and functions across campus.

Regularly Assess Progress on Learning Outcomes at Multiple Levels and in Various Contexts

Assessment excellence relies on leaders creating conditions in which faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders take this work seriously and engage in it often. This means progress on learning is assessed at multiple levels and in various contexts. Levels include learning outcomes at the institution-, program-, course-, assignment-, or learning event-levels. Contexts refer to learning taking place in class settings, including physical, online, hybrid, or independent learning environments; on campus through co-curricular offerings; and in the broader community, wherever and however a particular program defines this. Leaders should insist on plans and approaches that involve stakeholders in regularly taking stock on how and what students are learning through the use of credible evidence to make judgements about the outcomes of that learning.

Use Credible Evidence to Communicate Findings and Guide Ongoing Improvements

To determine how well students are achieving stated goals for learning, the use of credible evidence is necessary. Often, the architects of learning experiences for students—faculty and staff members involved in designing and implementing those experiences—are a principal source for determining what counts as credible evidence. Other stakeholders, including accreditors, employers, community members, and policymakers, have ideas about, and also inform and influence, the type of evidence we use to make claims about learning. Leaders play a key role in working with campus colleagues to understand the type and nature of evidence associated with assessing learning outcomes and then communicating findings in ways that make sense to and are valued by stakeholders. Most importantly, leaders can facilitate using findings from assessment processes as the basis for ongoing improvements and innovations related to student learning. Whenever possible, leaders should align assessment and improvement

outcomes to planning, budgeting, and resource allocation decisions and processes. By doing so, leaders sustain assessment excellence through a culture of evidence, improvement, innovation, and alignment.

Cultivate Distributed Leadership for Assessment and Improvement Throughout the Campus

Higher education institutions are complex. Work is performed in a knowledge-intensive setting involving highly specialized talent. Unique disciplines each have their own bodies of knowledge, histories, and traditions. Given this context, distributed leadership for assessment and improvement is needed in order for sustained excellence to occur. *Distributed leadership requires vesting approaches to and decisions about student learning and success in individuals throughout the campus in a collaborative, inclusive, and democratic manner*; this means leaders must share responsibility and authority for this work with others. *Distributed leadership recognizes that expertise and experience in this work ranges from novice to advanced practice*; this requires ongoing professional development, mentoring, peer learning, and sharing of promising practices. *Distributed leadership respects the various methods faculty and staff members employ in designing, implementing, assessing, and improving learning opportunities for students*; this rejects a one-size-fits-all mentality and embraces the diversity of our students and learning environments, including the complexities of student learning and the various conditions contributing to that learning. Finally, *distributed leadership involves making this work intentional, pervasive, and ongoing*; this fully appreciates that achieving and sustaining excellence in any endeavor is always a work-in-progress. Therefore, one of the principal roles leaders play is cultivating in others a sense of shared purpose for assessment excellence through a positive campus culture supportive of, and reliant upon, distributed leadership.

Leaders can establish and sustain such a culture by making assessment excellence a strategic institutional priority; attracting and retaining talent to support assessment excellence; developing sufficient capacity for assessment excellence; and rewarding, recognizing, and promoting assessment excellence. As we conclude the discussion of **The Leadership Imperatives for Assessment Excellence**, all leaders—both formal and informal—are encouraged to use their spheres-of-influence to continually lead by example in demonstrating their commitment to assessment excellence.