

## Introduction

In 2005, with funding from Lumina Foundation for Education, Alverno College became a coordinating partner for the *Innovation and Inquiry for Student Learning* project (IISL), a consortium of community and technical colleges from across the U.S. that are working to become more learning-centered. The focus was on using student learning outcomes to develop coherent and integrated learning in degree and certificate programs at two-year institutions. Of particular interest was whether two-year colleges, which are structured in the U.S. around multiple missions, could provide the kind of continuity in learning that would support a curriculum-wide, ability-based approach to education.

A total of 108 representatives from 42 participating institutions collaborated in-depth with each other and the planning team at Alverno—contributing to formal data collection on curriculum practices, sharing plans, articulating progress on campus initiatives, and participating in annual consortium meetings. There were two cohorts of member colleges in the consortium. Twenty-four different institutions participated in the founding cohort. An additional 18 institutions participated in the second cohort. Generally, two representatives from an institution would attend the consortium meetings. Most representatives attended more than one year, with representatives of the founding cohort attending three meetings, beginning in June 2006, and representatives of the second cohort attending two meetings, beginning in June 2008. For all of the participating institutions and their representatives at the meetings, the consortium was an opportunity to build a community of practice that supported one another's use of institution-wide student learning outcomes in the enhancement of student learning at their campuses. For Alverno, which offers four-year undergraduate degrees and a growing number of Master's degrees, the consortium has been a means to learn how two-year institutions are implementing and assessing curriculum-wide student learning outcomes as part of their efforts to become more learning-centered.

This edited volume comes out of this IISL consortium. At the initial 2006 meeting of the consortium, the idea of publishing a collection of case studies surfaced and generated a lot of enthusiasm from the participants. These case studies were to describe concrete situations and practices and, from these, draw conclusions that would be useful and relevant for a broad audience of faculty developers and assessment practitioners. In 2007, representatives from the founding institutions were invited to participate in the writing project. In 2008, we invited representatives from Butler Community College to also contribute a chapter. The resulting 11 chapters each provide an authentic glimpse into assessment at two-year institutions. The accounts range from how an individual classroom teacher is able to draw out and document student learning outcomes, to how an institution learns over time through implementing assessment initiatives in the context of accreditation, to how institutional assessment coordinators collectively learn as they participate in communities of practice. The chapters are written by and primarily for community and technical college educators and address the concerns and

perspectives of this audience. But, this compendium also serves to communicate to a broader audience of educators who are concerned with understanding how student learning outcomes are conceptualized and effectively implemented across educational settings. With this audience, the authors share a concern for building more seamless connections between two- and four-year degree programs.

A number of features that ground this collection make it a distinctive contribution to the assessment literature. First, each chapter is implicitly informed by the conceptual frameworks discussed and developed in the consortium. These frameworks address one of the most knotty challenges of our time; how do institutions meet external accountability demands while also making assessment integral to how faculty think about teaching at all levels: individual student, program, and institutional? Second, each chapter provides a close description of how assessment-related practices are being adapted to meet these challenges, with sufficient detail to reveal the texture of activities, initiatives, and perspectives. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, unlike some compendia of practice, these accounts attempt to describe in some detail not only successes, but also persistent, as well as emerging, challenges that may or may not be overcome.

Community and technical colleges have a unique role in U.S. higher education. Two-year technical colleges have long addressed the need for a more technically trained and vocationally-oriented workforce. Community colleges more specifically emerged in the 1960s, as America's response to a broader societal need for a more affordable and accessible higher education alternative. Increasingly diverse and growing populations of prospective students were first-generation Americans or among the working, under-employed. What they had in common were aspirations for a better life that often were not fully served by the existing higher education system. And so, community colleges were designed, from the beginning, to rapidly and comprehensively adjust to emerging needs in the community. Today they serve to provide everything from English as a second language for burgeoning immigrant populations, to high-demand career preparation (e.g., nursing), to newly emerging technical fields, such as recent offerings in environmental technology and sustainable practices.

In this context, both community and technical colleges tend to have some degree of emphasis on five primary missions, and these missions, in their combination and focus, set them apart from the typical university. One is the transfer mission: Two-year colleges provide about half of all students with their first two years of a four-year college curriculum, which is the general education portion, and so, addresses breadth in the liberal arts. A second is the professional/technical mission: Both community and technical colleges typically provide students with job training in specific technical areas. A third mission of many community and technical colleges is to provide community education for personal development/enrichment, that is, non-degree courses that adults might take to enrich their lives or learn new skills. A fourth mission of most two-year colleges is to provide basic skills to adults, that is, high school completion options, adult basic education, and English as a second language instruction. Finally, a fifth mission is to provide students who are underprepared for college with the kind of developmental education that assists them with both access to and success in higher education.

These multiple missions lead to unique opportunities and challenges for learning-centered education at two-year colleges. Being careful to acknowledge the diversity within both two-year and four-year institutions, there are some characteristics that tend to differentiate them and that provide unique opportunities and challenges. Congruent with state mandates, community and technical colleges tend to be more affordable and open access than four-year colleges and universities. This mission leads to a wide diversity of students, which is an opportunity to create

a rich learning environment where students' differing perspectives and experiences help make salient otherwise unexamined assumptions. The size of introductory survey courses tend to be relatively small in the two-year college when compared to those offered in large public universities that are the most affordable alternative, and this classroom intimacy supports a range of learning alternatives. Likewise, the faculty who seek out positions in community and technical colleges typically see teaching as their primary role and passion. Their promotion and tenure is predicated on their teaching effectiveness, not their research and publication record, thus professional development and faculty scholarship are tied closely to teaching and pedagogy. Two-year colleges from across the nation also have a great interest in articulating and assessing student learning outcomes, which has been demonstrated over the years by their representation at Alverno's summer workshops on ability-based education.

At the same time, there are many unique challenges faced by the two-year colleges as they seek to develop and implement coherent curricula and integrative models of ability-based education in particular. One of the most salient challenges lies in the transitory nature of the student body. Two-year college students are very likely to transfer frequently from one college to another, or might even be enrolled in multiple community colleges during the same term. Students who enroll at the two-year college are more likely to attend part-time, (and to work part- or even full-time) than the typical university student. Students often come to community colleges specifically to explore whether higher education is for them and may be ambivalent about whether or not they intend to pursue a degree. In many two-year colleges, classes with any prerequisites beyond a required first level course (such as English composition) are unlikely to attract enough students to make it economically feasible for the college to offer the class. Thus, the curriculum at two-year colleges is unlikely to be heavily sequenced, making it very difficult to systematically help students move from an introductory to a more advanced level of required abilities for graduation.

There are structural challenges on the faculty side as well. The percentage of classes taught by full-time faculty is often much lower than in the typical four-year school, with a large reliance on part-time/adjunct faculty, who may juggle teaching assignments at multiple institutions. As a result, it can be difficult logistically to find time for faculty to collaborate on curricular enhancements and assessment activities. Finding time for assessment activities can be a challenge for full-time faculty as well, which generally includes start-up time and favorable winds for them to construct collaborations that are integral to their work on curriculum and pedagogy rather than distinct from it. Typical teaching loads at community and technical colleges are three to four classes per term, each often involving a different preparation, which can easily take precedence over other types of duties such as committee work. Nevertheless, faculty sometimes make choices that further limit their time for assessment activities. There is a culture within many two-year colleges, where it is just accepted (without question) that a substantial proportion of faculty will teach overloads or "moonlights" on top of their regular teaching load. Thus while many community college faculty are seriously engaged in innovation and inquiry that would enhance student learning, it must be acknowledged that, for others, there is little time left for this work.

These distinct supports and challenges at two-year institutions provide one context for understanding the kind of substantial progress that is being made at these colleges, as well as others. Another is the formal commitment that institutions made to becoming more learner-centered when they joined the consortium. The primary criteria for inviting the founding institutions to the IISL consortium was their history of sending educators to the Alverno summer workshops on teaching, learning, and assessing. And so, the chapters in this volume provide a particular window on emerging practices at those two-year colleges that are committed to

implementing student learning outcomes and making these integral to teaching, learning, and assessment.

Although the goal of using curriculum-wide student learning outcomes to optimize individual student learning was broadly shared by consortium participants, this goal was often prioritized or understood in different ways. At the first consortium meeting, it became clear that most of the community and technical colleges had entered the national assessment conversation as a response to external accountability demands from accrediting bodies, state higher education boards, and the like. In this context, becoming more learning-centered could mean greater emphasis on using aggregate analysis of student learning outcomes to make curriculum improvement—to “close the loop” in the jargon of those assessment practitioners who have primary responsibility for program and institutional assessment. This “assessment practitioner” frame often was in some tension with a faculty-led assessment frame—one in which faculty use their definitions of student learning outcomes to coordinate teaching and assessment in their courses to reinforce broader and more durable student learning.

This perceived tension between student outcome assessment in response to accountability requirements and student outcome assessment for the improvement of individual student learning became a thematic background to the work of the consortium, which is reflected in these chapters. Despite or because of this tension, consortium representatives during the consortium meetings articulated for themselves the value of embedded assessment. For example, representatives often noted that the prospect for curricular coherence is improved when educators are not only able to connect course outcomes to curriculum-wide outcomes, but also embed outcomes assessment in their ongoing teaching. Progress in outcomes assessment was expected to translate into students being more likely to connect what they are learning in one class with another and, more crucially, with what they will do when they graduate. Although most did not believe that their institutions had yet sufficiently embedded outcomes assessments across the curriculum, there was a general sense that significant progress was being made and that, with this approach, faculty were engaged in useful discussions that led them to take greater collective responsibility for student learning across the whole of the curriculum.

Several chapter authors have elaborated a related theme: Making assessment integral to teaching and learning leads to distinctively useful pathways and strategies toward meeting accountability. These chapters reflect some of the differing ways institutions have addressed such an integrative approach. But, they also reflect how a perceived tension between assessment for accountability vs. assessment to enhance learning remains, in practice, only partially resolved.

It would be easy to exaggerate differences in perspectives among members of the consortium. Even those who have at times been most articulate about the pressure they are under to prioritize urgent accountability demands have also ardently sought to support practices that make assessment integral to classroom teaching and learning. Nonetheless, differing perspectives on how to resolve this tension are worth noting because where one starts (or the emphasis one has) is likely to be reflected in how engaged faculty are in using curriculum-wide student learning outcomes in their classrooms. Institutions may feel constrained to start in a place other than where they would prefer. But it is then all the more useful to see examples of practices that have evolved under similar constraints and that can assist in arguing for a better alternative or emphasis.

There are several additional themes that have emerged from the consortium. One has been developing a common language. As we, as a consortium, engaged in discussions during our

summer meetings, we found that there were many important words that each of us used, but with varying meanings from one college to the next. We found that these differing definitions corresponded to important differences in underlying conceptual frames, which impeded communication unless recognized and clarified. As a group, we decided that even if it was impossible to all agree on the definition of terminology, we would be careful when using these problematic terms to clarify our meaning. That is the approach we have collectively pursued with in the work collected here. We found it interesting that the most problematic terms were often the ones that seemed (to many of us) absolutely straightforward at first glance. For example, “general education” to some community colleges is taken to mean the entire transfer curriculum, i.e. the “general education” component of a four-year degree. For other colleges, “general education” has a much narrower meaning, and involves a set of required core courses, such as Freshman Composition, a Quantitative Reasoning course, etc. Another example of problematic terminology is the word “program.” All community colleges seemed to agree that professional technical programs were easier to see as “programs” than was the transfer program. Some colleges define the transfer program as the courses leading to an Associate’s degree. At other community colleges, evaluation of the transfer degree is further broken down into subprograms—either by distribution areas (e.g., the social science program, the natural science program) or by traditional academic departments (e.g., the psychology program, the biology program), even though these “programs” can sometimes be a loose connection of courses that do not add up to a degree, certificate, major, or minor. The word “assessment” itself is fraught with potential misinterpretation. Assessment can take place at many different levels of practice, ranging from classroom assessment of student work, to institutional or system level assessment that might include graduation rates, or alumni surveys. And yet, we often found that we did not naturally clarify what level of assessment practice we were sharing even when we switched from one level to another.

Finally, the need for faculty development and administrative support of assessment work was a central concern of consortium members. Colleges that had strong faculty development programs that targeted how to teach and assess for learning outcomes were those where faculty had taken ownership of the assessment program. This development work was particularly challenging and important with part-time faculty. One strategy for engaging part-time faculty included stipends for attending development activities. Members were particularly interested in strategies for making time available, and in supportive materials and activities, such as “Getting Results” (<http://www.league.org/gettingresults/web/index.html>), which is a free, web-based faculty development program.

The chapters that make up this volume vary in many interesting and important ways. The institutions differ in size—there are large community college districts, large and small individual colleges, and colleges linked together in statewide communities of practice. The colleges vary in terms of their geographical locations and the populations they serve—there are rural colleges, suburban colleges that serve mainly transfer students, and urban colleges that focus primarily on professional technical and job training. Finally, the chapters vary in terms of the level of assessment practice that is being described, from individual classroom practices to large communities of practice across colleges, and this is finally how we organized the volume.

The first three chapters focus on the faculty’s role in assessing student learning outcomes in the classroom. These chapters bring forward faculty, and in some cases, student voices. The reader gets a sense of how faculty and students experience initiatives that put a stronger focus on teaching and assessing for explicitly defined student learning outcomes. We start with a piece by Mary Anne Grabarek & Peter Wooldridge, of Durham Technical Community College, who

report on faculty leading an innovative approach to including students in the development and self assessment of student learning outcomes at the level of the course. Next we move to a piece from Madison Area Technical College. In this chapter, Mary Vlisides discusses targeted faculty development efforts that have assisted faculty in coming to understand how, at the course level, they can assess an Ethics core outcome, an outcome which had otherwise seemed amorphous and unobservable. Finally, Shree Iyengar and Ken Jarvis of Ann Arundel Community College report on their inquiry into faculty and student perspectives on Anne Arundel's student learning outcomes. They describe how they drew lessons from survey results to guide an update of the college-wide core competencies, which included more performance-oriented indicators, so that faculty can better assess these outcomes in their courses.

The next four chapters continue in this direction, each providing a broad institutional lens on assessment issues and processes. We hear from administrative and faculty voices who are in the midst of implementing assessment of college-wide student learning outcomes. Two chapters chronicle the process of infusing curriculum-embedded outcomes assessment into college structures. In Chapter 4, David England and Steve Ersinghaus of Tunxis Community College describe how they leveraged a Title III grant to support implementation of a course-embedded system for assessing general education outcomes. In Chapter 5, Phil Speary and Alexis Hopkins narrate a vivid account of Butler Community College's development and implementation of a curriculum-embedded system that comprehensively assesses institution-wide outcomes. Then, in Chapter 6, Catherine Crain of Cascadia Community College provides an ethnography of the college's founding, through which she reveals the challenges and opportunities in starting with a "blank slate" when designing and implementing outcomes assessment and other best practices. The last piece to focus on a single institution is by Chris Martin, Bob Mohrbacher, and Laurie Shuster of Pierce College. They describe in Chapter 7 how the college-wide student learning outcomes were used to guide a systematic program review that mapped implementation and alignment of outcomes assessment as the framework for their accreditation self-study.

The remaining chapters move beyond the single institution. In Chapter 8, Allatia Harris of the Dallas County Community College District articulates how a large district can develop common processes across campuses that will help faculty develop better assessment practices in their individual classes and programs. The next two chapters examine how communities of practice can inform and support assessment efforts. In Chapter 9, Robin Jeffers and Joanne Munroe, from Bellevue Community College (now Bellevue College) and Olympic College respectively, in a duet of call and response, describe a community of practice for assessment liaisons in Washington State and how this community of practice supports those leading assessment work on individual campuses. Then in Chapter 10, Todd Lundberg, from Cascadia Community College, critically examines virtual spaces that support faculty development on assessment and makes the case for reimagining them as ecologically viable communities. In the final chapter, Glen Rogers of Alverno College looks across consortium institutions to probe how two-year colleges are using institution-wide student learning outcomes to support the learning of individual students. From his perspective as a member of the consortium planning team, he presents findings on the progress institutions are making and proposes a five step model to guide implementation of institution-wide student learning outcomes.

Each of these chapters tells a story, both of the challenges and of the opportunities when we seek to improve our practice by focusing on student learning and assessment of student learning outcomes. They are written in different styles and voices and each makes a unique contribution to the volume. We hope you enjoy reading them!