

# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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## Institutional Assessment Practices Across Accreditation Regions

Nora Gannon-Slater, Stanley Ikenberry, Natasha Jankowski, & George Kuh

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### Accreditation Report

[www.learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org)

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### **NILOA Mission**

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The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

### **Acknowledgments**

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We very much appreciate the provosts and their designates who set aside time from their very busy schedules to complete the questionnaire. We are in your debt.

The NILOA Team

# Institutional Assessment Practices Across Accreditation Regions

Nora Gannon-Slater, Stanley Ikenberry, Natasha Jankowski, & George Kuh

## Executive Summary

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How are colleges and universities gathering and using evidence of student learning and how do these practices vary across accreditation regions? To address these and related questions, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), in 2013, asked the provosts/chief academic officers at all regionally accredited undergraduate degree-granting, two- and four-year public, private, and for-profit institutions in the US ( $n=2,781$ ) about the assessment activities underway on their campuses and how these institutions were using assessment results. Of those invited, provosts (or their designates) at 1,202 institutions (43%) responded. In this report based on the survey, we explore similarities and differences in assessment practices across the seven regional accreditation bodies. In addition, by comparing responses from this 2013 survey with those obtained from the 2009 NILOA survey, we flesh out changes in institutions' assessment practices over time.

Of note is that this report was specifically prepared for a meeting of the heads of the regional accreditation agencies through the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), thus this report assumes a level of background knowledge and awareness of regional accreditation processes and regions. Further, it is worth noting that while the findings lend themselves to consider that correlations between institutional responses might be caused by the accreditation regions, or that differences between the regions might be due to the regional accreditors, this causal relationship is not supported in the data or a finding of the report. A variety of factors including institutional type, size, control, and mission impact choice of assessment processes and measures, thus it is not the case that the findings are caused by the accreditation regions alone. Further, regions vary in the size of the institutional grouping served and thus some of the findings may reflect differences based in part on the number of institutions which make up a region.

## Findings

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The most noteworthy finding from the survey is that the similarities in assessment practices across accreditation regions outweigh the differences. While the great majority of universities and colleges tend to have learning outcomes statements that apply to all students regardless of major, there is some variance across regions with respect to the degree to which academic programs have articulated learning outcomes statements and whether those statements align with institution-wide learning outcomes.

While regional accreditation and specialized/program accreditation remain the primary drivers for assessment work at colleges and universities across all regions, survey responses suggest that increasing impetus for assessment is being driven by internal needs, including the use of assessment evidence to support program reviews, modify curricula, revise learning goals, and otherwise improve educational processes and effectiveness. Certain drivers of assessment practice have increased in relative importance over time—such as governing board and presidential mandates, statewide or coordinating board mandates, and faculty or staff interest in improving student learning. Although important in 2009, national calls for accountability and institutional membership initiatives appear less important today in prompting institutional assessment of student learning.

With the growth in articulation of learning outcomes statements and the prevalence of multiple drivers of assessment work, institutions are now using more—and more varied—approaches to assess student learning today than in 2009. The use of internally developed assessments (e.g., locally developed measures, classroom-based performance assessments, portfolios, etc.) has significantly increased across all regions and institutions report they find the most valuable approaches to understanding student learning are classroom-based assessments, national student surveys, and rubrics.

While productive use of assessment evidence remains a major challenge, reported use of assessment results has significantly increased at institutions in all accreditation regions, especially for purposes of program review, curriculum modification, institutional improvement, academic policy development, and resource allocation. Institutions report that assessment results are more often used to guide changes in policy and practice at the course or department/program level than at the college or institutional level. While it is heartening to see the increased use of assessment evidence for internal purposes, the use of assessment results in response to accountability requirements has also increased, regardless of region.

Transparency of institutions' assessment activity—with both external audiences as well as on campus—remains a concern. Several approaches to transparency were found to be useful in different regions for sharing assessment information internally, such as the use of assessment committees, dean's councils, and faculty meetings or retreats. But regardless of region, statements of outcomes for student learning were the most likely to be shared with external audiences as contrasted with student learning outcomes results. Most campuses across regions reported that assessment of student learning had substantial support from their institution's current organization and governance structures, but that more work was needed to effectively use assessment results internally to improve student learning, and to involve more faculty in student assessment through professional development opportunities.

In open-ended responses, respondents indicated a desire to balance the work and culture of assessment with preparation for accreditation. Respondents appeared to be seeking ways to bring these two worlds together, in closer alignment. While accreditation demands may serve to move assessment work forward, the results of assessment will need to be demonstrably useful in enhancing student learning and advancing institutional improvement if assessment is to be credible and sustainable over the long term.

## Implications

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The most important takeaway from this analysis is the relative congruence of institutional assessment practices across the seven regional accreditation agencies. While critics of regional accreditation often focus on differences and inconsistencies between regions, on the core question of assessing student learning, the responses from provosts from region to region were generally quite similar. This finding suggests the survey's most noteworthy implication: **Colleges and universities are generally aware of and responsive to the collective regional accreditation priority of assessing student learning.** While institutions are not yet where they need to be regarding assessing student learning and especially in using results to improve teaching and learning, the past few years have brought progress. As national leaders in institutional improvement and academic quality assurance, regional accreditation bodies can benefit from even greater coordination of policies and approaches to assessment. In his new book, Paul Gaston (2014) acknowledges the work of C-RAC and suggests additional areas for collaboration.

The findings point to a second implication that we present as a question: **If regional accreditation remains the prime driver of student learning outcomes assessment, what does this mean for regional accreditors? Our sense is that the time is propitious now to move quality assurance to the next level, shifting the focus from the doing of assessment to the impactful uses of assessment evidence in ways that make a genuine difference to students and institutions.** Evidence suggests that in the last few years institutions have made significant gains in the capacity to assess student learning outcomes. Four years ago, the typical college or university used an average of three different assessment approaches at the undergraduate level. By 2013, the average number of approaches had increased to five; and the range of assessment measures being employed had expanded. More institutions have established student learning outcomes at the institution level and more programs have aligned their learning outcomes with the overall institutional goals—all of which may have prompted use of more outcomes measures. What is surprising is the increase of the types of measures used by institutions. For example, use of rubrics, classroom-based assessments, and portfolios all jumped substantially across all regions since 2009.

In all accreditation regions, assessment of student learning has moved higher on institutional agendas. More measures are being used to assess student learning, and even now the uses of assessment appear to be shifting from mere “compliance” toward guiding efforts to foster student success and institutional improvement. Regional accreditors now have an opportunity (and arguably an obligation) to urge campuses to use what they know about student attainment to improve student success and strengthen institutional performance and to support campuses in their efforts to do so—thus, increasing the value of learning outcomes assessment to campuses and to the assurance of quality in American higher education.

# Institutional Assessment Practices Across Accreditation Regions

Nora Gannon-Slater, Stanley Ikenberry, Natasha Jankowski, & George Kuh

## Introduction

How are colleges and universities gathering and using evidence of student learning and how do these practices vary across accreditation regions? To address these and related questions, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), in 2013, asked the provosts/chief academic officers at all regionally accredited undergraduate degree-granting, two- and four- year public, private, and for-profit institutions in the US (n=2,781) about the assessment activities underway on their campuses and how these institutions were using assessment results. Of those invited, provosts (or their designates) at 1,202 institutions (43%) responded. The characteristics of institutions participating in the survey generally reflect the national profile in their institutional sectors, Carnegie classifications, and geographic regions. The responses from institutions document a broad range of assessment activities. Some institutions were well advanced in assessment efforts while others were just initiating this important work.

This analysis examines assessment practices across accreditation regions. It also incorporates a comparison of responses from the 2013 survey with findings from a comparable 2009 NILOA survey. Included is a snapshot of assessment practices in the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS), the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (Northwest), the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools–The Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC), and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (Middle States).<sup>1</sup>

Of note is that this report was specifically prepared for a meeting of the heads of the regional accreditation agencies through the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC), thus this report assumes a level of background knowledge and awareness of regional accreditation processes and regions. Further, it is worth noting that while the findings lend themselves to consider that correlations between institutional responses might be caused by the accreditation regions, or that differences between the regions might be due to the regional accreditors, this causal relationship is not supported in the data or a finding of the report. A variety of factors including institutional type, size, control, and mission impact choice of assessment processes and measures, thus it is not the case that the findings are caused by the accreditation regions alone. Further, regions vary in the size of the institutional grouping served and thus some of the findings may reflect differences based in part on the number of institutions which make up a region.

## Articulation of Learning Outcomes

Similar to the national snapshot (reported in *Knowing What Students Know and Can Do: The Current State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in US Colleges And Universities*), most institutions within each of the accreditation regions reported having articulated institution-wide learning outcomes that apply to all undergraduates, regardless of major. **In every accreditation region the reported articulation of institution-wide learning goals for undergraduate students increased during the past four years (Figure 1).**

*Learning outcomes assessment is key to addressing both affordability and access issues.*

*(provost at a master's institution)*

<sup>1</sup> For purposes of analysis, WASC includes two regional accrediting associations - that of the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) and that of Senior College and University Commission.

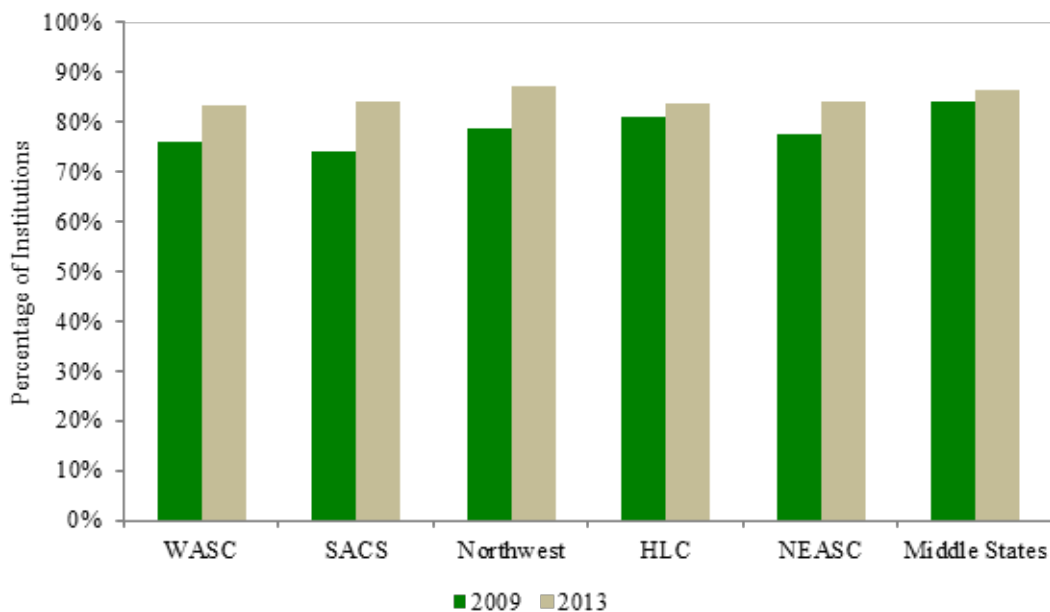


Figure 1. Institution adoption of institution-wide student learning outcomes from 2009 to 2013.

In addition to institution-wide outcomes, some 70% of participating schools also reported having student learning outcomes defined for all academic programs, although there was considerable variation between accreditation regions with respect to the degree to which learning outcomes for academic programs are or are not aligned with institutional outcomes expected of all students (Figure 2).

- Institutions within WASC, SACS, Northwest, and Middle States were more likely to have learning outcomes defined for all academic programs that aligned with institutional learning outcomes.
- Some 33% of institutions in Northwest reported that some departments, schools, or programs have defined field-specific learning outcomes that align with institutional learning outcomes.
- Institutions within NEASC were least likely to report having learning outcomes for academic programs in alignment with institutional learning outcomes.

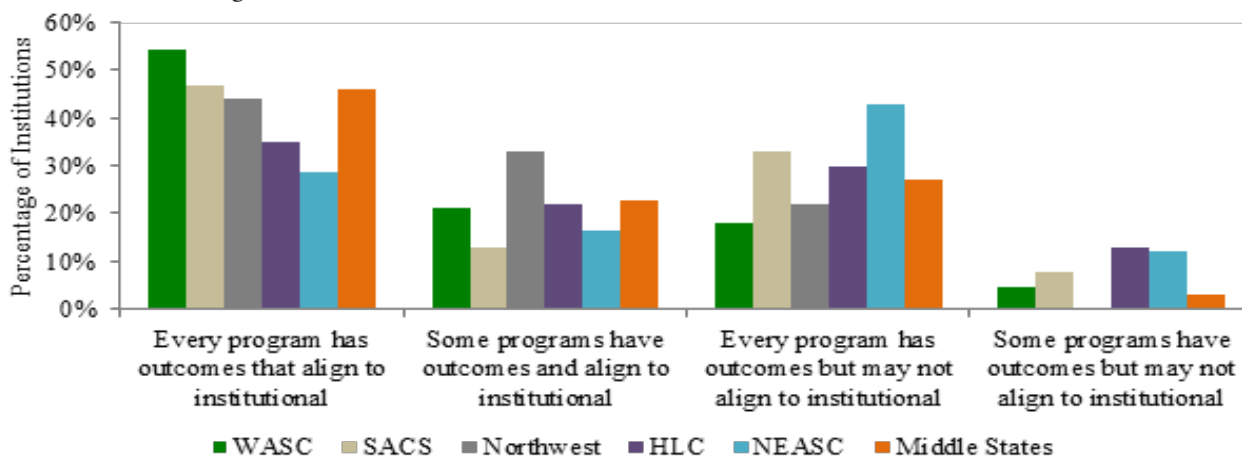


Figure 2. Program adoption and alignment of learning outcomes to institution-level outcomes.

## Assessment Drivers

A variety of forces prompt institutions to gather information about student learning (Figure 3). **Similar to findings reported in 2009 and the 2013 national report, regional and specialized/program accreditation bodies remain the prime drivers of assessment work at colleges and universities across all regions.** Furthermore, with few exceptions, the assessment drivers listed here are equally important across all regions.

- State mandates for assessment were more important to institutions in SACS than to those in Middle States or NEASC.
- Participation in consortium or multi-institution collaborative efforts along with statewide governing or coordinating board mandates for assessment were slightly more important in driving assessment in member schools of HLC.

One encouraging change since 2009 is that more campuses seem to be interested in using assessment evidence to guide internal improvement efforts through program review, curriculum modification, revision of learning goals, and other efforts. This begs an important question: Might regional accrediting bodies grasp this opportunity and fashion policies to reinforce the use of assessment for purposes of improvement as well as accountability in ways that enable institutions to harvest greater impact and benefit from the investment in the assessment of student learning?

*With so many competing demands on faculty time, assessment needs to be sustainable and manageable. For that to happen it needs to be useful.*

*(provost at a doctoral institution)*

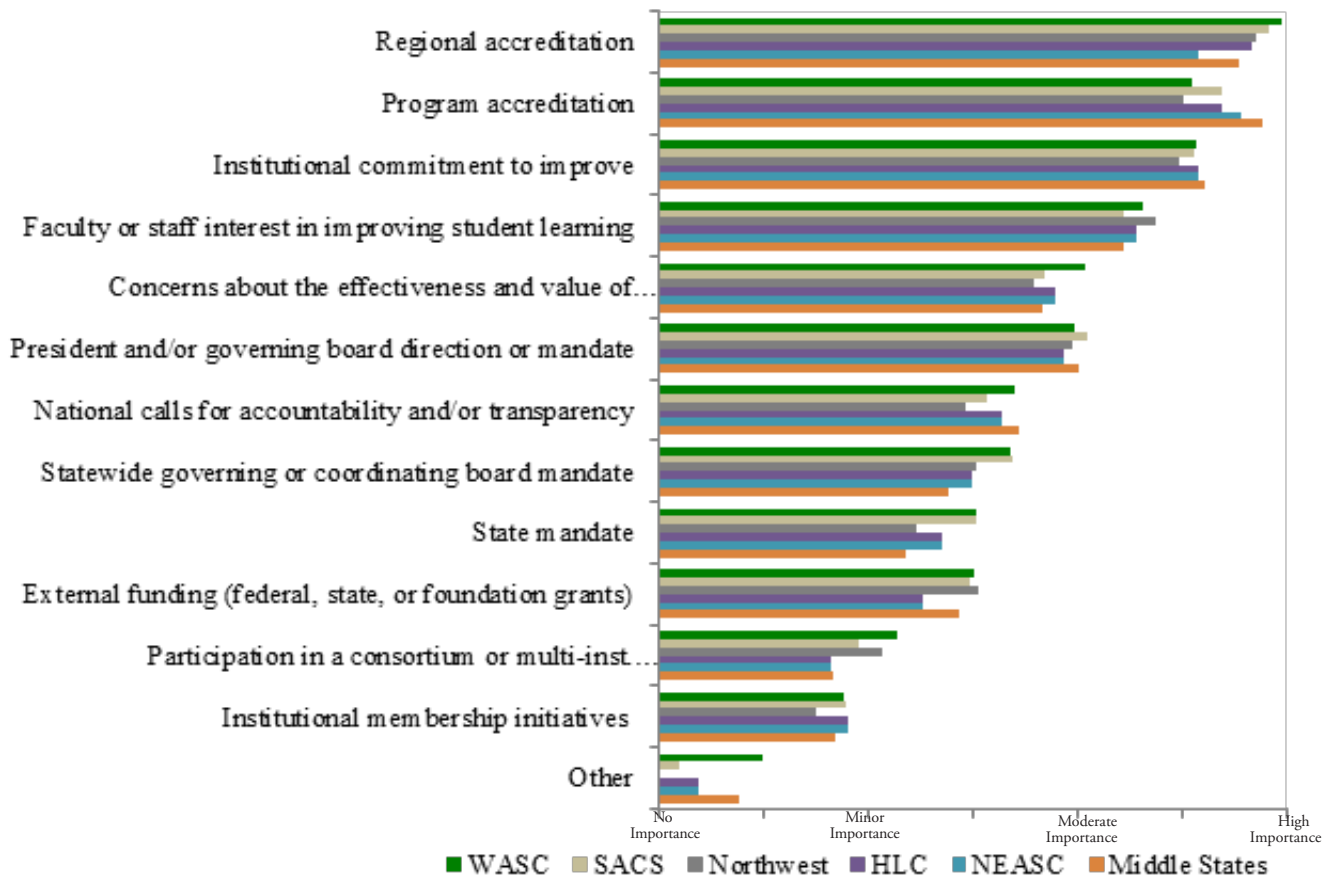


Figure 3. Drivers of assessment, by region.

While most of the forces that prompt student learning outcomes assessment have remained relatively unchanged in importance from 2009 to 2013 (Table 1)<sup>1</sup>, the findings show some variation across the regions:

- Governing board and presidential mandates for assessment increased in importance in SACS, Northwest, HLC, NEASC, and Middle States schools.
- The influence of statewide or coordinating board mandates for assessment increased in all regions except SACS.
- Faculty or staff interest in assessment became more important for HLC institutions
- Worthy of note is that national calls for accountability and institutional membership initiatives were less important in 2013 than in 2009 in prompting student learning outcomes assessment in all regions, but especially for institutions within SACS, HLC, NEASC, and Middle States regions.

Table 1. Relative emphasis of assessment drivers from 2009 to 2013, by region.

Assessment Drivers	Change from 2009 to 2013					
	WASC	SACS	Northwest	HLC	NEASC	Middle States
Faculty or staff interest	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Institutional improvement	▬	▬	↓	▬	↓	↓
Governing board/president	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Statewide/coordinating mandate	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Regional accreditation	▬	▬	▬	↑	▬	▬
Program accreditation	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
National calls for accountability	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Institutional membership initiatives	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓

Note: ↑ indicates statistically significant differences in the use of that assessment from 2009 to 2013. ↓ indicates directional differences reported but not statistically significant. ▬ indicates that no change occurred.

### Multiple Measures to Assess Learning

Experts in the assessment world generally agree that no single tool or approach can fully capture the complete picture of student learning. Fortunately, there are many more assessment tools and approaches available today than there were a decade ago (Borden & Kernel, 2010), and American colleges and universities across all regions are using them more frequently. Furthermore, the number of internal assessments (e.g., locally developed measures, classroom-based performance assessments, portfolios, etc.) has also significantly increased across all regions (Table 2).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Appendix A contains information on methodology and Appendix B contains tabulated results for assessment drivers by region.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix B contains tabulated results of assessment uses by region.



Table 2. Directional change in assessment administered at the institution level from 2009 to 2013, by region.

Assessment Type	Change from 2009 to 2013					
	WASC	SACS	Northwest	HLC	NEASC	Middle States
National student surveys	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Locally developed surveys	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
General knowledge and skills measures	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Classroom-based performance assessments	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Externally situated performance assessments	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Portfolios	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Rubrics	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Alumni surveys	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Employer surveys	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓

Note: ↑ indicates statistically significant differences in the use of that assessment from 2009 to 2013. ↓ indicates directional differences reported but not statistically significant. ■ indicates that no change occurred.

Institutions in accreditation regions indicated similar preferences for engaging a variety of kinds of assessment measures (Figure 4). Regardless of accreditation region, institutions reported that the most valuable approaches for assessing undergraduate student learning outcomes are (in this order) classroom-based assessment, national student surveys, and rubrics.

- Institutions within HLC and SACS were more likely to use measures of general knowledge and skills.
- Alumni surveys were more frequently used by member schools within Middle States and NEASC.

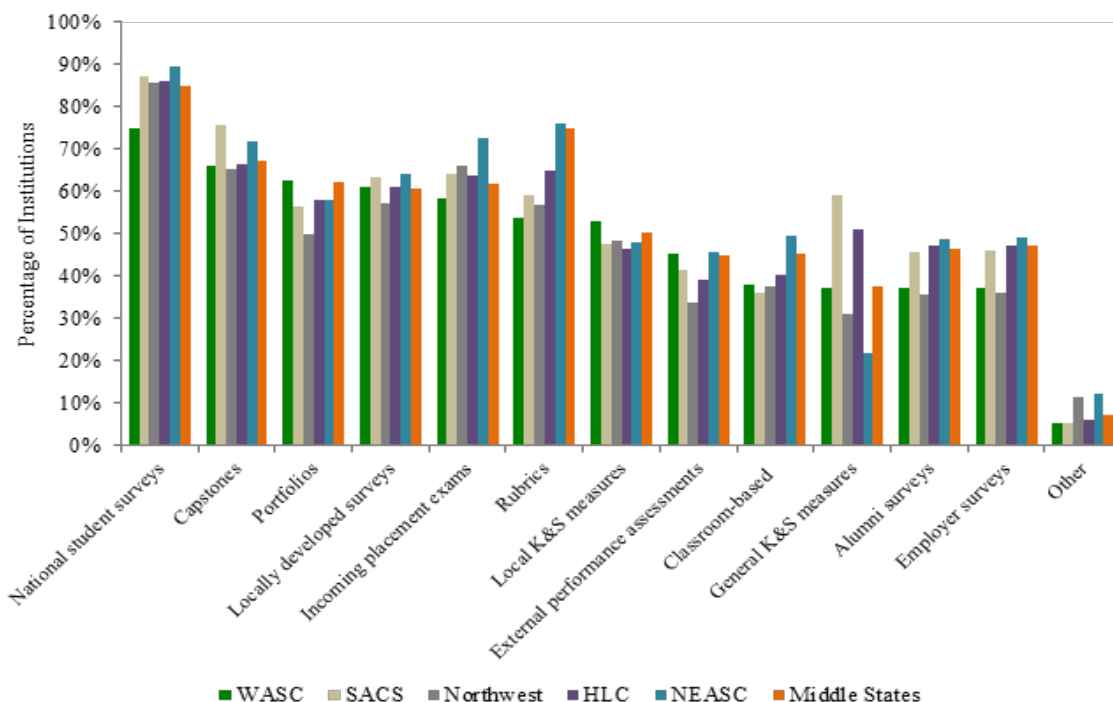


Figure 4. Assessment approaches used at the institution level to represent undergraduate student learning.

## Uses of Assessment

Institutions within all regions reported not only increases in the types of assessment measures they use but also more use of assessment results for a range of purposes. However, gathering information about student accomplishment can be an empty exercise if the data are not used in meaningful and productive ways.

**Compliance with regional and program accreditation expectations were the most frequently reported “uses” of assessment**, suggesting an opportunity for regional accreditors to support shifting the purpose for assessing student learning to institutional responsibility for improving student success and institutional performance. Use of assessment for a range of other reasons (beyond accreditation) also saw substantial increases from 2009 to 2013 (Table 3)<sup>3</sup>.

As the responses shown in Table 3 indicate, institutions across all accreditation regions reported more use of assessment results in program review, curriculum modification, institutional improvement, academic policy development, and resource allocation. In addition to these internal uses of assessment evidence, external accountability requirements also increased significantly for all institutions, regardless of region.

*Many faculty struggle with determining how to conduct a proper assessment and then how to use the results, and many of the disciplinary meetings are very broad and not specific in this regard.*

*(provost at a master’s institution)*

Table 3. Changes in uses of assessment from 2009 to 2013, by region.

Assessment Use	Change from 2009-2013					
	WASC	SACS	Northwest	HLC	NEASC	Middle States
Regional accreditation	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Program accreditation	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Program review	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Curriculum modification	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
External accountability requirements	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Learning goals revisions	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Institutional improvement	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Academic policy development or modification	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Strategic planning	↑	↔	↑	↑	↑	↑
Institutional benchmarking	↑	↑	↑	↑	↔	↑
Resource allocation and budgeting	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Trustee/governing board deliberations	↔	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓

Note: ↑ indicates statistically significant differences in the use of that assessment from 2009 to 2013. ↓ indicates directional differences reported but not statistically significant. ↔ indicates that no change occurred.

<sup>3</sup> Appendix B contains tabulated results of assessment uses by region.

Figure 5 shows that the uses of assessment results tend to be similar across regions.

- Across regions, institutions frequently reported using assessment evidence for various improvement-related tasks, such as curriculum modification, strategic planning, policy development, and faculty development.
- Institutions were least likely to use assessment results to communicate with prospective students, families, and alumni.
- Member schools of WASC were more likely to use assessment results for program review than schools in other regions.
- Institutions within HLC, Northwest and SACS were more likely to use assessment results for benchmarking than NEASC.
- Institutions in WASC and SACS were more likely to use assessment results for resource allocation and budgeting.

*Initiative overload is a very real problem. Shrinking state funding compounds this by reducing staff and increasing administrative requirements at the same time.*

*(provost from a public institution)*

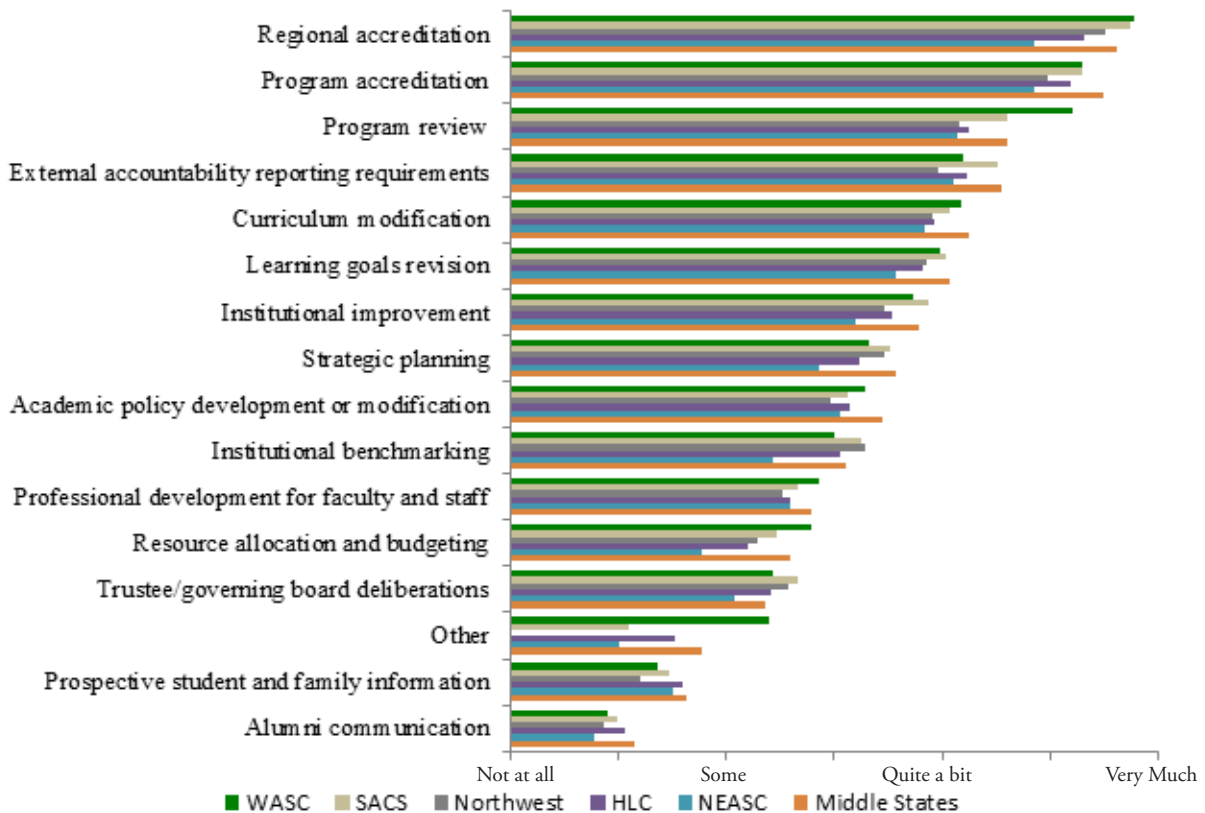


Figure 5. Extent to which assessment results are used for each purpose, by region.

Assessment results were more often used to guide changes in policy and practice at the course or department/program level than at the college or institution level (Figure 6). Institutions within regions were equally likely to use assessment results for making changes at the institution level or in specific curricular requirements or courses. At the school/college levels or department/program levels, only minor differences existed in how assessment results are being used.

- Middle States member institutions reported more use of assessment results at the school or college level and department/program level than did schools within NEASC.

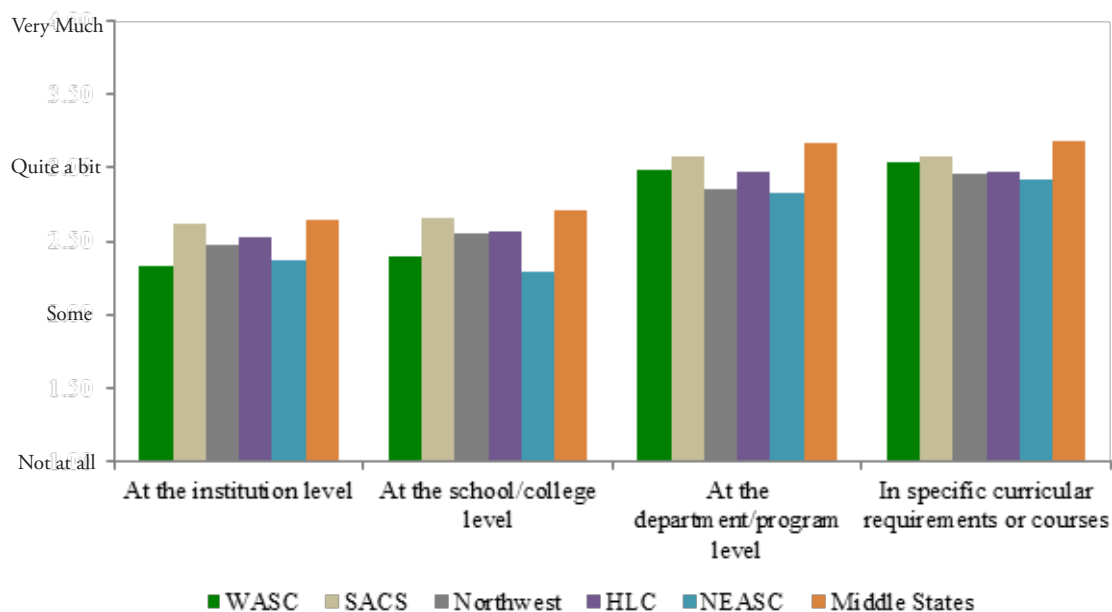


Figure 6. Extent to which changes are made based on assessment results, by region.

## Communication of Assessment Results

In all accreditation regions, institutions appear to be beginning to communicate assessment results, both within the institution and to the general public. The strategies employed by institutions across regions were quite similar (Figure 7).

- For all regions except Middle States, the most effective means of communicating assessment results within the institution were presentations of assessment findings at faculty meetings or retreats.
- Assessment committees were also reported as an effective way to communicate assessment results, especially for institutions within Middle States and equally important to faculty meetings or retreats for member schools of HLC.
- Institutions within SACS found the dean’s council more effective for communicating assessment results than did other accreditation regions.
- Institutions within Middle States and Northwest regions reported communicating assessment results through websites to be more effective than did other regions.
- Member schools of SACS and NEASC indicated that email updates were more effective means of communicating assessment results than did other regions.

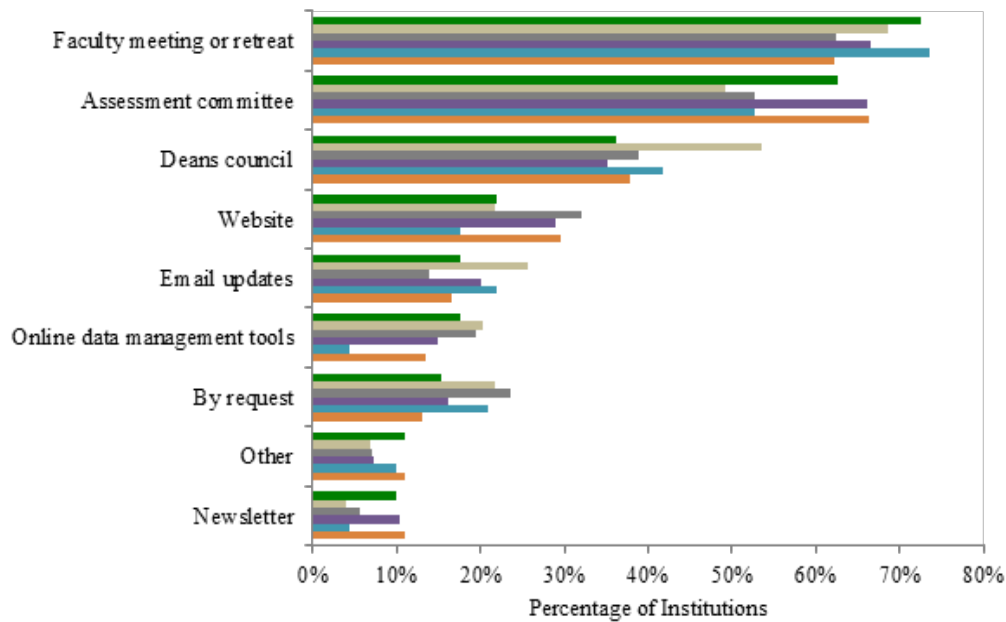


Figure 7. Percentage of institutions effective internal communication, by region.

How are assessment activity and evidence communicated beyond the campus? Across all accreditation regions, the most commonly shared information with external audiences was institutionally endorsed learning outcomes for all students (Figure 8).

- SACS member schools were less likely to make public student learning outcomes statements than campuses in other regions.
- Institutions within Middle States, HLC, and WASC were more likely to make assessment resources, current assessment activities, and assessment plans publicly available.
- NEASC schools were least likely to make assessment information public.

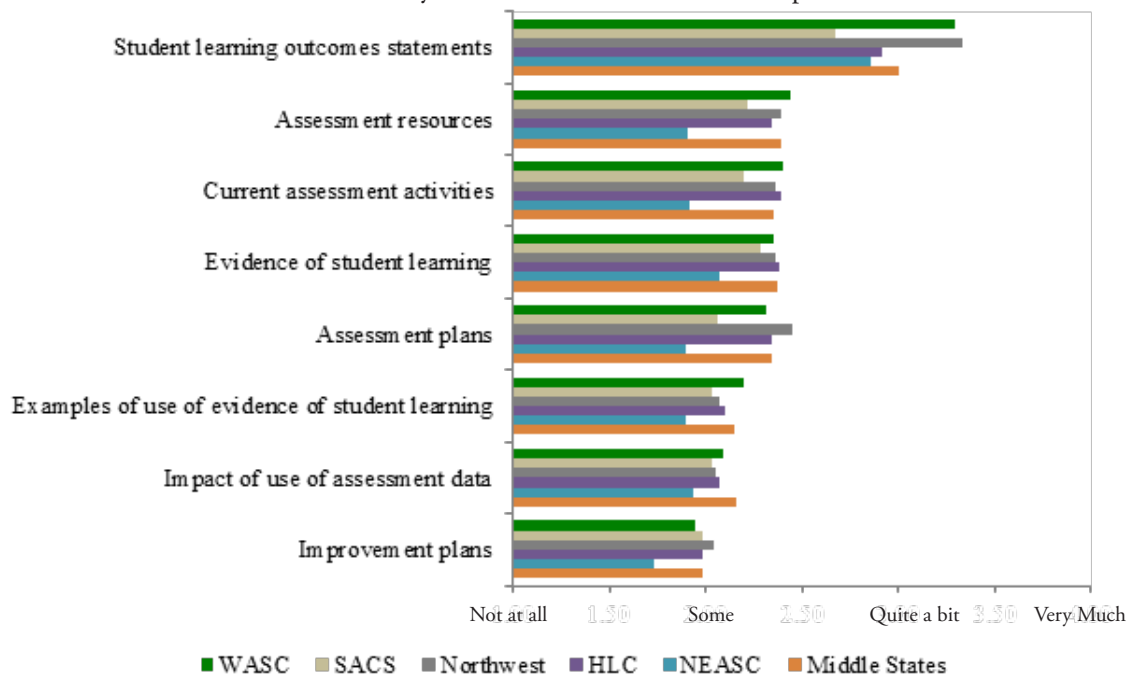


Figure 8. Extent to which assessment information is publicly available, by region.

## Organization and Structural Support for Assessment

Most institutions reported that student learning outcomes assessment work was supported by their institution's current organization and governance structures. Such support was strongest for institutions in SACS, HLC, and Middle States regions.

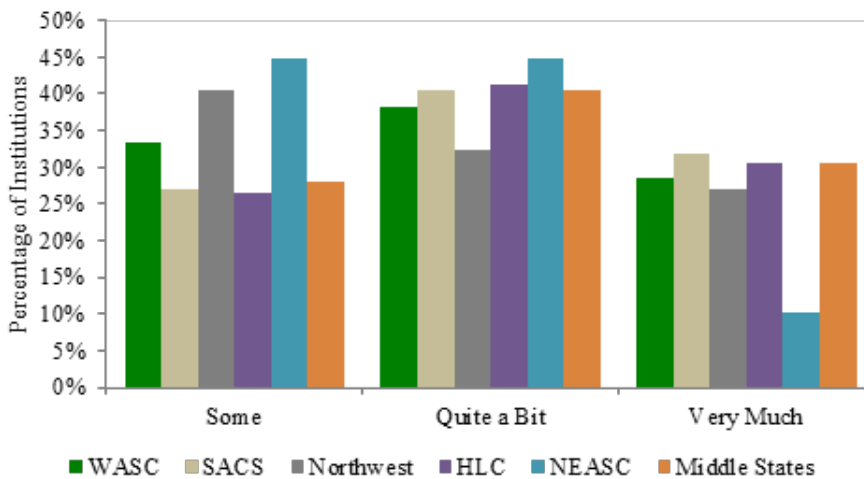


Figure 9. Percentage of institutions rating supportiveness of organization and governance structure.

Overall, institutions reported a wide range of supports for assessment activities on campus. The most important elements in all regions included

- institutional research office and personnel;
- institutional policy/statements related to assessing undergraduate learning;
- existence of an institutional assessment committee;
- faculty engagement and involvement in assessment; and
- availability of professional staff dedicated to assessment.

Minor differences existed across the accreditation regions with regard to the kinds of structures and conditions respondents considered supportive of assessment (Figure 10).

- SACS member schools were more likely to indicate institutional policies and statements about assessing undergraduate learning.
- HLC schools were more likely to report assessment committees.
- SACS schools were more likely to note an office of institutional research and the availability of assessment personnel, data management systems, and software.
- WASC schools were more likely to say funds targeted for outcomes assessment.
- Middle States, SACS, and WASC were more likely than HLC, NEASC, and Northwest institutions to indicate professional assessment staff and significant involvement of student affairs staff.

*The value of assessment lies not in the program or an individual course that is assessed, but in understanding that the real benefit of outcomes mastery is adequate preparation for success at the next level. This means changing how we work - how classes are scheduled, how we advise, how we develop programs, and revise courses - everything is different for us with learning in mind. That's the value [of the assessment] conversation we need to share internally and externally.*

*(provost at an associate's institution)*

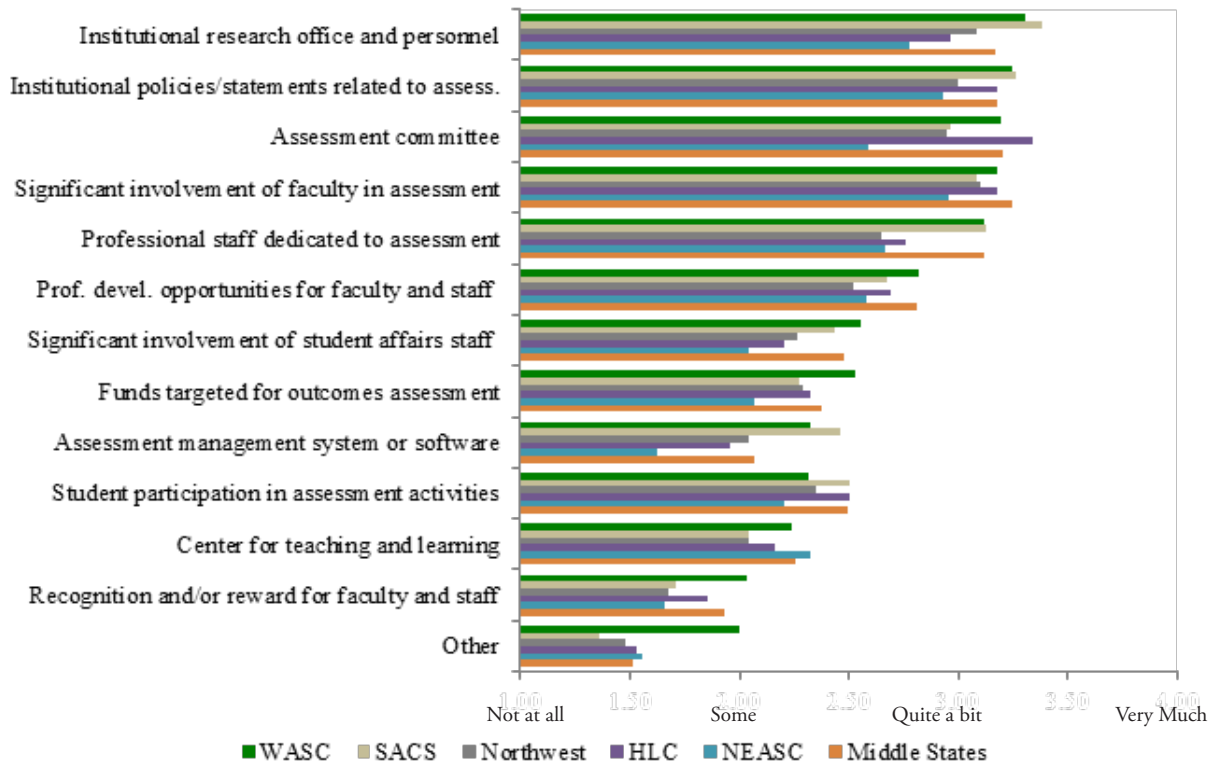


Figure 10. Extent to which various items support assessment activity, by region.

### Priorities for Advancing Assessment Work

A list of the top ten areas of institutional need to advance assessment work was identified by accreditation region, with significant commonality among eight priorities. **At the top of each region's list were providing professional development for faculty and staff and furthering faculty use of results. Less important but noteworthy was increasing faculty involvement in assessment in general.** Also, frequently selected by institutions were the needs for additional financial or staff resources, greater institutional assessment staff capacity, better technologies and analytics, greater sharing and access to assessment results, and more valid and reliable assessment measures. The relative emphasis on each of these priorities tended to vary across regions (Figure 11).

- NEASC member institutions emphasized needing more valid and reliable assessment measures of student learning and the need for more faculty involved in assessment.
- Institutions in the Northwest accreditation region tended to stress the need for greater institutional assessment staff capacity and additional financial or staff resources.
- SACS institutions emphasized needing more professional development for faculty and stronger administrative and leadership support.
- WASC campuses focused on the need for better assessment technology and analytics.



Figure 11. Percentage of institutions indicating areas of need to advance assessment, by region.

## Implications

While critics of regional accreditation often focus on differences and inconsistencies between regions, on the core question of assessing student learning, evidence reported here suggests an overall consistency. Institutions are aware of and responding to the collective regional accreditation priority of assessing student learning. While institutions are not yet where they need to be regarding assessing student learning and using results, advances have been made since 2009 in the process of assessment, from stating desired institutional outcomes for all students to using more and a wider variety of methods to obtain assessment results to reporting and using assessment information.

Four years ago, the typical college or university used an average of three different assessment approaches at the undergraduate level. By 2013, the average number of approaches had increased to five; and the range of assessment measures being employed had expanded. That schools are using more measures is not surprising as more institutions have established student learning outcomes at the institution level and more programs have aligned their learning outcomes with the overall institutional goals—all of which may have prompted use of more outcomes



measures. What is surprising is the increase of the types of measures used by institutions. For example, use of rubrics, classroom-based assessments, and portfolios all jumped substantially across all regions since 2009. It is also important to note that the motivation for assessing student learning outcomes appears to be shifting from mere “compliance” toward a focus on using the information to foster student success and guide institutional improvement.

Yes, some regional differences exist, but in absolute terms these variances do not appear to be major. For example, with respect to the communication of assessment results within the institution—at faculty meetings or retreats, in assessment committees, and as part of the work of dean’s councils—these modes of sharing assessment information are happening, but they were identified as effective means of communicating assessment results to different degrees across regions. Institutions within some regions are more likely to make assessment plans, resources, and activities publicly available. There are regional differences with respect to both structural and organizational support for assessment as well as priorities for advancing assessment work. Still, the similarities across regions far outweigh the contrasts.

As national leaders in institutional improvement and academic quality assurance, regional accreditation bodies can benefit from sharing views and coordinating policies and approaches to assessment. More than 1,000 invited responses to open-ended questions were received, and 600 of them related to regional accreditation. Respondents expressed concern that the work done on assessment, driven by preparation for a regional accreditation visit, often lost momentum following reaffirmation of accreditation status. Respondents said they hoped to get through their accreditation process with positive reviews but also expressed a very real fear that they would not meet expectations. Furthermore, respondents expressed concerns for balancing the creation of a culture of assessment within their institutions and “doing assessment because it matters for teaching and learning,” with the perception that assessment is “something we do because it is a requirement for accreditation.” The perception of assessment as something done to comply with regional accreditation mandates was viewed as a barrier to faculty engagement and involvement with assessment processes and as limiting the potential of assessment to improve student learning. Overall, the respondents were asking for ways to bring the purposes of accountability and improvement into closer alignment so that while accreditation moves assessment work forward, institutions retain it as a valued tool for its usefulness to student learning and institutional improvement.

Evidence suggests that over the last four years institutions have made significant gains in their capacity to assess student learning outcomes. Even now, apart from compliance with external demands, institutions appear to be shifting in the direction of institutional improvement—toward needs and interests of faculty and staff, concerns about academic effectiveness and value, and interests of presidents and governing boards. Regional accreditors should seize the moment and find ways to use the momentum of this shift to enhance the role of learning outcomes assessment in improvement efforts on campuses and in the assurance of quality in American higher education.

*Colleges and universities must evolve from a culture of compliance to a culture of evidence-based decision making.*

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## Appendix A

### Data Collection and Analysis

The 2013 NILOA national survey of chief academic officers was conducted by the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University between April and September 2013. The sample included provosts or chief academic officers at the 2,781 regionally accredited undergraduate degree-granting institutions listed in the Higher Education Directory, published by Higher Education Publications, Inc. A total of 1,202 institutions completed the survey for a response rate of 43%.

The survey was administered primarily online, with the initial invitation followed by three email reminders; a paper copy of the questionnaire was mailed to those who had not completed the survey after the third email reminder. Many of the questions were used previously in the NILOA 2009 questionnaire. Additional questions were revised or added, informed by changing practices in the field and input from NILOA's National Advisory Panel, a select group of assessment experts, and a focus group of chief academic officers convened during the January 2013 Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) meeting. A copy of the final 2013 survey may be found here: <http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/knownwhatstudentsknowandcando.html>

The characteristics of participating colleges and universities in terms of accreditation region (and other variables) were generally similar to the national profile.

Table A1

#### Accreditation region: 2013 participating institutions compared with national profile

Accreditation Region	2013	Current National
Middle States	16%	17%
NEASC	8%	7%
HLC	38%	35%
Northwest	6%	5%
SACS	24%	27%
WASC	8%	9%

As with the 2009 survey, we asked respondents to identify their position within the institution if they were not the provost who received the initial invitation to complete the survey. Table A2 outlines that among about three quarters of the responding institutions the provost or someone in the provost's office completed the questionnaire.

Table A2

#### Survey 2013 respondents by position

Position	%	N
Provost/CAO (including 136 assistant/associate provost)	74%	N = 883
Director of assessment (or person responsible for assessment)	18%	N = 223
Dean (or assistant/associate dean)	8%	N = 96

Frequency tables were produced for accreditation region; questionnaire items 1, 2, 3, 5, 13, 14, 15, and 16 were analyzed using the cross tabs procedure in SPSS (21), which yielded chi-square tables that identified statistically significant differences. These results were further analyzed to determine whether selected responses differed across institutions within regions. Items 6, 8, 10, 11, and 12 have interval scales and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to identify statistically significant differences between various groupings of institutions. A post-hoc test with Bonferroni correction was applied to control for an inflated type-I error rate. Statistically significant results were those at the .05 level or below. In addition, items that were paired from the 2009 and 2013 survey iterations were examined for change over time. Finally, responses to items 4 and 17–20 (the open-ended questions) were reviewed by two NILOA researchers, specifically with a focus on accreditation region. Broad codes were then developed in conversation about the general reading of the responses and thematic codes were applied to identify accreditation-related comments.

## Appendix B

### Survey Results by Region

*Table B1*

**Relative emphasis of assessment drivers from 2009 to 2013, by region.**

<i>Assessment Drivers</i>	WASC		SACS		Northwest		HLC		NEASC		Middle States	
	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013
Faculty or staff interest	3.0	3.3	3.1	3.2	3.1	3.3	3.1	3.2	2.9	3.0	3.1	3.2
Institutional improvement	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.4	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.4	3.7	3.6
Governing board/ president	2.6	3.0	2.5	3.1	2.1	2.9	2.4	2.8	2.4	2.6	2.5	3.1
Statewide/ coordinating mandate	2.0	2.7	2.1	2.7	1.9	2.6	2.0	2.4	1.8	2.4	1.9	2.4
Regional accreditation	4.0	4.0	3.9	3.9	3.8	3.8	3.7	3.8	3.7	3.7	3.9	3.9
Program accreditation	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.8	3.4	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.8
National calls for accountability	3.0	2.8	3.0	2.6	2.8	2.6	3.0	2.7	2.9	2.4	3.1	2.8
Institutional membership initiatives	2.2	1.9	2.3	2.0	1.9	1.8	2.7	1.9	2.2	1.6	2.2	1.8

Response options include No Importance, Minor Importance, Moderate Importance, High Importance

*Table B2*  
**Percentage of each type of assessment administered from 2009 to 2013, by region.**

<i>Assessment Type</i>	WASC		SACS		Northwest		HLC		NEASC		Middle States	
	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013
National student surveys	60%	77%	84%	88%	83%	92%	87%	89%	83%	92%	81%	89%
Locally developed surveys	44%	56%	51%	62%	34%	57%	50%	60%	23%	58%	44%	60%
General knowledge and skills measures	27%	41%	56%	59%	32%	39%	47%	53%	23%	28%	26%	36%
Classroom-based performance assessments	5%	60%	27%	69%	15%	68%	18%	62%	9%	60%	21%	65%
Externally situated performance assessments	3%	33%	13%	36%	3%	55%	6%	39%	0%	59%	12%	39%
Portfolios	5%	48%	7%	39%	6%	44%	6%	39%	5%	47%	7%	43%
Rubrics	25%	66%	26%	75%	21%	67%	29%	68%	16%	73%	26%	65%
Alumni surveys	24%	57%	37%	61%	29%	59%	40%	65%	21%	77%	41%	75%
Employer surveys	5%	28%	18%	47%	16%	38%	19%	45%	2%	50%	15%	41%

Table B3

**Extent to which student learning assessment results are used for various purposes, by region.**

<i>Assessment Use</i>	WASC		SACS		Northwest		HLC		NEASC		Middle States	
	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013	2009	2013
Regional accreditation	2.9	4.0	3.5	3.8	3.2	3.8	3.2	3.7	3.1	3.4	3.3	3.8
Program accreditation	3.1	3.7	3.4	3.7	3.1	3.4	3.2	3.6	3.1	3.4	3.4	3.7
Program review	2.3	3.6	2.3	3.2	2.2	3.0	2.2	3.1	1.9	3.0	2.3	3.3
Curriculum modification	2.3	3.2	2.5	3.0	2.4	2.9	2.5	2.9	2.3	2.9	2.6	3.1
External accountability requirements	2.2	3.1	2.3	3.2	2.3	2.9	2.4	3.1	2.1	3.1	2.3	3.4
Learning goals revisions	2.5	3.0	2.8	3.0	2.6	3.0	1.6	2.6	2.4	2.8	2.8	3.1
Institutional improvement	2.0	2.8	2.2	2.9	2.2	2.7	2.2	2.7	2.0	2.5	2.3	2.9
Academic policy development or modification	1.5	2.6	1.7	2.5	1.6	2.5	1.6	2.6	1.6	2.5	1.7	2.7
Strategic planning	2.3	2.6	2.7	2.7	2.4	2.8	2.5	2.6	2.3	2.3	2.6	2.8
Institutional benchmarking	1.8	2.5	2.1	2.6	2.1	2.6	2.1	2.5	2.0	2.0	2.1	2.5
Resource allocation and budgeting	1.5	2.3	1.6	2.2	1.4	2.2	1.5	2.0	1.3	1.8	1.7	2.4
Trustee/governing board deliberations	2.2	2.2	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.3	2.3	2.2	2.1	2.0	2.3	2.2

Response options include: N/A (not shown), Not at All, Some, Quite a Bit, Very Much.

Written-in responses for the “other” category included new program development or program specific benchmarking.

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Management Systems*

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*President Emeritus and Regent Professor  
University of Illinois*

**George Kuh**

*Director, National Institute for Learning  
Outcomes Assessment  
Adjunct Professor, University of Illinois  
Urbana-Champaign  
Chancellor's Professor Emeritus, Indiana  
University*

**Jillian Kinzie**

*Senior Scholar, NILOA; Associate Director,  
Indiana University*

### NILOA Mission

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NILOA's primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to [njankow2@illinois.edu](mailto:njankow2@illinois.edu).

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## About NILOA

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- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.

## NILOA Staff

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### NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

**Stanley Ikenberry**, *Co-Principal Investigator*

**George Kuh**, *Co-Principal Investigator and Director*

**Peter Ewell**, *Senior Scholar*

**Jillian Kinzie**, *Senior Scholar*

**Pat Hutchings**, *Senior Scholar*

**Timothy Reese Cain**, *Senior Scholar*

**Paul Lingenfelter**, *Senior Scholar*

**Natasha Jankowski**, *Assistant Director and Research Analyst*

**Robert Dumas**, *Research Analyst*

**Katie Schultz**, *Research Analyst*

**Carrie Allen**, *Research Analyst*

**Jelena Pokimica**, *Research Analyst*

**Nora Gannon-Slater**, *Research Analyst*

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## National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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For more information, please contact:

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA)  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
340 Education Building  
Champaign, IL 61820

[learningoutcomesassessment.org](http://learningoutcomesassessment.org)  
[njankow2@illinois.edu](mailto:njankow2@illinois.edu)  
Phone: 217.244.2155  
Fax: 217.244.5632