

Meta-Trends in Assessment

Stephen P. Hundley and Caleb J. Keith

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The 2nd edition of *Trends in Assessment: Ideas, Opportunities, and Issues for Higher Education* was released at the 2023 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis. This updated edition features more than fifty contributors, including several Assessment Institute organizers, partners, and thought leaders. Each of the book’s individual chapters provide a compelling framework around specific assessment and improvement topics and themes. In the final chapter of *Trends in Assessment*, ten meta-trends in assessment are provided for consideration, reflection, and action; these represent enduring and emerging perspectives related to higher education assessment and improvement. These meta-trends are excerpted here, organized around important concepts that recur throughout *Trends in Assessment* and elsewhere:

- Student Success
- Teaching and Learning
- Professional Development
- Assessment and Improvement

Student Success: Understanding and Including Students in Learning

Meta-Trend 1: Foster opportunities to intentionally integrate diversity, equity, and inclusion in our work

As colleges and universities increasingly attract students who have historically been under-served, -represented, and -resourced by higher education institutions, our structures, cultures, and practices will need to be developed or adapted to serve these students. Teaching and learning processes—and the assessment practices that accompany them—need to be both culturally-responsive and equity-centered. Among other things, this requires us to incorporate instructional practices and perspectives that consider the diverse array of students we serve; disaggregate data to call attention to the experiences and needs of specific populations; create educational interventions to address equity gaps, thereby ensuring all students have the opportunity to be successful; challenge, disrupt, or dismantle oppressive policies, practices, structures, or systems; and broaden access to higher education generally, as well as to campus-specific resources and programs. Attending to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion also requires us to be both thoughtful about comparison groups or benchmarks we use (e.g., making the “majority” group the default baseline or disproportionately focusing on “traditional” students’ expectations or experiences) and mindful about who is included—and who may be unintentionally *excluded*—in the creation, implementation, assessment, and improvement of learning opportunities.

Meta-Trend 2: Collaborate with students—as learning partners—to advance student learning and success

Students are often one the best sources of information concerning their learning needs, processes, and outcomes. Assessment should not be done “to” students; rather, assessment should be a

collaborative endeavor between the designers and implementers of learning experiences and the beneficiaries of such experiences. These include students and other stakeholders, such as employers, community members, and partners reliant on the demonstration of student learning in an applied or different context from which the learning was initially acquired. Although a focus on student learning *outcomes* is of paramount importance, it is also increasingly vital to assess and improve the *conditions, processes, and experiences* contributing to the learning. Thus, a holistic view of learning—informed by the student perspective—is imperative. Collaborating with students as learning partners could include involving students in the creation and review of learning outcomes statements and in the interpretation of assessment findings. Student partnership and collaboration aids in ensuring institutional systems are serving students as intended. Much as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning has advocated for student-centered approaches, so, too, should efforts to assess and improve student learning opportunities and experiences.

Meta-Trend 3: Support the holistic development of students, including their personal, academic, and professional needs and identities

Because students bring their “whole selves” to the learning environment, colleges, universities, and their partners are increasingly responsible for supporting students’ holistic development. This begins by establishing and fostering a sense of belonging, including connections to supportive communities focused on attending to personal, academic, and professional needs and identities. A focus on *personal development of students* means we take the time and care to truly understand who our students are, including their backgrounds, levels of preparedness for the collegiate experience, and their identity formation, including intersecting identities. It also means we promote physical and mental wellbeing and focus on mitigating the myriad challenges faced by our students, including issues around food, clothing, and housing insecurity; financial needs; transportation and child- or elder-care considerations; and outside commitments, such as work, family, or community obligations. *Academic development of students* ensures we are providing timely and appropriate in- and out-of-class supports, including advising, tutoring, mentoring, supplemental instruction, and other wraparound services. It also means we develop guided pathways to degree completion that intentionally scaffold learning and employ educationally-purposeful and -meaningful learning opportunities, such as High-Impact Practices. Finally, attending to the *professional development of students* ensures we help students plan and prepare for graduate and professional education, employment opportunities, and lifelong learning. We do so by continually fostering professional identity formation and aligning instructional and assessment methods to desired graduate outcomes—be they from disciplines, from the institution, from the profession, and/or from national or other frameworks.

Teaching and Learning: Implementing and Assessing Learning Experiences

Meta-Trend 4: Focus on quality and fidelity in designing and implementing learning experiences

Quality in collegiate learning experiences begins by developing goals for learning that incorporate evidence- and practice-informed approaches and interventions in designing instruction. In addition to faculty and other local subject-matter-experts, quality instructional design is often informed and influenced by disciplinary and professional associations and accreditors, program and institutional peer or aspirant benchmarks, and best or promising practices as reflected in a review of the higher education professional literature, including the

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and discipline-based educational research literature. A quality perspective also insists on high standards of student performance that are challenging-yet-achievable and appropriate for the instructional context. Fidelity strives to ensure what is conceptualized during instructional or programmatic development is actualized in its implementation; this is often referred to as implementation fidelity. Among its many uses, implementation fidelity is especially salient for learning experiences that involve multiple stakeholders sharing responsibility for learning goals. These include multi-section courses, High-Impact Practices, instruction facilitated by adjunct or contingent faculty colleagues, and learning taking place with instructional partners in applied, experiential, or community settings.

Meta-Trend 5: Engage stakeholders throughout the learning enterprise, including in curricular, cocurricular, community, and experiential settings

The dynamic nature of higher education recognizes that student learning and development transcends individual programmatic, disciplinary, or institutional structures. Indeed, the contexts in which learning and development takes place include institution-wide goals for learning; initial socialization and integration touchpoints; the general education program; academic programs and courses; High-Impact Practices and related interventions; support services and resources; and learning experiences complementing the curriculum: in cocurricular, community, and experiential settings. Given this extensive array of instructional venues, a host of stakeholders need to be engaged in assessing and improving learning. These include presidents, provosts, and institutional policymakers; deans and leaders of divisions or units; department chairs and program directors; faculty governance leaders; individual faculty and staff colleagues; institutional and program partners; students and student government leaders; alumni; and employers and community members. Certain stakeholders—institutional researchers, assessment professionals, registrars, student affairs educators, academic advisors, educational developers, field or internship preceptors, coaching and athletic staff—have access to unique or discrete data and information sources to enhance our collective understanding of the student experience. Employing intentional strategies for broad stakeholder engagement in assessment and improvement, on a periodic basis, provides robust opportunities to capture a more comprehensive view of the learning and development landscape being experienced by students.

Meta-Trend 6: Use inclusive sources and credible evidence in assessing learning

Assessment evidence is often reliant on relevant data, information, and artifacts employing a blend of direct, indirect, quantitative, and qualitative methods. Such credible evidence is often rooted in the norms, traditions, and customs of disciplines and professions. As a result, faculty and other subject-matter-experts are often in the best position to decide what counts as evidence, recognizing there is not—nor should there be—a “one size fits all” approach to assessing learning. Tools such as comprehensive learner records and ePortfolios—which have the potential to span multiple instances of learning—continue to be venues to encapsulate, demonstrate, and display evidence of authentic student learning outcomes, including both reflective and integrative aspects of learning. There continues to be considerable attention to broadening the nature of assessment evidence to intentionally include students’ backgrounds, perspectives, and lived experiences. Thus, designers and assessors of learning should consider their unique context to inform the appropriateness of instructional approaches and assessment methods, ensuring they reflect the needs, characteristics, and expectations of the students attracted to, and served by, the institution.

Professional Development: Creating Culture and Capacity

Meta-Trend 7: Build capacity for assessment through professional development, rewards, and recognition

Institutions committed to effective assessment practices strive to develop capacity for this work across campus and with external learning partners. Professional development opportunities can be offered through teaching and learning centers, campus and unit assessment committees, or other bodies. Capacity-building for assessment often engages assessment and institutional research professionals in providing internal consulting and assistance in developing interventions, using appropriate assessment methods or measures, and interpreting findings. Leveraging the capabilities of institutional systems and processes that support assessment—learning management systems, institutional accreditation and program review activities, and the work of campus-wide councils and committees—is another capacity-building strategy, as these provide recurring opportunities to build or strengthen a culture of evidence reliant on assessment. Furthermore, rewarding and recognizing the time, energy, and effort needed to effectively engage in assessment needs to be valued by administrators and colleagues. This can include annual merit increases; incentives that target strategic institutional priorities, including those associated with student success efforts; and promotion, tenure, and advancement opportunities. Finally, for assessment to sustain improvement and engage faculty and staff, reward and recognition systems for assessment must be embedded in the institution’s culture, reflecting a larger set of values derived from institutions’ teaching and learning missions.

Meta-Trend 8: Promote institutional cultures to sustain, scale, and improve learning interventions

Inherent in the assessment process is a commitment to continuous improvement, including sustaining those activities, interventions, and outcomes that are working well for students, programs, and the institution. Attention needs to be given to the sustainability of practices deemed effective, informed from assessment findings. We also need to scale worthwhile interventions working well in one part of the institution to the institution as a whole, and effective outcomes from select or isolated student populations to our entire student body. Doing so requires attention to the quality and fidelity of learning experiences, along with the goal of broadening access to valuable and significant learning experiences for *all* students. In addition to making ongoing improvements, we also need to continually identify ways to innovate what we are doing to provide opportunities for differentiating our instructional, programmatic, or institutional offerings. This will permit us to compete in an increasingly crowded higher education marketplace and respond to dynamic societal needs. Promoting cultures to sustain, scale, and improve learning requires us to have in place the strategies, policies, resources, infrastructure, leadership, and, importantly, collective commitment to make student learning an ongoing institutional priority.

Assessment and Improvement: Contributing to Higher Education’s Aims and Purposes

Meta-Trend 9: Appreciate the role assessment contributes to understanding and improving the higher education ecosystem

Assessment efforts continue to provide faculty, staff, administrators, and other stakeholders contributing to the higher education learning enterprise with plentiful opportunities to better understand strengths and challenges associated with learning facilitated across our courses, programs, cocurricular activities, entire campuses, and with partners in the community—no matter wherever or however “community” is defined. Intentional, pervasive, and systematic assessment processes compel us to establish goals for learning; align resources to support those goals; implement evidenced-informed interventions designed to foster student learning and development; periodically take stock of progress toward learning achievement by using a variety of assessment methods; make evaluative judgments based on assessment findings; and foster ongoing improvements and innovations within our respective contexts. Indeed, integrated approaches to assessment can both demonstrate and ensure institutional stakeholders take student learning and success seriously and that results of assessment—and the resulting improvements—are communicated transparently to internal and external audiences.

Meta-Trend 10: Recognize that assessment remains a work-in-progress, reliant on individual and collective efforts to achieve its potential

Against a compelling backdrop of continually evolving contextual factors across the higher education ecosystem, we have a responsibility to systematically assess and improve courses, programs, services, and experiences on college and university campuses and, indeed, in any setting where learning occurs. Despite numerous examples of assessment methods, practices, and outcomes demonstrating progress in the collegiate context, many experts agree assessment still has a long way to go to realize its full potential. One perennial trend is the need to recognize what and how we assess and, importantly, how assessment results can be best used to foster genuine improvements in student learning. Such actions are reliant on both individual and collective efforts through actions taking place wherever, whenever, or however learning occurs—in individual assignments, courses, programs, or units; across institutions, systems, disciplines, professions, or partnerships; and through macrolevel goals or initiatives more broadly in higher education. Isolated, fragmented, and disconnected efforts will likely not “move the needle” on assessment realizing its potential in higher education. As an ecosystem, we must encourage and engage in continued dissemination of practices, strategies, and findings so examples are increasingly visible and prevalent throughout higher education—representing and responding to the vast array of settings, contexts, and structures in which learning and development occurs. Additionally, it is imperative for assessment findings to be connected to subsequent improvement efforts. Thus, for assessment to realize its fullest potential, leadership at all levels should insist on using credible evidence to effectively inform subsequent interventions. Doing so intentionally and consistently will create contexts fostering improvements and innovations for the purpose of delivering on the promise of higher education.