





**New models for higher education:** Excerpt from an article by [Mark Clayton](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor —reproduced with permission

The future of higher education arrived without fanfare for Kimberly McClish during her freshman orientation last fall, when she was handed a laminated notebook divider.

On it were the "Principles of Undergraduate Learning" – a reminder of what her life would now be about: Communication skills, critical thinking, applying knowledge, intellectual depth, understanding society, and ethics.

Within a day or two, Ms. McClish forgot all about them. But later that semester, she found that her professors at the Indiana University-Purdue University campus in Indianapolis (IUPUI) insisting she compose assignments with those principles in mind – and explain how they were incorporated. The principles were in course syllabuses, too.

A simple tool, the statements are part of a five-year-old IUPUI effort to bring more coherence and focus to educating 19,000 undergraduates spread across 180 degree programs. The principles will also be the basis for assessing students to ensure they graduate with core abilities.

The experiment is just one small part of a growing effort to rethink and retool American higher education for the 21st century.

By most measures, higher education in the United States is a huge success story. Multitiered, diverse, with wide access and world-class research faculty and labs, US colleges are wildly popular with foreign and domestic students. Many of the 4,000-plus higher-education institutions are enjoying unprecedented enrollment.

Yet behind that rosy glow, the basic structure is increasingly ineffectual in its fundamental purpose of undergraduate education, some say. Low college-completion rates, soaring tuitions, and employer complaints that graduates can't write or analyze well are spurring speculation that higher education must change its approach. The student body, they say, has far different needs from those of the highly homogeneous, elite group of the 1960s.

Indeed, a study released yesterday by the Association of American Colleges and Universities argues that higher education runs a grave risk if it won't adapt.

"Even today, too many students still receive what Robert P. Moses calls a 'ghetto education,'" says the report, entitled "Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College." "If colleges hold low expectations for many of their students and shunt them into narrow or shallow tracks, they could be re-creating at the collegiate level the severe, discriminatory problems of the twentieth-century high school experiment."

A "practical liberal education" is not a "utopian dream" for institutions of higher learning, the report argues. Instead of graduating students with mediocre analytical and communications skills, colleges need to insist on crafting students who may become:

"Empowered learners" with strong oral, written, and quantitative skills they can use to evaluate a flood of information.

"Informed learners" who understand global and cross-cultural relationships, know a second language, and value the history underlying US democracy.

"Responsible learners" who understand the ethical consequences of actions and are active participants in democracy.

It could appear to be so much academic rumbling. But some observers see a new intensity behind the initiatives.

"Academics are forever writing about the future of higher education," says Alan Guskin, director of the Project for the Future of Higher Education at Antioch University in Seattle. "But this time is different from those. What we're seeing now is a sustained level of concern about the way in which the university is structured and funded that could lead to real change."

But access has been followed by pressures and expectations that appear set to reshape the role and cost of higher education.

Paramount is the expectation now that college is necessary to achieve a middle-class lifestyle. And unlike earlier eras, schools are being flooded with students of widely varying skills and income levels who expect a degree.

About 75 percent of high school graduates today go on to college, a far higher proportion than two decades ago. About 28 percent of college students are minorities. Women outnumber men on many campuses.

At the same time, preparation lags. Only 47 percent of high school graduates complete college-prep courses. Nearly 40 percent of students in four-year colleges take remedial courses – and these students have lower prospects for graduating.

Attendance patterns have changed, too. About 73 percent of undergraduates are nontraditional students, and 28 percent attend part time. By 2015, up to 2 million more young adults will seek to go to college, many from low-income families.

Higher education isn't responding nearly fast enough to such profound changes, critics say. Yes, a few freshman-year programs have improved learning and retention. Still, most freshmen take large introductory courses. Professors lecture. Students take notes and tests.

As the economy sours and tuitions soar, cost and quality are coming under more intense scrutiny. Parents, employers, and public officials want to know what students are actually learning for all that time and taxpayer money.

It's a question colleges have avoided.



"Every time we ask what they're learning, every time university administrators just say 'trust us,' " says Frank Newman, director of the Futures Project at Brown University in Providence, R.I. "Some states are discussing how to create incentives to improve retention and graduate rates. Others (Texas, Florida, Tennessee, Missouri, South Dakota, Arkansas, Wisconsin, and Georgia) have laws requiring testing of undergraduates on general education and other fields of study.

"Our retention rate was terrible before, students just weren't being successful," says Scott Evenbeck, dean of University College at IUPUI. "We needed to come together as a campus and help students make the transition to university life."

The current US higher-education system is falling woefully short of its abilities and failing students in the process, says Richard Hersh, the new president of Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.

"Our universities are world-renowned for their research," he says. "We've always assumed those reputations were equally true of the undergraduate programs – and now we're finding out that they're not."

Less than 48 percent of students who start college graduate from a four-year program. "If we're so good, why do we have such weak retention?" Hersh asks.

To begin to fix the problem, he says, colleges must set explicit goals for student learning so academic departments and general-education courses can align with them.

The report is intended as a road map for policymakers to create a "learner-centered" approach in college – focusing on what and how students learn, not just on what teachers wish to teach. To create engaged "intentional learners," it advises:

Having faculty members across disciplines and departments assume collective responsibility for the curriculum, to ensure that every student has an enriching liberal education.

Regularly assessing student progress in achieving goals.

Creating faculty reward systems that value learning-centered education.

Placing the institution's vision of a liberal education at the center of strategic planning and resource allocation.

We do not need more vocational-type teaching in college, Dr. Hersh says.

"The much more important and more powerful form of education for the 21st century is about **getting** people to deal with masses of information, make sense of it, and to be able to think, write, articulate, and have a moral compass – so we're not left just waiting for the next Enron moment."

### Assessment Progress Checklist

The Annual Report of the Assessment of Student Learning required of all GSU departments follows these steps:

- Submitted Assessment Plan including:
  - Program objectives expressed as learning outcomes,
  - Plan for determining whether the objectives have been met, and
  - Plan to interpret results and make changes based on the assessment results.
  - For programs with undergraduate programs, plan to assess GSU learning outcomes for communication (written and oral), collaboration, critical thinking, contemporary issues, quantitative skills, and technology skills. (completed summer, 2004)
- Began collecting data on student learning in fall 2004.
- Complete first-year data collection in spring 2005.
- Analyze results and prepare report as part of departmental annual report to Provost in summer, 2005.
- Revise assessment plans if needed in summer, 2005.
- Begin second round of data collection in fall, 2005.



*Is this a test or are we doing assessment?*

*Some say we do assessment the way we floss. As the time for the visit (dentist or accreditation team) approaches, we exhibit a burst of renewed activity. But the goal is to have flossing (and assessing) become part of our routine practice.*



## Frequently Asked Questions About Assessing Student Learning

### Why are we doing Learning Outcomes Assessment?

We have always assessed student learning outcomes—examinations, course projects, papers, internships, etc. The thing that is different about this process is that we are looking at the evidence of whether our students are learning what want them to as an element of program assessment and revision.

### What should we be assessing?

We should be assessing what **we** as faculty have proclaimed as the major goals of our instructional programs, namely the knowledge, skills and values that students should master within our programs. These major outcomes would be aligned with course syllabus objectives.

**What kind of statistics would be acceptable in the annual report?** Because the question we are answering is the extent to which our students have demonstrated that they know and can do the outcomes we have specified, most results will be in the form of tabulating the number and percentages of students (e.g., 45 students equaling 84% met outcome # 4). In cases in which an assessment results in a range of scores (e.g., performance on an examination) is it will be useful to report the mean score for the group, as well as how many met the standard.

### Why can't we just report on whether or not students have passed our courses?

Because our courses typically have multiple learning outcomes and objectives, we would lose the ability to assess whether our student have demonstrated mastery of a particular element of content or skill by just examining course grades. A major purpose of the assessment is to determine how we might improve our instructional programs, and so, we try to tailor the assessment process to the parts of courses the align with program outcomes, e.g., knowledge of elements of the content, ability to write clearly, ability to document and justify a conclusion, etc.

**Will assessment results be reported as aggregates only or by individual instructor?** Results from assessment plans should show only program-wide results and **never identify any individual faculty or students**. It is essential to protect the identity of faculty and students participating in the assessment process. The process is to look as programs, not individuals.

### What is the timetable for assessment? When should the data be collected? Analyzed?

Each program's assessment report is due at the end of each academic year as part of the annual report to the Dean. Data should be collected during the year at the points when students are assessed within courses or, in the case of an external assessment (one not tied to a course), annually in time to include the interpretation of the results in the annual report.

**For more FAQs about assessing student learning, go to:** <http://education.gsu.edu/ctl/outcomes/FAQs.htm>

## General Education Assessment at GSU

Perhaps you have noticed the mouse pads—the attractive white ones with blue lettering and the GSU emblem. This fall every freshman and all new faculty received a mouse pad with the GSU Learning Outcomes. The six outcomes, adopted by the University Senate last February, represent what every undergraduate student should be able to do—communicate, collaborate, think critically, analyze contemporary issues, and use quantitative skills and technology.

Although these outcomes are for every undergraduate student, the ways in which students will demonstrate the skills will vary across majors. Consider, for example the differences between effective communication skills in writing for a finance major, compared to a philosophy major or a music major.

Each of the six GSU outcomes is to be demonstrated and assessed as part of each departmental assessment plan. It is up to the departmental faculty to decide on the nature of the skill within their major and how it might be assessed in upper division courses.

The six outcomes are also being assessed in the GSU core for students in lower division courses. At the lower division level, the skills to be demonstrated will be much more uniform than in the majors and will provide departments with information about the level of proficiency they can expect of students beginning their major area of study.

The assessment process began during the 2004 summer term as a team of faculty members for each outcome completed pilot assessments. The integration of these outcomes with the traditional course content offers a new perspective on the old question: "Why should I take this class". For example, students will polish their writing skills while taking courses in political science and history; learn to use technology for word processing, researching the internet, and turning in work electronically in a composition course; and demonstrate critical thinking through laboratory courses in science.

This assessment of GSU outcomes in core courses continues with the intent of providing feedback that will allow core curriculum instructors to continually improve general education outcomes for students entering upper division courses.