

Title: *Significantly better: the benefits for an academic institution focused on student learning outcomes*

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Purposes

To describe how a college or university can develop the organizational capacity to focus on student learning outcomes. To show how the consistent application of this capacity would provide not only a response to external expectations but also unexpected benefits that, when taken together, would create a significantly better academic institution.

Design / methodology / approach

Six years of research and development, primarily as part of an expanding collaborative endeavor between participating colleges/universities and an independent academic R&D firm, has provided a laboratory for iteratively creating and testing new academic processes and supporting technologies.

Findings

Five essential elements of outcomes assessment, when incorporated into a system-supported academic process, can enable an institution to generate data on actual student learning directly out of its regular program wherever and whenever it chooses to do so, with seven significant benefits.

Originality / Value

The organizational capacity described in this article directly overcomes organizational invisibility of student achievement within its educational program -- a century-old deficiency within higher education.

Keywords

Higher education. Accountability. Outcomes. Assessment. Rubrics. Learning. Innovation. Technology.

Paper Type Conceptual paper

Introduction

A college or university that has the organizational capacity to focus on student learning outcomes can become significantly better as an academic institution. That is a primary claim of this special issue of *On the Horizon*. For most academics, this is an astonishing claim, since there is little or nothing in their professional experience to suggest that this could be true. Given the experience that most colleges and universities have had with outcomes assessment over the last five to fifteen years and the fact that the expectation for data on actual outcomes originated outside the academy, it is difficult for academics to believe that this focus can have any worthwhile internal or academic value. This essay will demonstrate, nevertheless, *how* an academic institution can have unexpected benefits by focusing on student learning outcomes. To restate the primary claim: an academic institution with the organizational capacity for a sustained focus on student learning outcomes can become significantly better than what it would otherwise be. A university can be a better university. A liberal arts college can be a better liberal arts college. A community college can be a better community college. A professional school can be a better professional school.

Each of these institutions can be better because each can be distinctive, with a rich set of student learning outcomes (both expected and actual) that, as a whole, are characteristic of that particular institution. They can be better because the faculty, working together, set academic and professional standards for students and reinforce them across-the-curriculum. They can be better because the curriculum, and within each course, the assigned activities, can be more creative and dynamic. They can be better because it is possible for appropriate persons to know where any student (or any set of students) stands relative to any set of expected learning outcomes. They can be better because academic support services are actively engaged in fostering the personal, professional and intellectual development of individual students. They can be better because each student can graduate not as a commodity but as an individual with a unique and visible pattern of achievement and readiness to contribute in a specific way to organizations and society. Finally they can be better because they can be "accountable" and provide evidence of educational results to external constituencies simply by attending to and doing their educational work well.

However, in order to gain these academic benefits, a certain qualitative threshold of organizational attention to student learning will need to be attained, and most of what has been tried and accomplished during the last two decades under the name of outcomes assessment falls well short of that threshold. Therefore, the collective experience of the last two decades, however real, is not relevant to the claim being made. Selecting and combining the best of two decades of academic experimentation now presents a new integrated academic practice that, for the first time, permits a college or university to reach and surpass this threshold.

A NEW "WHAT"

The possibility described here -- *an academic institution that as an institution is focused on student learning outcomes* -- is unexpected. Typically that phrase is used rhetorically to indicate an organization that has learned to talk about outcomes and, in some weak way, includes programs and courses that separately attempt to pay attention to these. Instead, here, the meaning of this phrase is quite specific, with each of its component parts having substantive meaning.

Student learning outcomes, following Peter Ewell's definition, "are properly defined in terms of the particular levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences."¹ This means, here, that all aggregated data are generated from the individual student up.

Focused has the specific meaning of sustained visibility. Like objects viewed through a camera with a variable focus lens, so a focus on student learning outcomes means that well-identified expected and actual student learning outcomes are sustainably visible.

...as an institution means that this information is actually and sustainably visible at the level of academic programs and institutions. This is in direct contrast to most colleges and universities, whose systems and academic processes are focused on courses and credit hours, plus course grades, all of which, when aggregated, produce statistics on enrollment, retention, course sizes, and GPAs. Given this conventional lens, expected and actual educational outcomes are entirely out of focus and are organizationally invisible. Instead, here, expected and actual student learning outcomes are part of the currency by which the institution measures student progress.

The new "what" described here, then, is an institution that has internal transparency (to appropriate persons) both for what students are expected to demonstrate and how well students are actually achieving this.

A NEW "WHY"

Up to now the primary reason for an institution to attend to student learning outcomes has been increased external expectations from accreditors. Indeed, without this external pressure, it is doubtful that the last twenty years of experimentation in outcomes assessment would have occurred. Yes, there have also been initiatives internal to the academy, such as learning-centered courses, active learning, and other interests stemming from centers for teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the primary impetus for most institutions to attend to

student learning outcomes has usually been an impending accreditation self-study. All of this remains important, and we will address it again later. However, that is not the reason presented here, which is to create an academic institution that, by academic criteria, is significantly better.

A NEW "HOW"

For understandable reasons, the typical approach within academic institutions for choosing *how* to assess student learning has been to accept a variety of different approaches, with different departments choosing whatever they wish, from what they consider most familiar or comfortable. By virtue of being an independent academic research and development firm, we were able to implement what is essentially the opposite approach. We concentrated all of our efforts and took the time needed to create a new way to do this. Beginning with a new "what" and a new "why" in mind (see above), we critically reviewed all of the approaches to outcomes assessment, and rejected all but the few that were best suited and most essential for creating a simple and fundamental organizational solution. These are the five best elements we identified:

1. A focus on work and activities that students are already doing as a regular part of their courses and co-curricular activities.

This places the emphasis on the integral work of the college, where the educational richness resides and where most would wish student attention to be directed. This is sometimes called *embedded assessment*, since the student work to be assessed is already "embedded" in the college's curriculum and ongoing activities. This is in direct contrast to extra "assessments" for which additional time needs to be found, either within courses, or in a separate Assessment Day, or in time that students could instead be using to concentrate on their coursework.

2. A careful analytical distinction between student work/activity and the outcome(s) for which that work/activity can stand as evidence.

This distinction is crucial for clarity, consistency and versatility. One activity (say, preparing a business plan in a course) may indeed be evidence for one outcome (preparing a business plan as an expected student outcome in a program), but more often a single activity (like writing a paper) can be evaluated simultaneously as evidence for 1) a student's comprehension of the topic, 2) a student's critical thinking, and 3) a student's ability to write. Alternatively multiple activities within a course can be evidence for one large across-the-length-of-a-course outcome. Given this distinction, it becomes possible to independently aggregate results on different outcomes (comprehension / thinking / writing) throughout the institution, separate from the various activities with which each is associated.² This is in direct contrast to evaluating the activities themselves, which are different enough to be not easily comparable.

3. The critical evaluation of student work/activity using explicit criteria of quality.

While many approaches to outcomes eschew the critical judgments of faculty, we have chosen to embrace them and to help make them better. A decade or more of assessment practice has shown that the best way to express those judgments is through the use of well-defined qualitative criteria, i.e., rubrics, in which the evaluator selects from a spectrum of defined levels of quality the one that most clearly characterizes the evidence. These are best done per outcome so that, to continue the example above, there would be a defined spectrum for assessing comprehension, another for critical thinking, and yet another for writing. This approach is a careful middle ground, between assessment approaches that disregard faculty judgment, on the one hand, and the customary approach to "grading" (in which an evaluator uses implicit criteria to assign earned points) on the other.

4. Collaborative decision-making for defining the expected outcomes and the related criteria of quality to be drawn upon in evaluations across academic programs and across institutions.

Faculty committees (whether within or across departments) work together to determine both the expected outcomes for an academic program and for the institution as a whole. They also cooperate on defining the rubrics to be used in evaluating those outcomes. This contrasts with a century or more of academic practice that has entirely delegated the criteria for evaluation of student work to each individual instructor, so that students view their task to be figuring out the grading system for each separate course.

5. The recognition that student learning outcomes are as much attributes of individual students as they are organizational attributes.

This key distinction is often overlooked. Indeed, it is common to consider outcomes assessment to be about a catalog course offered multiple times, in which students come and go and anonymously contribute outcomes data. Equally important, though, is the view in which named students progressively develop knowledge and skills, as the courses come and go. Both of these perspectives provide valuable information about outcomes.

These, we determined, were the best elements that other creative academics had seen were valuable for attending to student learning outcomes. Indeed, each of these was already in use in selected colleges or universities, and the usage of some -- the creation of rubrics (# 3) and shared defined outcomes (#4) - were becoming more widespread. However, we also determined that, as separate features, their value and their impact was limited. They were like

separate components of a not-yet-integrated solution. So we added a sixth essential element:

6. An electronic system or structure that knits these elements together as steps in a single and simple process, with information on all of the necessary new elements of information flowing through the process.

This structure focuses on expected and actual outcomes with the same systematic precision that the enrollment-based systems keep track of student enrollment (expected completion of courses) and course grades (actual completion of courses). An instructor's specific judgments about student outcomes and rubric scores are reported directly to a shared database in ways that previously did not exist. Thus the structure pulls the five other essential elements together, balances them, and makes each easier to accomplish. What unites them is a straightforward process that the structure underwrites:

- 1. Faculty collectively define intended student learning outcome and the criteria for their evaluation.*
- 2. Faculty either collectively or individually decide in which courses and in which activities students will have an opportunity to demonstrate these outcomes.*
- 3. Faculty oversee learning and evaluate individual student activities using these definitions and standards.*
- 4. Everyone reviews results and makes changes, if called for.³*

It is the sixth element -- a learning outcomes information structure -- that makes this process feasible. In fact, the academic process is dependent on the structure to work well, delivering everyone Web-based access from his or her desktop/laptop and permitting everyone to play his or her authorized role(s). This provides a college or university with a new capacity to distribute information on expected outcomes across the institution and to generate data on actual student learning wherever and whenever it chooses to use this approach -- capacities that are still unimagined by most colleges and universities. The existence of this new underlying structure means that this process can be used selectively, incrementally, and voluntarily. Yet wherever this process is used, the threshold of visible outcomes is crossed. The more consistently this process is applied, the more academic benefits begin to accrue.

Benefits to the institution

Stated once again, an academic institution that focuses on student learning outcomes in the way described can gain significant academic benefits. Given

increasingly consistent use of this approach across the institution, these are the benefits.

1. *Each institution can be clearly distinctive, with a rich set of expected student learning outcomes (both expected and actual) that, as a whole, are characteristic of that particular institution.*

There is indeed value in a college or university being distinctive, both because it differentiates it from other institutions and, more importantly because it means that who teach and work there (and who in the past taught and worked there), and the values they hold (and held), and how they conduct (and conducted) themselves, actually makes a difference in the character of the education it offers. When this is accomplished (and it is a genuine accomplishment), it is despite the various forces that diminish and reduce what "counts" in education and that tend to make institutions look and even become similar.

Conventionally, outcomes assessment has been one of these reductive forces. However, an academic institution that comes to consistently apply the process described above is in a different position. As time allows, faculty committees define expected student learning outcomes. Some of these are for academic programs. Some of these are for academic achievements across the institution as a whole. Some of these are similar to what a student might be expected to demonstrate in any college or university. Others are particular emphases of a specific institution or of a specific type of institution. Some are required; some are expected; some are stretch goals for the best students. Some are derived directly from the mission of the institution. Others appear because of the specific strengths of individual faculty. An analogous set are defined by those who work in Student Services, specifying the student learning outcomes that are characteristically demonstrated outside of courses: leadership, collaboration, organizational skills. As they are defined, these expected outcomes are entered into a virtual library and constitute the set of items to which this particular institution pays attention in its everyday student assignments and activities. These outcomes constitute the institutional mission and the programmatic goals, elaborated and applied throughout the curriculum, and clearly visible as electronically published documents. This set can be dynamic, changing over time, as faculty change, as technology changes, as the social and cultural challenges that students will face in society change. Moreover (see #6 below), this richness can be reflected in aggregated data on actual student achievement and a graduate's individual summary of demonstrated achievements.

2. *The faculty can set academic and professional standards for students and reinforce them across-the-curriculum.*

Imagine the difference this would make -- and it must be imagined, for present systems in higher education do nothing to assist this. In this new approach, faculty are assisted in playing two key roles. The first role is standards-setting.

The same faculty committees that define an expected student learning outcome can also define the criteria to be used whenever a learning outcome is drawn upon as a way to evaluate a student activity. They can also define the level within the rubric that needs to be attained by a student in order to successfully demonstrate that outcome. The second role is choosing to link a student activity to an expected outcome (and the rubric comes with it). Given this, the structure makes it easy to construct customized scorecards whereby faculty evaluations of student work create precise and granular electronic data -- this student, this setting, this time/date, this activity, this outcome, this rubric, this rubric score. The structure then can aggregate the results -- i.e., how student scores are distributed across the rubric -- in a wealth of ways: by course offering, by catalog course, by program, by area of achievement across courses. The effect is to reveal patterns of student achievement that, in academic institution, have never before been visible. The other effect is that students can be held to the same (or an increasingly higher) standard each time they are evaluated. Faculty, working together, thus have the means, as often as they choose to use it, to set and reinforce standards across-the-curriculum.

3. The curriculum, and within it, the assigned activities in courses, can be more creatively changed and dynamic.

The same distinction between activities and outcomes that permits consistency in outcomes assessment despite variety of activities also has the effect of freeing up changes in student activities while maintaining the expected outcomes. This is an unexpected bonus, since there are academic advantages in having the content of the courses being changeable. The art of teaching and of engaging students suggests that there is pedagogical value in connecting student activities to events outside the course: reported news, new information from conferences or recently published materials. The coursework exists in relation to an external context that presents new and at times unexpected opportunities for engagement.

Nevertheless there are educational forces that discourage change. The clear risk in higher education is to embed a sequence of expected outcomes in curricular structures and course syllabi (and related articulation agreements) that subsequently hinder creative change. Once set up as a necessary part of larger agreements, courses can become close to frozen. (This is a real risk also in many approaches to outcomes assessment.)

4. It is possible for appropriate persons to know where any student (or any set of students) stands relative to any set of expected learning outcomes.

This has been beyond the imagination for academic institutions, but once they become institutionally focused on outcomes, this too becomes possible. First it can create out of all of the granular data the full set of all of the achievements for any given student. That is, there is a continuously created record of a student's

achieved-outcomes-to-date. Then, courses and programs and institutions can identify the set of achieved outcomes that they are expecting at the conclusion of that course or that academic program or that institution (including the rubric score needed for any outcome).⁴ With these two sets of data, it is possible to let computers do what they do well -- to compare any student's achievement record to-date with any set of expectations and to see the difference -- "for this set of 15 outcomes, you have successfully shown 12 of these and have 3 to go." Higher education has never had this ability to zero in on the difference between expected and actual student achievements like this.

The fact that outcomes data is available for any given student provides the basis for having the same kind of comparative information for any given set of students. At the end of an academic year, one could take that year's graduates as the set of students and generate a report that shows in aggregate numbers precisely where that set of students stands relative to any defined set of expected outcomes set by the college or university. More importantly one could continuously see these data, in real time, for the set of students that are expected to graduate, and know precisely the areas where work still needs to be accomplished.

5. Academic support services are actively engaged in fostering the personal, professional and intellectual development of individual students. Colleges and universities have typically considered outcomes data to be for external purposes and have overlooked the value of their use internally. The system makes it easy for individual instructors to name the date on which they want their students to start working on an activity to be assessed. If that were consistently done, the librarians could know that on a given date 250 students are going to begin working on research papers, and *on that very date* an e-mail describing the ways they can help could be sent to those 250 students. Actual scores could also trigger the engagement of support services; for instance, students earning low scores on writing could receive an e-mail from the Writing Center or a student scoring particularly high on a given outcome could receive an invitation to participate in an interest club in that area. These are simply examples of ways that academic support services could actively attend to expected and actual student outcomes in a way that both best utilizes their services and responds to the exact learning situation at hand. Likewise, a student's advisor, with access to that student's full achievement record to-date, can look for both overall patterns of success/nonsuccess and clues to unexpected student abilities that would be the basis of encouraging and challenging the student.

6. Each student can graduate not as a commodity but as an individual with a unique and visible pattern of achievement and readiness to contribute in a specific way to organizations and society. I am deeply aware that, on the day this year that my daughter graduated, the college-as-an-institution knew less about her demonstrated abilities and inferred potential than on the day it had admitted her four years earlier. Individual faculty had been momentarily aware of

some of her capabilities, but on graduation day, the college only knew that she (like every other graduate that day) had successfully completed the degree requirements in her major. The alternative described here would permit the college not only to notice the growing demonstrated achievements as they happened but to provide each graduate with a summary of what he or she had demonstrated, strengths first, and from which it would be relatively easy to infer this student's readiness for the next step, whatever the student happens to choose. Once students understand that this will happen, they will begin to take an interest in what that achievement record will show, especially in the visibility of strengths that the college has not yet noticed. Eventually, for academic institutions that are open to this, the college/university and the student could co-create the content of their education.

These are the six academic benefits that result from the approach to outcomes defined above. In addition, there is a seventh benefit, namely:

7. The institution can be "accountable" and provide evidence of educational results to external constituencies simply by attending to its educational endeavor.

At the beginning of this article, we acknowledged that institutional attention to student learning outcomes has been primarily driven by external pressure from accreditation commissions. These external pressures are now more apparent than ever. Note the similarity between the academic process described above and this one, which is in many ways the template for accreditors:

Institutions and programs are responsible for establishing clear statements of student learning outcomes and for collecting, interpreting, and using evidence of student achievement. Institutions and programs have their own responsibilities for developing and using evidence of student learning outcomes. Specifically, institutions and programs should:

** Determine and publicly commit to the particular learning outcomes associated with various courses of study.*

** Determine and communicate clearly to constituents:*

** what counts as evidence that these outcomes have been achieved and*

** what level of attainment of these outcomes is required to assure the quality of institutional or program offerings.*

** Develop recognizable processes for regularly collecting and interpreting evidence of student learning outcomes*

** Use the results of this process to identify strengths and weaknesses or gaps between expected and actual performance and to identify and overcome barriers to learning.⁵*

For twenty years, "outcomes assessment" has required added activities -- assessment tests, special surveys, *ad hoc* research projects -- all of which provide narrow and momentary glances at outcomes while continuing to accept that the underlying institutional structures and practices are inattentive to outcomes. However, a college or university that applies the capability, as an institution, to focus on student learning outcomes already generates the data that is being requested. By deciding in what aggregated form these data should be publicly available and by documenting the decisions that it has made for improvement, an institution can easily meet and exceed these external expectations that today seem so difficult.

This approach also provides an academic response to the recent Commission on the Future of Higher Education ("the Spellings Commission") that called for transparent data that provides prospective students and their families with enough information on costs and educational results to enable them to choose the right college. If that is indeed the purpose for the requested information -- and it is the Commission's stated purpose for this information⁶ -- then information could be easily provided to prospective students. If the purpose of comparable information is to assist prospective students find the appropriate college -- if, that is, it is a question of **fit** -- then this is the type of information that is needed, not rankings or test score averages of incoming students:

- a) what this institution is about (its mission),
- b) what the institution expects all of its graduates to have demonstrated (the translation of its mission into institution-level expected student learning outcomes),
- c) what any specific academic program within that institution expects its graduates to have demonstrated (program-level expected student learning outcomes),
- d) what standards students are held to when evaluating whether (and to what extent) they have in fact achieved those learning outcomes, and finally
- e) aggregated data that shows where each graduating class stands relative both to the institutional expected outcomes and those for its programs.

But how can this information be comparable, if there are not uniform and imposed expectations? In four ways:

- 1) comparing their distinctive educational objectives, right down to expected student learning outcomes -- *are these the goals that you, as a student aspire to demonstrate? What is its educational mission? To what extent does the institution actually translate that mission into its educational program?*

2) comparing their standards and criteria for evaluation. *How well can it clearly state the standards that students are held to? Given your own sense of your ability, are these the standards you want to be held to?*

3) comparing the educational results. *Is the institution able to attend to student learning in a way that assists students to find their best educational content? To what extent are students already succeeding at these expected outcomes and standards?*

4) comparing the institution's overall capability to attend to student learning in these ways.

Separately, each of these seven would be a significant academic benefit, both to the institution and to students. The most value, though, would come from the network effect, i.e., the combination of these working together. When, in the future, we compare the quality of an academic institution that has these characteristics with what it was in 2007, we will be astonished at what we once took for granted.

The larger challenge

The case presented here is essentially an hypothesis, a specific version of ***if x, then y*** -- namely, if an institution focuses on student learning outcomes in the manner described, then it will become better academically in the ways described. To my knowledge, the explicit case for this hypothesis has never before been made. It is our intention is to follow this up by assisting actual colleges and universities to become living examples of significantly better academic institutions.

It should be noted, though, that there are three clear theoretical alternatives to this hypothesis. One of these -- the alternative ***if x, then non-y*** -- would indicate that it is possible for an institution to focus on student learning outcomes in the manner described and still not become significantly better. Perhaps this is so. There is nothing automatic about the life of institutions, especially academic institutions. Those who teach and work in a college or university that has developed the collective capabilities to work with outcomes and rubrics may simply overlook the possibilities that would then exist. However it is not likely.

A second alternative, perhaps understood logically as ***if non-x, then y***, suggests that the same set of academic benefits described here can be achieved by other approaches. If so, let those who believe this demonstrate this, first in a reasoned analysis and then in actual examples. Perhaps closest to this would be the systematic use of electronic portfolios throughout an institution, but this approach has three limitations. First, portfolios limit the student activities that are available to be assessed to those that can be expressed as artifacts (a small percentage of the whole). Secondly, they typically limit the ways in which data

on outcomes can be institutionally aggregated across portfolios. Thirdly, they place a burden on students to maintain these.

Also possible, not so much as an alternative but as a stronger version of ***if x, then y*** -- is ***if non-x, then non-y*** -- that is, if an institution does not focus on student learning outcomes in the manner described, then it will be incapable of achieving the academic benefits described. This would be a direct contradiction to the previous alternative, with which it is intimately related, for this third alternative could be easily disproved by the demonstrated success of any other approach. Let the challenge to others be very clear: show another way for an institution to have the academic benefits described above without using the integration of the six elements that have been described here.

Conclusion

The question before academic leaders has been: *how* can an academic institution, as an institution, actually focus on student learning? Our research and development has shown that the way described could accomplish this. The necessary technology to assist this already exists and will continue to develop in collaboration with the institutions that are heading in this direction. The small changes in academic practice that will make this possible can be, and at a few institutions are already being introduced and beginning to have an effect. (See the articles in this issue from faculty at Concordia University and at Kirkwood Community College.)

The choice for a college or university, then, is how to regard this new opportunity. There is a striking similarity between that institutional choice and the choice that a student has when approaching a course or other opportunity for learning. In their separate articles for this issue, Lynn Priddy and John Tagg provide the means to extend this analogy. Tagg recounts a striking research study about student learning. The researcher Evelyn Ng was able to classify students in a course by how they viewed their own goal in a BASIC programming course -- 1) meeting the stated requirements of the tasks at hand, 2) looking for the learning goals behind the various task, or 3) aiming for personal goals larger than the class itself. Comparing actual results at the end of the course showed that "the best predictor of how well the students learned the BASIC programming language in this study was not previous computer experience or ability, but the level of goal they adopted."⁷

Priddy, summarizing the Higher Learning Commission's collective experience with academic institutions approaching accreditation, highlights the difference between those that view the goal as "compliance to an assessment mandate" and those that view the goal as "commitment to student learning and to assessing so as to improve that learning."⁸ My own observation of a variety of academic institutions addressing outcomes assessment corroborates this. Many colleges and universities are seeking only to literally and minimally comply with

external expectations. Asked to produce data on student learning, they collect and present "data" of selected assessments applied to a sample of student work in disparate departments.⁹ Then there are colleges and universities that appear to understand the larger vision of what is being asked and that view each of the stated expectations as aspects that add up to developing the institution's capability to attend to student learning. There is also a small but increasing number of colleges and universities that aspire to develop long-term approaches that year-in and year-out begin to refocus the institution and its activities on student learning. These three institutional differences appear to be directly parallel to the three student differences noted by Ng. Perhaps an analogous empirical research study could test the hypothesis that the best predictor of how well an institution learns to focus on student learning would not be previous experience with assessment or even collective ability but the level of goal it collectively adopts.

When public judgments are made in, say, the year 2020, there will be institutions that are clearly perceived to be significantly better -- both better than they used to be and now better than other institutions. Of course, it will take time for an institution to achieve this. It could take ten years, perhaps more. Consider, though, that each of these benefits as well as an overall effect could come from the introduction and incrementally greater use of the one academic practice described above. Compare this possibility either to the mere extension of the current educational situation into the future or the begrudging adaptation to changes driven by external factors. These two choices, after all, are what nearly everyone is still expecting-- that higher education will be continue to be what it is now is or that it will become worse than it presently is. Higher education, however, can be significantly better.

¹ Peter Ewell, *Student Learning Outcomes and Accreditation: A Point of Departure*. Washington, D.C.: Commission on Higher Education Accreditation, pp. 5-6.

² Defined outcomes are increasingly the language that is used to describe expected educational results. See, for example, the way in which they infuse the Association of American Colleges & Universities' recently published report *College Learning for the New Global Century*.

(http://www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/documents/GlobalCentury_final.pdf). What we are discussing here, though, is the capability for an institution to have data on actual, not just expected, student learning outcomes.

³ The same process is applicable, with different language, in Student Affairs.

⁴ Courses and programs can also identify the set of already-achieved outcomes that they are expecting prior to the beginning of that course or that academic program (including the rubric score needed for any outcome).

⁵ Council of Higher Education Accreditation, *Statement of Mutual Responsibilities for Student Learning Outcomes: Accreditation, Institutions and Programs* (2003), p. 2-3.

⁶ *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. A Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. Pre-Publication Copy September 2006, p. 20.

⁷ See John Tagg in this issue, p. x.

⁸ See Lynn Priddy in this issue, p. x.

⁹ In these situations I have heard faculty complain that, in any sense other than external compliance, this is meaningless work, and they are right.