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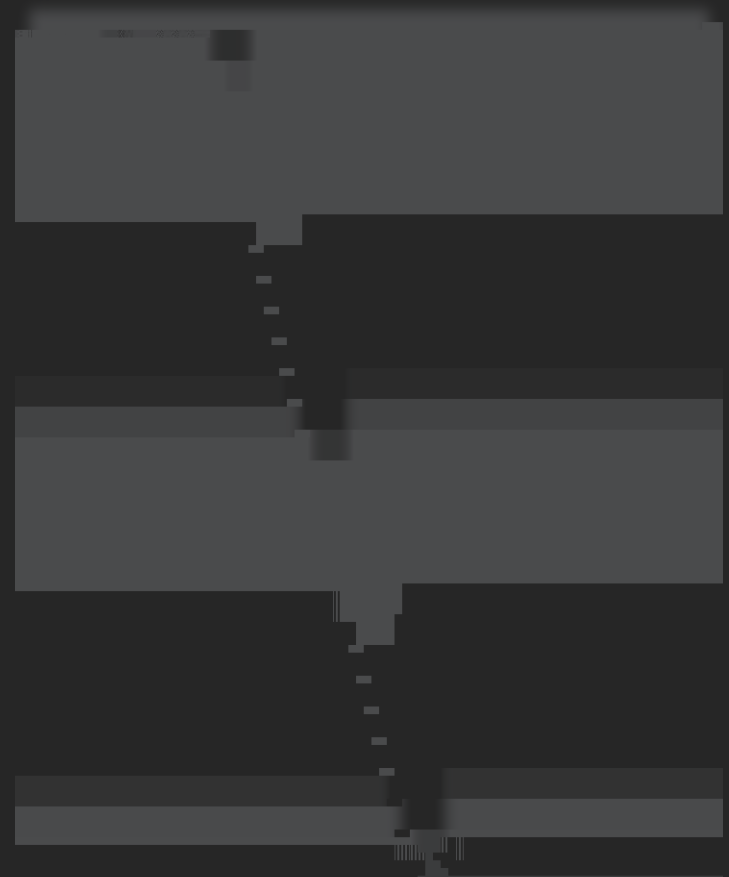
The idea for this article originated in what sounded like a simple request from change editor, Peg Miller. She asked for some examples of the ways in which the results of student learning outcomes assessments—particularly those derived from standardized tests—had been used to stimulate improvements in teaching, learning and student services such as advising. The request sounded reasonable—until we began searching for examples.

We scoured current literature, consulted experienced colleagues, and reviewed our own experiences, but we could identify only a handful of examples of the use of assessment findings in stimulating improvements. In fact, among 146 profiles of good practice submitted by colleagues at campuses from across the country for possible inclusion in a new book, Trudy Banta, Elizabeth Jones, and Karen Black found that only 6 percent of the profiles contained evidence that student learning had improved, no matter what measure had been used. Likewise,

their evaluation of the Wabash National Study, Charles Blaich and Kathleen Wise noted strong campus engagement with the process of assessment but few instances of actual change in response to the information generated by the study.

Accreditors, speakers at assessment conferences, and campus leaders all decry the fact that too few faculty are closing the loop—that is, studying assessment findings to see what improvements might be suggested and taking the appropriate steps to make them. This is difficult enough with locally developed measures; adding the need to interpret nationally standardized test scores and connect them with local programs and teaching approaches exacerbates the difficulty of the task. It is even rarer to find that the effects of making improvements on the basis of assessment findings are monitored over time to see if the de-

Many articles and books describe the qualities of good outcomes assessment. In her new book, Linda Suskie devotes



In this article we will describe some of the conditions that make it difficult to close the loop. We discuss the importance of faculty engagement in assessment, the difficulties created by external mandates for assessment and for testing, the challenges presented by high turnover in faculty and administrative leadership, and the need to develop realistic expectations about how long it will take to move from collecting evidence to making changes. Then, in an attempt to suggest a way of addressing these concerns, we introduce the concept of double-loop learning in assessment as a mechanism for increasing the likelihood that assessment will lead to improvements in learning.

To Close the Loop

Engaging Faculty is Essential

Although much of the national conversation about assessment focuses on measurement issues, encouraging the use of assessment data to guide change is much more about collaborating with colleagues to decide what to improve than it is about measurement. Evidence forms the basis for these collaborations, but even the most beautifully collected and interpreted evidence will have no impact on students whatsoever unless it engages an institution's faculty, staff, governance structures, faculty development programs, and leaders.

In a recent survey of chief academic officers conducted by the National Institute on Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), two-thirds of the respondents said faculty engagement in particular is a key element needed to advance assessment. While evaluating the work of individual students and informing them of their strengths and weaknesses is a process in which faculty engage routinely, taking a look at student work in the aggregate, not to mention other sources of evidence, to see

a chapter to this topic. Banta, drawing on several prior lists, identifies 17 characteristics of effective outcomes assessment (see Table 1), including beginning with a written plan with clear purposes, providing for faculty and staff development, and ensuring that assessment data are used continuously to guide improvements. Presenters at national and regional assessment conferences also provide examples of effective practices. With so much good advice available, why are improvements in student learning resulting from assessment the exception rather than the rule?

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