



## Revolution or Evolution? Gauging the Impact of Institutional Student- Assessment Strategies

For three decades, higher education has been discussing the coming of internal revolutions. In the 1960s and 1970s, the heralded “revolution” was managerial, as institutional research became a key aspect of institutional decision-making. In the 1980s, that study of organizational activities was refocused to support the improvement of academic management. Now, in the 1990s, the emphasis is on student assessment—on the evaluation of student performance and its prospects for improving the delivery of a college education.

While considerable effort has been invested in promoting and supporting such changes on college campuses, there has been little systematic examination to gauge their use and impact—particularly in the more recent case of student assessment. Given the lack of quantitative information, it is no wonder many assume that what began as good ideas have, as a matter of course, become widespread institutional policies.

This issue of *The Landscape* fills this empirical gap, using a new National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI) national survey—the first of its kind to examine the nature, extent, and impact of student-assessment strategies. Although these efforts hold great promise, what the survey suggests is that student assessment does not yet constitute a revolution. Instead, the assessment movement represents an important evolution in how institutions go about the business of improving their educational processes and outcomes.

### Measuring National Momentum

NCPI researcher Marvin Peterson of the University of Michigan, and colleagues Marne Einarson, Catherine Augustine, and Derek Vaughan, worked together to paint a national picture of institutional student-assessment strategies. Peterson and his team set out to design a survey examining how colleges and universities support, promote, and use student-assessment data to improve student learning and institutional performance.



The survey received responses from chief academic officers at 1,393 public and private institutions to questions about their student-assessment practices: What approaches had they adopted? What organizational and administrative supports had been instituted? How was the information being used—in expected areas such as decisions on instructional programs and faculty, or in more innovative ways affecting students, faculty, governance, and external relations? While the responses often varied by institutional type, in this initial report the focus is on general patterns across all institutions.

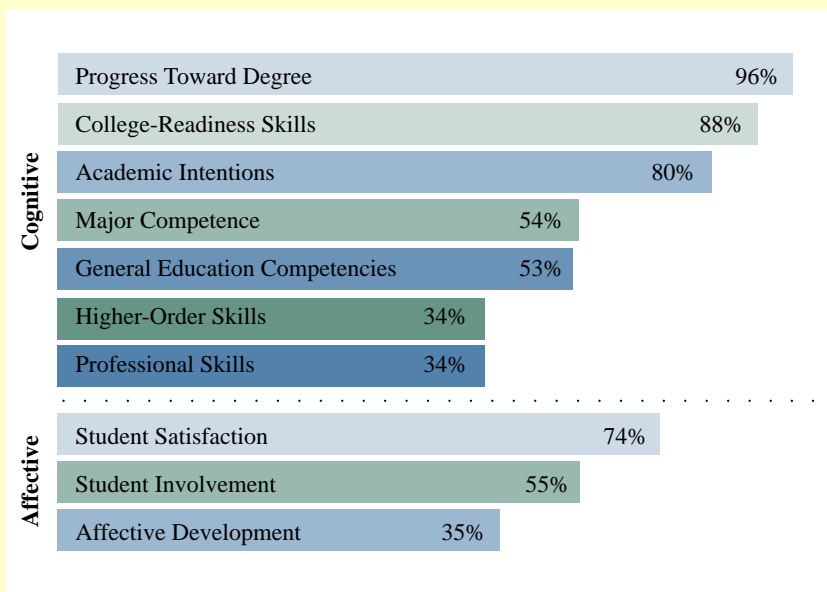
### Assessing Student Assessment

As shown in Chart 1, the survey indicated fairly substantial institutional activity in collecting student-assessment data. Institutions in the sample most often collected objective information on students’ academic

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**Chart 1**  
**Percentage of Institutions Collecting Various Types of Student-Assessment Data on All or Many Current Students**



progress (96 percent), basic college-readiness skills (88 percent), and their academic intentions (80 percent). A fairly high proportion of campuses (74 percent) also queried students about satisfaction with their undergraduate experience.

However, far fewer institutions indicated engaging in more complex assessment activity, such as collecting information on current students' higher-order skills (34 percent), affective development (35 percent), or professional skills (34 percent). Even fewer (23 percent) ask former students about their civic or social activities. Most institutions' approaches emphasize the use of easily quantifiable indicators of student progress and pay less attention to more complex measures of student development.

The methods for collecting student data are similarly traditional—primarily an emphasis on quantitative instruments. Institutions make limited use of more innovative—and usually more qualitative—assessment methods such as portfolios, capstone projects, observations of student performance, and

interviews or focus groups with current students, employers, or alumni. When these methods *are* used on a campus, they are found in only a handful of programs.

What are the primary reasons cited by institutions for conducting assessment? The overriding motivation is to prepare self-studies for accreditation purposes (69 percent), followed by internal improvement efforts, which include bolstering student achievement and academic programs (Chart 2). On the other hand, campuses have less of a tendency to initiate student assessment in order to meet state requirements, improve instruction in the classroom, or make decisions regarding the allocation of internal resources.

One problem is that assessment practice does not necessarily match an institution's motivation for collecting the data. As shown in Chart 3, institutions tend not to focus on gaining an understanding of the institution's role in improving student academic performance. Despite the intention to improve student achievement and the fact that 82 percent of the institutions surveyed included "Excellence in Undergraduate Education" as a component of their mission statements, 38 percent do not engage in studies connecting student experiences to student outcomes.

Of those campuses that do conduct studies of student institutional experiences, most are related to the effect of admissions policies (42 percent) and student financial aid (30 percent) on student performance—not to educational measures such as students' course-taking patterns (26 percent), their exposure to different instructional or teaching methods (21 percent), their use of academic and computing resources (17 percent), or their patterns of interaction with faculty (14 percent). Considering the extensive research on the impact of student-faculty interaction on student performance and the growing use of educational technology, a lack of attention in

these areas is one of the surprises the survey uncovers.

Apparently, administrators are not using assessment to inform their budgetary decisions, either. While almost half of the institutions surveyed maintain explicit budget allocations to support student-assessment activities, very few (4 percent) use this information to allocate resources to academic units. Instead, nearly 70 percent reported that their student-assessment management practices focused on increasing the breadth of internal access to assessment information on individual students.

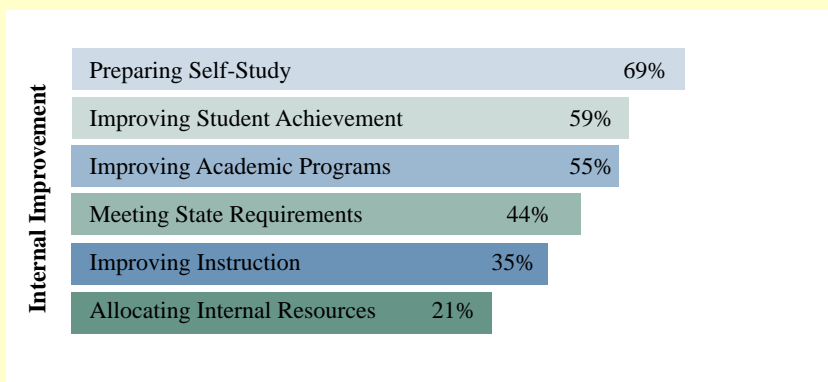
### Focusing on Faculty

The inconsistency inherent in what campuses report as the motivations for and uses of student assessment may have its roots in the role that faculty members play in many of these initiatives. Assessment is oriented toward improving academic outcomes, but there remain relatively few links between measures of student assessment, on the one hand, and the faculty's classroom responsibilities on the other. Too many campuses avoid linking these strategies to the faculty members who implement them or to activities in the classroom.

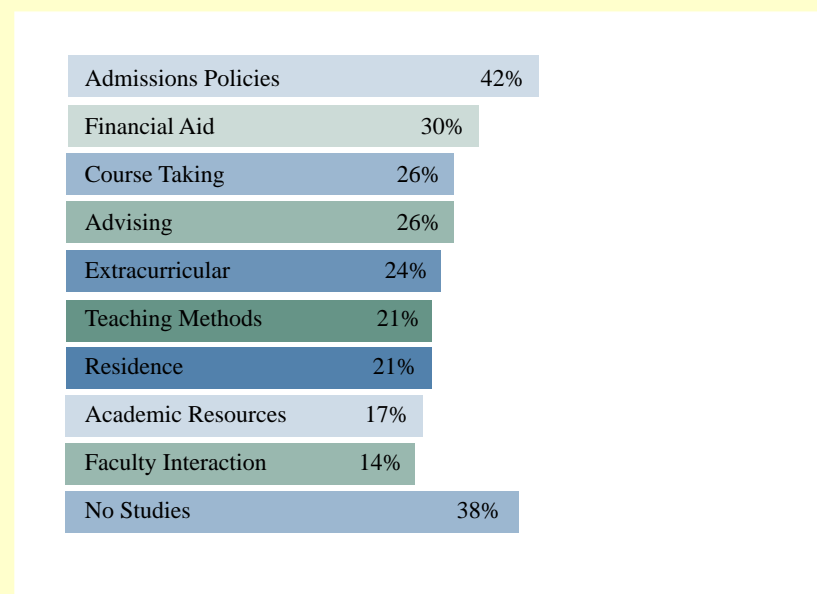
For example—in addition to uncovering a general failure to link assessment with the improvement of a faculty's instructional strategies—the survey may have identified a disconnect between faculty attitudes about assessment and institutional strategies used to promote it. While 58 percent of the institutions surveyed use faculty governance committees to promote these strategies, only 24 percent identified faculty members involved in governance as being very supportive of student-assessment activities. By contrast, 56 percent of the campuses use workshops for administrators to promote assessment, and 72 percent report that academic affairs administrators strongly support student assessment.

On many campuses, the use of assessment data to guide academic

**Chart 2**  
Reasons Cited by Institutions as Very Important Purposes for Conducting Student Assessment

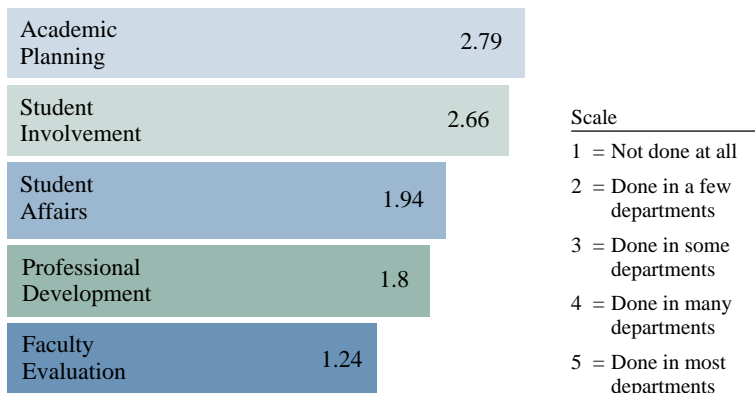


**Chart 3**  
Percentage of Institutions Conducting Studies of the Relationship Between Students' Institutional Experiences and Performance



planning is undermined by a lack of corresponding commitment to faculty accountability for student performance. Chart 4 displays responses—on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 signifying no use and 5 signifying use in most departments—to a question about the extent to which various activities associated with student assessment exist at an institution. The incorpora-

Chart 4  
Mean Responses for Institutions' Use of Student-Assessment Policies



tion of student performance data into academic program planning and review, general education or core curriculum review, course-level review and development, and review and planning for student academic support services occurred, on average, in at least some departments across each institution's campus. But few departments tie faculty evaluation, promotion, and rewards to improved student performance.

#### Uses and Impacts of Assessment Information

Perhaps the most disappointing finding was that institutions reported they are not using student-assessment data very extensively in academic decision-making and they believe this information has little or no impact on institutional performance—either internally on faculty, student, or educational patterns or externally on relationships with constituencies. Indeed, campuses reported almost no efforts to even monitor these impacts. While the general finding is that

student-assessment data are seldom used to make decisions, when an institution did engage in research on student performance, provided professional development, and practiced academic planning, it was more likely to use student-assessment data in decision-making.

#### Perspective

State agencies and institutional accrediting bodies may have stimulated the adoption of assessment activities by many postsecondary institutions, but these initiatives appear to have had little impact on how institutions have supported or used student assessment to improve their academic performance. Overall, the picture of institutional support for student assessment is an evolutionary one: considerable adoption of some types of student-assessment measures and some effort to support and promote assessment are both evident. Still missing is a sustained commitment to using student-assessment data to make academic decisions, to link goals to educational improvement, and to monitor the impact of assessment—internally and externally—on institutional performance.

Before student-assessment practice can become truly innovative, several questions need to be answered. How can campuses better measure and articulate the relationship between students' performance and their experiences? Will experimenting with more nontraditional types of assessment methods improve our understanding of student and institutional performance and lead to more innovative uses of the resulting information? Finally, what types of strategies and policies best link student-assessment information to a campus' decision-making processes and favorably impact both internal and external institutional performance measures? □