

ENGAGING AND MEANINGFUL
PROGRAM ASSESSMENT FOR
STUDENT LEARNING IN
COMMUNITY COLLEGES



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Executive Summary

Here are five premises about student and program assessment in community colleges that strengthen the likelihood that assessment will enrich teaching and learning rather than be a burdensome requirement. Each premise focuses on one facet of assessment: its purpose, the rationale, assumptions about the role of assessment in renewing teaching and learning, how to use assessment to address meaningful questions, and the context for valuable program assessment.

- Premise 1—Purposes for Assessment: *Assessment maintains the integrity of the student-teacher relationship when it focuses on the continued renewal of teaching and learning practices and treats accountability as a by-product rather than vice versa.*
- Premise 2—Fundamental Reasons for Educational Change: *The driving forces for program assessment are the increasing diversity among students, the explosion of knowledge, and the need for management strategies that handle great complexity.*
- Premise 3—Philosophical Positions Shaping Assessment for Renewal of Teaching and Learning: *Assessment best supports desired student learning outcomes when all education stakeholders are internally motivated and use assessment as a means to appreciate—*increase and value*—their learning.*
- Premise 4—Positioning Assessment Within a Research and Evaluative Inquiry Framework: *Student and program assessment are most useful when research and inquiry frameworks guide the selection of what to assess, how to interpret assessment evidence within a context, and how to move toward what is valued.*
- Premise 5—Rethinking Assessment through Communities of Learning and Integrated Practice: *Communities of Learning and Integrated Practice (CLIPs) create a safe, trusting environment for programmatic assessment and evaluative inquiry. This environment supports holistic, evidence-based self-reflection that results in valuable teaching and learning.*

For the sake of organization, the five premises are presented separately in this paper. Each, however, is intricately related to the others. The premises collectively provide an orientation to

assessment that is expected to result in sustained and productive use of assessment within the college. The premises ask the reader to consider core beliefs around the role of assessment—whether it be for the purpose of accountability or for renewal of instructional programs.¹ The premises place traditional approaches to program and student assessment in a historical content, and also look at alternative ways of thinking about student learning assessment within a broader research and inquiry framework. These emerging approaches maintain a focus on the renewal of teaching and learning in the service of student learning—where assessment is value-driven, participatory, and uses a holistic approach to understand the influences on student learning outcomes.

Finally, this paper includes “action” steps for readers who collectively wish to use Communities of Learning and Integrated Practice (CLIPs) as a structure to articulate and operationalize their own premises to guide their assessment-related activities.

Although this paper is written based on community college experiences, it has application to higher education in general.

¹ Student outcomes assessment as an instructional tool in the classroom is not addressed in this paper.

Introduction

This document provides a set of premises about program and student assessment. These premises may stretch and challenge you to consider new ways of looking at old ideas. The premises presented here are designed to stimulate conversations among community college stakeholders, and broaden the ways they think about assessment as a tool for enhancing teaching and learning among students, faculty, administrators, and others. While the premises draw on research and experience—around assessment, system change, appreciative and evaluative inquiry, educational evaluation, learning theory, and communities of practice—they are grounded in situations that illustrate the ideal as a real and desired possibility.

Any stakeholder group can use these premises to shape its assessment perspective. For example, the ideas can be used by department faculty who are considering the role of assessment within their courses and programs; by a mixed-role group of faculty, administrators, students, and community members planning how to develop and assess college-wide student learning outcomes; and by a faculty member and a student conversing about classroom assessment and grading. Various groups may respond differently to the ideas. For example, one group may readily accept them, while another group may be less willing to embrace one or more of the ideas. Some groups may choose to develop different premises than the ones presented here to better reflect their perspective.

The ideas in this paper are intended to prompt conversation. They are not presented as the “right answer.” We encourage groups to delve deeply into the issues, and articulate a conscious choice on the orientation to their work around assessment of teaching and learning. This document can provide a framework for these discussions—where participants can explore their underlying assumptions and perspectives about assessment, reach an understanding about the scope and multi-faceted issues surrounding assessment, and design an approach to assessment that respects the varied perspectives of those both within and outside the group.

How to Use This Document

This document includes five premises that fundamentally affect how assessment will shape teaching and learning in the college.

- Premise 1: Purposes for Assessment
- Premise 2: Fundamental Reasons for Educational Change
- Premise 3: Philosophical Positions Shaping Assessment for Renewal of Teaching and Learning
- Premise 4: Positioning Assessment Within A Broader Research and Inquiry Framework
- Premise 5: Rethinking Assessment through Communities of Learning and Integrated Practice (CLIPs)

We suggest that individuals read this document and make notes about points of interest that they want to discuss with others who share an interest in these issues. After reflection and discussion, we suggest that the group collectively engage in activities described in the section entitled *Integrating Premises 1-3*; the final activity in this section results in a synthesis of the discussion into a short premise that reflects the direction the group would like to pursue around assessment for student learning. Drawing on the fourth and fifth premises in this document, the group can then use their own premise to develop plans for assessment-related activities as described in the final section.

Terminology

Because individuals, colleges, and organizations across the country differ in their understanding of the terms we use in this document, here is a set of definitions to clarify what we mean when we use particular words.

Assessment is *measurement, an observation, simply seeing what is so*. The term “assessment” currently is often used to refer only to the measurement of desired student learning outcomes. Various inputs, aspects of the teaching and learning experience, and/or its context can also be assessed or measured.

Research is a process of rigorous reasoning, supported by a dynamic interaction of methods, theories, findings, and perspectives. Research can lead to new understanding. Each discipline—anthropology, biology, economics, chemistry, education and more—has its tradition of preferred research designs and methods.

Evaluation is *making decisions about worth and value*, based on assessments conducted within a research design, that is, based on a systematic investigation. Evaluation may or may not be done by the same parties who engage in the assessment.

Accountability refers to making information public about activities, accomplishments, and/or future plans.

Premise 1: Purposes for Assessment

Premise 1 — Purposes for Assessment

Assessment maintains the integrity of the student-teacher relationship when it focuses on the continued renewal of teaching and learning practices and treats accountability as a by-product rather than vice versa.

The current press for assessment in higher education institutions is driven primarily by two purposes: (a) a nation-wide push from state policy makers and regional accreditation agencies for greater accountability to the public for high quality teaching and learning, and (b) a call for curriculum reform. Walvoord elaborates on these driving forces:

“The current assessment movement has arisen primarily from outside the academy: from legislators, employers, governors, and other constituents who were disappointed with the quality of college graduates and the rising costs of higher education. Thus, the assessment movement wants change. It is suspicious of the status quo, or of those who say, ‘We’re already doing it.’ Other forces driving assessment are educational reform movements such as writing across the curriculum, learning communities, and problem-based learning, which rely on data about learning as the basis for meaningful reform. Assessment has been driven, too, by the increased competition among institutions of higher education, with up-and-comers using data about learning to market themselves and to challenge traditional institutions.”²

The dynamic tension between these forces has resulted in a perpetual push-pull motion that often fails to provide the desired benefits (Ewell, 2002). At the same time, there seems to be

² Walvoord, B. (2004) *Assessment clear and simple: A practical guide for institutions, departments, and general education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. p. 5.

widespread consensus that the intention behind assessment is to strengthen teaching and learning. In practice, however, it is an entirely different matter to hold the *renewal of teaching and learning*, as opposed to accountability, as the priority for assessment.

Whichever takes precedence—renewal or accountability—determines the nature and design of assessment. For example, colleges with accountability as a priority often design a college-wide assessment with common measures related to a few student-learning outcomes. The measures may provide easy-to-understand results for the sake of accountability, but may provide only minimally useful information to faculty members about learning related to a particular course. In contrast, a college whose priority is the *renewal of teaching and learning* may encourage the use of multiple measures that fit well within particular courses to assess learning outcomes. Using this approach, a secondary rubric-guided analysis of the data can provide a campus-wide picture that gives outsiders a clearer understanding of teaching and learning practices at the institution.

Establishing the “priority” purpose for assessment helps clarify who controls the college’s approach to the *renewal of teaching and learning*. Is it an external group that calls for accountability, or is it those internal to the college who have the primary responsibility to renew teaching and learning practices? Here another tension reveals itself: too much attention to external stakeholders can over-emphasize conformity and standardization in the assessment process, while, by contrast, too much attention to internal stakeholders can lose sight of the link to students’ lives outside of the educational setting. Instead of an internal/external dichotomy, colleges might resolve the tension between these interests by creating a broadly shared vision around the purpose of assessment, a culture that provides a foundation for strong collaboration among all stakeholders to reconcile opposing views, and attention to everyone’s roles and responsibilities regarding the renewal of teaching and learning.

Premise 2: The Fundamental Reasons for Educational Change

Premise 2 — Fundamental Reasons for Educational Change

The driving forces for program assessment are the increasing diversity among students, the explosion of knowledge, and the need for management strategies that handle great complexity.

Calls for assessment often blame educators or colleges for inadequate teaching. What results from this approach is a unwarranted sense of guilt among educators about their teaching methods and/or an unwillingness to let others know about their instructional practices. The forces that give rise to the need for the continual renewal of teaching and learning are broad societal conditions—the knowledge explosion in nearly all disciplines and the increasing diversity of society. These conditions are no one’s “fault.” Assessment comes to the fore because it is a powerful management tool for guiding a social system in a time of rapid and complex change. See Figure 1.

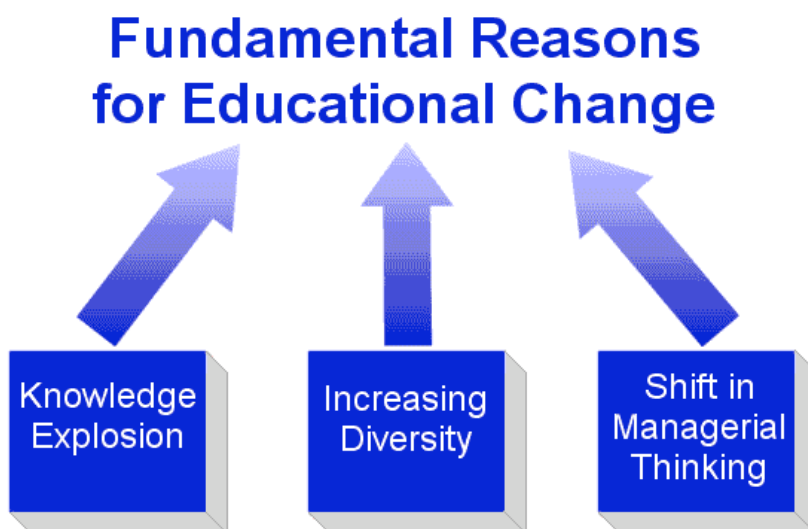


Figure 1. Fundamental Reasons for Educational Change

Knowledge Explosion

New information is emerging in nearly every discipline at a more rapid pace than in the past, spawning debate on what is most important to teach. These developments have resulted in more concepts, skills, and knowledge from which to choose. And there are far more applications of knowledge within and across disciplines than in the past. The expansion of new knowledge, skills, and conceptual perspectives requires more frequent deliberation about WHAT to teach, as well as more opportunities and needs for educators to stay current and informed about changes in their field as well as other disciplines.

Knowledge about how people learn is also expanding. Research on how the brain works and how people learn has grown tremendously in the past decade. This research has promoted the development and refinement of new instructional methods and curriculum frameworks, requiring educators and others to update their knowledge of HOW teaching occurs. Opportunities to access and reflect on this information, and on the role of assessment in the learning process, can encourage professionals to investigate, contribute to, and build on new knowledge in the field.

Recognizing the knowledge explosion as a broad social phenomenon with deep implications for teaching and learning reduces the blame and guilt. The roles and responsibilities of *all* of us are affected by the changing social and educational context. Maintaining this level of awareness generates a sense that “we are all in this together”—external stakeholders as well as internal professionals.

Increasing Diversity of Society

Many traditional instructional practices were developed for a fairly homogeneous population that changed little from year to year. Yet our society has become increasingly diverse—in ethnicity, economic levels, age, technology, and so on. Emerging research on teaching and learning seeks to address the growing variations among students’ cultural values and economic conditions; variations in learning styles and goals; the range of home and life experiences; and the status of education within students’ lives. Further complicating the picture are widespread changes in the application of disciplinary content, access to technology, financial resources to support education, and more. The growing diversity among both students and the

colleges that seek to meet their educational needs calls for different ways of thinking about assessment and how it can be used within these evolving contexts.

Premise 3: Philosophical Positions Shaping Assessment for Renewal of Teaching and Learning

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Assessment best supports desired student learning outcomes when all education stakeholders are internally motivated and use assessment as a means to appreciate—increase and value—their learning.

The broad social changes discussed above have prompted a shift in management strategies within most social systems, including education. The “old” approach to assessment—focusing on inputs to a system and taking the outputs and outcomes for granted—is now rife with challenges. We operate in a world in which constant change is the norm. The growth of knowledge and diverse populations has drastically increased the complexity of our social systems, creating multifaceted interactions that raise the level of uncertainty in assessment results. The most adaptive management strategies within nearly all social systems now focus on building consensus around desired outcomes and “planning backward” to determine the inputs needed to fit particular circumstances and/or shifting conditions. This outcome-oriented management approach helps colleges respond more effectively to both economic and demographic fluctuations. This fundamental shift accounts for the emphasis on the assessment of student learning outcomes.

Four basic concepts influence the extent to which an educational institution is able to create a dynamic, flexible process of assessment that ensures the renewal of teaching and learning in keeping with society’s rapid changes and diversity. These four concepts help maintain a focus on

renewal, and, in turn, help shape the ways that stakeholders think about assessment.³ (See Figure 2.) The concepts are: (a) focusing on student learning outcomes, (b) using a holistic perspective, (c) appreciating your assets, and (d) promoting self-motivated learning.

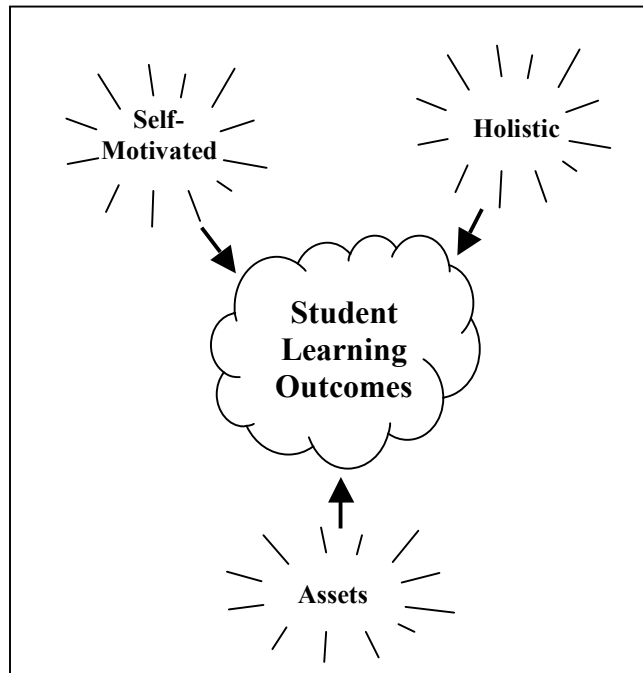


Figure 2 – The Climate for Achieving Outcomes

Focusing on Student Learning Outcomes

Hopefully, student learning guides change throughout the education system. It is the outcome that every function in an educational institution or system ultimately serves. There are many intermediate outputs or outcomes, but ultimately essentially all are expected to contribute to student learning. Institutional operations—from teaching to administration to governance—are determined by their contribution to a vision of what students should know and be able to do. That is, all parties can plan backward from desired student learning outcomes to establish their

³ These concepts have implications for how all facets of social systems—including education—operate. They affect how a social system defines its services, administrative functions, and governance/policy-making. Although these concepts can be applied broadly within the education or other social system, we will look here only at their implications for conducting assessment, research, and evaluation.

activities or their inputs into the system. To do so almost inevitably requires continuous learning among faculty, administrators, and governing leaders to address the knowledge explosion, increasing diversity, and management/leadership challenges.

Student learning outcomes identify essential understandings, knowledge of facts and principles, skills, and attitudes that prepare students to undertake meaningful activities in the rest of their lives.

Using a Holistic Perspective

Each educational institution is a whole unto itself—a dynamic system of inter-relationships among its parts and the environment. The institution is also part of a larger system that is influenced by many factors—national, state, and local policies, resources, and so on—with each institution having smaller systems within it. Adopting a more holistic view of an institution, classroom, or program helps us to understand its complexity, as well as its organizing patterns. It inspires a different perspective than simply looking at the sum of the parts that make up the whole system.

For example, assessments can be framed around small units of instruction to reflect the teaching and learning process within a class or course. Alternatively, assessments can reflect teaching and learning as part of a larger systemic whole—within a cluster of courses, programs, or a college’s whole set of offerings. Each angle complements the other, providing different perspectives and generating different information.

Using a holistic perspective allows us to consider a number of features as “fair game” for assessment, including the nature of the curriculum, instructional methods, selection of student learning outcomes, student engagement, administrative support, and the policy context. An assessment focused solely on student learning provides a more limited picture than one that includes the work of faculty or administrators and their connections to student learning. Assessments that include the widest array of stakeholders whose work is connected to student learning may provide the most complete data for assessing the renewal of teaching and learning.

Appreciating Your Assets

Assessment can focus attention on assets (qualities one wants to enhance) and/or deficits (qualities one wants to eliminate). Each approach will have a different effect on how the assessment contributes to renewal of teaching and learning. Some research suggests that people feel more motivated to change, and perceive change as more enjoyable, when assessment is asset-focused as opposed to problem-focused. Consider the following example:

“In 1982 researchers at the University of Wisconsin conducted a study of the learning process by videotaping two bowling teams during several games. Later, members of each team studied a copy of the video of their efforts in order to improve their skills. But the copies were edited differently. One team received a video showing only the times when its members made mistakes; the other team’s video included only the times when members performed well. After the bowlers studied the videos and acted upon what they had learned, what happened? Both teams did improve their game, but the team that studied its successes improved its score twice as much as the one that studied its mistakes.”⁴

The notion of valuing assets and using these existing building blocks for achieving desired outcomes forms the basis for Appreciative Inquiry.⁵ When something increases in value, it “appreciates.” “Inquiry” is the process of seeking to understand through asking questions. Appreciative Inquiry chooses assets as the dominant focus for inquiry. Assessment that borrows from this school of thought focuses on desired futures, using “value” as the impetus for change. It is a strategy that produces greater energy for positive growth than one based on deficits, problems, and needs.

Appreciative inquiry is a mindset. It is also a process—one that seeks to understand and appreciate assets and increase their potential. Appreciative inquiry uses a participatory, holistic approach to understanding and enhancing the assets that influence teaching and learning. It is a process where actions are motivated by constructive questioning, discovery, and design, not

4 Mohr, B. and Watkins, J. (2002). *The essentials of appreciative inquiry: A roadmap for creating positive futures*. Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications. p. 2.

5 The Appreciative Inquiry planning approach was originated by David Cooperrider in the early 1980s. For a brief explanation of Appreciative Inquiry see: Mohr, B. and Watkins, J. (2002). *The essentials of appreciative inquiry: A roadmap for creating positive futures*. Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications. Extensive information about Appreciative Inquiry is available through a web search.

criticism and disparagement. Participants in the process appreciate the best of what is, learn from their successes, and focus on what they value most. An asset may be a large resource or a small, undeveloped, yet promising resource at a given point in time.

*[E]vidence [from several cognitive-behavioral research studies] suggests that we can create positive images of ourselves through our own internal conversations. Norman Cousins popularized the notion that a person's mental state affects his or her health. In his book *Human Options* (Berkley Books, 1981), he writes of the therapeutic value of hope, faith, love, will to live, cheerfulness, humor, creativity, playfulness, confidence, and great expectations, all of which contribute to the body's healing. Bill Moyers created a series for PBS on the power of the mind to heal the body. And Jack Nicklaus's *Golf My Way* (Simon & Schuster, 1974) argues that positive internal affirmations ("I'm going to hit it down the middle of the fairway" rather than "Don't hit it into the woods") cause the entire body to respond to what the mind imagines is possible.⁶*

Living, changing systems often react in response to external factors. This "reactive" learning often serves to maintain the status quo. An awareness of assets and a vision of the ideal that builds on these strengths can produce an alternative orientation—one that looks forward, relinquishes old identities or ideas, promotes change based on strengths, and avoids the "fight or flight" syndrome through anticipation and planning. Each approach to assessment—whether it be value-focused or deficit-focused—has its place. The important point is recognizing the fundamental differences in how each approach motivates change.

Promoting Self-motivated Learning

One purpose of the education system is to socialize students into a way of thinking about a discipline or social system. This purpose focuses on ensuring that students accept certain ways of thinking or acting that subsequently become embedded in their repertoire of behaviors. A second purpose of the education system is to encourage creative, critical thinking—where educators promote choice, make students aware of multiple goals and/or multiple ways of accomplishing a goal, and increase awareness of the ways that students can shape their own learning.

⁶ Mohr, B. and Watkins, J. (2002). *The essentials of appreciative inquiry: A roadmap for creating positive futures*. Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications. p. 2.

These two overarching purposes can act against each other. The first can be constraining, the second freeing. The first relies on external motivation for learning, while the second relies on students' internal sense of self-motivation. These same tensions are found throughout the education system. They exist in the relationships between students and faculty, between faculty and administration, and between administration and governance.

Assessment plays a key role in how these tensions play out. For example, the purpose for assessment, the interpretation of the data, and use of the data can influence the extent to which learning is motivated (intentionally or unintentionally) by internal or external forces, and the extent to which the responsibility for learning is distributed among students, faculty, and administration. (See Modell, 2004.)

When we define learning as a “way of being,” it implies self-directed as opposed to passive learning. It reduces the dependent quality of learning that has become so prevalent—where students study only what is tested, or educators settle into ways of teaching that support testing and/or accreditation mandates. This alternative view allows educators to become more conscious of the options they have for *how* to teach, instead of simply relying on methods that have become rote and determined by external pressures.

Let us not underestimate these pressures for educators. They are real and immediate and often overwhelming. Without a doubt, this alternative approach requires a “breaking out” mentality that allows us to “blunder” and seek help on our own terms. Assessment that encourages this mindset promotes learning that is exploratory, continual, and open to paradoxes and contradictions. In essence, it is a view of learning in which we see ourselves as “perpetual beginners”—where nothing is immune to challenge in our learning process.⁷

Promoting the continuous learning of new instructional practices by faculty is as important as providing students with the tools for life-long learning. Further, there is wide consensus around the view that inquiry and reflection on practice are essential components of the teaching profession. Yet accountability issues can cause teachers to become preoccupied with only student learning and neglect the enrichment of their own learning. Teacher self-reflection requires the capacity, will, and opportunity to undertake the analysis of practice. Collegial

⁷ Vaill, P. (1996). *Learning as a Way of Being*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

dialogue enriches this process, helping teachers to make choices in relation to the community/system in which they operate, and to appreciate and apply appropriate knowledge in the profession.

Integrating Premises 1-3

Before proceeding to Premises 4 and 5, take time to integrate what you are thinking about the factors that influence assessment: the overriding purpose, rationale, and philosophical perspectives. By addressing the following questions, your group can begin to reflect on assessment as a mechanism for supporting the renewal of teaching and learning—guided by desired student learning outcomes, a holistic and value-driven perspective, and a view that promotes self-motivated learning. These questions are designed for use within your group, with guidance from a facilitator who has experience with Appreciative Inquiry.⁸

Guiding Inquiry Questions

1. **Best Experience:** Tell me a story about one of your best teaching and/or learning experiences where some type of assessment played a role. Looking at your many teaching and learning experiences, recall a time when you felt most alive or excited about your teaching and/or learning. What made it an exciting experience? Who else was involved? Describe the event in detail.
2. **Values:** What are the things you value about yourself, your work, and your organization related to teaching and learning?
 - **Yourself:** Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself in teaching and learning situations?
 - **Your work:** When you are feeling best about your work related to teaching and learning in this college (or group), what do you value about it?

⁸ The questions presented here are based on general questions frequently used in Appreciative Inquiry.

- **Your college/group:** What is it about your college (or group) that you value? What is the single most important thing related to teaching and learning that your college (or group) has contributed to your life?
 - **Students:** What is it you value about how students undertake their learning at your college?
3. **Core Value/Life-giving Factor:** What do you think is the core value or factor that allows your college (or group) to pull through during difficult times? If this core value did not exist, how would that make your college (or group) different than it currently is?
 4. **Three Wishes:** If you had three wishes for your college (or group) as you move forward on assessment-related work, what would they be? Consider including at least one wish about how students take responsibility for their own learning and how faculty support them in doing so.

Imagine Your Future

Summarize the responses to the questions by identifying and discussing themes. Gradually synthesize your perspective into a “provocative proposition” of about 25 words that expresses your group’s desired vision for its future work related to assessment. Use the premises stated at the beginning of the preceding three sections of the document as examples.

Premise 4: Positioning Assessment Within a Research and Evaluative Inquiry Framework

Premise 4 — Positioning Assessment Within A Research and Evaluative Inquiry Framework
Student and program assessment are most useful when research and inquiry frameworks guide the selection of what to assess, how to interpret assessment evidence within a context, and how to move toward what is valued.

Viewed holistically, student learning, teacher learning, and research on teaching and learning are highly interdependent. In an ideal world, none carries more weight or emphasis than

the other. The current emphasis in assessment, however, is on direct measures of student learning framed around achievement of stated student learning outcomes. Assessment of the extent to which students achieve those outcomes is vital for making adjustments in teaching and learning. However, this measurement by itself is of limited value and provides only part of the picture. Using an action research and/or a “valuative” (seeking what is of value) inquiry framework to supplement these data, we can gain a stronger basis for understanding the role of assessment and how it can enrich the teaching and learning process.

Assessment of Teaching and Learning Inputs and Outcomes

Consider teaching and learning as a system. The learning experience is framed around four components and their inter-relationships: student learning outcomes, curriculum, instruction, and student engagement. Although the assessment of student learning outcomes has special emphasis, data about all four components and their interactions help in the interpretation of the student assessment data. (See Figure 3.)

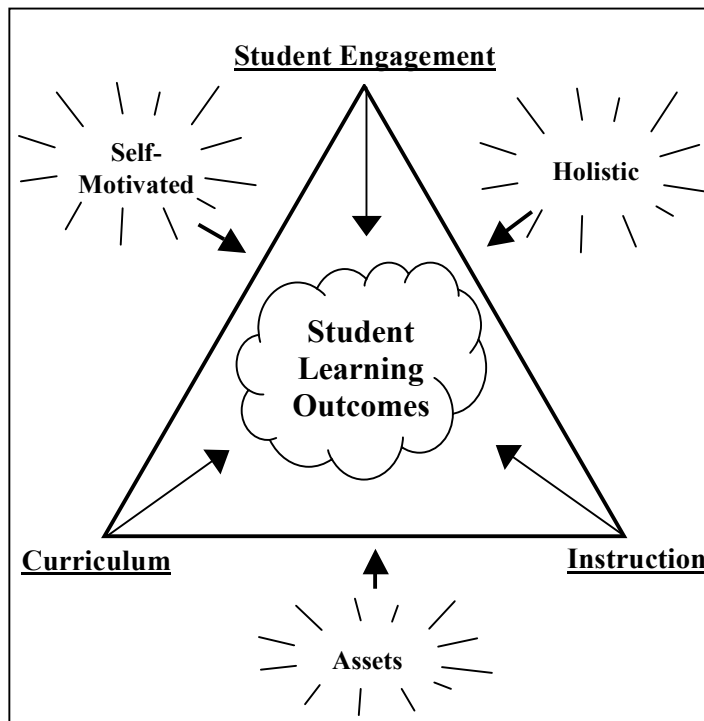


Figure 3 – Teaching and Learning Inquiry Framework in a Supportive Climate

Outcomes: Student learning outcomes are the guiding force for the renewal of teaching and learning practices. The assessment of student learning occurs around these outcomes. The key question is: Have students attained these outcomes or pre-requisites to these outcomes? We can also assess the value of these outcomes in the views of various stakeholders.

Curriculum: We use “curriculum” to refer to the content and philosophies that are taught and/or learned. We can assess the curriculum of a course or program against new knowledge and theories emerging within disciplines. For example: Is the content of the course still appropriate, given the desired student learning outcomes and new perspectives within the relevant discipline(s)?

Instruction: The growing body of knowledge about teaching methods and how learning occurs provides expanded options for teaching toward particular student learning outcomes. An assessment of the current methods used in relation to emerging research on promising practices can generate ideas about how to adjust instructional strategies to better achieve the desired student learning outcomes.

Student Engagement: Developing self-motivated students who take responsibility for their own learning requires strategies for actively engaging students. Assessment tools such as the *Community College Survey of Student Engagement* instrument can help determine the extent of engagement and provide information to guide thinking about engagement strategies.

There are many other forces within and across these four arenas that influence teaching and learning, including the context where learning takes place (e.g., classroom, community), and the role of organizational structures, processes, relationships, resources, and culture. Information on these various forces can help make sense of student learning outcome data, and inform decisions about how to adjust teaching and learning practices appropriately. While student learning is widely perceived to be the “bottom line,” many organizations in dynamic, complex environments are moving from a single “bottom line” to a multi-focus.

Using a “Valuative” Inquiry Framework

The field of educational evaluation is based on social science research methods that have evolved over many years. While research seeks to understand a phenomenon, evaluation seeks to identify the value, merit, and worth of a program, course, class, or other entity. Evaluation is

making decisions about worth and value. Assessments conducted within a research design provide the evidence for making such decisions. Since assessments—measures—alone are difficult to interpret, positioning assessment within a research and/or evaluation design helps make sense of the assessments in ways that can be applied by faculty, students, and others to enhance programs and practices. This is what is necessary for what is sometimes referred to as “closing the loop”.

Assessment, research, and evaluation are intricately linked. They can also vary in the methods used, how participants are involved, data collection tools, and ways of reporting. Further, each discipline has its own traditions of research. All, however, are designed to bring objectivity and a defensible line of reasoning to bear on the data. The use of experimental designs with control and treatment groups—the traditional scientific method—has dominated the sciences. In contrast, artists establish explicit criteria to explain their judgments. Lawyers use multiple pieces of evidence to build a logical argument. The anthropologist uses ethnographic approaches. Each approach is designed to generate evidence that supports a judgment about the validity of a hypothesis. The intent is to move away from indefensible or unsupported judgments to ones that are evidence-based. When we move from assessment to evaluation—from measurement to using those measurements to make evaluative decisions—we can increase the soundness of our decisions by thinking from a research point of view.

Two types of “research” have particular application, given the desired qualities of engagement and self-motivation for the renewal of teaching and learning. **Action research** is a particular way of researching learning and practice. It is sometimes referred to as practitioner research, or practitioner-led or practitioner-based research. The central idea of action research is one of self-reflection in support of learning, characterized by looking, thinking, and acting as an iterative or “recycling” set of activities. In traditional forms of research, individuals/groups conduct their research on other people; in action research, participants do research on themselves in cooperation with other people. Action research engages teachers in a research process that has direct application to their own practices, and requires them to participate fully in a process of self-examination.

A second approach—what we call “**valuative**” **inquiry**—incorporates the values of action research. It is a type of program evaluation that emphasizes self-reflection, decision-making, and

movement toward what you (and others) value, using research findings to make action-oriented and evidence-based decisions. In valiative inquiry, no individual is deciding for another, yet all are deciding with regard for one another. Valiative inquiry goes beyond action research by including multiple perspectives, and by recognizing that, in dynamic systems, there are many decision-makers who must work together around shared goals. Valiative inquiry calls for making our assumptions and what we value as explicit as possible.

Valiative inquiry draws on assessment, research, and evaluation. It seeks to use assessment, but places “measures” in a broader context to help make sense of the results. Like research, valiative inquiry seeks to understand; it uses a “research” mindset to inform the kinds of questions asked and the systematic processes used to generate evidence of the influences on teaching and learning. However, valiative inquiry shifts the focus and responsibility to those who seek to research, evaluate, and learn about their own work. It enhances deep learning, and supports the notion that teacher inquiry and continuous learning around their own practices are critical parts of being a professional.

Decisions are a judgment, an application of what we value. In any method of inquiry, who determines value and worth, and for what purpose, are critical issues that relate to the control and use of data. Valiative inquiry has the potential to reduce the need for external judgments by faculty (of student performance) or administrators (of faculty performance). Valiative inquiry shifts the responsibility for those judgments: self-evaluation becomes a primary strategy for enhancing teaching and learning, with insights shared collegially with others who have a vested interest in learning outcomes, curriculum, instruction, and engagement.

Premise 5: Rethinking Assessment through Communities of Learning and Integrated Practice (CLIPs)

Premise 5 — Rethinking Assessment through Communities of Learning and Integrated Practice

Communities of Learning and Integrated Practice (CLIPs) create a safe, trusting environment for program assessment and valiative inquiry. This environment supports holistic, evidence-based self-reflection that results in valuable teaching and learning.

We use the term *Communities of Learning and Integrated Practice (CLIPS)* to identify a particular approach to the more general concept of Communities of Practice. Communities of Practice (COPs) began to thrive in the 1990s when professionals realized how these groups could complement existing organizational structures. COPs allow participants to enhance their expertise in a time when new knowledge is growing at exponential rates, and becoming increasingly complex and specialized. These “communities” consciously nurture and harness know-how related to their purpose.

Similarly, Communities of Learning and Integrated Practice are groups of educators and other college stakeholders who choose to associate with one another. Participants are energized by a personal and professional desire to share experiences, insights, tools, and practices. CLIPs are a catalyst for action. They stimulate change. They allow participants to analyze and reflect on beliefs, strategies, and the consequences of their actions. CLIPS can elicit the strengths of those involved, and provide a vehicle for the group to engage in holistic, collaborative, and evidence-based decision-making. Groups become a CLIP when they choose to share certain norms, roles, and responsibilities and when organizations/institutions provide the necessary support.

CLIPS differ from other organizational structures in several key ways. They are more voluntary than formal. The leadership emerges from within and shifts freely, according to the needs/tasks of the group. CLIPs start and end as the group desires, and survive only as long as the participants find them worthwhile; they thrive when interaction is meaningful, energizing, and enjoyable, and when learning occurs that contributes to individual and collective

professional growth. While a CLIP is formed to accomplish a purpose determined and valued by all participants, the group may add or change members over time.

Although each CLIP has its own way of operating, CLIPs share a number of norms. They provide social support, excitement, and personal validation among members around a shared purpose. They create a safe, trusting environment where colleagues can address sensitive issues. They build a common vocabulary and move their philosophies into practice in flexible and tailored ways. They move know-how as directly and efficiently as possible to the person(s) who will use it. CLIPs view learning through sharing and applying knowledge to one's practice as the main goal of the community. Finally, CLIPs institute certain roles and responsibilities that support the group *and* serve the broader purpose of strengthening the culture of collaboration and renewal within the college.

CLIPs can provide a valuable structure for rethinking assessment practices. Assessment-focused CLIPs can take many forms. They may be short-term, temporary groups of faculty who attend a conference together. They may be existing organizational groups such as a committee, department faculty or project team. They may be groups specially formed to undertake a study of some aspect of their shared work around teaching and learning. Each of these types of groups will generate its own shared vision of its future, purpose, and tasks. Each will accomplish different results.

The ideas and arguments that surround assessment can spawn rancorous debate. CLIPs can provide a safe harbor in the midst of this storm—a context for reflecting on and trying out new approaches in a culture that supports professional growth and contributes a spirit of shared responsibility and innovation in the college. CLIPs seek to broaden the discussion around program assessment and evaluation, and take action based on what is learned through these conversations.⁹

9 See Appendix for a description of principles for developing effective CLIPS, and roles/responsibilities of individuals (internal and external to a CLIP) who help the group function.

Planning Your Assessment-Related Activities

In the earlier section entitled *Integrating Premises 1-3*, your group created a provocative proposition that described a vision for assessment that you would like to create together. Premise 4 focused on positioning assessment within a meaningful framework of action research and/or valutive inquiry, while Premise 5 described how a CLIP can provide an effective vehicle for exploring new assessment ideas.

Now you are ready to create an ongoing, manageable, dynamic assessment process to renew teaching and learning in your college. Your task at this point is to determine one or more overall action research or valutive inquiry questions that members of your group wish to address.¹⁰ The questions you ask and the design you choose will serve as the basis for determining what components you want to assess—for example, student learning outcomes and teacher practices.

Drawing on your college's CLIP sponsor and/or champion (see Appendix), work out a valutive inquiry plan for accomplishing what you have envisioned in your provocative proposition, or in a subsequent vision of the future that has emerged as your thinking has evolved. The action research or valutive inquiry process involves the following steps:

- Positioning the inquiry (deciding on valutive questions or hypotheses)
- Planning the inquiry (determining the research design)
- Collecting the data (assessing the relevant factors)
- Analyzing and synthesizing the data
- Applying the inquiry findings (using evidence to increase understanding and/or make decisions)

While this process looks linear on paper, it will likely not transpire this way in real life, nor should it. Recurring discussions about assessment goals, perspectives, context, data collection and analysis, action plans, and emerging issues will require group participants to revisit previous conversations in light of greater awareness, professional growth, and the changing forces and views of those both internal and external to the group.

¹⁰ You may decide that your group that has worked together through this document wants to stay together as a CLIP. You may also decide to reconfigure into more than one CLIP and/or bring in others.

Summary

There are many forces at work in the current educational landscape that influence assessment. Student learning outcomes lie at the core of this picture. It is the outcome we seek to improve. On the other hand, there are other critical pieces of the picture that affect both what and how students learn. The premises presented in this paper provide a framework for rethinking assessment from a broader perspective, illustrated by Figure 4.

We ask the reader to look deeply at their own college context, and take into consideration the social, cultural, technological, demographic, economic, and policy factors that influence teaching and learning in their setting. The premises are designed to stimulate CLIPs (or other interested groups of stakeholders) to collectively reflect on these factors, and consider the merits of an orientation that puts the focus of assessment squarely on the renewal of teaching and learning, as opposed to solely on accountability.

The Valuative Inquiry design reflects this shift in philosophy around the purpose and use of assessment. It focuses on value, assets, and potential. It encourages individual responsibility for learning, self-reflection, and assessment as a means to engagement (for students) and professional growth (for educators). It promotes a holistic perspective that takes into account curriculum, instructional methods, selection of student learning outcomes, administration, and other contextual factors. It seeks to move assessment beyond the focus on isolated student learning outcomes. In valuative inquiry, assessment is a potent tool for looking at where classrooms and programs are succeeding, and for bringing these data to bear on decisions that support the renewal of teaching and learning college-wide.

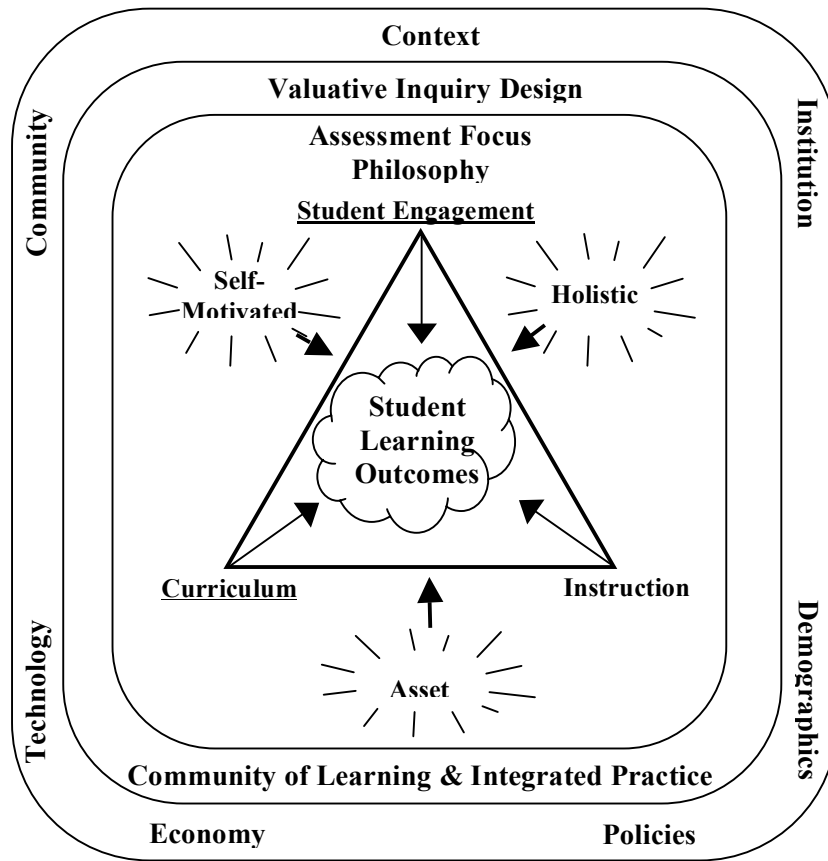


Figure 4. Assessment in Support of Sustained Practices for the Renewal of Teaching and Learning

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Appendix

Principles for Developing Effective CLIPs

Seven principles can help develop CLIPs that are inclusive, comfortable yet challenging, vibrant, and energizing for participants. These principles acknowledge that while spontaneity and self-direction are critical to CLIPs, guidelines can be helpful in creating the conditions where these groups flourish.

Principle 1	Design for evolution	Allow new people to become involved and new interests to be explored. Accept that there will be different activity levels and different kinds of support needed at different times.
Principle 2	Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives	Encourage a discussion between those within the community and those outside about what it could achieve. For example, encourage links between CLIPs, and department faculty, chair, and others.
Principle 3	Invite different levels of participation	Some people will be active in the community and some people will appear passive. Accept that contributions and learning take place in different ways.
Principle 4	Develop both public and private community spaces	Relationships form during informal community events and person-to-person communication is the purpose of the community. Formal organized events and discussion spaces are needed to help people feel part of a community. Both are important.
Principle 5	Focus on value	The true value of a community may emerge as it matures and develops. Community members are encouraged to be explicit about the value being delivered.
Principle 6	Combine familiarity and excitement	Familiar community spaces and activities help people to feel comfortable in participating. Introducing new ideas to challenge thinking also stimulates interest and keeps people engaged.
Principle 7	Create a rhythm for the community	Regular events, paced to avoid overload, create points around which activity can converge. They encourage people to keep coming back, rather than gradually drifting away.

Table 1 – Principles for Cultivating Successful Communities of Practice¹¹

CLIP Roles and Responsibilities

Within a CLIP

The basic roles and responsibilities within a CLIP are:

Participants: The *participants* interact with each other, sharing information, tacit knowledge, personal insights and experiences. Participants actively participate in discussions, raising issues and generating insights to move toward their desired future.

¹¹ Adapted from Wenger, E., McDermott R., and Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

They create a safe, trusting environment for exploration and learning. Their primary responsibility is to contribute to the shared learning, outcomes, or products of the community.

Facilitator: The *facilitator* applies various group processes to help participants sustain meaningful and healthy communication—drawing out the reticent, dampening the overly dominant, ensuring that dissenting points of view are heard and understood, posing questions to further discussion and keeping discussions on topic—all subject to the will of the community. They attend to timelines and shared responsibilities.

Scribe: During meetings the *scribe* records the essential points of the community's discussion and displays the notes where everyone can easily see them. The *Scribe* also provides follow-up summary notes and documents to the CLIP members to support the CLIP's work and maintains documentation that is important to the CLIP's work.

Practice Leader: A *practice leader* is acknowledged by members of the CLIP as contributing exemplary competence or insight regarding the issue, activity, or goal of the moment. Practice leaders emerge via the community's assent; they are not appointed. Practice leadership shifts as the issues, activities, and goals of the CLIP shift. Hopefully, many CLIP members will be practice leaders during the life of the CLIP.

As a CLIP forms, the facilitator and participants may choose to institute other roles and responsibilities to enhance their work. For example they might create the following:

Time Keeper: The *time keeper* helps the group arrange time for each task; keeps participants informed of time remaining for each task; and helps the CLIP renegotiate timelines when necessary.

Observer: The *observer* scans participants' behaviors, noting how well the group is following its own intentions and ground rules. Immediately before the meeting or work session ends the observer leads a debriefing discussion, helping the group continuously learn how to improve its collaborative work.

External to the CLIP

Certain roles and responsibilities exist outside of a given CLIP. They most commonly are:

Champion/Supporter: The *champion* provides enthusiasm and infrastructure for organizing the meetings and communications of the CLIPs. The champion is the chief supporter of the CLIP's communication venues, providing necessary infrastructure, supplies, tools, and technology.

Sponsor: The *sponsor* garners the college's support for a CLIP. The sponsor is instrumental in establishing the mission and expected outcomes for the CLIP and may help remove barriers that obstruct progress (e.g., time, funding, other resources).